

Food Insecurity: A Primer

Matthew N. O. Sadiku^{1*}, Tolulope J. Ashaolu², Abayomi Ajayi-Majebi³, and Sarhan M. Musa¹

¹Roy G. Perry College of Engineering, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX, USA

²College of Food Science, Southwest University, Tiansheng Road Beibei District, Chongqing, 400715, P.R. China

³Department of Manufacturing Engineering, Central State University, P.O. Box 1004, Wilberforce, OH 45384-1004

E-mail: sadiku@ieee.org; ashaolut@gmail.com; ajayi-majebi@centralstate.edu; smmusa@pvamu.edu

*Corresponding author details: Professor Matthew N. O. Sadiku, sadiku@ieee.org

ABSTRACT

Food insecurity or food poverty is an important issue among development economists and practitioners worldwide. Food insecurity occurs when a household cannot acquire enough food to feed all its members. It may be regarded as an accepted method for measuring food deprivation. It exists in most countries around the world. It has become a significant issue of public policy as well as public concern. The paper provides a brief introduction to the problem of food insecurity and considers its causes and effects.

Keywords: food insecurity; food security; food systems; food poverty; hunger

INTRODUCTION

Food is a fundamental need every person must have in order to survive and to participate actively in society. It has an important role in defining our identities. The world needs to recognize the right to food as a fundamental, universal human right. Food security exists when all people, at all times, have economic access to sufficient safe food. Food insecurity (FI) refers to not having sufficient food. It is the inability to access and procure adequate foods necessary to support an active and healthy lifestyle.

Because food insecurity is a growing global concern, a lot of attention has been given to it and its resulting social, psychological, and physical effects in recent years. Although food insecurity is a widespread problem throughout the world, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are the developing regions with the most severe food insecurity [1]. As a result of the recent rise in food prices, the proportion of people suffering from food insecurity has increased worldwide.

WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?

Food insecurity generally refers to a lack of access to enough good and healthy food for a healthy and productive life. It is having limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally safe foods. Although hunger is a potential consequence of food insecurity, food insecurity may not necessarily result in hunger.

Food insecurity is usually measured as a household concept that refers to uncertain, insufficient of food. When a household contains one or more food-insecure individuals, the household is regarded as food insecure. Although food insecurity is irrespective of age and race, people who commonly experience it in the US include children, elderly people, rural communities, white women, African Americans, and Latinos.

The concept of "food security" is relatively recent; it originated in the mid-1970s. Since then, the concept has become progressively more relevant. It is related to food insecurity, which refers to missing meals or reduction in the quantity and quality of food intake due to financial constraints.

The two concepts are related in USDA's description of the ranges of food security [2]:

- High food security
- Marginal food security
- Low food security (food insecurity without hunger)
- Very low food security (food insecurity with hunger)

The food security continuum is shown in Figure 1 [3]. In general, there are two types of food insecurity: chronic food insecurity and transitory food insecurity. Chronic food insecurity, a long-term or persistent situation, occurs when people are not capable to meet their minimum food requirement at all times. Transitory food insecurity refers to changes in food security status, a sudden change from adequate to inadequate food intake. In this case, food insecurity is a transient rather than a persistent condition.

CAUSES OF FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity is the consequence of several challenges that people face. It affects millions of people around the world, especially children and women in developing nations. It causes catastrophic amounts of human suffering. Major causes of FI include poverty, climate change, disasters, conflicts, and urbanization [4, 5].

• Poverty:

Food insecurity is naturally related to income. Food insecurity is disproportionately high among low-income families. In other words, the low income population group is most likely to experience food insecurity. Some people do not have sufficient resources to buy quality food. Addressing poverty, food shortage problems, and lack of reliable income sources is critical to ensuring that everyone has sufficient food. Poverty also prevents farming households to invest in agricultural assets, resulting in less farm productivity. We must keep in mind that not all poor people are food insecure; the risk of food insecurity extends to people living above the poverty level. Homeless people, polygamous households, and families in rural areas are also likely to be food insecure.

- *Climate Change:*

Climate change is a potential cause of food insecurity, particularly in the most food insecure regions. Climate has changed the agricultural productivity pattern. Extreme seasonal heat can cause damage to food systems. High temperatures can have dramatic impacts on agricultural productivity and food security. Tropical nations experience less temperature extremes than temperate nations and will be the first to experience unprecedented heat stress due to global climate change.

- *Disasters:*

Droughts, floods, earthquakes, and pests can destroy large quantities of food as it grows or is stored. Protracted political instability/crises, violent conflicts, erratic weather conditions, or war can cause food shortages.

- *Conflict:*

Conflict is a major driver of population displacement, producing refugees or displaced people worldwide. Conflict and civil insecurity can cause deep economic recessions, drive up inflation, reduce employment and income opportunities, and lead to acute food insecurity. Unfortunately, the number of local and international conflicts is also on the rise

- *Urbanization:*

Increasing rural-urban migration due to urbanization plays a major role in the food insecurity, especially in developing countries. According to Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of United Nations, 70 percent of the world population is expected to be living in cities by year 2050. This causes disruption in agricultural production.

Other causes of food insecurity in developing nations include rapid population growth, corruption, national policies, unemployment, and episodes of ill health, insufficient agricultural development, poor soil fertility, land degradation, food environment, low levels of education, and social and gender inequality. In the United States, the primary cause of food insecurity is poverty, low levels of education, poor health status, and disabilities. It is needless to say that these causes are complex and interrelated

EFFECTS OF FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity has some severe consequences which include malnutrition, health, behavior, and stress [6].

- *Malnutrition:*

This is a direct result of food insecurity. It is the underlying cause of death of millions of children each year. Malnutrition or undernutrition can cause decreased energy levels, delayed maturation, anemia, vitamin A deficiency, iodine deficiency, and iron deficiency. Food insecure individuals often rely on low-cost, energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods to satisfy hunger. Educational campaigns promoting balanced diets will reduce malnutrition.

- *Health:*

Food insecurity is an important indicator of well-being. It affects the health of many individuals in the United States and around the world. It contributes to many nutritional, health and developmental problems. It is a risk factor for both HIV transmissions. Wrong food choices can contribute to obesity, a leading cause of diabetes, heart disease, and early mortality. FI is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide.

- *Behavior:*

Food insecurity can have severe social, psychological, and behavioral consequences. It affects cognitive and behavioural development as well as physical growth, with mothers and children most vulnerable to the devastating consequences. Food-insecure individuals may experience reduced productivity, reduced work, and reduced income earnings, and poor school performance. Food insecurity affects children's brains and makes it difficult for them to reach their full potential.

- *Stress:*

Food insecurity is a source of stress for individuals. When people do not know where their next meal is coming from, they become anxious and depressed. As shown in Figure 2, family stress can be linked to poverty, food insecurity, and child overweight [7].

Other consequences include political instability, uncertainty, insufficiency, social unacceptability, worry, feelings of alienation and deprivation, living in pain, and adverse changes in family. These consequences are felt in our schools, our communities, businesses, and health care system. They are generally more severe for older adults than for the younger population due to aging, diseases, and health status.

REDUCING FOOD INSECURITY

A variety of interventions can be used in reducing or eliminating food insecurity. To reduce food insecurity, each nation should fulfill the needs for [8]: food availability, accessibility, and utilization. Food availability deals with increase food production and food imports. Food accessibility involves increase in the purchasing power. Food utilization ensures adequate diet, clean water, sanitation, and health care for the people's well-being.

Strategies that help households mitigate the effects of food insecurity included relying on friends and family, enrolling in federal aid programs, and turning to local resources such as food pantries. To cope with short-term food insecurity, some people eat less expensive and less preferred food and reduce portion sizes [9,10]. Others omit or reduce the size of meals, have less variety of fruit, vegetables, dairy products, and vitamins.

The problem of food insecurity can be overcome with long-term development such as improving education, raising agricultural productivity, and reducing poverty.

CHALLENGES

In general, high international prices for food products benefit nations that export those products, while low prices benefit importing nations. High and volatile food prices (determined by supply and demand) may increase due to stronger linkages between agricultural and energy markets. This could cause some importing countries to invest in their agriculture and reduce imports. Recent high food prices and changes in the world food situation are causing increases in the severity of food insecurity. In most cases, high food prices harm the poor people.

There is a lack of a common metric which can be used to identify the common determinants of food insecurity in different nations. This poses important challenges for objective measurement.

CONCLUSION

Food insecurity has been a major international problem. Its rates have increased since the millennium. Higher food insecurity is observed in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Several international efforts, such World Food Summit (WFS), United Nations Food (UNF),

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of UN, UN World Food Programme (WFP), and World Trade Organization (WTO), are committed to tackling this problem. United Nations and US Department of Agriculture (USDA) also play key roles in tackling food insecurity. The charitable programs and hunger-relief efforts like food stamps, food aids, food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, and feeding programs are all addressing food insecurity while promoting health. Ending food insecurity is a pressing global concern. For more on food insecurity, one should also consult journals exclusively devoted to food and related issues: *Food Control*, *Food Security*, *Global Food Security*, *Journal of Food Security*, *Food and Energy Security*, *Agriculture & Food Security*, and *African Journal of Agriculture and Food Security*

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AUTHORS

Matthew N.O. Sadiku is a professor in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas. He is the author of several books and papers. His areas of research interest include computational electromagnetics and computer networks. He is a fellow of IEEE.

Tolulope J. Ashaolu works at Southwest University. He is the author of several papers and books. His research interests include functional foods and food microbiology.

Abayomi Ajayi-Majebi is a professor in the Department of Manufacturing Engineering at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio. In 2015 he was honored by the White House as a Champion of Change for his significant contributions to the engineering education of minority students. He is a senior member of both the Society of Manufacturing Engineers and the American Society for Quality.

Sarhan M. Musa is a professor in the Department of Engineering Technology at Prairie View A&M University, Texas. He has been the director of Prairie View Networking Academy, Texas, since 2004. He is an LTD Sprint and Boeing Welliver Fellow.

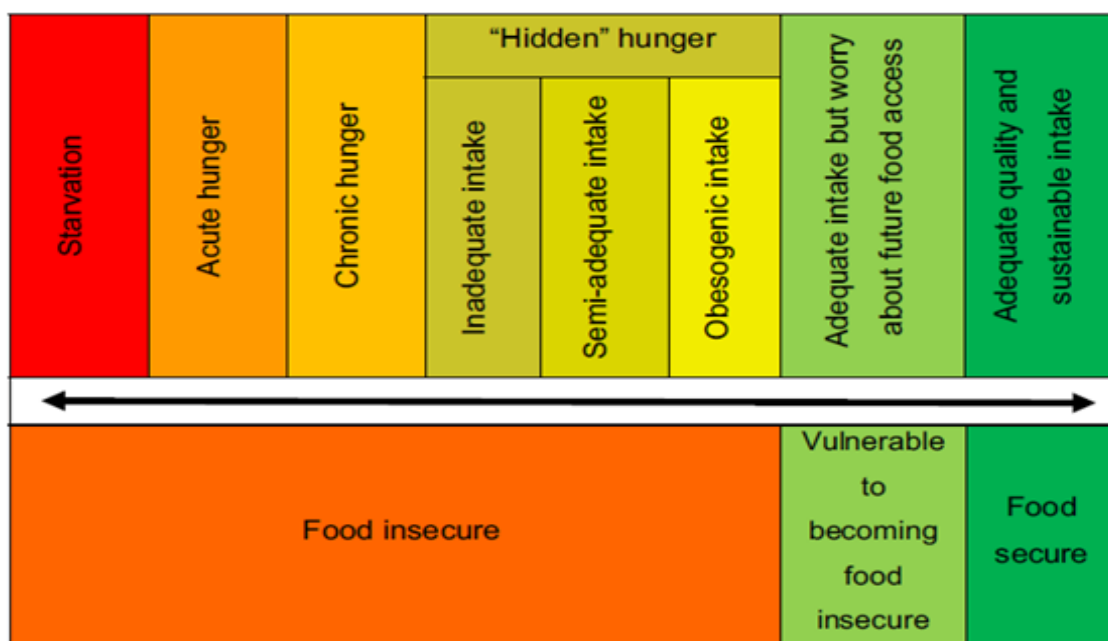


FIGURE 1: THE FOOD SECURITY CONTINUUM [3].

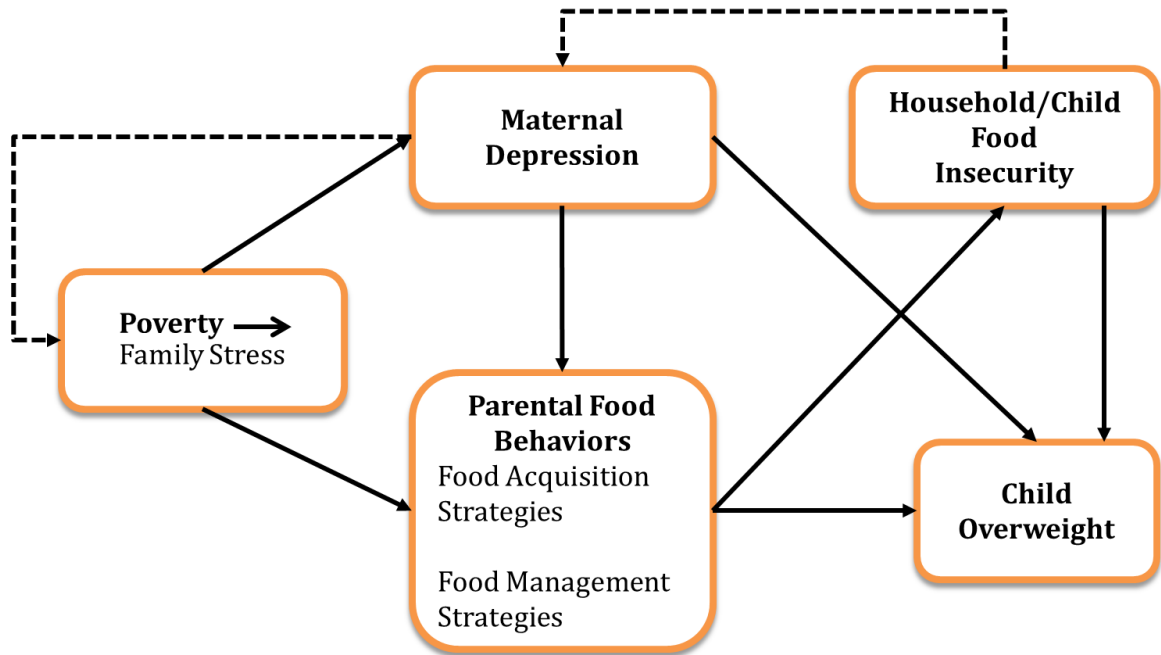


FIGURE 2: LINKING FAMILY STRESS WITH POVERTY, FOOD INSECURITY, AND CHILD OVERWEIGH [7].