

Issue At A Glance:

Childhood Food Insecurity and School Meals

Millions of food insecure children receive a large amount of their caloric intake from school meal programs. There must be an emphasis on protecting federal nutrition standards and expanding the eligibility criteria of the school meal programs to ensure that every child has access to healthy meals during school.

Food Insecurity in Children

Food insecurity occurs when a household has a lack of access or uncertainty of access to adequate nutritional food.¹ According to 2018 data by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), nearly 6 million children lived in food-insecure households and one in seven households with children were affected by food insecurity. More than 200,000 children lived in households with very low food security which means that the children experienced disrupted eating patterns and reduced quantity of food. The Brookings Institute finds that while the share of food insecure households with children is declining at a national level, it still remains above the 2007 pre-recession level.² Moreover, many states are experiencing statistically significant increases (between the 2005-07 school years and 2014-16 school years) in the percent of children in food-insecure households.²

This brief provides an overview of the effects of food insecurity on children and ways that school meal programs can be expanded and strengthened to ensure access to food for these children.

Key Legislation for School Meals³

Richard B Russell National School Lunch Act of 1946

A federal law that created the National School Lunch Program to provide low-cost/free school lunches to eligible students

Child Nutrition Act of 1966

A federal law that created the School Breakfast Program to provide low-cost/free school breakfast to children in public and non-profit schools and child care settings

Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010

A federal statute to reauthorize funding for child nutrition programs and set nutrition standards

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The Effects of Childhood Food Insecurity

According to the Food Research & Action Center, food insecurity can affect social skills, mental health, and school engagement in addition to physical wellbeing.⁴ Children who are food insecure are more likely to lack self-control, engage in physical fights with other children in school, and face disciplinary actions. Food insecurity also increases the likelihood that a child will have anxiety, irritability, and depression. Finally, food insecure children are more likely to be tardy or absent from school and less likely to stay focused, motivated, or engaged in school activities, leading to lower test scores and worse academic performance than their food secure peers.⁴

Food insecurity can also increase a child's likelihood of obesity and obesity-related conditions due to consumption of unhealthy, inexpensive foods. These conditions include cardiovascular disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, stroke, osteoporosis, and oral health issues. Moreover, food insecurity can cause fatigue and increase a child's chances of becoming ill due to a suppressed immune response.⁵ Food insecurity can also cause nutritional deficiencies, leading to conditions such as anemia. Finally, food insecurity affects a child's ability to safely take medications that need to be taken with food.

The Causes of Food Insecurity

Many factors affect household food insecurity and include the lack of supermarkets within ten miles of one's home in rural areas or within one mile of one's home in urban areas; lack of adequate transportation to the grocery store; low household income; and unforeseen events (e.g., emergency hospital visit or loss of job) leading to unexpected costs.⁵

A 2014 report by the Aspen Institute found that the following are factors specifically associated with *childhood* food insecurity⁶:

- Poverty, minority race, and low socioeconomic status
- Adult caregivers' mental and physical health
- Marital status of the head of the household
- Immigration status
- Incarceration of parents
- Childcare arrangements

School Meal Programs⁵

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP): In 2018, the NSLP operated in roughly 100,000 schools and residential child care programs, providing low-cost or free lunch to nearly 30 million children. Any student is allowed to receive lunch through the program. Eligible students can receive free lunches if they live in households with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) and students can receive reduced-price lunches if they live in households with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the FPL.

The School Breakfast Program (SBP): In the 2018-2019 school year, 14.6 million children participated in the SBP. As with the NSLP, children are categorically eligible for free meals if they participate in another federal assistance program such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Policy Proposals to Improve School Meals

Children who participate in both school meal programs can receive up to 58 percent of their daily caloric intake at school.⁷ Therefore, it is important to ensure that the eligibility criteria are capturing all the children who need the program and the federal nutrition standards ensure that children are exposed to healthy, nutritious meal options.

According to the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic (HFLPC), millions of eligible children are not receiving lunch through the program.⁸ Moreover, roughly half of the children who are eligible and receiving lunch are not receiving breakfast. To increase participation, HFLPC recommends allowing students to be directly certified to receive free school meals based on participation in means-tested programs such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Medicaid. Direct certification is a paperless process that automatically enrolls students participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) but not other programs, therefore leaving out millions of children who would otherwise be eligible.⁹ Without direct certification, families have to submit separate paper applications which pose as barriers.

Another recommendation is to remove the reduced-price meal category altogether. One reason is that the 30 cent payments for breakfast and 40 cent payments for lunch still pose financial barriers for parents and cause administrative burdens for schools as they are required to track the number of students that qualify and participate, collect payments, and manage delinquent accounts for unpaid meals.¹⁰ In 2006, schools that eliminated the reduced-price category observed an average of 44 percent increase in participation.¹¹



Did you know?

To ban the practice of “lunch-shaming” in which students who had student meal debt were provided with an alternative lunch, the state of California passed Senate Bill 265 to guarantee all students access to standard lunch regardless of unpaid meal fees.¹²

Two additional recommendations include providing universal free breakfast to all students regardless of income and providing innovative breakfast programs for students who cannot eat breakfast at the normal breakfast time due to logistical challenges such as getting to school on time.^{8,11}

Currently, school districts are operating at a small deficit when it comes to providing nutritional school meals that match the federal standards. Despite this, more than 90 percent of the participating schools have been able to adhere to the national standards. In order to improve participation and ease financial burden on schools, the HFLPC further recommends the following strategies for strengthening school meal programs: 1) increasing reimbursement rates for schools providing the meals; 2) expanding farm-to-school programs; and 3) increasing grants for upgrading school kitchen equipment and training staff.⁸

Protecting School Meals

In 2010, the Obama Administration passed the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 to reauthorize funding for school nutrition programs and to set federal nutrition standards to improve nutritional guidelines for school meals. The resulting guidelines required that schools meet nutrition standards for weekly calories, vegetables, fruits, grains, flavored milks and sodium. This year, the Trump Administration issued a final rule to lower these standards, citing increased waste and students rejecting food.¹³ The USDA's own study, however, indicated that there was a positive correlation between the 2010 nutrition standards and participation in the school lunch program.¹⁴ Given that many low-income children rely on these programs and that these programs have positive impacts on the future health and economic outcomes of participating children, it is crucial to ensure that the school meal programs continue to be expanded and held to high nutritional standards. By protecting school meals, we will protect a significant contributor to the nutrition and wellbeing of millions of American children who otherwise do not have access to nutritious food.

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Did you know?

There are options for children to receive meals when they are not in school:

- The USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program offers snacks and suppers for afterschool programs and day care centers
- The Summer Food Service Program provides meals for low-income children during the summer
- The Backpack Food Program offers easy-to-prepare take-home meals



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