

Feature

US Medicaid and food aid cuts imperil vulnerable children

Sweeping federal spending cuts, new cost-sharing rules, and eligibility restrictions for public health insurance and food aid will disproportionately affect vulnerable children across the USA, with potentially profound impacts on their development and wellbeing, according to experts contacted by *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*.

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) will cut more than US\$1 trillion from Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) over the coming decade. Among the hardest hit will be children from low-income families, those with chronic illnesses, and migrant youth. "It's going to be a generational impact", said Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba (Children's HealthWatch and Boston University School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA). "We know it's going to have an impact on children's development."

According to the Congressional Budget Office, the law will leave 10 million more people uninsured by 2034. The number of affected children is not yet clear, but nearly half of children in the US are insured through Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). "Millions of children will see health insurance and nutrition assistance benefits either completely eliminated or seriously reduced in the coming years", said Leighton Ku (Center for Health Policy Research, George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA).

New Mexico has the highest per-capita enrolment in SNAP and among the highest rates of CHIP and Medicaid enrolment. On Sept 5, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham called a special legislative session beginning

Oct 1, 2025, to address federal SNAP and Medicaid funding cuts. Marina Piña, spokesperson for the New Mexico Health Care Authority, said cuts to these programmes will be "catastrophic", potentially reversing New Mexico's recent reductions in child poverty. Medicaid, CHIP, and SNAP are critical programmes in addressing intergenerational poverty, Piña said.

"What affects parents will affect children", said Erica Eliason (Rutgers Center for State Health Policy, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA). The OBBBA restricts retroactive CHIP coverage to 2 months before enrolment, and introduced additional out-of-pocket expenses, which could preclude the frequent care needed by some families. More frequent eligibility renewals and recertification, more paperwork, and changing eligibility requirements push people out of programmes by design, Ettinger de Cuba contended. "You make it harder to get the benefit and therefore fewer people do—and those are your 'cost savings'".

Worse, Medicaid enrolment data—including names, addresses, race and ethnicity information, and immigration status—are now shared with the US Department of Homeland Security, which oversees US Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The nationwide wave of mass arrests of immigrants increases anxiety and has a chilling effect on enrolment, deterring eligible families from signing up. "Most children of immigrant families are US-born citizens, but they are harmed by policies that target undocumented immigrants", Ku said. "Many mixed-status families with children who are US citizens but parents who are not, will be scared to enrol their eligible

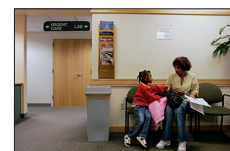
children in Medicaid and CHIP", he said. "The Medicaid and SNAP budget cuts will force states to find other ways to cut services that will almost certainly limit eligibility or services for children", Ku added. "These are not directly required by OBBBA but are indirect consequences as states try to find ways to compensate for the budget losses."

Lost access to food aid will ripple throughout low-income communities, increasing strain on food pantries. "We know that for every meal a community food pantry provides, SNAP can provide nine", Ettinger de Cuba said. "We can't food bank our way out of this." SNAP cuts also mean many children will also lose their automatic eligibility for free meals at public schools, impacting at least 400 000 children. "Food insecurity creates enormous stress in families", Ku said. "It can have long-term negative effects for children's health, behavior and development."

Learning and school performance, and even healthy friendships, can be lost to childhood food insecurity and anxiety. "If you're not feeling well and your belly is rumbling, it's really hard to have healthy friendships with peers", Ettinger de Cuba said. Parents will often go without food before they permit household food scarcity to impact their kids, she noted—sometimes leading to exhaustion, frayed tempers, and increased anxiety for children.

"I'm really scared for little ones whose families can't get enough food", Ettinger de Cuba said. "That's going to affect them well into the future and we're going to see it in our schools and in our workforce. It will affect all of society."

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For more on the **OBBBA's US\$1 trillion in cuts to Medicaid and SNAP** see www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/06/30/upshot/senate-republican-megabill.html

For the **CBO estimates** see www.cbo.gov/system/files/2025-08/61367-Uninsured-Data.xlsx

For more on **Lujan Grisham's announced special state legislative session** see governor-nm.us/2025/09/04/governor-announces-special-session-to-begin-oct-1/

For more on **mass immigration arrests across the USA** see nytimes.com/interactive/2025/06/27/us/ice-arrests-trump.html