

COVID-19 has exacerbated food insecurity

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The recent economic decline caused by the novel coronavirus and stay-at-home orders issued across the country has increased food insecurity and changed aspects related to children's nutrition for many families, according to researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Melanie Bean, Ph.D., an associate professor of pediatrics and co-director of the Healthy Lifestyles Center at Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU, and Elizabeth Adams, Ph.D., a postdoctoral fellow at VCU Massey Cancer Center who is working in the Department of Pediatrics at CHoR, recently surveyed about 600 U.S. families about food insecurity, foods in their home and child feeding practices during COVID-19. Both researchers have an interest in the links between childhood obesity, food insecurity and parent feeding practices. Through the survey, they wanted to see if there were changes in factors related to children's nutrition during the pandemic and if these changes differed for food insecure families.

Lead author Adams and Department of Pediatrics co-authors Laura Caccavale, Ph.D., a postdoctoral fellow, Danyel Smith, a health psychology graduate student, and Bean published the results of their study in the journal *Obesity* in early August. The survey, which was conducted in May, found that one-third of families have increased the amount of high-calorie snack foods, desserts and sweets in their home during the pandemic, while nearly 50% increased the amount of nonperishable processed foods. On the other hand, 60% of families decreased the amount of take-out, fast food, and already prepared meals while about 70% increased the number of home-cooked meals.

Food insecurity is a major problem in the United States and is paradoxically associated with pediatric obesity. The team's study found a drastic increase in the percentage of families experiencing food insecurity during COVID-19.

"We know that vulnerable populations are at greatest risk for food insecurity and associated health conditions," Bean said. "It is concerning to see such an increase in the amount of families experiencing very low food security."

Many of these families typically participate in the National School Lunch Program and get free or low-cost lunches each day at school. The closing of schools due to the pandemic forced many parents to provide more meals at home. School districts have helped by offering food at centralized locations or delivering it to neighborhoods. These nutrition assistance programs are necessary for helping families in need, Adams said.

"With children spending more time at home, the home food environment has become even more salient for shaping children's food intake," Adams said. "For this reason, we wanted to see if the types of foods in families' homes have changed during the pandemic."

In addition to looking at the types of foods kept in the home, the researchers also looked at how parents' behaviors have changed around feeding their children. Those practices include restricting access to certain foods, pressuring children to eat and monitoring children's [food](#) intake. Adams said that some controlling feeding practices could lead to unhealthy eating behaviors and weight gain in children if used repeatedly over time.

"There are many possible reasons as to why we saw an increase in controlling feeding practices during the pandemic," Adams said.

"Parents may be more likely to restrict certain foods if they perceive a lack of access, or pressure children to eat the limited foods that they do have, for example."

Ultimately, the researchers want to understand the role these changes play in shaping the future of childhood obesity. Bean said they would use their data to advocate for initiatives to help reduce [food insecurity](#) and childhood obesity following the pandemic.

"COVID-19 has changed so much for so many families," Adams said.

"The goal of this research is to raise awareness of how COVID-19 is currently impacting aspects of children's nutrition and obesity risk and to help figure out where we go from here."

More information: Elizabeth L. Adams et al. Food insecurity, the home food environment, and parent feeding practices in the era of COVID-19, *Obesity* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/oby.22996](https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.22996)

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