



FOUNDATION FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

FIRST FOCUS POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: FOOD SECURITY

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ABOUT THIS SERIES:

When the economy takes a downturn, it often hits the most vulnerable children and families the hardest. The recent recession is no exception. In their paper, “The Effect of Recession on Child Well-Being: A Synthesis of the Evidence by PolicyLab, Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia,” Katherine Sell and colleagues at PolicyLab at The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) Research Institute synthesize evidence of the effects of the recent and prior recessions on child well-being.

Among their takeaway messages is that it takes years post-recession for families to bounce back to pre-recession income levels, and low-income families take even longer to rebound. A second key finding is that public programs play a pivotal role in blunting the negative impacts of a recession.

As the economy weakens and state and local revenues dwindle, the need for public programs grows. The federal government can help by bolstering public programs and supporting states in their efforts to meet the needs of children and families.

This series of policy briefs will consider the role of public programs in the process of economic recovery and provide recommendations for improving the provision of services to vulnerable children and families as we bounce back from the most recent recession.

Poor nutrition resulting from food insecurity can have long-term developmental, educational and health consequences for children. For instance, children living in food insecure households are more likely to have a history of poor health, hospitalizations and iron deficiency anemia.¹

Sell and colleagues note that in 2008, one year into the recession, 21 percent of all households with children were estimated to be food insecure, the highest percentage since 1995 when yearly measurement started. And, the number of children living in food insecure households went from 17 percent in 2007 to 23 percent in 2008, making it the most dramatic spike in food insecurity since the USDA began measuring in 1995.

Food and nutrition assistance programs have been responsive to the increasing demand resulting from the recent economic downturn.^{2,3} Participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), National School Lunch programs and other USDA food and nutrition assistance programs is up since the start of the recession.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) provided a much needed infusion of funds for SNAP – a lifeline for low-income families. As of April 2009, ARRA funding enhanced benefits for SNAP recipients and in turn SNAP households saw a 13.6 increase in their monthly benefits.⁴ The Act also included approximately \$300 million over two years to help states cope with the administrative demands associated with rising caseloads.⁵ However, recent reports suggest that even with the additional administrative funds, some states have had to cut back on staff, potentially hindering program effectiveness.⁶



While SNAP provides the majority of nutritional assistance in the United States, school-based nutritional programs play an important role in the food security of school-aged children. Participation in the USDA National School Lunch Program (NSLP) has increased during the recent recession. In addition, for children who are not yet of school age, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides nutritional education and support to low-income pregnant and postpartum women and their children.

Reauthorizing Child Nutrition Programs

The recession has exacerbated child hunger throughout the nation and while the inclusion of child nutrition programs in the FY 2010 Continuing Resolution was critical to address their September 30th expiration, a failure to fully reauthorize child nutrition legislation before the end of this year will be detrimental to the health of America's children. The upcoming reauthorization of the Child Nutrition bill can play a pivotal role in ensuring that our food safety-net programs meet the growing needs of children and families. Specifically, we urge that the following provisions be included in the reauthorization.

- Allow for kids in foster care to automatically be eligible for free school meals – a critical addition to populations who are ‘categorically eligible’ for assistance;
- Critical provisions that establish demonstration projects to expand the “direct certification process,” through which school districts use information from state welfare or food stamp offices to certify children to receive free meals. Under the Healthy, Hunger -Free Kids Act (S.3307), which is currently moving through Congress, children on Medicaid in select Congressional districts would be directly certified, while benchmarks and incentive bonuses for states to improve their direct certification methods would be established;
- Make school lunches healthier by increasing reimbursement rates;
- Modernization and improvements to the successful Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants, and Children program by implementing an Electronic Benefit Transfer, while also extending WIC’s current 6 month certification period to a 1 year certification period;
- Expansion of universal meal service options through the addition of community eligibility to allow schools in high-poverty areas to offer free meals to all students without collecting paper applications;
- Simplify and reduce paperwork requirements for all Child and Adult Care Food Programs, cutting the red tape associated with providing children meals in day care settings;
- Expansion of the Afterschool Meal component of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) to allow children in all 50 states to receive a third meal or snack, this will help to feed children who are in child care for longer hours while their parents are working;
- Provides the Secretary of Agriculture with the authority to establish national nutrition standards for all foods sold in schools.
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Other Needed Nutrition Improvements

Although not included in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, we urge Congress and the Administration to include the following additional provisions in future legislative vehicles:

- Expansion of the “direct certification process” to include children who are on Medicaid in all school districts;
- Allow the afterschool, summer nutrition, and child care food programs to use area eligibility when 40 percent of the children in the area are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals (down from the current 50 percent requirement) this will reach more children in need;
- Addition of a provision for grants to support universal and in-classroom school breakfast programs to increase participation and reduce stigma that can prevent children from accessing the breakfast program;
- Congress and the Administration should continue to explore alternative vehicles to establish the weekend feeding pilot and expand the year-round simplification of summer and afterschool programs.

Fixing the SNAP Benefits Cliff

A final recommendation is to fix the current benefits cliff that SNAP recipients will face due to a proposed cut back on benefit levels as passed in H.R. 1586 - which is paid for in part by cutting short a boost in SNAP benefits provided in ARRA. SNAP benefits would be reduced beginning in April of 2014. This cliff could take place earlier as current child nutrition legislation proposes a cut that would begin in November 2013 instead of April 2014 to partially offset the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act. ARRA had been written to avoid a dramatic drop in SNAP benefits from one month to the next. The increased benefits were intended to continue until the automatic annual inflation adjustments in regular SNAP benefits increased their value to match the ARRA levels. The ARRA SNAP boosts were critical and continue to be vitally important for vulnerable families as we bounce back from the recent recession. Although the SNAP cut is not ideal it is imperative to pass child nutrition legislation before the end of the year despite the SNAP offset. Regardless of when the SNAP cut takes effect, advocates, Congress and the Administration will need to work together to fix the future benefits cliff.

Endnotes

- 1 Perry, A., Ettinger de Cuba, S., Cook, J., Frank, D.A., Meyers, A., Cutts, D., Chilton, M., Black, M., Casey, P. (February 2007). *Food Stamps as Medicine: A new perspective on children's health*. Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program [C-SNAP].
- 2 Pavetti, L. & Rosenbaum, D. (2010). *Creating a Safety Net that Works When the Economy Doesn't: The Role of the Food Stamp and TANF Programs*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
- 3 Zedlewski, S.R., Mon, E.Y.(2009). *Many low-income working families turn to the supplemental nutrition assistance program for help*. The Urban Institute.
- 4 Aber L, Chaudry A. Low-income children, their families and the great recession: What's next in policy? *Paper presented at the The Georgetown University and Urban Institute Conference on Reducing Poverty and Economic Distress after ARRA*. 2010.
- 5 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (2009).
- 6 Rosenbaum, D. (2010). *The food stamp program is efficient and effective*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.