

How Meeting Basic Needs Protects Wellbeing

Meeting basic needs such as food security is a foundational need. Not meeting these needs brings immense mental stress as families make impossible choices between food, housing, or medical care. This reality affects millions of people across the United States. According to the USDA, in 2023 more than **33 million adults and 13.8 million children lived in households that struggled to afford enough food**; and 1 and 8 households are food insecureⁱ.

The impacts can be especially damaging for children. Studies show that children who grow up in food-insecure homes are **1.79 times more likely to experience depression and anxiety** than their counterparts in food secure homesⁱⁱ. These challenges persist across developmental stages, for families living with food insecurity, youth ages 14–25 were **2.3 times more likely to have symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation**ⁱⁱⁱ.

This tie between poverty, unmet basic needs, and mental health challenges is an avoidable public health issue. Evidence shows that cash assistance reduces both food insecurity and mental distress^{iv}. The expanded Child Tax Credit (CTC) under the 2021 American Rescue Plan – boosted annual benefits from \$1,000 per child to \$3,000–\$3,600 per child and distributed funds monthly. This policy shift created the opportunity to study the impact of cash transfers on food security and changes in mental health. A review of the CTC found that the majority of the funds were spent by families on food and that **food insufficiency dropped by 24% after the first payment**^v.

Mental health improvements were also tied to reductions in financial stress and food insecurity. One analysis, *The Effects of an Unconditional Cash Transfer on Mental Health in the United States*, used data from the CDC’s long-running Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), which asks respondents how many days in the past month they experienced “stress, depression, and problems with emotions.”^{vi} The study found that **the increase in cash transfer from the 2021 policy change reduced the number of poor mental health days**^{vii}. The positive effects were noted a few months after the first transfer; however, after the policy changed and CTC benefits were reduced the reported improvements declined.

These findings reinforce that **mental health and food security are deeply interconnected**. Providers supporting forcibly displaced families experiencing financial strain can help by advocating for stronger anti-poverty policy and integrating resource referrals for basic needs, especially food, directly into mental health care. For additional resources, see CARRE guidance on [Food Insecurity](#).

ⁱ Matthew P. Rabbitt *et al.*, “Household Food Security in the United States in 2023,” USDA Economic Research Service, September 2024, Retrieved from <https://ers.usda.gov/sites/default/files/laserfiche/publications/109896/ERR-337.pdf>.

- ⁱⁱ Melchior et al. (Note 15) Food insecurity and children's mental health: a prospective birth cohort study. 1997–2005 Québec Longitudinal Study of Child Development, Accessed from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23300723/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ McIntyre et al. (Note 16) Depression and suicide ideation in late adolescence and early adulthood are an outcome of child hunger. 1994–2009 Canadian NLSCY, Accessed from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23276702/>
- ^{iv} Wollburg, C., Steinert, J. I., Reeves, A., & Nye, E. (2023). *Do cash transfers alleviate common mental disorders in low- and middle-income countries? A systematic review and meta-analysis*. *PLOS ONE*, 18(2), e0281283. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0281283>
- ^v Megan A. Curran. 2022. Research roundup of the expanded Child Tax Credit: One year on. Poverty and Social Policy Report, vol. 6, no. 9. New York: Center on Poverty and Social Policy, Columbia University, Accessed from <https://povertycenter.columbia.edu/publication/2022/child-tax-credit/research-roundup-one-year-on>
- ^{vi} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) 2024 Codebook*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/brfss/annual_data/annual_2024.html
- ^{vii} The Effects of an Unconditional Cash Transfer on Mental Health in the United States
Author(s): Clemente Pignatti and Zachary Parolin, IZA Institute of Labor Economics (2023), Retrieved from <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/16237/the-effects-of-an-unconditional-cash-transfer-on-mental-health-in-the-united-states>