

Study investigates the complex roads that lead families to food insecurity

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A UH study examined the many factors that lead a family to food insecurity. Researcher Daphne Hernandez says a better understanding of the family environment will lead to more relevant policies and programs. Credit: University of Houston

Food insecurity creates a host of unhealthy consequences. The roads leading there can be very different. Understanding those differences may provide a clearer picture of hunger in families and a better way of responding to families' needs. A University of Houston study examined four risk factors for families that can lead to varying degrees of hunger.

In her study "The Impact of Cumulative Family Risks on Various Levels of Food Insecurity," Assistant Professor Daphne Hernandez of the Department of Health and Human Performance says families who have challenges accessing adequate amounts of food also have other issues that impact their wellbeing.

"Half the households that are food insecure in the U.S. have both adults and children," she said. "In those families, the degree of food security varies from marginal to very low. We need a better understanding of what is happening in the family environment in order to craft relevant policies and programs."

Hernandez used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FF Study) to look at four family [risk factors](#): financial strain, poor health, family disruption and parenting disruption. These factors have been explored individually to look at issues such as childhood obesity but together can paint a clearer picture of [food insecurity](#).

The FF Study follows nearly 5,000 children in large U.S. cities. The data of the ongoing research informs policymakers and researchers on supporting disadvantaged and urban families and children.

Among Hernandez's findings are that a mother's poor health may determine whether her family is at risk of falling into the most extreme category of food insecurity—very low food security. These families reduce not only the quality of their food intake, but the quantity as well. Additionally, she found that financial strain is a factor in non-poor

households experiencing marginal [food security](#), as the [family](#) income is not low enough to participate in public assistance programs.

"Linking food assistance programs with established social services that specialize in physical health, mental health, and substance use assistance, rather than having food assistance programs work in isolation, could alleviate the most severe type of food insecurity," she said.

"Additionally, researchers should continue to investigate more refined ways of measuring [food](#) insecurity in families."

Her findings will be published in the March issue of *Social Science Research*.

Provided by University of Houston

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