



# The impact of cumulative family risks on various levels of food insecurity



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## ABSTRACT

The study uses the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study ( $N = 2025$ ) to examine the relationship between four cumulative family risk indices and refined measures of food hardship: marginal food security, low food security, and very low food security. Regression analyses indicate that cumulative family risk indices are useful in differentiating various levels of food insecurity. Specifically, the maternal poor health and risky health behaviors index is pertinent for distinguishing (1) food insecure from marginal food secure households and (2) very low food secure from low food secure households. In addition, the financial strain index is pertinent for differentiating between marginal food secure families from food secure families among non-poor households. Connecting food assistance programs with established social services may decrease the negative impact that cumulative family-level risk factors have on families' varying levels of food insecurity.

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## 1. Introduction

Food insecurity is a type of economic hardship that focuses on a household's lack of access to adequate food because of insufficient money and other resources for food (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2012; Nord, 2007). In 2012, 20% of US households were food insecure. In about half of these households only adults were food insecure; in the other 10.0% of the households (3.9 million households), adults and one or more children were reported as experiencing food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013). Among food insecure households with children the severity of food insecurity varies. For instance, in 2012 8.8% of households experienced low food security (i.e. LFS; households that reduce the quality, variety, or desirability of their diet) and 1.2% experienced very low food security (i.e. VLFS; households experienced a more severe type of food insecurity where individuals reduce their food intake and have experienced disrupted eating patterns; 463,000 households) (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013). However, not captured in these statistics are the numbers of children who experienced marginal food insecurity, a less severe condition of food insecurity that is traditionally categorized as food secure, but is still related to food hardship. Recent literature suggests that children and adults who experience marginal food insecurity are at risk for impaired health and nutritional outcomes, similar to children who are categorized as food insecure (Cook et al., 2013).

Up to this point, most of the food insecurity literature has focused on determinants and consequences of being food insecure (versus not). Less attention has been placed on the determinants associated with the varying levels of food hardship: marginal food security, low food security, and very low food security. To develop a clearer and more comprehensive

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understanding of why households with young children ( $\leq 60$  months) experience varying levels of food insecurity in the United States, the family environment must be investigated. Families that experience economic hardship also face *multiple family-level risk factors* that adversely impact the family's overall well-being. The cumulative risk theory postulates that it is the accumulation of risk factors (e.g., maternal unemployment and mothers having less than a high school education), rather than any one particular risk factor that influences a particular outcome (e.g., food insecurity) (Rutter, 1979; Sameroff, 1998; Sameroff et al., 1993). Aggregate scores (i.e. risk indices) provide the opportunity to measure the accumulation of risk related to a particular family domain. Individual factors fail to measure domain specific risks adequately and consequently do not allow risk levels of particular family domains to be compared. Empirical research has suggested that a cumulative risk aggregate is a stronger correlate to family and individual outcomes than any individual risk factor (MacFadyen et al., 1996). Thus, aggregate scores provide a useful basis for distinguishing various domains of risk that could contribute to the varying levels of food insecurity.

The current study uses four types of cumulative family risk indices to assess various levels of food insecurity among households with young children ( $\leq 60$  months). The indices are relevant to household environments of children and that have been used in previous research as determinants of childhood obesity (Garasky et al., 2009; Gundersen et al., 2008), but not explored together in relation to different levels of food insecurity in households with young children. The four cumulative family risk indices are: (1) financial strain; (2) maternal poor health and risky health behaviors; (3) family disruption and conflict; and (4) parenting disruption. Below the literature on individual family risks factors for food insecurity is reviewed.

## 2. Family risk factors

### 2.1. Financial strain

Household food insecurity is associated with various forms of financial instability (Tarasuk, 2001), including difficulty paying bills or having the inability to make necessary purchases (Gundersen and Garasky, 2012). Among households with children, food insecurity is more prevalent among households with an unemployed or disabled adult (Coleman-Jensen and Nord, 2013). Further, food insecurity is 10 times more prevalent in households in which an adult has not completed high school compared to households where an adult has completed college (Nord, 2009). In order to attempt to make ends meet, it is not uncommon for low-income parents to work more than one job; however, working multiple jobs enables only a small percent of these households to avoid poverty (Gardiner and Millar, 2006). Thus, various forms of financial strain are associated with experiencing food insecurity.

### 2.2. Maternal poor health and risky health behaviors

Previous studies has treated poor health, anxiety, depression, and obesity as outcomes of food insecurity and found a positive association between food insecurity and health outcomes among adult women (Adams et al., 2003; Gooding et al., 2012; Heflin et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2012; Olson, 2005; Siefert et al., 2001; Tarasuk, 2001; Townsend et al., 2001; Whitaker et al., 2006). Further, research indicates that there is a bidirectional relationship between maternal depression and food insecurity among rural, low-income families (Huddleston-Casas et al., 2009). Thus, other indicators of health may be predictive of different levels of food insecurity. Mothers who experience poor physical and mental health and engage in risky health behaviors may not be in the physical nor mental condition that is required to obtain the necessary food to avoid reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns, increasing their households' risk of experiencing food insecurity.

### 2.3. Family disruption and conflict

Previous research that has focused on family risk factors has considered children who do not grow up in two-parent households as having experienced family disruption (Garasky et al., 2009). Family disruption could be a result of a relationship separation or a parent being incarcerated. Single mother households are the dominant family structure among households with children who experience VLFS (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2012). Further, paternal incarceration is correlated with increased use of food stamp program participation (Sugie, 2011) and food insecurity (Cox and Wallace, 2013), suggesting families experience food hardships when fathers are incarcerated. However, food hardships can continue long after fathers re-enter into society as incarceration reduces individuals' employment opportunities, earnings, and limits economic mobility (Geller et al., 2011; The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010; Visser et al., 2008).

Aside from physical separation, family disruption can also be observed through conflict. According to family systems theory, parents have dynamic, dyadic relationships that influence each other (Cox and Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1974). When the quality of the dyadic relationship is harmonious, the relationship is considered a resource that can contribute towards the overall well-being of the household; however, when the quality of the dyadic relationships is filled with hostility or conflict, it can be detrimental to the overall well-being of the household. A severe form of conflict among parents is intimate partner violence. Intimate partner violence is associated with economic hardship (Benson et al., 2003; Jewkes, 2002; Strube and Barbour, 1983) and food insecurity (Hernandez et al., 2014; Spencer-Walters, 2011). The cumulative nature of disruption

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