

PROJECT FACT SHEET

Helping to Promote Good Nutrition in Food-Insecure Single-Mother Families

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Hunger is on the rise in Nova Scotia. Single-parent families led by mothers are more likely to live in poverty and, thus, to have limited access to food resources, both in terms of quality and quantity. According to Feed Nova Scotia 25,473 people used the province's food banks in March 2005, up 7.6 per cent over the same period in 2004. More than 8,000 of these were children, and 34 per cent were single parents. This population is at high risk for what's known in as *food insecurity*.

Previous research has shown that financial resources, government programming and social supports all affect the amount and type of food purchased by *food-insecure* households. Now, research conducted by a team from Mount Saint Vincent University is shedding light on how the management of food resources within *food-insecure* families may protect against — or increase the risk of — poor diet-quality and the resulting negative health consequences.

Graduate student Meaghan Sim and Theresa Glanville, Professor of Applied Human Nutrition, worked together to characterize the *food-management strategies* used by a group of 24 low-income families in Atlantic Canada. Using the supper meal, the team analyzed food type, portion size, servings per food group and preparation methods to determine a "*healthy plate score*" for each family member. They then compared these results to how the families scored on an index of five food-management strategies, which was developed from interviews with each family.

The team discovered that only three of the five strategies were positively related to diet quality. Mother-driven menus (wherein the mother controls food purchase, preparation and serving), the conscious application of healthy-eating practices to meals and snacks and, perhaps most dramatically, meal planning versus ad hoc food consumption are the behaviours found to promote better diet quality for all family members.

The remaining strategies — adherence to a formal meal structure and food privileging (mothers' sacrificing their own nutrition for the benefit of their children) – were not shown to have bearing on overall diet quality. Interestingly, nor was the severity of household *food insecurity*.

This study, the first research known to link *food-management practices* with diet quality, fills a gap in the current understanding of dietary behaviours within families. This understanding will be essential for designing successful family interventions aimed at improving diet quality and nutritional health, even when food resources are scarce. This is another step towards ensuring good health for all Nova Scotia families.

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