Food insecurity and its consequences for children’s development

COVID-19 intensifies the problem

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While we are all currently focused on how to avoid or treat COVID-19, the serious consequences of this global pandemic on children will challenge us far beyond its duration through its detrimental effects on child education and health.

One critical area is understanding the consequences of likely spikes in food insecurity, which is a household’s limited or unreliable access to enough and nutritious food, on child development outcomes. With schools closed around the world, more than 368 million children in 199 countries who rely on school meals are no longer receiving them. For many of these children, that school meal was the only nutritious meal of their day. School feeding is estimated to provide, on average, a transfer equivalent to 10% of poor households’ monthly income in low- and middle-income countries, which is now lost due to the discontinuation of the programs. Adding this to likely losses in other sources of income due to job losses following the pandemic, the risk of increased challenges in meeting children’s daily food needs intensifies.

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In our recent study, using data collected over three years on preschool children and their parents in Ghana, we examined how household food insecurity was associated with early childhood development outcomes, including academic (math and reading), short-term memory, social-emotional well-being, and self-regulation, which is the extent to which a child can behave to achieve her set goals. The longitudinal nature of the data allowed us to examine how the occurrence and persistence of food insecurity for children during early childhood was associated with children’s later outcomes in the first years of primary school.

Food insecurity may have lasting consequences on child development

Based on food security status over three years, households were classified into three groups: (i) never food-insecure; (ii) transitory food insecurity, if the household was food-insecure only in one year; and (iii) persistent food insecurity, if the household was food-insecure in two or all years.

Children from households that were ever food-insecure over the three years performed worse on literacy, numeracy and short-term memory tests. When we looked more specifically across the three groups, even transitory spells of food insecurity—meaning the household was food-insecure in only one of the time points—were associated with lower numeracy, short-term memory, and
self-regulation scores. This suggests that even a short-term spell of food insecurity can have serious consequences for children over time.

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In the early childhood years, children form the foundation for their social, cognitive, and academic skills, and for their future academic success. Thus, for preschool-aged children, the effects of food insecurity on development may have lasting consequences.

However, perhaps surprisingly, very few studies have examined issues of food insecurity during the preschool years, and none that we know of have considered them in a developing country context, where food insecurity is more widespread than in high-income countries.

Sound data from Sub-Saharan Africa, where the burden of food insecurity is greatest, are scarce. The region is also characterized by the largest number and proportion of preschool-aged children (29.4 million, equivalent to 44%) failing to meet key cognitive and psycho-social health milestones. Our results suggest that food insecurity may play a key role.

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These findings highlight the need for multi-sectoral approaches including social protection and nutrition to support early child development. They add to a scarce knowledge base that shows long-term detrimental associations of food insecurity at home during childhood on adolescent outcomes in India and Ethiopia.

Why is this evidence especially relevant now?

As the COVID-19 emergency unfolds, it is clear that the economic repercussions on households in Ghana and in countries around the world will be hard. This will be especially true in developing countries for urban informal workers that have day-to-day jobs and will lose their only sources of income as countries restrict movement and enforce lockdown measures. With schools closed, and with them, school feeding discontinued, many children will go hungry.

Food insecurity during childhood is linked to poor-quality diets and impaired nutritional outcomes. In turn, micronutrient deficiencies and stunting, a form of chronic malnutrition, in early childhood decreases cognitive skills and psycho-social health. In addition, food-insecure caregivers are more likely to experience increased levels of stress and anxiety, and may have less time to interact with children in order to provide the nurturing care environment that is critical for early child development.

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Finally, children experiencing food insecurity are more likely to display signs of stress and anxiety themselves, and to be fatigued and lethargic, which in turn may decrease the quality of their interactions with parents, siblings, teachers, and peers in educational settings.

School meals serve as an important safety net for the most disadvantaged children. They impact learning and nutrition outcomes, especially for most vulnerable groups like girls, poorest children and children residing in poorer regions within a country. Especially in times of crises, school meals have been shown to support children’s health and educational outcomes during emergencies.

What can be done?

The results from our study show that even transitory spells of food insecurity can have longer-term negative implications on child development. While the challenges of COVID-19 will continue over the next year at least, the challenges of child food insecurity do not need to.

For instance, existing social protection programs such as cash or food transfers can be scaled up to increase the transfer amount during the crisis or expanded to reach households that may have become food-insecure because of the pandemics. For instance, in Brazil, some states have topped up Bolsa Familia, the local cash transfer, with additional resources to compensate for missing school meals.

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Further, schools can be used as a platform to distribute food that is cooked on-site, as done in Jamaica or in some states in India. This measure would also support employment among school caterers and cooks, and their food providers. Other countries have adopted mixed approaches, depending on local contexts and needs: for instance, Colombia has allowed municipalities to pick between food baskets, take-home rations, or food vouchers in order to make up for lost school meals, while Uruguay has opted for either scaled-up cash transfers for households that were already receiving them, or food vouchers to collect at school.

In addition to reducing the spread of and searching for a vaccine for COVID-19, governments around the world should act immediately to safeguard the food security of households with children. Otherwise, the eventual end to the pandemic will be met with lasting repercussions on children’s health and development.

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