

## **Food and Housing Insecurity and Mental Health**

Food insecurity—the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints<sup>1</sup>—impacts 1 in 8 households in Canada and 1 in 6 Canadian children under the age of 18, amounting to more than 1.2 million children.<sup>2</sup> In addition, approximately 30% of Canadian households live in unsuitable, inadequate or unaffordable housing and are unable to afford alternative housing in their community.<sup>3</sup> When basic human needs like food and shelter are unpredictable or unattainable, mental health and overall well-being suffer.

Recent research found that Canadians struggling to meet their basic needs experience a greater risk for poor mental health, which increases with the severity of basic need insecurity.<sup>4</sup> Unreliable access to food or housing make it difficult for individuals to address mental illness, while mental illness can limit their ability to secure these basic needs.<sup>5</sup> Given this cycle, it is unsurprising that insecure basic needs is linked with increased psychological distress.<sup>6</sup>

To complicate matters, basic needs insecurities often co-occur as is the case in home and food insecurity. A recent Canadian study showed that 7% of home owners and 25% of renters experience food insecurity.<sup>7</sup> Housing insecurity has also been linked to poverty with a 2018 survey finding that approximately 1 in 15 Canadian children live in poverty and 1 in 4 live in unaffordable housing.<sup>8</sup> The impact of this snowball effect is reflected in the number of hospitalizations due to mental health problems, with a recent Ontario study finding that 1 in 3 adult hospitalizations due to mental health problems were linked to a household experiencing basic needs insecurity.<sup>9</sup>

Most vulnerable are children and adolescents for whom food and housing insecurities can potentially result in long term effects to their mental health. Studies have linked these insecurities to the development of hyperactivity and inattention in childhood<sup>10</sup> as well as depression and suicidal ideation in early adulthood.<sup>11,12</sup> Particularly vulnerable are children in single-mother households as one-third of these homes experience food insecurity.<sup>2</sup>

Experiencing food and housing insecurity has a destabilizing effect on mental health and well-being. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, government financial relief and moratoriums on evictions briefly stabilized an otherwise potentially catastrophic situation, with levels in household food insecurity remaining unchanged or slightly lower in Fall 2020 when compared with two years prior.<sup>13</sup> However, as pandemic-related benefits phased out, the cycle of food and housing insecurity in Canada returned to previous levels, contributing to continued disparities in a country with many resources and challenges for those in greatest need.

### **Websites and Resources**

<https://proof.utoronto.ca/>

<https://www.homelesshub.ca/>

<https://www.dailybread.ca/blog/food-insecurity-and-mental-health-3/>

[https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/subjects/health/lifestyle\\_and\\_social\\_conditions/food\\_insecurity](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/subjects/health/lifestyle_and_social_conditions/food_insecurity)

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