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**Unsafe food handling in families suffering from food
poverty
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Abstract

Traditionally, the home has been regarded as a place of wellbeing and safety, notwithstanding the fact that, within it, unsafe practices can take place that endanger its inhabitants' health. One such practice is the unsanitary handling of foodstuffs from the moment they are bought to when they are prepared, stored and eaten. So far this year, in Mexico City alone more than 182,000 cases of gastrointestinal tract infections have been reported by the city's health services.

The aim of this research is thus to determine which unsanitary practices occur in the kitchens of Mexican families suffering from food poverty, particularly when handling foodstuffs. This segment of the population is vulnerable to foodborne diseases due to insufficient schooling, a lack of adequate cooking facilities and overcrowding.

The present work includes results from case studies of ten Mexican families living in the barrio of Santa Fe, in the western outskirts of Mexico City. In spite of their diverse features and compositions, all families that participated in the study suffered from food poverty. Checklists, field observations and semi-structured interviews were relied upon to investigate how they purchase, prepare, store and eat their food, with special emphasis on their cooking practices.

A preliminary analysis of the data suggests that the families studied do share some risk-prone situations, facilities, and practices, such as lacking refrigerators, freezers and kitchen sinks upon which to wash raw foods. On the other hand, the majority of kitchens visited exhibited moderate to satisfactory levels of hygiene, with no overt signs of infestations.

Most families purchase their food on a daily basis from local markets, mainly because they cannot afford to procure large amounts of food for long term consumption or because they lack either refrigerators or adequate storage spaces. For the same reasons, they tend not to store surplus food. Furthermore, they prefer to purchase demijohns of purified water because they distrust tap water, although pH and chlorine tests performed onsite by the researchers suggested that it was safe for human consumption.

One of the riskier practices identified was that of leaving food exposed and unrefrigerated for long periods of time, in conditions favourable to bacterial growth. Punishing work schedules and long transit times from the home to the workplace force working women to cook either very early in the morning or late at night so as to provide the remaining family members with sustenance during their long absence from home. Additionally, not all women wash their hands properly before handling food and many disinfect fruits and vegetables without carefully following the disinfectant's instructions. Finally, there is a considerable risk of cross-contamination because of an unsanitary handling of raw meat and the use of a single cloth for most cleaning needs in the kitchen.

An awareness of these practices will allow the design of teaching materials and courses, adapted to the schooling and the circumstances of the population under study, aimed at safeguarding their health and wellbeing. Further research will focus on monitoring the effectiveness of this intervention.

Full Paper awaiting publication