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Editorial

Research on Adolescent Predictors of Young Adult Homelessness and Food Insecurity Reveals Opportunities for Prevention



A new study by Tucker and colleagues [1] set out to examine the adolescent predictors of homelessness and food insecurity during emerging adulthood. Researchers analyzed data from a longitudinal study of adolescents recruited from 16 middle schools in Southern California. During the 2019–20 follow-up survey, with an average age of 23, one in 13 (7.5%) young adult study participants reported some form of homelessness, and nearly one in 3 (29.3%) reported concerns or experiences with not having enough food, in the past year.

These rates follow a trend of survey studies revealing markedly higher rates of young adult homelessness than are reflected by traditional street-based and shelter-based counts and administrative data captures of homelessness. For example, a national survey study published in this journal estimated that 9.7% of young adults, ages 18 to 25, experienced homelessness in a year [2]. Another analysis of national survey data on food and housing insecurity among young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic found that 14% of young adults, ages 18 to 25, experienced some degree of food insecurity in the past week [3].

The alarming prevalence of homelessness and food insecurity among young people during a critical developmental stage reinforces the need for a public health response. That entails a greater emphasis on prevention over crisis response alone—moving “upstream” through systems change to achieve larger population-level impact [4–6]. To this end, the study’s contribution to our understanding of adolescent risk and protective factors of young adult homelessness and food insecurity has actionable implications.

Typically, in the absence of longitudinal data, we must rely on analyses of cross-sectional survey data (collected at the same time, rather than over time) that examine the existence of relationships between homelessness or food insecurity and other experiences or characteristics. By contrast, this research pushes beyond correlations to reveal predictors of future homelessness and food insecurity. In doing so, it opens a better window into early warning signs that could be the subject of earlier screening, identification, and intervention during adolescence.

Indeed, Tucker and colleagues’ study underscores the importance of screening for and addressing the effects of adverse childhood experiences such as exposure to abuse and domestic violence to help prevent young adult homelessness and food insecurity. This aligns with previous quantitative research demonstrating adverse childhood experiences as risk factors for adult homelessness [7], as well as qualitative research revealing histories of complex interpersonal trauma, loss, and childhood adversities that preceded experiences of unaccompanied youth homelessness [8].

If we apply these insights to screening and early identification of young people’s needs in schools, afterschool programs, healthcare systems, and juvenile justice systems, among others, these experiences need not represent missed opportunities for millions more youth [9–11]. Instead, communities—resourced by better policies and coordination—could identify and connect young people with these experiences and their families with the social and economic supports they need to disrupt pathways into homelessness and food insecurity.

The authors also found that, controlling for other variables in the model, the academic orientation during adolescence predicted both homelessness and food insecurity in young adulthood. There were subtle differences, with academic aspirations predicting homelessness and academic performance predicting food insecurity. These findings elevate the interconnectedness of academic outcomes and basic needs and strengthen the case for incentivizing, supporting, and resourcing school systems as critical agents in the prevention of homelessness and food insecurity.

The study leaves gaps for future research. Notably, this sample included few American Indian and Black identifying young people, who tend to face the highest rates of material hardship [12,13]. We also need better data to understand how factors at the community, policy, and societal levels predict future homelessness and food insecurity. These might include, for example, exposure to systemic and interpersonal racism, objective measures of community deprivations, and policies related to housing, safety nets, child welfare, and criminal justice. Such insights could help focus prevention policy beyond individual and family levels and more in the realm of structural and systemic causes and inequities.

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Nonetheless, with this study and others, we have enough evidence to act—to fund, develop, and evaluate more robust models for prevention and early intervention. Action or inaction is a policy choice. We owe it to young people and our future to make the right choice.

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