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Contact:
Suzanne Price
media@nutrition.org
301-634-7235

Food Insecurity Affects 50 Million People in America

Review published in Advances in Nutrition explains the scope of the problem and its consequences

January 16, 2013— [*Food Insecurity Is an Ongoing National Concern*](#), a review published in the January 2013 issue of *Advances in Nutrition*, notes that “food insecurity is a leading public health challenge in the United States today.” Food insecurity is defined as the uncertainty of having or being able to acquire enough food due to insufficient funds or other resources, and affects some 50 million Americans.

According to review author Craig Gundersen, “the extent of food insecurity is at an all-time high and, despite the end of the Great Recession, rates have not yet gone back down to the levels of 2007.” Prior to the recession, food insecurity had remained relatively steady for several years, affecting approximately 11% of the U.S. population. That percentage jumped to 14% in 2008 and has not yet begun to drop towards pre-recession levels. Most worrisome is the 40% jump among American households that now fall into the category of “very low food security.” One or more members in these households are hungry at least some time during the year because they cannot afford enough food.

Individuals who are food insecure are often malnourished and afflicted with a broad range of negative health consequences. For example, food insecure families are at higher risk for certain birth defects. Children who are food insecure often exhibit greater cognitive problems and higher levels of aggression and anxiety. Adults who are food insecure are more likely to suffer mental health problems such as depression as well as chronic diseases such as diabetes.

Interestingly, while income is strongly associated with food insecurity, there are many households that fall above the poverty line that are food insecure. Conversely, a high proportion of households below the poverty line are food secure. This may be due to the relative cost and ease of access to food, household budget management skills, as well as varying financial demands placed on households that compete with their food budgets.

SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, has been quite successful at reducing food insecurity and its attendant consequences.

Currently, more than 40 million Americans are enrolled in SNAP, with total benefits exceeding \$70 billion a year. This makes it the largest food assistance program and the largest “near-cash” assistance program in the United States.

With widespread calls to reduce federal, state, and local expenses and taxes, SNAP has fallen under close scrutiny. Gundersen, however, cautions that reducing SNAP benefits will have consequences beyond its adverse effect on hunger and food insecurity. The cost savings of reducing SNAP benefits, for example, might be outweighed by the increase in medical care and other costs associated with higher levels of food insecurity.

[ASN’s blog recently](#) offered a list of organizations that help combat food insecurity both domestically and internationally.

Recognizing the tremendous challenge of food insecurity in America, the January 2013 issue of *Advances in Nutrition* features two more reviews addressing the topic. [Food Insecurity and Healthcare Costs: Research Strategies Using Local, State, and National Data Sources for Older Adults](#) examines the relationship between food insecurity and the healthcare cost burden among older adults. In addition, [Are Food Insecurity’s Health Impacts Underestimated in the U.S. Population? Marginal Food Security Also Predicts Adverse Health Outcomes in Young U.S. Children and Mothers](#) makes the case that many American households currently categorized as “marginally food secure” are no better off than food insecure households.

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