

Thousands in Hawaii are malnourished

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It seems no one has been very eager to assess the extent of malnutrition in Hawaii. Lacking hard data, we can try to formulate more or less reasonable guesses on the basis of what we do know. A rough estimate of the extent of nutrition problems in Hawaii can be drawn from the extent of demand for remedies. Certainly not all of the people who receive food assistance of different kinds are malnourished, or would be malnourished without that assistance, but it is fair to say that a good many of them are in those categories.

In 1974-75, about 21,000 youngsters in Hawaii came from families poor enough to qualify them for free school lunches. Qualifications depended on family size, but even for large families the threshold level was an income of well below \$3,000 per year. There can be little doubt that these children needed the meals, and their families were probably needy too. If we estimate, conservatively, that the average family consists of four people, then we could guess on the basis of this information that some 84,000 people in Hawaii are malnourished.

IN 1975, 86,219 PEOPLE, or about one out of every 10 in the State, used food stamps. Many of them were not malnourished or even close to it. On the other hand, there are many people who would qualify who are not reached by the food stamp program. In 1972, 38,299 of those below the national poverty line received food assistance, while 30,244, or 44 per cent of these people, did not receive food assistance. In 1974 only 44.5 per cent of the estimated 160,839 people in Hawaii eligible for food stamps actually received them. Thus, it seems likely that there are many more people who are missed than there are "freeloaders." Despite all the uncertainties, it seems reasonable to estimate that at least half of all those eligible for food stamps, or about 80,000

people in the islands are significantly malnourished.

Undoubtedly, the major cause of malnutrition is poverty. There are varieties of middle and upper class malnutrition, shown by the incidence of obesity, heart disease, and other ailments, but the really serious

commentary

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malnutrition comes from not having enough money to obtain adequate food. Therefore, we should be able to make a reasonably good guess about the extent of malnutrition on the basis of knowledge about the extent of poverty in Hawaii.

BY THE 1970 CENSUS, 68,543 people, or 9.3 per cent of the population in Hawaii, were below the federally established official poverty line. This figure is incorrect, however, because it was established on the basis of the poverty line for the Mainland. The line for Hawaii is quite a bit higher, which means that the number of people below that line must have been considerably higher. In 1975, any nonfarm family of four on the Mainland with an annual income below \$5,050 was classified as being in poverty.

In Hawaii, the corresponding criterion level was \$5,810, 15 per cent higher than on the Mainland. Until better data can be obtained, we might estimate that the number of people in poverty in Hawaii was about 15 per cent higher than originally estimated, or about 78,860. Allowing for increases from 1970 to 1975, there must surely be 80,000 or 90,000 people in Hawaii who are below the official poverty line.

The poverty line is established on the basis of the cost of food, so that a family at the poverty line using the "Economy Food Plan" (an idealized, just-adequate diet, with perfect shopping and no frills whatsoever), would be spending just one-third of its income on food. With so little to spend, it can be assumed that all of those below the poverty line are malnourished. This is, in fact, the government's understanding.

The Senate Select Committee's report, "Hunger 1973," says, "The poverty line assumes that any family with a yearly income less than three times the cost of a minimal diet is poor. Therefore, to be 'poor' is, by definition, to be improperly nourished." Accordingly, using the poverty threshold level appropriate to Hawaii, and bringing the figures up to date, we would have to estimate that there are some 80,000 or 90,000 people in Hawaii who are malnourished.

ON THE BASIS OF THE 1970 census, it was estimated almost 26 million Americans, or 14 per cent of the nation's population, was below the poverty line. Thus, 14 per cent were presumed to be malnourished. If we were to use the same percentage in relation to Hawaii's mid-1974 population estimate of 846,900, we would guess that there were 118,566 people in the State who are poor, and thus, malnourished.

There are good reasons to believe that the malnutrition rate may be lower in Hawaii than it is on the Mainland. More non-market food sources are available. There are good opportunities for maintaining productive backyard vegetable gardens, fruits and coconuts

can be found wild in some areas, and fishing supplements the diets of many low-income families. Beyond what they produce for themselves, there is an active exchange of fruit and fish among neighbors in some communities.

On the other hand, there are good reasons to believe the malnutrition rate may be higher than on the Mainland. There may be a larger proportion of marginalized people, hidden in the valleys or the plantations or downtown, who are missed by the census takers and by the assistance programs. Food prices in Honolulu are higher than those of all Mainland cities. Food prices are higher on the neighbor islands than they are on Oahu. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 1973 that food in Hawaii was 19 per cent more expensive than on the Mainland.

EVEN WITH THE BEST DATA about the population it would be impossible to say exactly how many people in Hawaii are malnourished because there is no agreed standard or threshold saying where the line between adequate and inadequate nutrition should be drawn. As shown here, however, it appears that no matter how the question is approached, we must estimate that there are at least 80,000 people in Hawaii who suffer from malnutrition. That is, around 10 per cent of the people of Hawaii have diets which are so inadequate as to significantly impair their health.

Even if we were to suppose the figure should be considerably smaller, the conclusion is inescapable: there is extensive malnutrition in Hawaii. We need to explain it, and more importantly, we need to do something about it. To stimulate action, however, we first need to recognize its reality. Despite the uncertainties, it is possible to develop a rough estimate of the extent of malnutrition in Hawaii. Hopefully the assessment that has been offered here will lead all of us to take malnutrition in Hawaii — and elsewhere — more seriously.