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Poor in rural Oregon face 'double binds' when getting food

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A new study by Oregon State University researchers shows that those in poverty in rural Oregon often know what kinds of foods they should be eating, but face tough choices between eating well and spending less money for meals.

Joan Gross and Nancy Rosenberger, both professors of anthropology at OSU, examined the "double binds" of rural Oregonians living in poverty by conducting in-depth interviews with 76 low-income households in two rural Benton County communities. Their paper will be published in the December issue of the journal, *Food, Culture & Society*.

They found that when times were tough and money tight, food became a flexible expense.

"Paying the mortgage, keeping the electricity on, making sure you have enough money for medical care, these were the priorities," Gross said.

Oregon's economic inequality is one of the highest in the nation. From the 1970s to 2005, the wealthiest 1 percent of Oregonians tripled their income while the typical family saw no income change. Rosenberger and Gross said those they surveyed did not come from generations of poverty, and most of them were working, sometimes two or more jobs. Instead, respondents were people with middle class jobs, and a health emergency or a layoff at work that made them unable to maintain their same standard of living.

"The people we talked to thought of themselves as middle class, even though they might be on food stamps and make a wage far below the poverty line," Rosenberger said. "This is what we mean by double binds - inculcated habits that do not match the changing field in social, economic and political ways."

Specifically, researchers found the low-income families they interviewed often did things against their own better judgment. Even when people knew what foods they should be eating, they stuck with food habits acquired while growing up. One man who was diabetic was aware of what he should and shouldn't be eating but admitted that carbohydrate-rich food was more comforting and familiar. Others talked about the need to add more fruits and vegetables to their diets, but said it was too expensive.

"There were three main problems that we found," Gross said. "One, people said they didn't have enough money eat to healthy foods. Two, there was a perception that boxed and processed food was always cheaper. And finally, we found that those who used food pantries or gleaning groups did not get enough fruits and vegetables in the winter, and their diet suffered as a result."

In addition, many families faced a bind of social stigma. In order to feel like they fit in with societal norms, respondents said they made sure their kids were well dressed and had other material symbols of capital, such as cars and computers.

"Food is something that fills you up but people can't see it or necessarily judge your social capital based on it," Rosenberger said. "People who have lost their economic power don't automatically lose their taste and expectations that go with being in a certain economic class."

Finally, researchers found that the respondents were reluctant to accept

any government assistance. Government assistance is avoided at both household and community levels, especially by people who have lived rurally throughout their lives. In general, people felt more comfortable if they were using public assistance to support other people, such as young children. Interviewees in general were happy with WIC program and free and reduced lunch programs because they benefited children.

However, adults often felt if they used other forms of support, there was stigma attached. One woman told researchers, "My husband wouldn't use food stamps. He's got pride."

Rosenberger and Gross said the best solution to these double binds is to strengthen local food systems so that all Oregonian can feel more empowered about food buying. Both researchers have become involved in the Ten Rivers Food Web, a group dedicated to building an economically and environmentally sustainable local food system in Benton, Linn and Lincoln counties. Gross, who is president of the organization, said their vision is that 30 percent of the food consumed in those three counties is grown, processed and distributed there.

Currently, about 2 percent of the food grown in the tri-county "foodshed" (Benton, Linn and Lincoln) is consumed there. A report issued last year by Ken Meter, president of Crossroads Resource Center estimated than $400 million a year is lost by not keeping the food in the community.

"We need to start thinking of food as a human right," Gross said. "People can be more productive, healthier and more engaged if they are well fed. It benefits the body, but it also benefits our economy and our communities."

Source: Oregon State University (news : web)

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