January 2010 Topics

Low-Income Women’s Experiences with Food Programs, Food Spending and Food-related Hardships

Resources Recently Added to FLP/WNEP Resource Database

Low-Income Women’s Experiences with Food Programs, Food Spending and Food-related Hardships

By Gayle Coleman

Overview

Researchers at the University of Michigan interviewed 35 low-income women living in the Detroit metropolitan area to examine their experiences with food programs, their economic coping strategies and their food-related hardships. Over a three-year period from 2006 to 2008, nearly all 35 women were interviewed in all three years. The researchers were particularly interested in learning more about the following:

- What role do food assistance programs, as well as other public programs, play in the economic coping strategies of low-income families? What factors facilitate or impede use of these programs?
- What are the food spending patterns of lower-income families and do these patterns change in response to economic hard times?
- What type of food-related hardships are families experiencing?

Sample and methods

The women in the study were recruited from a list of participants in an earlier study which focused on low- and moderate-income families’ access to financial services. The analyses presented in this report are limited to the 35 respondents who reported that their household income in 2007 was at or below 185% of the federal poverty line (FPL). The women ranged in age from 21 to 51 years, with an average age of 35. Thirty of the 35 women were African American, two were White, one was Hispanic and two were Arab American. All but one woman had children living with them, ranging in age from toddlers to young adults. At the start of the study, eight were married, four were divorced and the rest were single. Over the course of the study, three women divorced, one married and one woman’s spouse died. On average, the women had two children living with them; two gave birth during the study period. Besides children, other family members moved in and out of some women’s houses. Twenty-six of the 35 women lived in the city of Detroit and the remaining eight lived in a nearby, working-class suburb. Median household income reported in the 2007 interview was approximately $15,000. All of the women reported household incomes that were at or below 185% of the FPL, with 69% of the sample below the FPL; only 3 women had incomes between 150% and 185% of the FPL. The women’s educational level varied: two women had Bachelor’s Degrees; one woman had an Associate’s Degree; nine women had taken at least some college classes; seven women were high school graduates with additional vocational training; and four women had high school degrees with no further education. Between 55% and 63% of the women worked during the study period with schedules averaging 31 to 36 hours per week during the study period. However, the number of hours worked varied frequently from the hours women were scheduled to work. Most women were paid between 10 and 11 dollars an hour. During the study period, most of the women changed jobs or experienced a period of unemployment.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information. The questions were flexible enough to allow interviewers to explore areas of interest related to the study. Interviews were done in the respondents’ homes and lasted approximately 75 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded for major themes. Women were interviewed once a year for three years.
Results
The Food Stamp program (now SNAP) functioned as the safety net for most of the women in the study. Women considered this program easier to apply for and use than other public assistance program such as Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) and Medicaid. Many of these women reported that their children received free or reduced price meals during the school year. However, one reported that her teen-aged daughter didn’t like the food served and another reported great difficulty in applying for the program. Most of these women were not eligible for unemployment insurance when they lost their jobs due to their previous length of employment at a job or status as a temporary worker. Eight women reported using private food pantries or charities that provided food on at least some occasions although none reported that they were frequent users. Some of the women who did not use such programs believed that these resources should be reserved for those who were worse off then they were.

Women were aware of the need to feed their families for the entire month and made their purchases based on this need. They reported being very careful shoppers by using coupons and purchasing sale items. Other strategies that some of the women used were to look for day-old bread or other foods discounted due to shelf life, and shopping at multiple stores to get the lowest prices. Most women said that they rarely ate out because it was cheaper to eat at home and when they did eat out it was usually at fast-food restaurants. As prices for food rose, women reported cutting back on purchases of cereal, fresh fruit, vegetables, red meat and/or milk. Many women indicated a desire to buy and eat more fruits and vegetables but noted that fruits in particular seemed to be priced very high. Other women, however, focused on getting the best prices for foods that they were used to eating.

Implications for Extension Educators: This study provides insight into the role of food assistance programs for low-income women, their perceptions on using these resources and strategies they use to feed their families. Although the sample size is small and limited to the Detroit area, it provides qualitative data that can help clarify the picture behind other statistics on food assistance programs. This information also can help us better understand this target audience and help us tailor education messages to better meet their needs.

Resources Recently Added to FLP/WNEP Resource Database

Eat Smart, Live Strong: Nutrition Education for Older Adults,
https://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/apps/flrc/tch_res2/resourceDetails.cfm?rid=5226


Fruits and Veggies Choices: Case Study,
https://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/apps/flrc/tch_res2/resourceDetails.cfm?rid=5219