



A summary of the research article “The Relationship between Childhood Adversity and Food Insecurity: ‘It’s like a bird nesting in your head.’” published in *Public Health Nutrition*¹ by Chilton, Knowles, Rabinowich and Arnold at Drexel University School of Public Health

Overview

The Childhood Stress study investigated the relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)²—including abuse, neglect, and household instability—and current household food security status among thirty-one female caregivers who reported household food insecurity.³

Methods

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

Results

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

Quantitative Results

1. Among participants in the study, higher ACE score was significantly associated with severity of food insecurity.
2. 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.
3. Reports of **physical and emotional abuse** were significantly associated with **very low food security** at the household level. See full article for results.

Key Terms

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

- emotional and physical **abuse**;
- emotional and physical **neglect**; and
- **household instability**, including parental separation, domestic violence, and mental illness, substance abuse, or incarceration of a household member

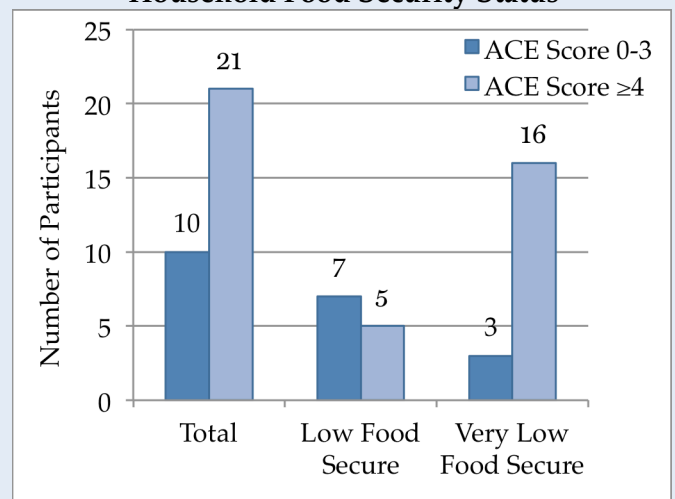
ACEs are associated with poor adult mental and physical health and economic outcomes.

Household food insecurity is defined as lack of access to enough food for an active and healthy life due to economic hardship. Household food insecurity includes two aspects:

- **low food security**: multiple indications of food access problems and reduced diet quality
- **very low food security**: food intake of at least one household member was reduced and eating patterns were disrupted because the household lacked money and resources for food

Food insecurity is associated with maternal depression and negative outcomes for adult and child health and wellbeing.

Figure 1. Adverse Childhood Experiences and Household Food Security Status



¹ For the full article, please see: Chilton, Knowles, Rabinowich, & Arnold. (2015). “The relationship between childhood adversity and food insecurity: ‘It’s like a bird nesting in your head.’” *Public Health Nutrition*.

<http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FFPHN%2F51368980014003036a.pdf&code=f68a37738b6651aa3e3ad43a422129d3>

² For more information on ACEs, see the CDC: <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/>

³ For more information on food insecurity, see the USDA: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us.aspx>

Qualitative Results

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

Emotional Abuse

"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

*Participants identified by pseudonym

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 of children by

- Ensuring 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
- Providing public assistance programs that recognize widespread exposure to trauma and violence, avoid re-traumatization of participants, and provide additional support to those with mental and physical health barriers to employment

Families reporting very low food security need far more support than they currently receive, and this support must take into account their exposure to trauma and violence so that caregivers can take advantage of opportunities to advance their educations, find and maintain employment, and attain economic security.

The Center for Hunger-Free Communities is a research, advocacy and policy center of Drexel University School of Public Health. The Center's goal is to develop innovative, empirically-tested solutions to the challenges of hunger and economic insecurity. Learn more at www.centerforhungerfreecommunities.org

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