

Food insecurity linked to muscle dysmorphia symptoms in adolescent and young adults

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Food insecurity, a significant and persistent problem affecting many Canadians due to economic disparities and limited access to nutritious food, has long-lasting repercussions on physical and mental health.

Researchers have now found that adolescents and young adults who experienced food insecurity had greater symptoms of muscle dysmorphia, characterized as a significant drive for muscularity and muscle dissatisfaction.

Published in the *Body Image*, the study is the first to investigate the association between food insecurity and [muscle dysmorphia](#).

Overall, nearly one in five participants with food insecurity were at clinical risk for muscle dysmorphia. The study analyzed data from over 900 participants from the Canadian Study of Adolescent Health Behavior.

"Muscle dysmorphia symptoms can be pervasive and severely impact individual functioning, which will only be compounded if someone is experiencing food insecurity, as well," says lead author Kyle T. Ganson, Ph.D., MSW, assistant professor at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. "Our study's findings underscore the importance of addressing food insecurity comprehensively, considering its multifaceted impact on both physical and [mental health](#)."

Prior research has identified food insecurity as a social determinant of health, and frequently highlighted the consequences of food insecurity, including stress, depression, and substance use. Additionally, food insecurity has been associated with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction.

Ganson and his collaborators found that the relationship between food insecurity and muscle dysmorphia symptoms were particularly evident in two key areas: functional impairment, where individuals experienced limitations in their daily activities and functionality due to muscle dysmorphia, and appearance intolerance, where individuals experienced heightened distress related to [body image](#) concerns and dissatisfaction.

"Individuals who experience food insecurity and muscle dysmorphia may displace money for food towards pursuits of muscularity, such as gym memberships and muscle-building [dietary supplements](#) like [whey protein](#) and creatine," says Dr. Ganson.

The authors also propose that those who experience food insecurity do not have the availability of high quality, whole foods, such as lean proteins and whole grains, that are required to build muscle mass and strength. "This lack of availability to high quality food may increase one's drive for muscularity and muscle dissatisfaction, as they are continually unable to achieve the body ideal they desire," says Ganson.

The researchers point to the need for appropriate interventions.

"Our findings have important implications that signal a pressing need for intervention efforts that consider both [food insecurity](#) and its impact on muscle dysmorphia," says Nelson Pang, MSW, co-author and doctoral student at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work.

Intervention efforts are particularly needed given prior research from the authors that emphasizes the rising concerns of [food insecurity](#) and [muscle dysmorphia](#) among Canadian adolescents and [young adults](#).

More information: Kyle T. Ganson et al, Food insecurity is associated with muscle dysmorphia symptomatology among a sample of Canadian adolescents and young adults, *Body Image* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2023.101628](#)

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