

Understanding Characteristics of Elders Receiving Home-Delivered Meals in New York City and Implications for Program Targeting and Delivery

Summary of Project Funded by CITRA Pilot Grant

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Specific Aims

The overall aim of this project is to provide comprehensive, factual data about the range of abilities and needs of 17,000 frail elders in New York City who receive meals delivered at home by a network of funders and providers. Frail older adults bring a range of nutritional and social vulnerability that home-delivered meals programs attempt to address, but decisions about targeting and program delivery by the network of program funders and providers are constrained by the lack of information about the clientele. This project alleviates this lack by addressing five specific aims:

1. What is the nature of the home-delivered meals population along a series of demographic parameters?
2. How does this population compare with older people in New York City as described by census data and a previous study of elders in New York City (Marjorie Cantor, *Growing Older in NY in 1990's*)
3. How do elderly meal recipients use, and how satisfied are they with, the various types of food they receive: hot daily-delivered, frozen delivered twice-weekly, shelf-stable boxed groceries, and chilled?
4. How are demographic characteristics associated with use of and satisfaction with types of home-delivered meal?
5. What characteristics predict use of and satisfaction with types of home-delivered meals?

Methods

This project used a quantitative telephone survey method to provide numerical estimates. Data collection took place during November 2004 to February 2005. We took a random sample of 200 clients from each of four boroughs in New York City using an updated sampling frame provided by Citymeals-on-Wheels of New York. The four boroughs sampled were: Queens, Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Staten Island. We also took a random sample of 705 clients from Bronx. Therefore, we have a random sample from each of the five boroughs using the same questionnaire, with a total sample size of 1505 that is representative of the population of home-delivered meals recipients in New York City.

The survey questionnaire was developed through a collaborative process with Citymeals-Wheels, an advisory group from multiple agencies in New York City, and collaborating researchers. The questions and responses were constructed in closed-form for easy administration and response, based on previous research conducted at Cornell and by Marjorie Cantor, and also based on the intensive effort of the collaborating team. The survey questions covered the following topics:

Screen for cognitive function
Meals-on-Wheels satisfaction
Meals-on-Wheels eating patterns
Other type of delivered meals
Kitchen resources and abilities
Relationship with Meals agency
Sources of nutrition besides Meals
Food security

Nutritional intake
Social resources and isolation
Use of formal services
Lifestyle
Mental health
Physical functioning
Demographics

Clients were initially contacted by a letter from Citymeals. The survey was conducted by telephone, using the Survey Research Institute (SRI) at Cornell. Surveys were conducted in English or Spanish. SRI had successfully completed a pilot study of 20 clients, and did not encounter any difficulty in reaching clients or completing interviews. SRI used a system of tracking and call-backs to ensure that a strong effort was made to reach each client selected for the random sample to minimize selection bias. Clients were informed of the purpose of the study and asked to give consent to participate. Clients participating in the survey were offered an opportunity to talk with a staff member at Citymeals-on-Wheels about any concerns they had. The cooperation rate (i.e., completed interviews divided by completed plus refused interviews) for the survey was excellent (89.7%) and was similar in each of the five borough.

After completion of data collection, data were provided to us as a documented SPSS file. Descriptive statistical procedures will be used to tabulate proportions and means of the variables. Contingency tables and regression methods will be used to examine associations of variables. For example, characteristics of clients will be studied with variables assessing satisfaction with the home-delivered meals program.

Collaborating Agencies and Process of Collaboration

The project was conducted according to the highest scientific standards in collaboration with Citymeals-on-Wheels of New York, the organization responsible in New York City for weekend and holiday home-delivered meals. Marcia Stein, the director of Citymeals-on-Wheels, and her staff have partnered in all aspects of the study. Dr. Marjorie Cantor is a consultant on gerontology with vast experience in research on elders, and she is collaborating on all aspects of the study. The project also involves researchers at the Weill Cornell Medical College (Dr. Mark Lachs) and in the Department of Human Development at Cornell in Ithaca (Drs. Karl Pillemer and Elaine Wethington) who are affiliated with the Cornell Institute for Translational Research on Aging (CITRA). We have benefited from discussions with the City Department for the Aging and the CITRA advisory board, and from additional funding from Weill Cornell Medical College, Community Trust of New York, and the Cornell Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center.