

CHAPTER 7 TOUGH CHOICES FOR LOW-INCOME RESIDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on the results of two focus groups conducted with Missoula County residents in the spring of 2004. Similar to the Missoula County Food Consumption Survey, the primary goal of the focus groups was to increase understanding of local food consumption issues. However, another intention of the focus groups was to gather information specifically from low-income people in order to more fully explore how food-related concerns and assets are perceived by County residents most likely to experience food insecurity. Focus group participants were asked questions about how they cope with running out of food or worrying about running out of food, where they go for food when they run short of money, the food-related assets in Missoula County, and any recommendations they might have to improve the local food system and specifically, what could be done to improve access to food.¹

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Focus groups provided us with the opportunity to hone in specifically on the food-related concerns of low-income county residents. Focus groups are a data collection procedure whose primary purpose is to gather information about participants' attitudes, perceptions, and opinions through the use of a group format.² They help create an environment where people can build on others' thoughts and impressions and learn from others' experiences in the process. We facilitated two pilot focus groups to assess the appropriateness of questions and then made adjustments based on participants' feedback.

Through collaboration with the Missoula Food Bank (MFB) and the North Missoula Community Development Corporation (NMCDC), we recruited 19 people for two separate focus groups conducted in March of 2004.³ The MFB is a nonprofit organization that provides food via donations and a small operating budget to low-income individuals and families up to twelve times per year. The NMCDC is a nonprofit organization whose programs address land preservation, low-income housing, and community building on Missoula's Northside. Both organizations provided us with a list of potential participants

¹ The focus group protocol, which contains procedural information as well as the questions asked of participants, is available from the authors.

² Krueger, R. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

³ We developed a telephone screening questionnaire that each organization used to recruit focus group participants. A copy of the questionnaire is available from the authors.

they had recruited for the focus groups. We contacted everyone several days prior to the focus group to remind them to attend.

Six people attended the MFB focus group, which took place at the Missoula Public Library, and 13 attended the focus group hosted by the NMCDC. Participants were provided with a meal and given a twenty-dollar stipend in appreciation for their time. Each participant completed a demographic survey before the discussion. Volunteers offered childcare services on-site for the duration of the group to enable participation by people who might not otherwise attend due to child care responsibilities.

Two members of the research team facilitated each focus group, which lasted approximately two hours. We audiotaped each focus group and transcribed the taped material verbatim. We hoped that focus groups consisting of people connected to the MFB and the NMCDC would provide us with useful information from county residents most likely to experience challenges with food security.⁴

We used content analysis to organize and code focus group data. To ensure reliability and trustworthiness of the process, several teams of researchers coded the transcripts from each focus group and then cross-checked the major themes identified and made adjustments accordingly. Researchers coded manifest and latent content to arrive at the most significant themes and patterns.⁵

Focus Group Participants

We combined the demographic data from both focus groups to provide an overall picture of the people who participated in this component of the study. Table 2, in the Appendix, presents the aggregated demographic data for the two focus groups. Note that two participants did not fill out the demographic questionnaire. Almost 60% were women. Only 10.5% of participants were currently enrolled in post-secondary education. Almost fifty-three percent were the primary food buyers in their families while approximately 32% shared these duties with other family members. Similar percentages were noted, as might be expected, concerning those who assumed primary responsibility for household food preparation.

Participants' education levels ranged from those having less than a high school education to those having achieved a four-year college degree. Almost 58% had some college education, which given the low-income levels reported, raises concerns regarding unemployment and underemployment in Missoula County and sustainable wages. For the entire group of participants, no one reported earning more than \$30,000 a year; in fact, almost 37% reported earning less than \$10,000 per year. Only four participants had no

⁴ Both MFB and NMCDC are located within the city limits and therefore, may not reflect the concerns of non-city residents.

⁵ "Manifest content refers to the visible surface content, such as frequency of words or phrases. . . Latent content refers to the underlying meaning or context of the entire text" (p. 95). See National Service Center for Environmental Publications. (2002). *Community culture and the environment: A guide to understanding a sense of place*. Cincinnati, OH: U.S. EPA Publication Clearinghouse.

children living in the home and most households consisted of at least two people. In the past year, 47% used food stamps and almost 37% participated in the WIC program.

Information from the Missoula Food Bank and the North Missoula Community Development Corporation focus groups were combined to arrive at the findings reported below. While there were demographic differences between the two groups of low-income Missoula County residents, income levels for both groups were extremely low.

Assessing Food Insecurity

The first three focus group questions were directed at finding out how many people ran out of or worried about running out of food during the past year, the frequency at which this occurred, and what events triggered these circumstances. Nine of the 19 participants, or almost half replied in the affirmative and reported running out of food on a monthly basis. Those relying on food stamp benefits commented on running out before the end of the month and others reported having to make “tough choices” about whether to pay bills or buy food. One participant described this as “sinking in quicksand and there’s no getting out.” Medical bills, rising utility rates, high rents, underemployment, job loss, and transportation costs were other common themes addressed by participants. Several participants also stated that they tended to eat more during winter, and therefore ran out of food more frequently during the winter months.

“Which is more important, having my house warm or having food in my belly and having food in my daughter’s belly?”

“I have to choose between either paying the medical bills to make sure I still have a place to live or food on the table or whatever so I just choose to have bad credit, because I try to live for today or what’s going on today. I don’t look down the road.”

Some comments made by participants included:

- ❖ I only get \$100 in Food Stamps a month to feed me and my daughter and I live on disability, so that’s not a lot of money.
- ❖ It’s just medical bills. You pay the rent. You pay the heat. You wind up eating macaroni with vinaigrette oil for dinner, because you can’t afford to exist.
- ❖ I get \$269 a month and before I used to not eat to make the dollars stretch and I still find myself skipping meals just to make it.
- ❖ Well do I put gas in the car or do I buy a gallon of milk?
- ❖ I’ve had two part time jobs in the past couple of years so I tend to run out [of food] twice a month because I get paid every two weeks, but I have a lot of bills and not a lot of income so...

- ❖ I was hit by a car and my income dropped from \$60,000 to \$14,000.
- ❖ Rent, the high rent, the cost of living here period. I mean I live in low-income housing. It's \$575 a month and that's low-income and that doesn't make any sense. I only get \$552 from my disability check every month, so my disability check doesn't even cover paying my rent. . .And the cost of like keeping your house warm and heating costs. I mean I live in a small apartment and it's still \$100 a month, even if I shut all of lights off and turn off the heat when I leave the house and everything.
- ❖ Prices on everything... Most people have to work two or three jobs to stay afloat.

Other participants reported that although running out of food rarely occurred, due to cost-of-living expenses they ran out of particular foods before the end of the month such as fresh produce, meats, and cheeses. They discussed having to make choices between various types of food (i.e., organic versus non-organic, produce versus “staples”) and paying bills or other cost-of-living expenses. In order to keep food on the table, they purchased less expensive food items, bought food in bulk, and tightly managed their budgets.

“I have to eat foods that are very cheap like potatoes, breads...a lot of that type of stuff.”

“I worry about running out of money to buy the kind of foods I want to eat [healthy, organic foods].”

Coping with Not Having Enough Food

In general, participants' comments concerning food shortage emphasized their abilities to be creative and resourceful. They made use of community resources such as food banks and soup kitchens. They diluted some food items and added fillers to others, reconstituted leftovers, and substituted ingredients. They ate filling foods such as potatoes and bread to sustain themselves longer between meals. Many expressed concerns that while not as nutritious, starchy foods are less costly and easier to ration and stretch. Freezers played an important role in addressing food security. Participants mentioned various foods they froze in order to ensure future availability such as casseroles, large batches of soup, and food sale items such as bread and milk. Other ways of coping included purchasing foods in bulk, buying larger quantities and then dividing them and splitting the costs with a friend, volunteering at the community gardens, and relying on family and friends.

“If you don't have enough hamburger to go with the Hamburger Helper, so you end up eating just Helper...which I've done before because I don't have anything else to eat.”

Their comments below provide insight into the ways in which they stretched limited food dollars:

- ❖ I like to water down juice.

- ❖ If I'm trying to make gravy and I'm out of flour, well I have these instant mashed potatoes...I might try them to see how they work.
- ❖ You can freeze milk. You can freeze cheese.
- ❖ Take a quarter pound of hamburger and throw in some oatmeal and make it a pound.
- ❖ We eat a lot of starch, fillers and that's basically what we're filling up on.
- ❖ I make a lot of soup because you can throw almost anything into soup.

Those participants who lived as they described, "right on the edge" due to unforeseen life circumstances such as job loss, illness, and other medical issues discussed going without food so children in the family could eat, skipping meals, "dumpster diving," stealing food, and dealing with the humiliation and frustration of having to access community food resources to survive. Some of their comments get at the heart of food insecurity issues:

"I actually went to the Providence Center because I knew I would get fed really well there. I was really depressed and I didn't have hardly anything to eat. I think I was about four or five months pregnant and I was looking for a way to feed myself enough because I knew I wasn't getting nutrients for my daughter. And I figured, well I might as well. . . It's almost set up where you have to lie or stretch the truth. It puts you in a position where you have to do that [lie] to just make ends meet."

- ❖ When I run out of milk, I give her [daughter] formula even though she is too old for it because I don't have the money to buy milk.
- ❖ I would go without breakfast and lunch sometimes so everyone else [in the family] could eat.
- ❖ The couple of churches I've gone into....they want to save me and it's like, you know and yes I appreciate your effort, but no, I'm not the one. It's not that I'm not religious. I have my own spirituality. I like my spirituality and I'm comfortable with my spirituality but why should I have to convert to get food. . . I'd rather skip a week's worth of meals to not have to deal with that.
- ❖ I'll admit there's been times when I actually went and stole food to survive. I went without but I stole for the kids.
- ❖ It isn't my common practice but I mean I have had roommates and you have friends who, you know, run out of food stamps, run out of, you know, times at the Food Bank. You know, they would start hitting dumpsters behind grocery stores.

Other Food-related Concerns

All of the focus group participants voiced considerable frustration about their inability to purchase healthy foods because of the expense. This was especially true for organic foods, fresh fruits and vegetables, and meats. They felt compromised and had to resort to packaged foods (if that's what was offered at the food bank) or non-organic fruits, vegetables and meats laden with harmful pesticides and additives. Other concerns mentioned were lack of adequate transportation to food stores and bewilderment about the amount of food wasted while families and their children are going without. Comments included:

“It’s frustrating how food...survival has become a money thing. If you can’t afford it, sorry. . . It’s all money, money, money, money, money, and the ones that have the money can afford food.”

“Yeah, you know when I was a kid my parents and I we used to grow our own corn. The biggest thing was getting past the little bugs when it comes to shucking the corn. I got corn seeds [recently] and grew corn and it got all the way up and there was not a bug in it. I was like, ‘Why is there no bugs in it?’ and someone goes, ‘They genetically altered the seeds.’ I was like, ‘No way, I want the bugs in my corn’.”

- ❖ Conventional food is like poison.
- ❖ I would love to buy all organic food, but it’s just so expensive...It’s too bad we have to make a choice.
- ❖ It’s definitely hard to go grocery shopping on the bus or being forced to shop once a month because you only want to pay for the cab once a month. . . and if you have your child with you, that’s an extra \$4.00 just for the ride to go four blocks.
- ❖ I’m forced to shop at Wal-Mart [cost] and that’s way on the other side of town and half the time I don’t have the gas to get all the way down there and all the way back.
- ❖ Healthy, organic food is really expensive in Missoula and um, I hardly make any money. . . we’re not going to have the money to buy the food we want to eat. Healthy food is a luxury item.

The impact of food insecurity on children was also addressed as a major concern. Going hungry and dealing with the short- and long-term physical and emotional impacts of malnutrition provide only a partial picture of children’s experiences.

“Sometimes I go to the Poverello. I don’t have a problem going in there but my kids do. You know it’s not that they wouldn’t get caught dead in there, it’s just like, ‘Mom, we’re really not that bad off.’ They feel ashamed.”

Participants discussed the shame and humiliation their preteen and teenage children experience when having to access food resources for survival and the ways in which they tried to “help” to make an inadequate food supply last longer.

“My daughter was the type that if she didn’t eat breakfast in the morning, she would start getting sick at school. Now all of a sudden she doesn’t eat breakfast and I say, ‘Susie, you tell me your stomach hurts if you don’t eat breakfast.’ And she says, ‘But I just drink water.’ She will sacrifice herself to help make the food stretch. . . I see my daughter cutting her food in half and saving it for another day or giving it to her brother.”

Food Resources

Focus group participants discussed the food resources they tapped into in Missoula County when money for food was running short. They tended to go to family or friends first before relying on community resources. They praised the Missoula Food Bank, local churches, and other food programs, as well as the community gardens, for their contributions. They also addressed the importance of social support networks such as family and friends. Some comments included:

- ❖ I’ve been to the Food Bank. Thank God they’re there!
- ❖ I go to a lot of extremes to get food. I’ll tell my friends how hungry I am so I can get them to take me out to eat something. I beg and beg my mom for money for food, yet again, I’m kind of ashamed about having to ask her.
- ❖ My brother, dad and I hunt and when we get something, we just all throw it in this communal freezer and whoever needs it, just grabs it.

FOOD-RELATED ASSETS IN MISSOULA COUNTY

Participants praised the community for its awareness and conscientiousness regarding local food issues as well as the number of available food resources in the county. They discussed the

“I think that the Food Bank and the Poverello are great! There’s somewhere you can go. You don’t have to starve and be hungry and mad.”

community gardens, including the Community Supported Agricultural program offered through Garden City Harvest, the Farmer’s Market, the Missoula Food Bank, the Poverello Center, and the WIC program. Other community assets mentioned were the food-buying club on Missoula’s Northside, the availability of hunting and fishing, diversity of food sources (i.e., restaurants), generosity of local businesses, and the University of Montana as a magnet for consciousness raising and social activism around food issues. Participants’ comments included:

- ❖ A strength in Missoula County is that there’s an interest in making sure that there aren’t a lot of hungry people.

- ❖ They're all community minded [Missoulians]. They're all behind us. Look at all the food drives they have.
- ❖ It's a strength [Farmers' Market] but they're way too expensive.
- ❖ Le Petit and the Good Food Store are really conscious. They don't waste and they donate all their extra stuff.

BRAINSTORMING SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Toward the end of the focus group discussion, participants were asked what the community could do to make it easier for people to get enough food and to address other concerns they had mentioned.

“If everybody had a reasonable, decent, priced market in your neighborhood and they don't have to truck it once a month to the store and pay for a cab or rely on other people for a ride...that kind of thing.”

Participants actively engaged in a brainstorming process, which provided them with the opportunity to make suggestions on how to improve the county's food system and build upon its strengths (see Appendix: Table 8). They strongly voiced the need for more public awareness/education regarding food issues despite the fact that many felt a high level of consciousness regarding food issues locally. They discussed changing welfare policies, establishing a living wage, addressing transportation as a barrier to food access, and creating government subsidies at local grocery stores for individuals receiving public assistance.

“I believe it should be more socialized. I know that's a nasty word to a lot of people... Socialized medicine would be great, socialized food banks would be a great idea too... Make it less embarrassing for people. Nobody in America should go hungry and nobody should go without health care.”

Other suggestions included promoting more volunteerism, conducting more food drives, offering free cooking classes, increasing the demand for organic food, allocating space for freezers and other methods of food storage and preservation, developing a program to assist individuals with transportation to and from food outlets, increasing voter registration and getting out the vote on important food-related issues, establishing a food co-op and putting more pressure on government programs to assist with issues of food insecurity.

The following quotes from participants illustrate ways they sought to address the food concerns and issues they identified:

“Just increasing the wages that they pay people in this area... Establish a living wage.”

- ❖ I think it would probably help if people were more educated about organic and conventional food and demand more organic food then more grocery stores would start carrying it...
- ❖ Putting money in the hands of the people that are addressing the problems and letting them work toward a solution. I'd like to see that start back up again.
- ❖ The community van would be a good idea because I could afford a dollar to go, you know, one way to the store and a dollar on the way back.
- ❖ The whole co-op idea, because I think that would really work.

SUMMARY OF KEY FOCUS GROUP THEMES

The web of interrelated themes discussed by focus group participants creates an illustrative picture of county food issues for low-income residents. Participants highlighted the challenges posed by the cost-of-living in Missoula County given low wages, and high food, rent, and utility costs. Their words spoke to leading lives of conflicting choices. They expressed the desire to eat healthy foods; however, food prices, especially for fresh produce, meats and dairy products, made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to live out their values. During hard times, bread, pastas, potatoes, and other inexpensive fillers became their daily staples. Choosing healthy foods meant skipping bill payments.

Despite such challenges, many participants expressed pride regarding their ability to creatively address their dietary needs and cope with food insecurity issues when they arose. Fishing, hunting, the community gardens, and a variety of feeding programs offered alternatives to hunger. However, those participants with few resources, those most stressed for money to make ends meet, experienced considerable conflict and competing demands related to food. Many made choices that, under “normal” circumstances, they would not make such as stealing food so their children could eat, selling plasma, skipping meals, and feeding their children less nutritious food fillers.

Focus group participants addressed the psychological, emotional, social and academic impacts of food insecurity on their children. Their children ate less healthy food, decreased their food intake and suffered from the social degradation that accompanies having to ask for hand-outs in a society where food resources are abundant. Participants’ comments gave new meaning to federal policies such as No Child Left Behind, which focuses exclusively on raising children’s academic performance but ignores one of the primary reasons why children struggle academically. Adequate nutrition plays an essential role in children’s physical and intellectual development.⁶ Research studies also indicate that children from food insecure homes have higher rates of illness when

⁶ Children’s Defense Fund. (1997). *Poverty matters: The cost of child poverty in American*. Washington, DC: Children’s Defense Fund.

compared to children who do not have to worry about where their next meal is coming from.⁷

Focus group participants eagerly provided recommendations to improve the county's food system. They offered both short- and long-term solutions. They suggested agency policy changes to increase food bank hours and distribute food stamp allotments on a bi-monthly basis. They recommended using advertising to inform county residents about the available food resources in the county. Long-term solutions addressed enacting a living wage, increasing local food production, and changing the current tax structure so it was more equitable for the working poor and others struggling to make ends meet in low-income households.

LINKING SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Using two data collection methods for exploring local food consumption issues and assets creates the opportunity to check and verify important issues across methods. By far, the most important food-related concern for both survey respondents and focus group participants was food quality, which included issues concerning food safety, pesticide residues on food, and eating healthy foods. Low-income residents were frustrated with their lack of access to high quality foods such as those produced organically or non-organic foods such as fruits, vegetables, and meats that are more nutritious than packaged and processed foods. Both the survey and focus group findings provide support for increasing access to and creating more markets for locally produced foods.

The price of food and other cost-of-living issues was the second most important area of concern for both survey respondents and focus group participants. The ability to eat well and have access to a healthy diet is directly tied to the ability to purchase high quality, nutritious foods. Comments made by focus group participants shed light on the tough choices low-income individuals and families face when having to decide, for example, whether to “heat or eat.” As would be expected, cost-of-living issues had a far greater impact on low-income respondents than on those in the middle- and high-income categories, although health and medical costs appear to be important to respondents regardless of income level. Transportation to and from food outlets emerged as an issue for both survey respondents and focus group participants, especially those in the low-income category.

⁷ Center on Hunger and Poverty. (2002). *The consequences of hunger and food insecurity for children: Evidence from recent scientific studies*. Retrieved September 4, 2004 from <http://www.centeronhunger.org/pdf/consequencesofhunger.pdf>