

Shielding children from food insecurity provides almost no protection from psychological problems

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It's easy to imagine the emotional distress of both parents and children in families where there isn't enough to eat. Especially if it happens

regularly. An increasing number of studies have shown an association between food insecurity and adverse mental health outcomes. Now, new research from McGill University has looked at the impacts of food insecurity on the mental health of both parents and children separately. The researchers found that in families where adults sacrifice their own nutritional needs so that their offspring are fed first, the mental health of both groups is less severely affected. Although it is affected, nevertheless.

The researchers used data from three cycles of the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) between 2007-2018 (with about 100,000 respondents in each cycle, approximately ¼ of whom were children or youth). Because [family members](#) responded separately to questions about [mental health](#) and well-being, and food security, it was possible to look at how food insecurity affected parents and children differently.

Shielding children from food insecurity has only limited effect on their mental health

"Although it is known that feeding children first protects them from malnutrition, how this practice affects family mental health has been unclear," says Frank Elgar, the senior author on the recent paper in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* and a professor in McGill's School of Population and Global Health and the Canada Research Chair in Social Inequalities in Child Health. "We found that, for the one in eight [households](#) in Canada that is food-insecure, the ability to shield children and youth was associated only with reduced risks of mood disorder in youth, though it was also associated improved mental health outcomes more generally in adults."

There was no evidence to suggest that shielding was associated with a reduction in the risks of anxiety disorder or having poor health or mental

health in youth. Shielding aside, the results of the study clearly show that food insecurity is associated with poor mental health and lower well-being in both youth and adults.

"When children and youth are affected by food insecurity during a formative stage in their [brain development](#), even if their parents do their best to shield them, there is no evidence that it significantly improves their psychological outcomes," adds Elgar. "These findings underline the importance of policies that look at [food security](#) and mental health at the same time. People at [food banks](#) don't just need food, they may also need mental health supports, especially to ensure that children and youth are not affected over the long term."

Detailed findings

- Approximately 84.5 % of the households in the sample were food-secure
- Approximately 15.5 % of the households in the sample were food-insecure to differing degrees (marginal, moderate, or severe)
- The more severe the degree of food insecurity in a household, the lower the level of shielding of youth and children on the part of parents. (Shielding occurred in about 65% of households with marginal food insecurity, 34% of the households with moderate food insecurity, and in just 11% of households with severe food insecurity).
- Approximately 6.3 % of households were food-insecure and shielding youth and children and approximately 9.1 % were food-insecure and not shielding youth.

Comparing youth and adult mental health in food-secure vs. food-insecure households

- Youth and children in food-insecure households where the young were not shielded, showed elevated risks of mood disorder, anxiety disorder, fair or poor mental health, fair or poor general health and low life satisfaction compared to those in food-secure households.
- Youth and children in food-insecure households where the young were shielded, showed elevated risks of only anxiety disorder and fair or poor mental health, and did not differ significantly from youth in food-secure households with respect to other mental health and well-being outcomes.
- Adults in food-insecure households, especially in non-shielding households, showed consistently greater risks of poor mental health and well-being compared with adults in food-secure households.

Comparing youth and adult mental health in shielded vs. unshielded households

- The only significant impact on youth in shielding households compared to unshielded households was a reduced risk of mood disorders. All other mental health risks were similar for youth in shielded and unshielded households.
- Adults had a 22-37% higher risk of their mental health being affected if they were unable to shield their children from food insecurity and showed a greater risk of mood disorders.

"While this study found that shielding [children](#) and youth from [food insecurity](#) is associated with better psychological outcomes in both adults and youth, further work is needed to isolate the costs and benefits of this protective behavior," adds Elgar.

More information: Margaret Ovenell et al, Shielding children from

food insecurity and its association with mental health and well-being in Canadian households, *Canadian Journal of Public Health* (2022). DOI: [10.17269/s41997-021-00597-2](https://doi.org/10.17269/s41997-021-00597-2)

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