

# HIDDEN FOOD STRESS

UNDERREPORTED IN NATIONAL DATA:

FAMILIES STRESSED ABOUT AFFORDING ENOUGH FOOD

AT RISK FOR POOR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Many families across the country experience stress over whether or not they will have enough resources to feed their families, technically known as “marginal food security.” We refer to marginal food security as **“hidden food stress”**. Those who are marginally food-secure worry about having consistent access to healthy food whereas food-secure families are confident that they have access to enough quality food. Though they are categorized as food secure in national datasets, research demonstrates that families that fall into the marginally food secure category actually face health risks similar to those faced by families experiencing food insecurity.

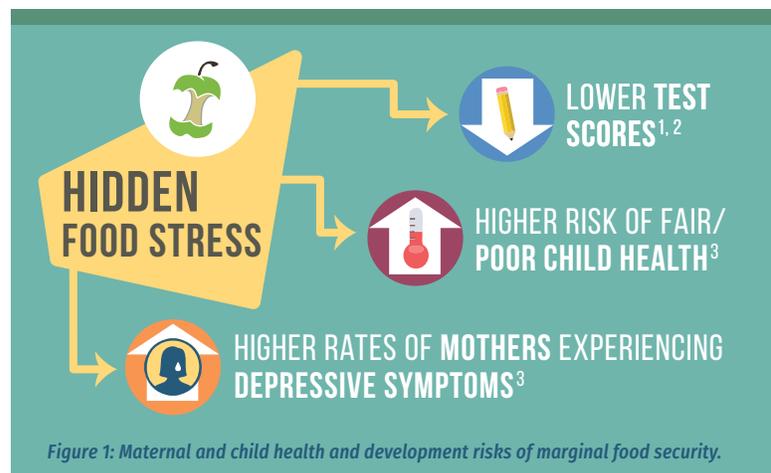


Figure 1: Maternal and child health and development risks of marginal food security.

Compared to fully food-secure families with children, health risks for marginally food-secure families include: <sup>3</sup>

**CHILDREN ARE 56%** —MORE LIKELY TO BE—  
IN FAIR OR POOR HEALTH

**MOTHERS ARE ALMOST 3X** —MORE LIKELY TO HAVE—  
DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS

**CHILDREN ARE 60%** —MORE LIKELY TO BE—  
AT DEVELOPMENTAL RISK

## FOOD INSECURITY AND HIDDEN FOOD STRESS PERSIST

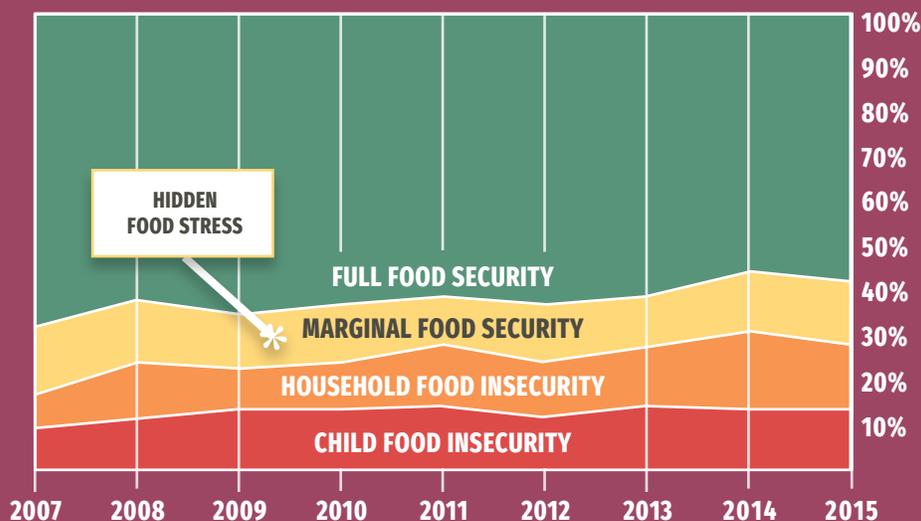


Figure 2: Food Insecurity and Hidden Food Stress Increased from 2007 to 2015 in families with young children. Source: Children's HealthWatch Data, 2007 - 2015.

Figure 2 illustrates how the trends in food security among households with young children have fluctuated since 2007. From 2007 to 2015, hidden food stress (marginal food security) remained a significant problem, fluctuating between 1 in 6 (14.2%) and 1 in 7 (12.2%) households with young children, based on Children's HealthWatch data. These families have not previously been tracked in national data. The proportion of households who are fully food secure — and therefore more likely to be healthy — decreased from 69% in 2007 to 63.9% in 2015.

Food security is impacted by changes in the economy (i.e., fluctuations in employment, food, housing, energy, and transportation costs) and federal/state policy — particularly changes to the structure or benefit level of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation’s largest nutrition program.

Realizing the negative impact of food insecurity at even low levels, Children’s HealthWatch validated the **Hunger Vital Sign™**, a two-question screener, which asks about food security. The Hunger Vital Sign™ is an effective clinical tool to help identify families that are marginally food secure and at risk of household or child food insecurity.<sup>6</sup>

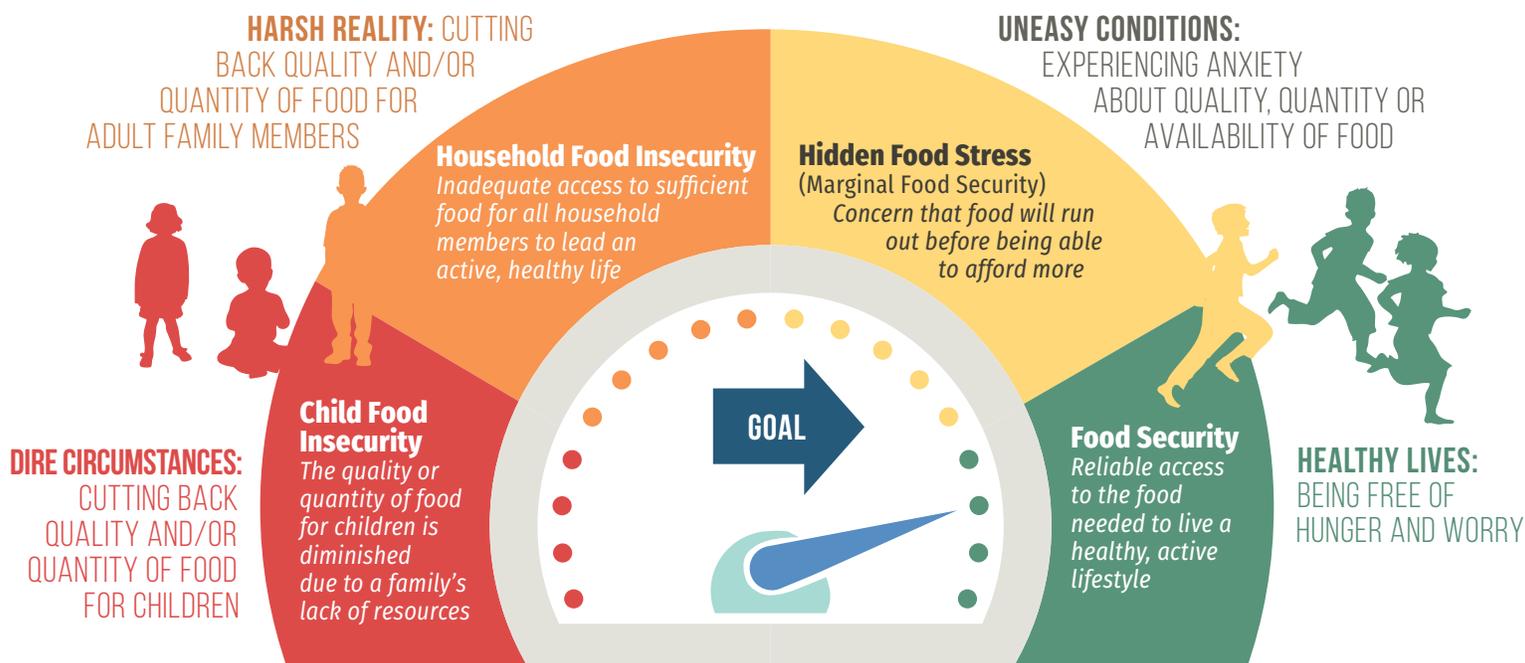


Figure 3: Moving families toward hunger-free by increasing family resources available for food

## DOCTOR-APPROVED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Reducing the stress families experience when they do not have enough resources for consistent access to healthful food requires a deeper understanding of the issue and comprehensive policy solutions that alleviate economic hardship and empower families to become and stay food secure. The American Academy of Pediatrics and others also recommend screening for and implementing strategies to address food insecurity, including hidden food stress, among families with children.<sup>7</sup>

### Solutions for improving food security include:

1. Report nationally on marginal food security, including from data collected by the USDA. Currently, families who are marginally food secure are categorized as food secure. Given the negative outcomes associated with marginal food security, these families should be counted separately from food secure families in order to better understand the magnitude of the issue and identify solutions for reducing food stressors among this population.
2. Help those who can work to find good jobs through effective job placement programs, and ensure those who cannot have the resources they need to be food secure. Ensure workers earn sufficient wages and are able to access assistance programs, when needed, to consistently afford household expenses, including food, housing, utilities, and child care without having to worry about making trade-offs between basic needs.
3. Subsidize healthful foods and make fresh, affordable foods widely available through the establishment of food trusts and healthy food prescription programs so families are not forced to cut the quality of food when resources are scarce.
4. Increase the SNAP benefit to reflect the real cost of a healthy diet by setting benefit amounts based on the cost of the USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans in line with recommendations from the Institute of Medicine.<sup>8</sup>

### Sources

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