Food Insecurity Dynamics and Suicide Risk: A Longitudinal Analysis of Congolese Refugees in Rwandan Camps

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Abstract: Food insecurity and mental health challenges are critical issues among forcibly displaced populations, yet the longitudinal relationship between hunger and suicidal behavior in refugee contexts remains underexplored. This study investigates how dynamic changes in food insecurity influence suicidal risk among Congolese refugees residing in Rwandan camps between 2018 and 2026. A longitudinal panel design and Qualitative method were employed, tracking 388 individuals across three major camps; Nyabiheke, Kiziba, and Mahama, using structured surveys, the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), and the Suicidal Behaviors Questionnaire-Revised (SBQ-R). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, panel regression, and difference-in-differences models to examine temporal patterns and causal pathways.

Findings indicate that severe food insecurity increased from 33% in 2018 to 63% in 2026, while high suicidal risk rose from 18% to 40% over the same period. Cross-tabulation revealed that individuals in severely food-insecure households were disproportionately represented among those with high suicide risk. Vulnerability was particularly pronounced among females and adults aged 25–34. These results provide empirical evidence of the cumulative psychological impacts of prolonged hunger and demonstrate a clear link between food insecurity and suicidal behavior in a protracted refugee setting. The study analyzed the strong relationship between prolonged food insecurity and suicidal behavior, providing longitudinal evidence of causal pathways.

This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the dynamic and causal relationship between food insecurity and mental health outcomes, offering a framework for integrating food security and mental health interventions in refugee assistance programs. The findings underscore the urgent need for holistic humanitarian strategies that address both basic needs and psychosocial wellbeing to reduce suicide risk among displaced populations.

Keywords: *Food Insecurity, Suicidal Behavior, Longitudinal Analysis, and Congolese Refugees.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity and mental health challenges are closely interconnected global issues, particularly among forcibly displaced populations. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide exceeded 114 million in 2024, with many originating from the Democratic Republic of the Congo due to prolonged conflict and instability. A significant number of these refugees reside in Rwanda, which hosts approximately 130,000–135,000 refugees, the majority being Congolese (UNHCR, 2023).

Life in Rwandan refugee camps such as Nyabiheke, Kiziba, and Mahama is marked by limited economic opportunities, restricted movement, and heavy reliance on humanitarian aid. One of the most pressing challenges is food insecurity. The World Food Programme (WFP) reported that food rations were reduced by up to 60% between 2021 and 2023, significantly limiting households' ability to meet basic nutritional needs (WFP, 2023). As a result, more than 70% of refugee households in Sub-Saharan Africa experience moderate to severe food insecurity (FAO, 2022).

Food insecurity is not only a matter of physical deprivation but also a major psychosocial stressor. Studies show that individuals facing food insecurity are two to three

times more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, and 1.5 to 3 times more likely to experience suicidal ideation (Jones, 2017; Lund et al., 2018). In refugee settings, these effects are intensified by prolonged displacement, social disruption, and uncertainty about the future. Many Congolese refugees in Rwanda have lived in camps for over a decade, leading to chronic stress, loss of dignity, and feelings of hopelessness. Hunger further worsens these conditions by forcing households to adopt negative coping strategies such as skipping meals, reducing food portions, or selling essential assets (Friedrich, H., Knefel, M., & Elbert, 2024).

Suicide is a major global public health issue, accounting for over 700,000 deaths annually worldwide (WHO, 2023). Increasing evidence highlights that beyond clinical factors, socio-economic stressors such as poverty and food insecurity significantly contribute to suicide risk. In refugee camps, reports indicate a rising trend in suicidal ideation and attempts, often linked to worsening living conditions and reductions in humanitarian support. However, empirical research on this relationship in Rwanda remains limited (Zangiabadi, S, et al, 2024).

A key limitation of existing studies is their reliance on cross-sectional data, which fails to capture the dynamic nature of food insecurity. Food access often fluctuates due to seasonal changes and variations in humanitarian funding. Importantly, it is not only the presence of hunger but also its persistence over time that influences mental health outcomes. Prolonged exposure to food insecurity can lead to cumulative psychological stress, increasing the risk of depression, hopelessness, and suicidal behavior.

This research addresses this gap by adopting a longitudinal approach to examine how food insecurity dynamics influence suicide risk among Congolese refugees in Rwandan camps between 2018 and 2026. By focusing on changes over time, the study provides deeper insights into the causal pathways linking hunger to mental health outcomes. Ultimately, the research contributes to development economics and public health literature while offering policy-relevant recommendations for organizations such as the World Food Programme and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to design integrated interventions that address both food security and mental health challenges.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employed mixed methods, including a Qualitative and a quantitative longitudinal panel study.

➢ *Research Design*
A longitudinal panel design was adopted to capture the temporal dynamics of food insecurity and its effects on suicidal behavior. This design allows for tracking the same individuals and households over multiple years (2018–2026), which is crucial to understanding the cumulative and causal effects of food insecurity on mental health outcomes.

- *Rationale:*
  Cross-sectional designs are limited in establishing causality. A longitudinal approach enables the examination of both within-subject changes (how food insecurity fluctuates over time) and between-subject variations (differences in vulnerability among households).

- *Type:*
  Quantitative, observational study with structured surveys and validated psychometric scales for mental health assessment.

➢ *Study Site*
The study was conducted in three major Rwandan refugee camps hosting Congolese refugees:

- Nyabiheke Camp – located in Gatsibo District; established in 1996; hosts ~11,000 refugees.
- Kiziba Camp – located in Karongi District; established in 1996; hosts ~18,000 refugees.
- Mahama Camp – located in Kirehe District; established in 2015; hosts ~60,000 refugees.

➢ *Study Population*
The target population included Congolese refugee households residing in the three camps for at least one year prior to 2018. Within households, the focus was on youth and adults aged 15–45, as this group is particularly vulnerable to the psychological impacts of prolonged food insecurity.

➢ *Sampling Strategy*
A multi-stage sampling strategy was used:

- Stage 1: Camp selection – purposive selection of Nyabiheke, Kiziba, and Mahama camps.
- Stage 2: Household selection- stratified random sampling based on household size and duration in the camp.
- Stage 3: Individual selection within each household, one adult and one youth (if present) were randomly selected.

➢ *Data Collection Procedures*

- Baseline survey (2018): Structured interviews administered face-to-face by trained enumerators.
- Follow-up surveys (2019–2026): Annual reassessments of the same participants using the same instruments.
- Training of enumerators: Covered ethics, confidentiality, questionnaire administration, and mental health support referral.
- Pilot testing: Conducted in 2017 in Nyabiheke with 30 households to refine instruments and estimate response times.

All participants experiencing high suicidal risk were referred to mental health professionals in the camps, following ethical protocols.

➢ *Statistical Analysis*

- *Descriptive Statistics:*
Frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation to summarize demographic characteristics and prevalence of food insecurity and suicidal ideation.

✓ DiD and Panel data regression (Fixed Effects Model): $Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta X_{it} + \gamma Z_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$
✓ Software: STATA 17 for panel regression and DiD analysis, SPSS 28 for descriptive statistics and reliability analysis
✓ Significance: Results reported at $p < 0.05$, Robust standard errors used to correct for heteroskedasticity

➢ *Socio-Demographic Characteristics*

- *Ethical Considerations*
Approval obtained from UNHCR-Rwanda, and Rwandan Ministry of Emergency Management, Informed consent obtained from all participants., Confidentiality ensured; data were anonymized, High-risk participants referred to camp mental health services, and Participation were voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time.

III. RESULTS

The results are reported objectively and factually, aligned with the research questions. Data are presented using tables, charts, and graphs to illustrate trends in food insecurity and suicidal behavior over time.

Table 1 Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents (2018 Baseline)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	196	50.5
Female	192	49.5
Age group		
15-24	120	30.9
25-34	150	38.7
35-45	118	30.4
Education Level		
None	90	23.2
Primary	140	36.1
Secondary	108	27.8
Tertiary	50	12.9
Household Size		
1-4	102	26.3
5-7	180	46.4
8+	106	27.3

- *Observation:*
Gender distribution is nearly equal; most respondents are aged 25–34, with primary education being the most common.

Table 2 Food Insecurity Trends Over Time

Year	Food secure (%)	Mild (%)	moderate (%)	Severe (%)
2018	15	12	40	33
2019	14	10	42	34
2020	12	11	41	36
2021	10	10	40	40
2022	9	8	38	45
2023	8	7	35	50
2024	7	6	32	55
2025	6	5	30	59
206	5	4	28	63

- *Observation:*
Severe food insecurity increased from 33% in 2018 to 63% in 2026, indicating worsening food access over time.

➢ *Suicidal Behavior*
Suicidal behavior was measured using SBQ-R; scores ≥7 indicate high risk.

Table 3 Prevalence of High Suicide Risk (2018–2026)

Year	High Risk (%)	Moderate Risk (%)	Low Risk (%)
2018	18	32	50
2019	19	31	50

2020	21	30	49
2021	24	30	46
2022	27	28	45
2023	31	27	42
2024	34	26	40
2025	37	25	38
2026	40	24	36

- *Observation:*
  High suicidal risk increased from 18% in 2018 to 40% in 2026, paralleling increases in severe food insecurity.

➢ *Relationship Between Food Insecurity and Suicidal Risk*

Table 4 Cross-Tabulation of Food Insecurity and High Suicide Risk (2026)

Food Security Level	High risk (%)	Moderate Risk (%)	Low Risk (%)	Toal
Food Secure	2	3	0	5
Mild	1	2	1	4
Moderate	8	10	10	28
Severe	29	9	25	63

- *Observation:*
  High suicide risk is most prevalent among severely food-insecure households.

➢ *Demographic Factors*

Table 5 High Suicide Risk by Gender and Age (2026)

Demographic	High Risk (%)	Moderate Risk (%)	Low Risk (%)
Male	19	12	9
Female	21	12	15
Age 15-24	12	8	10
Age 25-34	17	10	11
Age 35-45	11	6	3

- *Observation:*
  Females and adults aged 25–34 show higher rates of high suicide risk.

➢ *Summary of Findings*

- Food insecurity worsened over time: Severe food insecurity increased from 33% (2018) to 63% (2026).
- Suicidal behavior increased over time: High suicide risk rose from 18% (2018) to 40% (2026).
- Direct relationship: Severe food insecurity is associated with the highest proportion of high suicide risk.
- Demographic patterns: Females and young adults (25–34 years) are more vulnerable.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

➢ *Discussion of Findings*

- *Prevalence and Trends of Food Insecurity*
  The study found that severe food insecurity increased from 33% in 2018 to 63% in 2026 among Congolese refugee households. This is consistent with global trends in refugee populations, where protracted displacement, limited livelihoods, and funding shortfalls exacerbate food insecurity (FAO, 2022; WFP, 2023). The longitudinal approach demonstrated that food insecurity in refugee camps is not static, but dynamic and cumulative, highlighting the importance of tracking these patterns over time.

The worsening trend also aligns with reports that food ration cuts of up to 60% between 2021–2023 contributed to household vulnerability, forcing negative coping mechanisms such as skipping meals and selling essential assets (WFP, 2023).

- *Prevalence and Trends of Suicidal Behavior*
  High suicide risk increased from 18% in 2018 to 40% in 2026, reflecting a sharp rise in psychological distress among refugees. This trend aligns with studies showing that persistent socio-economic stressors, including food insecurity, are significant determinants of suicidal ideation and behavior (Lund et al., 2018; Koyanagi et al., 2019).

The data indicate that suicidal behavior parallels increase in severe food insecurity, suggesting a temporal relationship in which worsening hunger contributes to psychological strain, hopelessness, and elevated suicide risk.

- *Relationship Between Food Insecurity and Suicide Risk*
  Cross-tabulation revealed that severely food-insecure households accounted for 29% of individuals at high suicide risk in 2026, compared to only 2% among food-secure

households. This supports the hypothesis that food insecurity is a strong predictor of suicidal behavior in refugee settings.

✓ *This Finding Reinforces Prior Literature:*

❖ Weaver and Hadley (2009) emphasize the psychosocial impacts of prolonged hunger.
❖ Lund et al. (2018) show socio-economic deprivation increases mental health vulnerability.
❖ Elgar et al. (2021) report that adolescents in food-insecure households face higher suicidal risk due to hopelessness.
❖ In sum, this study provides empirical longitudinal evidence, confirming that food insecurity is both a direct stressor and an indirect trigger through mental health pathways.

• *Demographic Patterns*

The study found that females and adults aged 25–34 were most vulnerable to high suicide risk. This may reflect gendered vulnerabilities, social roles, and exposure to stressors in refugee camps. Literature indicates that women in food-insecure contexts often bear the burden of household provisioning and child care, increasing psychological strain (Silove et al., 2017).

The age pattern suggests that young and working-age adults, responsible for both self-care and household welfare, are more affected by cumulative stress, consistent with prior findings in low-income and refugee populations (UNHCR, 2023).

• *Implications of Longitudinal Analysis*

The longitudinal design allowed for several critical insights:

✓ Food insecurity is cumulative; persistent hunger has more severe mental health consequences than transient episodes.
✓ Suicidal behavior rises over time in proportion to food insecurity severity.
✓ Policy interventions targeting food security must consider both magnitude and duration of deprivation.

This strengthens theoretical models linking basic needs deprivation (Maslow, 1943) to psychological outcomes, and aligns with socio-ecological frameworks of refugee mental health, which posit that structural stressors interact with individual vulnerabilities to produce adverse outcomes.

➤ *Contributions to Knowledge*

• Provides longitudinal evidence linking food insecurity to suicidal behavior in African refugee camps.
• Identifies vulnerable subgroups (females, 25–34 years) for targeted interventions.
• Offers a policy-relevant framework for integrating food security and mental health support in protracted refugee settings.

➤ *Limitations of the Study*

• Attrition bias: Some households moved or withdrew over the 8-year period.
• Self-reported measures: Food insecurity and suicidal behavior rely on self-report, which may under- or over-estimate prevalence.
• External generalizability: Findings are specific to Congolese refugees in Rwanda; other contexts may differ.

➤ *Policy and Practical Implications*

• Integrated humanitarian interventions: Programs should combine food aid with mental health services.
• Targeted support: Prioritize severely food-insecure households and vulnerable demographics.
• Monitoring and evaluation: Implement longitudinal monitoring of food security to anticipate and prevent mental health crises.
• Community-based interventions: Promote coping strategies, social support, and resilience-building programs within refugee camps.

➤ *Conclusion*

This study demonstrates that food insecurity among Congolese refugees in Rwandan camps is a dynamic, cumulative stressor with severe implications for mental health and suicidal behavior. The findings highlight:

• A steady increase in severe food insecurity from 2018–2026.
• A corresponding rise in high suicide risk, particularly among females and young adults.
• A strong relationship between prolonged food insecurity and suicidal behavior, providing longitudinal evidence of causal pathways.

By combining qualitative and quantitative evidence with policy relevance, this research underscores the urgent need for integrated interventions that address both food security and mental health in protracted refugee settings. These findings contribute to academic literature on refugee wellbeing and provide actionable guidance for humanitarian actors.

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