

# Children and adolescents in food-insecure homes had more mental health visits

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Children and adolescents living in food-insecure households had a 55% higher frequency of physician visits for mental health reasons than those with adequate food supplies, according to new research published in

*CMAJ (Canadian Medical Association Journal).*

In 2021, almost 6 million people in Canada, including 1.4 million children and adolescents younger than 18 years faced food insecurity; that is, inadequate food intake because of [financial problems](#).

The study looked at population health survey data from the Canadian Community Health Survey on 32,321 children and adolescents linked to Ontario health care data. Researchers used a validated measurement tool to categorize household food access as food-secure, marginally food-insecure, moderately food-insecure, or severely food-insecure.

Of the total, 5,216 (16.1%) were living in food-insecure, 1,952 (6.0%) in marginally food-insecure, 2,348 (7.3%) in moderately food-insecure and 916 (2.8%) in severely food-insecure households.

Researchers also found that children and adolescents in food-insecure homes had a 74% higher prevalence of past-year acute care visits, defined as an emergency department visit or hospitalization for a mental or [substance use disorder](#). The most common visits were for [neurodevelopmental disorders](#), mood and anxiety disorders followed by [social problems](#) and other [mental health issues](#).

"The coexistence of household food insecurity and service use for mental and [substance use disorders](#) here is problematic, given that both of these conditions have each been found to have [negative consequences](#) for social, educational and developmental outcomes among children and adolescents," writes Kelly Anderson, associate professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at Western University's Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry.

"Taken together, these findings are concerning, and we need strong public policy to support families who face food insecurity," says senior

author Salimah Shariff, staff scientist at ICES Western. "As well, public mental health strategies must be improved and targeted to youth specifically to help reduce the strain on the public mental health system."

The authors note that the findings may not apply to First Nations groups and people in remote regions where food insecurity is particularly high, or to jurisdictions beyond Ontario. The data are also almost a decade old, and food insecurity has increased in recent years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The relationship between food insecurity and mental health issues may be more complicated, as a related commentary suggests.

"Given the diverse mental health conditions examined, it is unlikely that the mechanism of harm is lack of specific nutrients or poor diet quality," writes Dr. Lynn McIntyre, Professor Emerita of Community Health Sciences, Cumming School of Medicine, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta. "Much more likely is that food insecurity contributes to mental distress among those living in [difficult circumstances](#), as has been shown in studies of the relationship between severity of household food insecurity and mental health disorders among adults."

Reducing [food insecurity](#) may help alleviate some mental health issues for children and youth.

"Clinicians should advocate as vociferously about the need for income security for families who are food-insecure as they do for solutions to emergency departments being filled with patients who need primary health care. Some jurisdictions have proposed that practitioners screen patients for financial strain and take steps to ensure that those identified as such receive their financial entitlements," concludes Dr. McIntyre.

**More information:** Household food insecurity and health service use

for mental and substance use disorders among children and adolescent in Ontario, Canada, *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (2023). DOI: [10.1503/cmaj.230332](https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.230332)

Lynn McIntyre, Tackling household food insecurity to protect the mental health of children and youth in Canada, *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (2023). DOI: [10.1503/cmaj.230849](https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.230849)

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