

**“Great food – great variety – great price”:
A review of the Community Development Council of Quinte’s
Good Food Box Program**

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We assume full responsibility for the content of this report. Any errors or omissions are ours alone.

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Table of contents

| | |
|--|----|
| List of figures and tables | 3 |
| Executive summary | 4 |
| Introduction | 5 |
| Research methods | 6 |
| Findings | 7 |
| Who uses the Good Food Box program? | 7 |
| Why do patrons use the Good Food Box program? | 13 |
| What do patrons like about the program? | 20 |
| What other feedback to patrons give about the program? | 21 |
| Opportunities and recommendations | 22 |
| Conclusions | 24 |
| References | 25 |

List of figures and tables

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1: Gender distribution of survey respondents | 7 |
| Figure 2: Age distribution of survey respondents | 8 |
| Figure 3: Number of adults in the household. | 8 |
| Figure 4: Number of children in the household. | 9 |
| Figure 5: Incidence of reported low income | 10 |
| Figure 6: Incidence of reported food insecurity in the previous twelve months | 11 |
| Figure 7: Incidence of purchasing fresh fruits and/or vegetables in the last two weeks | 12 |
| Figure 8: Number of servings of fruits and vegetables consumed the day before | 12 |
| Figure 9: Strategies for acquiring food used in the last twelve months | 13 |
| Figure 10: The GFB helps people eat better. | 15 |
| Figure 11: Buying a GFB is good for local farmers and agriculture. | 16 |
| Figure 12: I would rather people not know that I use the GFB program | 16 |
| Figure 13: I feel good about myself when I buy a GFB. | 18 |
| Figure 14: The people running the GFB treat me with respect and courtesy. | 19 |
| Figure 15: I'd rather buy my fruits and vegetables from the grocery store than get them through the GFB. | 19 |
| Figure 16: Likelihood of continuing to use the program even if more money for food were suddenly available | 20 |
| | |
| Table 1: Why did you purchase this Good Food Box? | 14 |

Executive summary

The Community Development Council of Quinte's (CDC-Q) Good Food Box program is a bulk food buying program that enhances the accessibility and affordability of fresh produce for residents of Hastings and Prince Edward Counties.

While GFB program is available to anyone, 44% of survey respondents indicated that they live with low income. 48% of respondents indicated that they have experienced some degree of food insecurity in the last twelve months. These alarming figures may suggest that the GFB an important food source for people who are struggling financially.

Customers use the Good Food Box program for many reasons: They primarily use the program because it is affordable and offers excellent value for money. Many customers also appreciate that it helps them eat more fruits and vegetables, and that it helps them eat more local food. Other popular reasons for using the program include feeling like a part of the community, avoiding the temptation of buying too much at the grocery store, and having enough food to last until the end of the month.

The Good Food Box program is not stigmatizing to those who participated in this study. They respond overwhelmingly that they are treated with courtesy and feel good about themselves when using the program. They feel that the GFB helps people to eat better and that it is good for local farmers and agriculture. The majority of customers do not mind if other people know they buy a GFB and are not embarrassed by this fact. They are also happy to be buying fruits and vegetables through this program and would not necessarily prefer to do this shopping at the grocery store instead.

GFB customers like that they participate in the program and want the program to succeed and grow. They offer suggestions for helping the program to continue to thrive and expand, which can be organized according to the themes of improving the promotion of the program, facilitating delivery for less mobile patrons, creating sponsorship opportunities for program users to supplement order costs for more needy local people, growing the program by increasing the frequency of the orders or diversifying food offerings, and expanding and standardizing the information distributed with orders each month.

Introduction

Good Food Box (GFB) programs are typically non-profit bulk food buying programs that aim to increase the accessibility and affordability of fresh produce (fruits and vegetables) to people who participate in the program. GFB programs are typically not means tested; they are open to all members of a community¹. Public health and nutrition research indicates that GFB participation may have a positive, although non-significant, effect on fruit and vegetable consumption². Informal and anecdotal evaluations suggest that participation in GFB programs is related to increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, healthier general eating behaviours that follow from the presence of healthy foods in the home³, satisfaction with the program⁴, and self-reported increased feelings of food access and food security⁵. There are several dimensions to their limitations, however: only a very small percentage of people who could benefit from patronage actually use GFB programs⁶, and there are numerous barriers to participation both for those who use them⁷ and those who do not⁸. Good Food Box programs are an important part of a diversifying landscape of community food projects aimed at increasing food accessibility in underserved, vulnerable, or high-needs communities, although their universal availability can make them appealing for all types of health- and thrift-minded people.

Good Food Box schemes in Canada include, but are not yet widely characterized by, priorities such as populating boxes primarily or exclusively with organic, locally procured, and/or culturally appropriate produce in alignment with goals of environmental and social justice. Such box schemes include, most notably, Toronto's FoodShare organization⁹. Many smaller GFB programs are attempting to shift their food procurement patterns according to these priorities as well, by populating boxes with more locally grown produce when possible.

This report presents findings about the Community Development Council of Quinte's (CDC-Q) Good Food Box program. The findings fall under four main categories or questions: Who uses the Good Food Box program? Why do patrons use the Good Food Box program? What do patrons like about the program? What other feedback to patrons give about the program?

¹ Biberstein & Daalderop, 2008; Community Voices Consulting Group, 2011a

² Miewald, Holben, & Hall, 2012

³ Community Voices Consulting Group, 2011b; FoodShare, 2012

⁴ Bell, Rose, Roll, & Dupont, 2014

⁵ Brownlee & Cammer, 2004

⁶ Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013

⁷ Tsang, Holt, & Azevedo, 2011

⁸ Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013

⁹ Johnston & Baker, 2005; Scharf, 1999

Research methods

These study collected information in four ways:

1) Mail-in survey: GFB customers received a mail-in survey with their order in May 2014. The survey questions collected basic demographic data about participants as well as their reasons for purchasing a GFB, shopping and eating habits, and their opinions about the GFB program. In total, 393 surveys were distributed and 161 surveys were returned, representing a 41% response rate.

Mail-in surveys are helpful as a data collection tool because they are a low-cost way to cost way to solicit ideas from a large sample of people. They can be completed in private, at the convenience of the respondent. They have some important drawbacks when used as the sole data collection strategy, however. For instance, since researchers are not present during survey completion, respondents may skip questions or misinterpret them. From these possible misunderstandings, respondents may not provide pertinent information, which compromises the effectiveness of the study because it may present a distorted profile of the program and its users. Moreover, since the topics at hand may be sensitive to individuals due to the stigma attached around poverty, people could be less willing to answer some questions truthfully, or they may portray themselves differently from their day-to-day lives. This, again, could present a skewed picture of the Good Food Box program's impact on Hastings and Prince Edward County residents. Finally, since mail-in surveys require researcher oversight and compilation, processing errors may be present, which impacts the overall accuracy of the results. While mail-in surveys remain a helpful and important data collection strategy, it was important to collect data in a few other ways as well.

2) Interviews of customers: Nine random GFB customers consented to be interviewed on June 2, 2015 at the CDC-Q main office. These interviews included questions of the same nature as the mail-in surveys. They were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

3) Interviews with program leaders: Two administrators/leaders with the CDC-Q and GFB program more specifically also consented to be interviewed for the project.

4) Document review: Online and hard copy documents about the GFB program were collected and reviewed for the purposes of learning more about the GFB program's history and assessing the state of existing knowledge about the program.

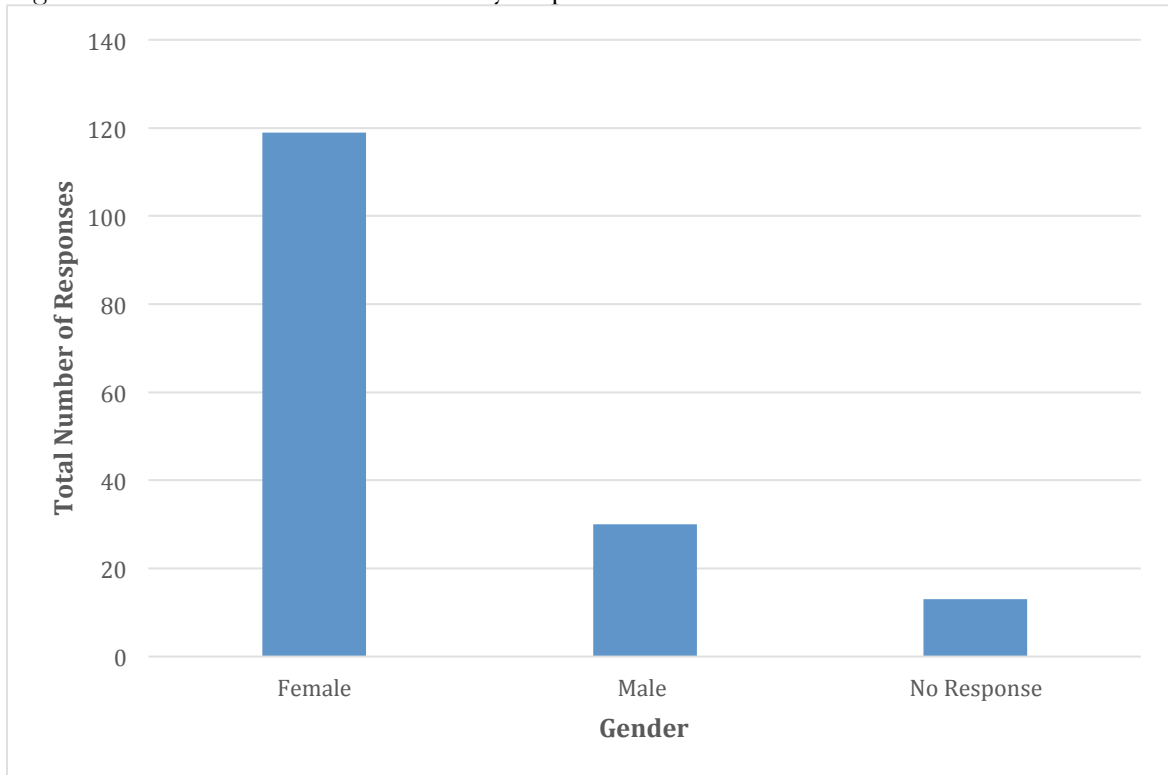
Basic statistics and figures were generated in order to analyze the quantitative data collected for the study. To analyze the qualitative material, an iterative coding strategy was used to read and reread the surveys and interview testimony, marking up the text in order to identify themes and generate conclusions. We strive to reproduce representative quotations in this report in order to best capture the diversity in opinions and realities of Good Food Box program patrons.

Findings

Who uses the Good Food Box program?

161 respondents (41% of the customers in May 2014) returned a mail-survey. Of these respondents, 74% identified as female, indicating that women comprise a significant majority of people who submit orders through the GFB program.

Figure 1: Gender distribution of survey respondents



As indicated below in figure 2, customers range in age from young to old. Survey respondents also shared information about the number of adults living in their household. Nearly one quarter (23.6%) of respondents lived alone. Over half (54.6%) of respondents indicated that two adults live in the household. A further minority of respondents indicated that three or more adults live in the household (see figure 3).

60% of respondents indicate that they live in a home without children. The numbers of children in the remaining households are depicted in figure 4, with two children being the most common living situation.

Figure 2: Age distribution of survey respondents

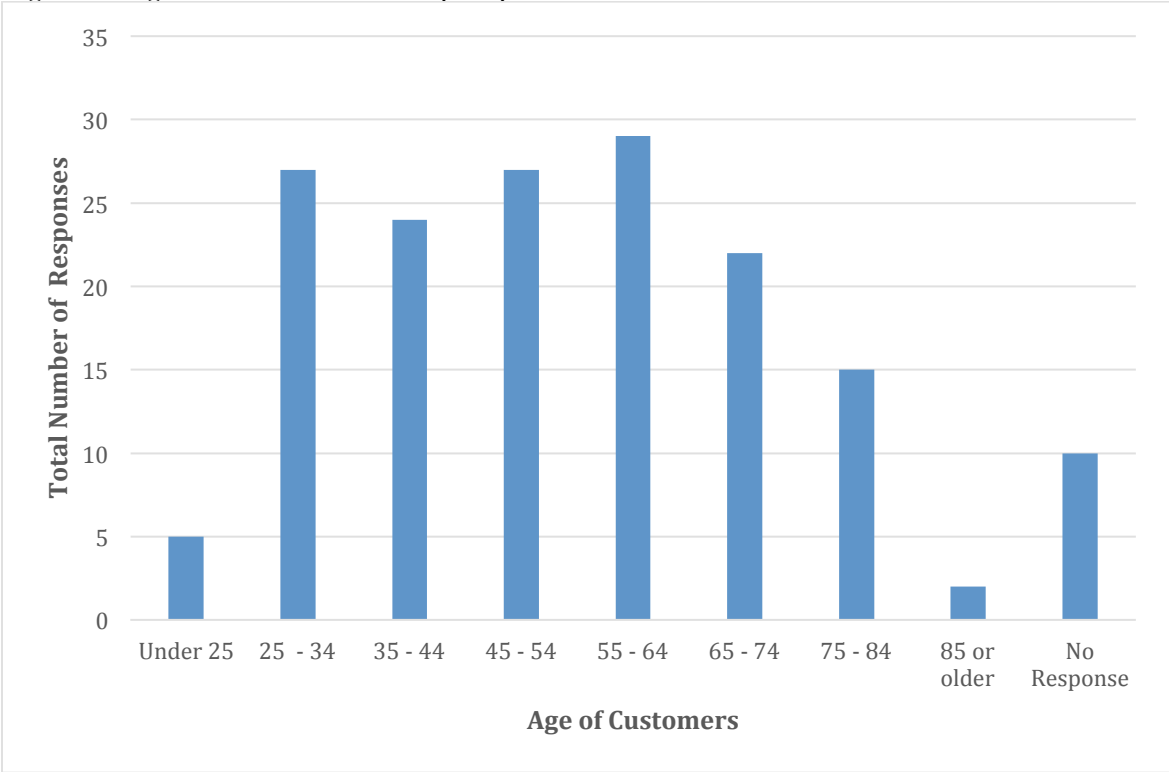


Figure 3: Number of adults in the household

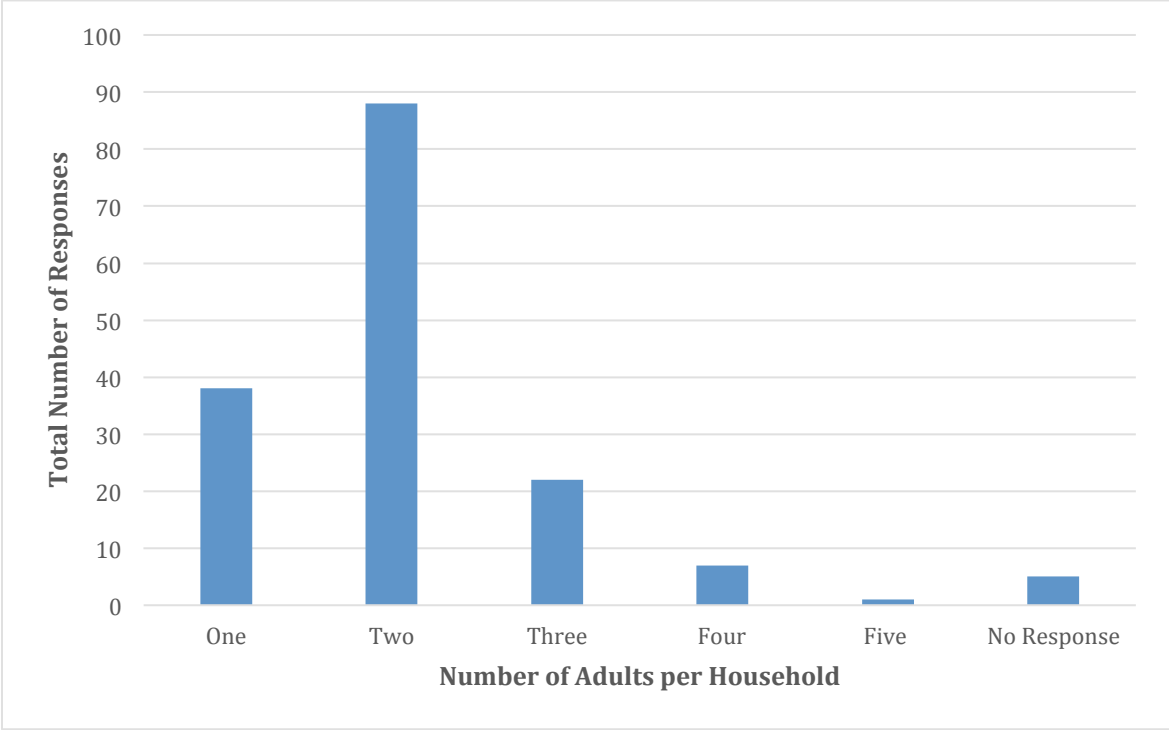
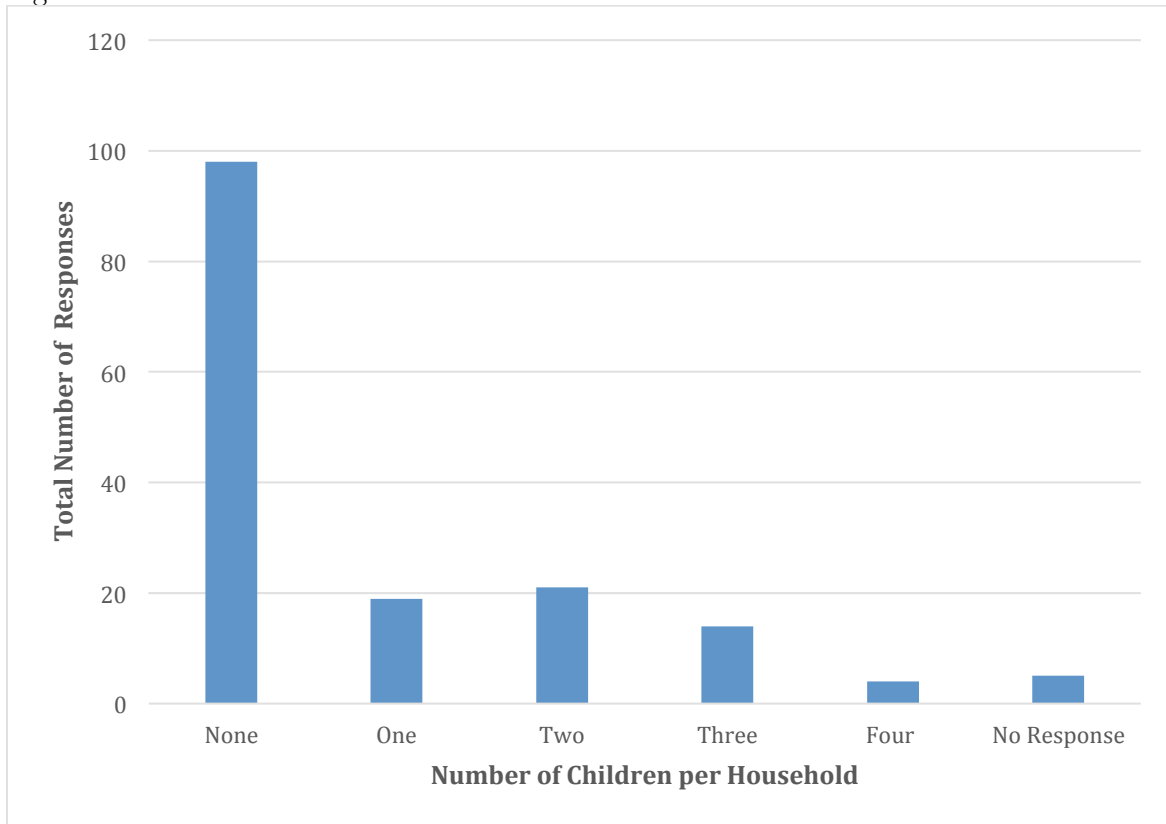


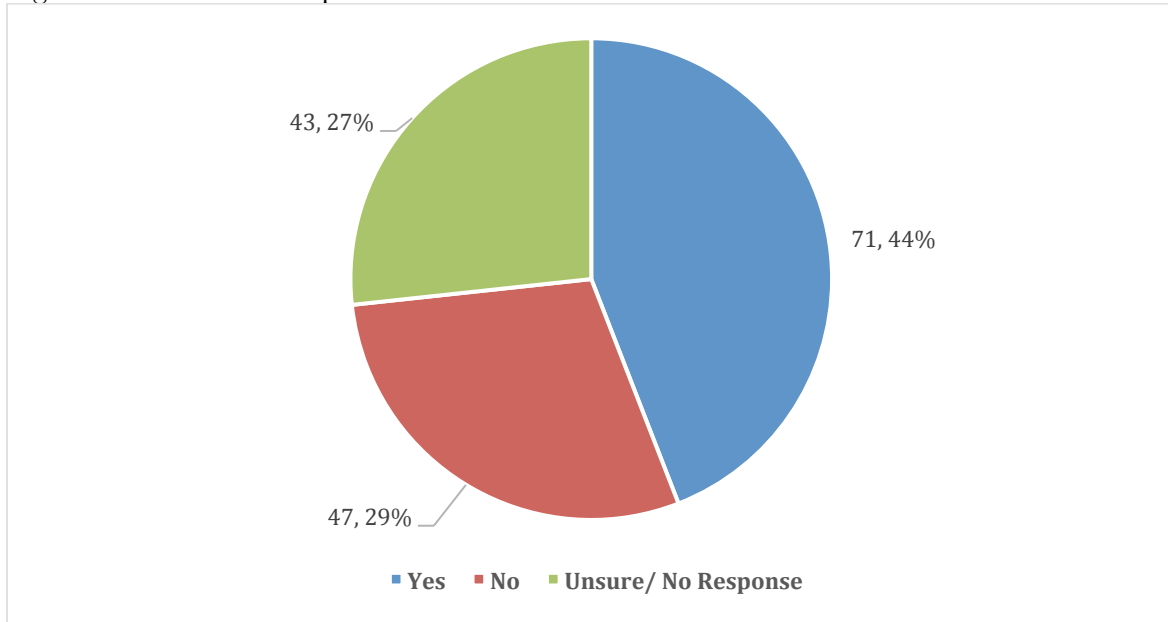
Figure 4: Number of children in the household



The economic situation of GFB customers is decidedly mixed and poverty levels are higher than the general population of Canadians, the estimates of which range from about 4.8% to 14% depending on source and poverty measure stand at approximately (cf., Canadians without Poverty, n.d.; Lammam & MacIntyre, 2016). When asked whether they would identify as one of the over three million Canadians living with low income each year, 44% of respondents answered in the affirmative. Another 29% indicated that they do not fall into this category. The final 26.7% of respondents indicated that they were unsure or provided no answer¹⁰. Most respondents (73%) own or lease a household vehicle, while more than one in five (22%) do not.

¹⁰ The most type of survey questions to ascertain incidence of poverty asks respondents directly about their income. This type of question can be stigmatizing and some respondents can feel that their privacy is being invaded. Therefore, at the CDC-Q's request, we used a modified question: 'Recent studies show that poverty is on the rise in Canada. Almost 1 in 10 Canadians can be classified as poor – that's over 3 million people. Does this new reality reflect the money situation in your household?'

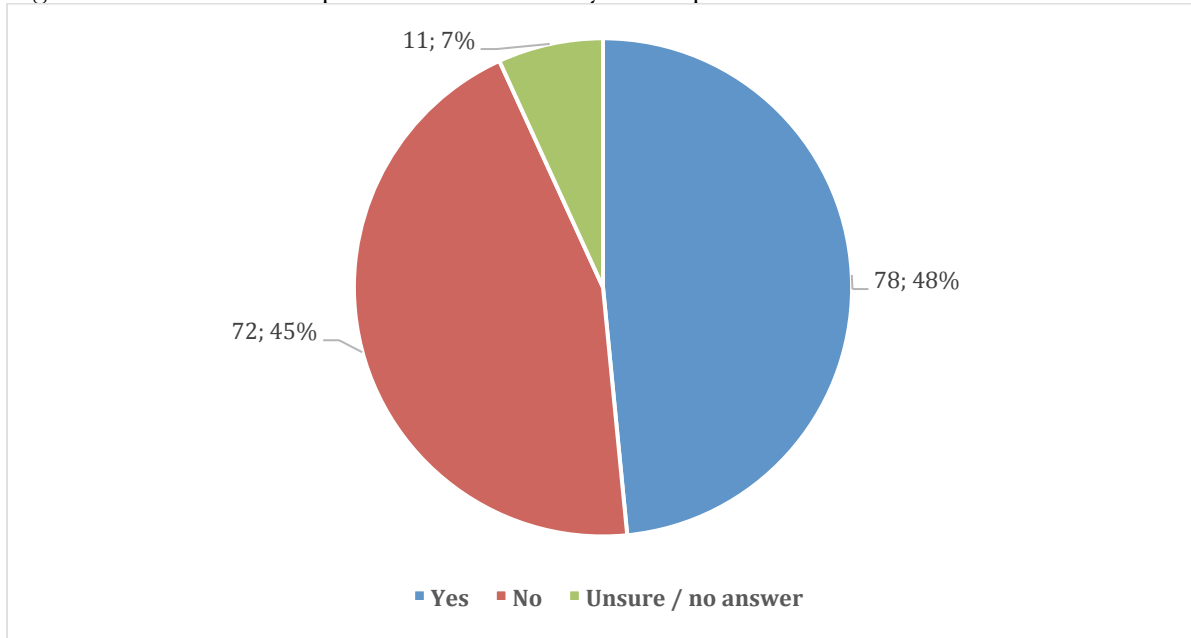
Figure 5: Incidence of reported low income



Similarly, reported rates of food insecurity are high among GFB customers. 48.4% of respondents indicated that they had been food insecure at some point in the last year, while a further 44.7% indicated that they had not. 6.8% of respondents were unsure or did not respond. This food insecurity rate is far higher than the best estimates of Canada as a whole: The most recent Canadian Community Health Survey suggested that 12% of Canadian households had experienced some level of food insecurity in the previous 12 months (Tarasuk, Mitchell & Dachner, 2014)¹¹.

¹¹ This question about food insecurity was phrased as follows: ‘In the last year, have any of these problems happened to you and your household? Not having enough food because of lack of money; worrying that there won’t be enough to eat because of lack of money; not eating the quality of variety of food that you would like, because of lack of money.’ This phrasing is taken from the Canadian Community Health Survey cycle 2.2 (2004).

Figure 6: Incidence of reported food insecurity in the previous twelve months



In terms of eating habits, 80% of respondents had purchased fresh fruits and/or vegetables in the last two weeks. 18.6% of respondents had not done so. When asked about the number of servings of fruits and vegetables (excluding juices or processed potato products) they had eaten the day before, most people had eaten 1-2 servings (29%) or 3-4 servings (31%) (see tables 7 and 8).

Figure 7: Incidence of purchasing fresh fruits and/or vegetables in the last two weeks

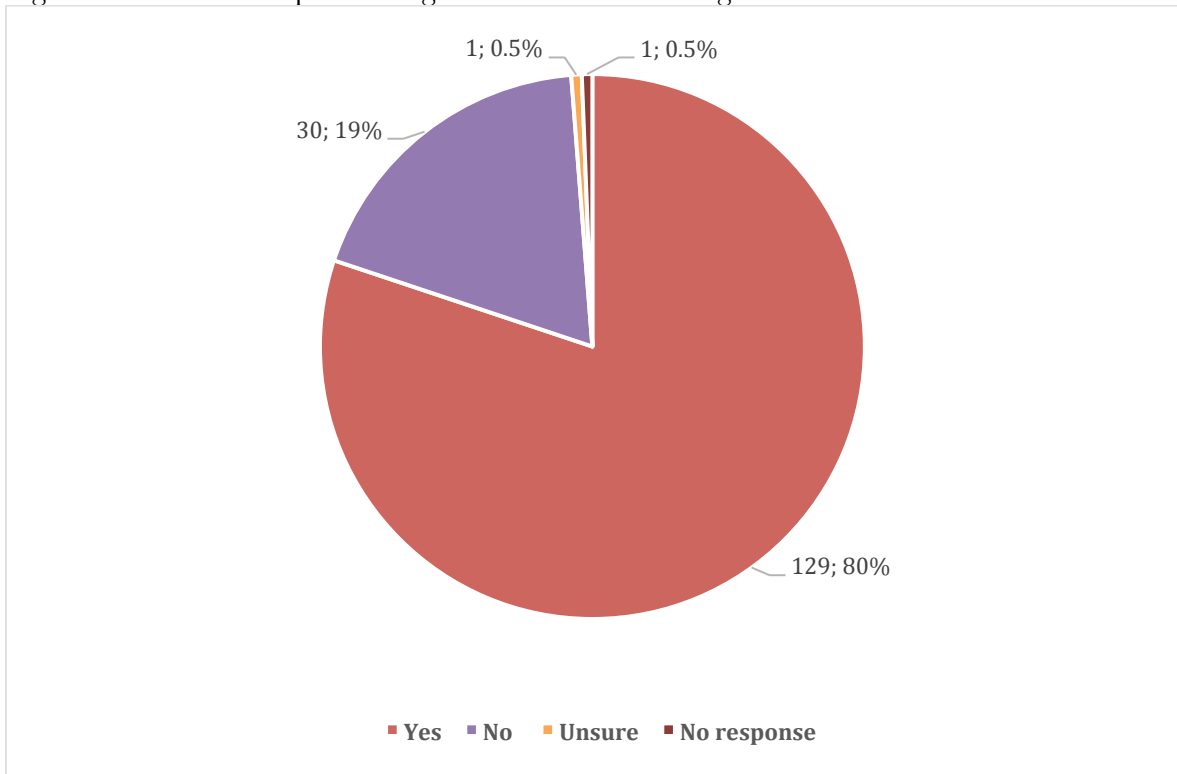
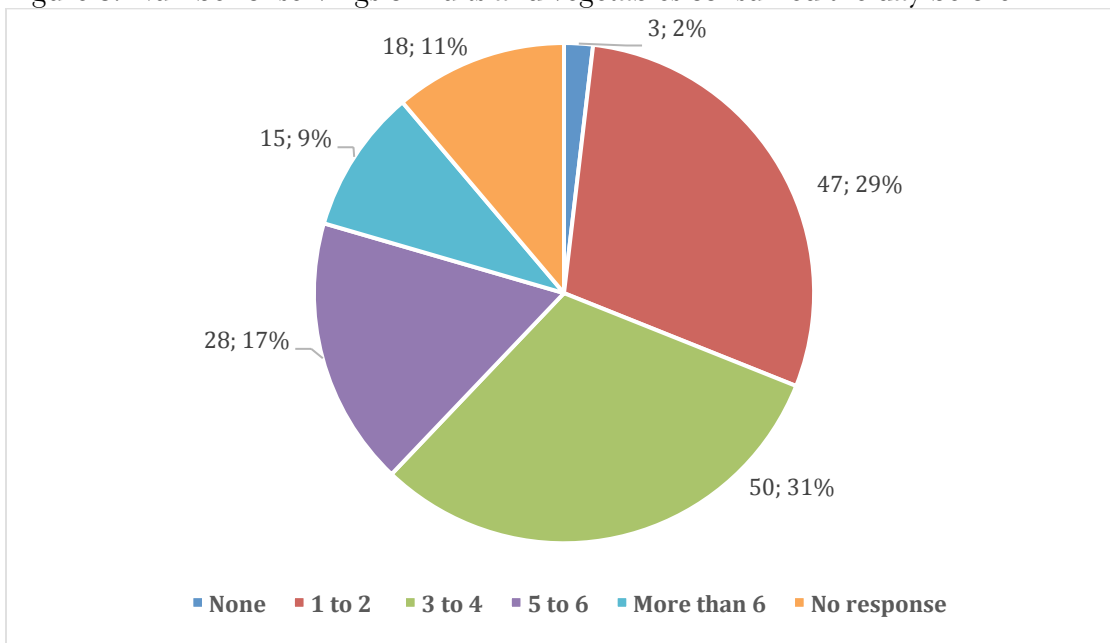
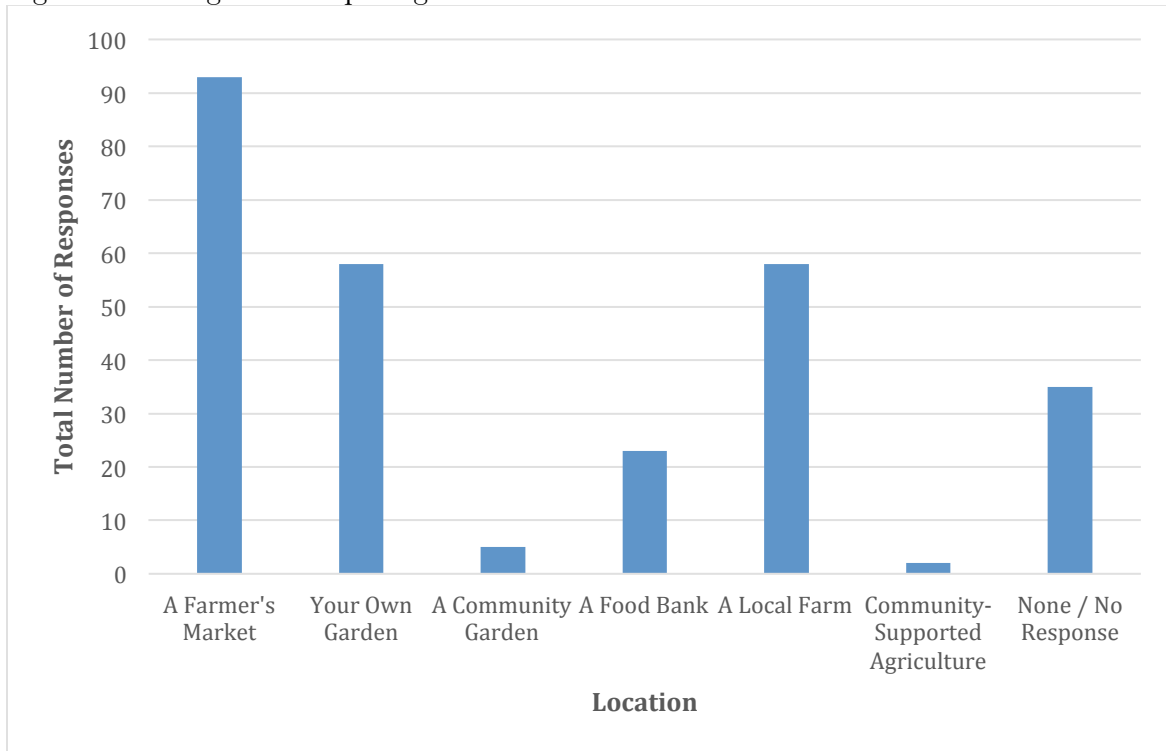


Figure 8: Number of servings of fruits and vegetables consumed the day before



Finally, in addition to getting some of their food from the GFB program, GFB customers get food for themselves and their household in a variety of different ways. Aside from shopping at grocery stores, which all respondents are assumed to have done, the most popular ways of acquiring food at some point in the last twelve months included shopping at a farmers' market (57.7%), growing food in one's own garden (36%), and visiting a food bank (14.2%).

Figure 9: Strategies for acquiring food used in the last twelve months



Why do patrons use the Good Food Box program?

GFB customers were asked about the reasons for purchasing that month's Good Food Box. Figure 9 summarizes possible options and their popularity. The most popular reason for using the CDC-Q's GFB program is the cost savings to customers. Nearly half of all respondents also appreciate that the program helps them eat more fruits and vegetables. Other reasons for buying the GFB include being able to eat more locally grown food, avoiding trips to the grocery store that can lead to unnecessary spending, feeling like a part of the community, and the GFB program's role in ensuring that customers will have food at the end of the month.

Table 1: Why did you purchase this Good Food Box?

| Reasons for purchasing GFB | No. of respondents | Percentage of respondents |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| I save money on food | 105 | 65.2% |
| It helps me or my family eat more fruits and vegetables | 75 | 46.5% |
| I feel like a part of the community | 22 | 13.6% |
| It helps me eat more local food | 31 | 19.2% |
| I can avoid the big grocery stores and retailers | 13 | 8% |
| I know I'll have food to last me until the end of the month | 25 | 15.5% |
| It supports small business | 12 | 7.4% |
| I can be more involved with the Community Development Council | 7 | 4.3% |
| It's a chance to try new or interesting foods | 2 | 1.2% |
| The food fits with my cultural/ religious dietary preferences | 5 | 3.1% |
| I'd rather get food from a community group than from a business | 18 | 11.1% |
| It gets my child/children excited about healthy foods | 12 | 7.4% |
| I can avoid the temptation to spend too much at the grocery store | 22 | 13.5% |
| It's easier than grocery shopping | 23 | 14.2% |

* Respondents could choose more than one option for this question, and hence the percentages total more than 100%.

Many respondents' comments elaborate on these ideas:

“Great food – great variety – great price”

“I have used the GFB for many years and know that it has helped my family eat healthier and save money. Great program! I wish they could do it more often!”

“A nutritionist, sent me because of my illness and severe drop in weight, told me about the GFB. It is an incredibly wonderful thing. I wish I had known about it before. The ladies there are also so friendly and helpful. [...]”

“I need to eat healthier.”

“I like to support local food.”

“After rent and other bills are paid there is not enough money to buy vegetables and fruits. The GFB offers a good variety at reasonable price.”

“To be healthier and teach good eating habits.”

“It is important to know my foods are healthy. And that all my family is eating is real food not laced with pesticides or genetically modified. I am a firm believer in

God’s green earth, the ultimate provider and not what someone else determines is good for us.”

“The choice I made suits me because I’m diabetic.”

“This keeps our farmers earning a fair wage to support their families. Real produces tastes better.”

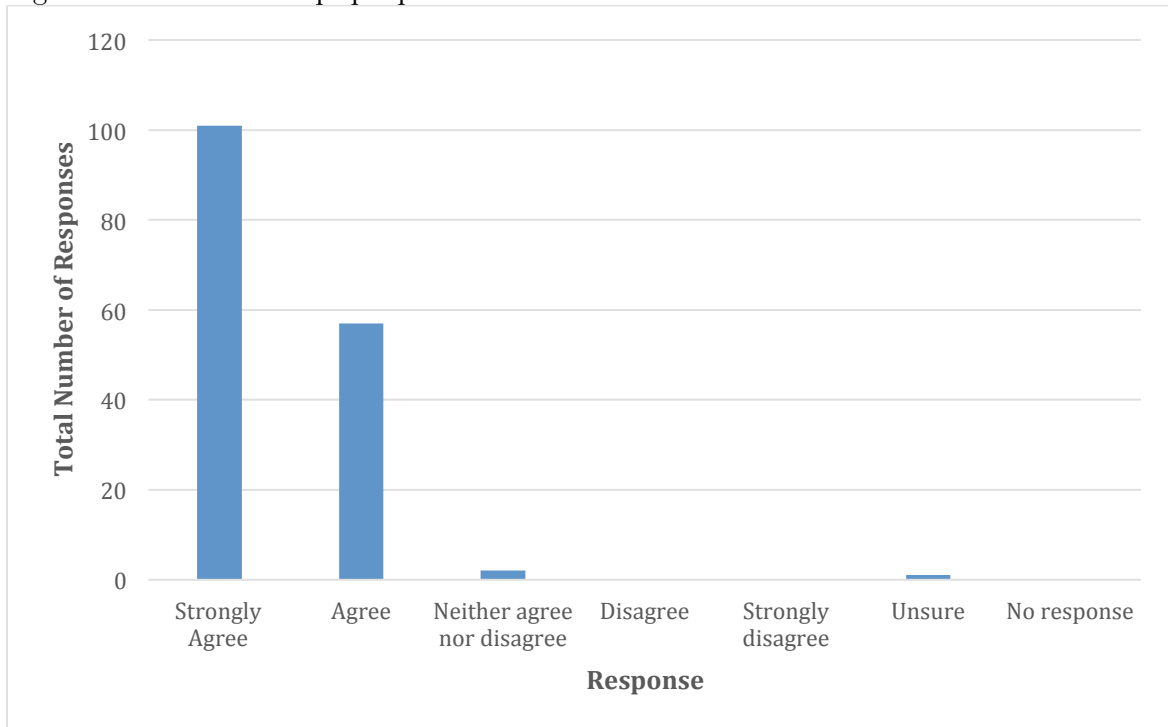
“As of right now, I feel that I’m able to put food on the table for my family. Yes, I have to watch what I spend but I feel that I’m doing alright.”

“Convenient, local produced, good variety, reasonably priced, contributing back to the community.”

“I hope it supports local business. Convenient. I hate grocery shopping!”

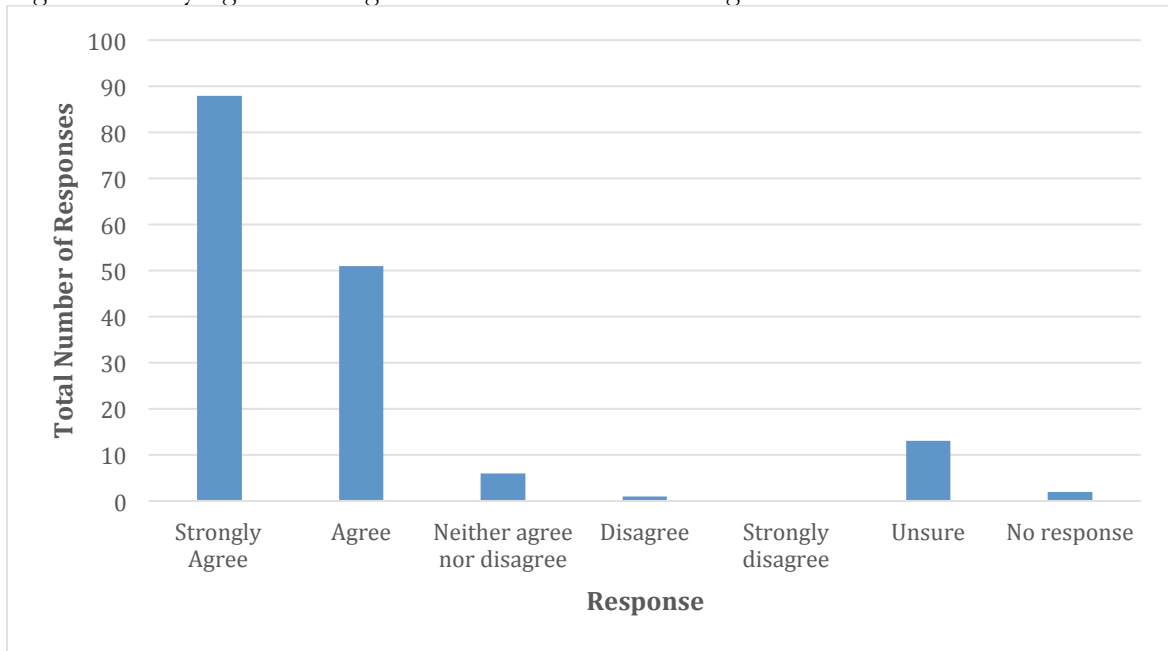
Survey respondents indicate other positive feelings and associations with using the program, or at least a lack of distinctly negative feelings and associations. For example, nearly all respondents believe that the GFB helps people eat better.

Figure 10: The GFB helps people eat better



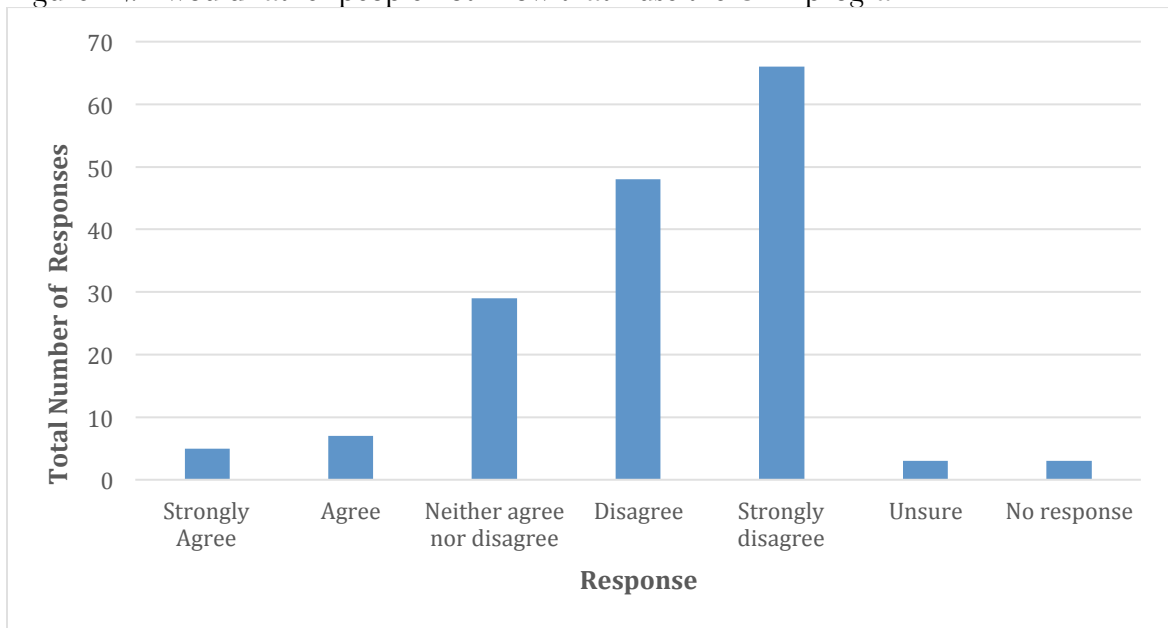
As shown in figure 11, they also believe that the GFB program is good for local farmers and agriculture.

Figure 11: Buying a GFB is good for local farmers and agriculture



The GFB program is also not perceived to be stigmatizing by those who completed this survey. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement, 'I would rather people not know that I use the GFB program', respondents strongly disagree and seem happy, or at least not very concerned, that people know they use the program.

Figure 12: I would rather people not know that I use the GFB program



On this question, respondents offered interesting ideas about what, precisely, stops the GFB from being stigmatizing. When asked how using the GFB is different from using a charity such as a food bank, respondents offer some of the following ideas:

“Not so embarrassing as using a food bank as I pay for the vegetables and fruit that I buy. These items are not something I purchase at a shopping mart.”

“I feel embarrassed that I have so little money, I want to contribute to the food I get - no drain an already over-taxed program like the food bank.”

“I totally disagree with charity. At least the GFB is supporting a group and I pay money for it. It is low cost. Most of all food in grocery stores is way overpriced!!”

“At least I’m paying.”

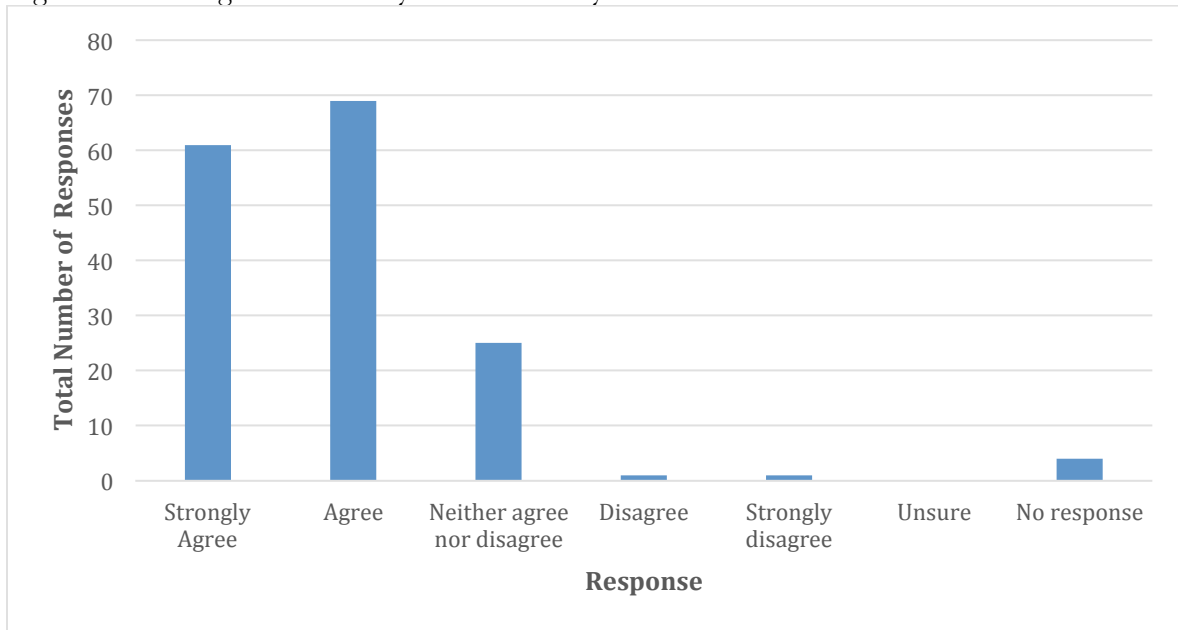
“We all need a little help sometimes. I would feel better about this because I am paying for the Good Food Box and it’s not taken from someone who might need a food bank or other programs. The Good Food Box is a wonderful way to eat fresh fruits and veggies plus it get my children exercise so if others knew I used, I would be proud. I have even told others about it to spread the work about this great program.”

“I’ve never had to use a food bank and the thought mortifies me. I was raised in a wealthy home and financially struggling is difficult for me to adjust to. The GFB feels less shameful because you can sort of hide behind it is a decision instead of needing it.”

Having to pay for the Good Food Box emerges as an important factor that influences the lack of stigma attached to the program. Paying for one’s food is seen as making a contribution, earning one’s food, helping the organization, and avoiding the embarrassment of needing charity.

Related to this point, another clear majority of respondents answer affirmatively to the idea that ‘I feel good about myself when I buy a GFB’.

Figure 13: I feel good about myself when I buy a GFB



Respondents also feel very strongly that the people who run the GFB program treat them with respect and courtesy. They leave comments such as:

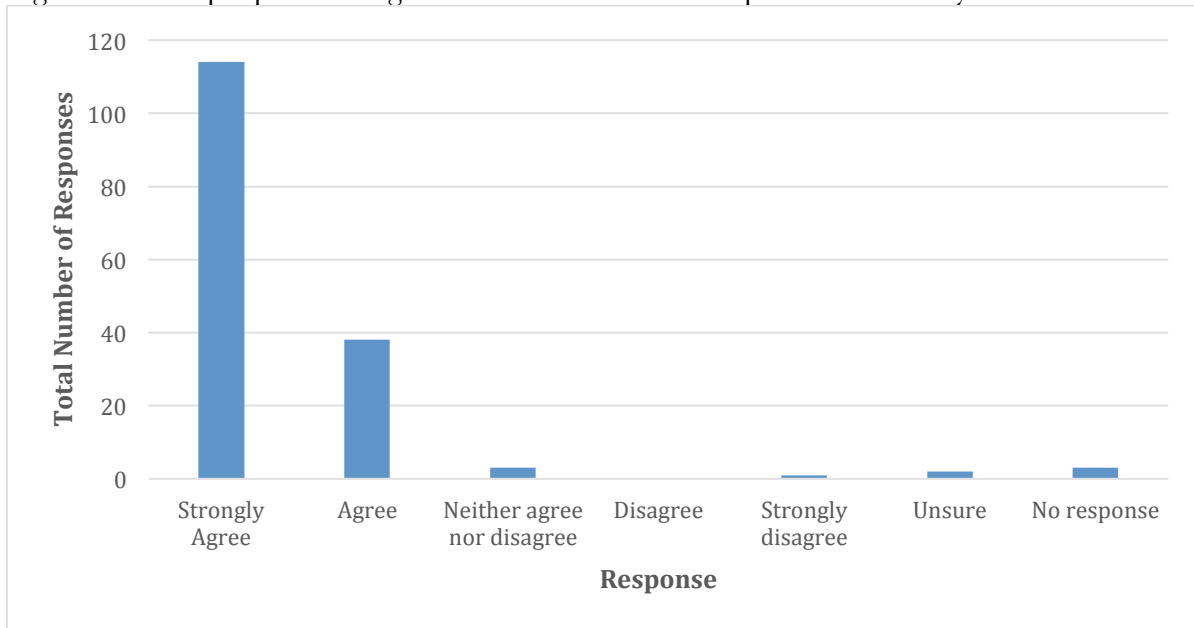
“I like the friendly atmosphere”

“The people at GFB are nice”

“[The woman at the front desk] made me feel very comfortable, she didn’t use ‘why are you here?’ or anything like that.”

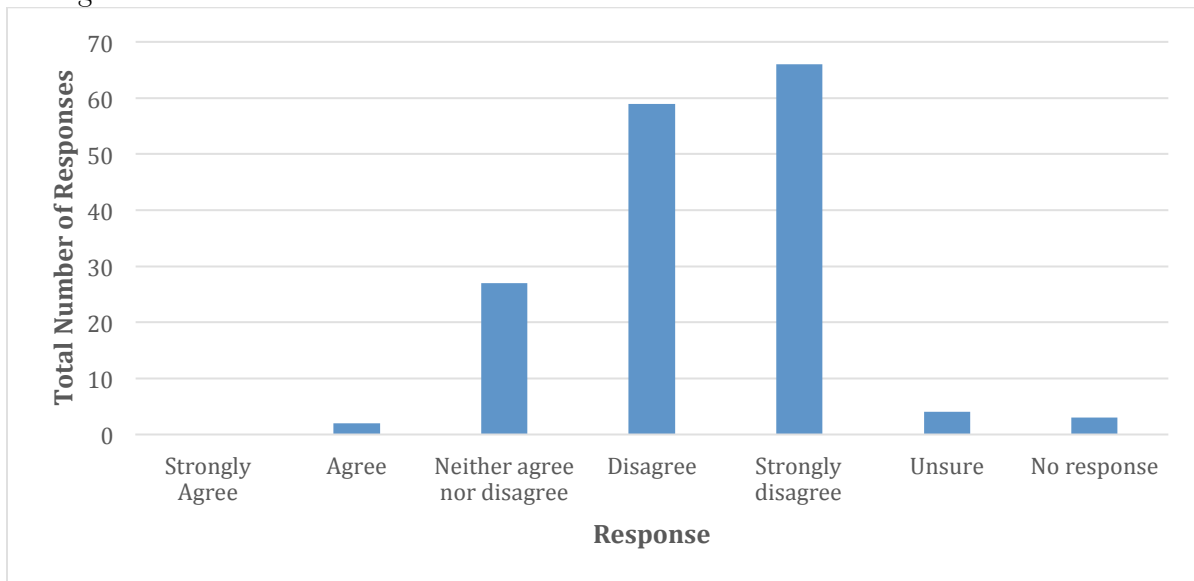
There is a strong majority agreement with the statement that respondents feel they are treated with respect and courtesy when interacting with staff and volunteers involved in the program.

Figure 14: The people running the GFB treat me with respect and courtesy



Finally, the voluntary nature of many peoples' involvement in the GFB program is confirmed when a majority of people disagree to some extent with the notion that 'I'd rather buy my fruits and vegetables from the grocery store than get them through the GFB', suggesting that many people like that they participate in the program rather than wishing they could stop.

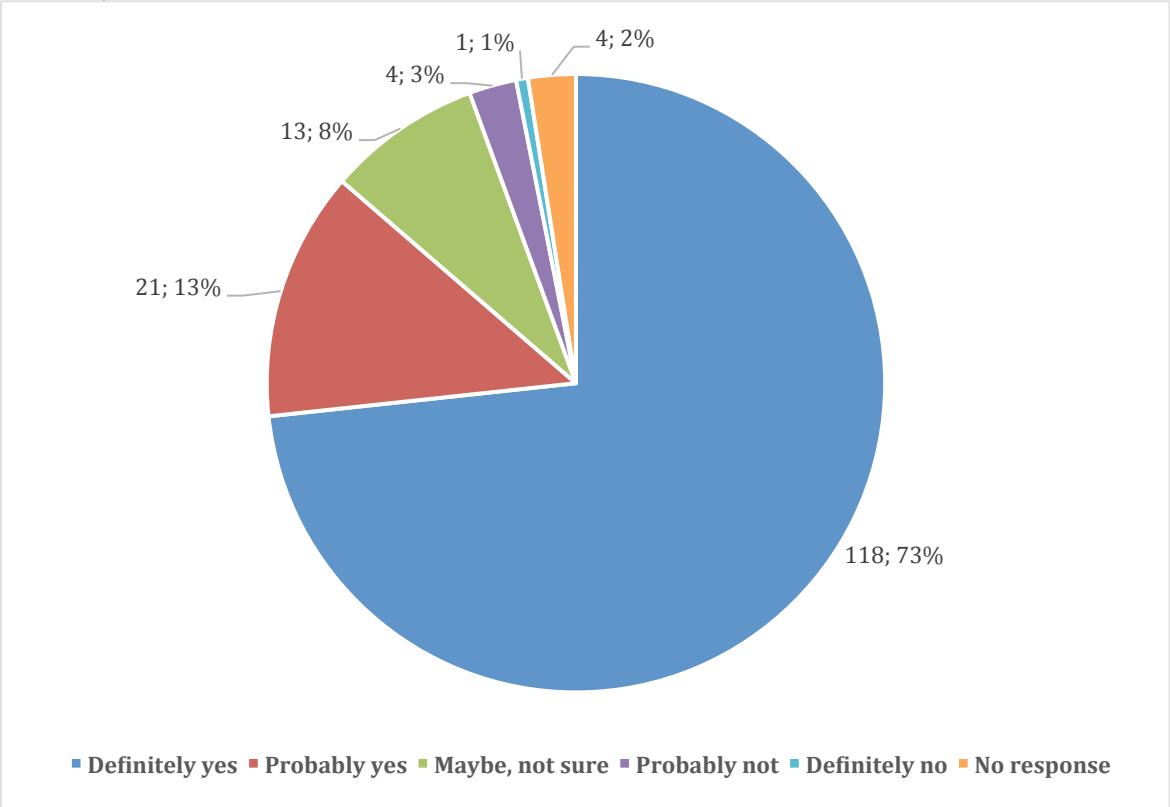
Figure 15: I'd rather buy my fruits and vegetables from the grocery store than get them through the GFB



What do patrons like about the program?

First, it is important to establish that respondents seem satisfied with using the program and are not especially eager to discontinue their patronage. Respondents were clear about their likelihood of continuing to use the GFB program if a situation arose where they suddenly had more money to spend on groceries: An impressive 86% of respondents reported that they would either definitely or probably continue to use the program.

Figure 16: Likelihood of continuing to use the program even if more money for food were suddenly available



Aside from the question of continuing or discontinuing their use of the program, respondents offer a wide variety of other endorsements for the program and reasons for their continued support. Themes include excellent value for money, high quality of foods received, convenience, supporting the Community Development Council, and supporting local farmers and producers:

“Whoever came up with this program should know it is a great idea. I’m not rich and I’m not poor but I found myself retired early because of a disability and without this program I would be eating more processed, canned food to see me through until my next pay at the 1st of each month. So thank you.”

“I like using this service because it is not charity and also because [...] it helps the community plus some local businessmen. It’s just a win-win situation. Saving money is always good.”

“The Good Food Box is available to everyone; one does not have to show proof of income or their financial situation. Fresh fruit and veggies are expensive and the Good Food Box does not discriminate who buys.”

“Anyone can buy the GFB and everyone loves a deal”

“This is an excellent program that only works with amazing volunteers. I have fruits and veggies for the month and recipes that I use to match. The volunteers are so important to keep people fed. Thank you so much to them.

“I am handicapped and my pension check is small. This GFB helps me. Thank you.”

“I am eating better and it has helped me lose over 35lbs in the last year. I will continue to get the food box.”

“It supports local growers/businesses. This makes your community stronger (more money = more jobs). It means supporting my community neighbors.”

“Continues community involvement and support of programs that help people.”

“I am 96 years old, no longer drive and I still live on my own in an apartment. My neighbor goes for her food at the bank and is kind enough to bring me fruits and vegetable with her food box. It’s such a good help for me.”

“We are now users of GFB and also impressed by the quality and quantity in food box and fruit bag. Find the staff very pleasing and respectful.”

What other feedback do patrons give about the program?

GFB patrons write overwhelmingly positive assessments of the program. At times, however, they offer constructive feedback about certain aspects of the program. While some of these issues cannot be resolved or addressed properly by the CDC-Q itself due to the nature of wholesale food production and distribution, we reproduce them here as a way to stimulate further discussion about possible improvements to the program.

“I think in our area once a month is not enough. Bi-weekly would allow people more options, less money to be spent at the store and less waste. If you take 2 boxes, the food wouldn’t last a full month. I like how much better we eat when we use the GFB program more regularly.”

“I would like to see more of a selection of fruits and veggies. Ex. Asparagus, sp. Squash, sweet onions, beans, blueberries, melons, avocado, pineapple, spinach.”

“Rotten vegetables and fruits at times.”

“No iceberg lettuce please.”

“I think it would be helpful to put a note in the box as to where the food comes from, if it organic/local, etc. As well as some recipes that can be made from the fruits and veggies in the box like potato leek soup, apples sauces, etc. Also a community garden perhaps run by the high school or elementary school would be a great idea, perhaps working along side seniors to create recipes from the old way of cooking. I would also like to see a check list that a home can use to add who suits what. I don't eat peppers so a pepper in my box gets given away or 1lbs potatoes may not be needed this month as it was last month, etc. So I guess having a rough selection of what goes in or substitution foods for others.”

“I would prefer not to receive every month cooking onions. Perhaps every 2nd month.”

Opportunities and recommendations

In this section, we offer a few ideas and possibilities for the program as its organizers at the CDC-Q continue their work into the future.

1) Promoting the program:

Good Food Box customers, for the most part, love the program and want to see it continue and grow. Many patrons do their part by promoting the program to people in their families and social networks, such as the patrons who note that “I tell everyone I talk to that I get the Good Food Box. You get a lot for your money” and “I tell everyone what a great deal it is and how much food you can get”. In addition to informal advertising, could the CDC-Q use other low-cost means of advertising the program, such as social media? One commenter is convinced that

“It needs better promotion. If others understood the economic value and how their money helps the money of others go further, they would certainly participate.”

Patrons seem eager to lend their voices in promotion of this program, and perhaps their praise could be the basis of volunteer-driven marketing efforts to make other Hastings and Prince Edward County residents aware of its many benefits.

2) Sponsorship opportunities

Several survey respondents noted that even if they stopped using the program because they suddenly had more money for food, they would still like to help others access it. The

following comments indicate some interest on the part of patrons to sponsor more needy individuals and families:

“I wish I could sponsor several boxes to give to others”

“I would pay each month for a random family to get one or donate the contents to our local food bank”

It is not unreasonable to assume that other, more affluent residents in the region might do the same, similar to making a yearly donation to emergency food charities. There might particular appeal to this idea given that the GFB contents are inherently health-promoting. The CDC-Q might consider, then, the feasibility of implementing a sponsorship program where patrons and donors can donate funds to anonymously purchase Good Food Box orders, or supplement the cost of an order, for other patrons who self-identify as being in financial need. Some ideas might include having a draw to ‘win’ a box or bag of produce, or a winter holiday sponsorship campaign.

3) Facilitating delivery for less mobile patrons

Since older people may experience both limited income and limited mobility, they are especially appreciative of people in their lives who deliver their Good Food Box orders each month. Deliverers, for their part, seem happy to help out and are usually patrons themselves. One commenter notes, for example, that “I deliver to [...] people who can’t get out of their house they love [the program] as much as I do”. There may be opportunities for the CDC-Q to increase program uptake by facilitating informal, unpaid deliveries of orders to people whose mobility challenges prevent them from using the program. In addition to existing volunteer deliverers, could the CDC-Q collect information from patrons requiring delivery services and coordinate local deliveries among patrons?

4) Growing the program

As indicated in the section above, some people wish that the GFB program ran more often, for example, twice of a month rather than once. One commenter explains that

"I think in our area once a month is not enough. Bi-weekly would allow people more options, less money to be spent at the store and less waste. If you take 2 boxes the food wouldn't last a full month. I like how much better we eat when we use the GFB program more regularly."

Some respondents also express a desire for more variety or different types of foods in their order. The CDC-Q might explore further the feasibility of, and demand for, increasing the frequency of the program or incorporating more variety of fruits and vegetables into their orders.

5) Expanding and standardizing information

Some respondents have the impression that there is a lack of uniformity across delivery/pick-up sites in terms of the distribution of recipes or other helpful materials, such as the commenter who notes that “I think each location should give the same things. Bridge Street hands out a recipe monthly to their clients. Hillcrest Community Centre does not”. Customers enjoy receiving this information and would like more information about the sources of the foods that populate their orders. One commenter notes, for example, that “I think it would be helpful to put a note in the box as to where the food comes from, if it organic/local, etc. As well as some recipes that can be made from the fruits and veggies in the box like potato leek soup, apple sauces, etc”. Are there opportunities for the CDC-Q to provide more information about food sourcing and creative preparation ideas across each of its pick-up locations?

Conclusions

Like many Good Food Box programs operating in communities throughout Canada, the anecdotal findings from this report suggest that CDC-Q’s Good Food Box program is making a difference to the nutrition, food budget, dignity, and overall wellness of those it serves.

This report has presented a snapshot of one segment of Good Food Box users in a given month and discussed at length the benefits they perceive to come from their patronage. Patrons use the program many reasons, including financial savings and value, the quality of the food they provide, the health benefits that come from eating more fresh fruits and vegetables, and helping a variety of people, including their families, local farmers and growers, and the CDC-Q itself. The program is a way to eat new foods, better foods, and affordable, healthy foods.

Patrons enjoy many things about using the program, including the courtesy and respect they feel when interacting with staff and volunteers, the fact that they pay to access the program and that prices are fair and reasonable, and that it helps them eat well on a limited budget. In spite of some suggestions for improvements, Good Food Box patrons overwhelmingly wish to support the program and see its continued growth and success.

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