Food Insecurity and Food Decision-Making: Uses of Behavioral Nudges in a Food Pantry Setting

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The Need: Roughly 14 percent of the U.S. population struggles with food insecurity, including 19.5 percent of households with children. Many of these food-insecure households face significant diet-related health challenges, especially with obesity, which has been closely linked to food insecurity and poverty. There is also evidence to suggest that living with the constant threat of food scarcity induces poorer decision-making in general. Some efforts to improve nutrition choices among food-insecure households restrict or patronize consumers. We developed 10 inexpensive behavioral interventions, or nudges, which can lead food pantry consumers to choose foods that are more nutritious.

The Approach: Behavioral economists use the term “nudges” to describe a host of strategies that influence human decision-making — in this case, encouraging food pantry consumers to choose healthier foods, such as fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy, and whole grains. We partnered with Feeding America’s network of hunger relief agencies to develop and field-test nudges using one or more key behavioral principles: convenience, visibility, setting taste expectations, social norms, smart choice structure, and priming. We ran a series of field experiments over 12 weeks across four states in a variety of food pantry settings. We discovered that subtle changes can in fact encourage food pantry consumers to make healthier choices.

Impacts: In collaboration with Feeding America, we distilled our key findings on successful nudges into a Practitioner’s Guide to Nudging Nutrition. This guide is being disseminated throughout the Feeding America network of 60,000 member agencies. The guide is also publicly available at the link below. Some of the successful nudges include: ensuring that produce is presented at waist level rather than at ground level; using signage to highlight the flavor or other appealing characteristics of foods, rather than nutritional information; displaying fewer unhealthy foods, and storing the rest out of sight; displaying whole grain items in multiple locations; displaying produce in attractive bins; placing healthier foods in the front of the line; and retaining commercial-quality packaging, when possible. Our research team made presentations and led trainings in the use of behavioral techniques to encourage healthy food consumption for pantry managers in New York, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Jersey, and Texas. We’ve also disseminated our findings through academic conferences and peer-reviewed journals.

Website: https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/resource/the-power-of-nudges-making-the-healthy-choice-the-easy-choice-in-food-pantries/