

## Session VI: Toward a Research Agenda: A Dialogue on Priority Setting

### Facilitator, Barbara Cohen

In yesterday's discussions, certain topics came up repeatedly: an individual scale, subgroup sensitivity, abbreviated scales and their appropriate use, household management, time differences in the questions, sequencing of questions, as well as how to communicate our findings so that they are useful in various public settings, appropriate comparative data, and predictors and outcome data. Consider these topics and others as you engage in group discussion and prepare to report your group's list of priorities.

### International Issues

#### Donald Rose

There was concern in our group about the proper use of domestic indicators in overseas situations. Some wanted to use the domestic experience to improve measurement elsewhere; while others thought it would be best to learn from what has been done in other countries to improve domestic activities. Ultimately, we concluded that we need to increase the communication and dialogue between those who work overseas in international settings and those who work domestically. We thought one way to improve the knowledge base would be to commission a set of review articles. Also, another conference could draw people together to discuss alternatives.

### Health and Nutrition Outcomes

#### Christine M. Olson

Our group focused on the need for individual-level scales since health characteristics are an individual-level outcome. It was acknowledged, however, that to look at the relationship between food insecurity and health, we probably ought to look at it at the household level as well as the individual level, especially for high-risk groups such as those with chronic illnesses and the elderly.

The timeframe of the food insecurity may need to vary with the health outcome under study and perhaps by age group. Poverty and possibly food insecurity experienced before the age of 5 might have a long-lasting effect. For diabetics, a very short timeframe may be best for looking at food insecurity and certain immediate health consequences such as hypoglycemia.

We talked about the need to refine some questions, such as those involving food safety and nutritional quality. Food-insecure people may exploit unsafe food sources such as contaminated fish or home butchering in basements. The idea of balanced meals may vary across sociocultural groups.

We know very little about the 18-item scale's ability to detect changes caused by educational interventions or participation in food assistance programs.

The last issue is whether NHANES IV is assessing all the health and nutrition outcomes that we might suspect would be associated with food insecurity.

### Community Food Security

#### Bruce Klein

The group had several conclusions. They considered "Information for Solutions" and "Research for Action" to be important concepts. So, we need to alert policymakers that there is a problem that needs to be solved, and we need to get the research out to involve community lay people, Federal Government, and State and local governments. Household food security needs to be linked with community food security. One way to accomplish this is to link through specialized surveys that match the characteristics of respondents in certain subgroups and geographical areas. For example, people who live in the Delta region are unique, as are the economic and social characteristics of their community. The 18-item scale must function in that survey within that community.

What makes a good community survey? What do you add to the 18 items to make the survey more useful not only to government, but also to the people you are surveying? Respondents might worry why the questions are being asked, and how their answers might affect them in terms of food aid, cash benefits, and even child custody.

There is a need to look at community food security within program evaluation. If community food insecurity exists, what does that imply about the millions of dollars in food assistance that is going to that community?

There are two kinds of solutions. An immediate solution addresses: “I cannot feed my family right now.” A long-term solution addresses the condition: “If I had a job that paid about \$8 an hour and if I could get child care, I could do a lot better. I could feed my family and help myself.”

Surveys must stand up to scientific accuracy to get scholarly credibility in the professional community, and have face validity so that the results are believable in the general community.

The entire community needs to be educated about food security. People who volunteer at soup kitchens, food pantries, and food banks need to see food-insecure people not as “the others” but as people in the community having problems.

## Methodological Issues

### Jean Opsomer

We noted that already there is quite a bit of data available from surveys that have been conducted or that are being conducted right now that could help to address many questions that I will talk about in the other points.

The current measure based on a 12-month scale does not capture the frequency and duration of food insecurity. Other data are available because we have a 30-day measurement in the current survey. We have measurements of how many days in the last 30 days something happened.

The reason people like the 18-item scale, or the abbreviated scale, is to obtain comparability across surveys. But is it reliable to move questions from one survey to another? Context is important. Is the survey instrument a personal or a phone interview? Has the interviewer built a rapport to get truthful answers to sensitive questions?

The other topic we talked about was whether to use 6 or 18 questions, depending on the objective of the survey. Is the survey about adult hunger, children’s hunger, or both?

## Program Evaluation

### Parke Wilde

People do not use this scale only on its own, but as part of program evaluation. We have data about income and other variables. With income data alone, you might miss people whose income rose but who are still experiencing hardship. Some in our group felt the food security measure is useful for addressing this problem, but others did not.

The subgroup sensitivity issue was less interesting and involved, because current surveys give information by geography and types of household.

Our main question involved public communication. Do the conceptions correspond to a reality that is salient to the public debate? People with experience on Capitol Hill cautioned that you cannot overpromise what this area of research is going to deliver. The response was that we need to communicate that this measure has a scientific basis.

In terms of more practical suggestions, once you found out who has these problems, you should followup with them in greater detail so that you know more than just this 18-question scale for that group.

## Economic Issues

### Jennifer Olmsted

We need better qualitative data, obtained by carrying out focus groups or in-depth interviews, to learn more about time-use issues, coping strategies, financial management, and the impact of culture. Can some issues be addressed by increased education? One idea was to have a pilot project for educating food stamp recipients on financial management. However, some recipients might not be very functional.

Other issues were whether food stamp eligibility requirements are right, and why there are non-participating eligibles. One or two people in the group wanted us to look at the asset test. We need better continuous longitudinal data rather than spotty observations to understand dynamics.

There was some skepticism about this scale and the fact that it was very complex. Some were skeptical that it could be applied to other countries for an international comparison.