

'Building wealth and health network' reduces food insecurity without providing food

June 10 2020

As the coronavirus pandemic forces so many to reckon with growing food insecurity and increased health challenges, the Building Wealth and Health Network program of Drexel University's Center for Hunger-Free Communities is reducing food insecurity and improving mental health—without distributing any food or medicine. How? By focusing on group experiences that promote healing and help people save money and take control over their own finances.

Parents of young children, who completed the Center's 16-session, trauma-informed program, are 55 percent less likely to experience household [food insecurity](#) than those who did not complete the program, known as "The Network." The study included 372 Philadelphia parents of children under six years old enrolled in the four-to-eight-week-long program.

In addition to the course, all participants were either receiving cash assistance through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and/or support from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as [food](#) stamps. The findings were recently published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*.

At present, one in five United States households is currently experiences food insecurity, according to an April Brookings report, with that number expected to increase due to COVID-19.

"As the coronavirus ravages communities across the United States, a

failure to stop the spread is causing unprecedented amounts of food insecurity," said senior author Mariana Chilton, Ph.D., a professor of Health Management and Policy and director of Center for Hunger-Free Communities at Drexel's Dornsife School of Public Health. "This pandemic continues to expose how fundamentally broken our country's social support systems are and how poorly some of our most vulnerable citizens are often treated. As it becomes clearer that public officials are not rapidly improving basic income supports for families, our findings suggest innovative ways to increase people's ability to care for themselves and each other."

Drexel's Building Wealth and Health Network combines a financial self-empowerment curriculum, matched savings account program (up to \$20/month for a year) that includes coaching and peer support to help members heal from adversity, gain stronger connections and build [economic security](#).

Participants were asked questions via computer survey before the study, and every three months for up to a year, about their health and economic well-being—including banking habits, whether they are employed, and their ability to afford food. Those completing all four sessions and the baseline survey were considered full participants.

By addressing the underlying social, behavioral, and emotional issues that frequently accompany food insecurity, previous studies show The Network helps participants heal from adversity, reduce symptoms of depression and feel less isolated. The recent study shows these outcomes also translate into reduced food insecurity, regardless of members' participation in public assistance programs and their employment status.

"For far too long policymakers have left social, physical and [mental health](#) out of the food [insecurity](#) equation. But we know these factors very frequently go hand-in-hand," said Chilton. "Now we have data to

show that the [program](#)'s comprehensive financial education and support helps families put food on the table not just for today, but far into the future."

The researchers caution that the Network is not a replacement for federal food assistance, which provides critical, life-sustaining nutrition while families move toward economic security. While the study worked with people who live in the City of Philadelphia, the authors suggest these trauma-informed approaches may provide benefit in other areas of the United States by increasing focus on health, well-being and financial savvy, in addition to promoting work or ensuring food access.

More information: Pam Phojanakong et al, Trauma-Informed Financial Empowerment Programming Improves Food Security Among Families With Young Children, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2020.02.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2020.02.008)

Provided by Drexel University

Citation: 'Building wealth and health network' reduces food insecurity without providing food (2020, June 10) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-06-wealth-health-network-food-insecurity.html>

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