

Food Stamp Reforms: The Impact on Elderly Consumers

Qualitative interviews were conducted to assess the degree of hunger and food insecurity as well as the nutritional practices among low-income elderly in Mississippi. Participation in and reliance on the Food Stamp Program was documented and characteristics of high-risk elderly populations were explored. Poor nutritional practices with this audience appear to be related to lack of money, limited access to transportation, poor overall health, and lack of nutrition education.

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House Bill 3734 will cut food stamp benefits for household that include elderly members by \$2 billion over six years. The hypothesis for this study was that the level of food stamp support available to elderly in Mississippi is currently inadequate. Further cuts will have negative implications on the health and nutrition of elderly.

Sample

A purposive sample of 62 low-income elderly from three congregate meal programs and five low-income senior activity programs was used. The locations were selected because of their geographic proximity to the 10 Mississippi State University students who conducted the interviews. Another reason for the selection of this sample was the directors of these sites gave permission for the interviews.

Of the sample, 20 individuals were currently receiving food stamps. All participants were over the age of 55 with 20 being age 55 to 65, 24 being age 66 to 75, 15 being 76 to 85 and one participant over the age of 86. Fifteen participants were White and 47 were African American. Nine participants were men and 53 were women.

Procedure

As part of the course requirements for the Fall 1998 Consumer Aspects of Aging class at Mississippi State University, five graduate and five undergraduate students were required to observe one interview conducted by either the instructor or graduate assistant and to conduct six interviews observed by either the instructor or graduate assistant. The instructor and graduate assistant conducted five pilot interviews in mid-September to test the interviewing instrument. All students were required to participate in a three-hour interview training and each interview was observed by either the instructor or graduate assistant to ensure consistent interviewing techniques.

Seniors at each site were given a brief description of the research project and informed that their participation was voluntary and they would remain confidential. Before beginning the interview, participants were read and asked to sign an informed consent form and permission to audio tape record the interview was obtained.

The interview process was qualitative. Questions were asked in the areas: (a) hunger, (b) food insecurity, (c) nutritional practices, (d) food stamp participation, and (e) risk factors for hunger, food insecurity, or poor nutrition. Students were trained to be conversational with the participants and often asked the questions in ways more easily understandable for the participant. Students were also encouraged to ask for clarification on answers and observe non verbal communication. Each interview took approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

Students transcribed the interviews from the tapes and wrote their personal observations from each interview. The transcriptions were then coded and analyzed by the students

Findings

The majority of elderly interviewed did not admit experiencing hunger or food insecurity, but the amount of food assistance received by this audience is insufficient (usually \$10 per month). Risk factors of elderly with hunger or food insecurity include lack of transportation, health problems, taking medications, and high utility bills. Poor nutritional practices with this audience seem to be related to lack of money, limited access to transportation, poor overall health, and lack of nutrition education.

Endnotes

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