

APSAC Research-to-Practice Brief

Study Title: Household Food Insecurity and Parent-to-Child Aggression

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Introduction:

In 2015, nearly 17% of households with children in the general U.S. population experienced food insecurity. For roughly a quarter of these households, the level of food insecurity was so severe that food intake was reduced and eating patterns were significantly disrupted. Food insecurity is more common among households who live in poverty. While a large research base has identified household level poverty as a clear risk factor for child maltreatment, food insecurity is one condition that is closely linked with poverty which may elevate children's risk of being experiencing child maltreatment. While food insecurity or food neglect has previously been linked to family violence and poor maternal impulse control, little research has examined whether food insecurity is an independent risk factor of parent-child aggression.

Hypotheses:

- (1) Household food insecurity at baseline measurement will be associated with more severe parent-to-child psychological and physical aggression at follow-up waves of measurement.
- (2) Food insecurity over two time periods will be associated with higher rates of psychological and physical aggression at follow-up measurement.
- (3) The relationship between household food insecurity and parent-to-child aggression will remain even after accounting for measures of maternal depression, impulsiveness, and other socio-economic variables.

Study Sample:

The sample for this study (n=2,330) was drawn from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal study of births born to mostly unmarried parents in large urban areas. This study relied on data collected in waves 3 and 4 when the target children were aged 3 and 5 years. Measures of parent-to-child aggression were derived from the Conflict Tactics Scale and included psychological aggression, physical aggression, total aggression, and composite aggression.

Findings:

Nearly 1 in 4 of the households in this sample reported experiencing food insecurity during at least one of the data collection time points. After accounting for child age, maternal age, race, maternal education, household income, and receipt of public assistance, household food insecurity was associated with increased rates of psychological, physical, and total aggression of caregivers towards their children. The association between household food insecurity and parent-to-child aggression remained even after controlling for maternal impulsivity and depression.

Recommendation:

The link between poverty and child maltreatment has been well established. To mitigate the effects of poverty, a more nuanced understanding of how specific components of poverty relates to child maltreatment is needed. The results of this study suggest that food insecurity is a risk factor for aggressive psychological and physical acts by parents toward their children – even after controlling for household income and other risk factors. The authors suggest that food provision may be an underexamined area in the fields of family violence and child welfare. In particular, the authors posit that providing food may be more feasible politically, socially, and practically than addressing other aspects of poverty such as housing or living wage. According to the authors, increasing the number of at-risk families who are using government and community food assistance programs is critical to fighting child and family hunger, and, if results here are replicated, child maltreatment. Such efforts are not easy, however, as many families who are eligible for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program do not participate in this program. Barriers to participation include confusion about eligibility, inconvenience of travel to state health offices, and stigma associated with using the program. Child welfare professionals may be able to facilitate access to formal food assistance programs by helping address these barriers and/or help families connects with informal food assistance programs such as food pantries.

Bottom Line:

Food insecurity is a common experience for U.S. households. While more research is needed to understand whether or not food insecurity is an independent risk factor for child maltreatment, evidence is emerging to suggest that household food insecurity may increase parents' aggressive behaviors toward their children. Efforts to alleviate food insecurity among families would positively affect child development and may help prevent child maltreatment.

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