

# Adjusting to less food availability can impact kids negatively

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A small child in Mumbai, with a shaved head, eating bread with her hand. Credit: Wen-Yan King/Wikipedia

Adjusting to family circumstances where there is less food available than previously can be a traumatic situation for children and can result in behavioral issues, according to new research from sociologists at Rice University. In addition, lack of regular access to food can also result in poorer health among children.

"Transitions Into Food Insecurity Associated With Behavior Problems and Worse Overall Health

Among Children" appears in the November edition of *Health Affairs*. The study looked at transitions in [food insecurity](#) among kindergarteners and first-graders between 2011 and 2012.

The Great Recession was particularly hard on low-income families in the U.S., with child poverty rates reaching a high of 22 percent in 2010, according to researchers Rachel Kimbro, an associate professor of sociology and assistant director of the Urban Health Program (UHP) at Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research; and Justin Denney, an assistant professor of sociology and director of the Kinder Institute's UHP.

"More than 1 in 5 U.S. children live in food-insecure households, a jump of nearly 30 percent from before the Great Recession, and this increased exposure to hardship warrants new estimates of the impact of food insecurity on child well-being," Kimbro said. "There are widespread, significant differences in outcomes for these kids."

For example, the research revealed that children who transitioned from food security—access to sufficient food at an individual or household level—to food insecurity between 2011 and 2012 scored about 5 percent lower than similar children who were not experiencing food insecurity on assessments of verbal and nonverbal communication, self control, external behavior (breaking rules, being physically aggressive and threatening others) and internal behavior (keeping feelings inside as a result of difficulty dealing with negative emotions or stress).

The study also found that parent-reported child-health status was 4 percent worse for children who were persistently food-insecure and 5 percent worse for those who transitioned into food insecurity.

"Our study shows that children who experience changes in food insecurity are most vulnerable to

negative outcomes, suggesting that assistance programs must be more responsive to the acute needs of families," Denney said.

The study used nationally representative data for 6,300 children from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study between 2010 and 2012. The children were in kindergarten at the beginning of the study and in first grade at the conclusion of the study. The data for the study came from teachers and parents in the form of questionnaires. The researchers controlled for a number of factors related to socio-economic status.

Both Kimbro and Denney agree that the study's findings raise serious concerns about the present state of child well-being and also for the long-term vitality of the U.S.

"Children's behavior outcomes and health status early in life are associated with reductions in workforce productivity and earnings, as well with greater [health](#) problems over the life course and shortened life overall," Kimbro and Denney said. "Our findings underline the importance of food security for the healthy development of [children](#)."

**More information:** *Health Affairs*,  
[content.healthaffairs.org/content/34/11/1949.abstract](https://www.healthaffairs.org/content/34/11/1949.abstract)

Provided by Rice University

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