

How food insecurity affects people's rights to choose whether or not to have children, and how they parent

June 1 2023, by Jasmine Fledderjohann, Maureen Owino and Sophie Patterson



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

[Food insecurity](#)—difficulties getting enough nutritious food for a healthy life—is a growing problem [globally](#). It has been linked to many health and social problems including malnutrition, difficulties managing

[diabetes](#), impaired development [in childhood](#), and reduced [school performance](#) for children.

Our recent [research](#) shows how [food](#) insecurity also matters for reproductive justice: people's ability to have only the children they want and raise them the way they want.

Led by Black women, the [reproductive justice movement](#) began in the US in the 1990s.

Awful acts of violence, such as forced sterilization and [child](#) removals, have aimed to prevent the most marginalized people from having and raising children. Reproductive justice highlights how marginalized people's options are systematically limited by the way our societies are organized.

Reproductive justice activists assert that everyone has the right to have a child or—equally—to not have a child. If people choose to have children, they should be able to parent them with dignity in safe and healthy environments. In our research, we show how food insecurity can restrict each of these rights.

Why food insecurity matters

For one thing, food insecurity affects nutrition. Malnutrition is linked with [infertility](#) and poorer pregnancy and [birth outcomes](#). This affects both the right to have a child and the right to parent in safe and healthy environments. It is impossible to provide a healthy environment for a child without access to sufficient [nutritious food](#).

And food insecurity can make it hard to meet other basic needs. Food insecure people are more likely to live in [unfit housing conditions](#), or even without a home entirely. They can face impossible spending

choices, such as whether to spend on food versus heating or cooling their home. Having to make trade-offs between food and other necessities is a barrier to the right to parent in safe and healthy environments.

Impossible spending choices also affect access to reproductive healthcare. Where healthcare systems charge for service, food insecure people face challenging decisions of whether to use their limited funds on food or healthcare.

And even where healthcare is free in principle—such as the NHS in the UK— there can be hidden cost trade-offs. Missing work to attend a healthcare appointment can mean less money for food. For people in precarious work who are more at risk of food insecurity, missing work could mean losing their job, placing future wages at risk.

Such impossible decisions between spending on reproductive healthcare and food affect both the right to have, and to not have, a child. It may limit access to contraception, abortion, prenatal care, infertility treatment, and other reproductive healthcare. Trade-offs between spending to feed one's child versus to take them to a doctor also impede the right to parent with dignity in a healthy environment.

Food insecure people may resort to criminalized methods to obtain food, which can lead to a prison sentence. For example, in some countries sex work is criminalized, but it can be an important source of income. Broader food security crises, triggered by events such as regional conflict or the COVID-19 pandemic, may make criminalized strategies [more likely](#).

In turn, disruption of routine reproductive [healthcare](#) in prison can negatively impact the right to have a child, and separating families through parental imprisonment compromises the right to parent. A [criminal record](#) may also limit employment opportunities and access to

housing, increasing the risk of food insecurity after release from prison.

And these are only a few examples.

Why is this a timely issue?

Events such as the pandemic, conflict in places such as Ukraine, Sudan, Ethiopia, Yemen and Syria, and the cost of living crisis have made matters worse. Such events have disrupted global food supply chains, displaced people, and made basic necessities unaffordable. On top of everything, the climate crisis will compound these problems in the coming years.

Meanwhile, reproductive justice is a pressing—and linked—global issue. Though it's been over 50 years since the UN [acknowledged](#) reproductive rights as a human right, reproductive choice continues to be compromised globally. Just one [high-profile example](#) is the restriction of women's right to abortion following a landmark 2022 US Supreme Court Ruling.

Recognizing the link between food [insecurity](#) and reproductive justice is important. The most marginalized people are at greatest risk of impediments to both food security and reproductive justice.

As an activist movement, grassroots action sits at the core of reproductive [justice](#), with a commitment to elevate voices previously unheard or overlooked. There is much to be gained from collaborating with similar groups working to combat [food insecurity](#) to drive mutual learning and action.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: How food insecurity affects people's rights to choose whether or not to have children, and how they parent (2023, June 1) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-food-insecurity-affects-people-rights.html>

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