

Parents' influence on children's diet and eating patterns in food-insecure households

Michael Burke, a doctoral student in the department of Health Promotion, Education, and Behavior at the Arnold School of Public Health, was awarded grant funding to examine the relationship between the social contexts of meals, diet quality, and eating patterns in food-insecure households with children, a population that might be at risk for decreased dietary quality and disordered eating.

Burke was one of three doctoral dissertation grantees selected nationwide by the Research Innovation and Development Grants in Economics (RIDGE) Center at the Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University.

Burke explained, "We know from previous research that children who are exposed to healthy parental dietary modeling, positive mealtime structure, and authoritative parenting styles are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables, consume less fat, eat out less, and skip fewer meals."

He added, "These factors comprise the social context of meals and are associated with improved diet quality and healthy eating patterns in children, yet, little is known about the social context of meals in food-insecure households."

In addition to Burke, Dr. Sonya Jones, faculty member in the department of Health Promotion, Education, and Behavior at the Arnold School and Deputy Director of the Center for Research in Nutrition and Health Disparities, is the Project's Principal Investigator.

Jones said, "This study is especially timely as it provides insight to diet quality and eating patterns among food-insecure children, information that is needed to better understand the social context of meals in this population and ultimately reduce health disparities."

The study is expected to involve 200 mothers/caregivers and their children. Parental and child surveys and a 24-hour dietary recall with the child will be administered. Survey questions will assess parental dietary modeling, mealtime structure, and parenting styles, along with other behaviors at mealtime.

Key Points

- Arnold School doctoral student, Michael Burke, was awarded a grant to examine the relationship between the social contexts of meals, diet quality, and eating patterns in food-insecure households with children.
- Social context of meals have been found to be associated with children's eating behaviors.
- This study will help fill the research gaps in at risk populations.
- Results will help inform policy makers and public health practitioners by providing needed information to address health disparities and reduce obesity rates.
- Services provided by the Center for Research in Nutrition and Health Disparities made the grant submission process feasible.

Twenty-five of the participants will also be interviewed to further explore how mothers/caregivers view the social context of meals being affected by food insecurity. From participants' responses, the most commonly mentioned characteristics related to how food insecurity affects the social context of meals will be identified.

"Results of this study will help identify the changeable behavioral factors within food insecure households. At this point, we don't know enough to understand what changes are needed. This study will give us some of the missing pieces of information that are needed to programmatically address health disparities in this population," said Burke.

Added Burke, "The grant management team at the Center for Research in Nutrition and Health Disparities made the grant submission feasible. Without their support, obtaining this award would not have been possible."