



# southern rural research project

802 first avenue

selma, alabama 36701

(205) 872-5562

## BLACK FARM FAMILIES--

### HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION IN RURAL ALABAMA:

#### A Survey by Southern Rural Research Project of Living Conditions in Eight Counties

DONALD A. JELINEK

DIRECTOR

KATHLEEN A. VEIT

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

#### FIELD STAFF

DONDRA SIMMONS

U. Z. NUNNALLY

During the summer of 1967, THE SOUTHERN RURAL RESEARCH PROJECT invited college students from all over the country to participate in a massive job of information-gathering in rural Negro areas of Alabama and Mississippi. The students, utilizing a 23-page questionnaire dealing with farm programs and related problems as well as living conditions, interviewed Negro families representing over 5,000 persons.

Eight Hundred and Ninety-Eight (898) of the interviews were conducted by 14 students and 7 locally trained research assistants in 8 representative blackbelt counties of Alabama. The following is a composite of the living conditions, food and health situations revealed by the answers to their questions--and the observations of the interviewers.

The Negro farmers interviewed are the invisible people of the South. One million farm Negroes were "lost" by the local white census takers for the 1960 census.\*

THE RESULT IS AS FOLLOWS:

\*

Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs, U.S. Civil Rights Commission, 1965, p.9, n.20).

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BLACK FARM FAMILIES--HUNGER & MALNUTRITION

IN RURAL ALABAMA:

A Survey by the Southern Rural Research Project of Living Conditions in Eight Counties

I. FOOD

A. Diet

NEARLY 25% OF THE BLACK FARM FAMILIES INTERVIEWED EAT NO FRESH MEAT OF ANY KIND AT ALL.<sup>1</sup>  
ANOTHER 25% EAT MEAT ONLY ONCE A WEEK.<sup>2</sup>

Of the meat that is eaten by the rural Negro family, most of it is pork --often the neckbones or just chunks of fat called "fat back" or "white meat," which is cooked in vegetables or fried like bacon. Rural Negroes rarely eat beef.

FRESH MILK IS NOT USED AT ALL BY 30.0% OF THE HOUSEHOLDS.<sup>3</sup>

Babies in these households are sustained on their

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<sup>1</sup>23.1%, H-26. All statements in capital letters are from the statistics of the survey. The percentages in footnotes refer to the exact figure. H-26 and all other such designations refer to the Table numbers in the Household survey. (The largest sample was 898 households; however, each Table gives the different number of households for the specific question.) The statements not in capital letters are based upon the direct observation or experience of the SRRP field staff.

<sup>2</sup>26.8%, H-26.

<sup>3</sup>H-26.

mother's milk, which--due to the poor health and low protein diet of the mother--may be scanty or lacking. In the absence of both fresh milk and the mother's milk, infants may be raised without any milk at all.

FRESH FRUIT NEVER APPEARS IN THE DIET OF NEARLY HALF OF THE NEGRO FARM FAMILIES INTERVIEWED.<sup>1</sup>

Fruit is not a common component of the meals because of its seasonal nature and because of the trouble and difficulty in canning and rationing it during the winter. Occasionally, landlords prohibit tenants from growing fruit-trees around their houses.

18.5% NEVER EAT EGGS AT ALL.<sup>2</sup>

Of those people who did raise chickens, many complained that their hens weren't laying. The reasons seem to be: too little knowledge about breeding, the lack of money for feeding during the winter months when the birds cannot find food for themselves, and the objection of certain landlords to their tenants' raising chickens.

OVER 50% OF THE FAMILIES DO EAT SOME PORTION OF VEGETABLES DAILY.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the families grow vegetables in their garden, generally okra

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<sup>1</sup>44.4%, H-26.

<sup>2</sup>H-26.

<sup>3</sup>53.1%, H-26.

collard greens, sweet potatoes, and turnips. These vegetables form the bulk of the main meal and are cooked with large quantities of grease and "fat back."

ALMOST A QUARTER OF THE FAMILIES INDICATED THAT THEY EAT DIFFERENTLY DURING THE WINTER MONTHS.<sup>1</sup>

In those cases, any money from the summer cotton checks has been exhausted on food; fresh vegetables cannot be grown in their gardens; and meat is a rarity unless the farmer has the facilities for killing some hogs during the winter months and freezing, salting or smoking them so that the meat can be rationed during the winter months.

## B. Food Programs

### 1. The Food Stamp Program<sup>2</sup>

#### a. Cost

HALF OF THOSE PARTICIPATING IN THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM HAD TO BORROW MONEY TO BUY THE STAMPS.<sup>3</sup>

One of the expressed purposes of the program--to break the dependency chain of credit/debt that binds so many rural

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<sup>1</sup>22.7%, H-27.

<sup>2</sup>At the time of the SRRP survey, only 2 of the 8 counties surveyed (Dallas and Greene) had initiated Food Stamp Programs. Therefore, the sampling for this section is small--between 85 and 180 persons responded to the questions concerning the program.

<sup>3</sup>50.6 , H-15.

farmers to their landlords and local grocers, who are  
essentially one and the same person--is defeated by the fact  
that the food stamps cost more than the average Negro family  
can afford to spend on food each month.

HALF OF THOSE IN FOOD STAMP COUNTIES WHO ARE NOT  
PARTICIPATING IN THE PROGRAM SAID THAT THEY  
COULD NOT AFFORD TO JOIN THE PROGRAM, ALTHOUGH  
THEY WOULD OTHERWISE LIKE TO.<sup>1</sup>

b. Transportation to the Food Stamp Office

HALF COMPLAINED THAT IT WAS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT  
TO GET TO THE FOOD STAMP OFFICE.<sup>2</sup>

THE MEDIAN DISTANCE TO THE OFFICE IS 17.6  
MILES.<sup>3</sup>

For the few who have a car, it is usually in dis-  
repair or needed on the farm. The price of \$3 to \$5 to hire  
a car into the county seat often exceeds the price of the  
stamps themselves. This cost is doubled for those who  
participate in a bi-monthly food stamp payment plan or for those  
who have to make extra trips because of trouble over certifi-  
cation.

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<sup>1</sup>51.8%, H-16.

<sup>2</sup>54.4%, H-23.

<sup>3</sup>H-22.

c. Treatment at the Food Stamp Office

ALMOST A THIRD SAID THEY WERE NOT TREATED

THE SAME AS WHITE PEOPLE AT THE FOOD STAMP

OFFICE<sup>1</sup> WHILE TWO THIRDS WERE ADDRESSED BY

THEIR FIRST NAMES.<sup>2</sup>

The rural Negro farmer is already familiar with discriminatory treatment at the hands of local Federal employees at the various county offices in past dealings with Federal programs. In the Agricultural Section of the SRRP survey (not yet published), 50.3% complained of being treated differently from the white people at the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) county offices, 52.3% at the Farmers Home Administration (FHA) county offices, and 34.9% at the Federal Extension Service (FES) county offices.

2. The Free Food Commodities Program

OF THOSE PERSONS RECEIVING FREE FOOD, MORE

THAN HALF SAID THAT THE FREE FOOD BY ITSELF

WAS NOT ENOUGH TO FEED A FAMILY.<sup>3</sup>

The basic diet of the rural Negro family is starch,

supplemented whenever possible by vegetables. Many families

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<sup>1</sup>30.2%, H-21.

<sup>2</sup>67.7%, H-20. The use of first names in the South historically indicates inferior status while the use of courtesy titles (Mr. & Mrs.) is usually indicative of civil rights victories either obtained at the voting booth or by boycotts.

<sup>3</sup>57.8%, H-8.

receiving the essentially starch and "filler" free food commodities--grits, rice, flour, rolled wheat, red beans, cornmeal, split peas, peanut butter<sup>1</sup>--literally subsist on them. However, even this "filler" food is not enough in most cases.

OUT OF THE 135 PERSONS USING FREE FOODS, ONLY 12 PERSONS WERE ABLE TO SUPPLEMENT THEM BY RAISING MEAT ON THE FARM,<sup>2</sup> 15 PERSONS BY BUYING MEAT,<sup>3</sup> AND 4 PERSONS BY BUYING OR RAISING EGGS.<sup>4</sup>

## II. HEALTH

### 1. Child Health

OVER ONE THIRD OF THE CHILDREN SUFFER FROM SORES AND SCABS.<sup>5</sup>

These open sores and oozing and pus-filled scabs on the heads, arms, and legs of the children are considered a "normal" childhood condition and go untreated until they become so severely infected that medical attention becomes imperative.

IN 14.2% OF THE FARM HOUSEHOLDS VISITED,  
SRRP INTERVIEWERS NOTED ONE OR MORE  
CHILDREN WITH VERY NOTICEABLY DISTENDED  
STOMACHS.<sup>1</sup>

In some cases the childrens' abdomens were so bloated  
out of proportion that toddlers of 1½ and 2 years were not  
able to balance themselves in walking.

IN 21.4% OF THE HOUSEHOLDS, MOTHERS REPORTED  
HAVING ONE OR MORE CHILDREN WHO SLEPT ALOT  
DURING THE DAY.<sup>2</sup>

These black farm children, who should be running and  
playing, spend most of their time sitting quietly and  
dozing--even in school. One ten-year-old was observed  
falling asleep while raising a spoon to place food in his  
mouth.

## 2. Adult Health

### 3. Birth and Infancy

12.7% OF THE WOMEN QUESTIONED WHO HAD HAD A PREGNANCY OVER THE PAST 5 YEARS HAD RECEIVED NO PRENATAL CARE.<sup>1</sup> A THIRD OF THE WOMEN HAD SUFFERED AT LEAST ONE MISCARRIAGE.<sup>2</sup> TWO THIRDS OF THE RURAL NEGRO BABIES WERE BORN AT HOME WITH THE AID OF A MIDWIFE.<sup>3</sup>

The midwife is untrained and unable to handle difficult births, which endangers the life of mother and child,, especially when there has been no prenatal care. Matters are further complicated by the fact that

ALMOST ALL OF THE HOMES HAVE NO INDOOR WATER<sup>4</sup> AND 5.0% LACK EVEN ELECTRICITY.<sup>5</sup>

For the most part, the water used in the delivery comes from outside sources which are often polluted with soil and/or animal waste. The wood stove used to boil water for the delivery pours soot into the air which makes sterile conditions almost impossible.

ONE THIRD OF THE MOTHERS INTERVIEWED HAD LOST ONE OR MORE CHILDREN<sup>6</sup>; 68.0% OF THESE CHILDREN DURING THEIR FIRST YEAR.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> H-49.

<sup>2</sup> 35.1%, H-53.

<sup>3</sup> 67.4%, H-50.

<sup>4</sup> 93.2%, H-82.

<sup>5</sup> H-80.

<sup>6</sup> 34.6%, H-54.

<sup>7</sup> H-55. According to the 1960 Census figures for Alabama, the infant mortality rate for Negroes was almost double that for whites

#### 4. Medical and Dental Treatment

##### A. General

THE MAJORITY OF THE FAMILIES WERE NOT ABLE TO SEE A DOCTOR AS OFTEN AS THEY NEEDED TO<sup>1</sup>-- IN MOST CASES BECAUSE THEY COULDN'T AFFORD THE DOCTOR'S FEE.<sup>2</sup>

AMONG THOSE WHO COULD AFFORD A DOCTOR, THE MAJORITY WERE UNABLE TO BUY THE PRESCRIBED MEDICINE.<sup>3</sup>

##### B. Infant and Baby Care Treatment

DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF LIFE 20.4% OF RURAL NEGRO BABIES RECEIVED NO MEDICAL ATTENTION WHATSOEVER.<sup>4</sup>

Most rural Negro Mothers are not aware of the free medical care that should be available to them through the County Health Department and free clinic:

MORE THAN HALF OF THE MOTHERS SAID THEY COULD NOT GET FREE BABY CARE.<sup>5</sup> 25% WERE NOT AWARE THAT THEY COULD GET FREE X-RAYS FOR THEMSELVES OR SHOTS FOR THEIR CHILDREN.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>58.8%, H-37. "Needing" to see a doctor is a very relative term. "Need" indicates an emergency situation or a serious injury for people for whom ill health and malnutrition is the norm.

<sup>2</sup>86.3%, H-38.

<sup>5</sup>53.2%, H-56.

C. Dental Treatment

THREE QUARTERS OF THE HOUSEHOLDS INTERVIEWED REPORTED A NEED FOR DENTAL WORK,<sup>1</sup> WHICH IN 78.8% THE CASES HAD NOT BEEN TAKEN CARE OF BECAUSE OF LACK OF MONEY.<sup>2</sup>

90.4% OF THOSE WHO HAD SEEN A DENTIST WERE TREATED ONLY BY THE PULLING OF TEETH.<sup>3</sup> ONLY 2.6% HAD EVER HAD A TOOTH FILLED.<sup>4</sup>

D. Treatment by the Clinic Personnel

83.9% OF THOSE WHO WERE ATTENDED BY THE CLINIC WERE ADDRESSED BY THEIR FIRST NAME.<sup>5</sup>

III. LIVING CONDITIONS

ALMOST TWO THIRDS OF THE HOUSEHOLDS INTERVIEWED DID NOT HAVE ENOUGH SHEETS AND PILLOWCASES FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY,<sup>6</sup> AND 6.1% DID NOT HAVE ANY AT ALL.<sup>7</sup>

In most cases, sheets and bedding are made from fertilizer sacks sewn together.

A QUARTER HAD NO BLANKETS AT ALL<sup>8</sup>; AND ANOTHER THIRD HAD SOME BLANKETS, BUT NOT ENOUGH.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 77.8%, H-59.

<sup>6</sup> 62.5%, H-70.

<sup>2</sup> H-60.

<sup>7</sup> H-70.

<sup>3</sup> H-62.

<sup>8</sup> 26.1%, H-71.

<sup>4</sup> H-62.

<sup>9</sup> 36.2%, H-71.

<sup>5</sup> H-64.

IN ALMOST A THIRD OF THE HOUSEHOLDS THE FAMILIES ARE NOT ABLE TO SIT DOWN TOGETHER FOR THEIR MEALS BECAUSE THE TABLE IS TOO SMALL.<sup>1</sup>

IN OVER A THIRD OF THE HOMES THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH CHAIRS,<sup>2</sup> AND IN 39.6% OF THE HOUSEHOLDS THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH DISHES, GLASSES, AND SILVERWARE FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY.<sup>3</sup>

72.3% OF THE HOMES HAVE PROBLEMS WITH RATS FLEAS, OR LICE.<sup>4</sup> MORE THAN HALF OF THE HOMES HAD FLOORS IN A BAD STATE OF DISREPAIR.<sup>5</sup> SIX HOUSEHOLDS HAD NO FLOOR AT ALL.<sup>6</sup>

It is through these holes, missing planks, and rotted boards that rats enter and exit at night; while rain falls from holes in the roof, collects underneath the house, and mixes with the garbage, adding to the rat problem.

IN 60.5% OF THE CASES COOKING IS DONE ON A WOOD OR COAL STOVE.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 30.6%, H-72.

<sup>2</sup> 35.2%, H-73.

<sup>3</sup> H-74.

<sup>4</sup> H-75.

<sup>5</sup> 54.2%, H-76.

<sup>6</sup> H-76.

<sup>7</sup> H-77.

The soot blackens the interior of the house and covers the few clothes which hang on nails or on a cord in corners of the room.

5.6% OF THOSE INTERVIEWED HAVE NO REFRIGERATORS OR OTHER MEANS TO KEEP THEIR FOOD COLD.<sup>1</sup>

VIRTUALLY ALL RURAL NEGRO HOMES, 93.2%, HAVE NO INDOOR WATER SUPPLY.<sup>2</sup> 73.1% OF THE FAMILIES DERIVE THEIR WATER SUPPLY FROM DUG WELLS.<sup>3</sup> ONLY 2.4% HAVE RUNNING HOT AND COLD WATER INDOORS.<sup>4</sup> TEN FAMILIES SURVEYED GOT THEIR WATER FROM A DISTANT SPRING.<sup>5</sup> 92.7% HAVE NO INDOOR TOILETS.<sup>6</sup>

A large number of these do not even have out-houses and are forced to use the bushes.

Homes are never centrally heated.

TWO THIRDS RELY ON THEIR WOOD OR COAL STOVE AND FIREPLACES FOR HEAT.<sup>7</sup> 10.7% HAVE GAS HEATERS.<sup>8</sup> 8.4% HAVE NO FACILITIES FOR HEATING WHATSOEVER.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>H-78.

<sup>5</sup>H-82.

<sup>2</sup>H-82.

<sup>6</sup>H-83.

<sup>3</sup>H-82.

<sup>7</sup>67.2%, H-79.

<sup>4</sup>H-82.

<sup>8</sup>H-79.

<sup>9</sup>H-79.