Designing Healthy Eating Policies Inclusive of People Experiencing Food Insecurity

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"They're [the government] always talking about **"nutrition is key for families"** and… the food pyramid that they say, is so important, then **make it inexpensive so that families don't question a bag of chips versus a bag of apples**, you know."

"Food is a priority, obviously, but at the same time, … in January we didn't have any heat because my gas was cut off… **so I had to decide, am I going to get my gas turned back on or am I going to buy food?** And I had to turn the gas back on because it was so cold outside."

"The pantry was down to little to nothing, so it was like one night, we had enough meat to do for the kids to eat and **I ate a can of green beans."**

"They're [the government] **not going to come put me in jail for questionable diet habits**, you know what I mean? … So it's not super healthy, and it's not ideal, but **it's not hurting anybody, but me."**

Liebe et al., 2024

How can we encourage healthy behaviors in an effective and non-judgmental way for people experiencing food insecurity?

Outline

DEFINE FOOD INSECURITY

EXPLORE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FOOD SECURITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

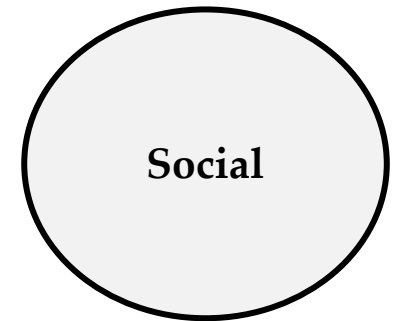REFLECT ON ROLE OF COPING AND STIGMA
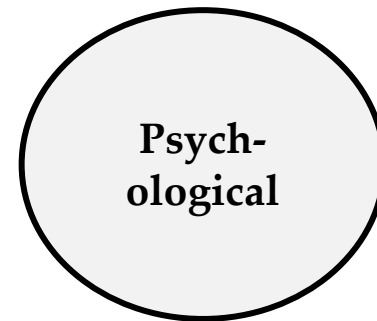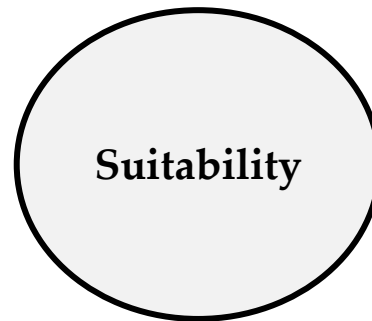
ACTIONABLE STEPS

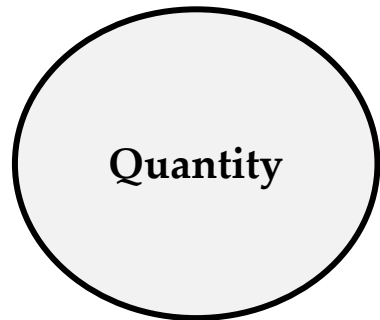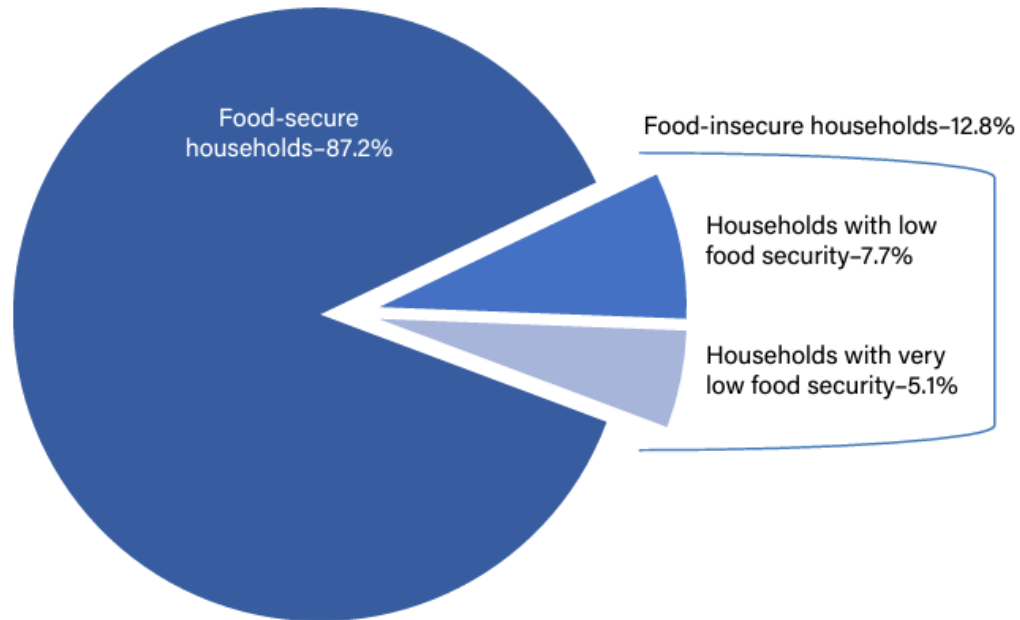# 01

Define Food Insecurity

What is food security?

"Food security means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life."

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

| Quantity | Quality | Suitability | Psych-ological | Social |

U.S. households by food security status, 2022

Food-secure households–87.2%

Food-insecure households–12.8%

Households with low food security–7.7%

Households with very low food security–5.1%

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2022 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.
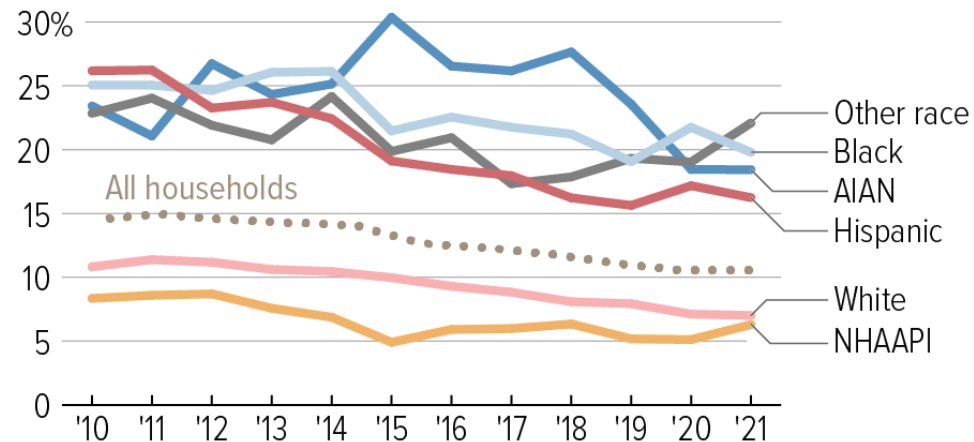
How prevalent is food insecurity in the US?

- 12.8% is **17.0 million households**

- **13.4 million** children live in food insecure households

Rabbitt et al., 2023

Prevalence of Food Insecurity

Food Insecurity by Race and Ethnicity Reveals Stark Disparities

Households that lacked access to adequate food at some point in the year

Note: Other race = people who are more than one race. AIAN = people who are American Indian or Alaskan Native. NHAAPI = people who are Asian, Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander. Hispanic people may be of any race. Race and ethnicity for the household are based on that of the household reference person (in whose name the housing unit is owned or rented).

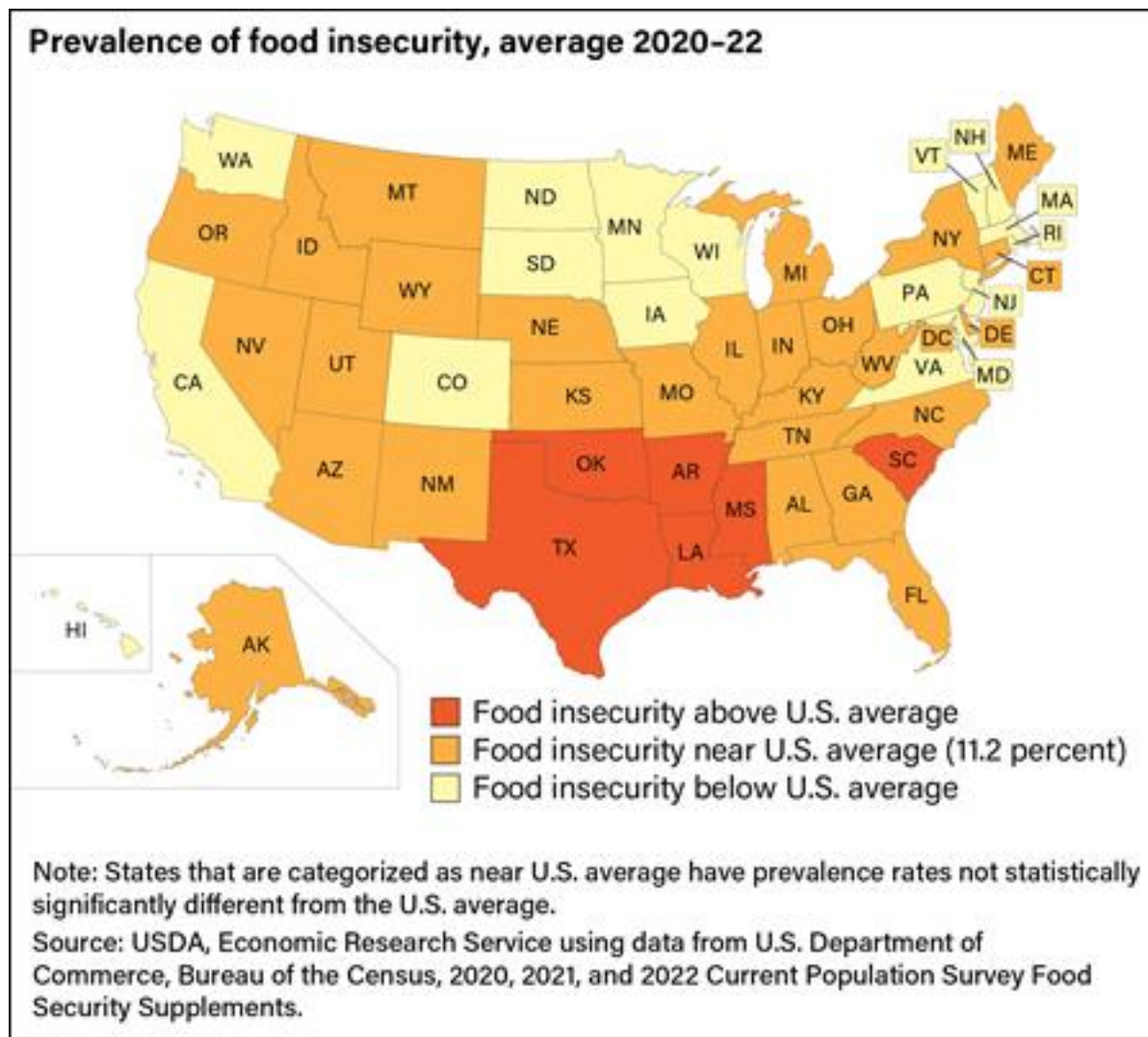Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement 2010-2021

CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES | CBPP.ORG

14.7%
of rural households are experiencing food insecurity

Rabbitt et al., 2023

Prevalence of Food Insecurity

14.1%

of households in Oklahoma experienced food insecurity in 2021

Prevalence of food insecurity, average 2020–22

Food insecurity above U.S. average
Food insecurity near U.S. average (11.2 percent)
Food insecurity below U.S. average

Note: States that are categorized as near U.S. average have prevalence rates not statistically significantly different from the U.S. average.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2020, 2021, and 2022 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements.

Feeding America, 2023

WHAT ARE THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF FOOD INSECURITY?

Social Determinants of Health

Non-medical, social and environmental factors that affect a range of health, quality-of-life, and behavioral outcomes

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Economic Stability
Employment status

Healthcare access and quality
Access to health insurance

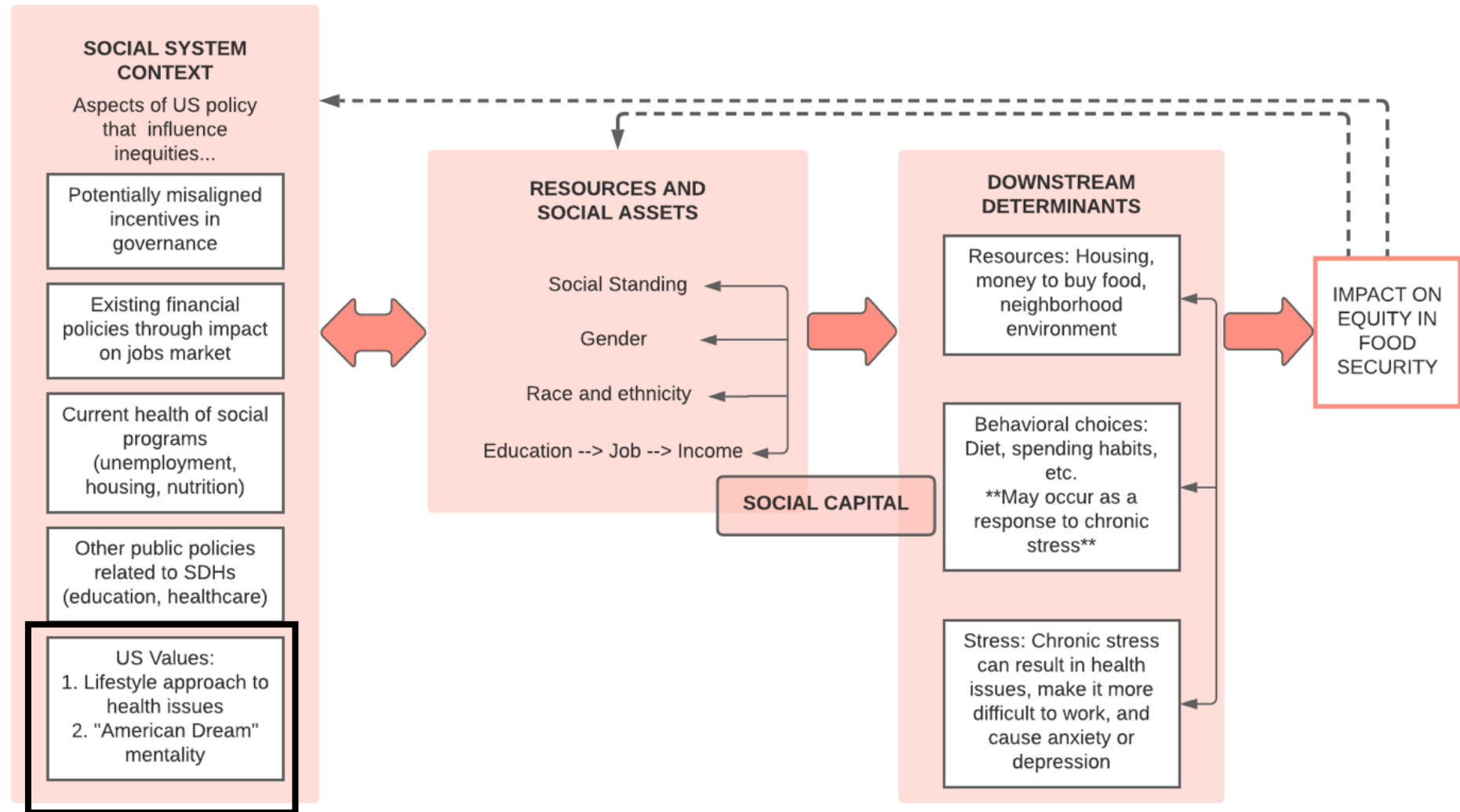Built environment
Neighborhood safety
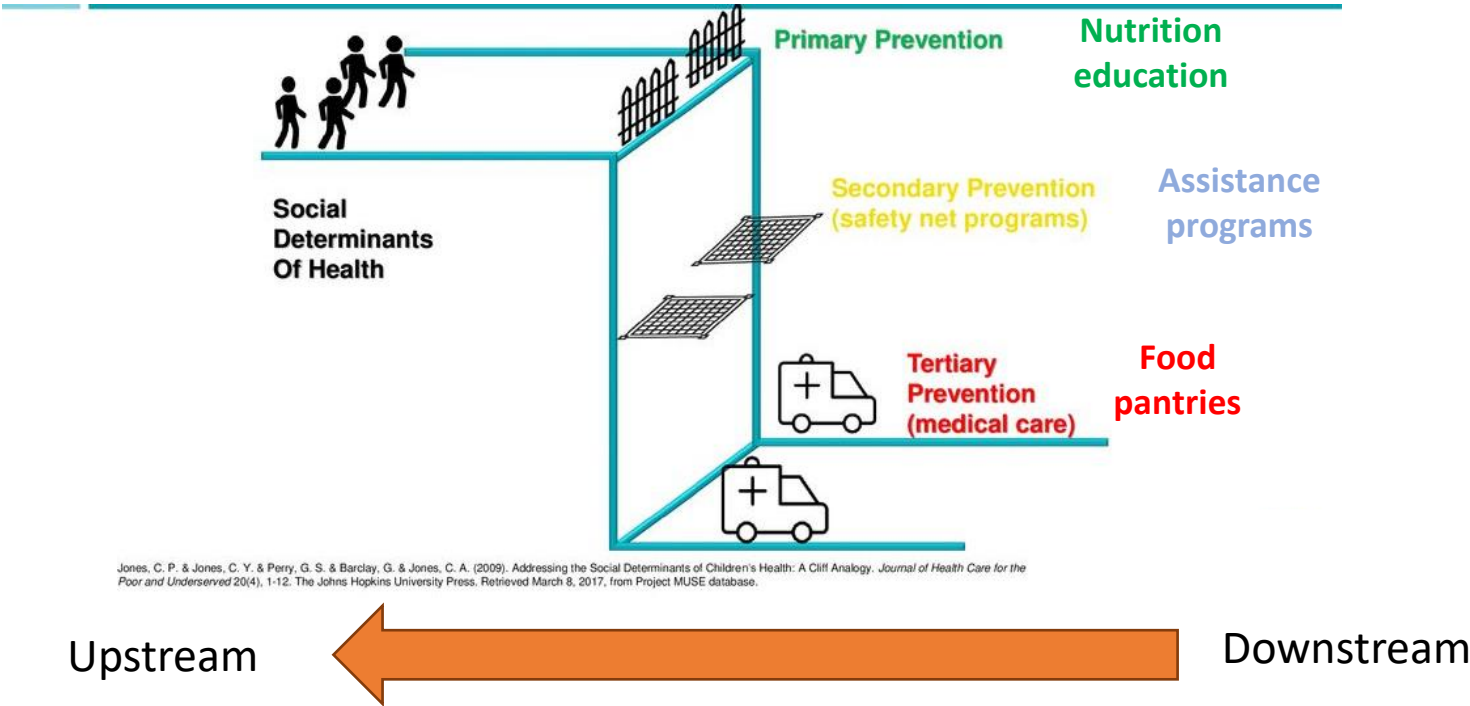
Education access and quality
Educational attainment

Social and community context
Social support

Solar and Irwin, 2010

Social Determinants Impact on Food Insecurity

SOCIAL SYSTEM CONTEXT

Aspects of US policy that influence inequities...

Potentially misaligned incentives in governance

Existing financial policies through impact on jobs market

Current health of social programs (unemployment, housing, nutrition)

Other public policies related to SDHs (education, healthcare)

US Values:
1. Lifestyle approach to health issues
2. "American Dream" mentality

RESOURCES AND SOCIAL ASSETS

Social Standing

Gender

Race and ethnicity

Education --> Job --> Income

SOCIAL CAPITAL

DOWNSTREAM DETERMINANTS

Resources: Housing, money to buy food, neighborhood environment

Behavioral choices: Diet, spending habits, etc.
May occur as a response to chronic stress

Stress: Chronic stress can result in health issues, make it more difficult to work, and cause anxiety or depression

IMPACT ON EQUITY IN FOOD SECURITY

Adapted from Solar and Irwin, 2010

Approaches to health promotion

Jones, C. P. & Jones, C. Y. & Perry, G. S. & Barclay, G. & Jones, C. A. (2009). Addressing the Social Determinants of Children's Health: A Cliff Analogy. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 20(4), 1-12. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved March 8, 2017, from Project MUSE database.

Adapted from Jones et al, 2017

02

Relationship Between Food Security and Mental Health

Mental Health Issues in Oklahoma

Mental health: State of emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing

Mental illness: Diagnosed condition affecting thought, emotion, and/or behavior

44th

Frequent mental distress

Lived Experiences of Mental Health Effects of Food Insecurity

"I have panic attacks, especially on payday… **You think you would get relief on payday but it's the worst.** Like I said I got paid yesterday, and I think I'm down to like $75 now… I probably paid … my car insurance, the electricity, [and] I didn't go food shopping… **it's constant worrying."**

[Using coupons] makes me feel savvy for being able to save money in a certain way, but…**there's also an element of shame to it**, that I have to use that in order to afford all the groceries that I, not even want, but the groceries that I need.

Um it's hard, because sometimes we [she and her partner] end up not wanting to be around each other, because we've been arguing. And sometimes the argument may not even be over food, but **it's worse because we're both hungry and we're tired**…

Food Insecurity and Mental Health Mechanism

?

Food Security ——————————— Mental Health

Potential Factors

Physical Health
Diet Quality
Social Support
Food Coping Strategies
Nutrition Assistance Program Participation
Personal Resilience
Coping Style
Social Determinants of Health

Palar et al., 2018; Ajrouch et al., 2010; Siefert et al., 2007; Wehler et al., 2004; Weiser et al., 2011; Whittle et al., 2019; Elgar et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2018; Corman et al., 2016; Myers, 2020; Maynard et al, 2018; Jung et al, 2017; Liebe et al., 2022, 2023

Mechanism

- **No direct effect** of food security status on mental health

- **Mediators:**
  - Behavioral food coping strategies
  - Social support

Liebe et al., 2023
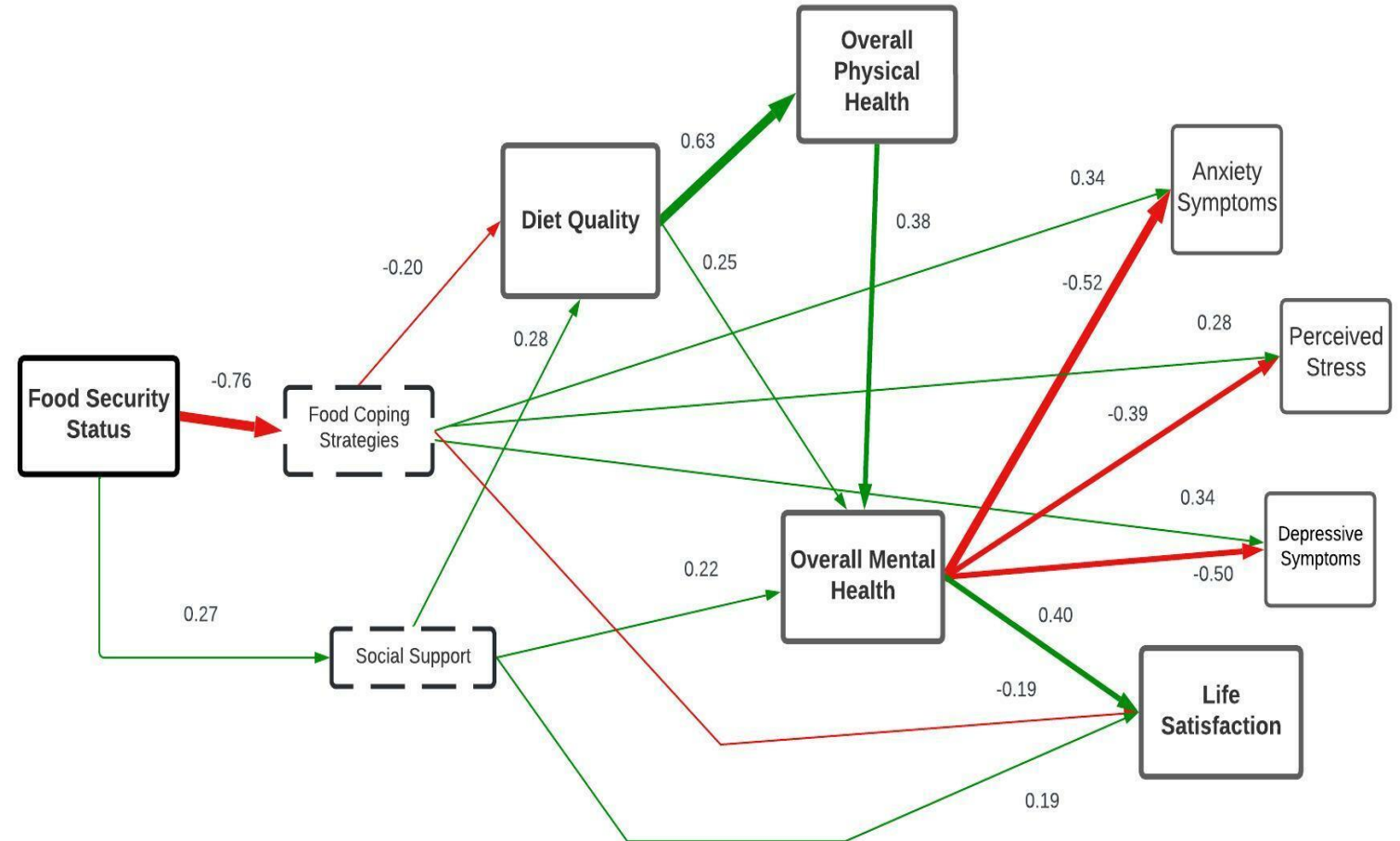
03

Role of Coping and Stigma

Lived Experiences of Coping with Food Insecurity

"I don't like to go [to the food pantry] … you feel judged by the workers and the other people there. One time I went and some lady… I'm not really sure who she was, made a comment because I had my nails done, and she was like oh well, 'why are you here if you can afford your nails done?' It was a birthday present so that was like… not a very good experience."

"My mom came to visit and she opened the fridge and she was like, '[Interviewee 4], this milk is basically cheese and this pizza looks like it's been in there for two weeks' and I was like, 'yeah mom, but when I open the fridge it looks full - that's why I haven't thrown anything away because it helps to see that full fridge', because **when I see an empty fridge it's like, 'oh my God I really have no [expletive] food."**

Liebe et al., 2024

Barriers to Assistance Program Participation

Time

Confusing process

Stigma
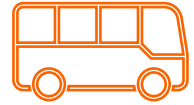
Transportation

Knowledge

Maxed out

Cultural relevance

Nestle, 2023; Pinard et al., 2017

Potential Contributing Factors

Poverty Stigma

Internalized: Expectation of discrimination
Experienced: Encounters with discrimination

Psychological Coping

Avoidant: Efforts to ignore a stressor (e.g. disengage, substance use)
Emotion: Reduce stress through emotional response (e.g. blame, accept)
Problem: Directly address stressor (e.g. plan, informational support)

Resilience Capacity

Absorptive: Ability to buffer impact of crisis
Adaptive: Flexibly respond to potential or current crisis

Food Resource Management

Strategies to maximize food budget (e.g. couponing, shopping with a list)

Policy and Community-Level Factors Impacting Access and Equity

Calloway et al., 2022; Carver at al., 1989; Palar et al., 2018; Pinard et al., 2016

04
Actionable Steps

How can we encourage healthy behaviors in an effective and non-judgmental way for people experiencing food insecurity?

Some Options

Acknowledge limitations of nutrition education

Screen and refer

Policy, system, and environmental changes

Nutrition education is not sufficient alone

Screening

- Can be done with as few as two questions
- May help reduce stigma if we can talk more about it
- **Does no good unless we are prepared to do something**

1. "Within the past 12 months, we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more."

Was that ...
- ☐ Often true
- ☐ Sometimes true
- ☐ Never true

... for you/your household?

2. "Within the past 12 months, food we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more."

Was that ...
- ☐ Often true
- ☐ Sometimes true
- ☐ Never true

... for you/your household?

Hunger Vital Sign™

Hager et al., 2010

Screening

1

Acknowledge

Thank person for being willing to share with you and acknowledge systemic contributions

2

Affirm

Ask about their experience and specific challenges

3

Refer

If they are interested, refer them to resources that may be beneficial and make a plan for follow-up

FRAC, 2021

Types of Resources

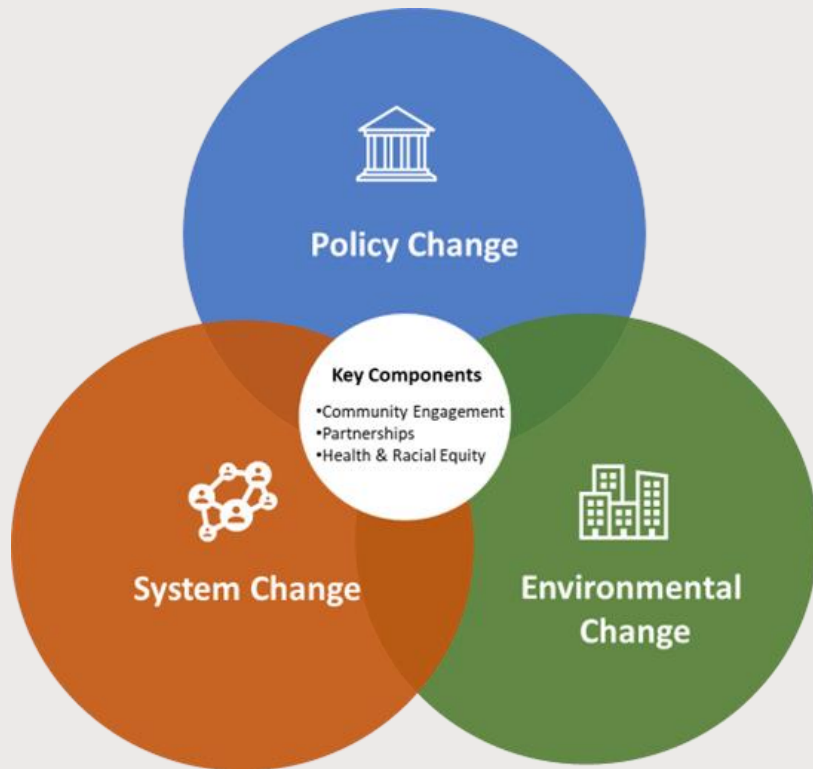Behavioral food management education

Connect with food resources

Coping skills education

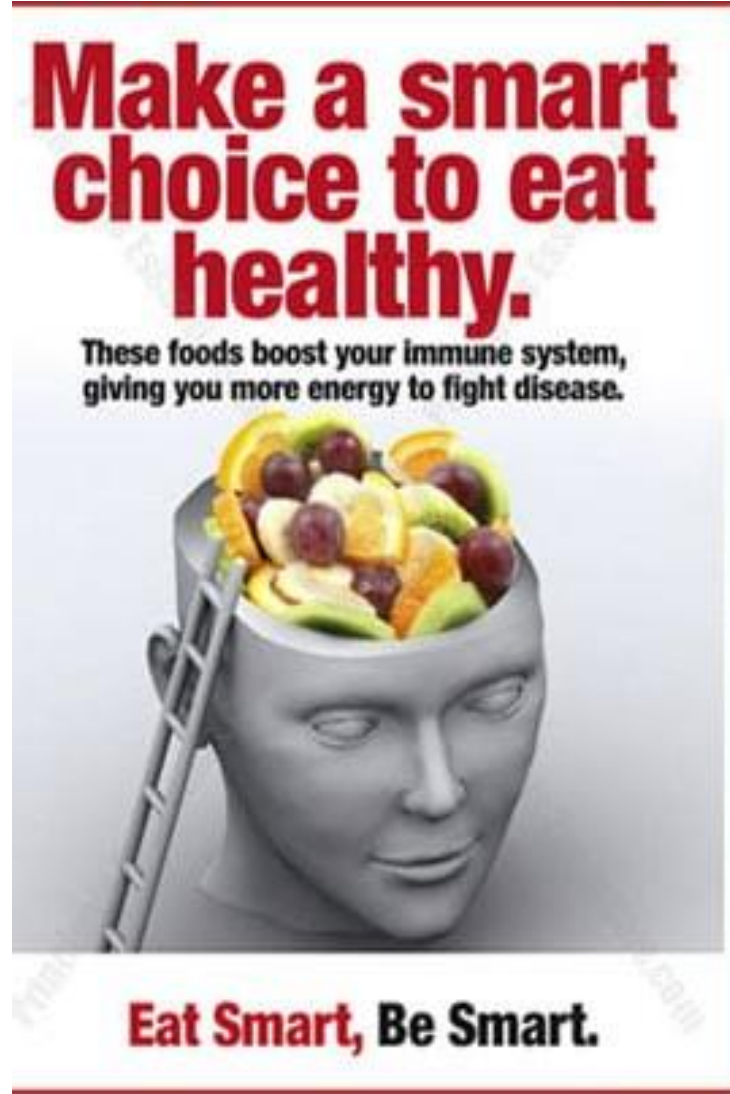Listen or connect them with someone who can

Connect with non-food resources

Policy, System, and Environmental Changes

Image: MA Health Funds

- Engage with partners and communities to solve problems
- Potential outcomes
  - Improve access
  - Promote healthy behaviors
  - Acknowledge systemic barriers to healthy eating
  - Lasting change
- **Consider the implications for people experiencing food insecurity**

Rural Health Information Hub, 2023

Image source: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/591308626045503781/

Image source: https://www.k12posters.com/Smart-choice-to-Eat-Healthy-Poster_p_95.html

Think about: How might these make someone experiencing food insecurity feel?

"**I feel like a crappy parent sometimes** when it gets to times like that where I'm running low on food and have to count on other people to help me."

"**I should be able to get it [food] on my own** [but I am not]."

"The worst part is if the kids really want, like, apple juice or something,…and like, I couldn't buy it. **It's the worst feeling as a parent** [that]…you can't get your kids toys and stuff."

Liebe et al., 2024

Questions?

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