

FOOD RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AND THE NEEDS OF LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS

A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH, FEBRUARY 2010

SITUATION

In Wisconsin many low-income individuals are struggling to feed their families and themselves. Many are working, but it's not enough. A living wage, the wage needed to cover all essential expenses, was \$25.82/hr for a family of four in 2008. For a single parent family with one child, that wage was \$15.34/hr. The average wage in Wisconsin for all industries, public and private, was \$18.83 in 2008. The federal minimum wage remained unchanged at \$7.25/hr. The poverty rate in Wisconsin was estimated to be 10.4% in 2008. Unemployment in Wisconsin was at 8.7% in December 2009. 1 in 3 children came from a low-income household in 2008. 1 in 10 Wisconsinites live in poverty, and plenty more make less than the living wage.

Many Americans have seen volatility in their income in the past few years, and none so much as low-income families. The Economic Research Service of the USDA reported that a lower income increased the likelihood of volatility in amount of pay from month to month. While some facing variance in income might reach out to benefits like FoodShare, other households might forego the process despite their temporary eligibility.

Other factors such as food prices and inflation can factor into a family's situation. Food prices spiked in 2007 and steadied in 2008 due to a demand for grains to produce biofuels and an increased demand from overseas markets.

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; one agency distributing TEFAP commodities reported a 17% increase in food pantry visits for a three-county sample between 2007 and 2008. Despite limited resources, improved food resource management can be an important step to improving the nutrition of low-income families.

In a study done by Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin in 2009, 23% of food pantry visitors surveyed reported having at least one member in their household with poor health; 54% reported having unpaid medical and hospital bills. Research suggests that low-income households facing food insecurity put off routine health care visits or purchasing necessary medication. In these households, emergency room visits and hospitalizations increased for both adults and children.

The recession of past few years has seen a dramatic increase in households facing food security that normally do not experience it: there was a 181% increase in households facing very low food security when the income was 185% of the poverty line, a group of households that traditionally have not experienced food insecurity. Additionally, these households do not qualify for federal benefit programs, but lack the resources to put adequate food on the table.

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 in 2009, has been used since 1998 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.

Wisconsin had the fifth-lowest incidence of food hardship in the nation in 2009, according to the Food Research and Action Center. We are doing a good job in Wisconsin, but there’s still work to be done. Curriculums like those offered by WNEP are serving our state’s residents who need it most.

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.

- In 1997, 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 2009, after a Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program (WNEP) activity on developing a family spending plan, 79% of the 235 adult learners who have never used one reported that they intended to try to use a spending plan for their families.
- At that same activity, persons entering the activity were asked if they used a spending plan. Of those asked, 61.2% of adults did not use a spending plan.

We can see from these statistics that information about developing spending plans is still needed for families. Reports from “Money for Food” participants indicated that learners find this useful.

Spending Patterns

The recession can be reflected in the spending habits of Americans across all income levels. The Consumer Expenditure Survey shows a 1.4% increase in spending on food at home, and a -1% in foods prepared outside of the home between 2007 and 2008. (Consumer Expenditures in 2007. April 2009. U.S. Department of Labor. Report 1016). The report also indicated a decrease (-2.5%) in spending on meats, poultry, fish and eggs, increased spending on cereals and other grains (3.1%) and dairy (5.2%).

Consumer spending on meals declined from 2000 to 2007 in middle- and low-income households, accompanied by a decrease in overall expenditures save for housing, which increased. In low-income households, food spending decreased by 5.7% while housing costs rose by 5.7%. The amount spent on meals away from the home increase by 1% while the amount on meals prepared at home dropped by 8.8%.

The ERS also did a study on low- versus medium-income households when it came to comparing shopping habits next to the Thrifty Food Plan, which is the estimated cost of nutritionally balanced meals a household could purchase for the least amount of money. Researchers found that households with incomes below the poverty line spent about 13% less than the Thrifty Food Plan. This indicates low-income families may not be eating adequately, considering nutrition or caloric intake. Similarly, those with incomes at least 185% above the poverty line regularly spent 25% more than the Thrifty Food Plan.

FOOD SHOPPING PRACTICES OF LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Food Shopping Practices

- In 2006, 14.3% of low-income rural Americans had to drive ten miles or more to get to a supermarket or larger grocery store. (USDA, 2009)
- 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:
 - 7% never plan meals ahead of time; 7.7% seldom or sometimes plan meals ahead of time; 85% plan meals ahead of time most of the time or almost always.

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.

WHAT WNEP PARTICIPANTS ARE SAYING ABOUT “MONEY FOR FOOD”

Adults who participated in these classes were most receptive to ideas and recipes that were healthy, affordable, and quick. While the learners had a lot of knowledge prior to these sessions, many reported in FY 09 that they did learn additional information that was useful to them

- 87% reported that they learned at least one new thing about making shopping lists
- 83% reported they had learned a new way to get more for their money while shopping.
- Older audiences reported that the tips were things “we used to do all the time,” perhaps reflecting the era in which they grew up
- Learning about spending plans was well-appreciated.
 - “Life is less stressful when you have a plan.”
 - “You could eat healthier if you plan.”
- Many participants reported learning shopping and cooking tools to stretch their food dollar
 - “[I will] make meals instead of boxed, quick convenient foods.”
 - “[I will] buy generic products.”
 - “[I will] pack lunches.”
- Many participants, after going through Lessons 1 and 2 of “Money for Food” were grateful to learn of new resources.
 - “There are resources I can use to help me through tough times.”
 - “It means a lot to have these resources.”
 - “[I will try more] community resources like the food pantry.”
 - “SHARE will be a big help.” / “I’m going to look into SHARE locations near me.”
- Lessons often made participants reflective about the effects their spending choices had.
 - “I will think about my bills first instead of buying unnecessary things.”
 - “As a single mom, [I realized] that I should make wiser choices when I spend my money, because even though I may not be fulfilling my wants, smart spending does fulfill my needs plus the needs of my children.”
- Those who finished Lesson 2C also commented about how they would share this information with other family members.
 - “I will use the “Planning to Stay Ahead” worksheet. I will share this info with my son.”
 - “Leaving with a lot of helpful information. Will pass on to my kids! I will share with my wife.”
- “Can’t wait for the next workshop. Learned a lot!”

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