Determining the Mental Health Needs of Food Insecure Individuals

Objective: This study examined the mental health needs of food insecure individuals and the various struggles that SNAP participants endure, beyond their access to food.

Method: Participants were recruited via flyers and listserv announcements. Participants (n=14) with a mean age of 44 years old had to report being a SNAP recipient, experiencing binge eating, and have a BMI of &gt; 25kg/m2. Participants shared their stories through qualitative research that focused on questions having to do with their SNAP benefits and eating behaviors.

Results: Participants (n=14) reported challenges with various mental health concerns. We identified three themes: depression and anxiety ("You get real depressed because you don't have enough, and you actually feel worthless because, you know, you can't provide food. I mean, that's just a basic necessity,") emotional eating ("It's usually where I'm upset and I'm trying to like, stuff, stuff down with food, to be honest,") and shame and embarrassment ("You know, you gotta ration off the food at the last moment. And there's a full freaking line behind you. It's embarrassing.")

Conclusion: The outcomes of this study indicated a clear finding that a mental health problem exists in this participant pool of SNAP recipients in North Carolina. Though receiving SNAP benefits may mitigate the risk of food insecurity, our results also indicate that support for mental health is also needed. Future research should focus on the development of interventions to increase access to mental health treatment among SNAP recipients and to provide increased social support.