



Food Security among Adults with Intellectual Disabilities

PI: Dr. Janet McCabe (Ontario Tech University)

PROJECT SUMMARY

Individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) face higher risks of heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. Healthcare often prioritizes treatment over prevention, making promotion-based approaches essential for improving long-term health.

This project examined food security among individuals with ID in Ontario, focusing on consistent access to safe, healthy food during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers assessed whether athletes had access to culturally appropriate food, grocery stores, and financial resources using the **Five A's of Food Security** framework: **Availability, Accessibility, Adequacy, Acceptability, and Agency**.

Through a **two-part online survey** with adults with ID and caregivers, followed by interviews, the study found:

- **Availability:** Adults with ID ate less due to financial limitations.
- **Accessibility:** Grocery stores were nearby, but barriers remained.
- **Adequacy:** Many struggled to maintain balanced, nutritious meals.
- **Acceptability:** Access to culturally appropriate foods declined.
- **Agency:** Most lacked control over food choices.

Food insecurity increased by 27% during the pandemic, with 33–41% living on less than \$20,000 annually, well below the poverty line. Reduced employment further impacted food access. However, fresh food consumption increased while fast food intake declined, likely due to more home-prepared meals.

Conclusion

Adults with ID and caregivers continue to face food security challenges. Addressing barriers to affordable, nutrient-dense food, food literacy, and meal preparation can improve long-term outcomes. These insights can also help refine Special Olympics programs to better support athletes' nutritional needs.

KEY MESSAGES

Promote Healthy Living & Nutrition:

Prioritize lifestyle-based strategies to improve long-term health, including accessible nutrition education and culturally inclusive meal planning.

Improve Food Access & Economic

Stability: Provide affordable shopping tips while advocating for greater support to reduce financial barriers affecting food security and athlete participation.

Support Meal Preparation Skills:

Teaching **cooking and grocery shopping strategies** can help individuals with ID become more independent in making healthier food choices.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please contact Janet McCabe at Janet.McCabe@ontariotechu.ca for more information on this project.