MARYLAND COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Maryland Rural Families Speak: About Food Security

Introduction

What is life like for families in rural areas since the passage of welfare reform in l996? Are they self-sufficient? If not, how much public assistance do they use? To whom do they turn for help?

These and other questions prompted researchers from 15 states to join together to investigate the little-known lives of 448 low-income families living in rural areas. The intent of the research is to provide current information to citizens, public policy makers and program directors as a basis for decision-making about the well-being of these families.

Maryland's 35 families live in Dorchester County on the Eastern Shore and in the mountains of Garrett County. Both of these counties are at or near the bottom in economic indicators. From those first interviews[1], they shared the following information.

Maryland Mothers
Average age - 28
Average # of children - 2
Married or living with partner - 60%
Education, HS or GED - 20%;
Beyond 49%; Below 31%
Race: 54% white, Non-Hispanic;
34% African American;
9% Native American
3% Multiracial

[1] Families will be interviewed three times over three years. These data come from Y2000.

Food Insecurity

Maryland families are food-insecure—they lack the ability to access at all times enough food to meet nutritional requirements to live a healthy life. On a standardized USDA food security scale, 15 (43%) were food-insecure. Maryland food insecurity scores were slightly less than the national study (47%).

More Garrett County families were food-insecure than Dorchester families:

Garrett:	**11**	**(55%)**
Dorchester:	**4**	**(27%)**

Making Ends Meet.

Food and clothing tied for the top challenges families faced in stretching their income for basic needs.

Of the food-insecure families. 2/3 said they are having trouble making ends meet with food.

Families tried to provide food from their own income or gardens. Some hunted. When food was scarce, mothers often went without food so that their children could eat. When they needed more than their income could provide they'd turn to relatives, the community and the government for assistance. In their own words families told us:

I would go hungry before I allowed my kids to go hungry.

My thing is, my kids gotta eat so something won't get paid.

I know what it's like not to eat. I would only have enough to buy diapers, a can applied. That's when I found out about WIC and I applied. They got cheeses, peanut butter and formula, but I had to buy certain things to fill in, and hot dogs. I know and they know what it's like to do without.

Government Assistance

As the above mother said, sometimes they turn to the government for help. Pregnant mothers, or those with a child under age 5, are considered eligible to get food vouchers from the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Woman, Infants and Children (WIC).

54% of the families get food stamps averaging $283/month. Of those, 66% are still food-insecure. Families reported mixed experiences with obtaining food stamps. In their own words:

Not eligible because we have a car.

Never applied; not even sure if we are eligible.

It's sad that, although husband is making $10/hr, we are still eligible for $274 a month in food stamps.

Community Assistance

Families go to their communities for assistance. When asked about getting food assistance from the community, families said:

Social services sent us down to the Salvation Army to get food. Energy assistance gave us a card for free food pickup.

We would go from food pantry to food pantry (looking for foods they needed or wanted). Sometimes they would give us cake or something like that. A lot of times you didn't get any meat.

Social services helped me find a' frigerator and sent me down to the Salvation Army to get food.

So we were going from one food pantry to another and a lot of times you didn't get any meat. So it was hard to get food on the table.

Family Assistance

The food assistance support source of choice for these families is relatives. Family members are approached for assistance before Social Services or food banks in virtually all cases. Food assistance transfers between generations occur regularly from grandparents or parents to their adult children. Often they share meals or give groceries.

Well, we were having difficulties because he's not making that much money. So, he can't buy like groceries right now. My grandmother has to buy 'em for us.

Finances & Food Security

Income for these families averaged $1174 per month or $14,088 per year. When an income-to-needs ratio (number of family members supported by that income) was calculated, 46% of these families were below the poverty line Income per person in the household was calculated and compared for food-secure and food-insecure households. Food-insecure households had 20% less income per person per month.

Food-Secure = $309/person/month
Food-Insecure = $243/person/month

Health & Food Security

Mothers were asked to self-report health problems from a standardized list. They reported problems ranging from 0-19 with an average of 5. Food-insecure mothers had twice as many health problems as food-secure mothers.

Average Number of Health Problems Among Mothers

Food-Secure: 4
Food-Insecure: 8

Mental Health & Food Security.

Mothers showed extensive depressive symptoms on a standardized test. Those who were food-insecure had nearly twice as high scores. (Above 16 indicates depressive symptoms).

Food-Secure: Average score **12**
Food-Insecure: Average score **23**

Transportation & Food Security

Families have transportation difficulties that affect their ability to get groceries. Nearly 40% frequently rely on family and friends for rides to grocery stores. Stores are often at considerable distance, especially in Garrett County.

How I get my groceries, take my children to the doctor, run errands… that's hard.

Life Satisfaction

There was no difference between food-secure and insecure families in their responses to life satisfaction. Most were pretty satisfied with life.

When speaking about her life, one mother said her family ***"…had food, a roof over their head, and family; what more could they want?"***

Research Study Description:

This Maryland study is part of the USDA multi-state, longitudinal research study NC223: "Tracking the Well-being of Rural Low-Income Families in the Context of Welfare Reform." Funding from the USDA National Research Initiative; the University of Maryland Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension, the Department of Family Studies, the Graduate Research Board; the USDA-MD Department of Human Resources Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program and the American Association of Family Consumer Sciences.

Cooperating study states include: California, Colorado, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon and Wyoming. Data were also collected in Virginia.

This study began in l998 and continues through 2003. *Its intent is to contribute to the debate about welfare reform and public assistance and to fill a void in information about rural families.*

In year one, 448 families in 28 counties in 15 states provided demographic, economic, mental and physical health, housing, childcare, transportation, food security, and family support information. The same families will be interviewed for 3 years to track their well-being over time.

For more information contact:
Bonnie Braun, Ph.D.
1204 Marie Mount Hall
College Park, MD 20742
301-405-3581
BB157@umail.umd.edu

This fact sheet created by:

Bonnie Braun, Ph.D., Study Leader
Extension Family Life Specialist
Department of Family Studies

Orville Grimes, Ph.D.
Leah Smethurst,
Melissa Rudd
Graduate Research Assistants

Reviewed by:

Cynthia Reeves Tuttle, Ph.D.
Nutrition Specialist
Meredith Pearson, Ph.D.
Food Stamp Nutrition Education Director

Irmgard Koscielniak
Extension Educator, Garrett County
Connie Barnett
Extension Educator,
Dorchester County

Thanks to Maryland Mothers

The authors want to thank the mothers who gave their time and allowed us to learn about their lives.
Without their cooperation, this study would not be possible.

We pledge to share the information and their words with policy makers and program directors with the intent of improving the well-being of low-income, rural families.

This fact sheet is second in a series released as new findings are available.

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