

FOOD RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AND NEEDS OF LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH, March 2008

SITUATION

In Wisconsin many low-income individuals are struggling to feed their families and themselves. Many hard working families are struggling, in part, because of their poverty level wages. Poverty wages are defined as wages that would not lift even a 40-hour a week full-time, year-round worker to the poverty line. It would take more than \$9.92 an hour in 2007 to be above poverty for a family of four. The poverty rate in Wisconsin was estimated to be 11% in 2006. In 2001 approximately 1 of 5 Wisconsin workers had poverty-wage jobs.

Good nutrition is hampered by lack of a variety of resources, especially income. Good nutrition can also be impacted by lack of other resources such as knowledge, skills, transportation, social support and community resources. Evidence from community food pantries indicates that the use of these community resources continues to increase throughout Wisconsin. Despite limited resources, improved food resource management can be an important step to improving the nutrition of low-income families.

Food resource management is described by researchers as “handling of all foods and resources that may be used to acquire foods by an individual or family” (Hersey et al. 2001). The researchers declare that the food resource management steps begin with planning. Food shopping practices, they feel, are the next “link in the chain leading to food consumption, preceding the activities of food storage, preparation, and service that may further affect nutrient values.”

WNEP’s Money for Food curriculum, updated and revised in 2007, has been used for the past nine years to focus food resource management education. Among other things, evaluation results indicate that learners have learned to develop family spending plans, to save money when eating away from home with their families, and to choose low-cost nutritious foods from the MyPyramid.

FOOD RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS

Planning

Low income families and individuals face income challenges in both amount and stability. Therefore, the need to plan is greater, as is the difficulty to do so.

- A national study of low-income households found that 76% of the households had a plan for spending, but only 34% reported that their plan was a written one.
- In 2007, after a practice activity on developing a family spending plan, 70% of the 303 learners who have never used one reported that they intended to try to use a spending plan for their families.
- In Wisconsin, persons entering WNEP were asked if they used a spending plan. Of those asked, 32% stated that they never used a spending plan; 34% seldom or sometimes used a spending plan; and 27% used a spending plan most of the time or almost always.

Spending Patterns

The percentage of income spent on food increases as the income declines. In 1998, low-income households (those with before tax incomes averaging \$7306) spent about 48% of their income on food, while other income groups spent a much smaller percentage -13% for middle class and 8% for the wealthiest. (Family Economics and Nutrition Review. 2001. Vol. 13. No 2). A 1998 labor market study found the food budget for assisted families was about 19% of their total budget.

Federal researchers found that households headed by people over age 64 increased their spending on food by 25% between 1990 and 1998. This was the highest increase of any age group during that period. In 2001, one-quarter of households using food pantries included adults over age 60.

Low-income families are more likely to purchase brand name products. The influence of advertising, the lack of decision-making skills and the comfort with familiar products are some of the reasons for sticking with these frequently higher priced items.

Spending on food away from home rose across all levels of income in 2005 with a corresponding decrease in spending, only by those with the lowest incomes, for food at home. The Consumer Expenditure Survey shows a 1.5% drop in spending on food at home off-set by an 8.2 percent increase in spending on food away from home. (Consumer Expenditures in 2005. February 2007. U.S. Department of Labor. Report 998). This drop in spending for foods at home was driven by a dramatic decrease (13%) in spending on meats, poultry, fish and eggs, for spending more on less expensive food items such as dairy (2.0) and other food items (7.7%) other than fruits, vegetables and cereals.

FOOD SHOPPING PRACTICES OF LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Food Shopping Practices

- In 1995, 40% of the rural food stamp population resided in localities without a supermarket or a large grocery store. (USDA,1997)
- In making food purchasing decisions, lower income women with children have been found to be significantly more likely than those with higher incomes to rate as important: how well the food keeps; the price; and ease of preparation. (Hersey, et al. 2001)
- Lower income women with children have been found to be less likely to use the nutrition label when buying food.
- Households with strict budgets were found to be significantly LESS likely than households with a non-strict budget to: make a complete list before going shopping; shop around for bargains; use coupons; or stock up on sale items.
- Food shopping constraints on low income families include:
 - Lack of nearby supermarkets
 - Limited selections in the accessible stores
 - Lack of transportation to stores of their choice
 - Limited time to food shop
 - Lack of child care and need to bring children along when shopping
- A study of the food shopping practices of food stamp participants found that:
 - Food expenditures peak in the first three days after food stamp allotment is received.
 - Children appear to maintain a steady food intake throughout the month, while adults appear to experience a significant drop.
 - Households that conduct major grocery shopping trips more frequently than once per month maintain steady food intake, while households that shop LESS frequently experience a significant drop.
- In Wisconsin, WNEP participants entering educational programs stated the following when asked about their food shopping practices:
 - 11% never plan meals ahead of time; 43% seldom or sometimes plan meals ahead of time; 43% plan meals ahead of time most of the time or almost always.

- 8% never compare prices when buying food; 36% seldom or sometimes compare; and 53% compare prices most of the time or almost always.
- 22% never used a grocery list when food shopping; 32% seldom or sometimes use a list; and 41% used a grocery list most of the time or almost always.
- 37% never read food labels when shopping for foods, whereas only 15% indicate they read food labels most or all of the time.

Making food choices on a limited budget.

- Few low-income households are able to provide healthful diets and at the same time spend less than the Thrifty Food Plan amount, as specified in Cost of Food at Home.
- As a whole, food stamp recipients are savvy shoppers.
- Food preferences and food cost are the most important considerations in making food choices.
- Ethnic and cultural traditions are strong factors in food choices and meal preparation.

TOPICS OF INTEREST TO FOOD STAMP RECIPIENTS IN WISCONSIN

During 2000, 5404 food stamp recipients responded to a brief survey conducted in 31 counties. When offered a list of possible topic choices, the respondents' top choices for what they would like to learn about were clearly in the area of managing food dollars. Percentages of respondents choosing each topic are shown below (each person could give more than one response):

- 35% said "getting more food for my money"
- 29% said "planning low-cost meals"
- 26% said "choosing food for good health"
- 24% said "what to do when there is not enough money for food"
- 21% said "cooking"
- 19% said "shopping for food"
- 19% said "managing money"
- 15% said "food safety"
- 12% said "feeding children"

Families with young children were most interested in "getting more food for my money." Also of interest were: "planning low-cost meals," "what to do when there is not enough food," "cooking," and "choosing food for good health." The older adults, 65 and older, were most interested in learning about "getting more food for my money," "choosing food for good health" and "planning low-cost meals."

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