

Housing Concerns are Associated with Household Food Access Among Low-Income Urban Families

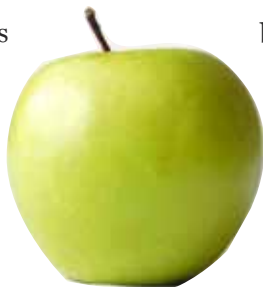
What you need to know

This research examines the relationship between housing affordability (spending less than 30% of household income on shelter) and household food security (financial ability to obtain adequate food). More specifically, it focuses on the inadequacy of the after-shelter proportion of household income and of housing subsidies in ensuring food security for low-income families.

What is this research about?

Household food insecurity is an extensive problem in North America, affecting 8% of Canadian households in 2007/08.

The key predictors of household food insecurity are low income and reliance on government assistance. Numerous calls for



responses to food insecurity have drawn attention to housing affordability as an important factor. Housing is considered to be affordable if 30% or less of gross household income is spent on shelter and utilities. Low-income households spending more than 30%

of household income on housing are left with little income to spend on other life necessities such as food, clothing and transportation. Current discussions about housing affordability often do not focus on the amount of after-shelter household income, which can have a profound impact on the health of a household's members.

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KEYWORDS

food insecurity, housing affordability, social housing, subsidies, urban households, access to food

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What did the researchers do?

The researchers interviewed 473 participants from families living in 12 high poverty areas in Toronto, Ontario. The sample included equal numbers of families living in subsidized and market rental units. Both families reliant on employment and on government assistance as their main source of income were interviewed. Households were eligible for the study if they included at least one child 18 years

of age or younger, had lived in their current dwelling for at least one month, had gross household incomes below a low-income threshold determined by Statistics Canada (e.g., under \$30,000 for a two-person household), and the potential respondent had sufficient English fluency to complete an oral interview. Interviews were conducted with the person primarily responsible for food shopping and management.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

The findings from this research suggest that food and housing insecurity are prevalent among low-income families residing in high-poverty neighbourhoods. Policy implications of this research include the need to redefine housing affordability to take into account the amount of money left over in low-income households after shelter costs are paid. Quality and adequacy of housing should also be taken into account. There is also a need for attention to the adequacy of current housing subsidy levels, as most families living in subsidized housing in this study were food insecure.

What did the researchers find?

The research showed that **two thirds of the low-income families studied were food insecure**, and the lower the household income, the higher the chance of a household being food insecure.

The researchers also found that among families in market rental accommodations, **as the proportion of household income spent on housing costs increased, so did the likelihood of food insecurity**. The likelihood of food insecurity did not differ between families in subsidized and market rental housing. However, families in subsidized housing were less likely to be food insecure compared to those on a subsidy waiting list, suggesting a protective effect of subsidies.

The researchers also found pervasive housing quality problems such that **almost half of the households lived in crowded housing and one fifth lived in housing in need of major repair**, indicating that low-income households struggle with multiple basic needs.

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