A Tipping Point

Leveraging Opportunities to Improve the
Nutritional Quality of Food Bank Inventory

MAZON | A Jewish Response
To Hunger

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The charitable food system in the United States provides more than 4 billion meals to over 46 million people each year.[1] Many of these people are also struggling with chronic diet-related health conditions, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and obesity. In response, food banks nationwide have taken great strides to meet the nutritional needs of the people they serve. The aim of the National Food Bank Survey was to scan the landscape and assess how and to what extent nutrition is being addressed by food banks, and the proportion of healthy versus unhealthy foods being distributed in the charitable food system. A total of 196 food banks completed the survey.

Key Findings

- On average, fresh fruits and vegetables comprise nearly one third of all food bank inventory distributed, while one quarter is made up of unhealthy beverages and snack foods.
- Over half of food banks use a system to track nutritional quality, and these food banks report healthier inventory than those without tracking systems.
- More than half of food banks have informal nutrition guidelines, and one third have formal nutrition policies; 85% of these food banks report that this has not negatively impacted annual donations or pounds.
- One out of seven food banks have formally banned some items, such as soda and candy, as part of their nutrition policy.
- Nearly 40% of food banks with nutrition policies and guidelines face difficulty knowing how to handle unwanted food and beverage donations.
- More than half of food banks have begun educating local food and beverage donors about the need for more nutritious donations, while only one fifth have approached national donors.

Recommendations for Food Banks

- Develop and implement a formal nutrition policy. Consider a ban on the acquisition and distribution of unhealthy beverages and snack foods as part of the nutrition policy (e.g., soda and other sugary drinks, sweet snacks, savory snacks, and candy).
- Implement a nutrition tracking system to monitor and assess the nutritional value of inventory.
- Engage and educate corporate donors about the kinds of foods and beverages food banks would like to receive to better serve the dietary needs of low-income communities.

Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON is a national advocacy organization working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the United States and Israel. While MAZON believes that the nation's federal nutrition programs are the first line of defense against hunger, we also know that tens of millions of people routinely rely on the charitable food system to meet their dietary needs. This system includes hundreds of food banks which collect, warehouse and distribute large quantities of food to the tens of thousands of food pantries and soup kitchens that are the direct providers for those in need.

Historically, the key metrics used to measure the work of the charitable food system have been the number of pounds of food or the number of meals distributed, regardless of their nutritional value. Over time it has become clear, however, that the nutritional value of those meals must be a primary consideration. The Hunger in America 2014 study by Feeding America[2] found that among people visiting food pantries, 33% of households had a member with diabetes, and 58% had a member with high blood pressure. Meeting the dietary needs of these families requires attention to the quality, not just the quantity, of food that is available in the charitable food system.

For more than a decade, MAZON has led national initiatives to improve the nutritional quality of food within the charitable food system. During that time, a growing number of food banks nationwide have responded to this public health crisis by shifting their organizational culture to focus more on nutrition. They have launched programs and partnerships to support their efforts to increase the distribution of healthy foods. And while there has been tremendous progress, there is no doubt that food banks continue to grapple with the challenges of managing unhealthy food in the charitable food system.

THE NATIONAL FOOD BANK SURVEY

The purpose of the survey was to scan and describe the national landscape of how and to what extent nutrition is being addressed by food banks, and the proportion of healthy versus unhealthy foods being distributed in the charitable food system. The survey focused on the distribution of 'healthy' foods as represented by fresh fruits and vegetables, and 'unhealthy' foods as the sum of sugar-sweetened beverages, sweet snacks, savory snacks, and candy.

The survey asked four key questions:

1) What proportion of inventory is comprised of healthy and less healthy foods?
2) How are food banks tracking nutrition?
3) Are food banks addressing nutrition through formal or informal policies, and if so, what impact is this having? How many food banks formally ban specific items as part of their nutrition policy?
4) Are food banks educating donors about nutrition, and if so, how have donors responded?

An online survey was sent by MAZON to 310 food banks nationwide. The survey was in the field for four weeks. A total of 196 food banks completed the survey, representing a 63% response rate; 90% of respondents are members and affiliates of the Feeding America network. Due to missing data and skip patterns, some of the findings represent fewer than the full sample of respondents. When this is the case, the relevant number of responses is noted. Additional details about the methods are in the Appendix.

On average, fresh fruits and vegetables comprise nearly one third of all inventory distributed, while one quarter is made up of unhealthy beverages and snack foods.

Respondents were given a list of product categories and were asked to estimate the percentage of their inventory distributed annually for each category.

- 32% of inventory distributed annually is fresh fruits and vegetables, on average.

- 25% of inventory distributed annually is unhealthy beverages and snack foods including soda, other sugar-sweetened beverages, sweet snacks, savory snacks, and candy, on average.

- 80% of food banks distribute 2% or less of candy.

- Nearly 75% of food banks distribute 2% or less of soda.

Estimate of annual distribution of fresh fruits and vegetables and unhealthy beverages and snack foods*

INVENTORY: ANNUAL DISTRIBUTION	AVERAGE
Fresh Fruits & Vegetables	**32%**
Total Unhealthy Beverages and Snack Foods:	**25%**
• Sweet Snack Foods and Desserts (e.g. cookies, cakes, bakery products, etc.)	9%
• Savory Snack Foods (e.g. crackers, chips, etc.)	8%
• Other Sugar-Sweetened Beverages	4%
• Candy	2%
• Soda	2%

*Due to missing data, the number of food banks answering this question series ranges from 175 – 180.

On average, the majority of food bank inventory is donated.

Respondents were asked what percent of their inventory is comprised of purchased, donated, and government procured foods and beverages.

- On average, nearly 60% of food bank inventory comes from donated foods.

Food Bank Inventory
(n=196)

Pie chart: Donated 58%, Government 23%, Purchased 19%

- Donated
- Government
- Purchased
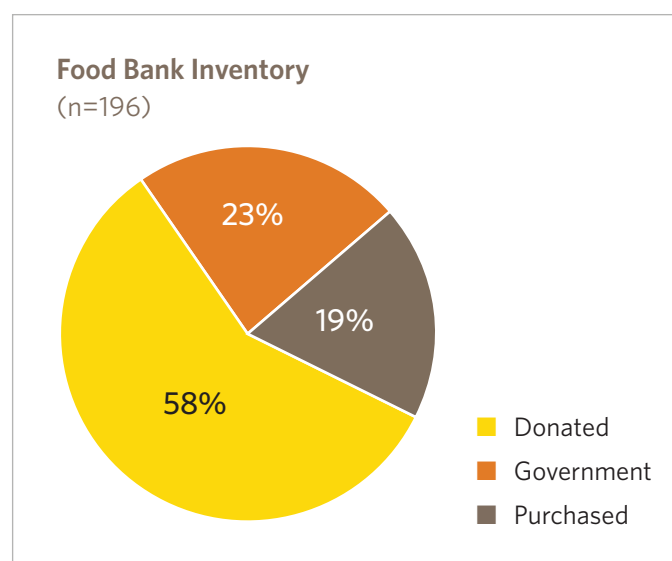
RESULTS

Over half of food banks report using a system to track nutritional quality, and this is associated with healthier inventory.

Respondents were asked if their food bank utilizes a system to track the nutritional quality of its inventory. If yes, they were asked to indicate which system they use.

- 54% of food banks report using a system to track the nutritional quality of their inventory.

We calculated the average estimated percentage of inventory for (a) fresh fruits and vegetables, and (b) unhealthy beverages and snack foods for the food banks using each tracking system.

- Food banks using tracking systems report distributing less unhealthy beverages and snack foods than food banks not using tracking systems.

Food bank use of inventory tracking systems
(n=185)

- Foods to Encourage (F2E) — 31%
- Choose Healthy Options Program (CHOP) — 11%
- Customized tracking system — 12%
- Do not currently utilize a system — 46%

54%

Distribution of fresh fruits and vegetables and unhealthy beverages and snack foods by tracking system

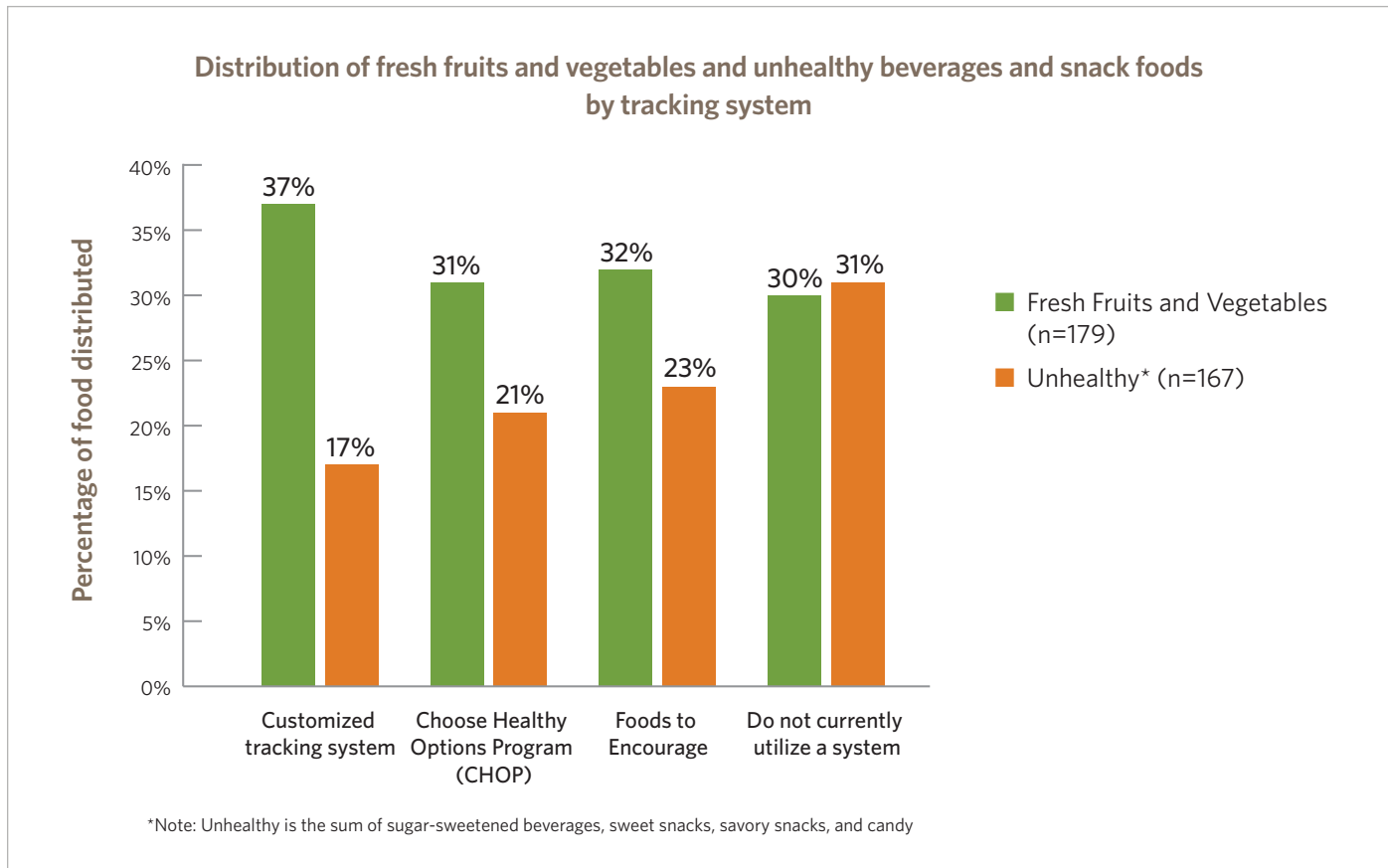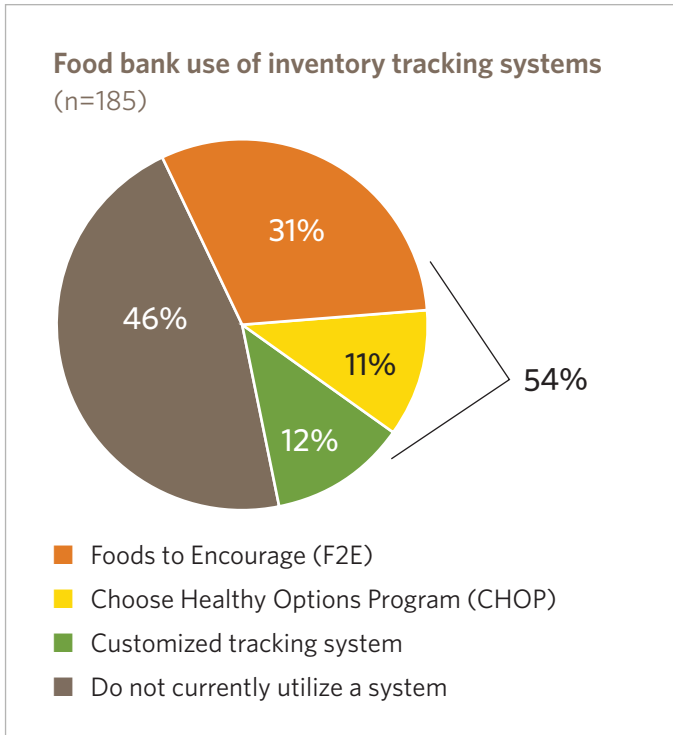Percentage of food distributed

Tracking system	Fresh Fruits and Vegetables	Unhealthy
Customized tracking system	37%	17%
Choose Healthy Options Program (CHOP)	31%	21%
Foods to Encourage	32%	23%
Do not currently utilize a system	30%	31%

- Fresh Fruits and Vegetables (n=179)
- Unhealthy* (n=167)

*Note: Unhealthy is the sum of sugar-sweetened beverages, sweet snacks, savory snacks, and candy

One third of food banks have formal nutrition policies, and more than half have informal nutrition guidelines.

Respondents were asked whether their food bank has a formal, written nutrition policy as part of its efforts to promote healthy foods and beverages. If they answered yes, they were asked whether the policy includes a "formal ban" on the distribution of certain products, and if so, which products were banned from distribution.

If the respondents answered that they did not have a formal nutrition policy, they were asked whether they have informal nutrition guidelines. All respondents who indicated that they have informal guidelines, 57%, or neither, 10%, (no policy or guidelines), were asked if they have plans in the works to develop and implement a formal nutrition policy. Notably, 49% of these food banks currently have plans to develop and implement formal nutrition policies.

Food Bank Nutrition Policy Status
(n=183)

- Formal Nutrition Policy
- Formal Nutrition Policy with Ban
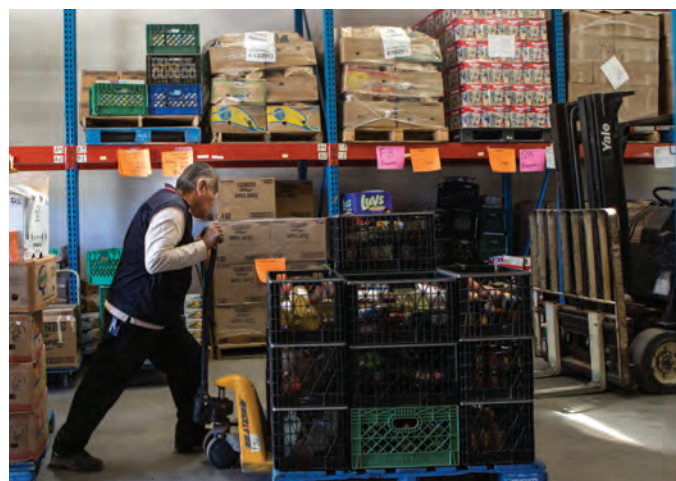- Informal Guidelines
- Neither
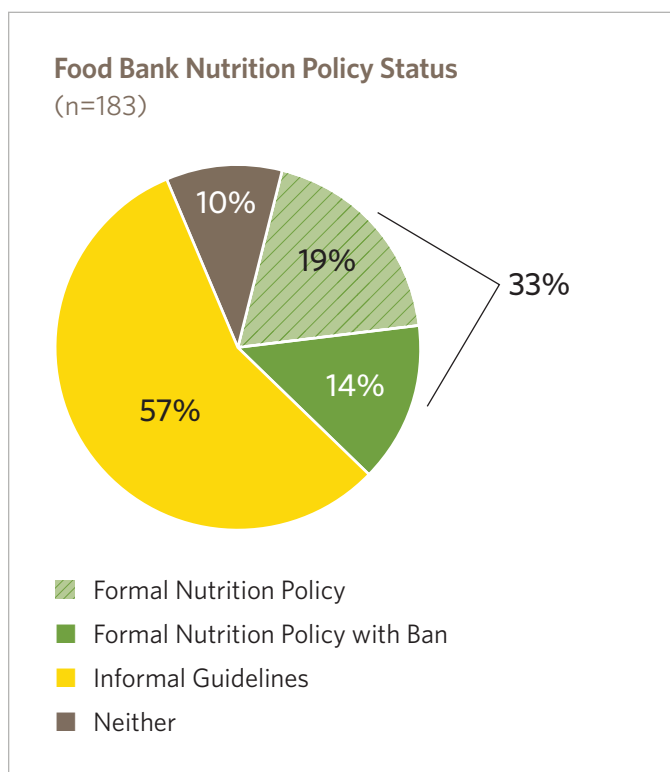
RESULTS

One out of seven food banks have a formal ban on the distribution of some unhealthy beverages and snack foods.

- Twenty-six food banks (14%) have a ban on the distribution of unhealthy beverages and snack foods as part of their formal nutrition policy.

DONATED PRODUCTS BANNED FROM DISTRIBUTION (Respondents selected all that applied)	NUMBER OF FOOD BANKS (n=26)
Soda	25
Candy	21
Other Sugar-Sweetened Beverages (e.g. energy/sports drinks, fruit drinks, bottled coffee/tea drinks, etc.)	12
Sweet Snack Foods and Desserts (e.g. cookies, cakes, bakery products, etc.)	9
Savory Snack Foods (e.g. crackers, chips, etc.)	4

- Of these 26 food banks, 15 decline to accept banned products.
- The 11 food banks that continue to accept banned products use a variety of strategies to manage unwanted donations.

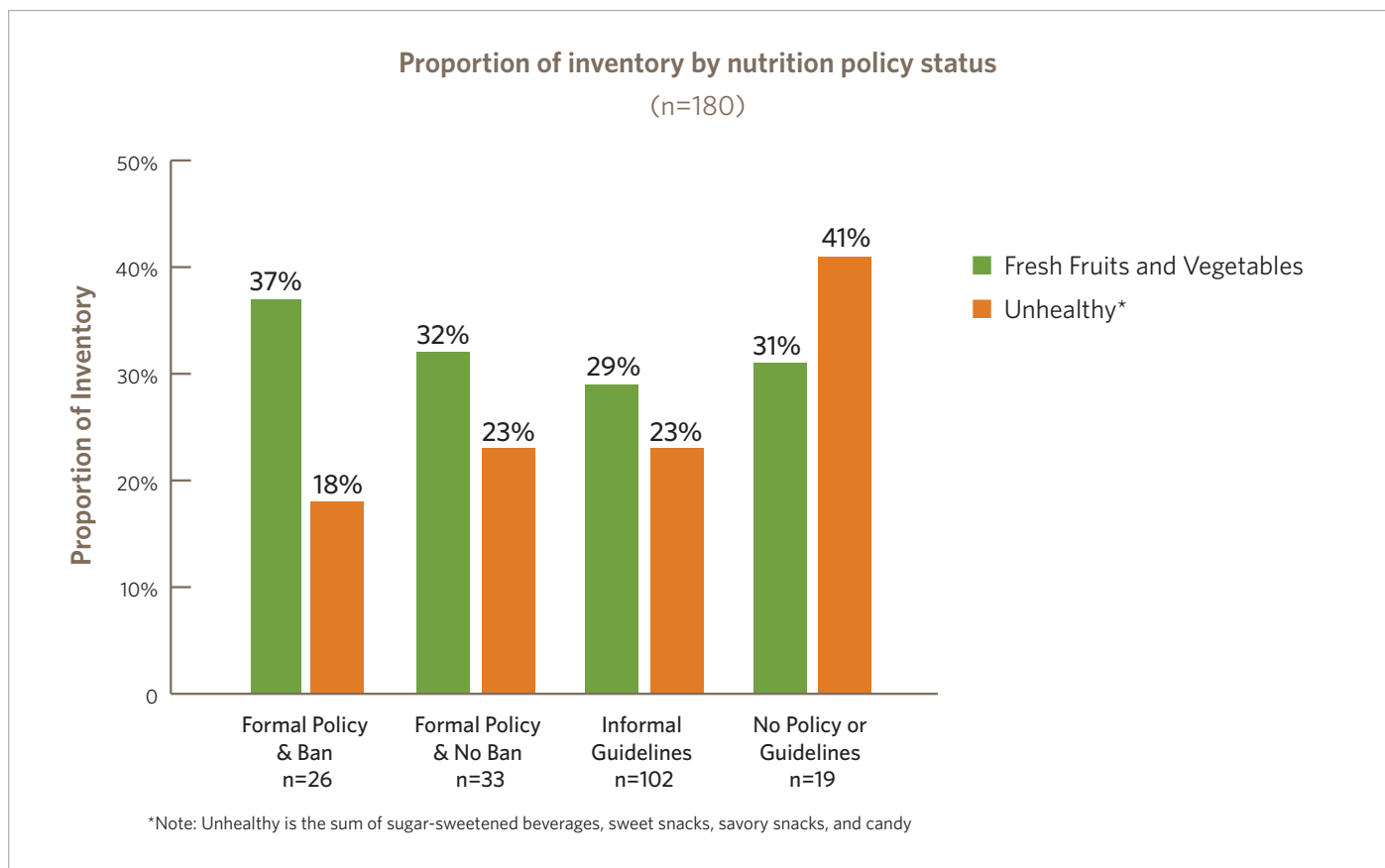| PRACTICES TO HANDLE UNWANTED DONATIONS (Respondents selected all that applied)	NUMBER OF FOOD BANKS (n=11)
Discard unwanted food and beverages	7
Recycle unwanted canned and bottled beverages	5
Compost unwanted products	3
Redirect unwanted products to other food banks	2
Donate unwanted beverages to local drug recovery programs	2

Nearly 40% of food banks with nutrition policies or guidelines (n=160) face difficulty knowing how to handle unwanted food and beverage donations.

- Even food banks who do not have a formal ban on the distribution of certain products struggle with this issue.

Food banks with formal nutrition policies and a ban are the only group that, on average, distribute twice as many fresh fruits and vegetables as unhealthy beverages and snack foods.

- Food banks without nutrition policies or guidelines were found to distribute more unhealthy beverages and snack foods than fresh fruits and vegetables.

Proportion of inventory by nutrition policy status
(n=180)

	Fresh Fruits and Vegetables	Unhealthy*
Formal Policy & Ban (n=26)	37%	18%
Formal Policy & No Ban (n=33)	32%	23%
Informal Guidelines (n=102)	29%	23%
No Policy or Guidelines (n=19)	31%	41%

*Note: Unhealthy is the sum of sugar-sweetened beverages, sweet snacks, savory snacks, and candy
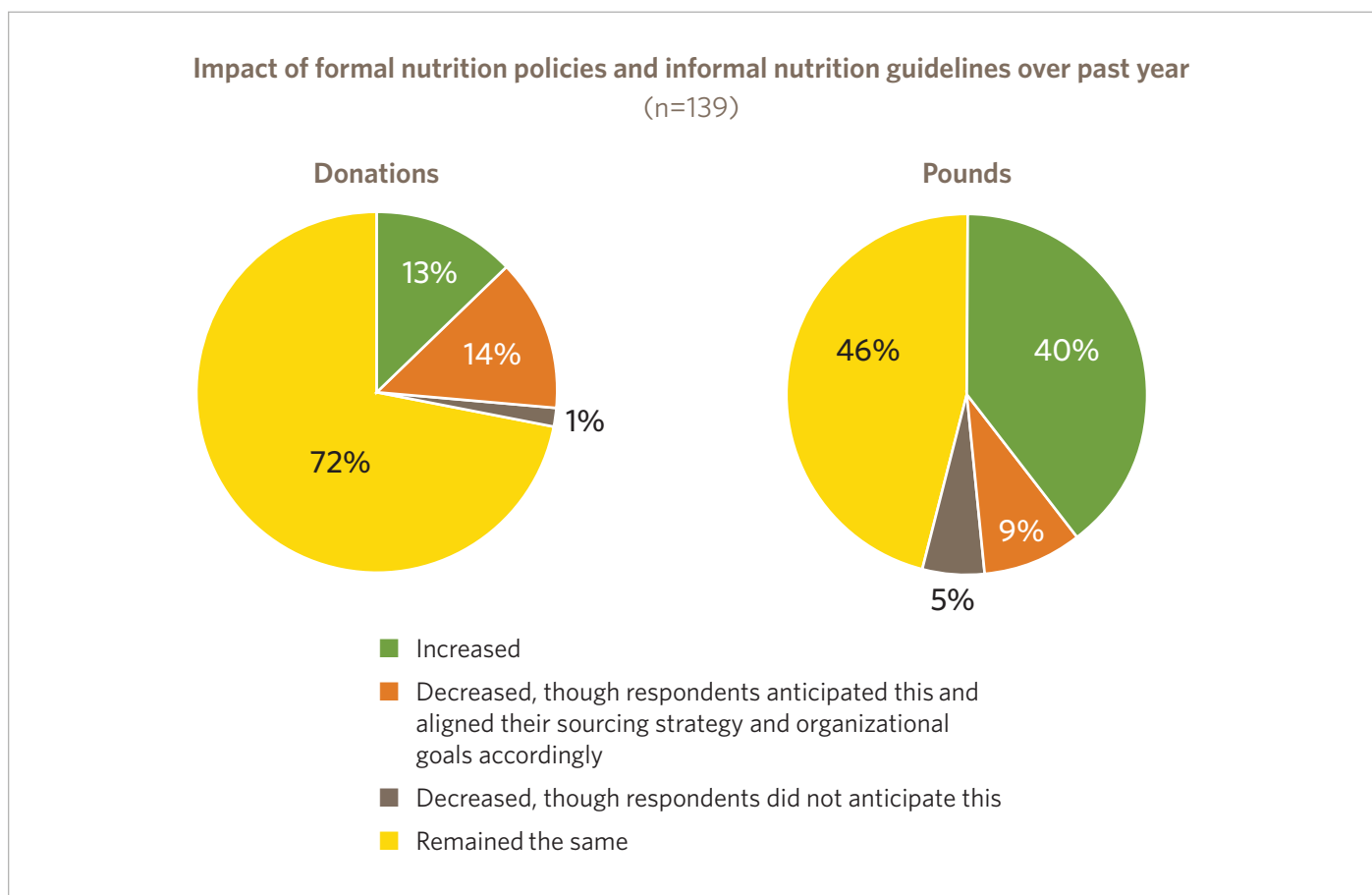
RESULTS

Formal nutrition policies and informal nutrition guidelines have not negatively impacted food banks' annual donations or pounds.

Respondents were asked whether their policies or guidelines had negatively impacted their food bank's donations or pounds over the past year.

- The majority of food banks (85%) reported annual **donations** have either remained the same or increased.

- The majority of food banks (86%) reported annual **pounds** have either remained the same or increased.

- Of those food banks that experienced a decrease in donations or pounds, many anticipated and prepared for those changes.

Impact of formal nutrition policies and informal nutrition guidelines over past year
(n=139)

Donations

13%
14%
1%
72%

Pounds

46%
40%
9%
5%

- ■ (green) Increased
- ■ (orange) Decreased, though respondents anticipated this and aligned their sourcing strategy and organizational goals accordingly
- ■ (brown) Decreased, though respondents did not anticipate this
- ■ (yellow) Remained the same

Educating local and regional donors
(n=78)

- 55% Positive
- 44% Neutral
- 1% Negative

Positive **Neutral** **Negative**

More than half of food banks have begun educating local food and beverage donors about the need for more nutritious donations, but only one fifth have approached national donors.
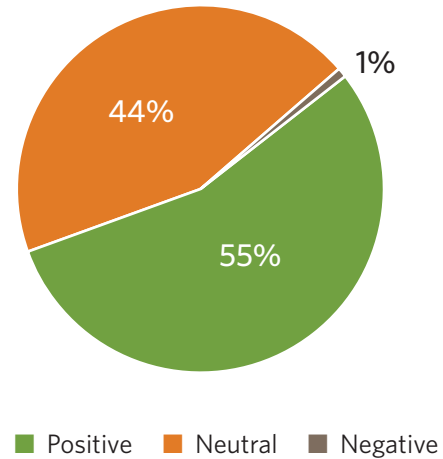
We asked respondents whether they had begun to educate local and regional donors about the kinds of foods and beverages they would like to acquire, in efforts to distribute more nutritious foods to the people they serve. Then, we asked the same question about educating national donors.

If the answer to either question was yes, the next question was whether the responses were mostly positive, negative, or neutral.
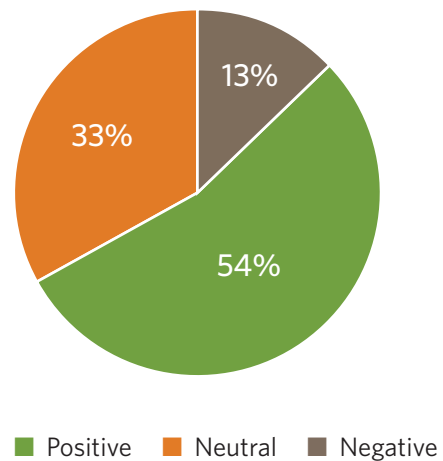
Of the 151 food bank respondents:

- 52% (n=78) have begun to educate local and regional food and beverage donors.

- 20% (n=30) have begun to educate national food and beverage donors.

- The majority of donors responded in a neutral or positive way.

Educating national donors
(n=30)

- 54% Positive
- 33% Neutral
- 13% Negative

Positive **Neutral** **Negative**

DISCUSSION

Maximizing distribution of fresh fruits and vegetables should be matched by minimizing distribution of unhealthy beverages and snack foods.

It is well-documented that food insecure populations are disproportionately at risk for chronic diet-related health conditions, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and obesity. According to the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans, improving diet quality includes both increasing intake of healthy foods (i.e., fruits and vegetables, lean proteins, whole grains, non- and low-fat dairy, healthy oils) and reducing intake of unhealthy ingredients (i.e., added sugar, sodium, saturated fat).[3]

Federal nutrition programs are innovating to help low-income communities access more fresh fruits and vegetables. Strategies include revising the WIC food package to include funds for fruits and vegetables, expanding "double up bucks" programs for SNAP to incentivize fresh produce consumption, and increasing produce portions and variety in the Child and Adult Care Food Program and the National School Lunch Program.

Food banks nationwide have also been at the forefront of these efforts by prioritizing fresh fruit and vegetable distribution, and seeking partnerships and solutions to logistical challenges associated with perishable foods. Survey findings demonstrate that these focused efforts are working, as food banks reported almost one third of their overall inventory distributed is fresh produce.

However, distributing fresh produce is not enough. The survey revealed that, on average, one quarter of the inventory distributed by food banks is comprised of beverages and snack foods that are high in added sugars, sodium, and saturated fat. Decreasing this number may seem daunting, but the survey reveals compelling evidence that this goal is attainable. Food banks have an opportunity to pursue two complementary strategies: increasing distribution of healthy foods while decreasing distribution of unhealthy foods. Food banks have already made tremendous progress toward reducing their distribution of soda and candy—foods that offer empty calories with no nutritional value. 80% of food banks are distributing 2% or less of candy, and nearly 75% of food banks are distributing 2% or less of soda. Knowing that relatively low percentages of soda and candy are currently present in the charitable food system should make eliminating these unhealthy foods and beverages a highly achievable goal.

The challenge that remains is to decrease the acquisition and distribution of products that comprise the much larger categories of 'junk food'— specifically, other sugary drinks and sweet and savory snack foods.

Nutrition tracking systems are important, but not universally utilized.

A significant takeaway from the survey findings is the lack of consistent use of tracking systems among food banks. Tracking systems are important tools that food banks can use to guide procurement decisions, evaluate the nutritional profile of inventory, monitor nutrition policies, and educate partner agencies to make more informed product selections when placing orders from food banks. Without utilizing tracking systems, food banks cannot sufficiently understand what's in their inventories, nor accurately measure progress toward reaching annual nutrition goals.

Roughly half of food banks do not use any system to track inventory for nutritional quality; the other half uses various systems including Foods to Encourage, CHOP, and customized systems designed to meet a food bank's individual needs. Food banks that use more rigorous nutrition tracking tools—especially a customized system and CHOP—report distributing the least unhealthy beverages and snack foods. In comparison, food banks with no tracking system report distributing the greatest percentage of unhealthy food.

As more food banks implement nutrition tracking systems, they will have the means to assess the proportion of distributed inventory that meets their nutrition standards and to measure their success.

Food banks with strong nutrition policies that ban empty calories are leading the way.

A formal nutrition policy is a written, board-approved directive outlining a set of strict standards that guide the food bank's acquisition and distribution of more healthful foods and beverages. Formal policies help create buy-in among staff, volunteers, and other key stakeholders, as well as ensure accountability and clear communication with partner agencies and food suppliers. Instituting a formal nutrition policy reflects the organization's values in building healthy communities and demonstrates to the public that the health, wellness, and dignity of those served is an organizational priority.

It is notable that while only one out of seven food banks have adopted nutrition policies with strict standards banning the distribution of less healthy products, their strategy is paying off. These food banks are distributing, on average, twice the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables as unhealthy beverages and snacks. Having a formal ban sends a strong and consistent message to food donors, partner agencies, clients, and the community about a food bank's commitment to pursuing positive health outcomes for the vulnerable populations they serve.

FROM THE FIELD

"We label some items when added to the inventory and ordering system, such as reduced sodium, whole grain, and 100% juice. We would like to implement a consistent way to label higher nutritional quality items, but we don't have the resources to do so at this time."

FROM THE FIELD

"When we explain why we have the policy (i.e. rates of diet-related disease in our community), pushback lessens or disappears. For example, a receiver at a local retailer was frustrated that we were not taking bakery products, but when our staff person talked about the level of diabetes in our community, the receiver said that her relative is managing diabetes."

DISCUSSION

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The cost of saying 'no' to unwanted, unhealthy donations

On average, nearly 60% of food banks' total inventory comes from donations. Concerned about maintaining positive relationships with food donors, food banks remain reluctant to refuse donations that include unhealthy food. Nearly 40% of the 160 food banks that have nutrition policies or guidelines reported difficulty knowing how to handle these unwanted food and beverage donations.

Even among food banks that have instituted a ban on distributing certain unhealthy items, the pressure to accept these banned items from donors remains strong. Only 15 of the 26 food banks with a formal ban request that donors discontinue donating products they no longer distribute.

Food banks use a number of strategies to manage unwanted products, each of which has operational and financial ramifications. Taking unwanted products wastes valuable staff and volunteer time, warehouse space, and results in disposal fees or transportation costs to redirect products—consequences which are inarguably an inefficient use of a food bank's limited resources.

FROM THE FIELD

"**Because we live in such a small community, we accept all donations (even though we do not distribute those we have banned). Not accepting these donations would cause an appearance of being 'unappreciative' in our community and we do not want to foster feelings of ill will.**"

AN UNDERLYING ISSUE

One underlying issue at the core of this discussion is the field's use of pounds or meals as its primary metric for success. By prioritizing weight rather than the nutritional value of food bank inventory, this outdated system focuses on quantity rather than quality, potentially discouraging food banks from shifting their efforts to distributing healthier foods.

Confronting the fear of losing food and beverage donors

As food banks look more critically at the nutritional quality of the food they distribute, they must confront long-held fears about:

- Losing highly-valued food donors, especially since some of these same donors provide funding to food banks

- Having to forgo desirable food donations that often arrive mixed with unwanted items

- Experiencing a reduction in their annual pounds or meals distributed

Corporate food and beverage donations often arrive at food banks as large pallet loads mixed with both healthy and unhealthy offerings—in part, because donors may find it too cumbersome to separate the two. Food banks, in turn, have been hesitant to ask corporate food donors for fewer unhealthy beverages and snack foods in exchange for healthier, more sought-after foods for fear that these important donors will stop donating entirely.

Real or perceived, these concerns have kept food banks from being catalysts for change and asking for what they want.

Encouragingly, some food banks are starting to educate donors about the kinds of food and beverage donations they would like to receive. The majority of donors had either a positive or neutral response to such requests. Survey respondents further indicated that their nutrition policies and guidelines did not negatively impact annual food donations or total pounds of food distributed.

These findings illustrate that most corporate food donors are not walking away, and fears about receiving fewer donations seem to be unwarranted.

An opportunity for corporate food and beverage donors

The food industry can play a constructive role in improving nutrition and public health, particularly among food-insecure communities. Corporate donors are incentivized to donate food to food banks by multiple factors, including tax breaks, community goodwill, and being relieved of redirecting or disposing of surplus product. However, these benefits are not based on the nutritional quality of the donations. Improving the nutritional caliber of food donations to the nation's charitable food system is an opportunity waiting to be claimed.

Two questions remain: Are corporate food donors willing to engage with food banks to change the composition of their donations? Are food banks willing to engage their food donors to become partners in improving the nutritional value of the food in the charitable food system?

FROM THE FIELD

"We are seeing that donors are shifting their truckloads of donations to align with our policy. We are getting less soda and candy, but procuring more of other types of foods to balance."

FROM THE FIELD

"No one disagrees with the goal to get more healthy food to the community; it's how to do so with the current food supply chain that can be the challenge."

In our current political climate, with drastic changes being proposed to SNAP, the role of the charitable food system will be even more important in the lives of low-income families and individuals nationwide. This underscores the need for improvements to the charitable food system to continue to promote and support the health of those who rely on it.

The information gathered from this report illuminates systemic issues and challenges within the food bank network and offers promising solutions and opportunities.

The percentage of unhealthy beverages and snack foods distributed through the charitable food system is too high. All key stakeholders—from large corporate food donors to small rural food banks—have a crucial role to play in realizing the collective goal of improving health outcomes for the vulnerable communities they serve.

Research has shown that low-income families and individuals prefer to receive fresh fruits and vegetables and lean proteins over soda, candy and snack foods when visiting their local food pantry.[4] So, the next choice is ours.

The following recommendations are ideas for food banks, Feeding America, corporate food and beverage donors, and policymakers to improve the nutritional quality of food in the charitable food system.

Food Banks

• Develop and implement formal nutrition policies. Consider a ban on the acquisition and distribution of unhealthy beverages and snack foods as part of a nutrition policy (e.g., soda and other sugary drinks, sweet snacks, savory snacks, and candy).

• Implement a nutrition tracking system to monitor and assess the nutritional value of inventory.

• Engage and educate corporate donors about the kinds of foods and beverages food banks would like to receive to better serve the dietary needs of low-income communities.

Feeding America

• Identify and support the implementation of an efficient and effective nutrition tracking system for network members.

• Launch a national donor education campaign to promote increased donations of healthy food and decrease the amount of unhealthy beverage and snack food donations. Consider developing a corporate food donation policy.

• Set a measurable network goal to decrease distribution of unhealthy beverages and snack foods to complement the goal of increasing fresh fruit and vegetable distribution.

• Update the current metrics used to measure food distribution (i.e., volume of pounds or meals) with new metrics that measure the nutritional value of the food distributed.

• Allow food banks the flexibility to accept or reject food and beverage donations based upon the organization's self-defined nutrition goals.

Corporate Food and Beverage Donors

• Continue to increase donations of more nutritious foods and beverages, while reducing donations of unhealthy beverages and snack foods. Consider eliminating donations of soda and candy to food banks nationwide.

• Develop systems and protocols to remove less healthful snacks and beverages from large pallet food bank donations.

Federal, State, and Local Policymakers

• Identify and implement policies that incentivize healthy food and beverage donations and discourage unhealthy donations to the charitable food system.

GLOSSARY

The definition of key terms used in this report are listed below.

Candy: A sweet food made with sugar or syrup, often combined with fruit, chocolate, or nuts.

Choose Healthy Options Program (CHOP™): A system that uses values found on the Nutrition Facts label to rank food as 1, 2, 3 or MC (minimal contribution) with 1 designating the healthiest rating. It was developed by the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank and is based on the Nutrient Rich Food Index.

Customized tracking systems: Systems that have been developed by individual food banks to identify and track the nutritional content of inventory.

Feeding America: The nation's largest domestic hunger-relief and food rescue charity.

Foods to Encourage (F2E): The framework developed by Feeding America to identify nutritious foods in a food bank's inventory. Detailed F2E identifies the specific nutrition standards foods in different categories must meet to be considered nutritious.

Formal nutrition policy: A written, board-approved policy that outlines a food bank's goals and organizational practices to improve the nutritional quality of its inventory and the foods distributed.

Informal nutrition guidelines: Organizational practices designed to maximize the nutritional quality of a food bank's inventory and the foods distributed.

Local and regional food and beverage donors: Food industry companies that distribute product in a limited geographic area and are not interested in the benefits of a national relationship with Feeding America (i.e. small food manufacturers or regional grocery chains).

National food and beverage donors: Food industry companies that have locations in multiple food bank service areas and desire the benefits of a national relationship with Feeding America (i.e. national grocery chains, large consumer packaged goods companies).

Other sugar-sweetened beverages: Beverages with added sugar other than soda, which include energy drinks, sports drinks, fruit drinks, bottled coffees, and sweetened teas.

Savory snack foods: Foods high in sodium, such as crackers and chips.

Soda: Full-calorie carbonated soft-drinks, such as Coke or Pepsi.

Sweet snack foods and desserts: Foods high in sugar, such as cookies, cakes and bakery products.

Unhealthy beverages and snack foods: A category created for the purpose of this report, which includes soda, other sugar-sweetened beverages, sweet and savory snack foods, and candy.

NATIONAL FOOD BANK SURVEY RESEARCH METHODS

The aim of this national survey was to assess the current landscape of food bank nutrition policies and practices, and examine how these are associated with the acquisition and distribution of fresh produce and unhealthy beverages and snack foods. This study was determined to be non-human subjects research and was deemed exempt from review by the IRB at the University of Connecticut.

Participants

The target population for this survey was every food bank in the U.S., including members and affiliates of the Feeding America network, as well as non-members (i.e. independents). Because there was not a readily available list of all food banks in the U.S., we used online searches to build this list. First, we created a list of all Feeding America food banks and their affiliates, which included partner distribution organizations and re-distribution organizations. Second, we searched for websites of independent food banks in each state. We considered an organization a food bank if it serves agencies such as food pantries, soup kitchens, or any other meal providers. Our final list included 310 food banks.

Survey

The survey was developed by MAZON and administered via SurveyMonkey. It included questions about the use of nutrition tracking systems, formal and informal nutrition policies and practices, efforts to educate donors, and challenges encountered. Respondents were also asked to estimate the percentage of their food bank's inventory distributed annually for the following specific categories: fruits and vegetables (fresh produce); soda; other sugar-sweetened beverages (e.g., energy/sports drinks, fruit drinks, bottled coffee/tea drinks, etc.); sweet snack foods and desserts (e.g., cookies, cakes, bakery products, etc.); savory snack foods (e.g., crackers, chips, etc.); and candy. The possible responses were from 0% to 100% in 5% increments, except for the bottom of the scale, which included 1-2%, 3-4%, and 5-10%. The survey also included open text boxes for additional comments from respondents. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The quotes in this report are from additional comments from respondents collected in the survey.

Procedure

An invitation to complete the survey was sent by email to the CEOs, COOs, and nutrition managers (if applicable) for all 310 food banks in mid-May 2017. The invitation requested that the recipients coordinate so that only one person responded from each food bank. Participation was voluntary and there was no monetary incentive for participation. The survey was in the field for four weeks. The link to the survey was also included in Feeding America's Network Connection email. Non-responders were emailed a reminder about the survey after two weeks. In the third week, individual emails were sent to non-responders. The final response rate was 63% (N=196); 90% of survey respondents are members and affiliates of the Feeding America network.

APPENDIX

Data Analysis

If more than one survey was received from a food bank, the most complete survey was used. All data were extracted from SurveyMonkey into Excel and Stata. A score for percentage of unhealthy foods was calculated by adding up the percentages of each of the specific types (i.e., soda, other sugary drinks, sweet snacks, savory snacks, and candy). If the response was one of the ranges (i.e., 1%-2%, 3%-4%, 5%-10%) the mean value was used (i.e., 1.5%, 3.5%, 7.5%).

Based on the responses to questions about formal written nutrition policies, the presence of a ban, and informal nutrition guidelines, all of the food banks were categorized into four mutually exclusive groups: 1) formal, written policy with a ban; 2) formal, written policy with no ban; 3) informal nutrition guidelines; and 4) no nutrition policy or informal guidelines.

One of the questions asked respondents to indicate if their food bank used any of the following systems to track the nutritional quality of their inventory. The responses were: Broad Foods to Encourage, Detailed Foods to Encourage, Choose Healthy Options Program (CHOP), Customized tracking system, Actively looking for a system, and Do not currently use a system. These responses were used to categorize all food banks into four mutually exclusive groups: 1) Foods to Encourage (combined both Broad and Detailed); 2) CHOP; 3) Customized; and 4) None (combined looking and do not currently use a system).

Study Limitations and Future Research

The primary limitation of this study is that respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of inventory distributed that is comprised of the different food categories of interest. Therefore, these findings should be interpreted with caution. However, it is noteworthy that this is the first national survey that has asked these questions, so these findings provide a valuable starting point for the field to understand more about the types of foods that are in the charitable food system. At this time, few tracking systems are implemented fully enough to reliably provide quantitative nutrition information about a food bank's inventory. Hopefully, nutrition tracking systems will become more common in food banks and future research will be able to provide more detailed information about the food that is in the national charitable food system.

ENDNOTES

[1] 2017 Feeding America Annual Report: A Hunger for a Brighter Tomorrow. Available at: http://www.feedingamerica.org/about-us/financials/2017-feeding-america-annual-report.pdf

[2] Feeding America Hunger in America 2014 National Report. Available at: www.feedingamerica.org/HungerInAmerica/hunger-in-america-2014-full-report.pdf

[3] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. 8th Edition. December 2015. Available at: https://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines

[4] Campbell, E., K. Webb, M. Ross, P. Crawford, H. Hudson, and K. Hecht. 2015. Nutrition-Focused Food Banking. Discussion Paper, Institute of Medicine, Washington, DC. Available at: http://nam.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/FoodBanking1.pdf

Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON is a national advocacy organization working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the United States and Israel.

For more than a decade, MAZON has led national initiatives to improve the nutritional quality of food within the charitable food system.

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