

Food Insecurity Rates Rise Steeply with Recession

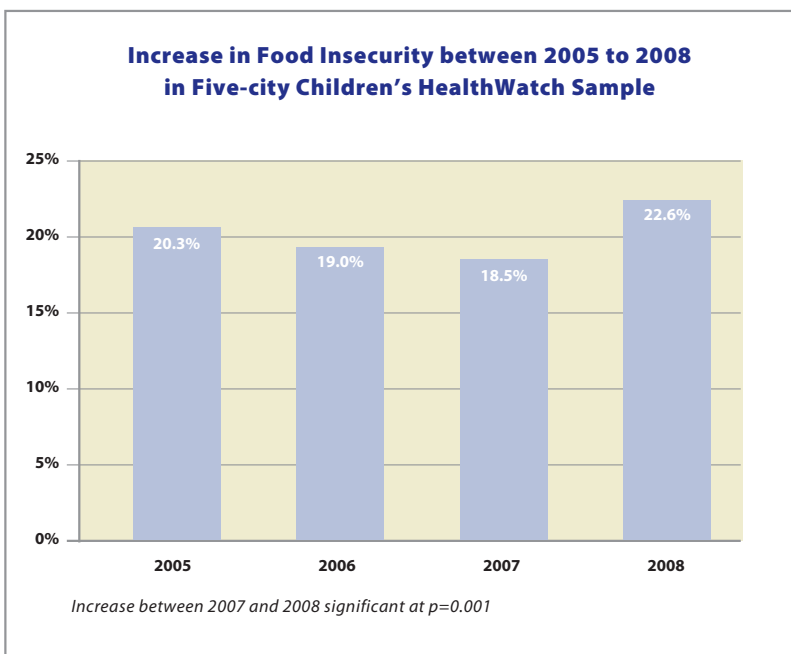
> Early Warning Signs

Early in our nation's history, miners carried canaries into mines to warn them of the presence of toxic gases. They knew that canaries are far more sensitive than humans to trace amounts of toxic gases and would quickly succumb, thereby warning miners to leave the mine. Very young children are like canaries in the mines in that they, too, are especially vulnerable to social and environmental insults. Often evidence of harm can be seen in young children, especially young low-income children, significantly before it shows up in older children or adults. Poor infants and toddlers are a "sentinel population," exhibiting, like the canaries in the mines, the earliest warning signs of harm.

Data from Children's HealthWatch show that the prevalence of food insecurity increased in our sample from 18.5 percent to 22.6 percent between 2007 and 2008. This 22.2 percent increase in the percent of food insecure families with very young children is significantly greater than any year-to-year change detected in our dataset since 2001. These data are based on a sample of 15,110 low-income families and are the most current data available on food insecurity in the U.S. It will be six months before the U.S. Department of Agriculture releases food insecurity statistics for calendar year 2008.

Summary of Findings

1. Food insecurity rose from 18.5 percent to 22.6 percent between 2007 and 2008 in a five-city sample of low-income families with children under age three.
2. This 22.2 percent increase in the percentage of food-insecure families is substantially greater than any annual increase seen in the last four years within the same ongoing sample.



Food Insecurity occurs when there is limited or uncertain access to enough nutritious food for all household members to lead active and healthy lives.

> Food Insecurity Harms Children's Health

These findings are deeply concerning. Research has shown a strong link between food insecurity and children's physical and mental health as well as their development and educational achievement.

Food insecurity undermines our nation's investments in education and health care. Research by Children's HealthWatch found that children in food-insecure families are more likely to be in poor health and have an increased risk of developmental delays than similar children in food-secure families. They are also more likely to suffer from iron-deficiency anemia and to have a history of hospitalizations.

Research has shown that children who enter school without proper nourishment are at an early disadvantage and struggle to keep up with their more advantaged peers. Food insecurity has also been found to have a continuing negative impact on cognitive and academic development over a child's years in school.¹ This can lead to increased costs for special education (children who are both food insecure and hungry are twice as likely to be in special education classes and to repeat a grade)² and, ultimately, diminished job prospects.

Conclusions

Early warning signs indicate that more children and families are suffering from food insecurity as a result of the recession. As pediatric researchers, we urge policymakers to use the upcoming reauthorization of child nutrition programs to strengthen and expand these crucial interventions. The programs scheduled for reauthorization address nutrition needs in pregnant mothers and children of all ages. These programs include WIC and child care feeding, which support our youngest children, as well as school breakfast and lunch, summer feeding and afterschool suppers which support children in elementary through high school. Scientific evidence has shown that these programs are vitally important even in good economic times. In a recession that has been called the worst since the Great Depression, they are a lifeline for millions of families with children. Children cannot wait until the recession ends. Their bodies and brains are growing now. Rising rates of food insecurity threaten their healthy growth and development. The lasting effects of early deprivation on children's ability to learn and on lifetime earnings will jeopardize America's future prosperity. Ensuring adequate nutrition for all children is an investment in the future of our nation.

This Policy Action Brief was prepared by Elizabeth L. March, MCP, Children's HealthWatch Executive Director, John T. Cook, PhD, Co-Principal Investigator, and Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, MPH, Research and Policy Director.

Children's HealthWatch is a non-partisan pediatric research network that carries out research on the impact of economic conditions and public policies on the health of children under age three. For more than a decade, Children's HealthWatch has interviewed families with young children in emergency departments and urgent care clinics in five hospitals in Baltimore, Boston, Little Rock, Minneapolis and Philadelphia that serve largely low-income families. Data are collected on a wide variety of issues including demographics, food security, public benefits, caregivers' health, health insurance and earnings, housing, home energy conditions and children's health status and developmental risk.

¹ C. Murphy, S. Ettinger de Cuba, J. Cook. Partnership for America's Economic Success 2008.

² Ibid.

