

Children's Food Insecurity in Cohabiting, Married, and Single-Mother Households

Background

Among U.S. households with children in 2013, 21% had household members who experienced food insecurity, including 10% in which children were food insecure. It is important to consider the relationship between more complex family structures (i.e., step families, cohabiting families) and patterns of child food insecurity because there is some evidence that household resources are allocated to children differently based on family type.

Current Study

Prior studies on the link between complex family structure and food insecurity are limited for several reasons:

- Based on data collected prior to the start of the Great Recession.
- Focused on a limited age range of children.
- Are unable to distinguish between married and cohabiting stepfamilies.
- Derive family structure from the household head or from one child.
- Do not focus on child food insecurity.

This study fills a gap by utilizing recent nationally representative data and a USDA measure of child food insecurity to understand how children (ages 0 to 17) are differentially protected from food insecurity by household family structure derived from the child's perspective.

Data: Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (2007-2013)

- Valid child food security and family structure measures (N=48,197 households).

Analytic Plan

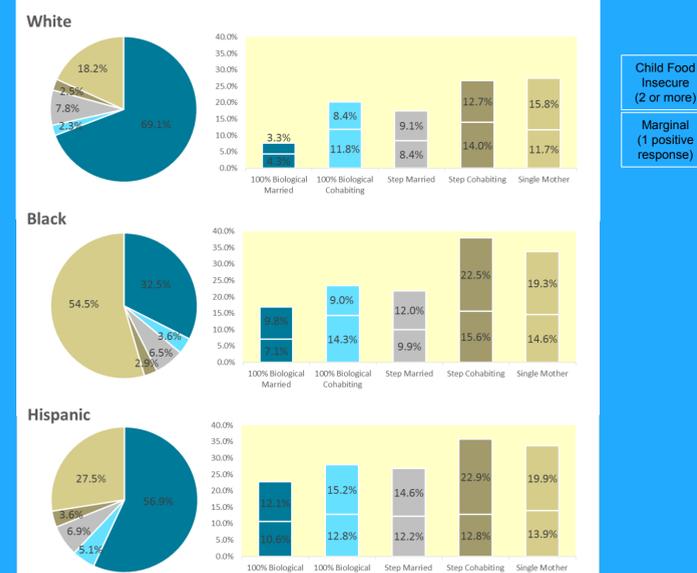
Two levels of child food insecurity are examined—marginal child food security (1 or more affirmative responses on Child Food Security Scale) and child food insecurity (2 or more affirmative responses).

Five household family structure categories were constructed: 100% Biological Married, 100% Biological Cohabiting, Married Stepfamily, Cohabiting Stepfamily, and Single Mother.

Logistic regression was used to model outcomes controlling for characteristics of household head (age, education), # of children, # of adults, poverty, and year of survey. Final models are stratified by race/ethnicity.

Descriptive Statistics

Figure 1: Family Structure and Children's Food Security Status (Marginally Food Secure and Food Insecure) by Race/Ethnicity



Note: Unadjusted means, weighted using household supplement weight. Marginal (one affirmative answer to Child Food Security Supplement) and Low or Very Low Child Food Security (at least two or more affirmative answers).

Results

Figure 2: Results of Logistic Regression Models of Marginal (or worse) or Child Food Insecurity, Family Structure Comparisons by Race/Ethnicity

	TOTAL		WHITE		BLACK		HISPANIC	
	Marginal	Insecure	Marginal	Insecure	Marginal	Insecure	Marginal	Insecure
Cohabiting Biological	>	>	>	>	=	=	=	=
Married Step	>	>	>	>	=	=	=	=
Cohabiting Step	>	>	>	>	>	>	>	>
Single Mother	>	>	>	>	>	>	>	>
vs. Married Biological Household								
Married Step	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Cohabiting Step	>	>	=	=	=	>	=	=
Single Mother	>	>	>	>	>	>	>	>
vs. Cohabiting Biological Household								
Cohabiting Step	>	=	=	=	>	=	=	>
Single Mother	>	>	>	>	>	>	>	>
vs. Married Step Household								
Cohabiting Step	=	=	>	>	=	=	=	=
vs. Single Mother								

A ">" indicates that the adjusted predicted odds of the outcome is significantly higher (p > .05) than the contrast group. A "=" indicates that the adjusted predicted odds of the outcome is not significantly different from than the contrast group.

Do children living in a married two biological parent household all have the same protective advantage against food insecurity?

- No. Only white children in 100% biological homes consistently have a protective advantage over each family structure.

Do children in cohabiting stepfamily households have similar levels of food insecurity as children living in cohabiting biological parent households?

- The biological status of the parents is not associated with the food security of children living in white or Hispanic cohabiting parent households.
- Among children living in cohabiting parent households, black children are more likely to be food secure when living with biological parents than with stepparents.

Results

Among stepfamily households, does marriage offer protection against food insecurity?

- Hispanic or black children have higher adjusted odds of food insecurity in cohabiting stepfamily households compared to married stepfamily households. There are no differences among comparable white households.

Do children residing in a household with a cohabiting mother fare better or worse than children living in a household with a single mother?

- Among white households, children living with a single-mother fare worse than children living in a cohabiting stepfamily household. The same patterns are not found among black and Hispanic households.

Conclusions

Net of socioeconomic characteristics, family structure is linked to the likelihood of children's food insecurity, but patterns vary by race/ethnicity.

Given that stable two-married parent families are in decline, it is imperative that food assistance programs continue to test and develop systems that reduce the risks of child food insecurity associated with increasing family complexity.

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