

FOOD INSECURITY AFFECTS CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Poverty & Hunger and related issues

Preventive move: Expanding the mid-day meal scheme to include breakfast for children at risk of food insecurity may prevent impact of hunger on child cognition. | Photo Credit: [G Moorthy](#)

With the introduction of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the mid-day meal scheme, there has been an increase in the number of children enrolling in schools. But new research says that Indian children are not able to perform well in their studies due to widespread food insecurity at home.

An international team from U.K. and India looked at data collected by Young Lives, a UK- and India-based research study of over 1,900 schoolchildren in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

The team examined how the experience of food insecurity at home at ages 5, 8 and 12 years affected children's performance in studying maths, reading the local language, vocabulary skills and English ability in adolescence (12 years old).

The study published in *Economics of Education Review* shows that children whose families struggled with their food needs during different stages of childhood performed less well in all the four tests in adolescence compared to their peers.

The link between food insecurity at home and learning was more pronounced for those children who experienced chronic food insecurity and/or experienced it during early childhood (at 5 years).

Further, transitory spells of food insecurity at home did not affect the kids' test scores in reading and vocabulary, but their mathematical skills were still affected. This suggests that children may be able to bounce back from short-term food insecurity in some learning domains, but not in others.

The researchers ask for early intervention from the government. "Because some curriculum is cumulative, it may be difficult for children who experience childhood food insecurity to catch up on learning later," explains Dr. Elisabetta Aurino, from Imperial College Business School, London, and the lead author of the work, in an email to *The Hindu*. She adds that teaching at the right level and remedial education programmes can also help children who have fallen behind to catch up with peers.

"Studies have shown that mid-day meal schemes can improve learning and classroom effort. Expanding this programme to include breakfast for children at higher risk of food insecurity or in the lean season may prevent hunger and its negative repercussions on child cognition," she adds.

"Our findings highlight how even very early experiences of food insecurity can have a lasting impact on outcomes across the life course," one of study authors Dr. Jasmine Fledderjohann, from Lancaster University adds.

Dr. Sukumar Vellakkal from BITS Pilani KK Birla, Goa Campus says, "Increased budget allocation and effective implementation of the Integrated Child Development Services programme would be also welcome. Also, the nutritional value needs to be enhanced. Community kitchens for provisioning free food for needy populations are another initiative worth considering in this regard, which could be provisioned and run through local bodies." He is one

of the authors of the paper.

The researchers add that experiencing food insecurity at home during childhood can affect India's economy through lower human capital accumulation. "There are plenty of economic studies that show that countries with better-educated workforces are more capable of innovating and grow at a faster pace than countries with lower human capital stock. If children from food-insecure households tend to learn less at school, a country is not reaching its potential in terms of human capital, thus hampering its economic performance," adds Dr. Aurino.

As this is a study on a very small population, the team suggests regular surveys that measure food insecurity among households with children across the whole of India are needed, as this will allow for tracking the state of household food insecurity over time and devise locally-appropriate remedial measures.

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