

Shopping Behaviors of Low-income Families during a 1-Month Period of Time

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore food shopping behaviors among low-income families over the course of the month.

Design: Two researchers conducted 13 90-minute focus groups.

Setting: Two community organizations serving low-income populations and a university campus.

Participants: Low-income adults (n = 72) who were the primary household food shoppers and who had at least 1 child less than 18 years old.

Variables Measured: Shopping behavior changes during 1 month.

Analysis: Focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and coded independently by 2 researchers. Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate sociodemographic variables such as age, sex, race/ethnicity, and participation in food assistance programs.

Results: Economics played a key role in participants' food shopping behaviors and influenced food availability throughout the month. To overcome economic barriers, participants used food and emergency assistance programs and engaged in menu planning, price matching, storing food, using credit cards, and receiving financial assistance from family members and/or neighbors.

Conclusions and Implications: Low-income families made strategic decisions to maintain a food supply throughout the month. These results suggest limited economics throughout the month may hinder families' ability to consume a varied, nutrient-rich diet, which may have an impact on future health status.

Key Words: low-income population, shopping behaviors, food expenditures (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2013;45:20-29.)

INTRODUCTION

Shopping behaviors among low-income individuals are influenced by many factors, including food costs, food access and availability, food quality, and use of coupons or in-store sales.¹⁻⁵ Hersey et al found that certain shopping practices among food stamp (currently known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP]) recipients, such as using a shopping list, can enhance dietary intake of vitamins A, C, and B6; folate; iron; and zinc.⁶ However, only approximately half of their sample population reported using this type of food shopping strategy, and the majority had insufficient funds

to cover food costs throughout the entire month.

Turrell et al identified income as the most significant predictor of food purchasing behaviors; those of a lower socioeconomic status were less likely to meet dietary fruit and vegetable recommendations than those of a higher socioeconomic status and education level.⁷ Furthermore, research has indicated that households using food stamps generally cannot meet dietary needs by the end of the month, thus increasing household food insecurity risk.^{6,8,9} Wilde and Ranney found that food expenditures reach their highest level approximately 3 days after receipt of food stamps and remain lower throughout the

remainder of the month.¹⁰ A qualitative study conducted by Seefeldt and Castelli indicated that food stamp participants ate cheaper, less nutritious food like "only ramen noodles" toward the end of the month when money ran short.¹¹ Other studies have suggested low-income households stretch food supplies at the end of the month in order to provide food for household members.^{4,12} However, it is uncertain how households may adjust their shopping behaviors, including types of food purchased, throughout a month in order to maintain a household food supply. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore food shopping behaviors of low-income households in relation to the ebb and flow of economic resources over the course of the month.

METHODS

Study Population and Setting

Low-income parents (defined as a household income \leq 185% of the poverty level) with at least 1 child

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< 18 years of age were recruited for this study ($n = 72$). The household income level of $\leq 185\%$ of the poverty level was chosen in order to capture households currently using or eligible for food assistance programs. Participants also had to identify themselves as the primary food shopper in the household to qualify for this study. Exclusion criteria included pregnant women and people who were not fluent in English. Participants were recruited via flyers posted at local food assistance program offices ($n = 11$), a local food bank ($n = 26$), on college campus information boards ($n = 25$), and by word-of-mouth through research participants ($n = 10$). Parents attending college or who had spouses attending college were included in this study because they are part of the demographic population participating in food assistance programs in the research study location. Brigham Young University's Institutional Review Board approved this study.

Focus Group Sessions

Thirteen focus groups were conducted by 2 researchers trained in focus group facilitation, methodology, and evaluation.¹³ The main focus group moderator was similar to the mean age of study participants and to the race/ethnicity reported by the majority of study participants. The number of participants in each focus group ranged from 2-9 people, and most focus groups ($n = 9$) included 5-7 people. Focus groups were conducted at food assistance program offices and on a college campus. Sessions were 90 minutes in length, audiotaped, and transcribed verbatim. Participants were asked about shopping behaviors and how they varied over a 1-month period of time (Table 1). The Social Cognitive Theory, which denotes a dynamic interrelationship between environmental, personal, and behavioral factors, was used to direct the development of the moderator's guide.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Health behavior theories, such as the Social Cognitive Theory, have been used extensively in the past to provide understanding of human behavior on food choice and to determine predictive factors of dietary intake.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ Participants in this study were reimbursed \$30 for their time and any expenses related to travel and/or child care.

Data Analysis

Focus group sessions. Transcripts were evaluated independently by 2 researchers using open-coding methods, with subsequent comparison and reconciliation of discrepancies. The pile-and-sort method, or "The Classic Approach," was used to determine the themes and subthemes that emerged.¹³ The steps of this method include: (1) adding line numbers and focus group numbers down the page of each transcript; (2) cutting up different quotes and sorting them under each focus group question to be analyzed; and (3) evaluating the collective responses under each question to develop themes and subthemes of the focus groups.¹³ Descriptive statistics, including means and frequencies, were used for sociodemographic variables, including age; sex; race/ethnicity; education; annual household income; number of children in the household; employment status; SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) usage; and participation in free or reduced-priced lunches through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) among those with at least 1 eligible child (child ≥ 5 years old).

RESULTS

The majority of participants were female, 20-39 years of age, Caucasian (white), unemployed, and had some education beyond high school (Table 2). All participants had at least 1 child < 18 years old; however, 39% of parents were college students or spouses of college students (data not shown). Only 31% and 51% of participants used SNAP and WIC, respectively. Among households with at least 1 child eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 71% participated in this program. Three dominant themes emerged after focus group evaluation: (1) the impact of economics on shopping behaviors during the month; (2) health concerns and shopping behaviors; and (3) shopping strategies to overcome economic barriers during the month. Unique subthemes were identified under themes 1 and 3. Under the first theme, one of the subthemes was the beginning of the month (BOM) vs the end of the month

(EOM) and food costs. Subthemes under the shopping strategies theme included food assistance programs, sales/price matching, planning, and food storage/bulk food purchasing.

Impact of Economics on Shopping Behaviors during the Month

BOM vs EOM. Most participants agreed that economics played a substantial role on shopping behaviors. More importantly, shopping behaviors were often influenced by the timing of receiving employment wages or SNAP/WIC benefits. In general, most SNAP participants received their allotments within the first 2 weeks of the month. For most employed participants, employment wages came every other week.

Throughout a 1-month period, some participants stated that their shopping and eating habits changed because they bought a greater variety of food when funds were available (generally BOM); however, toward the EOM or when economic resources were running low, they relied more on carbohydrate-rich, canned, and packaged food. One female participant's comment reflected others' perspectives on the changing household food availability during the month:

At the [BOM] you have all the fun food, you got the meat and the fresh vegetables and stuff and by the [EOM], you're eating the breads and the pastas and the canned stuff (45 years old, Caucasian female, NSLP).

Similarly, another participant stated:

The difference is more right when we've got paid versus right before the next pay check when there is nothing left in your budget. I think I probably make healthier choice(s) once we got paid because it's like, "oh, we can get fruit juice, vegetables, stock-up on things." And then at the [EOM] ... well, I have a dollar so I'm going to waste it at the dollar store on junk. You think you can't afford ... you just go more to your food storage, which ... is more canned and packaged (25 years old, female Caucasian, no food assistance programs used).

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