

Eating on a low income

This study looked at how people adapted to the experience of eating on a low income and why they made particular choices about buying food. All the families studied managed to get enough to eat but such 'success' was achieved at a price, such as self-denial, family stress and unwelcome changes in diet and shopping habits. The study found that:

- f** All the families had changed their food-buying habits in an attempt to economise. The cost of food took precedence over issues of taste, cultural acceptability and healthy eating.
- f** Mothers had to ration supplies, decide where to shop, not give in to temptation and even shop alone in order to restrict spending. For most, shopping had become unenjoyable and time-consuming. They often ceased to derive pleasure from eating.
- f** Families tended to shop little and often at local discount supermarkets as they could not commit income to buying in bulk or in advance from large supermarkets or food co-operatives.
- f** Families resisted radical changes and tried to maintain conventional eating patterns, often eating cheaper versions of familiar 'mainstream' meals. Limited income prevented experiments with new foods and imposed restrictions on the timing of meals. Often families ate together as they could not afford to prepare separate meals.
- f** Parents were concerned that their children should not seem different from their peers: having crisps or chocolate to take to school was not seen as a luxury but as a way of participating in conventional behaviour. So as to avoid waste, many children received more of their favourite foods than their more affluent friends, but these were not always healthy choices.
- f** Families had only a fragmentary knowledge of food issues despite - or perhaps because of - receiving information from a variety of sources, of which television was most popular.
- f** Advice on healthy eating was often not considered feasible or could only be partially carried through. When considering what to buy, families tended to think in terms of meals rather than the nutritional value of individual foods.

Poverty: the shared experience

The families in our study did not have enough money to buy the foods they would have liked on a regular basis, regardless of how well they managed their incomes. The movement onto, and the experience of, a low income varied with each family, yet it is possible to identify certain strands of behaviour that households had adopted in adjusting to having less money. This process of adjustment relied on families constantly making conscious decisions about what they could and could not afford. While all the households found this process difficult, it was especially so for those who had recently moved onto Income Support.

Despite the difficulty of living on a low income all the families managed to get enough to eat and in this respect they represent 'successful' families. However, such 'success' was achieved at a price, such as self-denial, family stress and unwelcome changes in diet and shopping habits.

The role of food in balancing the budget

All households tried to 'ring-fence' the money spent on food each week. However, this generally proved impractical for the majority of households since food represented one of the few components of their budget where there was any degree of flexibility. Bills and all other areas of expenditure were fixed to a much greater extent.

In order to maximise flexibility the families shopped for food on a weekly rather than a fortnightly basis so that they could 'save' money in case of unexpected demands. When families were particularly short of money they shopped more frequently as this afforded them greater control over food consumption within the household. Money was particularly short during the second week of the benefit 'fortnight'.

Additional income makes all the difference

Families who had even a little above the basic Income Support rates were able to manage more effectively than those who relied solely on benefits. These families more often succeeded in ring-fencing money for food; the additional income provided flexibility in other areas of their budget. It also meant that they could afford to buy the foods they preferred, often choosing quality rather than quantity, and they did not have to rely on relatives outside their own households for help.

The discipline of poverty

Even the most cursory investigation of food retail outlets reveals the wide range of choice available and the constant bombardment of shoppers with information about new items available. There is no escape in the home: many television adverts focus on food and encourage us to try new foods or new ways of preparation; these assume that most households will have enough money for their regular food items and for the occasional impulse buy and treat.

When food shopping can no longer be experienced as a relatively relaxed activity it is no longer possible to respond to the routine messages in television and in supermarkets. Instead shopping is severely constrained and the tight budget limits choice of shopping outlets and food items. The pressure is to cut back on snacks and treats and even on healthy foods such as fruit.

The costs of low-income budgeting fell on the entire household. However, as earlier research has established, mothers continued to be responsible for budgeting, shopping, choice of menus and food preparation and as a consequence, suffer disproportionately. First, they were most sharply aware of their changed circumstances and their poverty relative to others. Secondly, they strived to manage their budget and food selection so as to minimise the hardship for children in particular, but also for other adults. The women in our study had to ration supplies, to decide where to shop, not give in to temptation and even shop alone in order to restrict spending. It comes as no surprise that they often ceased to derive pleasure from eating.

Differentiation within the family

In managing the budget, women gave priority to the food preferences of other members of the household. 'Fairness' often meant women letting other members of the household, particularly children, take turns in choosing food, whilst making sacrifices themselves. They controlled access to food but often went without themselves.

The comments about children and the children's own accounts provide unexpected insights into the ways in which children are protected from the full impact of their families' changed circumstances. Many of the mothers emphasised that they could afford few treats, yet their children received more of their preferred foods, such as chips, beans, burgers and fish fingers, than their more affluent friends. The reason for this was that the children were being given what they liked in order to avoid waste.

The irony is that children in low-income families see themselves as having more access to preferred foods than their more prosperous contemporaries and yet they may be eating what are conventionally seen as less healthy foods in larger quantities.

Maintaining conventional eating patterns

A low income did not change household food preferences. Rather families struggled to continue to eat what they considered to be a 'mainstream' diet. In doing so they adopted a cheaper imitation of conventional eating patterns. To have radically rethought their diet would have involved trial and error and a low income offers no margin for error or waste. Only one family tried and they had failed.

A low income generated tensions and frustration within a family because people were denied access to many of the socially valued non-nutritional aspects of eating: the sociability of eating in a restaurant or fast food outlet with others, the convenience of buying take-away foods, the satisfaction of entertaining others in one's own home and the gustatory and emotional pleasures of rewarding oneself with a snack.

Families were aware of the benefits of healthy food though sceptical of conflicting advice. More to the point mothers could not afford more expensive foods like fruit, nor take the risk of buying nutritious foods their families might not eat.

Constraints on the budget meant that families were under pressure to eat together in order to avoid the additional cost of providing separate meals. Many resented this enforced eating pattern, especially as they saw more prosperous households around them moving towards increased flexibility, spontaneity and individual eating behaviours.

Adapting to life on a low income

The findings from this study indicate that the pressures involved in managing a low income, in terms of food and other expenditures, are considerable, particularly for the person who is assigned this task. These pressures can take the pleasures from shopping, food selection, food preparation and even from eating itself. There is a constant struggle to remain in touch with 'mainstream' eating habits and to avoid embarrassment to children and partners. The evidence does not suggest that the process becomes any easier over time, only that households become more knowledgeable about how to manage and, in some cases, more practised at keeping within budget.

There is a sense in which the more practised long-term recipients of benefits may become habituated to the constraints inherent in their predicament and therefore their frustrations become less explicit.

There is little difference in food aspirations and preferences amongst low-income families as compared to what we know of 'mainstream' families and little evidence of change over time on benefit. However, there is a constant awareness that neither aspirations nor preferences can be fulfilled as a matter of routine and even the carefully planned budget can be upset by an external assault such as an unexpectedly large bill.

Local and national initiatives

Any intervention, local or national, has to be predicated on an understanding of the food choices which families make and the reasons for these choices. For example, the success of local food co-operatives depends on families being able to order foods in advance and to bulk purchase. The results of this research have clearly shown that for families on low incomes this is not often possible. Families cannot predict how much money they will have available for food next week, never mind in two, three or four weeks' time. To spend ahead of their budget reduces flexibility and courts financial disaster. If initiatives to help low-income families are to succeed, they must offer the same degree of flexibility as their current food purchasing patterns.

When deciding what foods to eat, households did not think in terms of individual foods but in terms of meals. This has important implications for health educators and suggests that in order to improve the effectiveness of eating policies, health messages should reflect the eating habits of families and should take into account the fact that individuals and families do not think in terms of nutrients but rather in terms of meals and snacks.

About the study

This research was carried out over a 20-month period by Barbara Dobson, Alan Beardsworth, Teresa Keil and Robert Walker. It focused on the process by which families living on low-income decided what foods to eat.

48 households in two comparable areas of a Midland city were recruited to participate in the research as case studies. All the families had children and 24 were headed by lone mothers. Each case study comprised four elements: individual interviews, expenditure diaries, consumption diaries and

combined interviews with all members of the family where possible. In selecting the case studies, distinctions were made between new Income Support recipients, long-term recipients (defined as those in receipt of Income Support for 12 months or more) and other low-income families who were not receiving benefits.

Further information

This research was conducted by Barbara Dobson, Alan Beardsworth, Teresa Keil and Robert Walker. For further information, please contact the Centre for Research in Social Policy, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leics LE11 3TU. The full report - Diet, choice and poverty: Social cultural and nutritional aspects of food consumption among low-income families - is published by the Family Policy Studies Centre (price £7.50).

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