

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN FOOD INSECURITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

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According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), 12.8 percent of United States households, or 17 million households, were food insecure¹ at least once during 2022. This is a roughly 2.3 percent increase since 2020.² Food insecurity disproportionately affects people who experience poverty. Not having the option to buy food, let alone nutritious food, can have adverse effects on a person's physical and mental well-being.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE FOOD INSECURE?

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations defines a person as "food insecure" when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for healthy growth and development and an active and healthy life.³ However, a more inclusive definition would account for other aspects of an individual's life, such as access to culturally responsive foods or options that align with their culture; disabled persons who may have certain dietary requirements being able to afford those specific foods; or a person having the agency to choose their own food. Food insecurity also has consequences for one's psychological well-being, including feelings of deprivation or anxiety about food.⁴

POVERTY AND FOOD INSECURITY

As rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions steadily increase, lawmakers must act to address the connection between mental health and access to food. When discussing legislation that addresses this issue, lawmakers should consider the following:

1. The main causes of food insecurity include access to health care and racial discrimination but differ by state. State-specific policies around affordable housing, unemployment insurance, average wages, nutrition assistance programs, and the state Earned Income Tax Credit impact the resources and assistance available to individuals and families.^{5,6,7}

2. A significant number of people face challenges accessing affordable and nutritious food.⁸

According to the Supplemental Poverty Measure, the overall poverty rate in 2022 was 12.4 percent or 40.9 million people.⁹

3. Young people between the ages of 12 and 17 are particularly impacted by food insecurity.

Food insecurity is associated with greater odds of experiencing mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, and panic attacks. This time of life is critical, as inadequate access to food can have a detrimental impact on a young person's intellectual development and slow their growth.^{10,11,12,13}



4. The stress caused by the lack of readily available nutrient-rich food can adversely impact physical and emotional health over both the short and long term.¹⁴ Negative impacts can include prolonged stress, anxiety, and depression.

5. Mothers may experience food insecurity differently than others. While food insecurity can affect anyone, mothers may experience maternal deprivation, prioritizing feeding their children and going without food themselves. Food insecurity in mothers is significantly associated with psychological distress.^{15,16}



6. Food-insecure children are more likely to exhibit aggression, depression, anxiety, hyperactivity, and problems with attention.¹⁷ Children with these behaviors are often labeled “bad” without considering the impact of food insecurity on their behavior. This can lead to over-criminalization in schools and lower academic performance.

CLASP urges members of Congress to work together to reauthorize the Farm Bill and consider food insecurity as a root cause of mental health challenges. We encourage partners and individuals to raise greater awareness about the association between mental health and food insecurity through guidance and education.

¹ The USDA defines food insecure households as those with low and very low food insecurity, meaning those who had issues at some point in the year to provide food to all members because of limited resources.

² Matthew P. Rabbitt, Laura J. Hales, Michael P. Burke, et al., Household Food Security in the United States in 2022, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=107702>.

³ “Hunger and Food Insecurity,” Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. 2022, <https://www.fao.org/hunger/en/>.

⁴ Dr. Candice A. Myers, “Food Insecurity and Psychological Distress: A Review of the Recent Literature,” Current Nutrition Reports, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7282962/>.

⁵ Judith Bartfeld and Fei Men. Policy and Economic Factors that Affect Food Security. IRP Focus, 2020. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Focus-36-3c.pdf>

⁶ Judith Bartfeld and Fei Men, “Food Insecurity Among Households with Children: The Role of the State Economic and Policy Context,” Social Service Review, 2017, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/695328>.

⁷ “Hunger and Food Insecurity,” Feeding America, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/food-insecurity>.

⁸ “How Can I Eat More Nutrient-Dense Foods?” American Heart Association, <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/nutrition-basics/how-can-i-eat-more-nutrient-dense-foods>.

⁹ Emily A. Shrider and John Creamer, Poverty in the United States: 2022, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2023/demo/p60-280.pdf>.

¹⁰ Michael P. Burke, Lauren H. Martini, Ebru Cayir, et al., “Severity of Household Food Insecurity Is Positively Associated with Mental Disorders among Children and Adolescents in the United States,” The Journal of Nutrition, 2016, [https://jn.nutrition.org/article/S0022-3166\(23\)00738-1/pdf](https://jn.nutrition.org/article/S0022-3166(23)00738-1/pdf).

¹¹ Dr. Candice A. Myers, “Food Insecurity and Psychological Distress: A Review of the Recent Literature,” Current Nutrition Reports, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7282962/>.

¹² Priya Shankar, Rainjade Chung, and Deborah A. Frank, “Association of Food Insecurity with Children’s Behavioral, Emotional, and Academic Outcomes: A Systematic Review,” Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics, 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313115547_Association_of_Food_Insecurity_with_Children%27s_Behavioral_Emotional_and_Academic_Outcomes_A_Systematic_Review.

¹³ “Child Development: 13-16-year-olds,” Great Schools, <https://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/child-development-13-to-16-year-olds/>.

¹⁴ Masoud Heidari, Yalda Khodadadi Jokar, Shirin Madani, et al., “Influence of Food Type on Human Psychological-Behavioral Responses and Crime Reduction,” Nutrients, 2023 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10490081/>.

¹⁵ Dr. Candice A. Myers, “Food Insecurity and Psychological Distress: A Review of the Recent Literature,” Current Nutrition Reports, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7282962/>.

¹⁶ Priya Shankar, Rainjade Chung, and Deborah A. Frank, “Association of Food Insecurity with Children’s Behavioral, Emotional, and Academic Outcomes: A Systematic Review,” 2017, Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics, 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313115547_Association_of_Food_Insecurity_with_Children%27s_Behavioral_Emotional_and_Academic_Outcomes_A_Systematic_Review.

¹⁷ Rachel T. Kimbro and Justin T. Denney. “Transitions Into Food Insecurity Associated With Behavioral Problems And Worse Overall Health Among Children,” Health Affairs. 2015, <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2015.0626>.