

# Understanding experiences of children and parents in food-insecure families

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# Background

- Importance of food security to health and wellbeing (National Research Council, 2006)
  - *Obesity*
  - *Maternal depression and stress*
  - *Health, learning, and psychosocial functioning of children*
- Food security and family processes
  - *Parent and child interactions*
  - *Family eating patterns*
  - *Socializing and the social context of family life*
- Existing knowledge centers primarily on mothers' experiences and perspectives
  - *Make primary decisions about and acquiring food*
  - *More likely to be food-insecure (especially if single)*

# Aims

- Extend knowledge on how:
  - Family members experience food insecurity
  - Families manage food insecurity
- Understand children's experiences of food insecurity
  - Why and when does it happen?
  - What do they feel?
  - What happens to children as a result of food insecurity?
  - How do they face it?
  - Are they really protected against it?

# Three studies

- Two in-depth qualitative studies in SC

Maryah Stella Fram

Sonya Jones

Deborah Billings

Melly Perez

Mark Macaуда

Roger Williams

Mike Burke

Kendra DeLoach

Jessica Escobar

Christine Blake



- One mixed-methods study in Miranda state, Venezuela

Jennifer Bernal

Héctor Herrera

Juan Rivera



# Studies 1 and 2 samples (n=38)

- 21 rural, 17 non-rural
- 17 African American, 5 white, 16 Hispanic
- 16 male children, 22 female children
- 17 elementary, 13 middle, 8 high school
- 17 very low food insecure, 12 low food insecure, 9 food secure
- 21 receive SNAP
- 34 free or reduced lunch and/or breakfast

# Study 3 sample and methods

## **I. Interviews with children 10-17 y**

- 7 focus groups (n=42)
- 13 individual in-depth (n=13)

Qualitative

## **II. Development & testing of food-insecurity items**

Cognitive interviewing  
Survey of children (n=118; 9-16 y)

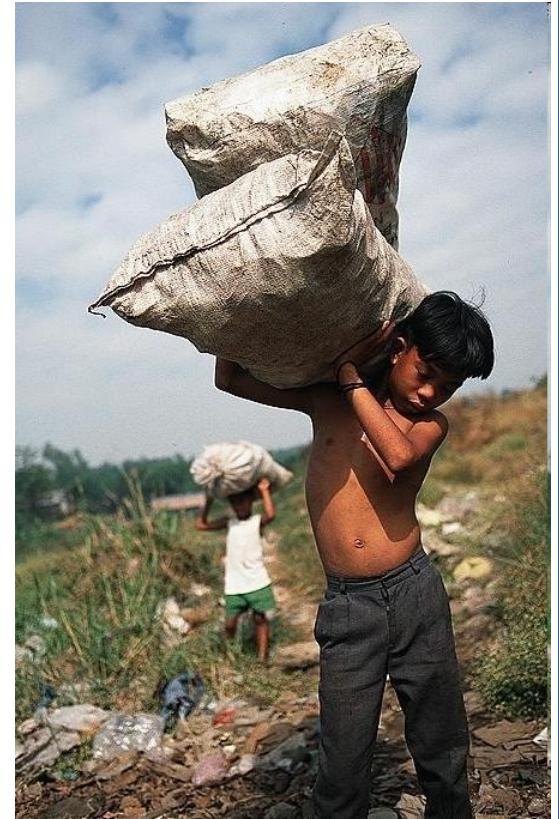
## **III. Survey of children and their mothers**

Food insecurity and related factors  
Mother-child dyads (n=131; 7-17 y)

Quantitative

# Family food insecurity affects children

- Awareness
  - Cognitive
  - Emotional
  - Physical
- Responsibility
  - Participation
  - Initiative
  - Resource generation



# Cognitive awareness

## **Knowing about food scarcity and family challenges created by it**

### Awareness of:

- *Inadequate quantity or quality of food*
- *Adult struggles to meet food needs*
- *Resources for meeting food needs*

### Contributors:

- *Parental information sharing*
- *Child observation*



# Emotional Awareness

**Feelings such as worry, sadness, or anger that are related to knowing about food scarcity and family challenges created by it**

**Awareness of:**

- *Worries about not having enough food*
- *Worries about what parents and others go through*

**Contributors:**

- *Lack of confidence that adults will work it out*
- *Child vigilance*

## Emotional awareness

***“They don’t really say anything, but you can read it in their face or if they’re out of money, you just know. I just know. It’s not really what they say, it’s just how they act. . . when they’re out of money and then you ask why don’t you go to the store and they don’t answer or something or, and they just try to find other ways, like they just forget . . . I can tell by people’s expressions . . . [my older sister] wouldn’t be frowning, but like it wouldn’t be a happy face, it wouldn’t be sad, it wouldn’t be any face at all, it would be just like - an empty face.”***

African American non-rural female, high school

# Physical awareness

**Physical feelings such as hunger, pain, tiredness, and weakness that are related to lack of adequate food resources at home**

Contributors:

- *No food at home or poor quality food*
- *Poor quality of food served at school*
- *Parental behaviors*

# Physical awareness

How do you feel when you get hungry?

***“Angry, mad, go to sleep basically, that’s the only thing you can probably do and after you wake up, you feel like you’ve got a bunch of cramps in your stomach and you’ll be light headed.”***

African American rural male, high school

# Child responsibility

**Participation: going along with adult strategies for managing scarce food resources**

- *eating less when asked*
- *when asked, choosing less expensive foods, or choosing only “real” food*
- *Helping or accompanying parents at food pantry*

# Child responsibility

## **Initiation: initiating strategies to make existing food resources stretch**

- *Eating less without being asked*
- *Encouraging others (e.g., siblings) to eat less*
- *Asking for less or less expensive foods*

# Child responsibility

## **Resource generation: taking action to attain additional food or money for buying food**

- *Part-time job*
- *Informal work (cutting grass)*
- *Giving money*
- *Asking neighbors for food or eating away from home*
- *Bringing food home after stay at father's house*

## Child responsibility – resource generation

***“... we'll like get together and we'll find a way to get money up, not, we ain't got to sell no drugs though, not like that, but we'll find a way to get money up. We might, we'll all get together and cut the grass or something . . . Sometimes they'll probably like, people will be putting money up on fights and stuff, too. And they might do dog fights every now and to get money like that.”***



# Children with food insecurity live adult roles

- Have to do more activities related with household chores such as ironing, washing, cooking, and taking care of siblings
- Engage more in child labor
- Engage in fewer activities related with school, recreational, and resting time
- Sacrifice time for activities that would increase their knowledge and quality of life



# Protection of family members

- Parents try to provide quality and quantity of food, and emotional support around eating
- Parents sometimes do not protect children (e.g., unemployed, drug or alcohol, ultra-poor)
- Protection is attempted in multiple directions:
  - Parents to children
  - Parent to parent
  - Children to parents (especially mothers)
  - Children to children (especially younger and poorer)

# Conclusions

- Children aware of and take responsibility for family food insecurity
- Compromised opportunity for children to fulfill their developmental need and right to study, play, rest, and live a happy childhood
- Parents unaware of some of their children's experience of food insecurity
- Children impacted by family food insecurity, even when adults believe they are protected

# Roles and myths

- Mothers

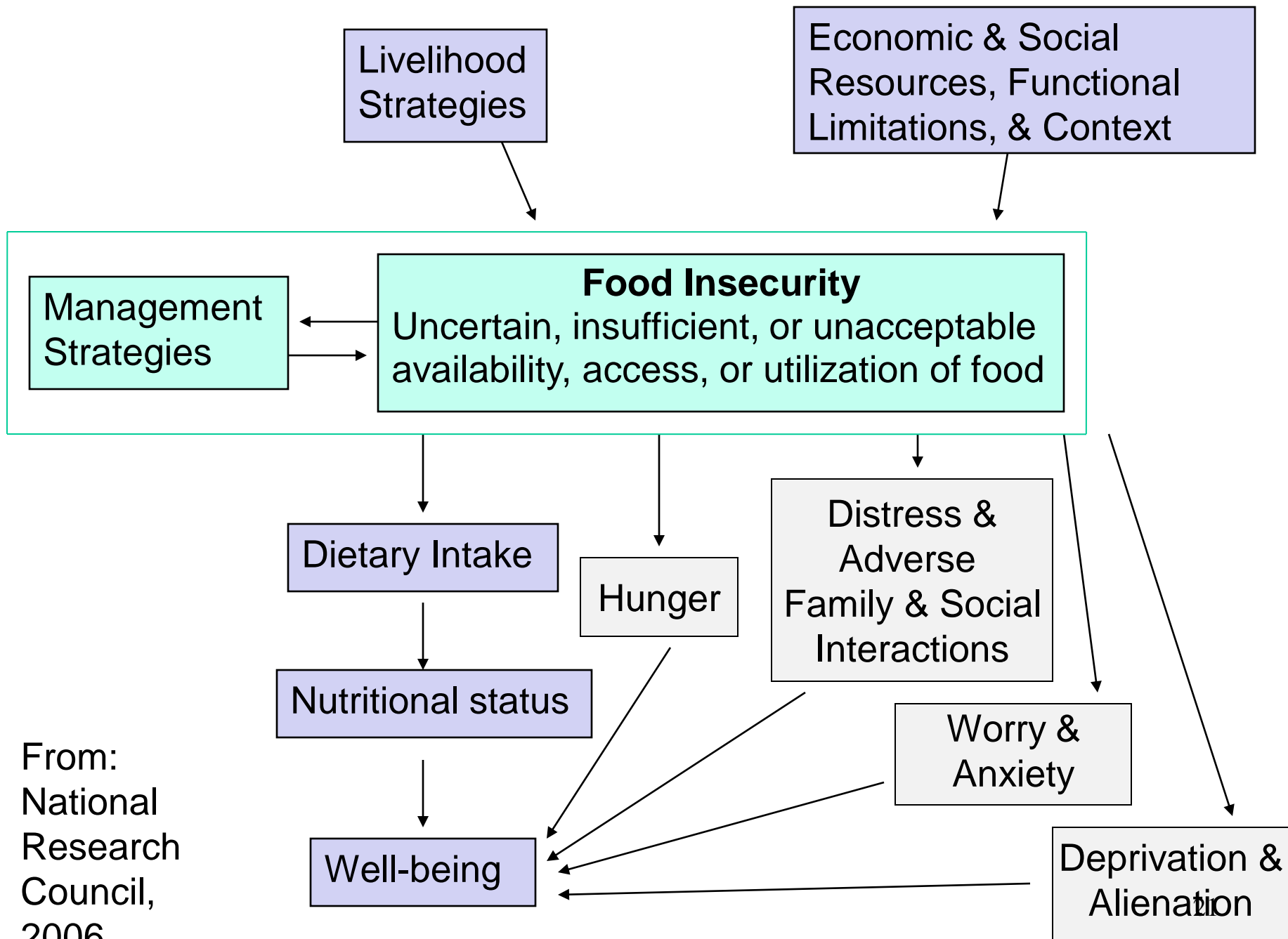
- Manager
- Protect children

- Fathers

- Provider
- Protect wife and children

- Children

- Active contributor
- Protect other children and parents (including myth)



From:  
National  
Research  
Council,  
2006

# Families are balancing

- Capabilities & assets against demands & stressors
- Among goals for children's:
  - Security and certainty
  - Safety
  - Nutrition and health
  - Education
  - Emotional and social development
  - Family cohesion
  - Belonging and acceptance

# Family balancing and environment

- Myths about roles in families (e.g., parenting) are shaped by powerful forces in society
  - > \$4B annually in advertising by fast-food industry to children
  - Sesame Workshop program for helping food-insecure families without promoting obesity
- Food-insecure families have limited choices to achieve belonging, acceptance, “normal”
- Food-insecure families are “susceptible”
- Family balancing has to be integrated with influences from food environment

# High-priority research gaps

1. How do roles and myths of family members play out in responding to food insecurity.....
2. How do families balance among demands and goals for children under resource constraints.....
3. How does the balancing of resource-constrained families integrate with food environment.....  
**.....and how do these processes put children and adults at risk of obesity?**
4. What aspects of children's experience of food insecurity are most important and how should we assess them?



# Some challenges for research

- Balancing between demands on and capabilities of parents and families
  - Demands (e.g., food insecurity)
    - Level
    - Volatility
  - Capabilities
    - Styles
    - Skills
    - Functioning
- Importance of understanding meanings and motivations

# Some challenges for research

- Relative importance of focusing on parenting in general vs. lifestyle behaviors
  - “Parenting practices to improve cognitive stimulation, family routines, and warmth are associated with lower BMI change” (Avula et al.)
- Understanding modifying effects of conditions
  - Work schedules
  - Marital status
  - Partner’s employment
  - Number of children
  - Immigration experience