

Study: Expanded Child Tax Credit led to improved health and nutrition among adults

June 24 2023



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The Child Tax Credit expansion, which expired at the end of 2021, has not been renewed due to concerns among legislators over the credit being overly generous, particularly to lower-income families with limited

tax liability, and the lack of an associated work requirement. Now, a new study, to be published June 24 in *JAMA Health Forum*, could inform the debate over the policy's future, said Dr. Jordan Rook, a fellow in the National Clinician Scholars Program at UCLA and the study's lead author.

"Cash transfer programs like the 2021 Child Tax Credit expansion may be powerful tools in improving the health, well-being, and nutrition of families," said Rook, who is also a general surgery resident at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. "Evidence like this can help guide the public, the media, and politicians as they advocate for and debate the policy's future."

Currently about one in six U.S. families with children lives in poverty, leading to poorer health and shorter life expectancy, according to the research team.

Prior to the pandemic, the Child Tax Credit provided up to \$2,000 per child ages 16 or younger for families with eligible incomes. Under the pandemic-era American Rescue Plan signed into law on March 11, 2021, the [credit](#) increased to \$3,600 per child ages five or younger, and \$3,000 per child ages 6 to 17.

Families were eligible to receive half of this amount in the form of monthly checks, which each month were worth between \$250 to \$300 per child. The credit was fully refundable, meaning that all [low-income families](#) with children were eligible to receive the entire credit, regardless of their work status or income.

These monthly payments reduced poverty by 40% in households with children, according to the researchers. But the policy, a temporary measure to assist families during the pandemic, expired on December 31, 2021.

The researchers used data taken from about 39,500 respondents to the National Health Interview Survey from January 2019 to December 2021. They found that prior to initiation of the monthly payments, 60% of credit-eligible adults reported excellent or very good health and 88% reported having [food security](#)—that is, access to sufficient food to meet normal dietary needs. Among ineligible adults, 55% said they had excellent or very good health and 89% reported food security.

They then used a [study design](#) known as a "difference-in-differences" technique to compare changes in health and food security between credit-eligible families and credit-ineligible families to estimate the impact of the Child Tax Credit monthly payments. Based on this technique, they estimate that following the start of the payments, eligible adults were 3 percentage points more likely to report excellent or very [good health](#) and 1.9 percentage points more likely to report food security than ineligible adults.

"Assuming the conservative estimate of one adult per household, this represents improved health for 1.08 million adults, and newfound food security for 684,000 households," Rook said. "These changes potentially represent important gains in health and nutrition for hundreds of thousands of US families because of this pandemic-era policy."

More information: Jordan Rook et al, Changes in Self-Reported Adult Health and Household Food Security With the 2021 Expanded Child Tax Credit Monthly Payments, *JAMA Health Forum* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamahealthforum.2023.1672](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamahealthforum.2023.1672)

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

Citation: Study: Expanded Child Tax Credit led to improved health and nutrition among adults

(2023, June 24) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-06-child-tax-credit-health-nutrition.html>

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