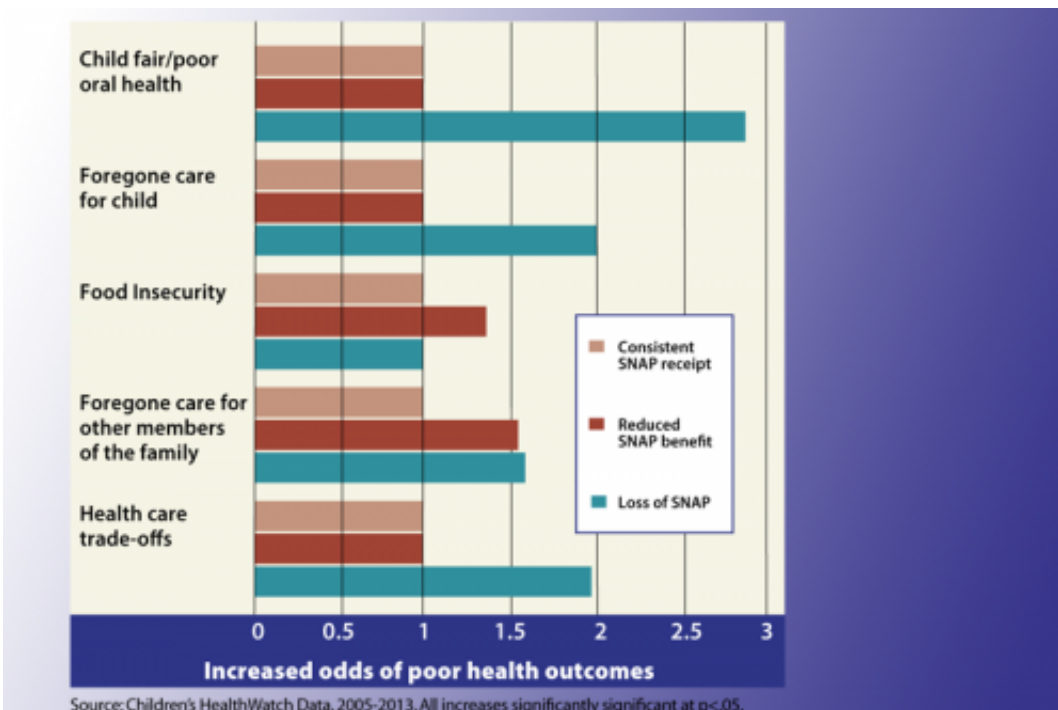


# Report shows challenges for working families in transition off of public benefits

December 15 2014, by Rachel Ewing



Getting a better job or more hours at work should be a boon to low-income individuals who are trying to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. But sometimes, instead, their families suffer more just when they should begin to thrive.

"Earning more income should always be a positive step forward, but for

too many families a modest increase in income, especially when those increases are often temporary, does not make up for benefits that are lost as a result of the increase," said Mariana Chilton, PhD, an associate professor and director of the Center for Hunger-Free Communities in the Drexel University School of Public Health and principal investigator of the Philadelphia site of Children's HealthWatch, a multi-site research program investigating the impact of public policies and programs on the health of young children seen in hospitals, emergency rooms, and primary care clinics. "When incomes are unstable, benefits help families stay stable. A loss of benefits can have drastic impacts on a [family](#), limiting their ability to purchase food and other basic necessities, and forcing families to return to benefit programs they were working so hard to leave."

That cliff effect—losing benefits in the transition out of poverty—is the focus of a new policy report released today by Drexel's Center for Hunger-Free Communities and Children's HealthWatch based on Children's HealthWatch data collected in Philadelphia from 2005 through 2013.

The analysis found that families who experienced a reduction of food stamp benefits (officially known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP) due to an increase in income were more likely to be food insecure or marginally food secure, than were families who received a consistent level of SNAP benefits.

The report was presented at a Shared Prosperity roundtable hosted by the City of Philadelphia's Mayor's Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity (CEO) in support of Shared Prosperity Philadelphia, the city's plan to fight poverty. Monthly roundtables bring together researchers, service providers and consumers, funders, and others to deepen knowledge and form more effective partnerships to address critical poverty issues.

The report indicates that losing or having a reduction of SNAP benefits due to income growth was associated with other sacrifices in the family's health and [health care](#), beyond access to food. Families whose SNAP benefits were reduced were more likely to include a family member who was forced to forgo health care due to cost. In households who lost SNAP benefits completely due to increased income, young children were twice as likely to have foregone needed health care due to cost and more likely to live in a household that made trade-offs between paying for other basic living expenses (food, rent or housing) to pay for health care.

These trade-offs and the fear of faring worse after benefit loss when earning higher wages are familiar for many people who live in poverty, including participants in the Witnesses to Hunger program in the Center for Hunger-Free Communities. Participant Imani Sullivan, for example, has described her first-hand experience with this struggle: "I was on my way to my job when my food stamps were cut off," she said. "They had called me to work there overtime for one day and I thought to myself, 'Well, if I go down here this one day, are they going to cut my [food stamps](#) off?' I really didn't know what to do. I don't think it's fair for us to get reprimanded for doing something positive."

To help families in Philadelphia and nationwide have a clear and effective path out of poverty and into economic independence, the authors of the new policy report recommend three major types of solutions:

- Reducing barriers to employment for families of [young children](#) by implementing measures such as mandatory paid sick leave and increased access to affordable childcare.
- Providing wages that allow families to achieve self-sufficiency without need for benefit programs. (Currently, many working families rely on SNAP because they do not earn enough from

working to make ends meet.)

- Developing processes for work support programs to help families move and stay off of benefit programs, e.g. by creating a more gradual decline in benefits.

The authors recommend developing creative solutions across local, state and federal policies.

"We are proud to partner with the Center for Hunger-Free Communities to support families as they increase their earned income," said Eva Gladstein, Executive Director of CEO. "We look forward to working with Dr. Chilton and partners at all levels of government to bring much needed relief to working families across Philadelphia."

**More information:** The policy report is available online:  
[www.centerforhungerfreecommuni.../files/pdfs/Making%20SNAP%20Work%20for%20Families%20Leaving%20Poverty.pdf](http://www.centerforhungerfreecommuni.../files/pdfs/Making%20SNAP%20Work%20for%20Families%20Leaving%20Poverty.pdf)

Provided by Drexel University

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