



# FOOD INSECURITY AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN BALTIMORE

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## BACKGROUND ON FOOD INSECURITY

- Overall, an estimated **6.8 million** young people in the US struggle to find enough food to eat (USDA, 2016)
- Food insecure youth have been found to have:
  - poor nutrition & reduced physical activity;
  - impaired cognitive development and higher risk for mood, anxiety, and behavior disorders (McLaughlin, 2012)
- Urban Institute/Feeding America study showed high-risk coping behaviors among youth receiving food assistance (Popkin et al., 2016)
- In Baltimore City, no data on adolescents.... But **41.6%** of low-income households are food insecure

## BALTIMORE STUDY

### **Primary objectives:**

1. To explore how adolescents experience and cope with food insecurity;
2. To identify potential approaches or interventions for addressing food insecurity voiced by young people themselves.



## METHODS

A total of **8** focus groups were held across six neighborhoods:

- 3 male
- 3 female
- 2 mixed-sex groups

Brief questionnaire on sociodemographic measures and food security status

- Based on validated food insecurity survey from the Child Food Security Survey Module developed at the University of Southern Mississippi

**4** Youth researchers trained in qualitative research and data collection

## DATA ANALYSIS

All focus groups were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and uploaded into Atlas.ti (version 8)

- **Inductive thematic analysis** approach was used for coding and analyzing qualitative data

Questionnaire data was inputted into an electronic database, cleaned, and analyzed using frequency distributions and chi-square test analyses

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Males (n=27)</b>	<b>Females (n=26)</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Age</b>			
14-15	4 (14%)	12 (46%)	16 (30%)
16-17	16 (59%)	11 (42%)	27 (51%)
18-19	7 (26%)	3 (12%)	10 (19%)
<b>Race (can check more than 1)</b>			
Black	20 (74%)	25 (96%)	45 (85%)
White	8 (30%)	1 (4%)	9 (17%)
Other	3 (11%)	2 (8%)	5 (9%)
<b>Employment</b>			
Full-time	0 (0%)	3 (12%)	3 (6%)
Part-time	6 (22%)	3 (12%)	9 (17%)
Not working	21 (78%)	19 (73%)	40 (75%)
<b>Food security status</b>			
Food insecure	12 (44%)	13 (52%)	25 (48%)
<b>Food security level</b>			
High	10 (37%)	7 (28%)	17 (33%)

# FINDINGS

## Food access:

- Majority of youth obtain food via fast food outlets and corner stores.
- While some youth did mention that there were grocery stores, the quality of food was poor, especially in comparison to stores in suburban areas;
- School food, and even food pantries in a school, were described as “*jail food*,” and “*having bad odors*”

## Coping with hunger:

- Across every focus group, adolescents described that girls prostitute for money to get food, sometimes as young as 8<sup>th</sup> grade

*If like you having money problems or whatever, you probably get yourself a sugar daddy and you probably have to do stuff with him in order for him to give you the money and all that*

(girl, Oliver neighborhood)



## FINDINGS

Boys, meanwhile, had to shoplift or sell drugs “*trapping*” for money

*Just like stuff from probably like robbing, probably hustling like depend on what you do, you might get an older person who might have mega money and he be like, yeah you trying to make some money? And then make it seem so easy for you, like all you got to do, you can make \$90 or \$100 a day, and if you got none you got to make that work.*

(boy, Easterwood neighborhood )

### Other ways to get money for food:

- Begging
- Cleaning car windows
- As a last resort – ask someone they knew for money

## FINDINGS

### Reasons for negative coping behaviors:

- Lack of jobs
- Family conflict
- Lack of parental monitoring
- Family responsibilities

*You know some people really go through stuff at home where they got to take care 4, 5, 6 brothers and sisters or their mother is strung out and they don't have that parent to go home to, to have home cooked meals or to clothe them or to bathe their brothers and sisters to get them to school. So it is like well school, I can't focus on school right now I got to get the money, I got to pay the bills, I got to eat.*

(girl, Park Heights neighborhood)



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Food assistance is associated with high level of **stigma and embarrassment**

As a consequence, food insecurity needs to be addressed within a broader set of economic challenges

- Food assistance should be combined with other services (i.e., job training, youth programming)
- Any strategy also needs to consider safety and transportation

*I think mostly people are embarrassed if they don't have a lot of food they don't talk or don't even try, like don't even go to these little donations because they are embarrassed, they don't expect people to understand, they expect people to judge them and all that.(girl, Easterwood)*

## DISCUSSION

Food insecurity may be a hidden problem that underlies a range of risk behaviors among adolescents in disadvantaged neighborhoods

Some evidence suggests there might be a biological link:

Studies among children have shown that food insecurity is related to low impulse control, greater delinquency, and higher interpersonal violence (McLaughlin et al, 2010; Macht, 1996)

A study among adolescents has also shown that low caloric intake increases stress (and even cortisol levels) which separately have been shown to be related to the onset of mental disorders (McLaughlin et al, 2012)

## DISCUSSION

- Findings point to the strong need for programs that address food insecurity specifically for adolescents...
- Adolescents pointed to addressing food insecurity broader – and combining it with other services (such as job training)... one study has found that increasing teenage employment was associated with a reduction in household food insecurity (Hamersma and Kim, 2015)
- Participants also mentioned the community recreation center as a place they would comfortable in receiving services

## NEXT STEPS

### Reflect

Reflect on study findings with local community organizations

### Develop

Develop dissemination plan to inform communities

### Host

Host forum to discuss implications of findings/recommendations

### Incorporate

Incorporate community and organizational feedback into intervention strategy

## PROCESS

Working group has been created – made up of members of youth advisory board; faculty; and interested organizations;

Aims:

- 1) to understand what is currently implemented;
- 2) to identify gaps;
- 3) to incorporate feedback into overall strategy

## CONCLUSIONS

Necessary for food insecurity among youth to be a high priority for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers;

- Gather more information on the prevalence and means of coping with hunger
- Inclusion of different stakeholders

This study also highlights the *power of youth voices* and the need to incorporate them into the design of any initiative to address food insecurity

