Project Title: Food Security, Health Outcomes, and Nutrition Education among Cambodian Women in Massachusetts

Project Leader: Lorraine Cordeiro

Project Overview

Food insecurity is a broad concept that describes limited or uncertain access to food, including culturally important foods. Food insecurity is linked to multiple poor health outcomes including inadequate dietary intake and micronutrient intake, overweight, obesity, and weight gain, overweight in children in the presence of maternal stressors, and metabolic syndrome. Resettled refugee populations in the U.S. have persistently high rates of food insecurity, which has implications for the long-term health of community members. Research on the effects of food insecurity on health outcomes in refugee populations in the U.S. is relatively new, with most research focusing on newly-resettled refugees.

An important long-term goal of national, state, and local agencies is to improve food security in these populations. Given, however, that a primary cause of food insecurity in all populations is likely intractably economic and not randomly distributed, we need to identify modifiable moderators between the predictor variable, food insecurity, and the criterion variables, health outcomes. This allows us to address the increasing health disparities that are related to food insecurity in a more immediate timeframe by determining ways to affect the moderators. Limited research exists in the field of public health and nutrition regarding moderators of health outcomes in the presence of food security. Our research project will greatly add to current understanding of these moderators and potential points of intervention.

This study aims to better understand why food insecurity is a persistent issue in an established Cambodian refugee population in MA, to determine factors that moderate good health outcomes in this largely food insecure population, and determine if a culturally-tailored nutrition intervention can improve food security and/or dietary practices related to food security.

Activity Summary

- A model for adapting existing NEP curriculum materials for specific populations(1)
- Capacity building for Cambodians and students interested in working with multicultural populations at UMass Amherst and in the community(8)
- Materials from three modified NEP lessons for use through Extension and by community agencies(3)
- Presentations at local and national conferences(4)
- Surveys with community members(73)
Total Educational contacts

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Narrative Summary and Impact

Faculty and students from the nutrition department presented several research papers and chaired mini-symposia at the annual scientific conference of the American Society for Nutrition/Experimental Biology Conference held April 26-30 in San Diego. A paper co-authored by Boudreau, Sibeko, Cordeiro and Peterman on “Young Cambodian Women’s Beliefs, Attitudes, and Perspectives of a Healthy Diet” was also presented. Other papers shared at the conference included “Household food insecurity is associated with depression among young Cambodian women in Massachusetts” whose co-authors include Peterman, Otis and Cordeiro. Cordeiro and Peterman presented “Household food security and consumption of a traditional medicinal tincture, sraa tenam, among Cambodian women in Massachusetts” and “Healthful Cultural Foods and Safety Nets: Experiences of Immigrant and Puerto Rican Families in Massachusetts.”

This study included 3 nutrition education sessions and engaged one minority-owned small business. Participants in the sessions were mostly low-income Cambodian American women. A curriculum and related nutrition education material were developed and tested. Five graduate and 6 undergraduate students were involved in the project. Two community organizations partnered with our team, and 3 community members assisted the team in implementing this project. The principal investigators were awarded a Distinguished Research in Partnership Award from the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of Greater Lowell, Inc.