



- The relationship between food and mental health is bidirectional. Improving diet has been shown to relieve symptoms of depression.<sup>1</sup>
- Compared to suburban areas, households in rural and urban areas are more likely to experience food insecurity.<sup>2</sup>
- The effects of food on mental health can start as early as during pregnancy and are associated with increased dysregulation in children up to 7 years old.<sup>3</sup>
- The movement behind understanding food's critical effects on health is called "Food is medicine".<sup>4</sup>

## Impact of Food and Nutrition on Mental Health

### Background

Food insecurity is the systemic state of not having enough to eat and not knowing where your next meal will come from. Almost 47.5 million Americans lived in a household that experienced food insecurity in 2023. Children made up 13.8 million of those individuals. Low-income households are more likely to be food insecure compared to the national average. Food insecurity was at a record low level in 2021 and has had increased rates in 2022 and 2023.

### Effects on Health

Food not only impacts physical health but mental health as well. Experiencing food insecurity is stressful and can lead to negative physical responses in the body, such as inflammation. Children with a high intake of unhealthy food show higher rates of behaviors like social withdrawal and aggression. Adults who experience food insecurity can have a stress response that is related to anxiety and depression.

### Impactful Policies and Programs

The record low levels of food insecurity in 2021 can be attributed to the expanded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Policies such as streamlining application processes and expanding eligibility and available benefits were drivers of the lowered food insecurity levels. Furthermore, a study found that individuals utilizing SNAP were buying healthier foods during the pandemic and less sugar-sweetened beverages and potato chips.

SAMHSA's Food and Mood Project describes and promotes the relationship between food and health. The Project works to address the intersection of food and nutrition security, behavioral health, and cultural food diversity.

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2023). Food and Mood.
2. Food Research and Action Center (2024). USDA Food Security Report Highlights Startling Hunger Crisis in America.
3. Pina-Camacho, L., Jensen, S. K., Gaysina, D., & Barker, E. D. (2015). Maternal Depression Symptoms, Unhealthy Diet and Child Emotional-Behavioural Dysregulation.
4. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (2024). Food is Medicine.

## Recommendations

This information and our recent Policy Institute panel on [Housing and Food Security](#) highlights the importance of broader investments in USDA programs including nutrition assistance programs, child nutrition programs, and food distribution programs. State Medicaid programs are positioned to provide nutrition assistance by covering connections to human service organizations (HSOs) that have food pantries and meal delivery services. Programs like SNAP and WIC are top programs for promoting nutrition in families. Ensuring a streamlined process with meal-delivery services through these programs is necessary for access in rural and hard to reach regions.

**MHA recommends increased support to expand USDA nutrition programs and encourages state Medicaid agencies to cover connections to HSOs to improve individuals' integrated access to nutrition.**

## About Mental Health America

Mental Health America is the nation's leading community-based nonprofit dedicated to addressing the needs of those living with mental illness and promoting the overall mental health of all. Our work is informed, designed, and led by the lived experience of those most affected. To learn more, visit <https://mhanational.org/policy-issues>.



- NCCARE360, a grant program in North Carolina, was able to [connect almost 200 individuals](#) with nutrition assistance during the two year grant period.<sup>5</sup>