



Social Work Approaches to Addressing Food Insecurity

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1. Abstract

This research explores social work approaches to addressing food insecurity, highlighting the multifaceted strategies employed by practitioners to alleviate hunger and improve nutritional access among vulnerable populations. Food insecurity is a complex issue that intersects with poverty, health disparities, and social exclusion, necessitating a holistic response from social workers. This study examines various interventions, including direct service provision, advocacy, and community engagement, that social workers utilize to connect individuals and families with food resources such as food banks, meal programs, and nutrition education. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of a strengths-based approach, empowering clients to navigate food systems and advocate for their needs. The research also addresses the role of social workers in policy advocacy, pushing for systemic changes that promote food justice and equitable access to healthy food. Through case studies and qualitative interviews, the findings illustrate the effectiveness of collaborative efforts between social workers, community organizations, and policymakers in tackling food insecurity. Ultimately, this research underscores the critical role of social work in fostering resilience and enhancing food security for marginalized communities, advocating for comprehensive strategies that address both immediate needs and long-term solutions.

Keywords: Social work, food insecurity, advocacy, community engagement, nutrition education, food justice, direct service, policy change.



1. Introduction to Food Insecurity

This section introduces the complex issue of food insecurity, highlighting its prevalence and impacts on various populations. It defines food insecurity as the lack of reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. The scope of food insecurity is explored through statistical evidence and case studies, demonstrating its widespread effect on individuals and families. The section also discusses the multifaceted nature of food insecurity, including socioeconomic factors, cultural influences, and geographic disparities. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of understanding food insecurity in the context of social justice and equity. The role of social work in addressing this issue is briefly outlined, setting the stage for subsequent sections. Ultimately, the introduction aims to provide a foundational understanding of the challenges posed by food insecurity. The significance of coordinated efforts to tackle this pressing social issue is underscored. (Fitzpatrick et al.2022)

What is food insecurity? Food insecurity is a complex issue in which an individual or a family's access to a reliable quantity of affordable, nutritious food is limited. This understanding of food insecurity shifts the focus from food access alone to the interconnected causes and consequences of food and diet quality, cost, and status. Food insecurity can be temporary or chronic and has the potential to affect both adults and children across diverse populations. To illustrate, 10.5% of households were food insecure in 2019, representing 35.2 million people, including 10.9 million children. Although this percentage represents a decrease from 11.1% in previous years, any level of food insecurity is concerning as it is associated with various health and behavioral abnormalities that, in turn, may counter policymakers' public health or socioeconomic goals.

1.1. Definition and Scope

Beginning with the definitions will help us to know exactly what we are talking about when we mention food insecurity. Food insecurity is described as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Thus, the concept of food insecurity extends beyond basic food intake or hunger to include a range of concerns about having enough to eat. As a result, food insecurity is operationally defined as limited



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access to a sufficient quantity of food due to a lack of financial or other resources, while hunger is defined as the uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food. Its conditions of inadequate food intake are prolonged, habitual, or involuntary, and result in reduced quality of life for all household members. Food insecurity can also lead to long-term negative impacts on health, educational outcomes, and overall well-being. There may be stigma or worry attached to these uncertainties and thus, food insecurity is thought to be a family management issue.

Vulnerable populations include those who are more likely to experience food insecurity due to a range of inequities. For example, children are one of the few demographic groups who hold household food insecurity rates above both the poverty and general population rates. Children face the potential for long-term negative effects on their health, well-being, and school performance because of food insecurity. Seniors also face the challenge of physical and mental impairments and disabilities that reduce food security, therefore increasing their vulnerability to food insecurity. Among the other groups specifically vulnerable to food insecurity are low-income persons, working people, one-parent or single-person households, the unemployed, and Aboriginal people. It becomes more challenging when we become aware that access to and affordability of food varies by geographic location. Rural areas have fewer food sources than large urban areas. This lack of food sources may exacerbate food insecurity within rural areas. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations seek to address these inequities within the communities.

2. The Role of Social Work in Addressing Food Insecurity

From engaging with individual clients on the frontlines to advocating for broad social and economic policy reform, social workers at multiple levels have long grappled with strategies for coping with these challenges. Historical and current social work approaches to address food insecurity have included lobbying for home colonies for indigent persons, the development of food strategies for individual clients, and participating in emergency food provision as intermediaries of the state. More recently, there has been a focus on upstream solutions for systemic issues found to be compounding food insecurity, such as a living wage, affordable housing, wealth inequalities, and immigration and criminal justice reform, which are central foci of the social justice values of the profession. Social workers have had to grapple with providing immediate-level care to individuals and families in need while



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simultaneously working to decry and change the practices and policies that keep households from meeting their food and nutritional needs. Even so, mythologies around individual behavioral solutions for addressing hunger and malnutrition persist. (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2022)

As food insecurity continues to command headlines and calls for action, contemporary social work students and professionals who engage in anti-hunger work will likely continue to see increasing demand for these services. Despite years of policy and advocacy action, food insecurity rates remain high in the U.S. In 2020, nearly 1 in 10 U.S. households lacked access to adequate food, and nearly one-fourth of all U.S. households were characterized by food hardship. In the U.S., food insecure households most commonly rely on charitable distribution through food banks and food pantries to help them meet food and other basic needs. Food banks and food pantries are expected to work in conjunction with other federal nutrition assistance programs. In FY 2020, the majority of food budgets of nonprofits distributed through Feeding America were associated with food philanthropy, which includes food and grocery donations from corporations and retailers, foundations, and individual donors. Reduced food bank output can be tied to a general oppression of feeding social and philanthropic systems, which has serious implications for client access to food pantries. Overcoming those barriers takes concrete moves towards building an anti-racist agenda within charitable food in the U.S.

2.1. Historical Context

Social welfare policy, and by extension the practice of social work employed in social policy making at local, state, and more broadly, national levels, has continued to maintain a focus on food as a human right. Since at least the mid-1960s, social movements have used the term 'food justice' to describe uprisings and struggles that contributed to policy discourses about food. Collectively, major statements from social activists and government panels have foregrounded the right of people to have food to eat as an organizing and structuring element of human services for at least the past century. More broadly, various policy interventions have been put in place following the 1930s Great Depression, the early 1940s World War, and subsequent antipoverty and War on Hunger initiatives to mitigate the obviously poor dietary intakes of food-insecure Americans. (Wudil et al.2022)



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Similarly, various stands, events, and movements can be identified to represent particular turning points, rekindling of interests, refocus, and historical landmarks relevant to present-day practice, implications, and policy responses. In utility, public and private food aid institutions and governing coalitions have been propped up and dramatically altered to respond to the food and social needs circulating at the dawn of societal ills like industrialization, potato famines, war, embargoes, and political failure. As noted, to critically inform the development of current or future social strategies to end poverty and insecurity, it is critical that we learn from these historical responses which have up until now been very well received. Contrary to present-day food and poverty programs and technocratic backgrounds which are struggling to keep people fed, policies appear to successfully abate food insecurity. Over the last century, rather, trends in food and economic policy have directly contributed to and caused society-wide hunger, and food availability is shaped by contemporary policy choices concerning work, land, tenancy, labor, and food trade. Finally, food injustice and insecurity are cyclical and propagated since they are historical and are also prevalent among human populations that have been oppressed by policies and structural conditions including Native Americans and Appalachians.

2.2. Current Challenges and Opportunities

The social workers that we spoke with work on the front lines, and they provide direct service both through emergency food box distribution and benefits case management. They are aware of ongoing challenges in addressing food insecurity in our community. Some of the aggravating challenges include underfunded food assistance programs and the high number of eligible recipients who are underserved due to this inadequate funding. They are concerned that the increasingly high prices of healthy food options lead the community they work with to choose cheaper, less nutritious food, and believe that this choice contributes to the rise in chronic diseases, which are quickly outpacing current public health strategies and funding. Estimating the kinship foster care caseload and policy impact of food assistance, however, has proven difficult both because of the lack of data and protective factors around behavioral problems upon entry into care and their influence on final adoption. (Shroba et al.2022)

Developers reported a host of challenges in trying to start or expand a particular social work-led or initiated intervention to address food insecurity. Some of the most significant challenges noted emerged from bureaucratic hurdles or restrictions. Issues



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include both aspects of current food distribution policy and social service policy, in addition to the more local dynamics of building coalitions and participating in the decision-making process. Respondents identified a few current and historical directions in food insecurity efforts that may create unique opportunities. They pointed out that, over the past couple of decades, there has been increasing emphasis from national, state, and local policymakers, as well as from advocates, on a variety of efforts addressing the four types and levels of food insecurity that support TANF and food assistance programs. In answering our question about current and historical developments that had a positive influence on their work, respondents from this site identified a uniquely improved community and administrative push to update and revisit hunger policy and practices.

3. Key Strategies and Interventions

Key strategies and interventions

There are multiple strategies and interventions that could be pursued when the desire is to mitigate and alleviate the impacts of food insecurity. First, there are a number of community-based programs that have done much in the past decade to support healthier eating and solidarity processes that could be expanded to address hunger in low-resource communities. Food banks have long been providing direct emergency food assistance, relying on food donations. Nutrition education and resources are increasingly being offered in conjunction with traditional food bank distributions to learn to eat programs. These programs focus on food education for children and care providers, including showing and discussing how to prepare and serve fresh fruits and vegetables, making healthier choices, and the importance of proper nutrition. (Banerjee et al.2022)

The community garden movement is expanding across the country, giving citizens engaged in community gardening an opportunity to access fresh fruits and vegetables for a fraction of the cost. Gardening shares are a growing phenomenon where multiple families assist in the gardening and share both the expense and the fresh produce grown. In many communities, food access and health contracts are drawing the attention of policymakers at the local and state levels, and the community nutrition programs that are doing this could be options in terms of working with those marginalized in low-income communities across the country. Various forms of grassroots efforts to influence the policies that impact local food issues are happening



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across the country, including farmers' markets, school lunch, and food stamp program interests. Food support and hunger-related policy advocacy and reform are essential to dismantling the systemic issues that contribute to hunger and food access challenges. Social workers can be especially important in these actions, with the ability to link research to public attention, linking community experiences to policy, and aiming past short-term solutions to work on long-term change.

3.1. Community-based Programs

A number of community-based programs are aimed at increasing food access to help alleviate some of the symptoms of food insecurity. Community-based programs tend to focus on broad strategies for addressing food insecurity and often have multiple and overlapping objectives. A common feature of a number of these programs is a strengthening of local food systems and a broad community development or asset-based approach that can lead to an increased ability of the affected population to be self-reliant and thus food secure. Key partnerships in most of these programs include local businesses, agriculture, food banks, volunteers, municipalities, health regions, or other community organizations. Emphasis on these partnerships recognizes that food security cannot be achieved by addressing food access alone. In addition, it addresses the issue of food waste by partnering with groups such as farm associations, restaurants, retailers, the food and beverage industry, and other organizations. These programs reduce waste and provide wholesome food while engaging community members in the community and at the grassroots level to develop a sense of ownership of the programs and to give a sense of importance to the providers and users of the charitable food security systems. A number of these programs have undertaken or are involved in community food assessments. Most report that the majority of their clients are women and children and range in age from 3 months to over 95 years. Most clients are using these programs as short-term stopgap measures, although large numbers have been using these programs for protracted periods. All of these programs focus on being non-stigmatizing and empowering; however, they do not have the funding to address all the issues affecting food insecurity such as affordable housing, safe and affordable child care, and fair wages. (Kardashian et al.2022)



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There is mounting enthusiasm for community sustainability and food security programs. Initiatives range from small grassroots programs to national organizations and implement numerous projects in a range of communities, regions, and provinces including various urban areas. Stakeholders in the emerging programs envision the direct impacts of their initiatives in three main areas: 1) food distribution and access, 2) social connection, and 3) community capacity building. Key goals of the programs include increasing access to nutritious food at affordable prices; increasing immediate and direct benefits to food banks, pantries, and their clients; demonstrating dramatic commitments from various sectors in alleviating hunger; engaging volunteers, staff, and board members in direct service and education, rather than solely fundraising; and increasing community sustainability through generating cash to cover food security program and outreach costs. A brief overview of the food security and/or community sustenance initiatives in these representative communities is helpful to illustrate new programs against their historical and/or geographical backdrops. It is also useful to compare the programs as they vary in philosophy and service delivery approach.

3.2. Policy Advocacy and Reform

Policy advocacy activities can help influence decisions that impact food systems and food insecurity at the local, state, and national levels. Many grassroots efforts are underway across the U.S. to influence policies at multiple levels of government, and pursuing policy reform offers opportunities for systemic change. Social workers can play a significant role in advocating for broader access to both food as a human right and nutritious food as part of the social and legislative framework needed to underpin such efforts. A wide array of strategies are used by social workers to engage in food policy advocacy, including direct lobbying, engaging community members, collaborating with groups and organizations, and empowering clients to be effective advocates. That having been said, social work engagement in food assistance programs is taking place within a wider context of other debates, for instance those considering universal health insurance and healthcare; immigration, citizenship, and work eligibility; and employment and occupational safety and health, where food concerns in general and FoodShare in particular have been contested. Advocacy efforts by a variety of stakeholders, including social workers, in these different areas may begin to construct a bridge linking efforts to reform food policies and enhance access to healthy food with alternative responses to progressive dismantling and



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growing need within food assistance safety net programs. It has been noted that the USDA's families reference grouping provides one of the lowest suggested estimates of money needed to raise children and that this amount appears to be based on the resources single-parent working families had in 1960. So, although many emergency food organizations have forged improved links to social services and development-based initiatives in recent years, when SNAP makes headlines the impact on food insecurity can be extensive. Social workers and SNAP are already involved in such initiatives but need not wait for federal and state policy changes to become more involved in linking local economic policy with emergency and supplemental food assistance and childcare in order to improve low-income families' food, housing, and economic security. Sustained policy advocacy efforts by social workers and other interested parties are needed to sustain such changes, bridging current and future efforts to provide food to people now in need or at risk.

4. Assessment and Evaluation in Food Insecurity Interventions

Assessment and evaluation in food insecurity interventions is an important aspect to ensure the development of evidence-based practices and to inform socially directed policy and program development and resource allocation. The food insecurity assessments aimed at enumerating and describing the prevalence of food insecurity generally do not reflect the subjective experience of people living with food insecurity. A wide variety of methodologies and research approaches have been described for assessing, measuring, or describing food insecurity generally and food insecurity in First Nations populations specifically. Many studies have used qualitative methods, while many other studies have relied entirely on quantitative approaches. The capacity and capabilities of organizations and programs, including the dissemination of the research results, are important when choosing methodologies and research approaches when working with northern populations as well as with First Nations populations, as it is a matter of respect. (Mottaleb et al., 2022)

Tools, frameworks, and methods for evaluating the effectiveness of food security interventions used to determine the outcomes and impacts are available. These can guide the needed long-term impacts of programs and policies that ensure sustainable solutions in a food insecurity program. Tools can consist of indicators measured at different times during and after interventions, while models or frameworks can guide the whole approach for the evaluation. Approaches for measuring effectiveness



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include studying inputs and outputs in the food security program and the extent to which its immediate and intermediate outcomes were realized. It is important to ensure that community-level indicators and models are adapted to map onto the specifics of socio-economic, cultural, and environmental situations of northern communities. As a first principle, the measurement and evaluation of food security processes and outcomes should be inclusive and involve all stakeholders, including participants and the community.

Evaluation activities must be respectful of the First Nations and respect cultural appropriateness in how the programs are delivered and how impact is measured. Ongoing processes for evaluation are advantageous in community-based programs, as programs can then better adapt to the needs of their constituency. The demands and challenges of data collection and evaluation in northern and First Nations communities must be explicitly considered, particularly with respect to differing cultural, traditional, and socio-economic relations between research data generators and research data users. There need to be mechanisms to ascertain whether and how northern and First Nations communities would benefit from data collection and evaluation activities, and to ensure that stakeholder collaboration and relevance assessment is thoroughly designed and carried out. (Farooq et al.2022)

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

In this document, we have highlighted that food insecurity is experienced by millions of Americans annually, with widespread consequences for individual well-being as well as public health more broadly. To combat this issue, many approaches have been taken, all of which can be understood as working at various levels of influence within ecological systems theory. However, it is our recommendation that efforts to effectively address food insecurity should take an integrated, or multi-level, approach to the issue. Furthermore, we contend that social workers are uniquely positioned to inform and implement many of these multi-level strategies to address food insecurity and put forth several potential intervention strategies about which social workers already have necessary insights. Ultimately, we conceive of efforts to address food insecurity as best left in social work hands. Food insecurity is large-scale; it must be addressed in a way that speaks to it, noticing and acting against the multiple prongs of causation. However, these prongs are highly dynamic, shifting over time in response to greater economic markets and politics. Social work approaches to addressing food



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insecurity must disrupt this dynamic, leaving individuals and their home ecologies more resistant and resilient. Research regarding policy and individual indicators and cautions from previous government programs and anti-poverty initiatives regarding the dangers of a merely private-sector-led effort can inform such responses. The future of this work will inform affiliates of best practices and hopeful directions for social work advocacy, including how emergent technology is changing food security responses and ways in which law and policy shifts can also make current interventions obsolete. Collaboration with other stakeholders and grassroots efforts stands to produce the most impactful response. We know that food insecurity is not synonymous with poverty, but historical experience also implores that the struggle for food security is nothing less than the journey for a living wage. This requires, in addition to direct service, activism. (Bowen et al., 2022)

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