



Connect Food Insecurity and Housing Instability Interventions

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COVID-19 stands to rapidly accelerate economic hardship, which is often accompanied by food insecurity — the lack of access to adequate nutritious food due to limited resources — and housing instability — the continuum of housing related experiences that may include frequent relocation, inconsistent rent or mortgage payment, or having to live in one's car. Depletion of household resources is a common driver of both food insecurity and housing instability, but current government programs designed to address these twin issues are offered and managed independently. My research suggests that since these types of economic hardships do not function in isolation, a holistic program that addresses both food insecurity and housing instability together could be a more effective strategy to combat them. For example, I recommend that recipients of food assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) be automatically eligible for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which assists households with heating and cooling costs, along with energy-related home repairs. My experience studying the precursors and consequences of food and housing insecurity leads me to believe that the current COVID-19 crisis will likely have immediate and far-reaching consequences on the ability of individuals and families to secure food and housing resources, and so policies that adequately address both issues are important in both the short- and long-term.

Furthermore, if both food and housing support are packaged together, they will address a third factor: mental health. The behaviors associated with the coping strategies used to manage food insecurity (e.g., reducing the size of meals) and housing stability (e.g., frequent moves) may contribute to social isolation and lack of social support, and these in turn increase the risk of maternal depression and parenting stress. In turn, adolescents in these food- and housing-insecure families internalize parents' struggles and manifest their own depression and anxiety symptoms. So, legislation that proposes food and housing insecurity interventions together, such as SNAP and LIHEAP, may reduce overall levels of household stress, and improve parental and adolescent mental health outcomes.