Clients could share anything (i.e., prompt was a single issue/concern). Data included a range of responses:
- Explicit requests for aid with name & number
- Food Finders’ metrics are based on specifically food qualitative data clients provided.

We implemented a secret box in the waiting area of Tippecanoe county, so we can continue bringing to light the material consequences of relying on only big data. In nonprofit settings specifically, funders’ requirements for data collection can negatively impact organizations’ efficacy and even cause “data drift,” which may precede mission drift — but researchers have shown that funders often prefer easily digestible data narratives and “feel-good” quotes to nuanced analyses (Ropp, Harmon, & Voida, 2017).

How can Food Finders leverage local knowledge through methods such as a secret box to address inaccuracies or inconsistencies in “objective” quantitative datasets?

To carry out the pilot study forward in a way that is useful for Food Finders, next steps would include:
- Implement a set of prompts for the secret box at the JP Lisack Community Food Pantry that mirror the questions Food Finders staff and volunteers use to measure clients’ self-sufficiency on official forms, which should elicit the same kinds of local, particular, personal data we found in the pilot study.
- Work with Food Finders staff to compare the interventions that are happening in a number of pantries pictured at right.
- Food Finders cannot sustain current growth — need more funding, potentially larger space, etc.

Overall, the project data suggested a disconnect between quantitative data Food Finders collects and qualitative data clients provided.
- Food Finders’ metrics are based on specifically food security levels and factors such as income and number of dependents, but client data suggested other factors impacted food security and necessary resources.
- Open prompt solicited variety of responses, but didn’t allow for direct comparison with Food Finders survey data; staff used responses to connect clients with resources at Food Finders and elsewhere, but response data may not be helpful for use with funders.

Secret Box Method
- Offers anonymous space to share thoughts and feelings
- Avoids barriers to entry like need for smartphone (QR code) or facility with technology (survey on tablet)
- Leaves almost total agency with participants, since box is anonymous and prompt is optional

Other secret box users include:
- Punch (2002), where secret box augmented focus groups and various kinds of task-based interviews with adolescents ages 13–14
  - Emphasized that secret box helped mitigate uneven power distributions between young participants and adult researchers
- O’Neill (2016). Anonymity allowed participants to express thoughts and feelings they were unable or unwilling to share in group interviews or out loud where their responses would be associated with them (experiences of sexual abuse, for instance)
- Suggested secret boxes as part of a larger group of methods in studies where power dynamics are unequal (like working with vulnerable populations at Food Finders, for instance)
- Lyndon (2018) based her work on Punch (2002). Participants were adults, unlike Punch, but power dynamics still existed in focus groups, and secret box was used to allow participants to share thoughts they were unwilling to share in front of others.

Projected Takeaways
- Since big, quantitative data is often dehumanizing, agency-denying, and marginalizing, especially to already vulnerable populations, being mindful of how we collect data from participants in settings such as non-profits is crucial.
- Methods such as the secret box, which are anonymous, have a low barrier to entry (as compared to digital surveys, for instance), and suggest but do not require a given prompt can empower participants to give data they want to share and hold onto data they don’t.
- Non-profits usually cannot avoid participating in big data collection, but using qualitative methods to collect thick, rich data from individual clients can help augment fragmented quantitative data and avoid “data drift” and other negative impacts.
- Ultimately, data that clients have more power over is data that helps nonprofits better serve clients.

Looking for a bibliography and further reading? Scan for my one-pager!