

Study suggests why food assistance for homeless young adults is inadequate

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Though young homeless adults make use of available food programs, these support structures still often fail to provide reliable and consistent access to nutritious food, according to the results of a new study by a University at Buffalo social work researcher. The findings, which fill an important gap in the research literature, can help refine policies and programs to better serve people experiencing homelessness, particularly those between the ages of 18-24.

"It may be tempting to think of [food](#) pantries, soup kitchens and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as the solution," says Elizabeth Bowen, an assistant professor in UB's School of Social Work and lead author of the study with Andrew Irish, a UB graduate student in the School of Social Work, published in the journal *Public Health Nutrition*. But these supports are not enough. "We're still seeing high levels of [food insecurity](#), literal hunger, where people go a whole day without eating anything."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as "multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake." Hunger is a "potential consequence of food insecurity [that] results in discomfort, illness, weakness or pain." In Bowen's study, 80 percent of participants were considered to be severely food insecure.

"There has been recent research about housing and shelter use for homeless young [adults](#), as well as work on drug use and sexual risk behaviors for this same population, but I found that not much had been

done on the issue of food access," says Bowen. "It's hard to even think about housing and health needs if we don't know how people are eating, or not eating."

It's not surprising to see a relationship between homelessness and food insecurity, but Bowen warns of oversimplifying what is in fact a more nuanced problem.

"This research is important because we're establishing a clear indication of food insecurity in this population, which we did not previously have," she says. "If we're going to design programs and services that better address food insecurity, along with addressing housing, education and employment, we need to know about the access strategies: How and what are homeless young adults eating? Where are they finding food? What do they have to do to get it? And how does that affect other parts of their lives?"

For her qualitative study, Bowen conducted in-depth interviews with 30 young adults between the ages of 18-24 who were experiencing homelessness in Buffalo, New York.

"Working with this small group gives us insights into the lived experience," says Bowen. "It's a way of setting a knowledge foundation and understanding of the topic in the context of people's lives, and what goes on with their health, housing, relationships, education and trying to get out of homelessness."

In Bowen's study, 70 percent of young adults were receiving SNAP benefits, also known as food stamps. But actually getting these benefits can be difficult.

SNAP covers dependent children under their parent's benefits until the child's 22nd birthday. But the program administers benefits based on the

parents' address and assumes that parents and children of a single family are living together.

"This is clearly a problem for [young people](#) experiencing homelessness since many of them are under 22 and obviously aren't living at the same address as their parents," says Bowen. "The young people in this case can't get SNAP on their own because they're already listed on their parents' open application for those same benefits - and the burden of proof is on the young person to demonstrate they don't live with their parents." Documentation is required as proof that the family is no longer together, according to Bowen, but in many cases getting the necessary paperwork is difficult because of strained family relationships.

"That's one avenue for a policy change," says Bowen.

But even with revised eligibility guidelines, food stamps sometimes are not enough, particularly for homeless young people who have no way to store or prepare food. Bowen notes that this problem would be greatly exacerbated by a change proposed in the 2019 federal budget to convert part of a household's SNAP benefits from electronic benefits to a box of canned goods and other commodities.

Homeless young adults' food access challenges are further compounded by the fact that young people are sometimes reluctant to use resources like soup kitchens, or have trouble accessing these places due to transportation barriers and limited hours. This finding mirrors prior research showing how [young adults](#) are not comfortable in places meant for the general homeless adult population, according to Bowen.

For instance, where shelter is concerned, an 18-year-old in the city of Buffalo is considered an adult and would go to an adult shelter, which can feel discouraging and unsafe.

"What I found in this study is that people were saying the same things about places to get food. They know about these soup kitchens, but the places feel institutional and stigmatized to young people," says Bowen. "If we want to develop food programs to be engaging to young people we have to think about breaking down some barriers. For example, because of food insecurity among students, many college campuses are now offering food pantries. I would like to think about how to integrate food pantries and other services into places where young people are going anyway."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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