

Food pantry clients struggle to afford diapers, detergent, other non-food items

April 2 2014

Many food-insecure families also struggle to afford basic non-food household goods, such as personal care, household, and baby-care products, according to a new University of Illinois study published in the *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*.

"These families often make trade-offs with other living expenses and employ [coping strategies](#) in an effort to secure such household items as [toilet paper](#), toothpaste, soap, or disposable diapers. What's more, nearly three in four low-income families have cut back on food in the past year in order to afford these essential non-food items," said Barbara H. Fiese, director of the U of I's Family Resiliency Center and Pampered Chef Endowed Chair.

The researchers found that over 33 million people used food pantries to supplement their basic food needs, with one in three low-income families experiencing difficulty in affording basic [household items](#). Of these families, 82 percent live in households with low or very low [food security](#), meaning they cannot afford enough food to feed their family.

In interviews of food pantry clients, the researchers used the Red Cross disaster relief list to help clients identify the personal [household products](#) they found most essential to daily living, then asked them about the consequences of going without these products and the strategies they used to secure them. Thirty-two percent of the households were headed by single parents, and most households lived on less than \$800 a month, she said.

"These parents really struggled to get personal hygiene and household cleaning products, sometimes even giving up prescription medication to afford these items. They may have resorted to taking toilet paper from public places. Other coping strategies include watering down products to make them last longer, substituting one product for another, not paying bills, and simply going without," she added.

Three themes recurred in the interviews: the battle to retain personal respect, being a good parent, and keeping the [family](#) healthy, Fiese said.

"Parents didn't want their children to be thought of as dirty or unclean because they didn't have access to [laundry detergent](#) or toothbrushes and toothpaste. They also feared being judged for not taking care of their kids and worried that they might be turned in for neglect," she added.

She emphasized that being unable to attend to basic needs such as oral health care, providing clean clothes, and keeping a clean home is a health risk for children.

For families with infants and toddlers, adequate sources of diapers were important. Although some food pantries had diapers, participants reported that they sometimes had to travel from pantry to pantry to get enough to meet their needs.

Laundry detergent was another pricey item with many families saying that they go without or only do laundry occasionally. "We can only afford to do laundry once a month," said one respondent.

Although participants said they might borrow from others to make ends meet at the end of the month, they found it embarrassing, and those feelings took a toll on them. "It gets overwhelming and stressful, and it's degrading," one mother said.

The results of the interviews used in this east-central Illinois study have been used to design a larger, nationally representative phone survey as well as to help [food](#) banks assess their clients' concerns regarding household product needs.

"The interviews shed light on the often complicated decisions that families have to make in balancing the need to feed their children, purchase household supplies for healthy living, and pay for medical expenses. Clearly these are not easy decisions, and the choices can have serious consequences for multiple members of the household," she added.

More information: Balancing household needs: The non-food needs of food pantry clients and their implications for program planning was published in a recent issue of the *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Food pantry clients struggle to afford diapers, detergent, other non-food items (2014, April 2) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-04-food-pantry-clients-struggle-diapers.html>

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