

“IT’S LIKE A BIRD NESTING IN YOUR HEAD” *The Relationship Between Childhood Adversity and Food Insecurity*

THE ISSUE

The Childhood Stress study investigated the relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)¹—including abuse, neglect, and household instability—and current household food security status among thirty-one female caregivers who reported household food insecurity.²

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are experiences before the age of 18 that include:

- emotional, physical, and sexual **abuse**
- emotional and physical **neglect**
- **household instability**, including loss or abandonment of a parent; domestic violence; mental illness, substance abuse, and incarceration of a household member

ACEs are associated with poor physical and mental health.^{1,3}

Household food insecurity is the lack of access to enough food for an active and healthy life due to economic hardship. It includes:

- **low food security:** multiple indications of food access problems and reduced diet quality
- **very low food security:** reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns

Food insecurity is associated with maternal depression and negative outcomes for adult and child health and wellbeing.^{2,4-5}

OUR RESEARCH

The Childhood Stress study used both quantitative and qualitative methods. These methods included a quantitative survey about health, economic, and demographic information and a qualitative interview in which participants described experiences with deprivation, violence, abuse, and neglect across the lifespan; education and employment; participation in public assistance programs; and hunger during childhood, as an adult, and among participants’ own children.

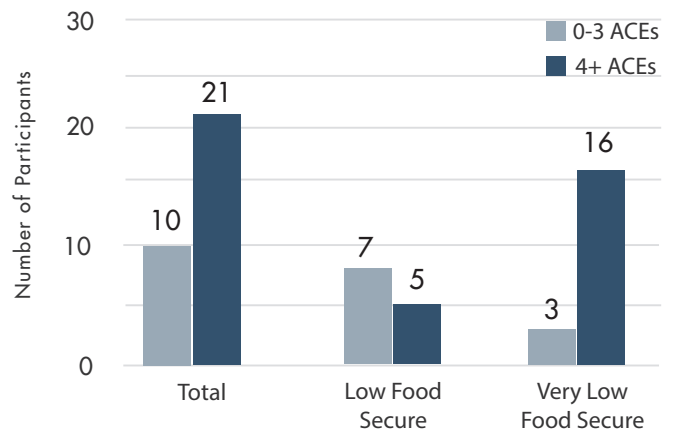
WHAT WE FOUND

Quantitative and qualitative results demonstrated an association between adverse childhood experiences and current food insecurity.

Quantitative Results

- Among participants in the study, higher ACE score was significantly associated with severity of food insecurity.
- Participants reporting very low food insecurity were more likely to report 4 or more Adverse Childhood Experiences compared with participants who reported low food security. See Figure 1.
- Reports of physical and emotional abuse were significantly associated with very low food security at the household level.

Compared to caregivers reporting low food security, caregivers reporting very low food security were more likely to report 4 or more ACEs



CAREGIVER PERSPECTIVES

Caregivers described how adverse childhood experiences, particularly emotional and physical abuse and neglect, negatively affected their emotional and physical health, school performance, and ability to maintain employment. In turn, these experiences hindered their ability to protect their children from food insecurity. The following quotations are examples of caregiver descriptions of these adverse experiences and the effects on their health and wellbeing.

Emotional Neglect

"If a person always says you're nothing; you're nothing. Then for a while I used to think I'm not anything. So maybe that's how I don't have a job, because I'm thinking I'm nothing...Because I can't find a job I cannot feed my daughter. How am I supposed to? I cannot buy her what she needs."

Tamira, ACE Score 9, Household Very Low Food Secure, Child Low Food Secure*

Physical Neglect

"I don't want [my son] to live through it. I know how hard it was on me. I know how much my stomach hurt from the hunger, how much my body ached, having pains and not having the medication for it, you know? The hunger, the pain, the depression – it always comes back. It's like a bird nesting in your head."

Claudia, ACE Score 9, Household Very Low Food Secure, Child Low Food Secure*

CONCLUSIONS & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These qualitative and quantitative results suggest a strong relationship between exposure to adverse childhood experiences and household food insecurity. This relationship should inspire researchers, advocates, and policymakers to comprehensively address family hardship through greater attention to the emotional health of parents and caregivers. Recommendations include:



Two-Generation Approach. Ensure that parents and caregivers have safe places to live and care for their children, access to behavioral health support, and opportunities to develop positive social relationships to remedy social isolation and emotional distress.



Trauma-Informed Systems. Provide public assistance programs that recognize widespread exposure to trauma and violence, avoid re-traumatization of participants, and provide support to those with mental and physical health barriers to employment.

For more information about this study, please see the following article:

Chilton M, Knowles M, Rabinowich J, & Arnold K. (2015). "The relationship between childhood adversity and food insecurity: 'It's like a bird nesting in your head.'" *Public Health Nutrition*, 18(4), 2643-2653. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980014003036>.

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