The global water crisis is among the most urgent issues of our time. Water insecurity, or the inability to reliably access and benefit from safe water, threatens human health and wellbeing, economic productivity, political stability, and the environment. As such, the World Economic Forum has listed “water crises” as among the top 10 most likely and impactful global risks.

Our ability to address this crisis could be significantly improved with better data. Currently, no agency collects nationally representative data on people’s experiences with water access and use. By analogy, measuring people’s experiences with food access and use—their food insecurity—has revealed that millions of Americans and billions worldwide are struggling with food. There is reason to believe that water insecurity may be both similarly prevalent and a driver of poor physical, mental, and economic well-being, both domestically and globally.

A new way to measure water insecurity
Until recently, no tool existed to comparably measure water insecurity. The Household Water InSecurity (HWISE) Scale fill this gap. It is a series of 12 questions that simply quantifies experiences of water insecurity in just 3 minutes. Answers are summed to generate a numerical score that is comparable across geographies, climates, and cultures. This intuitive indicator is already used by these and other organizations to guide decision-making and ensure accountability.

The HWISE Scale generates actionable data for policy making to:
1. Benchmark the prevalence of water insecurity, e.g. with Gallup World Poll.
2. Identify the neediest populations, to effectively target resources and care.
3. Assess the role of water insecurity in a variety of outcomes, from food insecurity and infectious diseases like COVID, to economic productivity and depression.
5. Develop policies and support effective evidence-based decision making that holds stakeholders accountable.
Opportunities for US global leadership in water research, development, and diplomacy

The United States has long been a thought leader in food security, e.g. the flagship program Feed the Future has touched countless lives. We can also become a leader in water security policy and practice with these 3 investments:

1. **Strategic commitments to data** on water access and use, e.g. mandating measurement of water insecurity in development projects, benchmarking global water security in Gallup World Poll and USAID’s DHS surveys.

2. **Integrating food and water security policies.** With data available on access and use of both food and water, we can make smarter, more efficient decisions about where to allocate resources to mitigate food and water insecurity.

3. **Setting goals and allocating resources** for water security alongside those for food security.

The impact and goodwill that such work can engender is sure to pay dividends by improving the health and economic productivity of millions, if not billions.

*The Household Water Insecurity Experiences (HWISE) Scale was created thanks to U.S. federal and international support. Thanks to this generosity, the HWISE Scale is now freely available for global use.*

For more information, contact Prof. Sera Young at sera.young@northwestern.edu (847) 467-2174 or visit the HWISE website www.hwise.org.

The hidden burdens of water insecurity

Water insecurity contributes to the 500,000+ annual from diarrhea. But this is just one of many negative consequences of water insecurity. Water is needed for almost all aspects of our lives, such that the impacts of water insecurity touch us in myriad, far-reaching ways.

Our work has shown that households that are water insecure are more likely to be food insecure. Water insecurity is also associated with greater stress & depression, worse HIV outcomes, poor infant feeding, more domestic violence, and less hand washing, a key issue in the time of COVID.

Further, the burden of water insecurity is borne unequally by women, because they are typically responsible for water acquisition as well as water-intensive chores like laundry, cooking, and childcare.