



center for BEST PRACTICES



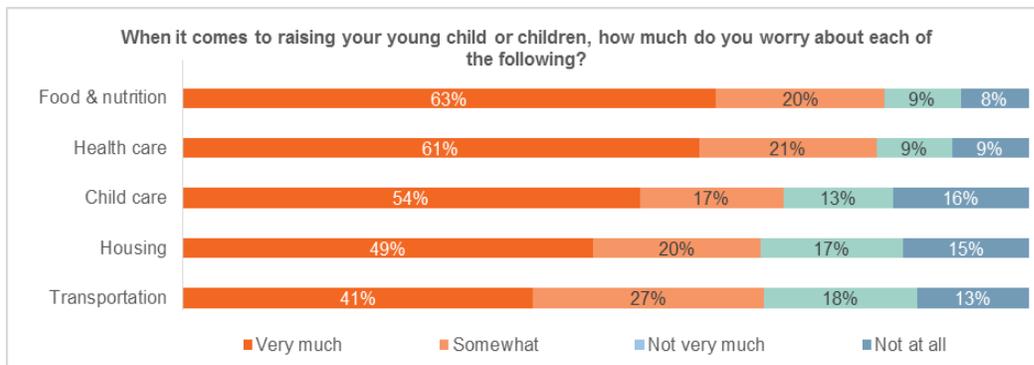
## EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH BRIEF: FOOD PREPARATION AND SHOPPING PRACTICES OF PARENTS

### BACKGROUND

Early childhood is a critical period of growth and development, and access to adequate food and nutrition in early childhood can have long-lasting implications on health and well-being. Share Our Strength partnered with APCO Insight to conduct a national survey among low-income families (less than 185 percent of the poverty-income ratio) who have children five years old and younger (pre-K). Between December 2016 and January 2017, a total of 1,000 parents and caregivers participated in the survey.<sup>1</sup> The survey asked parents and caregivers about their experiences caring for and feeding their children, as well as sources of support. This brief focuses on findings regarding meal preparation and food shopping practices.

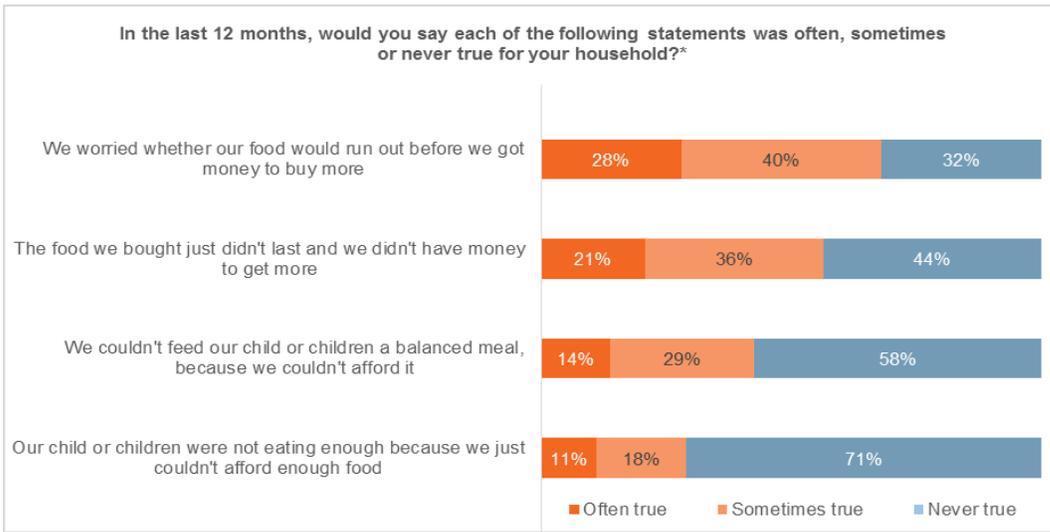
### FOOD AND NUTRITION CONCERNS

Food and nutrition is a top concern for more than eight in ten low-income families with young children.



Low-income parents with young children acknowledged serious food challenges in the past year.

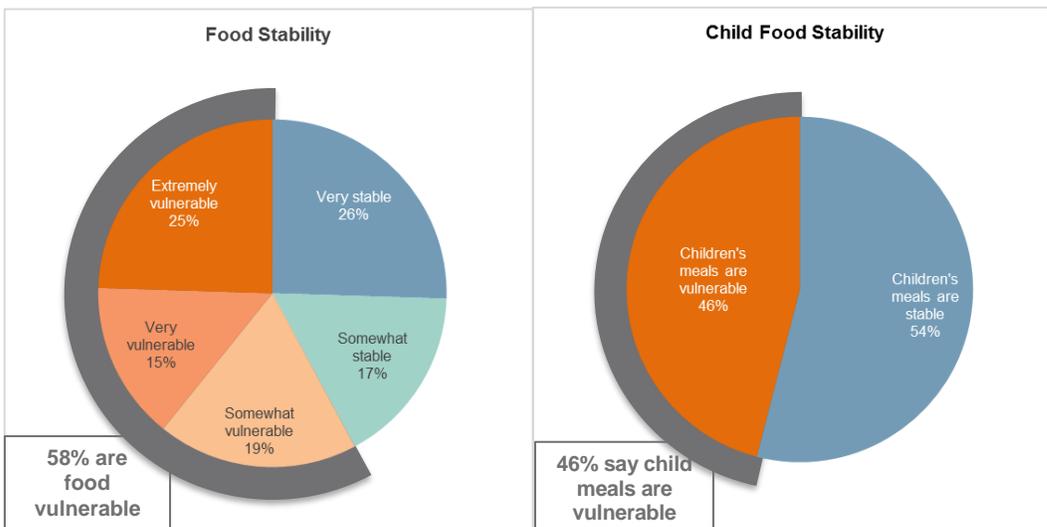
- More than two in three (68%) say they worried their food would run out before they got money to buy more.
- More than half (56%) say the food they bought did not last and they did not have the money to buy more.
- An alarming number report food challenges directly involving their children. Nearly one in three (29%) said their child was not eating enough, and 42 percent were not able to feed their child a balanced meal.



Based on these four food challenges, family and children meals were categorized as food stable or vulnerable.

- **Food Stable:** *Very stable* (answered never true for each of the four scenarios) or *Somewhat stable* (answered sometimes/often true for one scenario)
- **Food Vulnerable:** *Somewhat vulnerable* (answered sometimes/often true for two scenarios), *Very vulnerable* (sometimes/often true for three scenarios), or *Extremely vulnerable* (answered sometimes/often true for all four scenarios)
- **Child Meals Stable:** Answered never true for both scenarios about feeding children.
- **Child Meals Vulnerable:** Answered sometimes/often true for one or both scenarios about feeding children

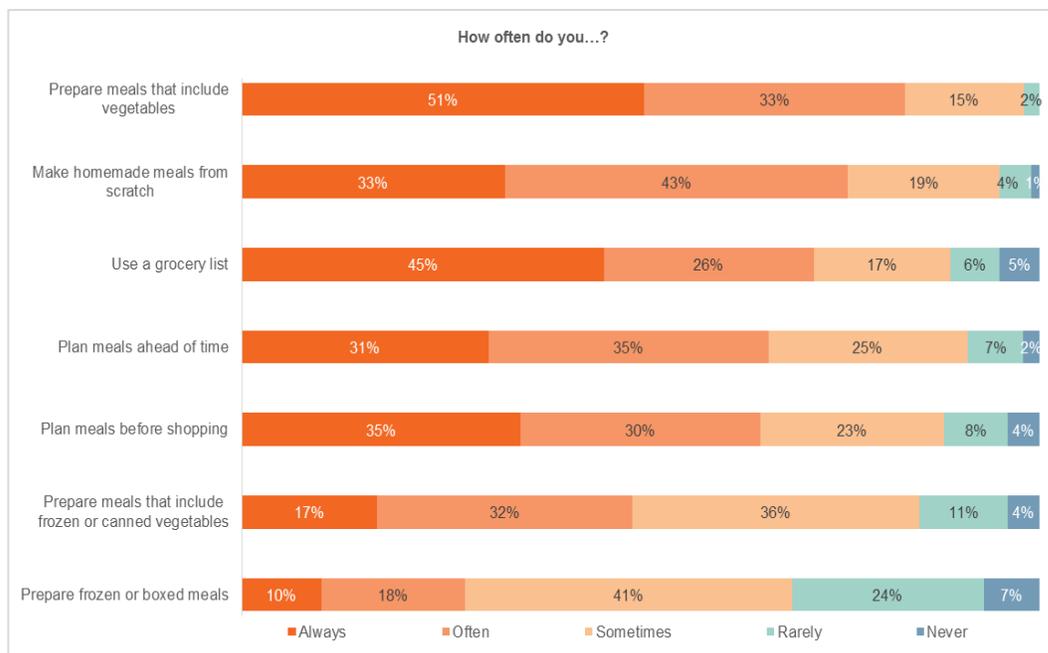
Looking across categories, 58 percent are food vulnerable and 46 percent say their children's meals are vulnerable.



## MEAL PREPARATION AND GROCERY SHOPPING

To help make ends meet, parents reported practicing behaviors to help provide healthy and budget-friendly meals for their families. The evidence suggests that those who regularly engage in positive behaviors are also more likely to be very confident their children are getting enough healthy food.

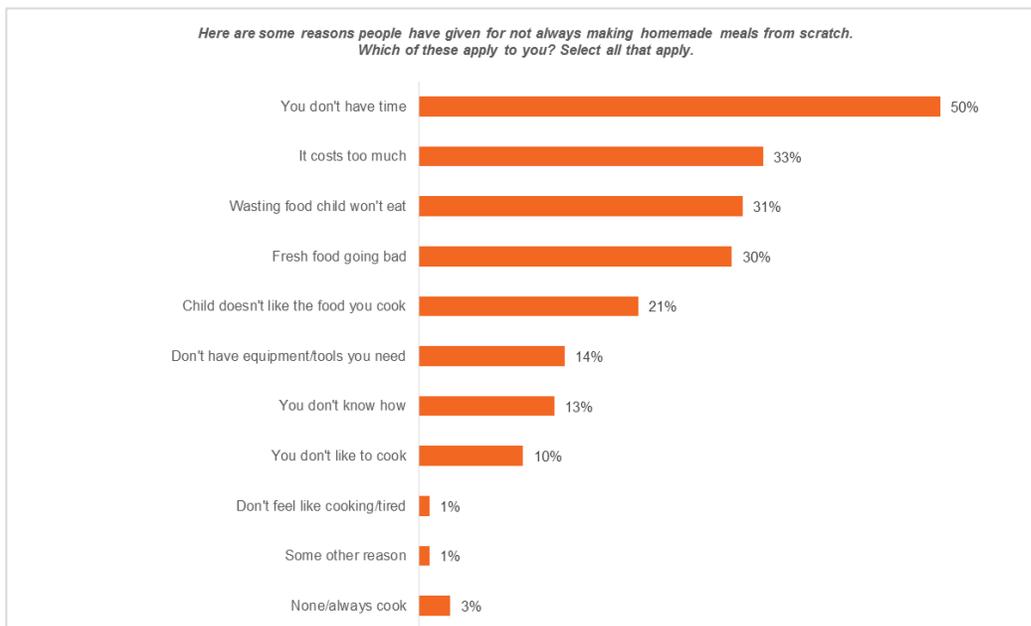
Even with a majority practicing positive behaviors, there is room for improvement as more than a third (35%) of families report they do not regularly plan their meals before shopping and 28 percent do not use a grocery list regularly. Moreover, nearly one in five (17%) do not regularly include vegetables in meals for their family and 28 percent regularly rely on boxed or frozen meals.



## BARRIERS TO HEALTHY MEAL PREPARATION

While many make homemade meals, families still say they face obstacles to cooking from scratch. Families report time as their biggest constraint. Many also say cost, food waste and children's tastes are barriers. While less common, a lack of tools, cooking knowledge and enjoyment of cooking play a role for some.

In comparison, the [Cooking Matters' 2012 It's Dinnertime report](#) found that cost was a greater barrier to cooking than time, when surveying families with children under 18 years old. This could be explained by where children in early childhood spend their time. Our survey of parents with children under 5 years old found that most are typically spending their time at home in comparison to older children (in school). Older kids also typically consume more food than young children, which likely has implications on parents' finances. The barrier that time poses among parents with children under 5 years old may also be explained by the hands-on, intensive demands of early childhood.



Food vulnerable families, who experience challenges accessing food, struggle the most, and cost is a greater barrier for this group than parents overall (43% vs 33%). There is also greater concern for wasting food their children won't eat among this group (37%) and higher rates of feeling they do not know how to cook (17%).

These concerns may lead food vulnerable families to be more likely to engage in a variety of behaviors to maximize their resources. Food vulnerable families are more likely to engage in less ideal behaviors such as preparing frozen or boxed meals (49%), but they are also more regularly engaging in positive behaviors that can stretch food budgets, such as planning meals before shopping and preparing meals with frozen and canned vegetables (71% and 60%, respectively). Other research supports the finding that parents and caregivers experiencing food insecurity are more likely to employ a variety of strategies with both positive and negative health consequences to help them maximize resources, from cutting back on junk food to purchasing fewer fruits and vegetables.<sup>ii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> 600 online and 400 by telephone

<sup>ii</sup> Gorman KS, Mccurdy K, Kisler T, Metallinos-Katsaras E. Maternal Strategies to Access Food Differ by Food Security Status. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2017;117(1):48-57; Burke MP, Martini LH, Blake CE, et al. Stretching Food and Being Creative: Caregiver Responses to Child Food Insecurity. *J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2017;49(4):296-303.e1.