



Food Insecurity and Mental Health

Defining Food Insecurity ^{3, 6}

Food insecurity (FI) is defined as:
the reduced ability to procure and consume nutritionally dense foods, leading to malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and/or chronic disease

Onsets of FI could arise from:

- **food shortages**
- **increased food prices**
- **loss of income**



Food insecurity can be considered across four dimensions:

Food availability

the supply of food is adequate

Food accessibility

people can obtain the food they need

Food utilization

people acquire adequate nutrients from their food

Food stability

people access nutritious food at all times

Food Insecurity Statistics ⁵

- Since 2020, 10.5% of the US population experienced moderate to severe food insecurity.
- Food insecurity was higher in the Southern region of the United States [12.3%] compared to the West / Midwest [9.5%] and Northeast [9.3%].
- Rural populations experience higher rates and intensity of FI.
- Statistics often vary across household demographics:
 - FI prevalence among households with a single mother was 27.7%,
 - FI prevalence for Black households was 21.7%,
 - FI prevalence for Hispanic households was 17.2%,
 - Native Americans experience the highest rate of FI, 23.5%.



Consequences of Food Insecurity³

Health Implications

- dietary inadequacies
- early child growth faltering
- development of chronic disease

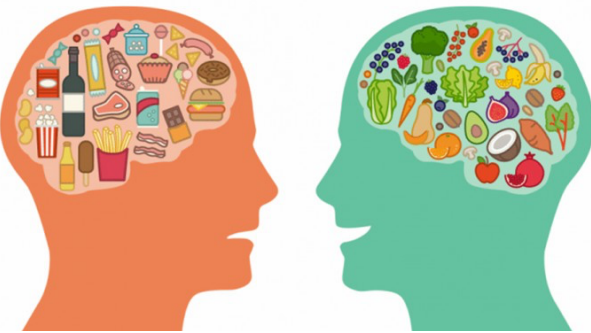
Economic Implications

- missed work days and lower income
- higher healthcare costs

Food Insecurity Effects on Mental Health^{4,9}

Less is known about the non-nutritional consequences of experiencing food insecurity.

Research suggests that there may be mental health effects associated with experiencing food insecurity.



- Food insecurity can increase the risk of depression, anxiety, substance abuse and/or chronic stress.
- Nutritional deficiency impacts brain functioning, which could lead to mental disorders or cognitive impairment.

- Experiencing food insecurity can be stressful. Individuals may experience mental distress when unable to maintain healthy food consumption patterns.

Research on Mental Health Associations with Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is associated with a 257% higher risk of anxiety² and 253% higher risk of depression²

- In a study of young adults, food insecurity increased the risk of suicidal ideation, depression and substance use, even when controlling for socioeconomic status (SES).⁸
- A study evaluating food insecurity and mental health across 149 countries demonstrated that food insecurity was associated with poorer mental health and increased psychosocial stressors, independent of individual's SES.⁴
- Experiences of food insecurity are common across different cultures: experiencing alterations in food quality and quantity, worrying about food, acquiring food in socially unacceptable ways, and disruptions of meal patterns, family rituals, and intergenerational transfer of knowledge.^{4,9}
- Psychosocial stressors are amplified under conditions of increasing food insecurity: anxiety related to one's ability to acquire sufficient food in the future may be provoked under conditions of mild food insecurity and is likely to increase with moderate and severe food insecurity.^{4,6,9}

➤ Additional research findings suggest those experiencing food insecurity often have poorer mental health combined with a reduced ability to access mental health services.¹

How Can Mental Health Providers Help Address Food Insecurity³

Mental health providers can identify individuals at risk of experiencing food insecurity and provide information and resources for support.



- Identify patients living in food insecure environments.
- Consider mental health needs that may result from experiencing food insecurity.
- Follow up with individuals during next visit; measure impact of food insecurity interventions on individuals' mental health and well-being.

Resources^{2,7}

- **Benefits assistance:** The Families First Coronavirus Act (FFCA) increased the benefits of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and made it easier for individuals in need to sign up for benefits.²
- **Food referrals:** Programs that provide information about available food-related resources or connect individuals with community/government agencies that provided food-related resources.
- **Produce vouchers:** Programs that provided vouchers or financial incentives for use at local farmers' markets to purchase fruits and vegetables.
- **Food provisions:** Programs that provide meal delivery or food on site.⁷

References

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