

Broad Matters Season 9 Episode 5

“Food Insecurity” with Jessica Gray and Francisco Moreno

Ken: Welcome to Broad Matters.

Quinetta: A podcast bringing you thought leadership, innovative perspectives and real-world impact from Michigan State University's Eli Broad College of Business.

Ken: I'm Ken Szymusiak, Managing Director for the Burgess Institute for Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

Quinetta: And I'm Quinetta Roberson, the John A. Hannah Distinguished Professor of Management and Psychology. Today we're talking about something that most workplaces don't measure, don't talk about, and often don't even see - food insecurity among working adults.

We tend to think of food insecurity as something that happens only when someone is unemployed or experiencing extreme poverty. But what if people working full time jobs, even multiple jobs, are still struggling to put enough quality food on the table? And what does that mean for their health, their focus, and their performance at work?

Ken: Joining us today are two guests whose work powerfully reinforces each other. Francisco Moreno is an assistant professor of management at Broad whose paper, “Working on an Empty Stomach: How Food Insecurity Impacts Job Performance Through Rumination” was recently published in Personnel Psychology. His research sought to understand whether food insecurity is quietly affecting workers here in the United States and found strong evidence that it is.

Quinetta: Also with us today is Jessica Gray, coordinator of student wellness and academic success at Broad. Jessica sees these realities play out every day through her work supporting students and families, navigating basic needs challenges in workplaces, universities and communities. Where Francisco brings the data, Jessica brings the lived experience, confirming that it isn't just theoretical, it's something happening right now in our community, often just out of sight. Francisco, let's start with your research. What questions were you trying to answer with this study?

Franciso: At first, we wanted to know if people with jobs could be food insecure. That was one of the challenges or assumptions that we wanted to figure out. And then if that was the case, we wanted to know how that affected them in their workplace. What were their experiences affected if they were food insecure?

Quinetta: Can you define food insecurity?

Broad Matters Season 9 Episode 5

“Food Insecurity” with Jessica Gray and Francisco Moreno

Francisco: That is actually a very important part of the research. So, food insecurity refers to individuals that cannot obtain enough quantity and quality of food. Normally, people just think it's about the quantity, but quality becomes really important, especially when it comes to nutritional needs. These people, in some instances they might have enough money to buy food, but not the right kind of food that gives them all the vitamins, minerals, nutrients that they need to be a healthy life.

Ken: What did the data reveal about how common food insecurity actually is for working people?

Francisco: Food insecurity exists among working adults, including full-time employees. Looking at the data, about 13% of the US population is food insecure, and within that 13%, about 20% of those food insecure people have full-time or part-time employment.

The results are there. The people who are food insecure definitely have jobs. So, they are in that situation regardless of the fact that they have jobs.

Ken: What were some of the impacts that you found, performance or these people's lived experience in the workplace, given this insecurity?

Francisco: In terms of the impacts, it definitely affects work performance, and this is through, constructive rumination.

Essentially, people worry a lot about this situation and that kind of distracts them from their work obligations. That ends up affecting their work performance. and also we saw that it impacts deviant behaviors, particularly theft. people are more likely to engage in this kind of behavior if they are food insecure. And then when we look at industries, it was found that service worker industries, particularly people who work in the food industry, food services are more likely to be food insecure over that 13% of the overall population.

It was very puzzling to us because the food is right there, but it's still there in that situation.

Ken: You mentioned that service workers tended to kind of bubble up to the top in terms of folks who might be facing this food insecurity at a greater degree. Did you measure across multiple types of industries looking for this information?

Francisco: We had in the paper two studies.

One of them was focused exclusively on service industry, but the other one was across industries. They both replicated their results, indicating that if you are in the food insecurity situation, regardless of the industry, your performance is going to be affected

Broad Matters Season 9 Episode 5

“Food Insecurity” with Jessica Gray and Francisco Moreno

via worrying a lot, and then you're going to be more likely to engage in behaviors like theft. We also tested about organizational citizen behavior.

You know, essentially being a good citizen of the organization, seeing if food insecurity actually affected that, and that was the one dependent variable that wasn't supported. So, it does seem like if you are a good citizen of the organization, this rumination, this worry that you have does not translate into you stopping those kind of good and positive behaviors.

Ken: Jessica, does Francisco's research findings match what you see in your day to day work with your clients?

Jessica: Yes, it does. So, in the past, I worked at a hospital. I've worked at nonprofits, working with families and individuals who are experiencing homelessness. And his research definitely supports what I saw in the field. Sometimes they have a large family, sometimes they have a smaller family, but most of them were living in their cars, working full time-jobs, working at different big food chains, working in the service industry, whether it's supporting people who are unable to mov. So like a lot of caretaker roles.

Regardless of the job, they were all working with me, which means they were all experiencing homelessness. They were all struggling to provide for their basic needs. They were all struggling to get food. So, I definitely think his research supports what I was actively seeing, and I worked with hundreds of people in social work. This is a norm of things that we see and case management.

Ken: The terminology around rumination is interesting to me. It's not necessarily the hunger itself in real-time.

It's the thinking about what happens next in your life, right?

Jessica: Yeah...

Ken: So, people ruminate on lots of things that, you know. It could be health. Could be food. But like all those could serve, as you know, really interesting data points for distraction in the workplace.

Jessica: The thing that people don't consider with rumination is that you build your life around whatever that focus is.

So, if it's lack of access to quality and a large quantity of food, when you go to work, you base what you do at work around, am I going to be able to eat? Can I grab leftovers for my kids when I go home? Do I have to choose between my lights today or my food? Great!

Broad Matters Season 9 Episode 5

“Food Insecurity” with Jessica Gray and Francisco Moreno

They provided lunch, so now I get a little extra money to go do this or pay this bill or put a little towards this.

I feel like people tend to simplify when they think about rumination. Like, oh, you're just thinking, “I'm hungry. I'm hungry” when it's more like, okay, I have a series of choices I have to make. Each interaction throughout the day that I have changes what decision I end up making.

Quinetta: Did you see more of an impact on quantity issues versus quality issues?

Is there like a correlation between those that people are more likely to deal with one versus the other, or it's both?

Jessica: I feel like it's both. From my experience. Especially when he was talking about the food service industry. I've come across people who think because somebody works at McDonald's, then they have access to food. But imagine eating fries every single day.

Quinetta: We saw it on Super Size Me.

Jessica: We did. Was that...

Quinetta: It didn't work.

Jessica: It don't, it don't!

Francisco: Yeah. And I feel like the concept of rumination is central there in the fact of those full-time workers. It's not just a matter of money. They might have enough money to like, feed themselves, so they might not physically feel that issue. But if the problem is bigger than that, like Jessica was saying about feeding their family, then that just sticks to you through your workday and actually is what ends up affecting the performance rather than whatever is going on in your stomach.

Quinetta: So, you both have seen the problems. Let's turn to some solutioning, and I'll ask Francisco, did your research point to any workplace support systems that actually help or things that don't work as well as we might think? And to Jessica, I would ask from your experience, what have you seen truly help people?

Francisco: We looked at what kind of interventions or personal characteristics would help this kind of situation.

So, some help, some didn't help. The things that work well where self-control capacity in the individual. When the individual has higher self-control capacity, then they are less affected by the food insecurity situation. And their performance doesn't take a

Broad Matters Season 9 Episode 5

“Food Insecurity” with Jessica Gray and Francisco Moreno

significant decline. And in terms of what can the organization do, we looked at supervisory support. That was one that worked pretty well when employees who were wearing the food insecurity situation had a boss where they could talk to, kind of vent about this situation, that proved that their performance wasn't affected and they didn't engage in those deviant behaviors.

And that kind of goes in line with the whole idea of rumination that we were talking about just now. The fact that you have that person inside of the workplace that you can talk to and vent, that kind of helps to debrief, drain those negative or those worrying thoughts that might be affecting your workplace. So those were the things that did work.

We also looked at food benefits that the company can give to the people. So, it can be snacks, gift cards, you know, any kind of food benefits. We hope that that would help the performance effects. But the results said otherwise. The results almost work in the opposite way. So, when companies give them these food resources, they were actually worse.

So, it might be aligned with that idea of rumination. That kind of counterintuitive result. Just because the company's offering you something to feed you at this moment. But if you're worried about your food situation overall, you are not hungry right now for lunch, but you have no idea how you're going to have dinner, how you're going to have breakfast.

I have all of these issues going on in my life. They keep ruminating and then the performance is affected even deeply.

Jessica: And it also creates stress because it's like, “I'm attached to this job now”. In order to eat, I have to stay here. And if it's not a good job or I don't have a good boss, it adds extra level of stress to my allegiance to the company.

Why am I here? I'm okay. I got to feed my family because they're providing me this food. But if I don't like my job, I'm struggling to figure out if I should go elsewhere because of that attachment and connection. A company I worked for, they had different food days throughout the week, and if I'm relying on that food to feed myself and my family, it creates another level of stress because I feel like I have to-

Ken: Dependence, or something?

Jessica: Yeah, dependency on it.

Ken: Yeah, it's not empowering from that perspective.

Jessica: No, not at all.

Broad Matters Season 9 Episode 5

“Food Insecurity” with Jessica Gray and Francisco Moreno

Ken: That's the strange thing is sometimes as well-meaning incentives have the reverse effects.

Quinetta: But that's what I was going to ask from like the rumination standpoint or from what works versus what doesn't work, is there a role of dignity in there? Right. So that the solution that's offered to the employee with food insecurity and their families, that there is dignity in the solution itself?

And then, you know, Ken, you said empowering. But there's some like agency as well.

Jessica: But I think that autonomy piece is so important. So many times, when people are helping other people it's a savior complex of, “I'm doing you a favor, so you should be happy with whatever I give you”. Regardless if you're allergic. Regardless if it's no name brand. Regardless if I would never eat it.

“You have food now. You're welcome”. That mindset of, “you're a human”, like it really does go a long way when you're interacting with somebody who's experiencing food insecurity.

Quinetta: So, both Francisco and Jessica, you talked about this being prevalent in the service industry. Maybe food insecurity is an issue among vulnerable populations. Would you say that's fair?

Jessica: I feel like safety is an illusion and everybody is one emergency away from needing support.

When I worked for nonprofits, some of my clients used to be nurses, teachers, but they were one emergency away. You don't know what is going to happen in your life. Those things put you just one step away from needing support regarding food, bills, whatever it may be. You don't know what's on the other side of the next minute.

Francisco: I think that you hit a very important point that there is research on food.

We're not the first one, but everything comes from the assumption up to this point that people had a choice into which kind of food they were able to get. That's what was understood. But here we're talking about people who don't have a choice. Like you mentioned. It can happen to anyone, and it can be a situation as simple as your car breaking down.

And then you had a choice of eating that unhealthy food and you were okay. Now you have to put that money on your car because it's the only way to get to work. And now you're in that situation where you don't have a choice. And that's why it's important to talk about it.

Broad Matters Season 9 Episode 5

“Food Insecurity” with Jessica Gray and Francisco Moreno

In this managerial workplace context, managers might not know that these people don't have a choice.

Quinetta: I also think it doesn't have to necessarily be a problematic event. I have a project at a manufacturing plant, and the workers have 30 minutes for lunch. There's a cafeteria, but they're like, if I spend the time walking to the cafeteria and waiting for the food and coming back, that takes half of it. Now I only have 15 minutes.

And so, they're thinking about what can I bring? What's going to be fairly cheap? But there are these other kind of environmental issues or like nature of work issues that also affect their food insecurity?

Jessica: I think that's a good point of when you get out of work, like, what do you have access to while you're at work? What do you have access to? Do you have access to a microwave or is that going to cause more time? If I had to choose between taking a foot break and just eating some chips and something quick or walking all the way here to this floor heating stuff up, and then now I've got ten minutes left to scarf everything down. I'm going to choose the chips and my feet break.

All of these things add up to a larger problem, and I think it's good that we're bringing up these different points so that it shows the complexity of it. Instead of simplifying it to, “oh, just be better”.

Ken: Or free snacks.

Jessica: Yeah. “Free snacks be better.”

Ken: Yeah.

Quinetta: So, we've been talking about this kind of like it's a them problem.

But Jessica, you're closely involved with the Broad Care Center, which supports students, faculty and staff facing food insecurity and other basic needs here on campus. So, you've been providing this for a year now.

Jessica: Yes.

Quinetta: What are some of the utilization rates or metrics?

Jessica: So, the Care Center is a free resource that's open to anybody who is affiliated with the Broad College of Business.

Broad Matters Season 9 Episode 5

“Food Insecurity” with Jessica Gray and Francisco Moreno

So, we wanted to make sure it was accessible for Business minors, for students who may be trying to get into Broad but may have not made it in. We wanted to make sure that they could still access the Care Center- faculty, staff. We provide free personal hygiene products, cleaning supplies, menstrual products and quick food. So, I just actually did the numbers before coming here and we've had over 365 uses since opening last year.

We've given out over 4000 products, over 160 individuals, so like unique users, have come to the Care Center, grabbed whatever they need, whether it's a cookie which I support, or a couple rolls of toilet paper or even more. That's currently our numbers, which I'm very excited about, especially since we started from nothing. Nobody knew who we were, and now we're almost at 400 uses, which is wild to me.

Quinetta: How does that work fit into what we've been talking about, and what have you found actually helps most?

Jessica: I'm going to start with what I found that actually helps most is allowing anybody who uses the Care Center autonomy. So, we don't ask questions of why you're using the care center. We don't have a requirement of what you get.

You're just able to come in, get what you need and then go, and then you can come back whenever you need more. 68% of the students who come into the Care Center are off-campus students. And one thing that we're noticing, too, from some of the testimonials is that that transition from campus life to off-campus life catches a lot of our students by surprise. So, they feel like they have more of a safety net with the Care Center, so that if they're struggling to budget because now, I have to pay for rent and not have to pay for food and electricity, now they could just come to the Care Center and get some of

the nitty gritty items that they don't consider, like dish soap or cleaning spray. So, they're able to get those items for free. On average, about 15 products are taken with each use, which total about \$20. That's a couple meals. I'm not going to lie. That is five \$5 pizzas that students are able to apply wherever, and sometimes it's back to their education, sometimes it's to their books.

Sometimes it's to a good night out or something to make them feel special. We try to make sure we get items that also make our students feel special. So, we encourage people to donate not just the basic necessities, but also like maybe some cologne or some spray or some scented body wash. Something where they can save \$13.50 by coming to the Care Center and getting it for free.

So, we talk about it like that, like, “Oh, it's a good experience. You can get this for free. You saved money.” Everybody loves couponing. So, we try to talk about it like that so that

Broad Matters Season 9 Episode 5

“Food Insecurity” with Jessica Gray and Francisco Moreno

students and faculty and staff feel comfortable utilizing it, and that also, too, provides a layer of protection, in a way, because everybody's using it and we don't know why anybody's using it.

For the people who may be in dire need, because it's normalized, it provides a layer of discretion so that if there is somebody who is in dire need of services, they can access it without being identified as somebody who is struggling, which makes a huge difference.

Ken: Thank you both so much for coming on the show today. If listeners want to keep up with you, where should they look?

Francisco: So, I'm on Twitter, @franjavimoreno and on LinkedIn as franmorenojournalist.

Jessica: For the Broad Care Center. You can visit us at broad.msu.edu/carecenter or follow the Care Center on Instagram @wellnessatbroad. For me personally, I don't have a special name on LinkedIn, but if you look up Jessica Gray and Care Center, you can find me on LinkedIn, and I would love to connect.

Quinetta: Well, we'll have to check out both of you on LinkedIn, as well as check out the Broad Care Center.

Ken: Want more Broad news and insights? Follow us on LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook @MSUBroadCollege or visit us on the web at broad.msu.edu/news.

Quinetta: And remember, like, rate and subscribe to Broad Matters on Apple Podcasts and Spotify.

Ken: That does it for this episode. I'm Ken Szymusiak...

Quinetta: and I'm Quinetta Roberson. Join us next time to hear faculty and staff weighing in on relevant issues and discussing how their work makes an impact, illuminating how and why Broad Matters.