Published in final edited form as:

Int J Eat Disord. 2019 June ; 52(6): 735–739. doi:10.1002/eat.23074.

Food Insecurity and Bulimia Nervosa in the United States

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Abstract

Background: Food insecurity occurs when access to food is limited by financial hardship. Yet, paradoxically, food insecurity is associated with overeating with emerging evidence that it may be related to disordered eating. A recent report found that food insecurity was associated with binge-eating disorder (BED), but it is not yet known whether food insecurity is also associated with bulimia nervosa (BN).

Methods: Participants were 873 respondents recruited online who completed a battery of established measures and were categorized into three study groups: healthy-weight (HW), BED, and BN. Hierarchical logistic regressions evaluated the extent to which low and very low food security were associated with BN compared with HW and BED study groups.

Results: Low and very low food security were both associated with increased likelihood of BN group membership compared with HW but not BED.

Conclusions: Our findings suggest that food insecurity is associated with BN and also suggest that food insecurity's association with BN is similar to that for BED. These findings highlight the need for greater clinical and research attention to associations between food insecurity and eating disorders that include binge eating to inform eating-disorder prevention and treatment.

Keywords

food insecurity; binge-eating disorder; bulimia nervosa; overeating; binge eating; weight

Introduction

Food insecurity is “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially-acceptable ways” (Bickel, Nord, Price, Hamilton, & Cook, 2000). Food insecurity can change dietary patterns because of perceptions of the amount or quality of food available to members of a household. Food insecurity may also have a cyclical pattern where access to food is limited and then abundant (e.g., due to paycheck or food stamp timing; Bruening, MacLehose, Loth, Story, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2012). The cycle of dietary restriction and overconsumption is

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The authors report no conflicts of interest.

also characteristic of binge eating in both bulimia nervosa (BN) and binge-eating disorder (BED), although dietary restriction is traditionally conceptualized as internally-motivated for weight loss (Fairburn, 2008). We recently reported, in a survey study of 1251 US adults, that food insecurity was associated with BED and obesity (without comorbid eating disorders) (Rasmusson, Lydecker, Coffino, White, & Grilo, 2018). A previous study of 503 adults seeking food from food pantries reported that food-insecurity severity was associated with binge-eating frequency, eating-disorder psychopathology, and compensatory-behavior frequency (vomiting, laxative/diuretic use, and excessive exercise) (Becker, Middlemass, Taylor, Johnson, & Gomez, 2017).

Despite the potential overlap in function between restriction related to food insecurity and internally-motivated restriction for weight loss, and research reporting associations with BED (Rasmusson et al., 2018) and weight-compensatory behaviors (Becker et al., 2017), no research has investigated whether food insecurity is related to BN as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Health Disorders, 5th edition* (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Thus, the current study aimed to extend our previously published work (Rasmusson et al., 2018) by examining the relation between food insecurity and BN. We hypothesized that food insecurity would be associated with membership in the BN study group compared with HW and further hypothesized that this relation would persist after adjusting for demographic characteristics (age, sex, education, race/ethnicity). We also sought to explore whether food-security status was associated with membership in BN compared with BED study groups.

Methods

Participants

Survey respondents ($N=873$) were English- and Spanish-speaking individuals from the US who responded to an advertisement to “share your opinions about eating, weight, and health” (“encuesta sobre la alimentación, el peso y la salud”) on Mechanical Turk and completed measures in English or Spanish. All participants were assessed concurrently. Mechanical Turk yields data with comparable reliability and validity as other recruitment sources such as psychology student subject pools (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) and has been used in many studies, including those focusing on food security (Darling, Sato, van Dulmen, Flessner, & Putt, 2018; Leung, Musicus, Willett, & Rimm, 2017). The current study was restricted to US respondents due to potentially contrasting food environments between the US and other countries. The study was approved by the institutional review board. All participants provided informed consent prior to the online survey.

Measures

Measure of Food Security.—The *USDA Household Food Security Survey Module: Six-Item Short Form* assessed financial influences on food consumption over the previous 12 months. Item-level scoring as described in the original measure (National Center for Health Statistics, 2008) characterized respondents as: “food secure” (no signs of difficulty affording regular, nutritious meals; total=0–1), “low food security” (modified food quality, variety, or

desirability to satisfy hunger; total=2–4), and “very low food security” (reduced food adequacy or quality to the point of repeated instances of physiological hunger; total=5–6).

Measures of Eating-Disorder Features.—The *Questionnaire on Eating and Weight Patterns-5 (QEWP-5)* assessed eating-disorder behaviors and cognitive features aligned with *DSM-5* diagnoses of BN and BED (Yanovski, Marcus, Wadden, & Walsh, 2015). The QEWP-5 followed the QEWP-R (developed for *DSM-IV*), which demonstrated adequate validity discriminating between individuals with and without binge eating in community (Nangle, Johnson, Carr-Nangle, & Engler, 1994) and primary care (Barnes, Masheb, White, & Grilo, 2011) settings. The Spanish-language version (S-QEWP-R) (Elder, Paris, Anez, & Grilo, 2008) updated as S-QEWP-5, was used for Spanish-speaking participants. The binge-eating frequency item from the *Eating Disorder Examination-Questionnaire (EDE-Q)* (Fairburn & Beglin, 1994), also available in Spanish-language version (Elder & Grilo, 2007), assessed objective binge-eating frequency over the previous 28 days.

Algorithms

Study groups were created using QEWP-5 and body mass index (BMI) weight categories (calculated from self-reported height and weight). Figure 1 depicts the flow and creation of study groups. BED study group criteria were: at least weekly binge-eating episodes (eating an unusually large amount of food and perceiving eating to be out of control) over the past three months (“1 episode per week” through “14 or more episodes per week”), at least moderate distress about overeating and feeling out of control (“moderately” through “extremely”), and denial of weekly compensatory behaviors over the past three months. Individuals in the BED group did not have BMI limitations. BN study group criteria were: at least weekly binge-eating episodes over the past three months (“1 episode per week” through “14 or more episodes per week”), at least weekly compensatory behaviors over the past three months (vomiting, laxative misuse, diuretic misuse, fasting, excessive exercise, diet pill misuse; “1 episode per week” through “14 or more episodes per week”), at least moderate overvaluation of weight and shape (“among the main things” or “the most important things”), and BMI >18.5 kg/m². Individuals in the healthy-weight group denied weekly binge eating (“no” or “less than 1 episode per week”), compensatory behaviors, and had a BMI 18.5–24.9 kg/m². The majority of participants in the BN study group reported distress about binge eating ($n=69$ of 78), although this was not an exclusion factor in algorithms because it is not in *DSM-5* diagnostic criteria.

Statistical Analysis

Differences in participant characteristics by group (HW, BED, BN) were examined using chi-square tests for categorical variables (sex, education level, race/ethnicity) and analyses of variance (ANOVAs) for continuous variables (age and BMI). Chi-square tests assessed associations between study groups and food-security status (food security, low food security, very low food security). Hierarchical logistic regressions evaluated associations between food-security status (food security, low food security, very low food security) and study groups (HW vs. BN group and BED vs. BN group) after adjusting for variance due to age, sex, education, and race/ethnicity. Reference groups for categorical variables were male

(sex), high school (education), non-Hispanic White (race/ethnicity) and food security (food-security status).

Results

The participant group had 873 individuals categorized as HW ($n=710$), BED ($n=85$) and BN ($n=78$). Data on HW and BED groups were previously published (Rasmusson et al., 2018) but are used here to provide relevant comparison groups for analyses of food security and BN. Table 1 summarizes differences across HW, BED, and BN groups.

Both low and very low food security were significantly more common in the BN study group than HW but did not differ significantly from BED. Within the BN study group, 28.2% ($n=22$) of respondents had low food security and 25.6% ($n=20$) of respondents had very low food security.

Overall, individuals with very low food security ($M=2.20$, $SD=5.65$; $p=.032$) and low food security ($M=2.56$, $SD=5.25$; $p=.001$) had greater binge-eating frequency than individuals with food security ($M=1.24$, $SD=4.06$), $F(2,870)=6.48$, $p=.002$, $\eta_p^2=.015$. Binge-eating frequency did not differ significantly by food-security status within the BN study group ($ps>.05$).

Hierarchical logistic regressions evaluated the extent to which low and very low food security contributed to study group classification and are summarized in Table 2 (BN vs. HW; BN vs. BED). Sex, age, education, and race/ethnicity were entered in Step 1. Food-security status was entered in Step 2 (reference group: food security). Low food security (OR 2.48, CI 1.39–4.42) and very low food security (OR 3.06, CI 1.64–5.70) were associated with BN compared with HW, and made a significant contribution beyond demographic variables entered in Step 1, $\chi^2(2)=16.20$, $p<.001$. Neither low food security (OR 1.05, CI 0.48–2.27) nor very low food security (OR 1.77, CI 0.75–4.16) was associated with increased likelihood of BN group membership compared with BED.

Discussion

Previous studies, conducted with different participant groups in the US, reported that food insecurity was associated with binge eating (Becker et al., 2017; Bruening et al., 2012) and was unexpectedly associated with weight-compensatory behaviors (Becker et al., 2017). Our previous study extended this new emerging literature by finding that low and very low food security were significantly associated with both BED and obesity versus a healthy-weight comparison group (Rasmusson et al., 2018). Findings from the current study extend earlier work further by showing that food insecurity is associated with BN as well as greater binge-eating frequency. Our findings that food-security status did not distinguish between BN and BED study groups, together with previous findings that food-security status for BED versus HW had effect sizes that were similar to those for food-security status and BN versus HW in the current study, suggest that the association of food insecurity with BN is similar to its association with BED.

Individuals with low and very low food security were more likely to be classified in the BN study group compared with the HW *but not* BED comparison group. Our findings extend the previous study by Becker et al. (2017) that reported associations between food insecurity severity and weight-compensatory behaviors among food pantry users that were contrary to their hypotheses; specifically, our findings suggest significant associations with BN relative to a HW control. Interestingly, our analyses revealed that neither low nor very low food security was associated with BN relative to the BED comparison group. This suggests that food insecurity may not necessarily contribute to the presence/absence of compensatory behaviors, and other factors may distinguish those who binge from those who binge and purge. Future research should investigate how patients perceive the function of weight-compensatory behaviors.

Our findings here suggest that restriction, even when stemming from food insecurity, might play a role in increasing or maintaining binge eating and BN psychopathology. We emphasize, however, that our findings are cross-sectional and preclude statements about directionality or causality and that longitudinal research is needed to better understand these associations. Moreover, study groups contained respondents who reported core features of BN and BED on established self-report questionnaires, but diagnoses were not confirmed with a clinical interview. Eating-disorder psychopathology and food insecurity were self-reported; however, research suggests that the current study's measures converge reasonably well with clinician assessments (Berg et al., 2012; Elder & Grilo, 2007; Keenan, Olson, Hersey, & Parmer, 2001). Moreover, there are relative strengths and limitations to both self-report and interview assessments for capturing different aspects of eating behaviors (Udo & Grilo, 2018). Notably, generalizability to those outside of the US is uncertain, and generalizability to the US population is limited because our sample was an internet community sample and not nationally-representative.

With the above caveats in mind, we cautiously suggest that food insecurity has the potential to complicate treatment for BN or BED. Indeed, the “food-stamp cycle” as a potential mechanism for the association between food insecurity and binge eating suggests that cyclical access to food may inadvertently help to maintain disordered eating by impeding regular eating patterns (Cook, 2002; Dinour, Bergen, & Yeh, 2007). Future clinical research should address prevention and intervention for food-insecure individuals who might be vulnerable to BN and BED, as well as whether current treatments for BN and BED need to be adapted beyond assessing for food insecurity (e.g., additional problem-solving around regular access to meals).

In summary, our findings suggest that low and very low food security are associated with BN but do not distinguish between BN and BED study groups. These findings emphasize food insecurity as a pressing public health issue with the potential to harm the mental health of low-income Americans. Therefore, policy-makers and health-care professionals should be aware of food insecurity and its potential to complicate prevention and intervention efforts with individuals with eating disorders; these findings contribute to the ongoing and increasing dialogue about the global burden of food insecurity (Perez-Escamilla, 2017). Development of preventative interventions and evaluation of the effectiveness of psychiatric

treatments for eating disorders in this vulnerable group of individuals facing food insecurity is a key clinical-research and health-care priority.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported, in part, by National Institutes of Health grant K24 DK070052.

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Figure 1.
Inclusion and Exclusion from Bulimia Nervosa and Binge-eating Disorder Study Groups

Table 1.
Demographic characteristics of participants in bulimia nervosa (BN), binge-eating disorder (BED), and healthy-weight (HW) groups

Characteristic	BN (n=78)	BED (n=85)	HW (n=710)	^a <i>p</i>	^b <i>Post-hoc tests</i>
Age (years)	31.58 ± 9.64	34.44 ± 10.15	34.16 ± 11.29	.134	<i>ns</i>
Sex				.561	
Male	24 (30.77%)	23 (27.06%)	232 (32.68%)		<i>ns</i>
Female	54 (69.23%)	62 (72.94%)	478 (67.32%)		<i>ns</i>
Ethnicity				.004	
Non-Hispanic White	44 (56.41%)	62 (72.94%)	461 (64.93%)		BN < BED
Hispanic / Latino	28 (35.90%)	18 (21.18%)	146 (20.56%)		BN > HW, BED
Non-Hispanic Other	6 (7.69%)	5 (5.88%)	103 (14.51%)		HW > BED
BMI (kg/m ²)	30.82 ± 9.25	33.41 ± 8.54	22.12 ± 1.71	<.001	BED > BN > HW
Education				.291	
High school	14 (19.95%)	10 (11.76%)	76 (10.70%)		<i>ns</i>
Some college	22 (28.21%)	33 (38.82%)	225 (31.69%)		<i>ns</i>
College degree	29 (37.18%)	32 (37.65%)	272 (38.31%)		<i>ns</i>
Post-college	13 (16.67%)	10 (11.76%)	137 (19.30%)		<i>ns</i>

Note. Table values are mean ± standard deviation for continuous variables and *n* (column %) for categorical variables. BN=bulimia nervosa, BED=binge-eating disorder, HW=healthy weight (non-eating-disordered); BMI=body mass index. BMI was calculated using self-reported height and weight.

^a *p*-value is for ANOVA (continuous variables) or chi-square test (categorical variables).

^b post-hoc tests for continuous variables used a Tukey HSD correction for multiple comparisons; *ns*=not significant.

Table 2.

Hierarchical logistic regression: multivariable associations between food-security status, binge-eating disorder and obesity

	Step 1		Step 2	
	<i>p</i>	OR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	OR (95% CI)
HW vs. BN				
Female	0.594	1.15 (0.69 – 1.92)	0.625	1.14 (0.68 – 1.92)
Age	0.075	0.98 (0.95 – 1.00)	0.144	0.98 (0.96 – 1.01)
Hispanic	0.010	1.97 (1.17 – 3.32)	0.011	1.99 (1.17 – 3.37)
Non-Hispanic/Non-White	0.221	0.58 (0.24 – 1.39)	0.191	0.55 (0.23 – 1.35)
Some college	0.042	0.47 (0.23 – 0.97)	0.079	0.51 (0.24 – 1.08)
College	0.131	0.59 (0.29 – 1.17)	0.468	0.77 (0.37 – 1.58)
Post-college	0.143	0.54 (0.24 – 1.23)	0.400	0.70 (0.30 – 1.61)
Low Food Security			0.002	2.48 (1.39 – 4.42)
Very Low Food Security			<0.001	3.06 (1.64 – 5.70)
BED vs. BN				
Female	0.704	1.15 (0.55 – 2.40)	0.637	1.19 (0.57 – 2.49)
Age	0.091	0.97 (0.94 – 1.01)	0.092	0.97 (0.94 – 1.01)
Hispanic	0.029	2.36 (1.09 – 5.08)	0.021	2.50 (1.15 – 5.44)
Non-Hispanic/Non-White	0.405	1.72 (0.48 – 6.15)	0.372	1.79 (0.50 – 6.41)
Some college	0.060	0.37 (0.13 – 1.04)	0.076	0.39 (0.14 – 1.10)
College	0.360	0.63 (0.24 – 1.69)	0.546	0.73 (0.27 – 2.01)
Post-college	0.762	0.83 (0.25 – 2.73)	0.959	0.97 (0.29 – 3.25)
Low Food Security			0.908	1.05 (0.48 – 2.27)
Very Low Food Security			0.191	1.77 (0.75 – 4.16)

Note. Step 1 variables included sex, age, race/ethnicity, and education level. Food insecurity variables (low and very low food security) were entered in Step 2 to assess whether they influenced BN group membership above and beyond the effect of demographic variables entered previously. Bolded values indicate significance, $p < .05$. Reference groups for categorical variables were: male (sex), White (race/ethnicity), high school (education), food security (food insecurity).