

# Determining the Mental Health Needs of Food Insecure Individuals

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## Introduction

The Living F.R.E.E. Lab at UNC Chapel Hill strives to understand the complexities of disordered eating and how this relates to food insecurity. One of their current studies worked to explore the social, psychological, and health factors that affect eating behaviors among Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients in North Carolina. Current research barely addresses eating disorders in underserved populations; thus, the lab wanted to help close this gap.

According to Feeding America (2021), 1,456,200 residents of North Carolina (NC) currently struggle with hunger. American citizens who receive SNAP benefits on a monthly basis often report that it is plausible that they eat to feel their emotions or to “stuff” their emotions. The following research strives to answer, **what are the experiences of these SNAP participants related to mental health?**

## Statement of the Problem

The Living F.R.E.E. Lab has conducted a qualitative research study on individuals who receive SNAP benefits with the goal of trying to understand how these benefits do or do not influence their eating behaviors.

A newfound link exists between food insecurity and eating disorder pathology. Food insecure participants have described immense feelings of excitement when they receive their benefits which can lead to acting out of control (Hazzard et al., 2020). Without examining the SNAP recipient in a holistic manner, we cannot begin to find resources for these individuals to deal with their stress in other ways besides eating.

## Literature Review

Individuals receiving benefits experienced more detrimental effects on their mental health because of the shame they felt and because of the hassle and effort it took to transition to assistance in the first place (Heflin et al., 2008).

This cycle of running out of SNAP benefits and having to eat cheaper, energy dense foods instead of nutrient dense foods feels like a helpless continuation and these families need more support (Bruening et al., 2012).

Regarding obesity and the treatment of these overweight individuals, it is important to focus on emotion regulation skills instead of staying hyper focused on dieting. Poor emotion regulation strategies can be associated with emotional eating such as avoiding stress by distraction with food (van Strien T. et al., 2018).

## Methodology/Procedure

1. Initial Review of Literature focused on understanding food insecurity in the U.S. and mental health

2. Qualitative Research with SNAP Participants focused on their eating patterns and behaviors

3. Transcription of semi-structured Interviews with SNAP recipients (n=14)

4. Initial Review of the Qualitative Research focused on key words related to mental health

5. Conclusion of three mental health themes of SNAP Participants

**\*Note that 14 individuals agreed to participate in this study, ranging from ages 31 to 58. To be included, participants had to report being a SNAP recipient, experiencing binge eating and have a BMI of > 25kg/m<sup>2</sup>.**

## Results

- Findings clearly indicated that a mental health problem does exist in this participant pool of SNAP recipients in NC.
- Specifically, future interventions to improve mental health should focus on these three themes: emotional eating, depression and anxiety, and shame and embarrassment.
- NC cannot continue to push aside the mental aspect of the SNAP program and society must determine a way to best support these individuals.

## Discussion & Future Directions

### Holistic Examination

As researchers start to explore this relationship between food insecurity and eating disorder pathology, the hope is that each individually receives a holistic examination and mental health aid.

### Future Interventions

Future interventions must work to hear the individual stories of SNAP participants and provide resources, such as a mentor program to improve their mental well-being.

## References

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