

Food insecurity has greater impact on disadvantaged children

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In 2016, 12.9 million children lived in food-insecure households. These children represent a vulnerable population since their developing brains can suffer long-term negative consequences from undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. A new study published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* found that among these vulnerable children, food insecurity had a greater impact on behavior problems in young children of single mothers living in urban neighborhoods.

"Most studies on the consequences of [food insecurity](#) have focused on the average effect, which assumes that all children are similarly affected," said corresponding author Christian King, Ph.D., Department of Health Management and Informatics, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, USA. "A greater understanding about how food [insecurity](#) affects children differently is necessary to respond properly to the issue."

This study used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a sample of children born to mostly low-income urban mothers, to examine associations between food insecurity and child [cognitive outcomes](#) and behavioral problems. This study focused on 5,000 couples and their children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large urban cities. Over the course of the study, both parents were interviewed at regular intervals.

Two tests evaluated the children's cognitive development with a parent-reported checklist measuring both externalizing and internalizing

behaviors. Examples of externalizing behaviors included whether the child argued a lot, was disobedient, or destroyed things. Examples of internalizing behaviors included whether the child was worried, sulked a lot, was shy, or refused to talk. Food insecurity was assessed at the household level.

The study used quantile regression to examine how food insecurity affects child cognitive and behavioral outcomes. This means of analysis was particularly effective in finding associations between independent and dependent variables in this multifaceted issue.

After analysis, household food insecurity was associated with more behavior problems (both externalizing and internalizing), and the negative association was greatest for children with the most behavior problems. Because child [behavior](#) problems have negative consequences, such as lower educational attainment and a greater risk of delinquency, food insecurity may increase these [negative consequences](#) and social disparities among children. These associations remained statistically significant even after accounting for other factors such as maternal depression, parenting stress, and material hardship.

"These results support the importance of increasing mindfulness about possible food insecurity among students and suggests that behavioral problems and poor cognitive outcomes may have underlying roots in [food](#) insecurity," said Dr. King. "School-based nutrition assistance programs could improve behavioral and cognitive outcomes, reduce absenteeism, and improve educational attainment in vulnerable [children](#)."

More information: Savannah Hobbs et al, The Unequal Impact of Food Insecurity on Cognitive and Behavioral Outcomes among 5-Year-Old Urban Children, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2018.04.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2018.04.003)

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