

Children's Backpack Project

PHASE 01: Program Food Findings

Project Background

The **Washington Food Coalition** partnered with eight children's backpack programs across the state. Each program primarily serves geographic areas with high health disparities, including BIPOC individuals and people living in under-resourced communities.

Methods & Findings

All eight backpack programs completed a survey in which they shared details about their program operations and logistics along with a list of food items in a standard backpack.

The number of items varied considerably across programs from as few as nine items per bag to as many as thirty-five.

We analyzed these foods using the national **Healthy Eating Research Nutrition Guidelines (HER) for the Charitable Food System**.

This gold standard was developed by field experts using an evidence-based approach to ranking and categorizing the nutritional content of foods.

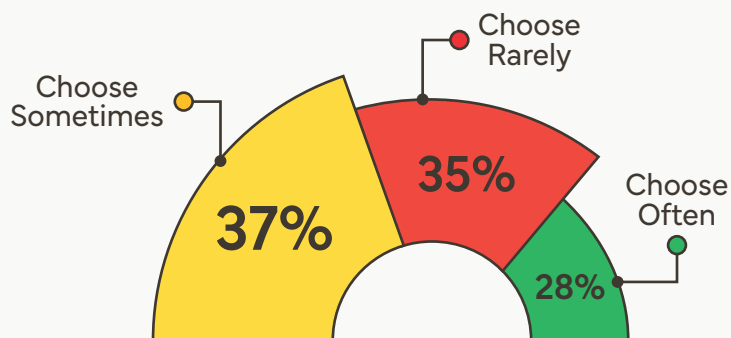
Project Objectives

- 1 Understand the challenges programs face in offering nutritious foods
- 2 Identify and support opportunities to address the barriers in offering nutritious foods
- 3 Help programs increase access to nutritious foods

Methods & Findings Cont.

Using the HER framework, we divided foods into eleven categories based on food type and ranked each one as **choose often, choose sometimes, or choose rarely**, based on total sodium, saturated fat, and added sugar per serving. Across all participating programs, the results were:

Nutrition Quality of Foods Overall

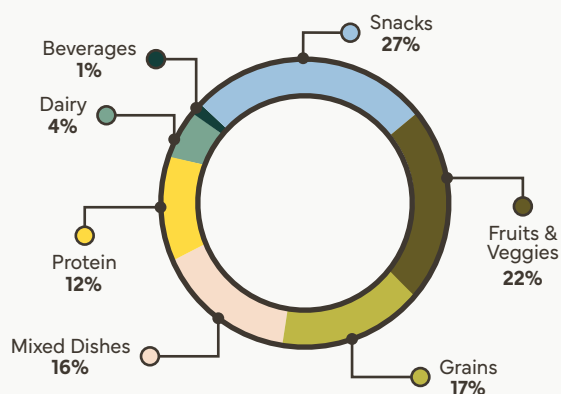


When broken down by organization, the variation was striking. One program distributed **56%** of foods ranked **choose often**, while another distributed just **11%** in that same category.

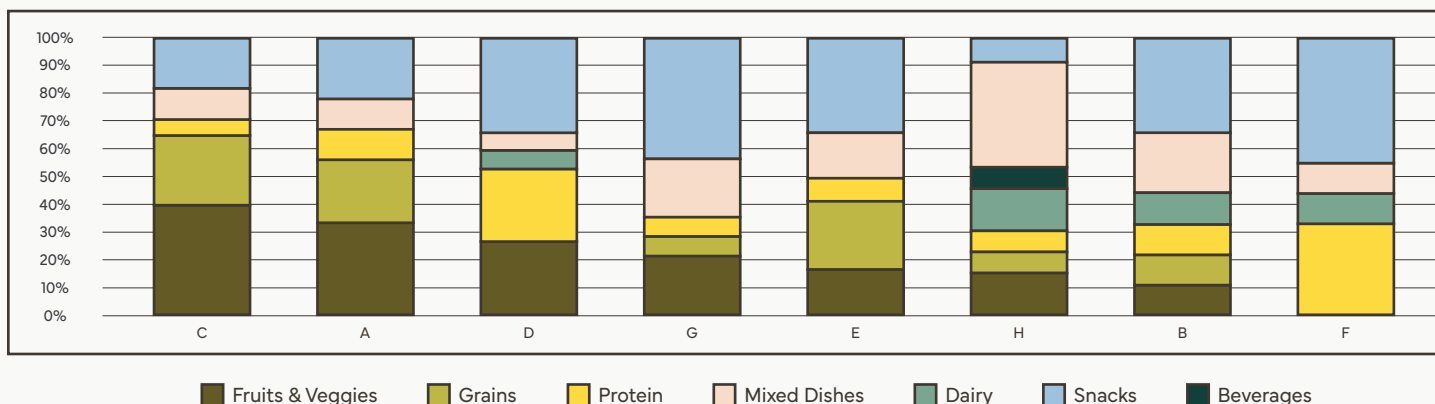
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The programs involved in this project distributed foods from seven of the HER food categories.

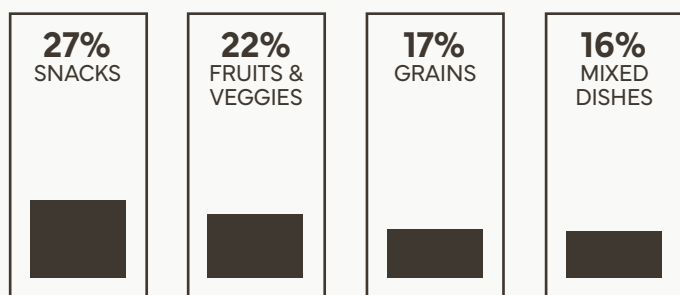
Desserts, cooking staples and condiments, non-dairy alternatives and miscellaneous products were not distributed. Only one program included a beverage item.



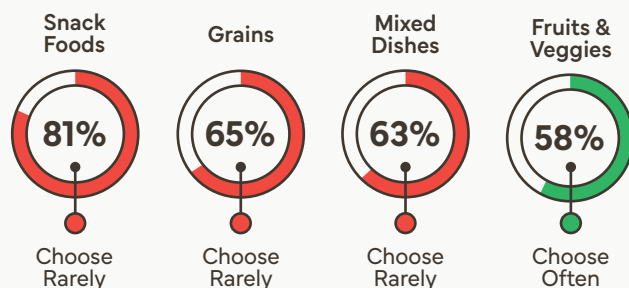
Distribution of HER Food Categories by Organization



Four Major Food Categories



Within these four categories, snack foods ranked **choose rarely** 81% of the time. Grains ranked **choose rarely** 65% of the time. Mixed dishes ranked **choose rarely** 63% of the time. Fruits and vegetables, the most nutritious of these categories, ranked **choose often** 58% of the time.



In Phase 02, we will develop a **Healthy Food Swaps Guide** offering alternatives ranked **choose sometimes** or **choose often** and **lower in sodium, saturated fat, and added sugar**. Our goal is to help programs make small, meaningful changes that improve the nutritional quality of what backpack recipients receive each week. Next steps include identifying potential vendors, convening program partners to assess additional needs, and inviting participants to apply for funding to purchase nutritious, culturally relevant foods or storage equipment.

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PHASE 01: Program Survey Findings

Scale & Reach

Programs vary widely in size. Some serve 21 – 50 students per week, while others serve more than 150 students per week. The largest program reaches over 12,000 students each week.

Most rely on volunteer assembly and partner with schools for distribution.

Knowledge vs. Practice

Most programs feel confident in their nutritional knowledge, but HER nutrition ranking data suggests there is a gap between awareness and day-to-day implementation.

Several respondents said they understand HER standards but face real-world constraints that make it difficult to apply them consistently.

Cost & Refrigeration

Limited funding and lack of refrigeration were the most commonly cited barriers.

Because most programs do not have access to a fridge or freezer, they are limited to shelf-stable items and mostly avoid fresh produce and perishable dairy or protein items.

Palatability & Food Waste

Programs want to offer healthier options, but many struggle when children refuse or discard them.

One respondent noted that produce items were "left on buses." Another described moving away from healthier choices after items were thrown away or donated back.

Vendor Support

When asked what they most wanted to discuss at the upcoming listening sessions, programs ranked **Vendor Options** as their top priority.

This reflects a shared sense that current sourcing options are limited and that programs need help finding suppliers that are both affordable and offer nutritious options.

Successful Swaps

Programs expressed a strong desire to move away from highly processed, shelf-stable, inexpensive, convenience foods that are low in nutritional value. These items include foods like instant noodles, chips, mac and cheese and canned soups - foods that are often very high in sodium.

Programs want to distribute foods with higher nutritional value such as tuna or chicken pouches, nuts, string cheese and shelf stable fruits and vegetables, as well as meal options that children will enjoy eating.