

How Nutrition and Lower Socioeconomic Status Affects the Overall Health of Rural Appalachian Residents

Johanna Dundon, Chloe Foutch, Renae Helm, Katherine Walsh

Introduction

Members of the rural Appalachian community have faced negative effects on their mental and physical health due to poor nutritional development.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify and understand factors that create food insecurity, such as lack of education, income, and assistance with daily life management and their impact on the rural Appalachian community. We considered the nursing implications to improve the lives of those that live in these rural communities.

Background

Appalachia is a region in the United States stretching through multiple states; The Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, and all of West Virginia. "42% of 25 million residents live in a rural setting" (Gutschall et al., 2017, p. 84). This is a significant problem for the Appalachian society. Due to geographical isolation many residents live in food deserts, are digitally divided and have lack of access to health care (Robinson, 2015).

Map of Appalachia



Photo via Appalachian Regional Commission

Literature Review

Twenty research articles have been collected from multiple databases such as, PubMed, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, Ovid, and government resources. These studies were conducted through use of questionnaires, statistical research and surveys. The studies include information regarding education and digital access, food insecurity, SNAP benefits, and the experience of adults and children living in rural Appalachian areas.

Findings

There is a strong culture and pride of an individual who lives in a rural Appalachian community. Rural Appalachia has higher poverty and increased instances of food insecurity compared to other areas of the nation. Not everyone qualifies for government benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Assist Program (SNAP), to provide support for their impoverished lifestyle; however, even those who do receive benefits continue to experience insecurities because they are unable to afford healthy food options and fail to get the proper nutrition they need. Healthy food being more expensive than unhealthy food is the biggest challenge of healthy eating according to many in rural Appalachia (Southerland et al., 2019). Studies show that due to lack of access to adequate resources such as the internet, nutritional education and food has created a health disparity. Out of 41 indicators measuring public health, the Appalachian Region compared to the United States as a whole scored significantly lower in 33 of the indicators such as rates of those suffering chronic conditions, suicide, and drug use (Marshall et al., 2017). Activities of daily life can become complicated when health literacy is low. Low literacy imposes a barrier on those with chronic disease and occludes understanding of the disease process and what they can do to improve their condition (Ashrafzadeh et al., 2017).

Conclusion & Implications

This educational deficit has built a cycle of food insecurity and unfamiliarity with the importance of nutrition. The health disparity this population is facing affects how the nursing community can improve the overall health status of Appalachian residents. Ways to improve conditions include, better education, increase in overall access, and assistance with daily life management. As nurses, it is important to recognize Appalachia is viewed as a subculture within the U.S. It is important to demonstrate culturally competent care to the clients of this setting. This can be achieved through understanding the needs and feelings of the residents to further provide them with teachings and nutritional education. Therefore, nutritional assessments are a vital part of the health history. Nutritional evaluation will aid in recognizing food insecurity and health disparities that rural Appalachians may face (Gutschall et al., 2017, pp. 95-98).

References

