

Children's Hunger Born From Mothers' Trauma

THE ROOTS OF CHILDREN'S HUNGER today may stretch back, in part, to the past childhood trauma of their caregivers. A new study from the Drexel School of Public Health now suggests a strong relationship between exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and household food insecurity among mothers of young children.

"The causes and realities of hunger and poverty are complicated and difficult to unravel," said Mariana Chilton, PhD, an associate professor and director of the Center for Hunger-Free Communities, who was lead author of the study published in the journal *Public Health Nutrition*. We are seeing that, for many people, experiences of hunger have trauma and adversity at their core."

The Childhood Stress study, led by Chilton with several Drexel graduates in the School of Public Health, used both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather information about 31 Philadelphia mothers' experience with deprivation, abuse, violence and neglect, as well as their experiences with hunger, education and employment and more.

The findings, Chilton and colleagues say, show that trauma and chronic stress are a largely overlooked part of the picture of why one in five American households with young children live with food insecurity. The results still point clearly to a value in considering ACEs as a contributor to food insecurity. Higher scores on the ACEs survey, for instance, were significantly associated with the severity of participants' household food insecurity.

In interviews, the study participants relayed their perceptions of how emotional and physical abuse in childhood affected their lives, including physical health, school performance and ability to maintain employment—all factors directly linked to household income and ability to afford enough healthy food for their own children.

"This study has been difficult for us, because examining the relationship between food insecurity and adverse experiences in childhood may simply add more stigma to families already stigmatized and blamed for the hardships that they face," said Molly Knowles, MPH '13, research coordinator at the center, and a co-author of the study. "It's important to be

clear that childhood adversity is one factor interrelated with many others, including low wages, insufficiently and inequitably funded education systems, racism and discrimination, lack of safe and affordable housing and an inadequate safety net."

The researchers recommend that those working to address poverty and hunger in children should include emotional health of parents and caregivers in a more comprehensive approach to policy and services. □

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) and Household Food Security Status

