



Policy Blog: Pantry Distribution Models and Neighbor Distribution Preference

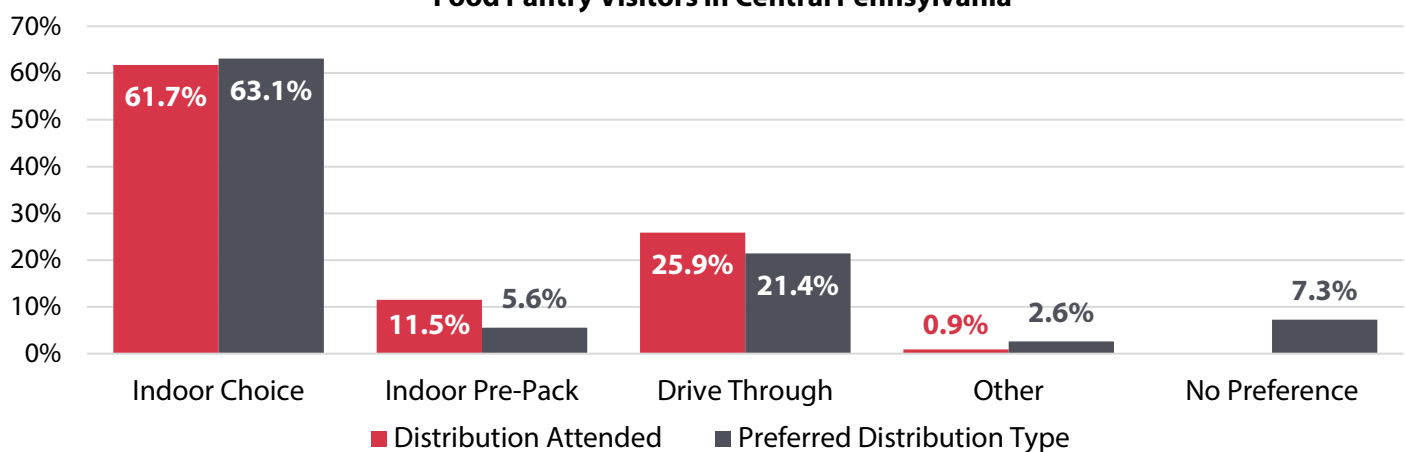
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Food pantries use a variety of methods to share food with the neighbors they serve. Historically, pantries have provided pre-packed bags or boxes, but over time many have shifted to a more grocery store-like model, where visitors may select the items that will best meet the needs of their household. In the last several years, drive-through models, where pre-packed food is loaded directly into neighbors' vehicles, have also become popular. Each of these models has different benefits and drawbacks for both pantry workers and for neighbors. In this policy blog, CPFBI IPR compares the share of neighbors visiting various types of pantries to the distribution model preferences of visitors to better understand how the charitable food network can most effectively serve households in need.

As part of its ongoing Community Hunger Mapping project, IPR conducts surveys with food pantry visitors. A wide variety of questions are asked within the survey, including several about pantry experiences. As part of the pantry experience module, nearly 3,300 neighbors who visited food pantries across 12 counties were asked what their preferred distribution model at food pantries would be, if it were up to them. The included counties were Adams, Bradford, Centre, Clinton, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Lancaster, Lebanon, Lycoming, Potter, Sullivan, Tioga, and Union. Together, these counties account for nearly two thirds (64.5%) of the population of the CPFBI's service territory, so the survey data can be considered to be broadly representative of central Pennsylvanian food pantry visitors.

The chart below shows food pantry visitors by the type of distribution at which they were surveyed compared to the type of distribution for which they expressed a preference. About three in five surveys were collected at a food pantry using an indoor client-choice model (61.7%), and a similar proportion of neighbors (63.1%) said they liked a grocery store-like environment at the food pantry. About a quarter of surveys were conducted at drive-through pantries (25.9%), and about one in five neighbors (21.4%) said drive-through was their preferred pantry model. One in nine (11.5%) neighbors was surveyed at an indoor pre-pack pantry, but only about one in twenty (5.6%) said this was their preferred service model. A smaller share of neighbors said they had no strong preference about service model (7.3%) or preferred another model, such as pre-ordering online or home delivery (2.6%).

Type of Distribution Attended and Preferred Distribution Type Among Food Pantry Visitors in Central Pennsylvania



Overall, these findings align with [other research](#) showing that client-choice is a best practice food pantry model in part because many visitors prefer it, along with other benefits like reduced food waste and more efficient use of volunteers. However, there is a sizable minority of neighbors who prefer drive through models, perhaps because of the convenience, increased accessibility for those with disabilities, or anonymity they provide. It is important to keep in mind that an ability to decide which pantry to visit based on its service model is itself an aspect of choice. Drive throughs can also introduce elements of choice by asking neighbors about their preferences around specific items, like the type of meat they would like to receive. Furthermore, this data indicates that indoor pre-pack distributions are not popular with neighbors. There may therefore be opportunity for pantries, especially those using a pre-pack model, to shift to choice or to experiment with innovative means of distribution like online ordering and locker pickup.