

# One in Five American Families Is

16 August 2010

Twenty-one percent of American households with children are “food insecure” - a situation that adversely affects children most - causing poor cognitive development, socio-emotional and health outcomes - according to a new report by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), a think tank at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health.

Food insecurity is a term used by the U.S. [Food and Drug Administration](#) to describe the situation when the food intake of one or more members of a household is reduced and eating patterns are disrupted because the household lacks money and other resources for food.

NCCP reports that the incidence of [food insecurity](#) has markedly increased in recent years, due largely to the worsening economy. “Households with children appear to be more at risk today of experiencing food insecurity than they were a decade ago,” says Vanessa R. Wight, PhD, the lead author of the NCCP report, “Examining Food Insecurity Among Children in the United States.”

The prevalence of food insecurity among children rose sharply in 2008 to about 11 percent after remaining between 8.0 and 9.5 percent for a decade. “With recent increases in poverty and unemployment, this trend is very sad for America, but not surprising,” says Wight.

The researchers also say that as the recession pushes more families into unemployment, the need for food assistance programs targeting children and families is even more apparent. A number of state- and federally-funded policies exist to address food insecurity and mitigate the effects of poverty on families and children, such as the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, the Emergency Food Assistance program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs.

Among NCCP’s findings:

Since the late 2007, when the recession began, the number of children living with an unemployed parent nearly doubled from 5.5 million to 10.5 million children by 2009.

Concurrently, participation in food assistance programs spiked: The number of food stamps participants increased 31 percent, from 25.7 million in 2005, to 33.7 in 2009. The sharpest uptick occurred between 2007 and 2009, as participation increased by 27 percent.

Participation in the School Breakfast and National School Lunch Program rose by 18 percent and six percent respectively.

In the last year alone, Emergency Food Assistance programs, such as food banks and pantries, have seen an 18 percent increase in demand.

“It is very critical that programs and policies are flexible enough to respond to extreme times of need like these today, yet also be comprehensive enough to address the potential long-term effects of poverty and food insecurity on [children’s](#) wellbeing.” says Wight.

Provided by Columbia University

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