



# Public Health Update: Black children at risk for hunger and poor development



The latest research from the Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (C-SNAP)  
September 28, 2007

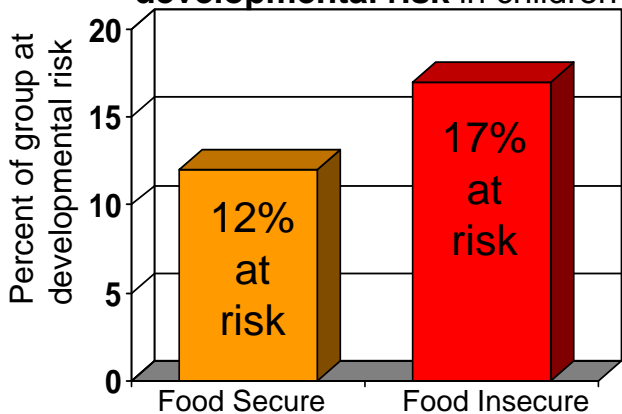
## A Chronic and Growing Problem

Poverty among families with children often manifests as food insecurity. In 2005, **16.7%**, of **American households with children under the age of 6** experienced food insecurity during the course of the year. In all, **12.4 million children** lived in food insecure households. This is **not a new problem**; in fact, prevalence of food insecurity nationwide rose from 10% to 11% of all households between 1999 and 2005.<sup>[1]</sup>

Without adequate nutrition, children's physical, cognitive, behavioral and social **development is impaired**.<sup>[2]</sup> Food insecurity is especially dangerous for children between the ages of 0 and 3, as this is the peak period of brain and body growth. The cognitive and physical development that takes place during these years cannot be replicated later in life, and deficiencies in family resources or well-being at this stage compromise both the short- and long-term health of children. Babies and toddlers who live in food insecure households are more likely to experience:

- **poor health,**
- **hospitalizations,**
- **iron deficiency anemia,**
- **problems with cognitive development, and**
- **behavioral and emotional problems.**

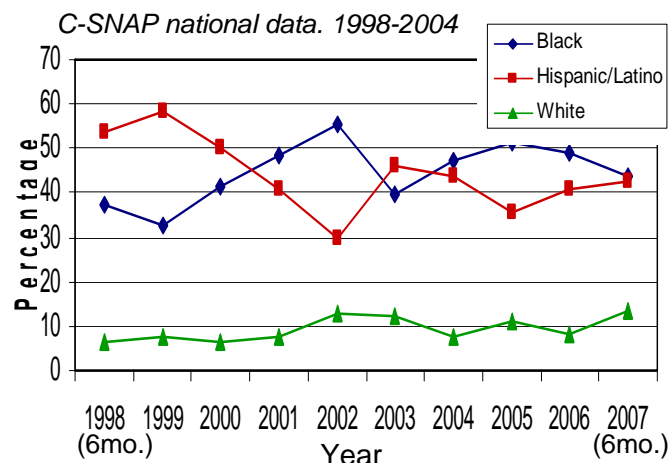
### Impact of food insecurity on developmental risk in children



C-SNAP, 2006 Developmental Risk

## The Color of Child Hunger

### Percent incidence of food insecurity, by race, among households with children



Trends similar to USDA national data on household FI

Poverty, and therefore food insecurity, disproportionately affect Black<sup>[3]</sup> families with children, and single Black mothers who are head of household. In 2005, **Black and Latino households were over twice as likely to experience food insecurity over the course of the year as White households: 22.4%, 17.8%, and 8.1% incidence, respectively.**

### Invisible victims

Food insecurity imposes health costs **well before children enter kindergarten**. Because they have yet to enter the school system, infants and toddlers are invisible to society's support systems, save for their parents and healthcare providers. And because undernutrition is not an eyeball diagnosis—many undernourished children appear physiologically normal to the average observer—food insecure children often go unnoticed and untreated.

**Food Insecurity:** Limited or uncertain access to enough nutritious food for all household members to lead an active and healthy life; A technical term for hunger

**Child Food Insecurity:** The most severe form of food insecurity, in which resources are so limited that parents can no longer buffer their children from the lack of food. Essentially, this is child hunger.

US Department of Agriculture, Household Food Insecurity in the United States, 2005.

[1] USDA, Household Food Insecurity Trends, 2005

[2] C-SNAP, "The Impact of Food Insecurity on the Development of Young Low-Income Black and Latino Children," May 2006

[3] The category of Black includes African Americans, as well as African immigrants and immigrant members of the African diaspora.

# The Medical Research

C-SNAP has spent the last decade conducting research on food insecurity and childhood development. The data has consistently shown that deficiencies in nutrition assistance programs have a direct negative impact on child health and wellbeing. **Specific results on Black infants and toddlers have demonstrated that:**

- Black children whose family food stamp allocation was denied or terminated were **84% more likely to be food insecure** than those receiving food stamps.
- Compared with black children whose family food stamp benefits were *not* reduced in the past year, those whose family benefits *were* reduced had **38% greater odds of being reported in poor health.**
- Black children without TANF benefits were **78% more likely to be food insecure** than those with benefits.
- Black children whose families did not receive WIC despite being eligible were **more than twice as likely to be underweight and shorter for their height** when compared to food secure children.

## Home Energy Assistance: Fuel for Our Future

C-SNAP's latest research report, "Fuel for Our Future," will be released in mid-October in collaboration with the Citizens Energy Corporation, and focuses on the links between nutrition, home energy, and child health. Energy costs rise when temperatures increase in the summer and fall in the winter. Even families with stable but low income are often unable to meet the demands of higher-cost months. For poor or near-poor families, saving for colder or hotter months is simply not possible. As a result, the increased heating or cooling costs incurred during extreme weather months can place severe strains on household budgets leading to **unavoidable trade-offs, often between food and energy.** This is **energy insecurity.**

C-SNAP analyses show that babies and toddlers who live in energy insecure households are more likely to:

- **be in poor health,**
- **have a history of hospitalizations,**
- **be at risk for developmental problems,**
- **be food insecure.**

Energy insecurity compounds the already-high costs of food insecurity among Black children. Black babies and toddlers whose families experienced energy insecurity were **82% more likely to be developmentally at risk** than Black babies and toddlers whose families were energy secure.

*The Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (C-SNAP) is a national network of pediatricians and public health researchers whose original, clinical research focuses on the public policies that affect the health and well-being of children ages 0 to 3 years old. The program has collected data on over 26,000 children in frontline healthcare settings since 1998.*

## Prescriptions for Policy

Food insecurity is a widely prevalent but readily preventable and treatable threat to the wellbeing of young children. It belongs to that rare category of health-related risk factors that can be **directly addressed** through public investment in programs to support young children's families. Policymakers have a unique opportunity to impact the health and wellbeing of children by pursuing positive changes in key areas of legislation, including:

- Expansion of **food stamp funding** in the FY 2007 Reauthorization of the Farm Bill
- Continued federal funding for State Children's Health Insurance Program (**S-CHIP**)
- Continued federal funding for **WIC and TANF**
- Promotion of **community-based nutrition** programs
- Funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (**LIHEAP**) and support for consumer **energy shut-off protections**

Until programs like these are adequately supported, our society can expect accelerating disparities in health and future prospects between children from low-income families and their higher-income peers. Such disparities perpetuate the cycle of poverty and erect health and wealth barriers along racial lines. Responsible social policies pertaining to all young children make economic sense, and enable the proper growth and learning that will allow them to succeed in tomorrow's America.

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