

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Focus Group Summary

A key finding of the focus group interviews was that participants tended to make most of their food-related decisions while in the grocery store. In addition, food budgeting was not reported as a practice by any of the participants. Lack of food resources was admitted to be a problem experienced at least once by many of the subjects. Explanations for such scarcities included the beliefs that the amount of food stamps received was insufficient and that poor food purchasing decisions had been made. Some form of food behavior change had been attempted in the past by a majority of the participants. The predominant behavior changes attempted were decreasing fat consumption, avoidance of fried foods, and decreasing portion sizes. Most of the reasons stated for attempting behavior change involved a desire for weight loss. The most prevalent nutrition education interests related to low-fat cooking and good nutrition for children. No conclusions could be drawn on preferred ways of receiving nutrition information due to the broad range of responses.

In addition to the focus group discussions, the close ranking for three of the choices, provided on index cards at the conclusion of the interviews, illustrated the diversity of reasons for making food choices. It is also possible that the participants represented a broad range in stages of change, although this could not be determined due to the low return rate of the follow-up questionnaires. It should be recognized that, although trends were identified through the results of this study, they are not generalizable to the entire population of food stamp clients. Programs utilizing the trends indicated in this study must be flexible and must identify and address specific needs of their targeted audience.

#### Focus Group Conclusion

Results of the focus group interviews illustrated trends in a lack of meal planning, specific behavior changes attempted, and specific interests in nutrition education among a diverse group of food stamp clients. This information could be helpful in the planning of nutrition education programs for this population. The focus group interviews not only provided insight into the beliefs, attitudes, practices, and perceived needs of food stamp recipients, but they also provided the participants with a feeling of involvement and an outlet to express their feelings and concerns. Although it was difficult to achieve a good focus group attendance, the majority of those involved became active members in the discussion. As suggested by Prochaska's Stages of Change Model, it is important for individuals to realize that they would like to make a change, that is "pre-contemplate" change, before action can occur.<sup>6</sup> Focus group research appears to be an effective way for nutrition educators to discover what certain populations need and may also be a way to facilitate change through group discussion and support.

#### Food Data Summary

Food consumption patterns noted through this study were in agreement with previous research, that low-income audiences do not eat adequate amounts of fruits, vegetables, whole grain cereals, or dairy products. Fruits were consumed less than half as much as vegetables.

Cereals and dairy products were also underconsumed. The only apparent trends in meat consumption were that ground beef was the most commonly consumed red meat and chicken was more popular than fish. Fats and oils were consumed frequently and soft drinks were the most commonly reported beverage. Seventy-five percent of the subjects purchased food in a grocery store and prepared meals at home. Twelve percent of the subjects purchased at least one meal from a fast-food restaurant. Several subjects from rural areas consumed the same meal more than once during a 24-hour period, indicating a need for more food variety.

Some of the findings from the 24-hour food recall analysis were compatible with the ideas expressed during the focus group interviews. The need for decreasing fat in the diets of food stamp clients was apparent in both parts of this study. However, trends in attempted dietary behavior changes reported by the focus group participants were not apparent in the food data results. For example, food intake data reflected a high intake of fatty foods, though reducing fat intake was the most frequently attempted behavior change by focus group participants. This may mean that attempted behavior changes by individuals may not be successful in the absence of effective nutrition education programs, since most reported a negative view of previous nutrition education efforts.

### Food Data Conclusion

Results of this study confirm that low-income audiences do not eat adequate amounts of fruits, vegetables, whole grain cereals, or dairy products. No past research has looked at the consumption frequencies of food stamp clients specifically; however, the results of this study suggest that their consumption is similar to the low-income American population as a whole. In addition, the ideas about food and nutrition expressed during the focus group interviews coincided with the general findings of the 24-hour food recalls. However, it should be noted that 24-hour food recalls may not accurately illustrate trends that would be apparent if weekly or monthly food consumption patterns of each individual were reviewed.<sup>50</sup>

### Recommendations for Future Research

When working with a limited resource population in the future, a modification of the traditional focus group method may be more effective. Use of pre-formed groups may improve the number of people that could be reached, such as use of adult learning center groups, appropriate worksite groups, and pre-scheduled WIC and EFNEP classes. In addition, all contact including reminder letters and phone calls may be more effective if they are from someone with whom the invitees are familiar. However, care must be taken to follow a strict reminder protocol including a phone call on the evening before the scheduled meeting.

Alternatives to focus group research for discovering the needs and perceptions of food stamp clients should be utilized to ensure participation of a larger number of participants. During two of the scheduled focus group interviews, only one invitee arrived to participate. A decision was made to proceed with the focus group meeting by involving the two EFNEP PAs that were present, along with the client. The EFNEP PAs contributed their own personal views as well as their perceptions of clients with whom they had previously worked. Although the comments of the EFNEP PAs were excluded from the results of this study, it was apparent from

this meeting that the PAs may be capable of contributing valuable insights for the improvement of existing nutrition education programs. In addition, other professionals working closely with limited-resource populations may be a useful source of ideas for program development.

In the other case where a single participant attended the scheduled focus group meeting, the tactic of a personal interview was utilized. Although a more personal atmosphere was achieved, this interview lacked the benefits of a group meeting. It was determined through this experience that focus group interviews were a more appropriate tool for assessing a group's perceived needs than individual interviews. The group interviews encouraged the brainstorming of ideas in a more productive manner and allowed for a larger number of people to be reached.

The findings of this study support the need to assess the attitudes, practices, and perceived needs of additional groups of food stamp recipients. It was apparent from the focus group interviews that spouses and children of the women who participated played a major role in household food decisions. Therefore, the opinions of these family members might lend more insight into which nutrition education approaches would be most effective. Additionally, single household food stamp clients from different age groups should be assessed.

A known characteristic of focus group research is the inability to use statistical analysis and the fact that the results are not generalizable to the entire population. In order to determine statistical significance of the findings of this study, questionnaires based on these findings could be distributed to large numbers of food stamp clients in a follow-up study. In addition to the statistical support that questionnaires could provide, those not inclined to participate in group discussions may be willing to fill out a simple questionnaire. A concern of this study was that people not willing to be involved may have had different views on the topics discussed than those who attended the meetings. The views of food stamp clients that have never participated in any nutrition-related event or program must also be determined.

The perceived need for information on child nutrition was expressed in the focus group interviews, but intake of children is not usually assessed in EFNEP. Therefore, more research should be done to assess the state of child nutrition in families receiving food stamps. Knowledge of child nutrition among parents receiving food stamps should also be determined. Results of the focus group research conducted in this study also failed to reveal any predominant stage of dietary change among the food stamp clientele. Future research is needed to investigate trends related to Prochaska's stage of change model within this population.

The comparison of the focus group interview and food data results may have been more useful if 24-hour recalls of the focus group participants themselves had been used. In future research, it is recommended that food recalls be collected on the participants of nutrition-related focus groups. Such a practice could also ensure that the focus group participants are representative of the population being studied. However, depending on the research topic, investigators should be careful not to bias the group interview by the food recall process.

It has been noted that 24-hour food recalls are limited in use with respect to identifying dietary patterns of individuals.<sup>50</sup> To insure that food intake data accurately represent the true food consumption patterns of the targeted population, future researchers might want to consider

using weekly or monthly food frequency checklists instead of 24-hour recalls. This type of research could also provide additional information on the variety of foods being consumed.

The development and evaluation of nutrition education programs should be a continual process to ensure that the changing needs and interests of the target audience are being addressed. The insight into the perceived and real needs of food stamp clients gained from this study should be used in further research to evaluate existing programs serving this population. Furthermore, additional assessment studies are needed to build on the current understanding of the attitudes and practices of food stamp recipients.