Child hunger is a prescription for depression in late adolescence and early adulthood

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Context
In cross-sectional studies, food insecurity is associated with poor mental health, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation among adolescents and adults with children. Much less is known, however, about the long-term effects of food insecurity, and even less is known about the pathways through which the association between food insecurity and depression occur.

Methods
The present study utilised data from the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), from 1995 to 2009. Using a single yes/no question that asked “Has [the child]/have you ever experienced being hungry because the family has run out of food or money to buy food?”, the authors sought to assess how reports of hunger were associated with depression self-reported according to the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Rating Scale (CES-D), combined with self-report of suicidal ideation. Results were reported as OR with 95% CIs.

Findings
After adjustment for potential confounders, such as gender and income, report of hunger during childhood was associated with adolescent and young adult reports of depression and suicidal ideation (OR=2.3, 95% CI 1.2 to 4.3). In addition, depression and suicidal ideation were associated with greater odds of having lived without the biological mother (OR=2.1, 95% CI 1.4 to 3.1) and with self-reported depression of the biological mother (OR=2.0, 95% CI 1.2 to 3.4). Child hunger was not associated with general self-image and emotional quotient.

Commentary
This study found that if a child ever experienced hunger they were more likely to report depression and/or suicidal ideation when they become adolescents or young adults. As the authors state, such longitudinal studies are rare, and the results indicate significant urgency to treat child hunger in order to prevent depression and suicidal ideation later in life.

The strength of this study lies in its ability to address hunger with a life-course perspective to demonstrate how early economic adversity can translate into depression or suicidal ideation in adolescence and adulthood. Food insecurity and depression among mothers can have a profound impact on parenting of young children and exacerbate hunger for the next generation. Hence, this study provides insight into the potential intergenerational transfer of hunger.

A weakness, however, lies in the reliance on a single hunger question. This question emerges without proximate reference to economic hardship, and has an imprecise time period for exposure—‘ever experienced’. In NLSCY, this question is followed by questions about severity (‘How often did this happen?’) and family coping (‘How did caregivers cope, eg, by skipping meals themselves?’). There is no reference to these questions in the analysis. Moreover, the authors do not provide the sample number of individuals that reported affirmatively to the hunger question.

A methodological bias occurs within the NLSCY survey itself, as the hunger question analysed is nested among questions related to parenting practices. The question is preceded by questions regarding family disagreements and punishment; questions following inquire about exposure to violence in the media and exposure to fighting, hitting or hurting others in the household. This question is similarly placed in the child’s portion of interview. The placement of the hunger question may signal to the interviewee that the experience of being hungry is related to parenting practice, rather than economic hardship. This placement may have influenced the respondents to focus on their abilities as parents, rather than on financial security or nutrition adequacy.

Finally, this study ignores significant predictors of depression and suicidal ideation available in the dataset, such as exposure to violence and lack of parental attachment. These childhood exposures to adversity, now becoming more commonly referred to as ‘toxic stress’, have long been recognised as predictors of poor mental health and suicidal ideation. The literature also identifies exposure to violence as a significant correlate. Failing to include these strong predictors of depression and suicidal ideation, either as confounding variables or as comparative variables, makes the results appear simplistic.

This should not prohibit readers from taking child hunger very seriously, however. It should encourage a greater awareness of the need to urgently implement interventions such as nutrition assistance and other income support programmes that alleviate family stress.

Competing interests None.

References