

Treatment Plan for Hunger

SNAP, WIC, and the Community Eligibility Provision

The rapidly developing brains and bodies of children in the first years of life and throughout childhood depend on healthful, adequate nutrition. Children whose families have enough healthy food throughout early childhood have better health and development outcomes compared to similar children whose families struggled to provide enough food. There is a large body of research demonstrating the importance of consistent access to nutritious food to support the health and well-being of children from early childhood through adulthood, which would result in substantial long term savings in health care and education.^{1,2}

Food insecurity, like any serious illness, threatens the health and development of our nation's children.^{3,4} Fortunately, ways to address food insecurity and prevent its reoccurrence exist. We have the opportunity to improve the health of millions of people nationwide by increasing their ability to afford healthful food. Recognizing the public health necessity of providing families with children resources to purchase food, the United States government has programs to provide children and their families with nutritional support. Programs including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) are critical remedies that have been shown to reduce food insecurity and improve health and development in early childhood.^{5,6,7} However, inadequate funding and participation barriers have limited these programs' ability to alleviate food insecurity and effectively treat households with children. While the growing economy has contributed to reductions in food insecurity,⁸ there is still an urgent need and significant opportunity to make critical policy changes that will further such reductions and better protect families in future economic downturns.



About the *What If?* Series

Through the What If Project, Children's HealthWatch is providing real and specific models of better policy futures, working toward our vision of a future where all children's basic needs are met, sustaining their health and enabling them to reach their potential.

For this brief, Children's HealthWatch asked,

"What if we optimized key child nutrition programs to reduce food insecurity?"



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Children's HealthWatch is a nonpartisan network of pediatricians and public health researchers with the mission to improve the health and development of young children by informing policies that address and alleviate economic hardships.



Food Security: Reliable access to the food needed to live a healthy, active life

Marginal Food Security: Concern that food will run out before being able to afford more

Household Food Insecurity: Inadequate access to sufficient food for all household members to lead an active, healthy life

Child Food Insecurity: Quality or quantity of food for children is diminished due to a family's lack of resources

Previous research from Children's HealthWatch showed food insecurity among families with children under age 4 cost the United States \$1.2 billion in health-related expenditures in 2015 dollars.⁹ New research from Children's HealthWatch uses innovative simulation modelling techniques to demonstrate that SNAP, WIC, and NSLP are key components of a treatment plan for food insecurity.

Findings and Policy Solutions

We recommend a set of strategies to ensure all young children and their siblings have reliable access to food. Through simulation modelling, Children's HealthWatch research shows the potential impact of positive changes to SNAP and WIC—and continued implementation of a robust CEP—for families experiencing food insecurity.*

Each of the following situations reflects the policy examined in isolation; the results given here do not reflect the potentially larger synergistic effects of combining two or more of these policies, though this is of interest for future work. These findings are conservative estimates of the impact of each policy—the true impacts may be greater. For example, these percentages do not quantify the shift from more severe to less severe categories of food insecurity, though this would be a certain side effect of these policy changes.

Increase the SNAP benefit to reflect the real cost of a healthy diet

The U.S. Department of Agriculture utilizes the following four food plans to represent a household diet for four different cost levels: the Thrifty Food Plan (minimal cost), Low-Cost Food Plan, Moderate-Cost Food Plan, and Liberal Food Plan (highest cost). Designed to provide a nutritious diet at a minimal cost during short-term emergencies, the Thrifty Food Plan is intended to help families temporarily manage their market basket purchases during times of economic uncertainty, but as a treatment to alleviate food insecurity it is ineffective.^{10,11} Nevertheless, SNAP benefits are currently calculated based on the Thrifty Food Plan. We recommend replacing the Thrifty Food Plan with the Low-Cost Food Plan when calculating a household's SNAP benefit allotment to reflect a more realistic and sustainable cost of a healthy diet and ensure a more effective dose of SNAP so families are not forced to cut the quality or quantity of food due to constrained resources.

If SNAP benefits were calculated based on the Low-Cost Food Plan, SNAP-participant families with children would have an 8% would shift into a higher income-to-poverty-ratio** category due to an increase in purchasing power for food. That increase would result in **5.3% of currently food-insecure people living in SNAP-participating families with children becoming food secure** over the course of one year. This means that nearly half-a-million people experiencing food insecurity despite receiving SNAP benefits would get enough of a boost in the amount of money they are able to spend on food to provide nutritious meals for all family members to live active, healthy lives. Moreover, others would see a reduction in the severity of their food insecurity.

Expand WIC eligibility to age 6 to ensure continuity of care

WIC supports young children and their families by providing increased resources for nutritious food. Currently, WIC provides nutrition services for children up to a child's fifth birthday, when many children enroll in kindergarten and become eligible for school meals. However, many children do not enter school until after age five—as late as their sixth birthday—and are left ineligible for both WIC and school meals, thus experiencing a gap in treatment and putting them and their families at increased risk of food insecurity. We recommend expanding WIC to age 6 to ensure children receive an adequate course of nutritional support.

If WIC age-eligibility were increased to age 6, 2.2% of newly eligible 5 year olds' families would increase their food purchasing power into the next higher income-to-poverty-ratio category.** This change would result in a **1.5% reduction in food insecurity among WIC-eligible food-insecure 5 year olds and their families.** This means 13,208 people in families, including 3,221 five-year olds, will become food secure. Other families would also increase their food purchasing power.

Ensure high-poverty school districts provide low-income children with healthy meals

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a powerful tool that allows school districts with high-poverty schools to provide all students with breakfast, lunch, and afterschool meals at no charge to students by identifying eligible students without requiring an application.*** By eliminating the administrative burdens of screening and verifying large numbers of individual applications, CEP decreases school and federal administrative costs, increasing both efficiency and participation in school meal programs. Further, these programs increase access to food for children in food-insecure households^{12,13} by simplifying how students access free meals, and eliminating the student stigma associated with not paying for meals.¹⁴ We recommend maximizing school meal participation by maintaining community eligibility standards at 40% and continuing to ensure that all eligible schools utilize this provision to provide meals to students.

The National School Lunch Program enabled 13.4% of all children whose family food purchasing power was increased by their participation in the NSLP at the time when the CEP threshold was set at 40% to shift into a higher income-to-poverty ratio category.** In 2014, **1.71% of all food-insecure children participating in the NSLP became food secure because of the program.** NSLP provided between 122,900 to 154,700 students living in food-insecure families with access to nutritious lunches, boosting their families' abilities to purchase additional meals: making nearly one-quarter of a million people food secure.

Summary of Findings

1. If SNAP benefits were increased by basing the calculation on the Low Cost Food Plan, SNAP-participant families with children would have an 8% increase in purchasing power for food. This would result in 5.3% of currently food-insecure people in families with children becoming food secure.
2. If WIC age-eligibility were increased to age 6, 2.2% of newly eligible 5 year olds' families would increase their food purchasing power. This change would result in 1.5% of WIC-eligible food-insecure 5 year olds and their families becoming food secure.
3. Through school meal programs, 13.4% and 13.1% of all children whose family food purchasing power was increased by their participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP), respectively, shifted into a higher income-to-poverty-ratio category. This resulted in 1.7% of food-insecure families of students participating in NSLP and 1% of food-insecure families of students participating in SBP to become fully food secure in 2014.

The School Breakfast Program also enabled a similar increase in purchasing power, which shifted families in to higher income to poverty categories. **In 2014, 1% of food-insecure children participating in SBP became food secure.** SBP enabled between 39,902 to 46,450 food-insecure students and their families to become food secure. Further decreases in food insecurity can be reached if all eligible students and students in all CEP eligible districts receive free breakfast and lunch.

Proposals to raise the threshold for the Community Eligibility Provision (i.e. requiring 60% of students to be at-risk of food insecurity) would likely increase—rather than decrease—the risk of food insecurity among these students and their families. School districts across the nation continue to enroll in CEP, leveraging it to increase participation in the NSLP, SBP, and the Afterschool Meal Program. Through those programs, keeping the CEP at its current threshold of 40% will maintain food security for many families and help more families to become food secure.

* Full summary of methods and findings available at <http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/publication/treatmentplanforhunger>

*** The ratio of income to poverty is a family's income divided by their poverty threshold

*** A school's eligibility for CEP is based on its Identified Student Percentage (ISP), which is determined by dividing its total number of identified students (students in households receiving SNAP or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or who are homeless, migrant, enrolled in Head Start, or in foster care) by its total enrollment. Currently, schools with an ISP of 40% or greater can adopt CEP and thereby receive adequate federal reimbursement to provide free meals to all students.

Conclusions

Policy solutions that form an effective treatment plan for food insecurity are within reach. Improvements to SNAP and WIC in particular have the ability to provide additional financial resources so that thousands of families are newly able to consistently afford enough food. Such changes would support families across the country struggling with food insecurity and have the added potential to reduce health care costs associated with food insecurity, benefiting the country as a whole. Sustaining families' food security through proven nutrition assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, and NSLP is an effective treatment plan for our nation's children whose families experience economic hardships.

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