

Food Insecurity is a Social Determinant of Health

Food insecurity is “lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life.”
(U.S. Dept. of Agriculture).

Food insecurity has several associated short and long-term sequelae. Food insecure children are at risk for physical, emotional, and intellectual development problems, including anemia, asthma, anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders and are at higher risk of hospitalization. These health effects are pervasive and long-lasting. Children experiencing food insecurity also have increased school absences, reduced concentration, and poor performance on tests. In adults, food insecurity leads to higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, and mental health issues.

In Jefferson County, the food insecurity rate is 13% of the population, which equates to about 4,130 community members (2020 data from feedingamerica.org).

In America, wealth and pay gaps rooted in a history of structural racism contribute to current disparities. Food-insecure adults and children were more likely than their food-secure counterparts to be from historically disinvested communities, have lower incomes, and lack health insurance (Berkowitz, [Table 1](#)).

The Cost of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is associated with a higher risk of chronic disease, which leads to increased health care expenses. Health issues and associated expenses result in lost workdays and financial trade-offs in the household, which, in turn, limit access to timely treatment, increase the need for acute health care services, and further financial instability. Individuals with food insecurity had significantly higher estimated mean annualized health care expenditures – an extra \$1,834 per year (avg. 2011-2013). In Washington State,

food insecurity is estimated to account for up to \$1.52B in healthcare costs per year. In Jefferson County, the estimate of health care costs associated with food insecurity is \$4,784,115 annually.

The Role of Jefferson Healthcare

The Population Health Department at Jefferson Healthcare has developed a Food Insecurity Portfolio to address these concerns. Integrating evidence-based interventions reduces food insecurity and its related side effects. Several interventions are being explored through this portfolio.

- Provide lists of food resources for patients
- Provide prepared meals to birth parents through a pilot program in the Family Birth Center.
- Establish produce prescription program (VegRx) for primary care pediatric patients in partnership with Jefferson County Farmers Markets
- Stock a neighborhood Little Free Pantry through employee donations
- Provide short-term food supply to address patients' immediate needs through an onsite food pantry of food bags
- Establish a CSA prescription program for patients undergoing cancer treatment

As we expand, we are looking at:

- Expanding screening for food insecurity during clinic visits
- Exploring strategies to mitigate access issues in local food deserts

For further information, please contact: Tina Herschelman | therschelm@jeffersonhealthcare.org | *Population Health Food Insecurity Portfolio Lead*

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Berkowitz SA, Basu S, Gundersen C, Seligman HK. State-Level and County-Level Estimates of Health Care Costs Associated with Food Insecurity. *Prev Chronic Dis* 2019;16:180549. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd16.180549>