MOBILE PANTRY OF LOWELL SURVEY

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Background

The Mobile Pantry Program (MPP), sponsored by the Merrimack Valley Food Bank (MVFB) in Lowell, Massachusetts, needed to obtain information about access to sufficient amounts of food or lack thereof among their clients in Greater Lowell.

It is important that MPP clients be food secure, i.e., that they have a sufficient amount of food to ration throughout the month until their next food delivery; that appropriate foods are delivered for a nutritious diet; and that the food supply is used appropriately in moderation.

The MVFB will use this survey to assess their efforts as well as to make any changes possible to better serve their clients.

Methods

Study Design / Participants
Descriptive, cross-sectional study of 309 households inhabited by 341 homebound, low-income elderly and/or disabled MPP clients and 25 dependent children – 92% fluent in English – between October 10, 2011 and November 16, 2011.

Data Sources / Variables
A 25-item, paper, English-language questionnaire requested anonymously self-reported information pertaining to food security, food preparation capabilities, healthy food preferences, and satisfaction with Mobile Pantry services. Covariates were age, gender, race and ethnicity.

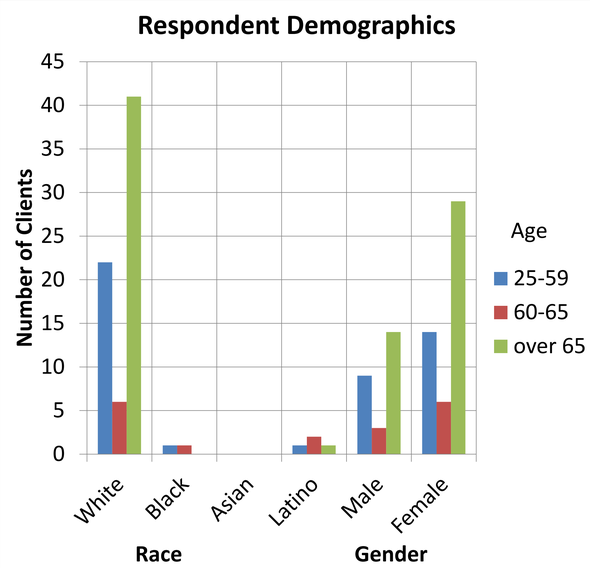
Results

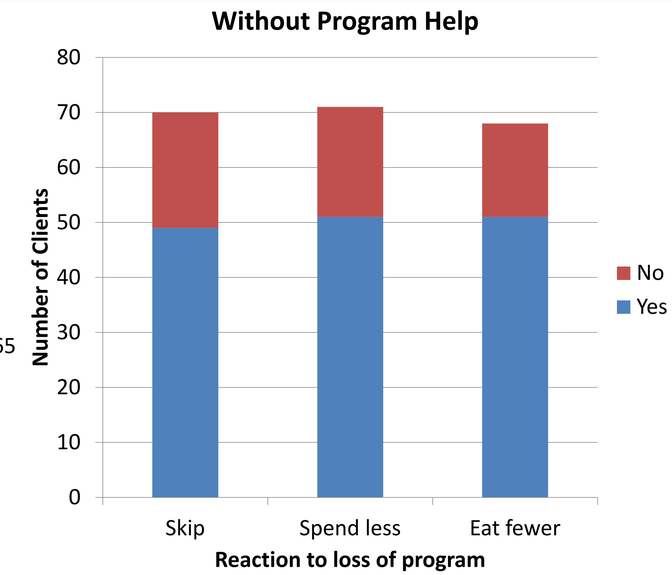
The 77 clients who responded were mostly white females over age 65.

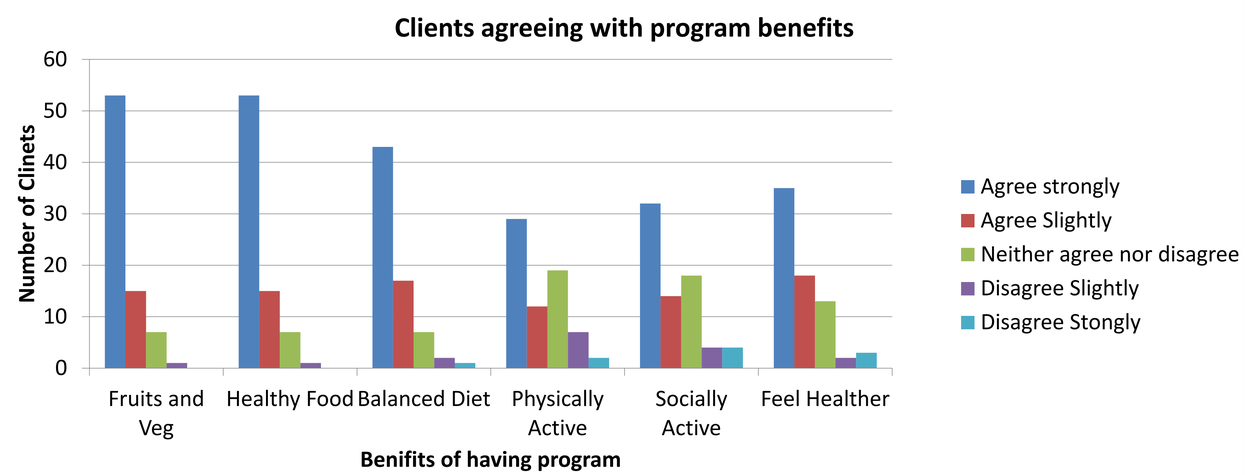
Most respondents agreed strongly that with MPP's aid they ate more fruits, vegetables, and healthy foods; ate a balanced diet; were more physically and socially active; and generally felt healthier.

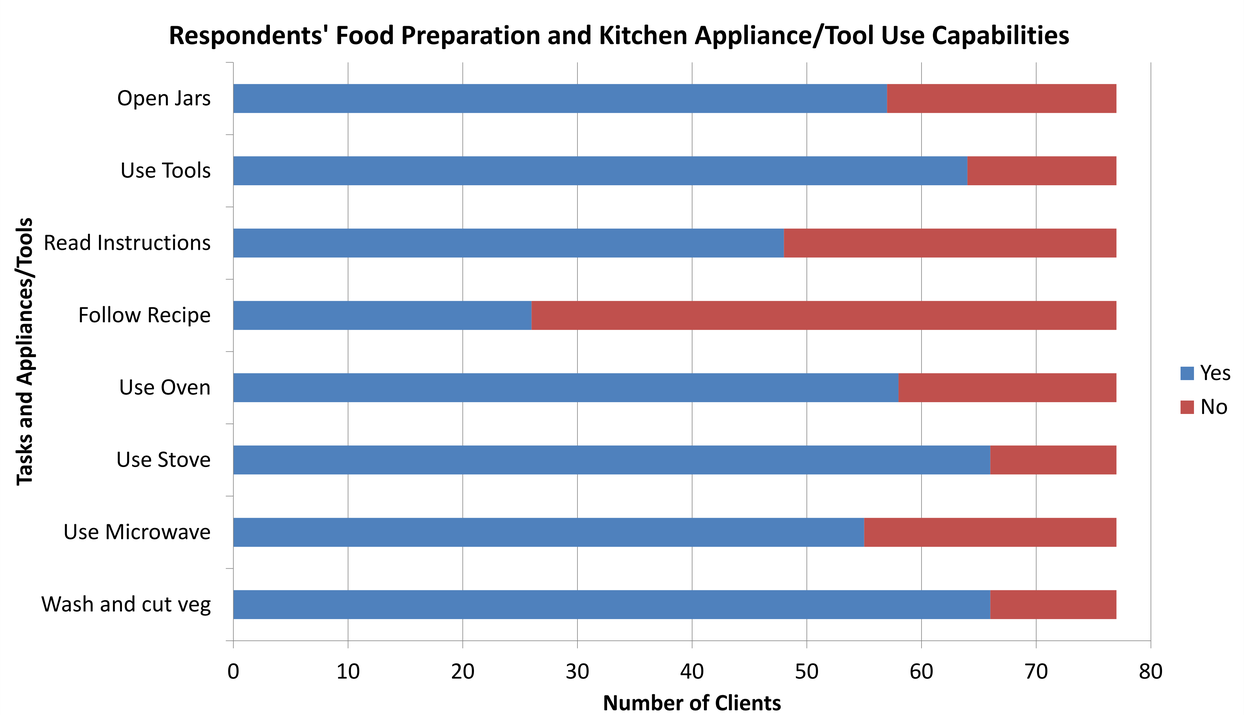
Most respondents would skip more meals, spend less on other necessities and eat less produce if they did not have help from MPP.

The majority of respondents felt able to perform all of the food preparation tasks and use all of the kitchen appliances / tools about which they were asked with the exception of following a complicated recipe.









Discussion

Key Results
Respondents felt strongly that MPP's services benefited them. Most ate better and felt healthier. A large majority rated MPP's service excellent.

Limitations
- Low response rate may have introduced systemic sample bias. Those with positive feedback may have felt more comfortable participating than those with relatively negative opinions.
- Sample may not be demographically representative of total client population. Population based on MPP client intake data is more inclusive and respondents seemed confused about race and ethnicity categories.
- A language barrier may have contributed to small sample size, and to skipped questions.

Interpretation
Since all MPP's primary clients are low-income elderly and/or disabled individuals, some with children, it is not surprising that respondents indicated that, without MPP, they would skip more meals and spend less on other necessities to pay for food, nor that 95% used most or all food delivered. It seems there is a need for a program like MPP. A longer response period or an explicit deadline may have made firmer inferences possible due to larger sample size.

Generalisability
Our conclusions may be reliably applied to only a small group of low-income elderly and/or disabled clients in the Greater Lowell area. Further generalization should be done with caution.

Conclusion

MPP may be essential for the health, nutritional well-being and food security of the low-income elderly and/or disabled in the Greater Lowell community. The results of this study may be utilized to improve MPP services and food variety.

References

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This work was supported by Suellen O'Neill and the Mobile Pantry Program of the Merrimack Valley Food Bank