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Nutrition and Food Insecurity

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Families which are able to take their next meal for granted probably do not link their household “security” to food. But for a surprising number of U.S. residents, the issue of food security is just this fundamental and the question of how they are going to feed themselves and their children is one they must struggle to answer every day. According to the US Department of Agriculture, 14% of households and 21% of children are food-insecure¹¹, meaning they have “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways².” In the current issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children (JARC)*, “Food Matters: Food Insecurity among Pregnant Adolescents and Infant Birth Outcomes”, we explore the modern “dirty secret” of food insecurity.

This release of this issue coincides with the most recent policy paper by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) titled “Promoting Food Security for All Children”³. The AAP highlights the deleterious effects of food insecurity on child health and developmental outcomes. Not only does under-nutrition have significant impact on weight gain, cognitive function and school success, food insecurity is often associated with many other adverse social determinants of health.

Food insecurity is interwoven with many complex psychosocial issues such as mental health, violence, and poverty. Food insecure households have higher rates of underemployment, live in poor neighborhoods, report higher rates of tobacco use, and incur an increased rate of mental health issues. This complexity creates challenges for targeted solutions.

One facet of the complex issue of food insecurity is the impact it has on the immigrant children and families. As noted by “Household food insecurity status and Hispanic immigrant children’s body mass index and adiposity” and “The Impact of the California Drought on rural, Mexican-origin, Families” in the current issue, the financial pressures on struggling immigrant families can result in choices between food and medicine, or food and household bills. The “Impact of the California Drought on rural, Mexican-origin Families” highlights how in poor families, where employment is uncommon and often requires mobility, many families may have to travel to follow work and still endure unreliable work and minimal hours. This unpredictability in employment may manifest in food insecurity. “Household food insecurity status and Hispanic immigrant children’s body mass index and adiposity” reports on a well-known, but

counter-intuitive fact; the increased rate of obesity in low-income children. They report that two-thirds of Hispanic immigrant children are food insecure, and half were overweight or obese.

In “Food Matters: Food Insecurity among Pregnant Adolescents and Infant Birth Outcomes”, Grilo and colleagues report that over one half of the pregnant teens that they surveyed reported food insecurity during their pregnancy. Not surprisingly, food insecurity was associated with lower birth weights and premature births. Given the profound burden of prematurity on our healthcare system, strategies to address maternal food access are crucial.

The SNAP program, initially enacted in 1961 by the federal government, provides monthly food benefits for families which fall below 130% of the federal poverty level. This includes approximately 47 million Americans. In this issue, “Monthly SNAP benefit duration and its association with food security, hunger-coping, and physiological hunger symptoms among low-income families”, studies the relationship between benefit duration of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; aka “Food Stamps”) and five primary outcome variables, including food security.

Food insecurity is a pressing problem with a patchwork system of “solutions.” The federal government, along with many states, has enacted programs to alleviate food insecurity, but the problem remains relatively unabated. Many municipalities feel ill-equipped to deal with the full implications of food insecurity leaving a void within many communities. Some neighborhoods respond by promoting community gardens, some by supporting a food bank, and others with farmer’s markets. These are grass-roots responses without an overarching organizing structure. In order to treat the issue of food insecurity effectively we must begin by understanding the complexity of the issue, and begin to realistically address the social and fiscal costs food insecurity is imposing upon us as a nation. Only once this is accomplished, can a true supporting framework be developed. This issue of JARC is a step towards understanding the ramifications of food insecurity and we hope it equips readers with the knowledge to take meaningful action.

References

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