



June 2013 IRP Podcast featuring Daniel Miller of Boston University and hosted by David Chancellor of the Institute for Research on Poverty

“Family Change, Father Involvement, and Child Food Insecurity”

Transcript

[Chancellor] You’re listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

For this, our June 2013 podcast, I spoke with Daniel Miller of Boston University about how changes to family structure and father involvement relate to food insecurity for kids. In this context, food insecurity means having limited or uncertain ability to acquire food that is safe and nutritionally adequate. For Miller, this work is part of a larger project with Steven Garasky and Lenna Nepomnyaschy on non-resident father involvement and food insecurity. Miller says that the number of kids living in food insecure households is persistently high. And, this is despite big increases in spending on the SNAP program, which was formerly known food stamps, in response to the Great Recession. But, Professor Miller says it’s hard to know what the food insecurity rate would have looked like without the expansion of these programs.

[Miller] It’s not clear whether absent that spending, food insecurity would have gone up but it’s been persistent and despite the attempts of a lot of nutrition programs.

And so, along with that, we see—you know, this is something that’s been widely documented and so there is an increase in the prevalence of so called non traditional family forms and that’s really anything where kids aren’t living with two biological parents.

[Chancellor] According the Census Bureau’s 2012 data, one quarter of U.S. children currently live with just one parent and other research shows that over 40 percent of U.S. births are now to unmarried parents—so understanding this connection of family type and family change and food security status is very relevant.

[Miller] We find a number of different things which are not maybe so surprising. The first is that food insecurity seems to be the highest in single mother families. So, if you’re just looking at family structure so—kids living in different family types, it is highest in single mother families and that’s compared to kids living with both of their biological parents-- their mom and dad who are married and compared to, also, mothers who have repartnered with a

different new social father as well as comparing them to kids who are living with cohabiting mothers who are either cohabiting with their biological father or with another father.

[Chancellor] Ok, so generally, kids in two parent homes should be better off than in one parent homes in terms of their food security. Miller says the next step they took was to build on this and look at changes between family types for kids over the course of their middle childhood.

[Miller] It's a little bit more complicated story and there, it's actually interesting, the result about single parenthood stands up to that analysis also. So, if we're looking over time at the way that people change---the kids who are in single mother homes still tend to fare the worst and we see some benefits to entering into marriage as well as to transitions of other sorts. Which is sort of what you might expect.

[Chancellor] Looking at these other sorts of transitions, you might see that a social or nonbiological father in a household might be less invested in kids that aren't his. Professor Miller says these sorts of questions about the relationship between family change and child food insecurity haven't really been examined before and only a few studies have looked at family structure and food insecurity.

[Miller] There's another paper that's looked at family structure changes and just food insecurity generally, but generally nobody has bothered to look at kids and there's some sense that parents tend to protect kids from food insecurity and so it's not clear whether the kind of disruption that attends to family structure changes would trickle down to kids' food insecurity.

[Chancellor] The results we've heard so far might lead us to think that food insecurity is tied solely to a lack of income in the household. However, Miller and his colleagues have found that their findings hold up independent of family socioeconomic status. So, what is really going on and why might family structure matter?

[Miller] Food insecurity is distinguished from hunger in the sense that it's about economic deprivation. So, at its heart, it's really about a lack of resources—are families able to marshal the resources to put quality and consistent food on the table? That said we find that this holds up independent of family socioeconomic status and independent of whether families are in poverty or not. So it's clearly more than just an income story. There's this literature on food insecurity that suggests that people make choices based upon the consistency of income. And so this is where the idea of father involvement comes into play and, particularly in the case of a single mother household, she's making decisions about the food that gets put on the table based on other things that are external to her. One of those is the way that a father is involved what kind of support is he providing to the household?

While we haven't tested this in this paper, it seems like a clear candidate for the idea that single mother families are still at risk above and beyond simple economics because they are not able to make good choices about the kind of food that they can put in the household because there might be inconsistent support from the dad that is throwing them off. That's just a hypothesis and I think we will look to test that moving forward.

[Chancellor] But even if it's the case that inconsistent support from the dad is throwing some mothers off in being able to make consistent food provision choices, there are still many single mother households where consistent support from fathers *can* be counted on. Miller says that they see in kind support playing an important role here.

[Miller] It's so called in kind support that seems to be instrumental to food insecurity. And so, in kind support is support that dads provide that's not cash support and it's not about social contact with the kids. It's the type of stuff where dads are paying for bills or they're helping out buying things that the kids need. So, it's provision of goods and services more than it is actual cash. And that seems—when dads are involved in that way, that seems to lower risk for child food insecurity.

[Chancellor] Miller says that, in terms of the larger body of research on the ways that family structure impacts child outcomes, parenting quality and family stress are a couple of the major points of consideration that they are looking at in trying to figure out how family change interacts with food insecurity.

[Miller] There's another literature that looks at food insecurity and maternal depression and there is evidence that it sort of operates in both ways. Obviously, being food insecure is a very challenging thing for any family and so that—there seems to be some evidence that that prompts depression on the part of moms, but also that it operates the other way—that depression operates on food insecurity, increases food insecurity for moms. And, we know that depression is a correlate of single motherhood. There's something very complicated going on here and I think it is deserving of a little more nuance – investigation—so that's the next thing that we're looking to.

[Chancellor] Another aspect of this complexity comes down to measurement issues. When you're looking at family change, there is a lot of variation in the ways that families are formed and with the biological ties within a household and how those might be related to food insecurity.

[Miller] Let me say this-- When we're thinking about child food insecurity when the father is involved, we're presuming that their involvement is related to their child. But in reality, the measure that we are using is a household measure of food insecurity so, in homes where there are kids that might be biologically related or might be half siblings—it's not clear that

that the child that we quote unquote care about is—in the sense that he or she is related to a nonresident bio dad—is the one who we’re indexing when we’re thinking about child food insecurity.

[Chancellor] Miller says that food insecurity is a real problem for children. However, it has not received quite the amount of attention as other issues and there are still a lot of questions about it.

[Miller] But there’s just a lot that we don’t know about it and for kids in particular. And there are a lot of people and a lot of households, a lot of families, a lot of children that suffer from food insecurity and we don’t have a clear sense of why, and so research that’s drawing more attention to that, that’s trying to figure out these determinants—I think is probably pretty important. And, without overemphasizing the importance of our own study, it seems like differences in families and family structure is probably a natural way to think about—especially since we’re clear in the literature that it’s not simply an income story, that there is something more complicated going on, so these dynamics of family change could probably be an important way for policy makers and programmers to think about reducing the incidence of food insecurity—especially in kids.

[Chancellor] Miller says that as they move forward with this work, they want to look at what sort of other mechanisms – in addition to family structure -- are contributing to child food insecurity. They also want to learn more about how specific family changes contribute to changes in food security levels, and to break down their data by race and ethnicity and income to see if they can pick up on differences there.

Thanks to Daniel Miller for sharing this work with us. You have been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.