

ABSTRACT

A socio-economic survey of 301 households was conducted in the parish of St. James, during 1982. Households were chosen from enumeration districts, randomly selected from within three ecologically defined strata. Urban households from wealthy districts and rural households farming over 10 acres of land were excluded.

The data suggest that the prevalence of urban undernutrition has increased over the past 7-9 years. Of the observed variation in nutritional status, 28 percent was explained by 10 socio-economic variables. Of 7 categories of households identified, least at risk were those supported by professional and technical persons or farmers operating over 2.5 acres, while those most at risk were dependent on the urban unskilled and the skilled self-employed.

Causal analysis revealed that although child health and food consumption were the direct precursors of child malnutrition, these were in turn due to poor household and community socio-economic conditions. The households' inability to provide adequate diets and child care appeared related to inadequate and unstable income and employment opportunities.

Two public policies were evaluated. The data suggest that while the Food Assistance Plan will save some of the most at-risk from nutritional disaster, the benefits are too little to be generally effective. Better targeting and commodity choice would improve the plan. Additionally, an income supplement might be a better

alternative to food stamps. The First Rural Development Project was found to have improved the incomes of beneficiaries. However, insufficient selection bias, inadvertent displacement of squatters, the number of beneficiaries and the real size of income increases make its impact small in relation to need.

The study confirms the necessity to approach nutrition improvements through socio-economic development, and underscores the importance of far reaching social restructuring to prevent the continuous occurrence of malnutrition in Jamaica.