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Attempting to Close the Food Gap: An Evaluation of the 2011 Fair Share Program in Gettysburg, PA

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Abstract

Background: Families in Adams County with an income between 160% and 250% of the Federal Poverty Income Guidelines and ineligible for federal food assistance programs were determined to be in the “food gap.” In collaboration with Adams County Farm Fresh Markets and the Center for Public Service at Gettysburg College, the Adams County Food Policy Council developed the Fair Share Program to provide monthly food vouchers and educational sessions to a group of families in the food gap to use at farmers markets in Gettysburg, PA. The goals of the program were to provide families not eligible for federal food assistance with an increased ability to purchase healthy foods, increase fruit and vegetable consumption, support local farms the local economy, and provide nutrition education and support.

Purpose: We sought to identify the effectiveness of the pilot Fair Share Program in reaching its goals and to determine ways to improve the program in the future.

Methods: 25 families who participated in the Fair Share Program during the summer of 2011 were given surveys at the start of the program, and interviews were conducted with participants at the end of the program. Surveys were given to the participating vendors at the farmers markets at the conclusion of the program. A bivariate analysis of the participant survey was done comparing results from Hispanic and non-Hispanic participants using SPSS Statistics 17.0, while the vendor surveys and interviews were evaluated qualitatively.

Results: There were several noteworthy differences between the habits and perceptions of the Hispanic and non-Hispanic participants, including fruit and vegetable consumption patterns, reasons for not shopping at the farmer’s markets, and where food is typically obtained from. Interviews indicated that both participants and vendors had overall positive experiences with the program even though challenges including price and language differences were experienced.

Conclusion: The Fair Share Project reached its goals and had a positive impact on the community. Improvements should be made if the program is to be continued in the future to address the challenges participants faced while participating, and there is strong support for continuation and extension of the program.

Keywords

food gap, fair share, poverty, food assistance, policy, Adams County, Pennsylvania, fruit, vegetable, healthy, local

Disciplines

Community Health and Preventive Medicine | Environmental Public Health | Public Health

Comments

This project was mentored by Amy Dailey (Health Sciences) and Kim Davidson (Center for Public Service).

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December 8, 2011

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CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

In order to be eligible for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, a household must meet certain income criteria. Generally, the household’s gross

monthly income must be within 130% percent of the poverty level and net monthly income must be within 100% of the poverty level. For a household of 4 in 2011, the federal poverty level was set at \$22,350 in all states except Alaska and Hawaii (2). If a household's income is even slightly above the guidelines, they do not meet the criteria that would make that household eligible for SNAP benefits. Unfortunately, there is a significant portion of people whose income is too high to make them eligible for SNAP benefits, yet too low to meet the needs of their household. This discrepancy has been termed the "Food Gap" by activist and author Mark Winne, and it is a problem that affects many.

There are many individuals in Adams County that live in the food gap and are not eligible to participate in federal food assistance programs. The Fair Share Project was developed to provide a group of Adams County families within the food gap with the ability to purchase healthy, fresh, local foods. The project aims to "increase fruit and vegetable consumption, support local farms and our local economy, and provide nutrition education and support." Twenty-five families were pre-selected through other Adams County organizations to be participants of the pilot program. To be eligible, the families must have had an income between 160% and 250% of the Federal Poverty Income Guidelines (FPIG). In addition, they needed to be referred to the project through Child Care Information Services (CCIS) or be a current recipient of the Campus Kitchen at Gettysburg College. The families each received \$40 in vouchers per month during the months of June through September of 2011 that could be used to purchase fruit, vegetable, eggs, meat, and bread. At each month's Fair Share event, the participants were given nutrition education and guidance by nutritionists Audrey Hess and Betsy Wargo. Audrey Hess was responsible for working with the Spanish-speaking participants and translating, while Betsy Wargo worked primarily with the English-speaking participants. They

were also responsible for contacting participants prior to the Fair Share events to remind them to pick up their vouchers at the farmers' market. The project was funded through an online fundraising competition and the resale of donated Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares from four local farms (3).

This report aims to analyze the barriers, outcomes, and effectiveness of the Fair Share Program. Participants were given a survey at the start of the program in June asking about their food shopping and consumption habits, as well as their perceptions of the farmers markets. At the end of the program, several of the participants were interviewed about their participation in the program and the food vendors at the farmers markets were given a survey about their perceptions of the SNAP and Fair Share Programs.

CHAPTER 2: PARTICIPANT SURVEYS

Methods

The survey was created by Environmental Studies student Sara Tower and was administered to the 25 participating families of the Fair Share Program on June 3, 2011 at the first Fair Share event at the farmers market at the Gettysburg Recreation Park in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. 19 of the 25 surveys were completed at the market and 2 were partially completed, for a total of 21 returned surveys included that were included in this analysis. The English-speaking participants were given the survey in English and the primarily Spanish-speaking participants were given the survey in Spanish. Bivariate analysis was used to analyze the results of the Hispanic and non-Hispanic participants. The survey can be found in Appendix A.

Results

Sample

A total of 21 surveys were administered on June 3, 2011 to the pre-selected participants of the Fair Share Program. The racial and educational characteristics of the participants are described in Table 1. Fifty-two percent of the participants identified as Hispanic while 47.6% identified as either “White/Caucasian,” “Black/African-American,” a combination of the two, or “White/Asian-American,” all composing the Non-Hispanic category. Eight participants (38.1%) responded as having a high school diploma or less, and 8 participants (38.1%) responded as having some college education or a 2-year degree. There was no response about education level from 5 (23.8%) of participants.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

	Total ($n = 21$), n^* (%)
Race/Ethnicity	
Hispanic	11 (52.4)
Non-Hispanic	10 (47.6)
Education	
High school diploma or less	8 (38.1)
Some college or 2-year degree	8 (38.1)

*Numbers for each characteristic may not sum to total because of some missing data. (Percentages based on missing data.)

Bivariate Analysis

Table 2 shows the eating and food shopping habits of the Hispanic and Non-Hispanic participants. A higher education level among the Non-Hispanic participants was nearly statistically significant. Hispanic participants obtain their food predominantly from Walmart and Mexican Food Stores, significantly more often than non-Hispanics participants. Other grocery store chains including Giant, Kennie’s Market, and Weis were common food shopping locations

for both non-Hispanics and Hispanics. An equal number of Hispanics and non-Hispanics obtained food from the food pantry or Campus Kitchens, and only one non-Hispanic participant indicated that they obtain food from a home garden.

Additionally, it can be seen that the Hispanic participants tended to have healthier eating habits in general, consuming fruits and vegetables more often, fast foods less often, and feeling as though they have the ability to afford healthy food more often. The Hispanic respondents also responded as eating together as a family more often than the Non-Hispanic respondents. The main reason both groups of participants indicated for not shopping at the Farmers Markets was that the food was more expensive than at the grocery store. For Hispanic participants, not being able to speak or read English very well was also a significant reason. Other minor reasons among both participant groups included not having enough time and not having enough knowledge about what to buy or how to prepare the foods from the markets. None of the participants indicated that the market location, their comfort level at the market, or a lack of preference for the foods sold at the market as being reasons for not shopping there.

Table 2. Habits of Participants ($n = 21$), n^* (%)

	Hispanic (n=11)	Non- Hispanic (n=10)	<i>p</i> value (Fisher's 2- sided)
Education			.119
High school or less	5 (83.3)	3 (30.0)	
Some college or 2-year degree	1 (16.7)	7 (70.0)	
Main purchaser of household food			.582
Wife/mother or husband/father	7 (70.0)	9 (90.0)	
Other or multiple persons	3 (10.0)	1 (10.0)	
Main preparer of food in household			.576
Wife/mother or husband/father	6 (66.7)	8 (88.9)	
Other or multiple persons	3 (33.3)	1 (11.1)	
Where family obtains food from			

Walmart	10 (90.9)	4 (40.0)	.024
Giant	5 (45.5)	8 (80.0)	.183
Kennie's	5 (45.5)	5 (50.0)	1.00
Weis	2 (18.2)	2 (20.0)	1.00
Mexican Foods Store	8 (72.7)	0 (0.0)	.001
Convenience Store/ Quick Mart	1 (9.1)	0 (0.0)	1.00
Food Pantry/ Campus Kitchens	2 (18.2)	2 (20.0)	1.00
Trade/Barter	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	-
Home Garden	0 (0.0)	1 (10.0)	0.476
Other	0 (0.0)	1 (10.0)	0.475
How often shop for food			.670**
Once a month	2 (20.0)	3 (30.0)	
Twice a month	6 (60.0)	4 (40.0)	
Once-several times per week	2 (20.0)	3 (30.0)	
How often feel able to afford healthy meals			.072**
Rarely	0 (0.0)	1 (10.0)	
Sometimes	2 (20.0)	6 (60.0)	
Usually or Always	8 (80.0)	3 (30.0)	
How often consume fruits and/or vegetables			.066**
Once-few times per week	1(10.0)	5 (55.6)	
Almost everyday	5 (50.0)	1 (11.1)	
Once or twice per day	4 (40.0)	3 (33.3)	
How often consume processed/pre-packaged foods			.751**
Almost never	2 (20.0)	1 (11.1)	
Once-several times per week	6 (60.0)	5 (55.6)	
Almost every day or once a day	2 (20.0)	3 (33.3)	
How often consume fast foods			.228**
Almost never	4 (40.0)	1 (11.1)	
Once or twice a month	3 (30.0)	6 (66.7)	
Once a week	3 (30.0)	2 (22.2)	
How often family eats together			.088**
Once a week	0 (0.0)	3 (33.3)	
Several times per week/almost everyday	6 (60.0)	5 (55.6)	
Everyday	4 (40.0)	1 (11.1)	
Have visited the farmers market previously	3 (30.0)	5 (45.5)	.370
How often shop at farmers markets			1.00
Few times per year	4 (80.0)	5 (50.0)	
Few times per month	1 (20.0)	0 (0.0)	
Have had to skip meals due to money constraints	5 (45.5)	4 (40.0)	1.00
How often have had to skip meals			1.00

Only one or two months	2 (40.0)	1 (10.0)	
Some months	3 (60.0)	3 (30.0)	
Reasons for not shopping at farmers market			
The food is more expensive	5 (45.5)	5 (50.0)	1.00
No time to shop at the market	2 (18.2)	3 (30.0)	.628
Don't know what to buy or how to prepare the foods	3 (27.3)	4 (40.0)	.650
Don't speak or read English very well	7 (63.6)	0 (0.0)	.003
Don't know anyone else who shops at the market	0 (0.0)	1 (10.0)	.474

*Percentages based on missing data when applicable

**Pearson's chi-square

CHAPTER 3: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Methods

Several participants of the Fair Share Program were interviewed following the completion of the program in September, 2011. Interviews with seven of the participants were initially scheduled at the final Fair Share event for later in the month. Due to scheduling conflicts and difficulty getting in contact with participants, only four interviews were completed. The first three interviews were done at a meeting of the Circles of Support group. The fourth and final interview took place at the South Central Community Action Program (SCCAP) building.

Results

The four interviewees provided almost exclusively positive feedback about the Fair Share Program. Comments of praise were given about the people involved with program, the quality of the food and the atmosphere at the farmers markets, and the encouragement to eat healthier and try new foods. While the participants described the food and produce at the markets to be “fresh,” “really good,” and “excellent,” they also described some of it, such as the eggs and some of the organic food, as “overpriced” and “really pricey.” The prices of most of the produce, however, were thought to be reasonable and “allowed you to look at different things, such as green peppers, that would normally be too expensive at the grocery store.” In addition to the

fresh and affordable produce, the environment of the markets also received praise. The vendors were described as friendly, often giving free samples to the children of participants, and participants felt welcome and comfortable at the markets. All four interviewees agreed that the hours and location of the markets were convenient and accessible.

The program also appeared to have a positive effect on the lives and eating habits of the participants who were interviewed. Although two of the participants didn't notice any significant changes in the eating habits of them and their families, the other two participants indicated that some changes to their diets and habits were made as a result of the program. One participant indicated that she learned a new method for cooking green beans and greens from one of the vendors that is healthier and quicker than boiling, and this is now the only way she cooks those vegetables. The same participant indicated that she often made homemade salsa with the produce from the market, and her family began cooking more Mexican food just so they could eat the fresh salsa. Another interviewee claimed that she and her family have been eating more salad and healthier salads since the program started. She stated her family has "tried to eat healthier before, but for some reason it worked this time around," and that her family ate more fruits this year than ever. A different participant said that while she and her family ate a lot more apples than usual because of the program, no changes were seen in the eating habits of her children because it "takes time for kids to adjust to new foods."

Two of the interviewees had children with health issues, and they felt that the Fair Share Program was helpful in dealing with these issues. One participant had a diabetic son who has no health insurance provided by his job and eats a significant amount of produce, salads, and fruit and indicated that the program allowed her to buy a lot of these fresh foods for him at affordable prices. Another interviewee had a daughter who was vitamin D deficient, and asserted that she was

able to learn some new things about which vitamins were in certain products, as well as some new snacks that could help with increasing her daughter's vitamin D and protein intake from the informational tools provided at the Fair Share events.

At the end of the interviews, the participants were asked to share if they had any of their own ideas for improving the community's access to healthy foods. While elaborate answers were not given, there was a consensus that more local connections should be made, between farmers, local markets such as Kennie's Market, and local schools. One woman pointed out that if a program like the Fair Share Program could be connected with the children in the Free and Reduced Lunch program in schools, many families could benefit greatly. Another interviewee said that although she has lived in the area for 17 years, she didn't know there was a farmers market, and making others more aware of the existence of the farmers markets would be beneficial.

CHAPTER 4: VENDOR SURVEYS

Methods

At the conclusion of the Fair Share Program, the food vendors of the Adams County Farm Fresh Markets were given surveys about their perceptions of and participation in the Fair Share Program and the SNAP benefits program. Surveys were administered on each of the three market days: Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday. Completed surveys were collected from seven of the ten total food vendors from all market days and analyzed qualitatively. The vendor survey can be found in Appendix B.

Results

Most of the vendors felt “somewhat,” “fairly,” or “moderately” informed about the goals of the Fair Share Project, while one vendor felt “very” informed. In regards to the SNAP benefits program, 4 vendors felt they felt somewhat informed and understood the goals, while 2 felt very well informed and 1 did not feel informed at all. Four of the vendors indicated that they would like more information about these programs in the future, whereas two would not be interested in being provided with more information and one vendor did not respond. Every vendor indicated an increase in their sales as a result of the Fair Share and SNAP benefits programs.

Several of the vendors indicated that the programs caused changes in their customer base. For example, one vendor indicated that the programs brought “more Hispanic and town people” to the markets, and others indicated that their customer bases were broadened with customers they wouldn’t normally get. While participants in these programs altered the customer demographics of the vendors, the vendors did little in response to this change. One farmer said that he brought more of his products when he knew a Fair Share event would be occurring, and another offered more “seconds” (produce of slightly lesser quality), but the rest of the vendors did not make any changes in the amounts or types of products they offered. A response from one vendor was received in which they claimed to offer prices to Fair Share and SNAP customers that they felt were fair. Additionally, none of the vendors made in alterations in their displays or signs despite the change in their customer base and the more frequent attendance of Spanish-speaking customers.

Six of the seven responding vendors said they did not face any challenges when it came to interacting with participants of these programs, and the one that did indicate that they faced some challenges did not elaborate on what those challenges were. None of the vendors changed their

perceptions about these programs or their participants from the start of the programs to the time the surveys were conducted. Overall, all of the vendors had a positive experience with the Fair Share and SNAP programs and encouraged the programs to continue in the future.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The Fair Share program was largely successful, and the surveys and interviews done in evaluation give insight into the perceptions and habits of a group of families in the food gap. Some of these perceptions and habits differed significantly between Hispanic and non-Hispanic participants, an indication of differing barriers between groups. More challenges in participating and attending the farmers markets were faced by the Hispanic participants than by the non-Hispanic participants, though interviews questioning those specific barriers were unable to take place. Previous research has been done about the attitudes of SNAP recipients towards the farmers markets and about food access barriers for the Latino community in Adams County. While many of the findings from previous research and this evaluation reveal similar findings, several contradictions have also been found.

A study on the attitudes of SNAP recipients towards farmers markets found that “time constraints are the most prevailing barriers preventing SNAP recipients from shopping at the farmers’ markets (1).” While this may be true for SNAP recipients, the Fair Share participants did not indicate time as being a reason for not shopping at the Adams County farmers markets. Although only a small number of interviews were conducted, those participants who were interviewed indicated the contrary: they found the market times and locations convenient and accessible. This may be due to the fact that although SNAP recipients and Fair Share participants may be somewhat similar in terms of income level, their working habits may differ. As past

research on Gettysburg farmers markets indicates, some recipients do not consider time as a barrier because they are currently not employed (1). In addition, many of the Fair Share participants were part of households where there were multiple adults available to shop for food at different hours despite their working hours.

As with some of the SNAP recipients, many of the participants in the Fair Share Program indicated that they either did not know of the existence of the farmers markets at all, or were only vaguely aware of them. Most participants had never attended any of the markets, or had only attended once a year. The fact that so few participants knew about the farmers markets suggests that information about their times and locations should be promoted more effectively throughout the community.

Price was the overwhelmingly the biggest barrier for the Fair Share participants overall. Both Hispanic and non-Hispanic participants seem to obtain most of their food from chain grocery stores, possibly because they believe prices may be lower at these establishments. The interviews suggest that while the produce was very affordable, other items and certain vendor's products were overpriced. The fact that most individuals on a budget only find only the produce at the market to be affordable and thus cannot purchase other products may be a deterrent for shopping at the market. Chain grocery stores have the draw of having everything one could need in one convenient location, with many things, such as meat and eggs, at a much more affordable price than is offered at the farmers markets.

Within the Hispanic participants, however, the existence of a language difference was also a significant reason that many did not choose to shop at the farmers markets. Although none of the Hispanic participants indicated feeling unwelcome or uncomfortable at the markets, the majority claimed that not being able to speak or read English very well was a deterrent.

Similarly, previous research found that “due to culture and language differences, members of the Latino community are sometimes uncomfortable shopping in certain environments,” and a similar discomfort occurs shopping in grocery stores that require interaction with English-speakers (4). The results of the survey administered to the Fair Share participants showed that Walmart and Mexican food stores were primary shopping locations for the Hispanic participants, likely due to the preferred nature of interactions at these stores. Although there was a significant language barrier for many of the participants, the vendors did not perceive this as a problem and thus did not take action to address the issue.

Despite this lack of communication between many of the Hispanic and the vendors, the vendors had a positive experience with both Hispanic and non-Hispanic participants. Their overall sales were boosted and felt the Fair Share program was beneficial. Both the vendors and the participants indicated that they would like the program to continue and found it helpful. The participants who were interviewed were especially grateful for the assistance that was provided through the program. It should be kept in mind, however, that the participants who were interviewed were all English-speaking participants who were very active in the program and attended the Fair Share events and the farmers markets on a regular basis. Scheduling interviews with less active participants and Spanish-speaking participants proved to be difficult, and feedback about the program from these participants was not obtained.

The pilot trial of the Fair Share Program proved to be relatively successful. The goals of the program were to provide families not eligible for federal food assistance with an increased ability to purchase healthy foods, increase fruit and vegetable consumption, support local farms the local economy, and provide nutrition education and support. The results of the surveys and interviews show that these goals were met. While the goals of the program were met,

improvements can be made if the program is implemented in the future. Language differences should attempt to be overcome for the Spanish-speaking Fair Share participants, possibly by displaying signs in Spanish and having translators from the community available at the market to assist customers and vendors in their interactions.

Additionally more investigation into the barriers and needs of future participants and potential participants should be done so that additional concrete suggestions for improvement can be made. While the program was successful with the actively involved participants, there were several participants who dropped out of the program and did not retrieve or use some of their vouchers for each month. The program began in June with a total of 24 participants and ended in September with a total of 11 participants. If participants failed to pick up their vouchers after the July event, the vouchers and a letter encouraging participation in the remaining months were mailed. For the months of August and September, vouchers that were not picked up at the scheduled times were mailed to participants upon request only. Of the 11 participating families that remained in the final month of September, only 2 were Spanish-speaking. This may be indicative of the existence of specific cultural or language barriers. Overall, 592 vouchers worth five dollars each were distributed and 556 were redeemed. This is a redemption rate of 94%.

Although it is difficult to get feedback from those individuals who dropped out or were not actively engaged in the program, investigations into the reasons why they chose not to participate fully would be useful so that those specific barriers can be addressed when implementing the program in the future. Altering or extending the program to reach more individuals should be considered. For example, some of the participants suggested that the Fair Share program and the farmers markets attempt to connect with local schools and grocery stores in order to make fresh, local products more conveniently available to a greater number of people.

Increasing promotion of the farmers markets to different sectors of the community may also be beneficial to increase the diversity and amount of customers that are drawn to the markets.

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