

SAFEGUARDING THE HEALTH, NUTRITION, AND DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN OF COLOR

By Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba and Madina Agénor

When money is tight, low-income families are forced to make tough choices about the use of their resources. One of the results of constrained financial resources is food insecurity. Food insecurity refers to a household's limited or uncertain access to enough food for all household members to lead an active, healthy life at all times. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), in 2004 12 percent of all U.S. households (13.5 million) were food insecure at some point during the year.

Since blacks and Latinos are disproportionately poor and near poor

compared to their white counterparts, pronounced racial and ethnic disparities exist in the rates of food insecurity. In addition, USDA data show that all households with children are at a significantly higher risk for poverty and food insecurity than households of the same race/ethnicity without children. As a result, black and Latino households with children face particularly elevated rates of food insecurity.

Sound Social Policies Can Protect Children from Food Insecurity and its Health Effects

A recent study conducted by the Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (C-SNAP) pediatricians and child health researchers shows that a number of federal nutrition assistance and income support programs can help mitigate the negative health and growth effects of poverty and food insecurity on children in low-income households. Low weight- or height-for-age are important markers of inadequate nutrition, which, in turn, has other health effects. These poor growth outcomes are also linked to inability to fight infection and impaired learning. Nutrition assistance programs, such as the Food Stamp Program (FSP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), provide low-income

households with increased resources for food. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is an income support program, providing low-income families with minimal income to meet basic needs. The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and Subsidized Housing provide support for other survival expenses, such as heating, cooling, and housing costs. There can be serious consequences for young black and Latino children's health and well-being when their families do not receive benefits for which they are eligible.

- Black children from potentially eligible families who *did not* receive a housing subsidy were *more likely* to be underweight and shorter in height.
- Black children from potentially eligible families who *did not* receive fuel assistance were *29 percent more likely* to be at nutritional risk for growth problems.

In addition, contrary to some assertions, C-SNAP research demonstrates that receipt of food stamps, WIC, housing subsidies, or LIHEAP is not associated with overweight in young black children.

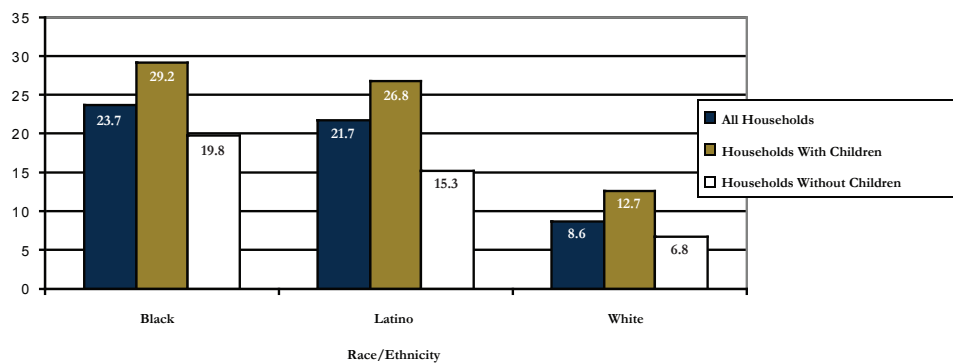
Young Latino children are healthier when eligible families receive benefits

C-SNAP found that the following programs have positive outcomes for low-income Latino infants and toddlers' growth, weight, and height: TANF, FSP, WIC,

and Subsidized Housing. (The associations between LIHEAP and Latino children's health and growth were not significant due to comparatively small numbers of Latino families in the study receiving LIHEAP) When Latino children whose families did not receive program benefits were compared to Latino children in recipient families, the findings were as follows:

- Latino children whose family TANF benefit was terminated were *63 percent more likely* to be food insecure.
- Latino children whose family food stamp benefit was terminated were *more than twice as likely* to be food insecure.
- Latino children whose families were potentially eligible but *did not* receive WIC were *more likely* to be lower in weight and shorter in height.
- Latino children whose families were potentially eligible but *did not* receive a housing subsidy were *90 percent more likely* to be short in height.

Figure 1. Food Insecurity in All U.S. Households vs Households With and Without Children, by Race/Ethnicity, 2004



Source: Nord, M. Andrews, and S. Carlson, *Household Food Security in the United States, 2004/ERR11*, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (October 2005), www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/err11.

Young black children fare better when eligible families receive benefits

C-SNAP data show that the following programs have positive outcomes for low-income black infants and toddlers' health status, weight, and growth: TANF, FSP, WIC, Subsidized Housing, and LIHEAP. When black children in families who were not enrolled in these programs were compared to black children in recipient families, the findings were as follows:

- Black children whose family TANF benefit was terminated were *78 percent more likely* to be food insecure.
- Black children whose family food stamp benefit was terminated were *84 percent more likely* to be food insecure.
- Black children whose families were potentially eligible but *did not* receive WIC were *more than twice as likely* to be underweight and shorter in height.

Similar to the findings for young black children, C-SNAP research demonstrates that the receipt of food stamps, WIC, or housing subsidies is not associated with overweight in young Latino children.

Food Insecurity Is Linked to Poor Child Development

While the link between food insecurity and the physical health of young children has been well documented, few studies have assessed the effects of food insecurity on the development of infants and toddlers. Child development encompasses the ways in which children acquire skills in a range of domains, including memory, cognition, language, gross and fine motor ability, social interaction and behavior, and perception. Research on preschool and school-aged children has shown that poverty and food insecurity affect children's readiness for school, as well as their level of achievement throughout their academic careers. Although Alderman and colleagues at the Pan American Health Organization describe the first three years of life as the brain's period of most rapid change, the intersection of poverty, food insecurity, and young children's development had not been adequately documented, particularly for infants and toddlers of color.

To address this critical research gap, C-SNAP recently studied the relationship between food insecurity and developmental risk in black and Latino children between the ages of four and thirty-six months who come from low-income families. "Developmental risk" refers to a continuum of vulnerabilities relating to slow or unusual development in one or more areas (e.g., speaking, moving, or behavior). Children who are found to be at higher developmental risk may face an increased likelihood of experiencing problems later in life, such as with learning, attention, and/or social interaction. Frances P. Glascoe's Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS) was used to detect developmental risk in the C-SNAP sample of children.

After controlling for potentially confounding child and parent characteristics, C-SNAP found that food insecurity is a powerful predictor of overall developmental risk among low-income black and Latino children under age three. Black children from low-income, food-insecure households have *57 percent higher odds of their parents reporting significant developmental concerns* than black children from low-income, food-secure households. Similarly, Latino children from low-income, food-insecure households have *more than twice the odds of their parents reporting significant*

developmental concerns than Latino children from low-income, food-secure households.

It is important to note that the impact of food insecurity on children is not always visible to parents, caregivers, healthcare providers, or policymakers. Food insecurity may have clinically meaningful effects on the mental development of low-income black and Latino children even if there are no physically discernable signs. For example, even after taking into account a child's low birthweight and current weight, C-SNAP analyses show that *young black and Latino children from low-income, food-insecure households face greater developmental risk* than their food-secure peers.

What These Results Mean for Young Children of Color

Five key conclusions may be drawn from C-SNAP's research on the effects of food insecurity on young children of color and the impact of federal programs on their health and well-being.

- By virtue of their families' disproportionate burden of poverty, young black and Latino children living in low-income households are especially vulnerable to food insecurity, ill health, and associated developmental risk.
- Safety net programs are a wise social investment. In particular, these cost-effective social policies help mitigate the negative effects of food insecurity on the health and growth of young children of color.
- In contrast, terminating and denying benefits to eligible families seriously compromises young black and Latino children's health and well-being during a critical period of body and brain growth, potentially perpetuating lifelong economic disadvantage.
- Food insecurity can be linked to early childhood developmental impairments that may significantly jeopardize black and Latino children's future readiness for school and academic success, which, in turn, may restrict their adult employment opportunities.
- Although more research is needed to establish a link, it is plausible to suggest that if safety net programs can protect children's health and growth from the ill effects of food insecurity, then these same programs can also help to buffer children from developmental risk.

What Action Is Needed?

Policymakers have a unique opportunity to prevent and/or reduce the harm associated with food insecurity. The most critical policy actions include fully funding and expanding federal family support programs that buffer young children from food insecurity. Such action would encompass the following:

- Expanding Food Stamp Program eligibility and increasing benefits in the 2007 Farm Bill;
- Ensuring that WIC is adequately funded during the FY 2007 Appropriation by rejecting the proposed 20 percent state match and 25 percent cap on Nutrition Services and Administration funding;
- Implementing work requirements in the Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) of 2005 in a way that supports TANF families who face significant barriers to employment;
- Improving allocation of funds to state and local housing agencies to ensure that all eligible families receive vouchers; and
- Investing more in fuel assistance to help protect against food insecurity and impaired growth among young children as energy costs rise.

In addition, it is necessary to implement DRA Medicaid changes with great care to ensure that children do not lose any portion of the Early Periodic Screening Diagnostic and Treatment benefit. Lastly, policymakers must consider how risk factors associated with food insecurity and access to programs vary by racial and ethnic group, and address each group's specific needs by implementing well-researched and nuanced policies. □

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