Association between Food Insecurity and Suicide Risk

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A recent study found an association between participation in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) and suicide risk. While other studies have found that food insecurity can contribute to mental health issues and suicidal behaviors (thoughts, plans, and attempts) globally,¹ this is the first study to document the association in a nationally representative U.S. sample.

To determine whether SNAP is an appropriate setting for suicide prevention, researchers analyzed 2012-2018 data on adults ages 18 and older from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health. In the survey, SNAP participation was measured by asking whether the respondent or a member of their household had received benefits in the past year. Suicide-related outcomes were also measured with yes-no questions about having suicidal thoughts, planning a suicide attempt, or attempting suicide in the past year. The analyses controlled for demographic variables such as race/ethnicity, gender, marital status, age, education, employment status, and household income and size. Adjusted models were stratified by demographic factors, socioeconomic status, self-perceived physical health status, mental health service use, and age.

The results of the analyses indicated that SNAP participants were 1.89 times more likely to have suicidal thoughts, 2.35 times more likely to have planned suicide, and 2.89 times more likely to have attempted suicide in the past year than non-SNAP participants. When these results were adjusted to account for survey year, demographics, socioeconomic status, health status, and mental health service use, the association between SNAP participation and suicidal thoughts remained significant, with slight significance for planning and attempts.

These findings suggest systematically screening SNAP participants for mental health and suicidal behaviors may allow early identification of those at risk and offer an opportunity for prevention and intervention, particularly for those who may not be reached through other social services. This study is especially relevant given the increased prevalence of food insecurity resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note that this is a cross-sectional study (i.e., it reflects data collected at one point in time) and does not reflect current or ongoing conditions. The study measured SNAP participation by household rather than individual, and therefore may have implications for engaging the person at risk in suicide screening and intervention.


