

New options at Dallas food pantry boost food security

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Jessica Turcios, B.S., Senior Research Assistant at UT Southwestern, checks on the food deliveries that will be used to create the meal kits. Credit: UT Southwestern Medical Center

Nutritious meal kits and no-prep meals improved food security and perceived dietary quality among clients of a Dallas food pantry, according to a pilot study led by UT Southwestern Medical Center. Published in *BMC Public Health*, the [research](#) suggested these dietary

interventions could also help with prevention or management of diet-related chronic diseases.

"When people are food secure and able to eat a more balanced diet with greater variety and nutritious options, they are less likely to miss school, are able to be more engaged at work, and can improve their overall health and well-being," said first author Kelseanna Hollis-Hansen, Ph.D., Assistant Professor in the Peter O'Donnell Jr. School of Public Health and a member of the Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center at UT Southwestern.

"Understanding what nutrition interventions can be implemented through trusted community partners and which options are most desirable to the [community members](#) themselves can encourage engagement and lead to greater improvements in food security and diet quality," said Hollis-Hansen.

Food pantry clients tend to experience higher rates of food insecurity and diet-related illness, including heart disease, stroke, hypertension, high cholesterol, and Type 2 diabetes. Some face additional barriers, such as disabilities or prohibitively high costs of nutritious foods.

Of the tens of thousands of annual clients served through Dallas' Crossroads Community Services, 91% consistently lack access to nutritious food, and few consume the minimum recommended amounts of fruits or vegetables.

UTSW researchers partnered with Crossroads to learn more about clients' preferences for nutritious no-prep meals and meal kits and whether those interventions could improve food security and diet quality.

Previous research has shown that meal kits, which supply ingredients and a recipe for clients to follow, lead to more selections of produce and

whole grains from the food pantry than other options. Nutritious no-prep meals, which need only to be reheated, are another nutrition intervention strategy that could remove challenges that some people might face with food preparation.

"Being able to deliver these interventions through a trusted community partner that people already visit reduces the number of places they have to go to fill their fridge and pantry, and it invests back into the community," Hollis-Hansen said.

Sixty-six Crossroads clients were randomly assigned either meal kits or no-prep meals—breakfasts and dinners for a family of three—for two weeks. Favorite breakfast entrees included blueberry waffles, a spinach and mozzarella flatbread, and a turkey sausage burrito. Dinner options included chicken teriyaki with brown rice and carrots; chimichurri beef with carrots, cauliflower, and couscous; and Dijon pulled pork with green peas, carrots, and quinoa.

"We want to understand what [nutrition interventions](#) and types of food are most desirable to these community members so that we can provide more of what people actually want to eat at Crossroads," Dr. Hollis-Hansen noted.

On average, participants had an annual household income of \$19,058, and 47% did not have medical insurance.

From surveys, UTSW researchers found that both meal options improved participants' [food security](#) and perceived diet quality. Participants, who completed questionnaires at the outset of the study and after two weeks, liked both options but favored the meal kits more over time. Further research on improving healthy no-prep meals could benefit different populations, such as people who have recently had surgery or are receiving medical treatments.

More information: Kelseanna Hollis-Hansen et al, A pilot randomized controlled trial comparing nutritious meal kits and no-prep meals to improve food security and diet quality among food pantry clients, *BMC Public Health* (2023). DOI: [10.1186/s12889-023-17355-3](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-17355-3)

Provided by UT Southwestern Medical Center

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