

# Federal Programs that Protect Young Children's Health



A non-partisan pediatric research center that monitors the impact of public policies and economic conditions on the health of young children.

## > **An investment in children's health is an investment in our country's economic health.**

Infants and toddlers, whose bodies and brains are in their most rapid period of growth, are uniquely vulnerable to even short-term deprivation. Ensuring that they have the basic physiologic building blocks for healthy bodies and minds is not only the right thing to do – it is the smart thing to do. Research has shown that children who suffer from poor nutrition, unstable housing and inadequate home heating have a greater likelihood of poor health, a higher risk of developmental delays and, in some cases, an increased risk of hospitalization.<sup>1,2,3</sup> These are costly problems in human and economic terms – problems our nation can ill afford as we seek to address the growing deficit and to position ourselves to compete in an increasingly global economy.

Fortunately, our country has a number of highly effective programs that help protect brain and body growth in very young children. These programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP – formerly food stamps), WIC, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), and subsidized housing, have all been shown to be effective in reducing the risks of poor child health and development.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Reductions to these programs or structural modifications, such as block granting, which could ultimately reduce the number of families able to access them in times of need, will undermine the health of our nation's youngest children.

For over a decade, Children's HealthWatch has been monitoring the impact of these programs on the health, development and nutrition of low-income children. Our findings demonstrate significant improvements in young children's health and well-being as a result of participation.

## > **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - SNAP**

Over the last 40 years, SNAP has helped low-income families put food on the table. The program, which was designed to expand to meet the increased need that comes with tough economic times, has been a critical source of support for families in every state across the country in the recent recession. For many, it was the first time they had ever turned to the government for assistance in feeding their families. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service, food security improved among SNAP recipients after the 2009 increase in the SNAP benefit instituted as part of the

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.<sup>7</sup> SNAP's role in decreasing food insecurity<sup>8</sup> is important because we know from research that food insecurity compromises children's health.<sup>1</sup> If very young children do not receive adequate nutrition in their early years, windows of opportunity for their optimal growth and development can be permanently closed.

Research by Children's HealthWatch<sup>1</sup> has shown that compared to children who are food secure, *children under age three who live in food-insecure families are more likely:*

- To have a history of hospitalizations
- To be in fair or poor health
- To be at risk for developmental delays
- To have iron deficiency anemia

Fortunately, our research has also shown that *children receiving SNAP are more likely to be food secure* than young children in families that are eligible but not receiving benefits due to access barriers.<sup>9</sup> In short, SNAP plays an important role in protecting the health of America's youngest children. Changes to the structure of the program that would prevent it from expanding to meet the needs of families in difficult times would directly compromise children's health, development and nutrition.

## > **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children – WIC**

WIC is the nation's only program designed to provide essential nutritional support during the prenatal period, and in children's early years, and provides scientifically-developed food packages for pregnant and nursing mothers and their young children. Years of research have supported the efficacy of WIC in protecting the health and development of our youngest children and reducing mortality due to malnutrition. Any decreases in the investment in WIC would be quickly reflected in increases in the number of children in poor health and at risk of developmental delays. Our own research shows that *children under age three who are eligible for but do not receive WIC due to access barriers are more likely to be food insecure, in poor health, at risk for developmental delays and underweight and/or short for their age* than similar children who receive WIC.<sup>10</sup> These impacts would likely lead to increases in healthcare and education costs that would far outweigh any short-term savings.

## > The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program – LIHEAP

LIHEAP, which provides assistance with home energy expenses to income-eligible families, serves as an especially important source of support for families in high-cost energy markets. Young children are particularly vulnerable to extreme heat and cold. Making sure they can grow up in homes with adequate heating and cooling is not simply an issue of comfort, it is an issue of health. Our research has shown that even after taking into account a family's receipt of nutrition assistance through SNAP or WIC, *children in families that receive LIHEAP are more likely to have healthier weights for their age and less likely to be hospitalized when seeking care for acute medical problems.*<sup>5</sup> For many American families, LIHEAP is a critical tool for protecting the health and well-being of their children. Full funding of LIHEAP is a wise investment in children's health.

## > Affordable Housing

Many low-income families pay more than 50 percent of their income in rent, leaving severely limited resources to cover other basic household expenses. Subsidized housing, which traditionally caps rent at 30 percent of income, frees up resources that allow families to meet the needs of their youngest children. Our research has shown that *children under age three who live in subsidized housing are more likely to be food secure and less likely to be seriously underweight* than children in similar families on the wait list for subsidized housing.<sup>11</sup> At present, only one in four families that are eligible for subsidized housing receive the benefit.<sup>12</sup> Reductions in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's budget would clearly compromise the health of our youngest children who might otherwise have benefited from this important program.

### Protecting the health of our children

**Our nation has made a significant investment in programs that protect the health of our youngest children. Being hungry or cold is not merely uncomfortable; for millions of American children it jeopardizes their current and future health as well as their ability to learn. Long before children reach school age, the foundations for their success are strengthened when we ensure they receive the nutrition they need and live in affordable housing with adequate heating and cooling. As our nation's leaders grapple with deficit reduction, we urge them to consider the evidence indicating the importance of investing in – and protecting – our youngest children. The costs of failing to do so will far exceed any short-term savings that might be achieved.**

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

<sup>1</sup> Cook, JT, Frank, DA. Food Security, Poverty, and Human Development in the United States. Ann. N.Y. Acad. Sci. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Cutts, DB et al. Housing Insecurity and the Health of Very Young Children. AJPH (in press).

<sup>3</sup> Ettinger de Cuba, S et al. Fuel for Our Future: Impacts of Energy Insecurity on Children's Health, Nutrition and Learning. Children's HealthWatch, September 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Perry, A et al. Food Stamps as Medicine: A New Perspective on Children's Health. C-SNAP, February 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Bailey, K et al. LIHEAP Stabilizes Family Housing and Protects Children's Health. Children's HealthWatch, February 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Gayman, A et al. WIC Improves Child Health and School Readiness. Children's HealthWatch, January 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Nord, M, Prell M. Food Security Improved Following the 2009 ARRA increase in SNAP benefits. USDA ERS Report No. 52, April 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Food insecurity, as defined by the USDA, occurs when families lack consistent access to sufficient healthful food for all family members to enjoy active and healthy lives

<sup>9</sup> Bailey, K et al. Too Many Hurdles: Barriers to Receiving SNAP Put Children's Health at Risk. Children's HealthWatch, March 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Jeng, K et al. Feeding our Future: Growing up Healthy with WIC. Children's HealthWatch, May 2009.

<sup>11</sup> March, EL et al. Rx for Hunger: Affordable Housing. Children's HealthWatch, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Rice D, Sard B. Decade of neglect has weakened federal low-income housing programs. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; February 24, 2009.

