



Sequester puts America's brain trust at risk

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POSTED: Wednesday, February 27, 2013, 6:30 AM



"This is me breaking the cycle of hunger with my daughter. I don't want my daughter to go through what I went through." (Photo and Voice by Whitney H.) Photo gallery at [Witnesses to Hunger](#)

On Friday if Congress and the president do not act, what is known as the budget sequestration-- automatic cuts to a wide range of government programs-- will kick in.

This spells public health disaster.

The first to feel the massive cuts to public health programs will be mothers and young children. The youngest are like canaries in a coal mine – the most sensitive to any change in the political winds, and thus the best human indicators of how well our policies are working. Cuts are scheduled to hit Head Start, childcare subsidies, special education, and mental health services, to name just a few.

One area that will be particularly painful relates to families' most basic needs: good nutrition. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for [Women, Infants & Children](#) (WIC) provides supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for pregnant and lactating moms and their children under five. WIC serves [53% of all infants and 25% of all pregnant women in the United States](#) – more than 9 million mothers and young children each month.

If sequestration is allowed to go forward on March 1, WIC will be slashed by 5.1%. Sound small? It is the equivalent of dropping 600,000 mothers and young children from the program.

Cuts to this program would have devastating health consequences for women and children. Compared to eligible families that do not participate, WIC participants have better nutrient intakes resulting in healthier pregnancies, healthier births, and healthier children. They have [reduced rates of anemia and increased rates of healthy weights and overall excellent health](#).

At the Center for Hunger-Free Communities, which I direct, we see these positive health effects in ongoing national research called [Children's HealthWatch](#). Our studies show that WIC works by helping to prevent food insecurity and to promote child health and development.

An infant's developing brain creates [700 neuronal connections a second](#), so any type of nutritional deprivation that jeopardizes this rapid brain growth can have lifelong consequences for a child's cognitive, social and emotional wellbeing. In other words, WIC supports the infrastructure of America's future brain trust.

WIC also has economic benefits. Every [\\$1 spent on WIC saves up to \\$4.21](#). Consider this: the average first year medical cost for a baby born without complications is \$4,551; the average cost for a preterm or low birth weight baby is \$40,003. WIC helps curb these costs [by reducing the risk of preterm birth by 25% and low birth weight by 44%](#).

WIC is a recipe for good health and economic success. Legislators need to know this. The pressure is on all of us to protect America's No. 1 public health nutrition program for families and young kids. (Find out more at the [National WIC Association](#).)

Ironically, March 1, the dark day that the sequester could take effect, is also the day that a documentary about hunger in America premieres in theaters, on Netflix and On Demand.

[A Place at the Table](#) features our Children's HealthWatch findings about the positive impacts of nutrition assistance, and shows our efforts to educate the public and legislators in partnership with the women of [Witnesses to Hunger](#), a combination research and advocacy project that encourages mothers and caregivers who have lived with poverty and hunger to use their stories and pictures to create long term change. In the film the Witnesses and I bring to life the real Philadelphia story, and join others across the country to show what hunger is truly like and how to solve it.

The film is not depressing. It's hopeful. Because once you learn about hunger and poverty from those experiencing it, you will be compelled to take action. *A Place at the*

Table is not just a movie. It also is a massive social action campaign, that allows you to take part in ending hunger now. (Join by [clicking here](#) or texting “FOOD” to 771777.)

Which version of Friday would *you* prefer: helplessly pondering the sequester-initiated start of a deterioration in America's brain trust – or helping to protect it for generations to come?

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