

Research Summary

Community-Based Study of Cooking in a Group of Young Low-Income Women

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Today thousands of packaged foods of all kinds are available everywhere, from the supermarket to gas stations and everything in between. It is believed that over time, Québécois (and other North Americans) are spending less and less of their energy on preparing foods from basic ingredients, and instead are choosing to buy foods that can be made into a meal easily and quickly without very much actual cooking. Some groups are concerned about this happening because it could mean that people who cannot afford to buy the more expensive healthy packaged foods might end up less healthy than the people who can afford them, which could widen the health gap between richer and poorer people in society.

A Special Research Team

A research team made up of four young women and one young university researcher conducted a study of cooking in young low-income women in Montreal. The community women were recruited with the help of several community organizations working on food security in Montreal. These women not only helped to design the study, but also collected the data and participated in the presentation of study results.

Focus Group Discussions, Meal Photographs and Interviews

The research team decided to collect information by finding young low-income women to participate in focus group discussions on topics related to their day-to-day experiences of food, cooking and grocery shopping. The team also decided to ask the focus group participants to bring home cameras to take pictures of everything they ate over the course of three days. The research team held six focus groups with a total of 22 women, aged between 18 and 33 years. These women came from a variety of neighbourhoods in Montreal. Almost all the women had household incomes below \$20,000, and more than half had children.

Seventeen of the women took home cameras and returned them after taking three days of meal photographs. The pictures were then studied to look for patterns in cooking and to add to the information from the focus groups.

The research team used the information from the focus groups and meal photographs to prepare a list of questions to examine cooking and food practices even further. Another 50 women from various neighbourhoods in Montreal, aged 18-35 years, participated in interviews given by the research team members. These interviews asked questions about family meals, cooking learning, grocery shopping, foods cooked and food security.

Study Results

Lots of interesting information came from the focus group discussions, the pictures of meals and the interviews. The major information areas are presented here.

Food Security

More than half of the 50 women who participated in interviews were found to have either low food security or very low food security. Also, more than half of the women had used a food bank at least once over the course of the last year.

Cooking Abilities

Almost all of the women interviewed felt that they were either capable or very capable of making a variety of meals using basic ingredients but about a quarter (12 of the women) did so twice a week or less and 22 of them did so 3-6 times a week. Very few ate in restaurants or bought take-out more than twice a month. Also, almost a quarter of participants said that they ate toast or cereal as their main course for more than one meal a day twice a week or more. Even though the women who were interviewed felt they were able to cook meals using simple ingredients like plain vegetables, meats and grains, they did not do so very often.

Grocery Shopping

Participants in both the focus groups and the interviews did their grocery shopping at several stores on a regular basis. In addition to regular supermarkets, many participants also shopped at fruiteries, dollar stores, outdoor markets, and specialty stores. They shopped in these places because either the prices were lower than at a regular grocery store, there was

more selection or better quality food. More than half of the women who were interviewed said they bought groceries in a dollar store at least once a month. Also, a large number of women (19 of the 50) did their grocery shopping twice a month or less. Grocery shopping at dollar stores and shopping infrequently both indicate not buying very many fresh vegetables and fruit and more canned, dried and frozen food.

Many participants used grocery store flyers and bought foods on special whenever possible. Some participants talked about not buying foods that they considered expensive such as cheese, some cuts of meat, and fish, as well as some vegetables and fruit. Some said they first bought food for their children, and used whatever money was left to buy food for themselves.

Food Eaten

The foods that the interview participants reported preparing most often were potatoes, pasta, ground meats, chicken parts and eggs. In the meal photos, inexpensive foods such as grains, potatoes, canned vegetables and inexpensive cuts of meat were seen most often. Almost a quarter of all meals in the photos contained a pasta dish, and the focus group participants also emphasized pasta as a staple food in their diet. Also, 10 of the 50 interview participants reported preparing Lipton SideKicks, Kraft Dinner, ramen noodles or Chef Boyardee twice a week or more and another 18 women reported preparing these dishes 3-4 times a month. The women in the focus groups explained that they like these dishes because of the variety of flavours and sauces available, and because they make trying new flavours easy.

More than a quarter of all the meal pictures contained a dry powdered or canned sauce (or soup used as a sauce) as part of the meal. Both interview and focus group participants explained that prepared sauces are safer to use because it is more difficult to make a mistake with them that might mean having to throw food away. For

the same reason some women said that although they would like to try new foods and new recipes, they are afraid to because they might end up wasting money on food that their family cannot or will not eat.

Other Information Collected

The women in this study also talked about negative perceptions they believe others have of their food habits. They talked about their household roles as mothers, girlfriends and spouses, about nutrition, and where they learned about food and cooking as they grew up. They also described the skill and energy it takes to organize and plan meals for themselves and their families.

Conclusions

The young low-income women in this study did what they could to adapt to their life circumstances and to enjoy food and cooking despite financial and other challenges. It is easier and often cheaper to buy and prepare packaged, and often not very nutritious food, than it is to eat healthy vegetables and fruit, whole grains, meats and dairy products. The women in this study were doing what is 'normal' for most people – they were buying foods to fit the financial, time and other constraints of their lives. The difference is that the prepared foods that are within the financial means of lower income people are often of poor nutritional quality, and high in fats, sugars and preservatives. So it seems that lower-income people are more likely to suffer the health consequences of the 'normal' North American diet because of their limited means. If we want everyone to be healthier, including low-income people, then it is the 'normal' diet that needs to change.

If you would like more information on this research project, including more in-depth results, please contact Rachel at rr.engler-stringer@umontreal.ca or jocelyne.bernier@umontreal.ca.



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