

# Study Aims to Show Why Some Veterans Go Hungry

Peaches sit, waiting to be picked up before the start of the first Farmers' Market on Travis Air Force Base, California. (U.S. Air Force/Senior Airman Nicole Leidholm)

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A new study seeks to understand why some veterans experience food insecurity, having little access to healthy food, skipping meals or using money budgeted for groceries to pay other bills.

With previous research showing that roughly a quarter of post-9/11 veterans have experienced hunger or food insecurity at some point after their service, Nipa Kamdar, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Houston's Department of Health and Human Performance, sought to determine what barriers keep veterans from obtaining and eating quality food.

Using a unique approach to qualitative research called photo elicitation, she let the veterans explain their challenges through photographs of objects or situations they felt hindered or helped their access to food.

"This is a problem in this community, but it's not being fully recognized," Kamdar said during an interview with Military.com. "I really wanted to understand what was happening in the veteran household and really get the story, rather than just the numbers."

Kamdar gave cameras to 18 low-income veterans who had at least one child between the ages of 5 and 11. Later, she met with them to share pictures and allow them to explain their reasons for choosing their subject matter.

Kamdar said the photographs provide insight into families facing hardships that data or simple interviews don't convey.

"Veterans may have physical or mental health disabilities and limited social support that further restrict their access to food," she said. "There is limited knowledge about the barriers to accessing food within this community."

Study participant Alisha Strife, a former [Army](#) soldier injured in a [Humvee](#) accident in Iraq in 2005, said her barriers included being unable to work while recovering from her injuries and, later, monthly health care premiums that totaled \$1,700 -- more than half her [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) disability compensation.

As part of the research, she took pictures of her gas gauge on empty and her VA prescription bottles.

"A lot of it is ... just making sure those things were taken care of. Then, there is the amount of time it takes to attend medical appointments and take care of kids, along with the high divorce rate, or being single parents that typically veterans may be," Strife said.

Kamdar said another veteran also took photos of his medication. The former service member explained that, [with post-traumatic stress disorder](#), he has bad days when he cannot cook for his family.

"It's on the other members of the family, which includes the kids for that day, to fend for themselves," Kamdar said.

While the results have yet to be analyzed or published, Kamdar said she has learned lessons she is now sharing with community food banks and non-profits in the Houston area, where she did most of the research.

For example, she said student veterans with jobs and families who also are studying in college can't get to food banks, which normally are open during the workday.

She went to a central food distribution center this week to discuss this finding, she said.

"They didn't know about how the hours of operation of some of these pantries make it difficult for veterans to make it there," she said.

Kamdar also found that veterans are most at risk for food insecurity in the first three months of their transition from military service, when they are trying to find a job, establish a home and fend for themselves.

She'd like to see legislation to shorten the time period for veterans to qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. It can take 30 days or more to be approved for SNAP but, since an applicant has to show income history to qualify, they must prove they are no longer receiving active-duty pay.

"If we could get them to access it sooner if they qualify ... it would increase access," Kamdar said.

The research was funded by the William T. Grant Foundation, a nonprofit focused on reducing inequality among children and youth. The group was interested in the research, Kamdar said, because food insecurity puts children at increased risk for mental health and physical disorders, impaired learning and decreased productivity in school.

What struck her most, she said, was that the children of these families were rarely affected by the food insecurity because the veterans simply went without eating themselves to ensure that their kids were fed.

"They make do with what they have and make sure the kids get what they need. It is just taken for granted that they would skip a meal, wouldn't eat or eat just once a day," Kamdar said. "They consider this normal."

Kamdar hopes to analyze the information and publish it but also bring the information to organizations that help veterans and those experiencing hunger.

"I don't know when I would do a gallery-type exhibit, but if that opportunity came to get these photos out there, [I'd do it]. Me telling you in words is not as impactful as the photos with their captions," she said.

Strife said she participated to call attention to a little-known problem for some veterans.

"Veterans don't typically ask for help," she said, "and I don't think the VA recognizes this is a major issue. My main reason for participating is to make sure that we get veterans connected to the available resources."

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