

Voices on Food Insecurity

A summary of research conducted to explore the food security issues, challenges and coping strategies of vulnerable families with children under five in Regina



"There's always a level of pride getting in the way or a certain degree of just like 'Oh, you know, I mucked up. I don't have enough of this. I ran out of food. I don't have any more money for milk.' There's always that oh, I could have done, it's always my fault, guilt thinking."

"I would buy stuff and then I would come home and realize I don't have much. So my concern would be don't eat it too fast because I'd have to make it last for this long a period."

"It's hard just to...to make it every month...to budget and you're scraping by..."

"And I like them a lot (community kitchens). You don't pay a whole lot, and it's subsidized and then you'd take a bunch of new food and then if you don't like it, you've only got enough for two people, you get a serving for two, so it's not like you're wasting all your money. Try something new. And it's fun with all these people and the kids and just to get out..."

It's very difficult because it's embarrassing and my family is the kind of people that, you had the child, go raise it, kind of thing. I just find it embarrassing for myself because they expect you to look after him and it's just not happening right now... but the Food Bank, it's hard because they ask you to get referred, and if you need food now, you need it now, you don't need it 24 hours from now, you need it now. I didn't know anybody that could refer me, and I just had to find a church to fit me in. "
"My dad helps me too, so he usually gives me money and that... I just don't like running out of food all the time...It's just hard."

"I get money probably twice a month so by the end of the month I have to do my big shopping and a week later or so I have to make the money that comes in stretch until it gets a little bit slower and my cupboards start getting emptier, stuff like that. I have to make it stretch. So I notice that for probably about the first week or the first two weeks of every month I don't worry too much about it but come by the middle of the month or so, then I start to, second week, middle of the month, I start to kind of, not panic, but just wonder 'Hope this lasts.'" And I notice about myself when something runs out, I really focus on it. 'Oh, we're going to need this in the next couple of days. I just know it. I know it, I know it.'" And I panic and it gets hard, piles up higher and higher and I don't know. I think my biggest concern is that all the little tricks, I find I just can't make it stretch far enough anyway. I don't know what it is, whether I'm not budgeting it right or now even, when we have food in the house, not doling it out, giving them too much one day or... I said, a lot of times I wonder if it's just decisions I make or something. I don't know."

"Like it's not a case of abuse or mismanaging money when you're given a thousand dollars or thirteen hundred dollars on social assistance and you're rent is anywhere from five to six hundred and you gotta live on seven hundred dollars and you have no vehicle, no washer and dryer...I mean how do you do it and you've got to take a taxi places...you don't have a phone...it's difficult...so well, it's almost impossible quite frankly."

Inside this issue:

Voices of Food Insecurity	1
Main Findings - Income Management	2
Main Findings - Food Acquisition	2
Main Findings - Food Management	3
Summary of General Recommendations	3
Summary of Specific Recommendations	4
Contact Information for Full Report	4

Main Findings

Income Management Issues

- Three major barriers to income management included lack of money, other priorities (eg: housing) and food costs.
- Lack of money influenced types and amounts of foods purchased, frequency and location of shopping, strategies used to stretch money further, whether services available in the community were used, their perception of shopping and their feelings of despair. It also led to making sacrifices, to being creative in food preparation, and to not eating out.
- Caregivers typically found there was not enough food to last until the next welfare cheque.
- Food costs influenced food purchases - foods perceived as expensive were bought less often and included fruits and vegetables, milk, meat and treats for children.
- No-name foods were bought more frequently than brand name foods.
- Stores were perceived as raising prices of foods when welfare cheques were received.
- Respondents felt that monetary support received from the welfare system was insufficient to support their needs.
- Many respondents indicated they would not use feeding programs in the community.
- Respondents used numerous strategies to overcome income difficulties including budgeting, using generic brands, comparison shopping, bulk purchasing, using coupons, pawning items and substituting regular expenditures.
- The importance of knowing how to budget was stressed - however, the need for budgeting classes or information was not overwhelming.

Food security means having access to enough food at all times for an active and healthy life. At a minimum it includes the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and the assured ability to acquire personally acceptable foods in a socially acceptable way.

Food Acquisition Issues

- The major barriers to food acquisition revolved around child care issues, transportation and charitable food assistance.
- Transportation was an issue for most respondents.
- While half of the respondents felt that child care was an issue when it came to food acquisition, the other half thought it was not an issue.
- For those respondents that found child care a barrier when shopping for food, the main reason given was difficulty in transportation.
- Only a few mentioned that their shopping skills were a barrier to food acquisition.
- Most of the barriers mentioned surrounding charitable food assistance focussed on the Food Bank. The Food Bank was perceived as having poor quality food, being difficult to visit without adequate transportation, and having rules in place that were not conducive to users. Using the Food Bank was a last resort for many respondents who deemed it as a humiliating experience.
- Respondents used various strategies to cope with food acquisition. The two most frequently mentioned strategies included seeking help from families and friends and using charitable food assistance.

Main Findings

Food Management Issues

- Barriers identified related to child preferences, lack of nutrition knowledge, cooking skills, storage, charitable foods, cooking equipment, time, stigma of feeding programs, food sharing, anxiety, health problems and child care.
- Lack of cooking equipment led to the use of more packaged foods
- Lack of a deep freeze was a common concern. Foods could not be bought in bulk, especially meat packaged in bulk quantities and bread.
- Less than half of the mothers with infants breastfed. Reasons cited included feelings of being scared, stressed, and depressed. Those who sustained breastfeeding beyond six months felt it was convenient and inexpensive.
- Anxiety about children getting enough food was a barrier or challenge for many. Numerous strategies and tricks were used to deal with anxiety that became common a few weeks after social assistance cheques were distributed including hiding food, portioning food to be eaten in a day. Hoping that one had enough was common.

Feelings

- While it was not the intent of the study to identify feelings of respondents, it was clearly apparent that negative feelings were common in this population especially in relation to charitable food assistance and the social stigma associated with its use.

Summary of Recommendations

General Recommendations

- **Work together at all levels (locally, regionally, and provincially) to address the underlying factors and conditions that influence food insecurity and subsequent poor health of families with children under five years of age.**
- **Ensure policy and program initiatives across sectors and at all levels increase food security for families with young children. In particular, they should increase food access, reduce stigmatization and provide opportunities that increase self-sufficiency and dignity, build community capacity, and promote sustainable food systems.**
- **Ensure family caregivers (citizens) are important partners in all strategies to address inequities related to their food security issues.**
- **Support non-charitable community food programs that work with other partners as much as possible to coordinate and deliver services, which improve food security.**
- **Ensure emergency food needs of families with children are adequately met.**

Study Description

This research study focused on food security issues of vulnerable families with children under five years. Several phases guided the research.

*In the **preliminary phase** existing nutrition and food related programs in Regina were identified. In **Phase 1** 38 interviews were conducted with key individuals from agencies and organizations addressing early childhood issues. **Phase 2** saw the formation of a community partnership to help guide the work of Phase 3. In **Phase 3** 50 interviews were conducted with families in households with children under five years perceived to be food insecure.*

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- Increase public awareness of the food security issues of families with children less than five years old.
- Involve Regina and area citizens and community partners from a broad variety of sectors in building a framework (eg: food charter) which provides focus for community action and ultimately leads to food security for all residents.
- Establish a mechanism to review the impact of existing policies on food security of families with young children, to identify policy changes needed at different levels and to ensure more policy integration across sectors is undertaken.
- Review Saskatchewan's income support policy options. Ensure that support allowances adequately cover current food and rental housing costs to meet basic nutritional needs of families with children less than five years who receive social assistance.
- Strengthen, sustain, and provide funding for programs and initiatives that:
 - * enhance the affordability of quality, safe food for young families by providing alternatives to traditional food distribution channels,
 - * enhance transportation and delivery options in order to access safe, quality food at reasonable cost and with dignity,
 - * create physical environments in work and community settings that promote flexible work arrangements to meet family needs and safe neighborhoods with affordable housing,
 - * increase access to farmer's markets, community gardens etc. and to appropriately located retail quality food outlets that reflect the diversity of the neighborhood,
 - * promote use of locally grown and produced food (eg: in community food projects, childcare facilities, schools and food outlets), and
 - * offer an educational component that a). recognizes and builds on existing shopping, cooking, and food management skills and b). includes practical information and resources about the specific nutritional needs and normal eating and growth patterns of infants and young children.
- Increase community awareness of the availability of food and nutrition programs and related services for families and their children.
- Reduce barriers and implement initiatives (eg: Baby Friendly Initiative), which increase the rates of exclusive and sustained breastfeeding, an important guarantee of food security for all infants and their families.
- Support social policy and program initiatives that ensure adequate, accessible, affordable childcare that is available to all families with children.
- Ensure that the emergency food needs of all vulnerable families with children are met in a manner which is timely, preserves self-dignity and improves accessibility.

For more information or a copy of the full research report contact research partners: Shawna Berenbaum, PhD, PDt, Associate Professor, College of Pharmacy and Nutrition, University of Saskatchewan. Phone: (306) 966-5836 Email: berenbaum@sask.usask.ca or Eunice Misskey, MCEd, PDt Public Health Nutritionist, Population & Public Health Services, Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region. Phone: (306) 766-7724 Email: eunice.misskey@rqhealth.ca