

Nutritional assistance program needed to treat increasing food insecurity among children and their families

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A new perspective published in *Pediatrics* warns of the detrimental consequences food insecurity can have on children and families. Written by pediatric health experts from Children's HealthWatch, based at

Boston Medical Center, the perspective highlights the importance of protecting and enhancing SNAP benefits given the financial challenges facing millions of families, particularly as a result of COVID19.

Recent research shows two in five households with children under 12 years old were [food](#) insecure by the end of April this year, meaning they were unable to afford enough food for all [household members](#) to live active, healthy lives. In nearly half of these households, parents also reported that their children were directly experiencing food [insecurity](#), a technical way of saying children were not getting enough healthy food to eat. These levels exceed those found at any time since food insecurity measurement was implemented in the late 1990s, including during the previous Great Recession of 2007-2009. Data demonstrate that some young families have still not recovered since then, proving how essential it is that long-term solutions to promote food security are efficiently implemented and sustained.

"We need to advocate as pediatric professionals to ensure that existing nutrition programs reach all children and that the 'dose' of available interventions is sufficient to decrease food insecurity long term," said Deborah Frank, MD, FAAP, founder of Children's HealthWatch, first author of the perspective, and a professor of child health and well-being at Boston University School of Medicine. "Children are hungry today—their bodies and brains will not be healed with promises of an economic recovery next week, next month, or next year."

Scientific evidence continues to show that the negative impacts of food insecurity on children's health and ability to learn and get along with other children are of national concern. Children living in households experiencing food insecurity are at greater risk of fair or poor health and hospitalizations, developmental delays, cognitive impairment, poor academic performance, abnormal weight and body mass index, and decreased social skills. This can also increase the vulnerability of

experiencing future chronic conditions, including obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. In response, pediatric clinics across the country have implemented programs to help families access federal assistance programs to the fullest extent, such as SNAP, to reduce food insecurity and improve families' ability to meet other basic needs. And the data shows that participating in SNAP improves overall child health and supports the cognitive and emotional development and academic performances of children.

This perspective comes at a time when the New York Reserve also released a report showing that households with children are more likely to be experiencing the financial impacts of COVID-19. Prior to COVID-19, three regulatory proposals were issued that would collectively reduce benefits or cut off over 1.5 million households from SNAP, and additionally remove nearly one million children from accessing free school lunches. Right before the COVID 19 epidemic newly implemented public charge rule went into effect, impacting use of government support among immigrant families, which include access to federal nutrition assistance programs. The risks of limiting access to these programs include the health and developmental consequences of [food insecurity](#) risks which, are even higher for households who currently participate in this critical assistance to help make ends meet.

"In the face of COVID-19, we must enact strong, evidence-based measures that respond to the realities of families with [children](#)," says Dr. Eduardo Ochoa, MD, FAAP, Principal Investigator at Children's HealthWatch and co-author of the perspective. "That means ensuring families have financial resources to afford food without sacrificing other [basic needs](#)."

Negotiations in Congress on another COVID-19 relief package are currently underway and Children's HealthWatch research demonstrates the importance of boosting SNAP benefits and increasing access to

assistance, especially as temporary expansions and flexibilities to the program are set to expire at the end of August.

More information: Deborah A. Frank et al. SNAP Is Medicine for Food Insecurity, *Pediatrics* (2020). [DOI: 10.1542/peds.2020-002105](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-002105)

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