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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 44
Issue 2 June

Article 3

2017

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Recommended Citation

Gonzalez Guittar, Stephanie (2017) "Barriers to Food Security Experienced by Families Living in Extended Stay Motels," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 44 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol44/iss2/3>

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Barriers to Food Security Experienced by Families Living in Extended Stay Motels

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Families who are food insecure do not have regular access to food, access to enough food to satisfy their hunger, or have to resort to extraordinary measures to access food, such as traveling to food pantries and other emergency food sources. This article focuses on low-income families with children who live in extended stay motels and experienced food insecurity. Families reported several indicators of food insecurity and discussed the barriers to food security they experienced as a result of living in a motel. Families reported that the locations of the motels, lack of transportation, the lack of storage space and kitchen appliances in the rooms presented barriers for them to regularly access and store enough food for their families. Despite receiving government assistance in the form of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, most families depended on food pantries or charities to supplement their food supply each month. The interviews revealed that economic resources are not the only barriers to food security, and these barriers need to be taken into account when attempting to address food insecurity among disadvantaged populations such as families living in motels. Several strategies to alleviate food insecurity among this population are discussed.

Key words: food insecurity, homelessness, poverty, SNAP, hunger, motel residents

It is paradoxical that, in the land of plenty, there is much to be researched in the area of food insecurity and hunger. Although public polls and research have demonstrated the prevalence of hunger in America, there is much to learn in order to understand how to address the problem effectively. In this article, I discuss the barriers motel residents experience in accessing quality food

as well as the storing and cooking of food. Improving food security is not just a matter of giving people food, but giving people food they are able to cook and eat for nourishment. When individuals do not have access to storage or cooking facilities, it is difficult to nourish themselves with quality food. Lacking these basic facilities presents less than ideal sanitary and health conditions for food handling and preparation, and it also represents a heightened risk for food insecurity.

It is estimated that 14.3 percent of Americans are “food insecure” (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010; U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2015) low food security refers to “reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet” but with “little or no indication of reduced food intake” (need p#). Individuals are food insecure when they do not have regular access to food, access to enough food to satisfy their hunger, access to a variety of food in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle or resort to extraordinary measures to obtain food (e.g., food pantries, emergency food sources). Individuals who experience low food security are at risk of “very low food security” which is defined as having “disrupted eating patterns” (e.g. skipping meals) and/or reduced food intake (Connell, Yadrick, Hinton, & Su, 2001; USDA, 2015) (need page or para.# here). Based on these two working definitions, researchers have established that food insecurity is a problem of not just the quantity of food but also the quality of food.

Food insecurity is a symptom of poverty (Bhattacharya, Currie, & Haider, 2004; Mammen, Bauer, & Richards, 2009). As of 2014, 14.8 percent of Americans were living below the poverty level (U.S. Census, 2014) and nearly 15 percent of all households in America and 39 percent of low-income households were considered food insecure in 2008 (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010). Food insecurity, like poverty and homelessness, occurs as a progressive series of events that may eventually lead to very low food insecurity (persistent hunger). In the first stage, individuals worry about not having enough food, so they may adjust their food purchases to cheaper, lower quality food items in order to have a sufficient quantity of food to not experience hunger. Without further resources, individuals may have to limit their food intake or decrease the quality of their food in order to have enough food for other family members, especially

children. As a last resort, adults may skip meals altogether, and, if no more food resources are available, children's food intake may eventually be decreased (Connell et al., 2001). Food insecurity has detrimental consequences for the individual as well as the household. Lack of food can lead to higher rates of morbidity, chronic health conditions, and malnourishment (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013).

There are several predictors of food insecurity. Food insecurity is more prevalent among minority groups, those with lower education levels, and those only participating in one food assistance program (Connell et al., 2001; Nord, Andrews & Carlson, 2005). The U. S. Conference of Mayors (2014) reported that 54 percent of requests for food assistance were households with children, and 40 percent of individuals requesting assistance were employed. There is also a relationship between the types of jobs individuals hold and food insecurity. Individuals who work at night, have family demands, work multiple jobs and/or jobs with inflexible hours are more likely to have limited food choices and lack the time to prepare foods (Devine, Connors, Sobal, & Bisogni, 2003). These situational factors make people more likely to be food insecure. Even though working may provide financial resources to alleviate food insecurity, the job itself may interfere with the ability to provide adequate food for themselves and their families. The same can be said about food assistance programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Women, Infants and Children (WIC), which aim to alleviate hunger in America.

Despite receiving food assistance via SNAP or WIC, previous studies have found that individuals and families with children enrolled in SNAP benefits are more likely than those who are not receiving benefits to be food insecure (Ribar & Hamrick, 2003; Wilde, 2007; Wilde & Nord, 2005). In Central Florida, where this study took place, 63 percent of Second Harvest Food Bank clients were receiving SNAP benefits at the time they sought food pantry assistance (Second Harvest Food Bank, 2014). Among those living in poverty, those who are ill, disabled, and/or homeless have a higher risk of food insecurity (Weiser et al., 2009).

Furthermore, families with children tend to have a higher risk of food insecurity (Nnakwe, 2008). According to Second

Harvest Food Bank in Central Florida (2014), 27 percent of its clients are children under the age of 18. Food insecurity has several physical and mental health risks and consequences for adults and children alike. Children who are food insecure may suffer from poor behavior and academic performance (Alaimo, Olson, & Frongillo, 2001). As discussed below, extended stay motel residents in this study reported the majority of these high risk indicators of food insecurity.

Housing expenses are typically where families spend most of their monthly budgets, and food insecurity is typically highest in areas where housing costs are high (Mammen et al., 2009). As housing costs increase and wages remain stagnant, some families are left without affordable housing options. These families are left with little choice other than to find refuge in a motel where the weekly rent includes water, electricity, cable and perhaps even wi-fi. The motels do not collect any rental or utility deposits up front, and as such, serve as affordable housing units in many communities. Some national (U.S.) newspapers have documented the rise of families living in motels, specifically in California and Florida, where there are high numbers of low-wage workers and a high cost of living (Eckholm, 2009; Santich, 2014; Toner, 2011).

At the time of this publication, there is no peer-reviewed research on food security among families living in motels that the author could find. Since high housing costs are a predictor of food insecurity, motel residents represent an at-risk and "hidden" food insecure population. Some of the families in this sample paid between 60-90 percent of their income towards their weekly motel "rent." Families in motels often have to make a conscious choice of restricting or bypassing food in order to keep the roof over their heads, if at least for one more week. Some motel residents in this study engaged in what they described as the "rob Paul to pay Peter" cycle, where they negotiated payment plans with the motel managers to delay their weekly rent a few more days so they could afford to buy their necessities. They lived in a constant state of worry over housing and food. According to Second Harvest Bank of Central Florida (2014), 12 percent of their clients live in temporary housing (shelter, motel or streets/camps) and, out of all of their clients, 70

percent reported having to choose between food or rent at least once in the last 12 months.

Although there is extensive literature on food insecurity and its correlation to poverty and other poverty-derived factors, this article focuses on the reasons why individuals are food insecure beyond financial reasons or location (e.g., food deserts). The present study contributes to the literature on food insecurity by providing insight into a marginalized and largely invisible population, families living in motels, and it identifies specific barriers that explain why these families were food insecure. The data reveal that these families employ some of the common strategies used by food insecure individuals to cope with their food insecurity but also experience barriers that are not well documented in the academic literature. The findings highlight the barriers that non-traditionally housed, low-income families experience when obtaining, storing and cooking food.

Methods & Data

Data for this study were derived from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 families living in motels in Central Florida. The interview schedule focused on the experience of living in a motel. Participants were recruited via flyers and utilizing a snowball sampling method. Flyers were posted at locations motel residents may frequent, such as the motel lobbies, food pantries, bus stops, nearby churches, government assistance office lobbies, and day centers. I also volunteered through a local non-profit organization that delivered donated grocery items in bags to the families in motels. Through that program, I was able to meet some families in the motels who later became participants in this study.

Interviews were conducted in a location chosen by the participants. Most of the interviews were conducted in the motel rooms where the families lived, but others were conducted at nearby food establishments or a food pantry that motel residents frequently visited. These interviews lasted from 30 minutes to over 2 hours, were audio-recorded and were later transcribed. As the sole researcher on this project, all phases of data collection and analysis were performed by me.

Every transcript was reviewed and analyzed. Initial coding was performed by reading each transcript, line by line, and making note of themes that arose. Every reference to food was then copied and pasted into a Word document for further analysis. Once the initial themes of food insecurity were identified, the data were more carefully analyzed using “focused coding” (Charmaz, 1983), which led to the themes presented here.

Participant Characteristics

The length of time living at the motel ranged from less than two weeks prior to the interview to a little over three years, with an average length of stay of 11 months for the entire sample. All but one family in the sample had children living with them in the motel. Besides the couple without children, the smallest household was made up of three persons and the largest included seven family members in one room (3 families had 7 members each).

Fourteen of the families interviewed were nuclear families, with mom and dad both living in the motel room with the children. Ten of the 18 households (56 percent) were Latino. Two families were non-Hispanic Black and the rest were non-Hispanic White. The high proportion of Latinos in this sample is representative of the Central Florida region where the interviews took place.

Thirteen of the 18 families had at least one employed member of the family. Five families had a member who received Social Security Disability benefits. Only one family had no income at all at the time of the interview, because they had recently moved to the area. All families in this study had incomes that made them eligible for SNAP benefits, which all but one family received. This family had not applied for benefits because they had also recently moved to the area and did not know where to apply for benefits until I informed them during the interview. All families paid relatively similar weekly rates for housing, regardless of the motel in which they resided or the number of people in the room. The rates ranged from \$160 to \$190 per week.

Findings

All of the families in the sample reported not having enough food at some point during their stay at the motel. There were various barriers to food security while living in the motel. The location of the motels themselves presented a barrier for the families. All of the motels where the interviews took place were located along a very busy highway in a non-residential area, which meant the food shopping choices were limited. Some of the motels were not within walking distance of a full grocery store, and motel residents relied on the nearby convenience stores, where prices were higher and selection was limited. The findings below present the various barriers the families experienced to food security.

Transportation

At the time of the interviews, nine families (50 percent) did not have a car. As many commented, in Central Florida you need a car. Public transportation was easy to access, but the families lacked the funds. Most of them relied on rides from others (where they traded goods/babysitting services as payment) or walked, if within walking distance. One father described how time consuming and exhausting it was for them as a family to seek assistance without a car. He said, "Sometimes we have to walk with these two [points to the toddlers] and go to [street] over there by downtown, and you know how these kids can get when they're walking with the sun blazing in their face ... umph." It took them a full day to walk downtown, four miles each way, with four children under the age of 10 in tow, to reach the one church that was able to help them pay for their motel room that week because they had no income.

Furthermore, lack of a car was repeatedly mentioned as a barrier for getting groceries. Some took the bus to the grocery store, which meant the families could only purchase groceries they could carry with them back to the motel, and some families had to do this while also managing children on the trip, which added more stress to an already inconvenient process. One family had moved around different motels for a while and the mom, Inocencia, explained what the grocery shopping day

was like back when they lived without access to a car in their prior motel—a motel which was further away from stores than their current motel:

... well, we didn't have a supermarket nearby, so we had to go to the Walmart on [name of street, 7 miles away] and the [grocery] bags would make really deep marks on our arms, and then at the hotel we had to walk up to the 5th floor because we were on the 5th floor. So, grocery day was an uphill day.

Families had difficulties accessing food, shopping for groceries, transporting food, and storing food. These represent characteristics of food insecurity and some families experienced periods of very low food security as a result.

Issues with SNAP (food stamps) benefits

A major barrier to the families living in motels was the logistics of applying for SNAP benefits. In the state of Florida, all Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) applications are electronically processed, which presents a barrier for these families. Although most of the motels offered free wi-fi, some families did not own a computer and/or reliable transportation to travel to the Department of Children and Families (the agency in charge of TANF benefits including SNAP/food stamps) to apply for benefits.

Despite the barrier, all but one family was receiving SNAP benefits at the time of the interview. However, all families who received benefits reported the lengthy delay from the time the initial application was submitted to the time they received approval of benefits. This time frame was reported as a very low food secure period for the families. Beyond the barrier of the electronic application, time itself represented a real barrier. When asked how long it took to receive benefits from the time of application, Natalia responded, "It took a while. ... It was like 2 months; it was really hard to get." Below, Dee describes in detail her frustrations, which echo what several other families reported during their interviews.

Dee: You know, we didn't get our food stamps for 2 months after I applied, and they keep saying we need this paperwork, we need that paperwork.

Interviewer: So, you waited 2 months for benefits?

Dee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did they give you retroactive benefits from the time you applied?

Dee: They gave me payback but they almost didn't, they tried to cancel it. They tried to say "oh well you didn't answer us in time." I was like, "excuse me, I called every day for 8 hours and didn't get a human." Seriously. No joke. Want me to call them to hear it? And then you finally get through and it's like, "we're busy, call back later" for hours, and hours, and hours, and hours, and hours, and hours. They don't even have an office where you can go to. The office down here is only to do paperwork and talk on the computer. There's 2 ladies there, that's it. Ok? There's no human to talk human to, you know what I mean? It's just the phone.

The numerous phone calls with no responses caused delays in receiving benefits. Beyond the missed calls and the unanswered phone calls were the lost letters in the mail or the ones not delivered to their "mailboxes" at the motel in time for the mandatory phone interviews. Lost or late mail meant the application process was stalled until another interview could be scheduled. Mail at the motels is a challenge. Motels are not categorized as residential dwellings, and as such, mail is not delivered to the individual rooms. Some motel owners were nice enough to hold mail for the residents, but others were not so fortunate. This meant that some families had to obtain P.O. boxes, and if they didn't have a car, they did not get mail every day. The fact they didn't have direct access to their mail meant that they were at risk of missing those time-sensitive letters from TANF scheduling a phone interview to confirm application and move on to the next step.

Despite the eligibility of SNAP benefits, all of the recipients of SNAP benefits (17 out of 18 households) reported feeling consistently worried about having enough food. Most families reported that their food stamps benefits did not last them a full month and often ran out by the third week, which led them

to nearby churches and food pantries for subsistence. When I asked Debbie, mother of 5, if she ever had to reach out to any organizations for help she replied, "I have a whole list of them, like uhm, whenever we run out of food stamps, I go to the food banks." Debbie also pointed out the difficulties of living in a motel, such as the type of food available and the high costs of laundry for her family of seven. Without a washer/dryer, motel residents are forced to either use the laundromat, wash and dry clothes by hand, or use a combination of the two. The washers and dryers located in the motel cost \$1.75 per load, which added up quickly for her family of seven living on only her husband's income.

Donna also wanted to make clear to me that despite living in a motel, she did not have any of the services traditionally associated with hotel stays. Donna explained, "Uh, they don't give you maid service ... You cook, you clean, you buy your own toilet paper, your own laundry stuff, your own, you buy everything yourself." Donna was trying to debunk the myth that families living in motels get free toiletries, toilet paper, and laundry service for linens and towels. The families still had to budget for all of those personal care items, just like when they had their own apartments, only now they lived without the full kitchen and proper living space. Though all of the motels included utilities (water, electricity and land-line telephones) in the weekly rent. Some motels even included wi-fi, though the families did not have computers to take advantage of it.

Cooking Restrictions and Limited Space

Limited Space and Cooking Facilities. The lack of adequate food preparation space, appliances and storage was a constant challenge. Motels typically have restrictions on the type of appliances that are allowed in the room. Some of the families did not have access to a full size refrigerator, freezer or stove. There was only one motel in this sample that offered a full-size refrigerator to extended-stay residents. The others only supplied a mini-refrigerator. Many reported they were told they could not have hot plates, two-burner stoves, toaster ovens or other cooking appliances due to the "fire code."

Everyday tasks such as cooking, cleaning and storing food are more difficult at the motel because of the restrictions on

appliances and lack of storage. Not to mention the lack of sanitary conditions since the only sink available is the bathroom sink. Motel residents noted how inconvenient and unsanitary it is to have to cook and clean dishes in the same place as where other bodily functions take place. This is particularly troublesome with mothers of infants who had to prepare formula and wash bottles in the bathroom sink which violates the recommended instructions for preparing infant formula.

All rooms were equipped with a microwave but as one resident, Aida, said, "you can't live off of microwave food for years... and that stupid refrigerator. It works, it's just there's no space. There's no space for anything." She had lived in a motel for 3 years. Mara, mother of 3, angrily told me, "have you ever tried to cook in a microwave, uff, it's hard...with 3 kids, it's hard!"

The lack of a proper refrigerator and freezer meant some families could not stock much perishable food items at once. Styrofoam chests were not used as a strategy to extend refrigeration capacity. This is probably a result of a couple of variables: lack of ice machines and lack of transportation. Unlike "vacation" motels, these motels did not have the amenities that some of us associate with a hotel. Ice machines were not available at most of these extended stay-motels. Therefore, if a family wanted to fill a Styrofoam chest with ice, they'd have to transport it from the nearby convenience stores. In the heat of the Florida summer, if a family did not own a car, it would be difficult to do so. When asked what was their most pressing need at the time, Joe said, "food" and his wife, Orphee added, "or ice" which references the refrigeration challenges of storing perishable food.

Based on my observations when I visited the motel rooms where the families lived, I saw boxes of cereal, crackers, chips, "juices" (e.g. fruit-flavored beverages), microwaveable soups and pasta (e.g. soup in a cup and mac and cheese) and various canned items. I did not see any fresh fruits or vegetables on the counters. As Yanira mentioned, "I have enough juice, milk and corn flakes for the kids." My observations were limited to what was clearly visible on the counters at the room. It certainly may not be representative of everything they stored. Some families were quite proud of their ingenuity and ability to cook almost anything in their rooms. These comments came from a specific group of families living in one specific motel that included a

full-size refrigerator and a very empathetic manager who was willing to look the other way when families utilized a hot plate for example (discussed in more detail later).

Spending More. The restrictions on appliances often forced families to rely on highly processed, pre-packaged or canned foods that typically cost more than raw ingredients. Jane, mom of 5 children and pregnant, expressed her frustration at not being able to have a kitchen to cook proper meals and also not receiving enough SNAP benefits to offset the costs:

I mean, it's not, it's not enough space for everybody, like I can't cook my kids a meal like I should be able to cook my kids a meal. You know, I love to cook, my kids love to eat so yes, they do go through food like crazy. You spend more in food in a hotel, you spend more, because, it's horrible and I only get \$500 a month which is for me and our 4 children—*Jane (and Mike), family of 6 soon to be 7*

Mara, the single mom who felt cooking in the microwave was difficult felt so overwhelmed by the cooking limitations that one day she gave up and called the children's father/ex-boyfriend for help. She said:

one time I told the kids' dad to [come] take them to his house and he took them for a month because it was just so hard with the kids. The kids were, it's not that they were not good but I was spending too much money. You know the kids want hot food, they don't want to eat [snacks] all the time...thank God I had food stamps and there was a big refrigerator. But when it comes to food, oh, it's horrible. It's horrible.

Mara also discussed how she received the same amount in food stamps when she lived in her own apartment as she does living at the motel. The difference is that when she lived in the apartment at the end of the month she would "still have like \$50-75 left" because she could "make rice and pork chops but you know the kids would only eat half a porkchop" so one meal prep lasted multiple meals. She had not managed to cook a meal big enough to have left overs since living in the motel and thus, she felt like it was more costly to survive in the motel room.

Donna's feelings aligned with Mara and Jane. She also felt like it was easier and cheaper to live in an apartment than the motel room. Donna said, "I mean it's never enough food when you're feeding 7 people you know" and later added:

I mean there's sometimes, you worry about your room and I pay my car insurance and then I'm like worried about what about food for the day? You know I worry about that. I mean I find it difficult sometimes trying to survive here. I felt, I survived better in a home.

The participants reported that they tried to be frugal and stretch their SNAP funds but just could not at the motel. After being evicted, Jeanette thought she would get some help with breakfast meals for her family if she moved to a motel but the motel she lived in did not offer complimentary breakfast. When I asked about what it was like to live in a motel, Jeanette replied,

the most difficult, the most difficult is that they're supposed to give you food, because I've seen some hotels that give you food, like in some of them, like the Days Inn. Being there, being hungry with the kids ...

The Days Inn did include free breakfast for their guests who paid \$79.99/night + tax compared to the motel where Jeanette stayed which cost approximately \$25/night + tax. During my data collection period I visited some motels in the area that did provide complimentary breakfasts to their guests but would deny service to those who were deemed as "residents" rather than temporary guests. Another motel resident who was not interviewed for this study but spoke to me about her experience said she believed the difference was due to the fact that once people lived in a motel for 6 months they no longer had to pay the "tourist bed tax" and were then considered "residents" of the motel rather than guests.

Coping with Food Insecurity

Kids First. There was a consistent concern about the kids from every parent in this sample. Several parents made references to

rationing their own portions or skipping meals so their children could eat (more). Only one mother, Jeanette, disclosed to me that she knew her children experienced hunger. Her children were not school-aged so they did not have the advantage of having access to at least one meal, lunch, at school. Based on the narratives, it is feasible that more children are experiencing hunger but parents were afraid to disclose that to me out of fear of being reported to the Department of Children and Families.

However, several parents commented on their own hunger experiences but made sure to clarify that their children did not go hungry. For example, Jennifer, single mom who lived with her parents and her brother all in one room, made sure to let me know, "We might not have food for ourselves, but I always, like I always [tell other family members], "listen, this is her food [her daughter], don't touch it" sorry, you know."

Jane was not receiving food stamps benefits for herself or her partner because as an unmarried mother, she refused to put her live-in boyfriend/father of her children through child support enforcement (a requirement for unmarried mothers to receive benefits). Thus, she received only \$498/month in food stamps for her four children but her family of 7 seven struggled to make due. Their strategy was to ration or skip meals. She explained, "So we [adults] basically kinda try to eat one meal a day because if not then there's not enough for the kids, they won't have food. I'd rather go hungry than have my kids go hungry, the way my mother showed me you know, the kids go first, always."

Ingenuity. Despite the limitations in the motel room and the limited food choices, some families were very proud of their cooking ingenuity. For example a woman showed me how she cooked rice and beans in the microwave in an empty "Country Crock" butter tub. A couple of residents had grills where they could cook meat. Sunny was gifted a grill from the guests next door because they couldn't take it to their next residence. Joe, a veteran, had a self-sufficient attitude. Joe told me, "That's one thing the military did, I did learn how to survive without going out there and doing a crime to somebody. I'm not gonna do that ... I gotta do what it takes even if it leave me from not eating but I gotta make sure that they eat [pointing to his wife and daughters]." His wife, Orphee added, "we have patience. Took objects and built a grill, really, and he was gonna cook rice

and everything off of that homemade grill. A couple of bricks, blocks and a stove rack that was a grill." At the time of the interview, they had not cooked rice on the grill, only meat, but Joe and Orphee were slowly learning how to adjust to the motel. They specifically talked about how it takes extra patience, time and planning to cook meals in the motel.

Some residents challenged the established restrictions of the "fire code" and managed to sneak in some cooking appliances in order to have more choices. Jackson, single father of 3, purchased an electric skillet and said, "I can cook just about anything that they need but it's an inconvenience you know." Similarly, Aida and Joey bought a toaster oven which was on the list of banned appliances so that they could, "bake cakes and stuff for the sweet tooth of the kids." Perhaps the most bold about this practice was Donna, she told me:

I have a frying pan. Actually, technically, even though it's an extended stay, there's not supposed to be cooking in the rooms 'cause of the fire Marshall. You're really not supposed to because there's no ventilation system. They're supposed to have a ventilation system in order, if you're going to cook. I have to, I mean we have to eat, I do with that frying pan there, girl, I make everything in it. I make from lasagna to a pork roast to ... I cook. (laughs) look at the size of the kid, he's 13! I cook, that doesn't stop me, I put on the fan so it circulates and the smoke alarm don't come off and I open up the back door ... I make everything, I'll even make a cupcake in there if I have to.

"Necessity is the mother of invention" and these families, especially those who had spent a considerable amount of time in the motel (1+ years), had to adjust and figure out how to survive with what they could. Those who challenged the established rules did so risking the roof over their head. As Aida and Joey mentioned, the hotel where they had previously stayed did not allow any cooking appliances at all, and if housekeeping found them in a room it was cause for immediate eviction. They decided to move to a motel that they viewed as less strict, though it was only so because they had built a good relationship with the housekeeper. Other motels, such as the one where Jackson lived, did not offer housekeeping services to extended-stay residents

which made it possible for him to have his electric cooking appliance without high-risk of eviction.

Family Support. Despite all of the families claiming they did not have any financial support from their family or friends, five families made reference to either perceived or real family support if they were ever in what they considered to be emergency situations. Luis and his family spent over a year in various motels and mentioned visiting his mom and sister in the area when he was low on cash and needed a meal for his daughter (toddler age). Joe and his family had spent six months in the motel and his family was out of state but he said:

If push come to shove, with the income I get it's enough to make sure I got something over my roof, but if I were to really, gotta come down to I need some more money, I hate to do it, I get on the phone, I got my brother in the Carolinas, my mom but you know that's the last option.

Joe and his family seemed to have a healthy and strong relationship and felt they could count on their family to come through if they ever needed them. Dee, on the other hand would receive support if necessary but would also receive deterring comments from her mother. She explained:

I call my mom and tell her I need money and she sends it and then tells me she has no food in the fridge because she gave me the money for the kids; that hurts. I always used to look at that picture of the woman in the depression, you know where she's sitting like this and she has the two kids on her shoulder, I always wondered how she felt and used to think this a long time ago, and now I'm that woman.

Dee's description of her relationship with her mother was echoed by others. Those who kept in touch with their families, whether nearby or far, felt like they just could not ask for help unless it was absolutely necessary because their family members had struggles of their own. When asked if she had any family support in the area, Mara responded:

Well, if I need something but it's not a ... you know they too have their own bills. My brother, his wife, you know, doesn't

work. My brother has 3 kids, and he's younger. He has his responsibilities.

However, Mara could count on in-kind support from her mom and ex-boyfriend/father of her children. She referenced multiple occasions where she would visit her family to have dinner and/or bathe the kids at their house (her children felt the motel room was dirty and would not take baths in the tub).

Overall, these families had histories of poverty and financial challenges growing up. Thus, it was difficult for them to rely or even ask for help from their family members who more often than not were in similar financial situations.

Sharing and Pooling of Resources. Although most of the motel residents were food insecure and "homeless" because they lacked support from family or friends, there was a small group of motel residents whose experiences were drastically different than other participants who lived in different motels. Four of the 18 families interviewed were fortunate enough to live in a motel that fostered a sense of community among the residents, I'll refer to it as Hotel A. Hotel A was physically and "socially" different than the other motels where other participants resided. For one, Hotel A had two towers each with 6 floors. One tower was for the "tourists" and the other tower was the "extended stay" tower or as a social worker referred to it, the local shelter, since this county did not have a homeless shelter for families. Hotel A has a main lobby with elevators that lead to the rooms whereas the other extended-stay motels are one-story, and have doors that directly face the parking lot. Perhaps the "look" of this location made the residents feel safer and more likely to socialize with each other.

Participants who lived in Hotel A commented about their "neighbors" across the hall or next door and their common struggle whereas other participants living in the other motels just referred to "the people next door" or the "people over there." The families in Hotel A had good rapport with each other and felt comfortable enough asking each other for help and felt that there was no judgment but lots of support. As Donna mentioned,

The other thing about the hotels, is that everybody understands one another, doesn't judge anybody about having no

money, having no food or what kind of situation we're in. Everybody understands "cause they're living it so everybody bends over backwards to help each other."

The residents at Hotel A expressed gratitude for the social support they received from other residents but also the manager of Hotel A. The manager at this site was cited as compassionate and all of the families living in this motel spoke of a time when he helped them through rough times by allowing them to have a payment plan for their rent rather than kicking them out for non-payment. The support the residents received from other residents and the manager seemed to serve as a buffer against some of the negative feelings the residents experienced while living in the motel. While the families were food and housing insecure, it made them feel less vulnerable to know they could count on someone nearby to help them out. For example, Inocencia explained, "I didn't BBQ but I always donated food to be cooked and we had a group of about 10 rooms, 10 families like parents with kids, and we all helped each other." Another resident, Jennifer said, "Like it's Donna, uhm the other lady, and then us and we like basically help each other out when there's no food, the other person has food, cook for everybody like a big family." BBQ's were commonplace around the pool in this hotel. One family would bring hot dogs, the other burgers, another one pasta salad or buns and have pot-luck type meals.

Another common practice was to exchange services for food or cash. Jennifer was often a babysitter when other parents in the hotel had appointments or work. She explained to me that not everybody could pay her in cash but they would either return the favor and babysit her daughter when necessary or cook for her family in return. Donna mentioned her neighbor across the hall was the "hairstylist of the floor" and would braid or style hair in exchange for goods as well.

Carpooling to resources like food pantries was also mentioned as way they help one another. Dee said, "A lot of people here will do that, they carpool to the food pantries like the [name of church] or the Salvation Army, they go to the thrift stores together, they go to Walmart together, we go to the pharmacies together, we do a lot of carpooling and babysitting." Dee was a self-proclaimed "people-person" who knew everybody at

Hotel A. She never envisioned herself as a person who would be in her position but she said, “now we’re babysitting people’s kids, we helped pay someone’s rent with money we didn’t have but they had kids, they were \$50 short. They’re supposed to pay us back this Friday, God I hope they do, and then uhm, we know we fed people.”

These residents also gave each advice on how to navigate the system to get what they needed. They made sure that they spread the word among their floor neighbors when outreach events were being held at the hotel or nearby. They also shared information such as which food pantries stock which items. Multiple residents cited how another resident helped them find an agency or food pantry that stocked what they needed at some point. Dee explained how it is difficult to manage and keep track of all the locations, dates and times in which agencies are open to the public. For example, she said, “This church over here, [name], we learn which church gives you real food and which ones give you cans, Salvation Army give you cans, you need beans you go there, if you need meat or milk you go over here, clothes over here, you know what I’m saying, that’s what we do. It’s hard.” She was one of the few residents with a car so she often led carpools to these different places.

Many of the residents here talked about how they would give “their shirts off their back” to another family with kids in need. This type of informal support system helped some of the families make it through the tough times when they waited to be approved for food stamps or when food stamps were suspended. Besides the nourishment they received from the food, it was visible that the families at this motel felt more stable because they had support from their neighbors and had built a sense of community which allowed them to remain hopeful.

Hotel A was very open to social service agencies coming to the hotel and do events for those who lived there. As a volunteer, I later participated in the USDA summer lunch program that was hosted by Hotel A. This experience allowed me to see just how close the families in this particular hotel were and how they looked after each other. Often times, one mother would take charge of the kids in her floor and bring them to the area where lunch was served. These types of events allowed the old and new residents to familiarize themselves with others who

were living at the motel and had similar experiences. In a time where social service providers are limited by budgets and are under-staffed, perhaps the experience of Hotel A can serve as a model to test in other areas. The residents here had a general mistrust of the agencies but when they came to the events put together by the agencies, they met others and that allowed them to form a community where they could get emotional support as well as some forms of instrumental support (e.g. barter food for babysitting services) from peers.

Conclusion

Families living in motels for extended periods of time experience food insecurity during their stay and are at-risk of long term food insecurity. These families experienced at least the first two levels of food insecurity described by Connell et al. (2001). The adults in the family reported engaging in strategies to alleviate their hunger by rationing portions or skipping meals so that the children would have enough food to eat.

Most studies on food insecurity are quantitative and while they highlight the prevalence and severity of food insecurity among different populations, it is difficult to discern the exact barriers or causes of the food insecurity beyond financial restraints. The participants in this study are extended stay motel residents with children, they have low to no incomes, limited to no transportation, limited computer access, and some had a disabled member in their family. These individuals experienced compounding barriers, the stressors of financial instability but also the stressors of not being able to access food in a traditional manner. Service providers and policy makers should note these non-traditional families' experiences and make adjustments in their services to attempt to alleviate the risk for food insecurity and hunger.

The rising costs of living across the nation and the stagnant wages are driving more low-income families to motels as a way to avoid being street homeless (see Eckholm, 2009; Toner, 2011; Woodhouse, 2015). The families interviewed for this project were able to pay their weekly rent (barely and some were behind some) but were completely unable to save any money. They moved into the motel as a temporary solution to their housing

crisis (e.g. eviction) but their inability to save money kept some of the families at the motel for an extended period of time.

The average length of time at the motel in this sample was 11 months. This means that the families are at risk of long-term food insecurity due to the barriers present when living in a motel. Long-term food insecurity can present significant mental and physical health difficulties for the adults as well as the children (Becker Cutts et al., 2011). The risk coupled with the difficulty of accessing motel residents makes it difficult for social service providers to reach out to these families directly. It is difficult to estimate the number of individuals and families living in motels across the nation because they are largely a hidden homeless population. Unless families reach out for services, no one would know who is “living” in a motel outside of the motel employees.

Although the study here represents a small group of families living in motels in Central Florida, the barriers to food security experienced by them are ones that could affect others in similar housing and economic situations. For example, college students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are living in dorms or in arrangements with others in a single dwelling may experience some of the same barriers to food security. College students may lack transportation to grocery store, have more access to vending machines and unhealthy food options on campus, lack economic resources to buy adequate food, or lack kitchen appliances in their dorms. Future studies on food insecurity should include open-ended questions that allow for an in-depth qualitative analysis of the reasons for food insecurity among specific sub-populations to determine more general patterns. Without qualitative data, it may be difficult to draft effective social policy or local initiatives to alleviate the problem. For example, the local WIC program staff informed me they had a different list of approved food items for mothers living in motels such as eligibility to purchase ready-made infant formula rather than the powder formula so as to minimize the necessity for mixing formula with distilled water that needs to be purchased. Based on the experiences of these families, it would also be beneficial to have a different mathematical formula for SNAP benefits for those living in motels to take into consideration the higher costs of pre-packaged, microwaveable foods.

In Central Florida, local groups such as rotary clubs and church groups have become involved in helping these families. Some have organized outreach events at motels where they would deliver crock-pots to extended-stay residents. It would be beneficial to these families to have agencies or groups educate extended-stay residents on how to cook meals with approved appliances at the motel. For example, some of the recent Puerto Rican migrants were not as familiar with crockpots and had not considered purchasing one because they did not know what/how to cook in them.

Another strategy to alleviate food insecurity is what a local non-profit organization does which is to deliver reusable bags filled with groceries at the school bus stops in front of the motels on Fridays. This gives families a little help through the weekend when school-aged children do not have access to meals at school. These are typically stocked with a protein item (canned meat), Mac n' Cheese boxes, "soup in a cup", cheese or peanut butter crackers, minute rice and canned vegetables.

Further research should take into consideration the various ordinances and policies that motels in different areas may operate under. Motel owners and managers often find themselves between a rock and a hard place when dealing with families in their establishments. Some, like the one in Hotel A, are empathetic and supportive of families while others are more "business-oriented" and do not perceive having any responsibility to accommodate these families any different than other guests. As evident in this sample, the management of a motel can make a significant difference in the (perceived or real) well-being of families living in their establishments.

Moreover, there may be significant geographical differences in demographics and reasons for living motels that should be explored. Spatial design of motels may be a critical variable in determining how social networks are formed in motels and/or perceived levels of safety and solidarity among residents. These factors are influential in the mental and physical well-being of families living in extended stay motels.

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