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Livelihood Strategies of Food Insecure Poor, Female-Headed Families in Alabama's Black Belt

By Andrew A. Zekeri

Department of Psychology and Sociology
Tuskegee University
Tuskegee, Alabama 36088
Phone: 334-272-8006
Email: zekeri@tuskegee.edu

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UK Center for Poverty Research, 302D Mathews Building, Lexington, KY, 40506-0047
Phone: 859-257-7641; Fax: 859-257-6959; E-mail: ukcpr@uky.edu

www.ukcpr.org

INTRODUCTION

Research interest in food insecurity (limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways) has heightened over the last decade. Since, 1995, the Food Insecurity and Hunger questionnaire has been administered annually by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as part of the Current Population Survey. Analyses of survey data for each year up to 2004 by Economic Research Service (ERS) researchers documented racial and regional differences in the likelihood of food insecurity and hunger among households (Andrews et al. 2000; Nord 2002a; 2002b; 2001; Nord and Andrews 2002; 2003; Nord, Andrews, and Carlson 2002; 2003; 2005; Bickel et al. 1999; 2000).

African American and Hispanic households are more likely than whites to be food insecure and hungry, and rural African Americans are an 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. For example, according the national data from the December 2003 Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey released on November 19, 2004, by the USDA, 31.7% of single female-headed households with children, 22.1% of black non-Hispanic households, and 22.3% of Hispanic households were food insecure and hungry. These figures are higher than that of all Americans living in hungry and food insecure

households (11.2%). According to Nord, Andrews and Carlson (2005), food insecurity in the United States increased from 11.2% in 2003 to 12% in 2004.

State and regional differences in the prevalence of household food insecurity are also important findings in the USDA/ERS series *Measuring Food Security in the United States* (Nord and Andrews 2003; Nord, Andrews, and Carlson 2003; 2005). Rural south in general, and Alabama in particular, experienced significant higher prevalence of food insecurity and hunger compared to the national average (Nord 2001; 2002a 2002b; Nord and Andrews, 2003; Nord, Andrews, and Carlson 2002:7-8). These findings have pressing implications for the social well-being of female-headed families in the south.

Although national and regional studies have produced new insights into some aspects of the prevalence of food insecurity and hunger, some sociological questions are still unanswered. For example, what are the consequences of food insecurity for these single mothers and their children? Since some do not receive food stamps (Zekeri 2004a; 2003b; Onianwa et al. 2004), how do the food insecure poor families get their food and make ends meet? These are the research questions I address in this study. Such policy-relevant questions have hardly been asked, let alone answered in food insecurity research. The proposed study differs from most social science research on food insecurity in that it addresses these questions in a rural context, where poverty has persistently been above the national level. Little systematic information exists at the regional and national levels that depict how food insecure single mothers get their food, nor is much known about their other livelihood strategies in a rural context.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to examine how food insecure, poor, single mothers get food for themselves and their children. In other words, how do single mothers make ends meet?

THE RESEARCH SETTING

Regionally, Alabama's Black Belt had the highest concentration of poverty in 2000. It has the highest concentration of poverty because it has a disproportionate number of African Americans and a relatively high rural population. Because of the spatial concentration of poverty, the poor in Alabama's Black Belt have poor neighborhoods, and the area has a low tax base to finance public schools and a shrinking number of businesses (see Zekeri 2002; 2001; Murray and Zekeri 2004). Some communities have lost retail stores and often lack adequate consumer food resources. In some of these counties, the poor include a mix of long-term residents who have been poor for generations and local residents who have recently slipped into poverty by deterioration of employment opportunities and/or reduction in the number of workers per household, often associated with single-parenthood. Low-income households are dispersed throughout the open country and its isolated hamlets. Persons with limited financial resources who live in these places risk not having access to affordable and nutritious foods. This in turn affects their diets and health.

Based on 2000 Census Statistics, almost 90% of the families in Alabama's Black Belt are female-headed units with children under 18. Median household incomes, which were around \$16,646, ranked among the lowest in the nation, and poverty rates ranged from 40% to 41% yearly. Because of the poverty and housing structures, crime

was a major concern for families living in the area. There are no large grocery chains in the area. Rural communities in the area that have lost their retail stores often lack adequate consumer food sources, and the elderly and persons with limited financial resources that live in these communities risk not having access to affordable and nutritious foods. Instead, the area has multiple small corner grocery stores whose other trade is “liquor.”

RESEARCH METHOD

According to national experts, food insecurity occurs when there is “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Anderson 1990; Bickel et al. 2000; Nord, Andrew and Carlson 2005). Food insecurity was measured using the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module (see appendix), which has been developed and tested by the USDA (Bickel et al. 2000; 1996; Nord, Andrew and Carlson 2003). The questions in the instrument are based on research over two decades that identified sets of conditions, experiences, and behavior patterns that consistently characterized the phenomenon of food insecurity. This instrument classifies households as food secure, food insecure without hunger, food insecure with moderate hunger, and food insecure with severe hunger during the previous 12-month period.

Based on my previous studies (Murray and Zekeri 2004; 2003; Zekeri 2004a; 2004b; 2003a; 2003b; 2003c; 1999; 1996), I selected 100 single mothers who were classified as food insecure using the USDA food insecurity scale (see appendix for the questions used) (Nord and Andrews 1999; Nord, Andrew and Carlson 2005). Single

mothers who were food secure were not considered for this sample. All of the selected single mothers that I asked for interviews granted them.

Participants were interviewed up to two times during a 1-year period (May 2005 through June 2006) using in-depth semi-structured techniques. Participant observation was also used as some of the research assistants and the investigator spent considerable time in the study area. Focus group interviews were also conducted with low-income mothers. Extensive probing was used to produce full accounts of situations and incidents related to food insecurity. The interviews were conducted to help determine how food-insecure single mothers provide the daily necessities of food for themselves and their children and make ends meet. The interviews covered many of the same issues in the USDA's 18-item food security scale used previously and yielded richer, narrative data about how single mothers and their children are coping with food insecurity.

A majority of the interviews took place in respondents' homes, providing opportunities to observe gardens, food storage facilities, and the general living conditions. As the mothers' trust in me increased, information on household income and coping strategies were gradually pieced together. Five focus groups (daytime and evening) of low-income mothers were conducted at the five study sites (Bullock, Dallas, Lowndes, Macon, and Wilcox counties). Participation was voluntary and five single mothers self-selected to attend meetings after seeing posters at community centers, food pantries, and other local agencies. However, when I asked these self-selected single mothers for interviews, they refused.

About The Respondents

Although the sample was heterogeneous, it included never-married mothers, separated, divorced, or widowed mothers, high school dropouts, college students, high school graduates, mothers living in private and public housing, and mothers of different ages (Table 1). The majority was African American (85.7%) and had no education beyond high school. Regarding household income, the majority (57.1%) earned less than \$10,000, and 13.3% earned \$14,000 or less. Many were unemployed and looking for work. Overall, a majority of the respondents were poor, had lower education levels, lived in poor quality housing, and were not receiving food stamps (Table 1).

RESULTS

As in other poor rural areas in the country, single mothers in Alabama's Black Belt face the daily challenges of making ends meet (Edin 2000). In this section, I identify various livelihood strategies used by these single mothers to solve their food problems (Table 2).

1. Employment – More than half of the women obtain food from their income, and many women talked about the difficulty of finding employment, particularly a job that pays a living wage. About 51% of the single mothers are employed full-time and others are working part-time (Table 1). The jobs available to these single mothers are often unstable, offer few benefits (childcare and health insurance), and pay low wages. Ten percent of the single mothers work part-time as nurses' aide but continue to receive partial welfare benefits. Concern over the lack of safe and affordable childcare emerged as a common structural reason why women turned to or remained on welfare. Mothers worried about the psychological effects of inadequate care – crowded, dirty, or

impersonal conditions – on their children. Two mothers work in the informal or underground economy (creating sexual favors, buying and selling stolen goods, or drugs). These single mothers were concerned about feeding their children. Many of them indicated that they would go to great lengths, including going without food themselves, to protect their children from hunger. As one single mother put it, *“I have to do things so my kids can eat. I don’t worry about me, just for my kids. I have to live day by day for my kids.”* These women are preoccupied with the well-being of their children, and they are resourceful and enterprising. Some of these mothers, who are working, relied to some degree on government benefits.

2. Government Assistance - The majority of women interviewed were simply trying their best to be “good mothers,” caring for their children the best way they knew how. Less than half of the single mothers I interviewed (44.1%) were receiving food stamps (Table 2). Nine percent received cash assistance from community groups and charities. Fifteen percent received cash, vouchers, or direct assistance from a community group, charity, or student aid program to pay their bills. Making ends meet on the income provided by welfare requires ingenuity and creativity. The single mothers told me repeatedly that welfare does not provide enough money for them and their children to live on. Consistent with previous national research (cf. Edin and Lein 1997a; 1997b; Jarrett 1994), 12% of the mothers usually run out of money well before the end of the month. In addition to running out of money before the end of the month, 30% of the women interviewed also did not receive enough food stamps. However, few single mothers (11%) made comments suggesting that food stamps played an important role in helping them avoid serious food problems. One mother said succinctly, *“If it wasn’t for food*

stamps, my children and I will probably starve to death.” Another mother expressed her opinion about food stamp: *“I am glad I have food stamps. They help out a lot.”*

The consumption patterns of the mothers interviewed were not exorbitant. They rarely bought clothes for themselves or spent very much on entertainment. They spent a greater part of their incomes on basic necessities such as food, shelter, electricity, cleaning supplies, and clothing for their children, with very little, if any, disposable income left.

In order to make ends meet, single mothers on welfare must do without basic amenities that many people take for granted. Some single mothers I interviewed were without cars, telephones, washing machines, and clothes dryers, things most Americans think are routine household appliances.

3. Informal Support: Cash Assistance from absent fathers, boyfriends, relatives, and friends – Family members also provided the means to prevent food insecurity (Table 2). Twenty-two percent of the single mothers interviewed are receiving contributions from boyfriends in order to make ends meet. They relied on their boyfriends to help pay the bills that welfare alone does not cover. Gifts from boyfriends are important resources to single mothers and their children. They provide the unexpected “treats” that make the monotony of poverty easier to endure. Boyfriends also sometimes provided emotional support to the entire family.

About 10% had families who were in better financial circumstances and were therefore able to offer greater amounts of assistance while others come from poor families themselves, and therefore family members had little to offer. I was surprised to find out how some family members with meager resources of their own were willing to

share what they had with their relatives. It was common for mothers to feel most comfortable borrowing or relying on their family members for help, rather than friends or neighbors.

Here is how one mother acknowledged help from her family: *“Pretty much my family will help me. Whenever I am lacking like bread, milk, and cereal, they will pick it for me or give me a couple of dollars. That is how I have made it so far.”*

Another mother said that, *“If I need something, I can call a couple of friends and neighbors that I have known for many years, and they usually get it for me.”*

Thirty-three percent of the single mothers received help from the father of their children through the formal child support collection system and others in a covert manner.

African Americans in general have been characterized in the ethnographic literature as intensely reliant on kin and family networks for a variety of kinds of support (Stark 1974). Therefore, the relatively high level of using social networks to deal with food insecurity is not surprising. Even for those without problems in getting food, the ubiquitous sharing of food that is the norm supplies them with extra food, especially garden produce.

4. Help from Charities, Churches and Social Agencies - Some single mothers go to private or public charities and social service agencies for support. These agencies provided important and valuable resources, at least occasionally, for a majority of the single mothers interviewed. Food banks were among the agencies mentioned most often (42%); although, some single mothers used them on regular basis. This 42% of single mothers turns to food banks in an effort to achieve food security and provide budget

relief. Some use food banks at special times, particularly around Thanksgiving or Christmas, but others relied on food banks as a normal part of their strategy to avoid hunger or to augment food resources.

Twelve percent said that they rely on local churches to feed themselves and their children and makes ends meet. One single mother expressed her feeling: *“Usually, by the end of the month, I am out of everything. I go to the food pantry and they will give me a box and a bag full of groceries.”*

Another mother said, *“I always run out of food stamps by the end of the month. That is when I go to the Food Basket and the Churches. They help a lot; they really do.”*

Another mother of four kids said, *“a lot of us have to go to these churches to get food bags.”*

5. Cohabiting – In the study setting, cohabiting has become a common family context for both childbearing and childrearing. More than half (58%) of the single mothers I interviewed were cohabiting with a male partner. Moving in with a boyfriend is seen as an adaptation to economic hardship because cohabitation can offer financial and non-financial benefits for a single mother. One financial incentive for a single mother to cohabit is the sharing of housing and utility costs. The cohabiting single mothers said that they shared childcare and food responsibilities with their partners.

6. Doubling-up – One-fourth of the single mothers in this sample were co-residing or doubling-up with a friend or relative (excluding cohabiting partners) for financial reasons. Some relatives and friends often threatened to put single mothers and their children out when they had trouble getting along. Three mothers indicated that relatives sometimes made good on these threats.

7. Eating at a Senior Meal Program - One of the actions taken to cope with current or impending food shortage is eating at a senior meal program. Eighteen percent of the women interviewed used this strategy to cope with not having enough food to eat. Getting commodity food is another action used by these same women. However, commodity foods are generally distributed only twice a month in most of the communities, and the amount and type of foods that are available are unpredictable. Commodity foods can supplement household supplies but cannot provide a significant and reliable food supply.

It is important to note that there is a resistance to using some food assistance programs such as food stamps in response to food insecurity by the elderly women in the sample because of their pride and the reluctance to use services considered to be welfare (see Table 1).

8 Belt-Tightening - This strategy includes making cheaper and smaller meals. Twenty-seven percent of the single mothers engaged in belt-tightening actions, eating smaller amounts or less expensive foods from time to time. This is similar to Quandt's (1999) findings among adults in a rural community. These mothers and their children cut the size of their meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food.

CONCLUSION

My main objective in this research was to examine the various livelihood strategies that food-insecure single mothers in Alabama's Black Belt use and to understand the nature of their food problems. The qualitative results of the study suggest

that these single mothers resort to a variety of strategies to support their children and solve their food problems.

Most of the mothers in this study expended considerable energy and pieced together numerous strategies to make sure that there was an adequate amount of food for themselves and their children. Some of these strategies include work, government assistance such as food stamps, cash assistance from relatives and friends, use of food banks, pantries, churches, cohabiting, doubling-up, eating at senior meal programs, and belt-tightening. Food gifts were considered socially acceptable and symbols of community. I found extensive networks of kin and friends supporting and reinforcing each other among African Americans. They devise schemes for self-help strategies for survival in communities where there is severe poverty. They also immerse themselves in a domestic circle of kinfolk who will help them. There is an interdependence and cooperation of kinsmen in black communities, lending support to Carol Stack's book *All Our Kin* (1974). The data from my study show that network-based survival strategies are still alive and well among poor African American single mothers.

Contrary to expectations, there is low participation in food stamp programs, and food stamps do not figure prominently in actions to deal with food insecurity. At least part of the reason may lay in the rural nature of the study setting. When asked why they did not use food stamps, many stated that they do not know if they are eligible, and some stated that the process was too much trouble for the amount they will receive.

The findings suggest that strategies to makes ends meet among single mothers in Alabama's Black Belt single are similar to their counterparts in other areas of this country (Brown and Lichter 2004; Edin and Lein 1997a; 1997b; Edin 2000; Jarrett 1994;

Secombe 1999). This is despite the considerable economic hardship and poor labor market opportunities in the Black Belt. The livelihood strategies identified here, however, do not necessarily translate evenly into reductions in poverty or increases in family income. The single mothers that I interviewed live a tenuous existence between hope and despair.

To these single mothers, living on welfare is considered second best to earning an income, which is preferred for both financial and social reasons. There is stigma attached to being on welfare to the extent that some mothers do not want to apply for food stamps (see Table 1). Single mothers who are receiving or have received assistance are sensitive about it, and do not talk about it. The stigma is felt more among the older single mothers than younger ones. In some cases, I was told that adults openly discuss the welfare status of their neighbors and friends, exaggerating the amount another family receives and criticizing the way it is being spent.

Of those single mothers who have been on welfare, most do not consider it an adequate or a satisfying means of supporting a family. Therefore, they constantly draw on their resources of personal ingenuity and social contacts to obtain small, irregular, cash income, as well as goods and services. Furthermore, money problems are constant in most of the families. The stress and worry about getting by is ever-present. There were very few women who did not have to piece together a complex array of tactics to ensure that their families' food needs were satisfied.

In sum, the findings of this research and in other recent studies suggest that new and innovative solutions may be needed to ensure the food security of low-income families and their well-being. It seems clear that improving local employment contexts

and job availability will be important in any policy designed to increase the well-being of these single mothers and their families.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The conclusions drawn from the analysis suggest a number of policy considerations for state officials and agency staff. Reported dependence on family and friends should be assessed for its reliability because food gifts may not constitute a dependable source of food on an individual basis.

Although many social and economic factors -- including social class, race, and education affect health status -- the impact of food insecurity has not been adequately studied. Health care and social service providers may have to explore ways to detect food insecurity through routine screening and provide access to food supplies when needed by single mothers. This is because hunger and food insecurity have the potential to affect health on many levels. The financial need to cope with inadequate food supply is a stressful circumstance that could change physical health-related behavior, mental health, and priorities regarding medical problems. Medication adherence and diet compliance may not be a high priority for patients with limited access to adequate food supply. Future research should investigate the health, social, and psychological impacts of food insecurity.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The study has a number of limitations. First, the sample size is small. While my findings are generalizable to the population of the study setting, they cannot be generalized to other rural counties in Alabama. Second, my food insecurity index used to select the single mothers measured adult food insecurity, only. To identify the extent of

food insecurity in the children of the study setting, future research should include additional indicators.

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Table 1. Description of the Sample

Category	Percent
Race/Ethnicity	
African American	85.7
White	14.3
Educational Attainment	
Did not complete high school	44.3
Completed high school or equivalent	31.7
Some college or post high school training	17.3
Completed a college degree	6.7
Income^a	
Under \$10,000	57.1
\$10,000 to \$14,0000	13.3
Employed (including part-time)	51.1
Unemployed	48.9
Participating in Food Stamp Program	
Yes	44.1
No	55.9
Reasons for not Participating in Food Stamp Program (n=53)	
My eligibility ran out	15.1
The process was too much trouble for the amount I will receive	13.2
I do not want to apply for food stamps	17.0
I do not know if I am eligible	26.4
I applied but was denied	3.8
I am waiting for my interview	15.1
Other reason	9.4

a. Percentage scores do not sum to 100% because missing data are not reported in the table.

Table 2. Livelihood strategies used by single mothers to solve their food problems.

	Percent
1. Employment	51.0
2. Government Assistance	44.1
3. Informal Support	
Cash Assistance from absent fathers	33.0
Cash Assistance from boyfriends	22.0
Cash Assistance from relatives	10.0
Cash Assistance from friends	6.0
4. Help from Charities, Churches and Social Agencies	
Food Banks	42.0
Churches	12.0
5. Cohabiting	58.0
6. Doubling-up	25.0
7. Eating at a Senior Meal Program	18.0
8. Belt-Tightening	27.0

Appendix

Table 1. Questions Used to Assess Food Security of Households (USDA Core Food Insecurity Scale Items).

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1. We worried whether our food would run out before we get money to buy more. (often true, sometimes true = 1; never true = 0)
 2. The food that I/we bought just didn't last, and I/we didn't have money to get more (often true, sometimes true = 1; never true = 0)
 3. I/we couldn't afford to eat balanced meals. (often true, sometimes true = 1; never true = 0).
 4. In the last 12 months did you and/or other adults in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food? (yes = 1; no = 0)
 5. If yes, how often did this happen? (Almost every month, some months but not every month = 1; for only 1 or 2 months = 0).
 6. If yes, in the last 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you should have because there wasn't enough money to buy food? (yes = 1; no = 0)
 7. If yes, in the last 12 months, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because you couldn't afford enough food? (yes = 1; no = 0)

USDA Food Insecurity scale
Food insecure ("yes" to 2-6 items)

Short Form of the 12 Month Food Security Scale prepared by Nord and Andrews, 1999; Nord et al. 2003; 2005.