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Use of national surveys for targeting food and nutrition programs to homeless children and families

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Homeless children and families present with a variety of health and nutrition problems (Weinreb, et al., 1998; Parker et al., 1991; Wood et al., 1990). Nutrition issues include food insecurity, anemia, failure-to-thrive, and obesity. The New York Children's Health Project is one of the largest providers of comprehensive health care to homeless families, with >10,000 visits/year. Sections of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) and the short form of the United States Department of Agriculture 12-month Food Security Scale were adapted to assess baseline behavioral characteristics for a group of sheltered homeless mothers (N=31).

Demographically, the population surveyed parallels the New York City homeless family population: 90% Minority (35% Hispanic, 55% African-American); mean age: 25.95 years (range 19-42 years). 45% were pregnant or had delivered within 3 months of the survey. Results were used to develop and implement a health promotion and disease prevention program focusing on nutrition. The BRFSS was also used for program evaluation. These adaptations proved to be effective for use with a homeless population. From the pre-test, we were able to plan interventions to target immediate needs such as food insecurity and plan education components to address areas of nutrition needs. Access to and adequacy of prenatal care emerged as problems. The BRFSS post-test results show patients were more realistic about assessing their health status. More patients were eating fruits and vegetables and were willing to try a larger variety of foods.

Learning Objectives: At the conclusion of the session, each participant will be able to: 1) Identify nutrition-related concerns of homeless children and families. 2) Identify screening tools that can be adapted to assess behavioral characteristics and nutrition needs for a sheltered homeless population. 3) Better understand the problem of food insecurity among homeless families.

Keywords: Homeless, Nutrition

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