

Another squeeze on the poor

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AS FOOD prices keep soaring, food stamps are losing their buying power. It's a blow because families were already struggling to stretch the benefit so it would buy a full month's worth of food.

Now the average \$181.30 monthly allocation in Massachusetts buys even less. Although more people are using food stamps - an increase of 10 percent in Massachusetts since March 2007 - they're getting a benefit with less value. Instead of waiting for an inflation-related increase that's due in the fall, Congress should act now. Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr., Democrat of Illinois, has called for a temporary food stamp increase of 20 percent.

When they shop, low-income consumers face tough choices: It's often cheaper to buy junk food. Some of the biggest price jumps have been in nutritious foods, according to the US Department of Agriculture. In the year since May 2007, the price of soda went up 2.8 percent, for example, but the price of milk went up 10.2 percent.

Weakened food stamps are a particular threat to children. Without enough nutritious food, they can be more vulnerable to illness, emotional problems, and developmental delays, according to the Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program, a research and policy center that gathers health data on children across the country.

Doctors at Boston Medical Center say they see very young, undernourished children whose growth is stunted. They cite research estimating that infants and toddlers who live in homes that are "food insecure" are 30 percent more likely to be hospitalized than those with enough to eat.

Increasing the value of food stamps is an effective way to protect children from hunger and poor health, to help them thrive now, in school, and later in life. Children shouldn't be the victims of spikes in world food prices that poor families can't possibly control. ■