

About this report

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Including Children’s Views Can Enhance Our Understanding of Food Insecurity

Research by Maryah Stella Fram, Edward Frongillo and Sonya Jones, University of South Carolina

Meeting basic food needs was a struggle last year for more than one in five American households with children. This includes 22 percent of households outside metropolitan areas and 23 percent of households in the South.¹ Parents in these situations often substitute a cup of tea or a large glass of water for a meal to ensure their kids



never go without, or they take up their neighbor’s offer to send the kids over for dinner. Above all, they strive to shelter their children from hardship – if they can.

But do they? We know a lot from research about the strategies parents use to make ends meet, but we know very little about how children experience the fallout from thin budgets and bare cupboards. Maryah Stella Fram, Edward Frongillo and Sonya Jones, in their RIDGE working paper, “The Family Food Decision-Making Study,” talk with 26 children and teens in rural and non-rural South Carolina to find out how they handle food insecurity.

Family Economics

The families interviewed were often on precarious grounds financially. Only seven of the 26 mothers interviewed were working in the formal labor market; many were victims of layoffs or firings or working for companies

that went under. Three mothers had returned to school, two others were running informal day cares out of their homes, and two were living, in part, on student loans. Fathers had suffered job losses and reduced hours and wages as well. The families were nearly evenly split between rural (14) and urban (12) areas. Eight of the families were white, and 18 were African-American.

1 Nord M, Andrews M, Carlson S: Household Food Security in the United States, 2008. In: Economic Research Report. vol. Report Number 83. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture; 2009.



None of the mothers received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), but 14 families had experienced food insecurity in the past year, based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's

food security measure.² Ten families were receiving food stamps, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Sixteen of the 26 families interviewed had applied for SNAP, 10 were receiving benefits, six were struggling with barriers in the application or recertification process, and one was too embarrassed to apply. Nearly all (21) of the children received free or reduced-price school meals. Two families received help from community members who donated food, and the majority of mothers tapped into social networks to help put food on the table by eating at friends' or relatives' homes or sharing food. Nine families had used food pantries or soup kitchens.

Family Coping Strategies

Most of the families struggled to stretch their food budgets through the end of the month. They used a variety of strategies to make ends meet, including shopping at dollar stores and Wal-Mart, using coupons and sticking to a strict shopping list. Others relied on cheap foods such as Oodles of Noodles, peanut butter, and rice and beans as staples or ate stale products they got free or at reduced cost. One mother reported serving "breakfast for dinner" at times. "I would prefer to eat healthier," she told the interviewer, "but we can't afford it. Bottom line."

Mothers also reported drinking water and tea to feel full and eating "light meals." "I try not to eat," said one mother, "because I want my kids to have more and my husband to have more." One mother resorted to taking food out of the trash can for herself so that her daughter could eat better food.

Children's Experiences of Hardship

Although parents tried to protect their children from the hardship, it was apparent that many of the children were well aware of the situation. "They don't really say anything," said one young girl of her parents, "but you can read it in their faces."

They were also aware of the strategies their parents had devised. As an elementary-school girl said when food was running low, "We had to keep going over to my friend's house back and forth asking if she had butter and milk and eggs...I really didn't feel good about it because I'm not comfortable asking people that." Or, as another said,

"I just hated it – eating hot dogs or the French fries or Oodles of Noodles."

They were also aware of their mothers' sacrifices, as this young girl explained: "I know that I'm not gonna like starve 'cause my mom won't let that happen."

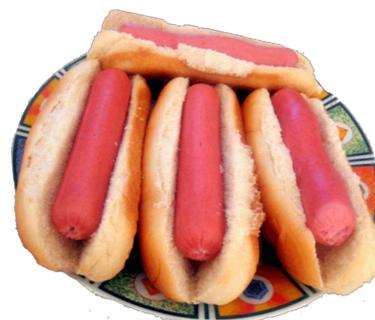
Not all children were as confident about the situation. A high school boy was "angry, mad" about the lack of food in the house. His strategy: "go to sleep basically, that's the only thing you can probably do, and after you wake up, you feel like you've got a bunch of cramps in your stomach and you'll be light-headed."

The children were also creating their own strategies, sometimes secretly, to handle the shortages. In one family, the mother described skipping meals and filling up on water to save food for her son, emphasizing that she kept this strategy from him so he could enjoy childhood. But in a later interview,

her son made sure she was out of earshot before whispering that he did not eat much to make the food last longer.

Sometimes the children went to work, as this high-school boy described his and his friends' efforts to help out: "We'll like get together and we'll find a way to get money up, not, we ain't got to sell no drugs though, not like that. But we might all get together and cut the grass or something.

...People will be putting money up on fights and stuff, too. And they might do dog fights every now and then to get money like that."



² For more on the USDA Household Food Security measure, see G. Bickel et al., "Guide to Measuring Household Food Security" (Washington, DC: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Analysis, Nutrition, and Evaluation, 2000).

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Problems in Families Sometimes Stretch Beyond Hunger

Most of the children in the study were affected by food insecurity to some degree. Sometimes the children's experiences were difficult, but not dire. Food quality was less than desirable, and children were aware of and responsive to food needs in ways that children from more affluent homes generally are not, but they had enough to eat and trusted their parents to manage food problems.

Other children, however, experienced more severe aspects of food insecurity. These children often lived in families with additional complex problems, including a parent's mental or physical challenge, domestic violence, recent relocation, job loss, and geographic or social isolation. A mother in a rural area, for example, had neither a car nor a refrigerator and spent hours each day walking to the nearest grocery store and back. An urban mother had left a violent marriage, and her stress, fear and sudden poverty overwhelmed her. The recession was only exacerbating issues, with hours cut back and informal income from selling scrap metal or yard sales on the decline.

SNAP benefits often divided those who were struggling with food insecurity and those who were less stressed. Children in households that received benefits were less likely to have cut back on food or experienced hunger and, therefore, were less attuned to the hardships. In two families where SNAP benefits had recently increased, mothers reported having enough food for themselves and their children, and the children reported no worries about food running out. In contrast, of the eight children in the study who reported cutting back on how much they ate, only one was in a family receiving SNAP benefits.

Policy Implications

Although parents tried to protect and shield their children from hardship, their efforts didn't always work. Children were affected

by food insecurity, and sometimes in ways that parents did not know about. This suggests that estimates of child hunger based on parental reports may be too low – a serious concern given the developmental consequences of childhood food insecurity. Children in food-insecure households, for example, are more likely to experience depressive symptoms, academic and social developmental delays, and adverse health outcomes.

Hunger and stress can also impact parent-child interactions and create difficult family dynamics, which in turn can affect children's outcomes.³

Subsequent studies should replicate this child-interview approach with children of different race-ethnicities, in different locations and in families of a variety of structures. This information would then lead to better approaches to measuring child food insecurity and more accurate estimates of the prevalence, severity and distribution of child hunger in the United States.

SNAP helps families make ends meet, as evident in the experiences of families who receive benefits compared with those who do not. This important program should continue to be supported, and access to SNAP should be improved. Children are better protected from food hardship in families that receive SNAP. Children in food-insecure household also rely heavily on school lunch and breakfast programs.

These and other programs that provide food directly to children should offer healthy food and enough food to meet children's nutritional needs – both during the school year and in the summer months.

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3 Katie S. Martin and Ann M. Ferris, "Food Insecurity and Gender Are Risk Factors for Obesity," *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2007): 31-36; Kristen Slack and Joan Yoo, "Food Hardship and Child Behavior Problems among Low- Income Children," *Social Service Review*, vol. 79, no. 3 (2005): 511-536; R. Rose-Jacobs et al., "Household Food Insecurity: Associations with At-Risk Infant and Toddler Development," *Pediatrics*, vol. 121, no. 1 (2008): 65; L. Weinreb et al., "Hunger: Its Impact on Children's Health and Mental Health," *Pediatrics*, vol. 110, no. 4 (2002):e41; P.H. Casey et al., "Child Health-Related Quality of Life and Household Food Insecurity," *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, vol. 159, no. 1 (2005): 51-56; National Research Council, "Food Insecurity and Hunger in the United States: An assessment of the Measure" (Washington, DC: Committee on National Statistics, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 2006).

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