

A Case Study of Food Security Status of African American Non-Food Assistance Recipients in Alabama's Black Belt

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Abstract

The purpose of this field research is to determine the prevalence of food security and insecurity and their consequences in high-risk populations at the local level. This study was conducted as part of a larger project, Food Insecurity in Poor, Female-Headed Families in Five of Alabama Black Belt Counties. Findings indicate that overwhelming majority of the study participants are food insecure. Majority depended on church or community food pantries and used different strategies for stretching their food budget. Food insecurity leads to anxiety about food and food resources and caused participants to adopt strategies for stretching meager food resources. I found extensive networks of kin and friends supporting, reinforcing each other – devising schemes for self-help, strategies for survival in a community of severe economic deprivation. Many couldn't afford to eat balanced meals, they skipped meals, they ate less than the felt they should, couldn't feed the children a balanced meal, Children were not eating enough, Cut size of a child's meal, Children skipped meals, Did not eat for whole day, Reduced quality and variety of diet, Worried food will run out and Food bought did not last. Food insecurity involves physical, physiological, and psychological consequences. Thus, food insecurity should be treated as a health issue that should concern not only social scientists but also clinicians and dieticians.

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Introduction

Since 1995, considerable attention has been devoted to the prevalence of food insecurity and hunger in American households by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The Food Insecurity and Hunger questionnaire has been fielded annually since 1995 as part of the Current Population Survey. Analyses of survey data for each year by Economic Research Service researchers documented racial and regional differences in the likelihood of food insecurity and hunger among households [1-9]. African American and Hispanic households are more likely than whites to be food insecure and hungry, and rural African Americans are especially vulnerable group. Households headed by single women in general, and particularly those by African American females are at even greater risk for food insecurity and hunger.

In an analysis of national data collected in the December 2001 food security survey, Nord and his colleagues [9] found that the use of Federal and Community Food Assistance Programs by food-insecure households also varied by race and ethnicity. Food pantry use was especially higher among African Americans and Hispanics than among Whites (2002:31-33).

Regional differences in household food insecurity are also an important finding in the USDA series Measuring Food Security in the United States [5,8,9]. Rural south in general, and Alabama in particular, experienced higher levels of food insecurity than existed in the nation on average [2-6]. Regionally, food insecurity was almost three times as prevalent among rural African Americans as among rural whites [7].

Though analyses of annual food security surveys at the national level have produced new insights into some aspects of food insecurity and hunger, many questions are still unanswered at the state, regional, and local levels.

For example, in spite of the heavy use of food stamps by African Americans in the south and single women headed families in particular, why are so many still foods insecure? Are there holes in the food stamp programs (the most critical components of the safety net against hunger) that leave people without food? If so, where? What barriers prevent food insecure households from participating in programs that could reduce their food insecurity? What are the consequences of food insecurity for the family and children? Regional-level research to

determine the prevalence of food security and its consequences in high-risk populations at the local level is needed to answer some of these questions.

Research Method

This study was conducted using qualitative case study in Black Belt Counties where previous research had already explored a variety of contemporary issues [10-15]. Participants were low-income individuals. Attempts were made to recruit all low-income families with children living in the home. Various racial and ethnic groups participated but majority of the participants were African Americans. They relied on an array of government assistance programs such food stamps, Temporal Assistance for Needy Families, housing support, and Medicaid.

Household food security was measured during interviews using the 10-item household food security questionnaire [16]. This instrument has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of food security (Frongillo 1999). The questions about food insecurity ask whether respondents worried that their food will run out before they got money to buy more and whether they could not afford to eat balanced meals. Questions about the more severe level of food insecurity ask whether children skipped meal because there was not enough money for food, and whether adults did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food. Each question asks whether condition or behavior occurred during the past 30 days and specifies a lack of money or other resources to obtain food as the reason for the condition or behavior. These food security questions were asked during the interview help to describe the household conditions and behavior patterns.

Over the 2 months of this study, I conversed with many people who are food secure and insecure, and I had the opportunity as a rural sociologist to observe people in their families and communities.

Definition of Terms

Food Security is defined as access by all respondents at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life (Nord and Andrews 2002; 2003). Food security includes at minimum:

1. Ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods
2. An assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways ((Nord and Andrews 2002; 2003).

The Fieldwork: Alabama's Black Belt Counties

This section provides a brief overview of some important economic indicators and trends for the Black Belt region.

W.E.B Dubois (1899), working at Atlanta University, was the first to use the term Black Belt. In his famous essay, *The Negro in the Black Belt: Some Social Sketches*, Dubois captured the more expansive, sociological meaning of the term. For him, as for me in this research, Black Belt is just more than the color of the earth or a particular type of agriculture. Rather it is the historical legacy of slavery and continued presence of large number of African Americans. My definition of Black Belt is based on racial composition: I define "Black Belt" counties as counties in Alabama where 50% or more of the population

is African American. Forested counties are counties that have more than 50% of their land covered with commercial forest.

The Black Belt is one of the poorest regions in the South. Poverty, infant deaths, poor education, births to single mothers, and high unemployment are prominent in the area. For example, a child in the area is more likely to be born out of wedlock and more likely to come home to poverty. A man in the area is more likely to drop out of school before the 10th grade and leave the mother of his children. It is a place where more than seven of every 10 people are African American and doctors and hospital are so scarce that sick residents must travel up to 40 miles to the nearest hospital. The high schools performed dismally on standardized tests and graduation rates, producing almost as many dropouts as graduates. There is persistence poverty, lack of industrial growth, high occupational segregation, and low quality of life for African Americans living in the region [17].

Racial conflicts have tarnished the Black Belt's image over they years. Relationships between whites and African Americans in the area have been marked by many episodes like those of the United States – sometimes a step backward and occasionally a step forward. The area is characterized by a high degree of variation in the quality of labor force, labor market conditions, racial compositions, and rural-urban differences that some author conclude that the conditions are analogous to a Third World country [17-20]. Twenty households were interviewed within four counties.

Preliminary Findings

Majority of the 20 households and individuals interviewed within the four counties indicated the following:

- They couldn't afford to eat balanced meals
- They skipped meals
- They were hungry but didn't eat
- They ate less than the felt they should
- Couldn't feed the children a balanced meal
- Children were not eating enough
- Cut size of a child's meal
- Children skipped meals
- Did not eat for whole day
- Reduce quality and variety of diet
- Worried food will run out
- Food bought did not last
- Eat with someone else who has food – People feel an obligation to help their kin. I am fascinated by the intricate kin ties that entangled people and resources across generations. People have always turned to one another and have always lived together.
- Eating leftovers
- Buying large quantity of food and sharing with relatives

The food insecure families adopt a variety of tactics in order to survive. They immerse themselves in a domestic circle of kinfolk who will help them. To maintain a stable number of people who share reciprocal obligations, at appropriate stages in the life cycle people establish socially recognized kin ties. They consciously expand the number of people who are intimately obligated to care for one another.

Many of the women interviewed said that by the end of the month they are sometimes out of food or money. They are forced to borrow, rely on local charities, or juggle their bills

in order to feed themselves and their children and make ends meet.

Here are what some of the women have to say.

“Usually by the end of the month, before food stamps come in, I am out of everything. I go to the food pantry and they will give me a box and a bag of groceries.”

“You always run out of food stamps by the end of the month. That is when you go to the Food Basket and the Catholic Church. They help a lot, they really do. My mom tries to help, too. It is tough.”

“I’ve looked for every possible source of help. The Food Basket and Catholic Church help with food and clothes.”

“I don’t do too bad, except for things like bread or milk. If I run low, I ask my mother for something. She will give it to me and I replace it back to her when I get my food stamps.”

Summary

The overwhelming majority of the study participants are food insecure. Majority depended on church or community food pantries and used different strategies for stretching their food budget. Food insecurity leads to anxiety about food and food resources and caused participants to adopt strategies for stretching meager food resources.

My research on food security showed me the space of life in the Black Belt and the patience with which residents who are food insecure endured pain, misfortune, and disappointment. I found extensive networks of kin and friends supporting, reinforcing each other – devising schemes for self-help, strategies for survival in a community of severe economic deprivation.

I found that not having enough money to feed the family can undermine people’s ability to reach their aspirations for themselves and for their families, as well as limit their capacity to meet the expectations of their health needs. Failure to achieve these aspirations and expectations often undermines a person’s self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Frustration and depression result, which become a barrier to future opportunities.

The reciprocal relations between psychological, social, cultural, and economic forces are extremely important to understanding how people “fall into food insecurity”. The contention here is that food insecurity should be examined or studied, not just with reference to dollar incomes, but in terms of people’s total economic situation and the larger social, psychological, health and cultural context in which economic food insecurity is embedded.

Conclusion

It is important to learn that some study participants were not comfortable visiting food banks and using SNAP because of the stigma associated with food charity and government programs.

Policy Recommendation for Medical Professionals

This field research provides information about the prevalence of food insecurity demonstrates the need to address this issue in medical settings. Steps should be taken to acknowledge a culturally tailored food insecurity prevention and education programs. This is particularly the case for less educated patients who are more likely to be food insecure. These people may be suspicious of government food programs. Whenever possible, African American professionals from local health departments

and community-based organizations are to be used to present government food security education in African American communities because they may foster the trust of fellow African Americans.

In conclusion, public health officials, health care providers, policy-makers, political leaders and governmental agencies should evaluate different strategies to dispel food insecurity.

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