

# Food insecurity predicts mental health problems in adolescents

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A study published in the December 2012 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* found that adolescents who experienced food insecurity in the past year have a higher prevalence of mental disorders than adolescents whose families have reliable access to food.

Using data from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A), a group of researchers led by Dr. Katie McLaughlin, of Boston Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, examined 6,483 [adolescents](#) aged 13-17 years to examine the relationship between [food insecurity](#) and past-year mental disorders. Food insecurity was defined as the inability to purchase adequate amounts of food to meet basic needs. The study examined whether food insecurity, as reported by adolescents and a parent or guardian, was associated with the presence of past-year mental disorders in adolescents over and above the effects of other indicators of socio-economic status including [parental education](#), income, and poverty status.

The study found that a one standard deviation increase in food insecurity was associated with a 14% increased odds of past-year mental disorder among adolescents, even after controlling for poverty and numerous other indicators of socio-economic status. Food insecurity was associated with elevated odds of every class of [common mental disorder](#) examined in the study, including mood, anxiety, behavioral, and substance disorders. Food insecurity was associated with adolescent mental disorders more strongly than parental education and income.

The findings suggest that the lack of access to reliable and sufficient amounts of food is associated with increased risk for adolescent mental disorders over and above the effects of poverty. These findings are concerning because recent estimates have suggested that more than 20% of U.S. families with children experience at least some degree of food insecurity. Given the dramatic increases in [child poverty](#) in the past decade, these findings argue for expanding programs aimed at alleviating hunger in children and adolescents.

Dr. McLaughlin said of the study, "The fact that food insecurity was so strongly associated with adolescent [mental disorders](#) even after we accounted for the effects of poverty and other aspects of socio-economic status suggests that lack of access to reliable and sufficient amounts of food has implications not only for children's physical health, but also their mental health. This underscores the importance of increasing the reach and uptake of programs designed to assist families struggling to provide adequate food for their children."

**More information:** The article "Food Insecurity and Mental Disorders in a National Sample of U.S. Adolescents" by Katie A. McLaughlin, Jennifer Greif Green, Ph.D., Margarita Alegría, E. Jane Costello, Michael J. Gruber, Nancy A. Sampson, Ronald C. Kessler, appears in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, Volume 51, Issue 12 (December 2012) [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2012.09.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2012.09.009)

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