Adequate quantity and quality of food is a basic need that affects our ability to learn, earn, survive, and thrive. Given the numerous negative outcomes associated with poverty and hunger, food insecurity is a serious threat to the well-being of our society. While food assistance programs undoubtedly help low-income families meet their food needs, such measures are not enough to alleviate food insecurity\textsuperscript{1,2}. In order to effectively address food insecurity, policymakers must consider the potential of intervention strategies, such as nutrition education. This policy brief presents findings from a national study of rural, low-income families, with particular emphasis on skills that may protect families from food insecurity.

**Background**

Rural, low-income families face income inadequacy, limited access to resources, underemployment and unemployment, and many other barriers to self-sufficiency, which create family frailty and crisis\textsuperscript{3-12}. Rural families have a higher risk of nutrition-related chronic illnesses, obesity, and other conditions\textsuperscript{13,14}, therefore problems affording food may compound this risk. Food insecurity disproportionately affects rural women, minorities, and children\textsuperscript{15}.

Although food stamps help some families meet food needs, food stamp benefit amounts and participation in other food assistance programs are not significantly associated with food security\textsuperscript{16,17}. Barriers such as misinformation about eligibility, fluctuations in eligibility, and lack of access prevent large numbers of eligible individuals from receiving food stamps. Because food assistance cannot alleviate food problems in all at-risk families, policymakers should consider other means of addressing food insecurity.

Some studies suggest that life skills and community resource knowledge protect some rural families from food insecurity. Food security is also associated with food resource management skills, such as the abilities to manage bills, make a family budget, and stretch groceries until the end of the month\textsuperscript{17,19}.

### Recent Findings

A recent analysis of 315 rural mothers revealed significant differences between mothers in food secure and food insecure households\textsuperscript{20}. Key findings reveal:

- Mothers in food secure households reported higher levels of food-related life skills, including the abilities to make a family budget, manage bills, and stretch groceries to the end of the month.
- During Year One, the ability to make a family budget predicted food security. However, the stability of these relationships over time is unclear.

### Food Secure vs. Food Insecure, Year One

- **Employed**
- **WIC**
- **School Lunch**
- **Difficulty paying for food**
- **Family budget**
- **Shovel bills**
- **Stretch groceries**
- **Prepare a well-balanced meal**

- **Food Secure**
- **Food Insecure**
• Income, food stamps, and participation in WIC and the School Lunch Program are not significant predictors of food security in either year.
• From Year One to Year Two, household incomes and overall skills increased, while food assistance receipt and problems affording food decreased.
• The food security status of 29.7% of households studied improved from Year One to Year Two, while 50.5% stayed the same and 19.8% declined.
• Unlike Year One, levels of food-related life skills did not significantly differ between mothers in food secure and food insecure households in Year Two.

Implications
Food insecurity, one of the many detrimental consequences of poverty, adversely affects the health and well-being of millions of Americans. These findings provide important insight into the factors that may protect low-income families from food insecurity and suggest implications for:
• Improvement in access to, and effectiveness of, food assistance programs.
• Better coordination of various food assistance policies and programs aimed at addressing food insecurity.
• Optimizing skills and behaviors aimed at managing family resources.
• Inclusion, or expansion, of food resource management in nutrition education programs.
• Additional research to determine the best means of intervention to help protect rural, low-income families from food insecurity.

Suggestions for Policy and Programming
• Target efforts to alleviate poverty and food insecurity to address the diverse strengths and needs of low-income families
• Continue to revise Food Stamp Program eligibility and increase access to food stamps
• Increase nutrition education resources dedicated to food resource management intervention for limited resource populations
• Provide food resource management tools as part of food assistance programs
• Encourage doctors, health agencies, and nutrition educators to screen for food insecurity.

This policy brief created by: Stephanie Grutzmacher, MS. Review by Bonnie Braun, PhD & Elaine A. Anderson, PhD, thesis advisors.

References:
17 Olson, Seiling, & Lawrence, 2001.
18 Anderson & Swanson, 2002.

Data for this research come from the USDA multi-state, longitudinal research study NC223: “Tracking the Well-being of Rural, Low-Income Families in the Context of Welfare Reform.” For more information, please contact ea8@umail.umd.edu or bbraun@umd.edu.

A copy of this and other research briefs can be obtained at: www.hhp.umd.edu/FMST/fis/MDresources.htm