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Poor Are Priced out of Healthful Eating

Basics cost families more than food stamp benefits allow

by **Phuong Cat Le**

In a food-conscious city such as Seattle, where consumers are willing to pay a premium for all things wild, organic and locally grown, chances are pretty good that you can find and buy healthful food wherever you live.

But can you afford to buy and eat healthfully if you're poor?

A researcher compared food prices in Seattle's Rainier Valley and Queen Anne neighborhoods and found that a family of four living on the maximum allowable amount of food stamps can barely afford the basics here.

Jamillah Jordan, a fellow with the Congressional Hunger Center in Washington, D.C., shopped for groceries -- apples, potatoes, bagels, corn flakes, macaroni, canned peaches, ground turkey and other items -- and discovered what those on limited incomes know well: Even the basics cost families a little more than food stamp benefits allow.

"Nutrition is important, but it's really a matter of economics," said Jordan, who has been working on the Grocery Gap Project with Solid Ground, a Seattle non-profit. "People were telling us, 'If I can't afford a nutritious diet, I'm not going to buy it' ... If people simply can't afford that, what does that do to their health?"

The U.S. Department of Agriculture sets food stamp benefits for a half-million people in this state -- and 26 million nationwide -- by pricing items in its Thrifty Food Plan, a basket of food intended to provide a nutritious diet at a low cost. Benefits change monthly based on inflation.

Jordan surveyed nine retailers on Queen Anne and 10 in Rainier Valley to see whether you could find and buy a week's worth of food in that Thrifty Food Plan for \$121.30 a week -- the maximum benefit that a family of four with two school-age children could receive.

On average, groceries on Queen Anne cost \$1.97 more a week than the national standard, whereas groceries in Rainier Valley cost 29 cents more a week.

Someone who doesn't receive the maximum food stamp benefit can't afford to eat healthfully in Seattle, Jordan said. A family of four could receive a maximum monthly benefit of \$525.60 in food stamps, but the reality is most don't, she said. The average household benefit was \$183.38 month in Washington last year, below the national average of \$213.91.

Jordan says the Thrifty Food Plan allowance is based on "unrealistic criteria" and doesn't take into account regional differences in food costs.

Her study also found that more items in the market basket were available on store shelves on Queen Anne than in Rainier Valley and that independent stores such as Viet Wah and Trader Joe's offered a greater variety of healthful foods at cheaper prices than major supermarkets.

Bobbie Cook, 64, a Rainier Valley resident, tries to stick to a budget but finds that she often goes over. When possible, she buys nutritious food, but most of the time it's more expensive.

"I have to get the best I can get without being extravagant," she said. "You have to be very, very careful and knowledgeable about your buying of foods."

Cook spends about \$45 a week on groceries and lives on disability benefits.

"It might not be the healthiest, but you could eat healthy if you knew what you're doing and work at shopping right."

As a diabetic, Becky Mustoe knows she should be eating a high-fiber, low-fat diet, with plenty of fruits and vegetables and a balance of carbohydrates. But she can't always do so on her limited budget, she said.

"I should be eating low-salt, but a lot of the products I buy are high in salt. But you got to do what you've got to do with the price and availability," said Mustoe, 58, who gets about \$50 a month in food stamps and lives on disability benefits.

Mustoe stocks up when there's a sale, buys in bulk and usually bypasses brand-name items. Safeway is too expensive, she says, so she shops at Saars Grocery or the Grocery Outlet when she can get a ride there and supplements with canned goods she picks up twice a month from the food bank.

"A lot of low-income, disabled and seniors end up having Class B food," she said. "I believe organic and very fresh or frozen food would be optimum for me, but I have to make compromises because of the money."

Adam Drewnowski argues that economics is often left out of the equation when people talk about healthful eating.

"When you start looking at the nutritious food that you're told we ought to be eating, they cost a lot of money," said Drewnowski, director of the University of Washington's Center for Public Health Nutrition. "It's just amazing how nutritious food is becoming a luxury item and increasingly inaccessible to an ever larger number of people."

It's cheaper to eat energy-dense foods rich in starch, sugar or fat than it is to eat lean meats, fish and fresh produce, he said.

A Boston Medical Center study in 2005 found that the Thrifty Food Plan cost \$27 more a month in Boston than the national average.

But not all numbers point to the Thrifty Food Plan being out of whack with reality. USDA researchers surveyed 34 food retailers in the nation's capital in 2000 and found that the plan averaged \$3.19 less than the estimated weekly benefit. And a blogging mom and self-described policy wonk [tried eating on the Thrifty Food Plan for a month](#) using the maximum benefit and came in \$50 under the monthly limit.

"Overall, I think it's realistic and not time-consuming," said Mark Lino, an economist with the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion of the U.S. Department of Agriculture who helped conduct the Washington, D.C., study. "When people shop on the Thrifty (Food Plan), they have to be more savvy shoppers -- buy in bulk, use coupons when they have them, buy generic versions of food. You have to use shopping skills."

Still, the USDA plans to revise the 1999 Thrifty Food Plan in coming months.

Some researchers, such as Diego Rose, a professor at Tulane University, say the USDA plan fails to take into account the time it takes working families to prepare meals.

Lino disagrees. "It does require some cooking time, but you're not required to stay at the stove for two hours."

Carol Tinkham makes more compromises when she shops ever since she was laid off from her job last summer. Her shopping and eating habits have changed, and she's noticed that she has gained weight.

"Being on a set fund, I couldn't eat the way I was used to eating," she said. "I couldn't afford all the good things I used to buy, like lean meats."

She used to buy locally grown grapes, plums and apples when they were in season, but it's rare if she can afford a red pepper at \$1 or \$2 apiece. These days, she tends to buy frozen dinners when they're on sale at 10 for \$10.

"Normally, I wouldn't buy that, but you could afford to have those," she said.

Instead of buying lean meats, she opts for cheaper-grade hamburger. She knows butter is better than margarine spreads, but the latter is cheaper.

"You just have to watch what you buy," she said.