

Texas Obesity Research Brief

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Cumulative Family Risks and Food Insecurity

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Food insecurity is the lack of adequate resources to obtain sufficient healthy food. This study uses the data from the Fragile Families & Child Well-being survey to examine the relationship between four cumulative family risk factors: financial strain, maternal poor health, family disruption, and parenting disruption with various levels of food insecurity. The levels of food security are defined as marginal food security, low food security and very low food security.

Types of Family Risks

Family risks are a combination of the following measures:

Financial strain – Economic hardship, maternal unemployment, disability, working multiple jobs.

Poor maternal health – Overall health, diagnosis of major depression, diagnosis of anxiety, use of illegal drugs/misuse of prescriptions.

Family disruption – Single parenthood, paternal incarceration, relationship conflict, intimate partner violence

Parenting disruption – Mother had children with

What we know

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Financial strain affects the food security of a family.

In the U.S. 20% of households with children were food insecure in 2012.

What we found

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Maternal poor health is significant in predicting a more severe level of food insecurity.

Linking food assistance programs with other health services could significantly reduce the negative impact of food insecurity on families.

About the Author

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Daphne Hernandez is Assistant Professor of Nutrition & Obesity Studies at the University of Houston. Her research focus is on health disparities.

Data and Methods

Data from 2025 socially disadvantaged parents of preschool-aged children born between 1998 and 2000 were analyzed. Forty-nine percent of the families were black, 26% Hispanic, and 25% white. Sixty-three percent of the sample was low-income and primarily native born (88%).

Levels of Food Insecurity

Marginal – Anxiety over food supply but there are little to no changes in diet

Typically research has combined low food security and very low food security under the umbrella called “food insecurity”.

Low food security – Reduction in food quality

Very low food security – Reduction in food quality AND quantity. Disrupted eating patterns occur. This is the most severe type of food insecurity.

Our Mission

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The mission of the Texas Obesity Research Center is to conduct basic and applied research in obesity prevention, treatment and control. TORC will educate students in an interdisciplinary approach to topics related to obesity and its comorbidities.

TORC will enhance collaborations within and among the University community, health professionals, and social agencies on projects related to obesity and centralize efforts to obtain funding from foundations, industry, and the federal government.

Findings

Maternal poor health distinguishes between various levels of food insecurity. Families in which mothers were in poor health were more likely to experience food insecurity (versus marginal food insecurity). They were also likely to experience very low food security from low food secure households. In other words, a mother’s health plays a key role in differentiating between the most severe types of food insecurity. This is vital in understanding the needs of families that have the least access and availability to food.

Application

In the past, there has been a significant focus on the link between financial stress and food insecurity. The results from this study show that overall health, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse of mothers are important indicators of food insecurity. It is suggested that food assistance programs should be linked with already established social services specializing in physical health, mental health and substance use assistance. The collaborative partnership of social service programs could also help alleviate the most severe type of food insecurity. It could also prevent the young children in these food insecure households from experiencing the negative health and developmental consequences associated with food insecurity.

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