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ROCZNIKI NAUKOWE
STOWARZYSZENIA EKONOMISTÓW ROLNICTWA I AGROBIZNESU

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AGNIESZKA POCZTA-WAJDA¹, MARTA GUTH

Poznan University of Economics and Business, Poland

**CHALLENGES TO HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY
– EXPERIENCES FROM EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES**

Key words: food security, systematic review, PRISMA, COVID-19, EU countries

ABSTRACT. Household food security in a self-sufficient and highly developed regions such as the European Union is a rare topic in the scientific literature. Recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and food market disruptions, have reignited discussions on food security in the EU. Therefore, the aim of this article was to review the latest available publications on household food security in the EU and to explore the challenges and issues that contribute to the persistence of household food insecurity in EU countries. The review was carried out using the PRISMA methodology and includes articles from the last 20 years. The results suggest under European conditions, lack of food security means that people affected by this problem cannot afford food of sufficient quality and quantity to stay healthy and participate in society. The review of existing literature confirmed the importance of education, gender, age, marital status, household composition and location, country-specific heterogeneity, employment status and income in preventing food insecurity in EU countries. The problem of food insecurity particularly affects women, unmarried individuals, less educated individuals, less skilled workers and lower income families, and is strongly linked to mental health.

¹ Corresponding author: agnieszka.poczta@ue.poznan.pl

INTRODUCTION

Food security is a state in which everyone consistently has physical, social, and economic access to adequate, safe, and nutritious food that fulfils their dietary needs and food preferences, enabling an active and healthy lifestyle. This phenomenon can be analysed at the global, national, household, or individual level. When it comes to household food security in European Union (EU) countries, it is rarely addressed in scientific literature. Most research focuses on the supply side, noting that the EU is largely self-sufficient at the national level. Even when some products can't be produced, high-income levels allow for imports. It's often assumed that household food insecurity isn't widespread, as FAO [2023] data shows undernourishment at less than 2.5%. However, broader FAO measures reveal that 5-7% of the population faces moderate or severe food insecurity, with rates in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania reaching up to 15%.

Numerous studies conducted in developed countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia show that between 10% of the population in the U.S. [Rabbitt et al. 2024] and up to 21% in Australia [Miller and Li 2022] face food security challenges. Unfortunately, the same level of data and research is lacking for EU countries. Aside from limited information from FAO [2023] and Eurostat [2023], there is no comprehensive and regular data collection comparable to that of the U.S. and Canada.

Recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian intervention in Ukraine, have renewed discussions on food security at the household level in the EU. Therefore, the main of this article is to provide a systematic review of recent publications on household food security in the EU. The research question refers to challenges that contribute to household food insecurity despite the region's high level of development and self-sufficiency.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Next section presents methodology applied for the systematic review. Then, bibliometric analysis and content analysis are presented. The final section derives conclusions.

RESEARCH MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

In our study, we followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines for conducting literature research. PRISMA is an evidence-based checklist that guides systematic reviews and meta-analyses through three stages: (1) identification, (2) screening, and (3) inclusion [Page et al. 2021]. These steps help researchers identify the most relevant publications. The method supports both quantitative and qualitative analyses and enhances review clarity, transparency, and completeness [Li et al. 2020].

The research was carried out in September 2024. During the identification phase, we used the Scopus search engine, recognized as one of the most comprehensive and reliable sources of information. To ensure the relevance of the selected articles, we applied the following inclusion criteria: (i) articles addressing food security; (ii) focusing on the household level; (iii) specifically related to European Union Member States. The search strategy complied with the following inclusion criteria: (i) restricting searches to titles, abstracts, and keywords; (ii) using key terms associated with food security and households or families; (iii) limiting the search to European Union Member States; (iv) narrowing the publication period to 2005-2025 (the selected time frame was guided by two factors: 2005, as the first full year of EU membership for 10 additional countries, and 2025, due to journal backlogs, with some articles already being published online with a 2025 date); (v) selecting relevant subject areas such as economics, econometrics, finance, social sciences, business, management, accounting, environmental science, and agricultural and biological sciences; (vi) limiting the language to English. Finally, our data collection was based on the following search phrase:

TITLE-ABS-KEY ((“food *security”) AND (household* OR famil*) AND (“European Union” OR “EU” OR austria OR belgium OR bulgaria OR croatia OR cyprus OR czechia OR “Czech Republic” OR germany OR denmark OR spain OR estonia OR finland OR france OR greece OR hungary OR ireland OR italy OR lithuania OR luxembourg OR latvia OR malta OR netherlands OR poland OR portugal OR romania OR “Slovak Republic” OR slovakia OR slovenia OR sweden)) AND PUBYEAR > 2015 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, ”ECON”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, ”SOCI”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, ”BUSI”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, ”ENVI”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, ”AGRI”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, ”ar”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, ”English”))

The exclusion criteria (see Figure 1) applied during the screening phase allowed us to focus solely on studies that specifically addressed food security at the household or family level. We deliberately excluded studies conducted at the national level. Furthermore, papers that did not explore challenges or issues contributing to food insecurity were also excluded.

Following the initial search, we identified a total of 160 documents. During the abstract screening, 120 records were excluded due to a lack of relevance. The remaining 40 papers were then subjected to a detailed eligibility assessment. One article was excluded due to a lack of full-text access, and another was disqualified as it was written in Spanish. Additionally, 4 papers did not focus on the household level, and 2 failed to address relevant challenges. As a result, we finalized a sample of 30 publications, which served as the foundation for subsequent quantitative and qualitative analyses. Figure 1 provides a visual summary of the literature selection process.

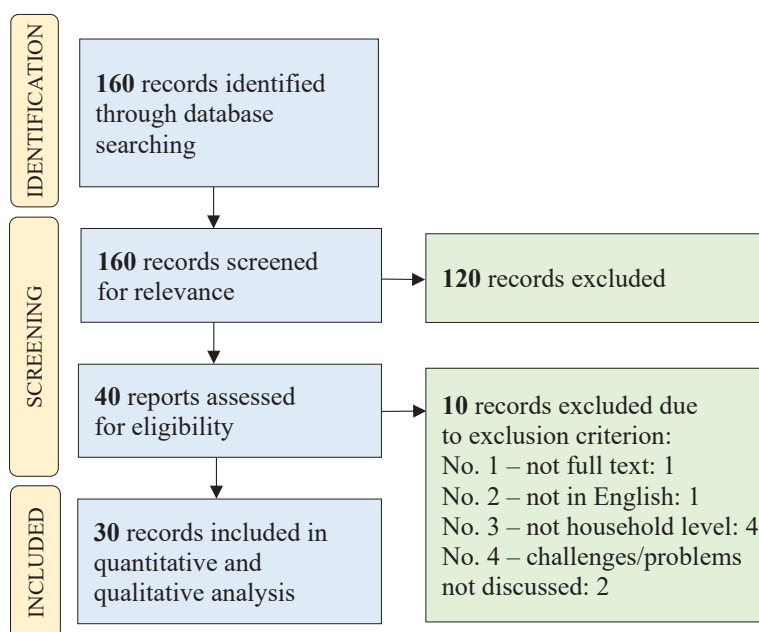


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram modified to authors' research

Source: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram [<https://www.prisma-statement.org/prisma-2020-flow-diagram>]

RESEARCH RESULTS

BIBLIOMETRIC STATISTICS

The analysis of the results begins with an examination of the temporal and spatial scope of the research, as presented in Table 1. Several notable trends emerge from this analysis. Firstly, there has been an increase in the number of articles published on the topic of food security at the household level in EU countries. In 2015, no such articles were found, only 1 article was published in 2016 as well as in 2017, while by 2022, this number had risen to 7. The lower values for 2023 and 2024 may be attributed to the specific nature of the publication process.

Secondly, the publications are limited to only a few EU countries, predominantly located in Southern Europe. From the group of so-called new member states, publications

Table 1. Spatial, time and title scope of reviewed journals.

Time scope of articles		Spatial scope of articles		Journal scope of articles	
Year	no. of articles	country	no. of articles	journal name	no. of articles
2016	1	Portugal	6	Food Security	4
2017	1	Poland	4	Nutrients	3
2018	2	Spain	3	Food Policy	2
2019	4	Romania	3	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	2
2020	5	Italy	3	Others	29
2021	5	France	2	Type of data:	
2022	7	Greece	2	Primary	17
2023	3	UK	2	Secondary	12
2024	2	Multi-country	5	Review	1

Source: own study

were found only for Poland and Romania. Thirdly, the articles were published in a wide range of journals, including the highly prestigious Food Security and Food Policy. Lastly, the majority of the articles were based on independently collected primary data. This is likely due to the aforementioned issue of the lack of regular and comprehensive data on this topic.

The most frequently discussed challenge to household-level food security in EU countries was the issue of low and unequal incomes, highlighted in 15 articles. These articles often pointed to specific marginalized social groups that are particularly affected, such as the elderly (8 articles), single parents, large families, young people, and women (6 articles each), the unemployed (5 articles), migrants and individuals with health issues (3 articles each), and national minorities (1 article).

Other challenges related to household food security mentioned in the literature include the high cost of food (5 articles), changing lifestyles (3 articles), as well as the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and issues with support programs (2 articles each). The next section provides a detailed discussion of these issues.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

ECONOMIC REASONS FOR HOUSEHOLD FOOD INSECURITY IN EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES

Insufficient income is the primary challenge to household food security in EU countries, with studies revealing that food insecurity is closely tied to household poverty, not only in less developed nations but also within the EU [Nie and Sousa-Poza 2018, Beacom et al. 2022, Maia and Santos 2022, Pinto et al. 2022]. Despite efforts to reduce undernourishment, other forms of malnutrition, such as obesity, have risen [Penne and Goedemé 2021]. This suggests that many individuals cannot afford food of adequate quality and quantity, impacting their health and societal participation [Dudek 2019]. Research in Portugal [Alarcão et al. 2020] links low income and education levels with food insecurity, affecting both native and immigrant groups. In Greece, between 2009 and 2014, food insecurity was more prevalent among low-income, low-wealth, and immigrant households, particularly in Athens and the island regions [Konstantinidis 2022]. Similarly, in Romania, the socio-economic marginalization and labor market discrimination of Roma populations contribute to higher food insecurity [Ciaian et al. 2018]. A study of 801 homeless families in Paris revealed that only 14% were food secure, while 43.3% experienced low food security, impacting both adults and children (Martin-Fernandez et al. 2018). Furthermore, food insecurity influences future life choices, particularly for youth in low-income households [Brannen and O'Connell 2022].

SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC REASONS FOR HOUSEHOLD FOOD INSECURITY IN EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES

The aging population across Europe has brought renewed focus on the challenges faced by older individuals, including their vulnerability to food insecurity due to a mix of social, economic, health, and spatial factors [Nie and Sousa-Poza 2018, Gkiouras et al. 2020, Gajda et al. 2023]. Peng Nie and Alfonso Sousa-Poza [2018] determined that employment, higher education, and household income reduce the likelihood of being unable to afford essential foods like meat, fish, poultry, or fruits and vegetables. Similarly, Robert Gajda et al. [2022] found that economic and social factors were the main drivers of food insecurity among urban residents of low social status, while health and spatial factors were more prevalent in rural areas and smaller towns. Hanna Dudek and Joanna Myszkowska-Ryciak [2020] found that education, gender, age, marital status, household composition, employment, and income all play significant roles in preventing food insecurity in Poland.

Tess Penne and Tim Goedemé [2021] discovered that in 16 out of 24 European countries, at least 10% of the population in urban areas faced income-related food insecurity. In Poland, smallholder households (of size 4,000-15,000 EUR Standard Output and labour engagement more than 75% Annual Work Unit) are particularly vulnerable, with 43% experiencing some level of food insecurity, including nearly 9% facing severe insecurity [Poczta-Wajda et al. 2020]. In Romania, rural households perceive food availability as a significant factor in food insecurity, more so than food consumption or access [Pastiu et al. 2024]. Additionally, Southern and Eastern European countries, such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Italy, and Spain, are more susceptible to food unaffordability than Germany [Nie and Sousa-Poza 2018].

In Portugal, women, unmarried individuals, and those with lower educational levels and incomes are particularly at risk of food insecurity, especially during economic crises [Maia et al. 2019]. Similarly, Nzinga H. Broussard [2019] highlights that women, who often bear responsibility for household food provision, are more likely than men to experience food insecurity, sometimes compromising their own health by eating less or skipping meals.

CURRENT CHALLENGES TO ENSURE HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Since the 2008 financial crisis, demand for food aid has surged across high-income countries, with food insecurity rising in many European nations [Davis and Baumberg Geiger 2017]. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this trend, increasing food insecurity and reliance on food aid. In Catalonia, Spain, 66% of participants identified as new food aid recipients due to the pandemic, with higher rates of food insecurity observed [Carrillo-Álvarez et al. 2024]. In Italy, food insecurity rose from 8.3% to 16.2% after the pandemic, with Southern households being disproportionately affected [Dondi et al. 2021].

The pandemic also led to poorer nutrition, especially among children, with increased consumption of “junk food” and subsequent weight gain. This unhealthy eating poses risks like obesity and negatively impacts children’s education and development [Tecu et al. 2020, Zaçe et al. 2021]. Moreover, food poverty can affect children’s emotional well-being and social relationships, with feelings of shame often accompanying food aid reliance [Palladino et al. 2024].

Food insecurity is also linked to various health issues. Studies show associations between food insecurity and poor psychological well-being, body dissatisfaction, and a higher drive for thinness among adolescents [Shankar-Krishnan et al. 2021]. Moreover, food insecurity often coexists with depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse, particularly in young adults, suggesting that addressing food insecurity during critical life stages may help prevent mental health problems [Pryor et al. 2016].

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The authors of the existing literature on the subject concluded that food insecurity is a prominent dimension of household poverty, not only in less developed countries but also in European Union countries. Although progress has been made in reducing undernourishment, other forms of malnutrition such as obesity and overweight are on the rise. In the European context, food insecurity means that people affected by this problem cannot afford food of sufficient quality and quantity to stay healthy and participate in society. People from food-insecure households were more likely to have an unhealthy lifestyle profile. Low family income, immigrant households and low levels of education were the main factors associated with food insecurity. The review confirmed the importance of education, gender, age, marital status, household composition and location, country-specific heterogeneity, employment status and income in preventing food insecurity in EU countries. The problem of food insecurity particularly affects women, unmarried individuals, less educated individuals, less skilled workers and lower income families. The 2008 crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in household food insecurity. Parents reported that their children were eating more, there was an increase in junk food consumption and an increase in children's weight, while adolescents were losing weight. Poor nutrition in children has a negative impact on their education and long-term development. Self-reported illness, depression, suicidal ideation, substance use problems and poor self-rated health were also associated with food insecurity.

Despite the increase in publications on household food security in EU countries, this literature remains insufficient. The research is selective, irregular, and unsuitable for international comparisons. Our review has certain limitations, such as: the selection of only one database, namely Scopus; the focus on scholarly articles within the fields of economics, econometrics, finance, social sciences, business, management, accounting, environmental science, and agricultural and biological sciences; the exclusion of grey literature; and the restriction to articles published in English. Nonetheless, it clearly highlights current research and publication trends on household food security in the EU.

Unfortunately, the lack of relevant studies is reflected in the level of food assistance available to those affected by food insecurity. While household food security in the EU is addressed by policymakers through a range of strategies aimed at ensuring access to affordable, safe, and nutritious food for all citizens, along with supporting sustainable agricultural practices, the scope of these programs remains limited compared to the extensive food assistance systems in countries like the USA or Canada. Key initiatives include the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), through which individual member states can implement food assistance programs. However, to develop more effective and comprehensive policies, the first step is a thorough diagnosis of the problem, which, as research in this article has shown, is currently limited in scope.

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WYZWANIA DLA BEZPIECZEŃSTWA ŻYWNOŚCIOWEGO GOSPODARSTW DOMOWYCH – DOŚWIADCZENIA KRAJÓW UNII EUROPEJSKIEJ

Słowa kluczowe: bezpieczeństwo żywnościowe, systematyczny przegląd literatury, PRISMA, COVID-19. kraje UE

ABSTRAKT. Bezpieczeństwo żywnościowe gospodarstw domowych w samowystarczalnym i wysoko rozwiniętym regionie, takim jak UE, jest rzadkim tematem w literaturze naukowej. Ostatnie kryzysy, np. pandemia COVID-19 i zakłócenia na rynku żywności, ożywiły dyskusje na temat bezpieczeństwa żywnościowego w UE. Celem artykułu jest dokonanie przeglądu najnowszych dostępnych publikacji na temat bezpieczeństwa żywnościowego gospodarstw domowych w UE i udzielenie odpowiedzi na pytanie, jakie są wyzwania i problemy krajów UE, które prowadzą do utrzymywania się braku bezpieczeństwa żywnościowego gospodarstw domowych. Przegląd literatury dotyczył artykułów za ostatnie 20 lat i został przeprowadzony przy użyciu metodyki PRISMA. Z analizy wynika, że w warunkach UE brak bezpieczeństwa żywnościowego oznacza, że osoby dotknięte tym problemem nie mogą zapewnić dla siebie żywności o wystarczającej jakości i ilości, aby zachować zdrowie i uczestniczyć w życiu społecznym. Przegląd literatury potwierdził, że w zapobieganiu braku bezpieczeństwa żywnościowego w krajach UE znaczenie mają takie czynniki, jak: wykształcenie, płeć, wiek, stan cywilny, skład i lokalizacja gospodarstwa domowego, heterogeniczność specyficzna dla danego kraju, status zatrudnienia i dochody. Problem braku bezpieczeństwa żywnościowego dotyczy w szczególności kobiet, osób stanu wolnego, osób słabiej wykształconych, mniej wykwalifikowanych pracowników i rodzin o niższych dochodach, a także jest silnie powiązany ze zdrowiem psychicznym.

AUTHORS

AGNIESZKA POCZTA-WAJDA, DR HAB. PROF. UEP

ORCID: 0000-0001-5618-1590

Poznan University of Economics and Business

Institute of Economics

Department of Macroeconomics and Agricultural Economics

e-mail: agnieszka.poczta@ue.poznan.pl

MARTA GUTH, DR HAB. PROF. UEP

ORCID: 0000-0001-9332-1193

Poznan University of Economics and Business

Institute of Economics

Department of Macroeconomics and Agricultural Economics

e-mail: marta.guth@ue.poznan.pl

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