

Feeding the Mind: Exploring the Link Between Food Insecurity and Mental Health in Youth



Student Opportunity for Applied Research (SOAR) Scholars and Core Four Partnership
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Background

Food insecurity impacts nearly 1 in 5 U.S. households with children and is even higher in Texas, where rural rates reach 17.9%.^{1,2} In Hays County, over 39,000 residents, 10,700 of them are children lack consistent access to nutritious meals, contributing to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and stress in youth.^{3,4} Addressing these gaps requires year-round, community-driven solutions that reach families where they are.

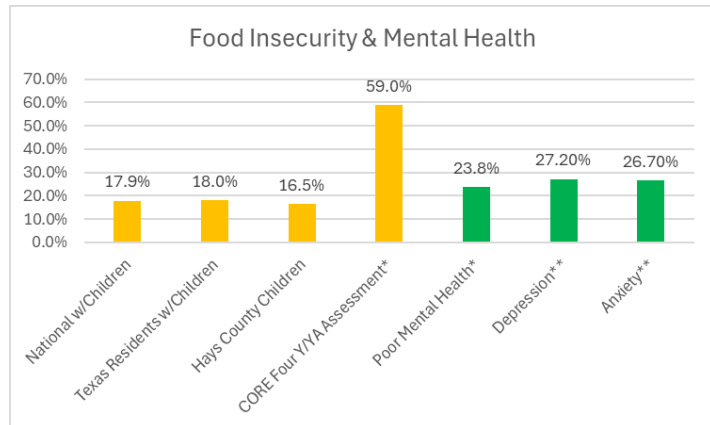
Methods

This analysis integrates academic research with community-based data collected through the CORE Four Partnership. Data sources include national reports (USDA), state statistics, and local findings from two Youth/Young Adult (Y/YA) Community Needs Assessments (2024, 2025), supplemented by information from the Central Texas Food Bank, Feeding America, and the Hays County Food Bank. To inform survey design, focus groups were held with youth and young adults (ages 11–24). Surveys were distributed in Spring 2025.

Results

Local assessments reveal that 59% of youth and young adults in Hays County report food insecurity.⁴ The emotional toll of food insecurity may be linked to higher levels of anxiety, depression, and poor mental health among adolescents, who often lack control over food access. Despite increased efforts by food banks and schools, gaps in service remain particularly in rural areas and during out-of-school times. Food insecurity is both a nutritional and mental health crisis.

Data Visualization



*Often/Sometimes combined.
**Meets Clinical definition of Depression/Anxiety

Findings: Nutrition survey data from the CORE Four Y/YA Assessment shows that 59% of youth and young adults experience food insecurity (Often/Sometimes combined). Food insecurity may be linked to increased poor mental health, clinical depression/anxiety, contributing to lower academic success and district ratings in Hays County.

Implications

To reduce the long-term consequences of food insecurity, especially among youth, a more integrated and equitable approach is needed. This include:

- Expanding the reach of current food assistance programs.
- Implementing year-round support systems.
- Designing flexible, community-driven solutions.

Addressing food insecurity through both a public health and mental health lens is essential to improving the overall well-being of youth and families in Hays County and beyond.

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References (full list)