

Food insecurity and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Canadians living in households that experienced food insecurity (insecure or inadequate access to food because of financial constraints) during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic were significantly more likely to perceive their mental health as fair or poor and to report moderate or severe anxiety symptoms than Canadians in food-secure households. Approximately one in seven Canadians (14.6%) were estimated to live in a food-insecure household in May 2020.

A new study, released today in *Health Reports*, is the first to examine the association between household food insecurity and self-perceived mental health and anxiety among Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also estimated that 9.3% of Canadians living in food-insecure households reported having recently accessed free food or meals from a community organization.

Food insecurity has been associated with poorer diet quality and a variety of physical and mental health problems. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the already stressful experience of food insecurity may be compounded further by physical and social isolation, worries about new health risks, and deepening financial insecurity.

This study found that, compared with individuals in food-secure households, Canadians in households that experienced moderate food insecurity during the previous 30 days were nearly three times as likely to self-perceive their mental health as fair or poor and to report moderate or severe anxiety symptoms. Those living in households with severe food insecurity were four times more likely to self-perceive their mental health as fair or poor, and more than seven times more likely to report symptoms of moderate or severe anxiety. These associations take into account a number of sociodemographic factors including household size, employment status and financial impact from COVID-19.

Monitoring both food security and mental health status will be important as the COVID-19 pandemic continues.

Note to readers

This study is based on data collected from May 4 to May 10, 2020, as part of the Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 2 (CPSS2). The CPSS2 was designed to collect information related to COVID-19 concerning the labour market, behaviour, household food security status and mental health impacts for the Canadian population 15 years of age and older living in the 10 provinces. The current analysis was based on 4,481 respondents, which represents a population of 30 million. Household food security status in the previous 30 days was measured using a brief six-item household food security survey module. Food insecurity was categorized as marginal, moderate or severe. Current self-perceived mental health was assessed by asking respondents, "In general, how would you describe your mental health?" and was classified as fair or poor versus excellent, very good, or good. Feelings of anxiety were assessed using the seven-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7).

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5311](#).

The article "[Food insecurity and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)" is now available in the December 2020 online issue of *Health Reports*, Vol. 31, no. 12 ([82-003-X](#)).

This issue of *Health Reports* also contains the article "[Trends in the prevalence of depression and anxiety disorders among working-age Canadian adults between 2000 and 2016](#)."

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