

Study of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) (SUMMARY)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides nutrition assistance to Tribal communities through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), which has been operating since 1977. It provides income-eligible families with a monthly package of USDA Foods.

The last nationally representative study of FDPIR was based on 1989 data. Since that time, there have been many changes in FDPIR affecting eligibility, warehouse operations and distribution, customer service, and improvements in the types and variety of products offered in the food package. This report provides an update of FDPIR participant characteristics and program operations, based on a nationally representative sample of participants and sites.

Key Findings

Demographic and Economic Characteristics

Food insecurity is dramatically higher for FDPIR households than all households in the United States. In 2013, the percent of FDPIR households with low food security was more than four times the percent of U.S. households (34 percent compared to 8 percent). The percent of FDPIR households with very low food security was also much higher, 22 percent compared to 6 percent.

The characteristics of FDPIR participants show both continuity and change over the last 25 years:

FDPIR continues to serve a very-low-income population. Households still rely heavily on Social Security (36 percent of households in 2013 versus 29 percent in 1989) and increasingly on a combination of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) (31 percent vs. 18 percent). Since 1989, the share of households with earnings declined from 31 percent to 26 percent, while the share of households with no

gross income rose slightly from 10 percent to 12 percent.

The percent of one-person households has increased significantly over time. In 2013, 48 percent of the households served had only one member compared to 33 percent in 1989.

Elderly participation has increased while the participation of children has declined. The share of households with elderly adults aged 60 years or older increased from 15 percent in 1989 to 21 percent in 2013, while the share of households with children under the age of 18 declined from 31 percent to 18 percent. In 2013, 29 percent of FDPIR households contained only elderly members compared to 19 percent in 1989.

Role in Food Supply and Participation Dynamics

FDPIR contributes significantly to the household food supply. Although FDPIR is intended to be a supplemental food package, it is the sole or primary source of food for 38 percent of households based on survey responses. Over 31 percent of participants obtain some of their food from traditional or native food sources, such as hunting, fishing, farming, and gardening.

Only a small minority of households, about 5 percent, switched between FDPIR and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the last 12 months according to the participant survey. Households that did so noted a preference for FDPIR's enrollment procedures, customer service, and cultural sensitivity. Other households preferred SNAP because of the perceived quality of food at supermarkets and the greater choice of foods that could be obtained with SNAP benefits.

FDPIR Program Operations

Local FDPIR program operations vary considerably within Federal guidelines. To the extent possible at each program site, managers

tailored warehouse hours, tailgate and/or home delivery options, and product selection to the circumstances and preferences of participants.

Almost all FDPIR programs use paper applications, the vast majority of which were submitted in person either at a program office or a tailgate site. Remote locations and lack of participant access to computers or to the Internet inhibit expansion of these technologies.

Most sites placed a USDA Foods order once a month, but the frequency of ordering depended on the size of the program and food storage capacity. Almost every site reported that delivery of USDA Foods occurred once a month, usually 1 week after an order was placed.

All produce was ordered once a week online through the Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh Produce Program and delivered weekly to ensure availability of fresh fruits and vegetables to participants throughout the month. The DoD Fresh Produce component of the FDPIR program was very popular and often cited as one of the best features of the program, by both FDPIR staff and participants.

About 85 percent of FDPIR households reported picking up their food package at warehouses and other FDPIR locations, which included store settings and nutrition centers. Tailgate pickup was used by 5 percent of households and home delivery by 6 percent because they were unable to use other sites.

Nearly three-fourths of households reported receiving nutrition education materials – recipes, calendars, newsletters – when picking up their food package. Less than 20 percent reported attending cooking demonstrations, workshops, or food tastings which are often held outside distribution centers. About half reported that nutrition education is helping to change their cooking and eating habits.

Participation Satisfaction

Participant satisfaction with FDPIR is overwhelmingly positive. FDPIR households report high satisfaction rates in all areas assessed—food package, program staff, facilities, and application process. Almost 90 percent of survey respondents indicated that they were satisfied with

the food package – including the variety, freshness, quality, nutritional value, taste, and visual appeal of the food. Across sites visited, there was a commonly held perspective that the quality of food in FDPIR has improved over time.

Recommendations

Participant suggestions for improvements centered on building a more culturally relevant, local, and fresh food package. The diversity across programs is perhaps most apparent in requests for cultural foods. Food items that are viewed as cultural vary considerably across Indian Country.

Flexibility and incentives can continue to promote innovation in FDPIR across Tribes. There is wide diversity of preferences, needs, and conditions across Indian Country. FDPIR offers the flexibility to meet those needs, and Tribes have shown innovation in tailoring FDPIR operations to their Tribal communities and stretching tight budgets through ingenuity, collaboration, and leveraging of resources.

Data Sources and Methodology

Data collection activities for this study included:

- Collection of extant administrative data from a sample of FDPIR applications and recertifications in 23 Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs),
- In-person and telephone surveys of FDPIR participants identified in the sample of applications listed above, and
- Site visits to 17 FDPIR programs that included interviews with staff, Tribal leaders, focus group discussions, and observations of FDPIR offices, warehouses, food package distribution centers, and tailgate distribution sites.

None of the administrative data and interview results are attributed to specific ITOs. In some instances, unique features of specific FDPIR programs are identified.

For More Information

Pindus, Nancy M, et.al. (2016). *Study of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)*. Prepared by Urban Institute for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (available online at www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis).