

Severe food insecurity linked with disordered eating behaviors in young people, including binge eating five years later

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Growing scientific evidence highlights a strong link between disordered eating and food insecurity (i.e., inconsistent or lack of access to adequate

food), which disproportionately affects individuals across lower socioeconomic groups. A new study from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health now shows how the relationship between food insecurity and disordered eating unfolds over time.

The study, led by postdoctoral fellow Vivienne Hazzard and co-authored by Professor Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, was recently published in the journal *Preventive Medicine*.

Hazzard analyzed data from 1,813 young people who participated in Neumark-Sztainer's long-running Project EAT (Eating and Activity in Teens and Young Adults) cohort study. The study participants were followed from adolescence into young adulthood over a ten-year period. The participants were surveyed at five-year intervals about various aspects of their well-being, including their eating habits and other related topics.

The study found:

- Young people who had experienced severe [food](#) insecurity were more likely to report a range of disordered eating behaviors throughout adolescence and young adulthood.
- Severe food insecurity was most strongly linked with some of the most concerning disordered eating behaviors.
- Specifically, binge eating and extreme weight-control behaviors, such as self-induced vomiting, were 1.5 times more prevalent among young people who had experienced severe food insecurity than among those who had not.
- Binge eating was also 1.4 times more common five years later among people who had experienced severe food insecurity, even after accounting for pre-existing binge eating. This finding points to a lasting effect of food insecurity.

"Previous University of Minnesota research shows that even involuntary food restrictions are linked to binge eating once the involuntary restrictions are no longer in place," said Hazzard. "The results of this new study provide evidence that severe food insecurity serves as a significant risk factor for binge eating."

Hazzard said these findings have important clinical and public health implications. Providers working in clinics should screen patients for both food insecurity and disordered eating, refer patients with disordered eating to mental health professionals and/or other specialists (e.g., dietitians) as needed, and provide patients experiencing food insecurity with referrals for food resources.

From a public health perspective, multilevel community interventions are needed to reduce food insecurity itself and its consequences, including disordered eating. To develop interventions, more research is needed to understand the causes linking food insecurity and disordered eating.

More information: Vivienne M. Hazzard et al, Associations between severe food insecurity and disordered eating behaviors from adolescence to young adulthood: Findings from a 10-year longitudinal study, *Preventive Medicine* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2021.106895](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2021.106895)

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