Healthy Diets Are Elusive For The Long-Term Unemployed, New Report Finds

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A man tries to attract the attention of potential employers as he hands out resumes in Toronto's financial district. Reuters/Mark Blinch

More than 9.7 million Americans are currently unemployed, and just over a third have been without a job longer than 27 weeks. One of the results is that most have trouble maintaining healthy diets.

Deshawn Huckaby, 28, is among them.

After losing a janitorial position, Huckaby now balances his time between caring for his 7-year-old daughter and looking for jobs from his home in the Bronx, New York, where the unemployment rate is 11.2 percent and per capita income is about $18,000 annually.

“It’s very hard to balance,” he said. Huckaby has been living off savings from his old job, but still has to get financial help from family members to pay for basics like rent and food. He’s learned a few things along the way.

“The cheapest thing to get is Oodles of Noodles -- they’re like three for a dollar,” he said. “But
they’ll get you real fat, it’s like paste.”

He said he prefers to cook at home and eats as healthily as possible, but it’s not simple on his monthly food budget of $189. “If I was going to take that money and get tofu my fridge would be empty,” he said.

It’s a problem faced by many among the long-term unemployed: how to maintain a healthy diet on a limited income. New research shows that unemployment and health problems go hand-in-hand. According to a recent Gallup poll, the longer a person is unemployed, the higher the rates of obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

“Unemployment may cause some people to engage in behaviors that lead to health problems, while pre-existing health conditions may make it harder for others to find and keep work,” the Gallup poll reports. “For many individuals, both dynamics may be at work, perpetuating a negative cycle of declining job prospects and worsening health.”

While the pattern is clear, the specific reasons that unemployment and health problems are linked vary. Most Americans know what it’s like to reach for unhealthy comfort food and skip the gym in times of stress, but for the long-term unemployed, the problem is not always a matter of exercising willpower, or poor health education, economists say. Other stress factors are often at work.

Harry Zhang, a health economist at Virginia's Old Dominion University, started examining the relationship between health and unemployment during the recession.

“My main research is on obesity, but that last recession was so severe, I figured some people must have negative health outcomes,” Zhang told International Business Times.

Zhang found that a person’s health after losing their job had a great deal to do with their socioeconomic status. For instance, high-level CEOs tended to get in better shape during periods of unemployment, because they finally have time to go to the gym.

But for most people, it’s the opposite.

“That’s just the 1 percent; we’re worried about the 99 percent,” Zhang said. “Very poor people with limited income may be able to afford some fruits or vegetables when they have a job, but after they get unemployed they rely more on unhealthy food.”

It’s no surprise that healthy food tends to be more expensive. In fact, a 2013 study from professors at the Harvard School of Public Health and Brown University shows that eating healthier costs at least an extra $1.50 per person, per day.

In their research, the professors learned that despite the fact that most people know how to eat right, it’s not always economically possible.

“Conventional wisdom holds that healthier foods and diets are more expensive than less healthy
options, an assumption which has become a reflexive part of how we explain why so many Americans are overweight,” the researchers wrote, adding that this poses a major problem for socioeconomically disadvantaged populations.

That, in turn, creates an even bigger problem for the long term as such people look for jobs.

“This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy,” said James Levine, an endocrinologist at the Mayo Clinic who studies obesity. “We live in a society that isn’t compassionate toward people with obesity. There’s a discriminatory tone with respect to people with obesity, regardless of the job description.” Levine added that a lower level of self-esteem or depression also makes job interviews difficult.

In 2010, researchers from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Department of Psychology found that the way employers perceive an applicant’s weight sometimes leads them to make biased decisions.

And for the applicant, the cycle is hard to break. People in low-income areas tend not to have the same choices available to most Americans. The USDA defines "food deserts" as any area without ready access to fresh, healthy and affordable food with a poverty rate of 80 percent or higher. Their researchers estimate that at least 18 million Americans live in such areas.

“Rather than being less intelligent and lazy, one can point to the inability to get healthy foods,” said John Weed, an assistant director for the Workforce Development Program at the nonprofit BronxWorks community center in New York City.

Given the lack of access to larger supermarkets in lower-income areas, “people tend to shop at bodegas or corner delis where they buy sugary drinks and unhealthy foods, which are relatively cheap and accessible,” Weed said, adding that those who are unemployed tighten their wallets even more and go for cheap fast or pre-prepared food.

He also noted that many of the unemployed people in the Bronx area don’t have health insurance, so can’t access local hospitals and clinics, which can exacerbate diet-related problems such as high blood pressure, heart problems or obesity.

Joel Berg, of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, said it’s a misconception to think that all poor food choices are cultural or a learned habit in many communities, where people simply grow up not knowing or wanting to eat healthier.

“A lot of that is patronizing, ill-informed and often has a racial undertone,” Berg said. “There are a lot of reasons why economics are tied to obesity.”

Berg and others have started a program that delivers healthy, fresh food to people in low-income areas through a subsidized, community-supported agriculture program, known as a CSA. Participants essentially buy a share in local farms’ output and get a week’s supplies of locally grown vegetables.
Jackie Williams, who has volunteered with the project for almost two years, said the program has quickly become popular at her distribution center at 169th Street and Grand Concourse in the Bronx, New York, one of the poorest community districts in the state, where more than half of the CSA participants are currently unemployed.

“A lot of times when they don’t have this program, people are not able to go to the farms or afford these different vegetables,” Williams said. "It would be cheaper to go to McDonald’s and get a dollar burger than go and buy a nice chopped salad that costs $8 or $9."

The share packages range in cost, depending on a person’s status and income. For some, the price is as much as $8 per week. Last week, participants got kale, scallions, arugula, spinach, beets, romaine, red-leaf lettuce and swiss chard.

“They know the importance of it, they have children and they want them to be healthy,” Williams said. “They really appreciate it.”