



The Real CoSt of a Healthy Diet Healthful Foods Are Out of Reach for Low-Income Families in Boston, Massachusetts

Neault, N., J.T. Cook, V. Morris, D.A. Frank (2005) *The Real Cost of a Healthy Diet: Healthful Foods Are Out of Reach for Low-Income Families in Boston, Massachusetts*, Boston Medical Center Department of Pediatrics, August 2005. Accessed on December 28, 2006 from: http://dcc2.bumc.bu.edu/csnappublic/HealthyDiet_Aug2005.pdf

Millions of United States households face significant barriers to healthy eating, leading to high rates of both under nutrition and overweight among American families. Both nutrient under-consumption (consuming too few of some essential nutrients) and energy over-consumption (consuming an excess of calories) lead to serious health problems in adults and children. Both phenomena are related to food insecurity and poverty. Improved access to healthful foods can prevent or improve these two conditions and their associated health consequences.

A community-based food security project conducted by Boston Medical assessed the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, the basis for food stamp allotments (<http://www.usda.gov/cnpp/foodplans.html>), in Boston, MA, as well as the cost of a modified, healthier diet that adheres to the government's most recent nutrition guidelines. Food costs were then compared to nutrition assistance program benefit amounts to assess the ability of low-income families to purchase the two market baskets. On average, the monthly cost of the TFP in the sampled stores in Boston is \$27 more than the *maximum* monthly Food Stamp benefit. In addition, the average monthly cost of the healthier diet in the sampled stores in Boston is \$148 more than the *maximum* monthly Food Stamp benefit. The costs of both the TFP and the healthier diet are substantially greater than the *average* Food Stamp benefit received by most families in Boston. Even when School Meals benefits are added to average Food Stamp benefits, benefit amounts are not nearly enough to meet food costs.

Findings from this study indicate

- Food Stamp benefit amounts should be increased to reflect the government's recent nutrition guidelines and to account for regional differences in the costs of food and other basic needs;

- Benefit calculation methods should be changed to reflect the current realities facing low-income families; and
- Food Stamp Program funding must be increased, rather than reduced, so that realistic benefit amounts can reach more eligible families.

- **The Food Stamp Program serves as the first line of defense against hunger.** It enables low-income families to buy food in authorized stores with coupons and Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards.
- **Maximum Food Stamp benefit amounts are based on the cost of the USDA Thrifty Food Plan (TFP),** which is outdated and does not adhere to the government's most recent nutrition guidelines.
- **Over 25 million Americans participate in the Food Stamp Program.** Most receive a benefit that is far below the maximum allotment determined by the TFP cost.
- **Food Stamps reach only 54% of eligible persons** in the United States.