

Strengthening the Child Nutrition Programs

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Child nutrition programs play a crucial role in ensuring food security and nutrition security* among the nation's youth. Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) provides Congress with an opportunity to reduce hunger and improve the diet and health of millions of children throughout the United States by strengthening the child nutrition programs. The last CNR, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA), became law in 2010 and was monumental in improving children's food and nutrition security through the federal child nutrition programs. At a time when many families are still experiencing COVID-19-related food and nutrition insecurity, it is vital that Congress pass a strong CNR.

STATISTICS RELATED TO THE CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

7.6%

of U.S. households with children experienced food insecurity in 2020.

14.4

MILLION

children and adolescents aged 2-19 have obesity; or about 1 in 5, according to the CDC.

\$32.3

BILLION

Federal expenditures for child nutrition programs in FY2020, including \$10.7 billion for Pandemic-EBT.

FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS AUTHORIZED UNDER CNR:

- National School Lunch Program (NSLP)
- School Breakfast Program (SBP)
- Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)
- Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)
- Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
- Special Milk Program
- Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP)
- Farm to School Program

MAKING THE CASE FOR HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL



Improve Diet Quality: Providing healthy school lunches is positively associated with better diet quality.



Improve Academic Performance: Healthy school meals for all is positively associated with students' academic performance.



Improve Attendance: Healthy school meals for all significantly improves attendance among students who live in low-income and food-insecure households.



Promote Equity and Reduce Stigma: Providing meals for all students at no cost can reduce racial and ethnic disparities in food insecurity.



Eliminate Unpaid Meal Debt: Healthy school meals for all eliminates unpaid meal debt that can lead to shaming students and harm school nutrition budgets.



Improve Food and Nutrition Security: Healthy school meals for all students can improve food security among low-income students.

While the combined annual budget for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) is \$18.7 billion, research shows that school meal programs provide a \$21 billion in net value to society through human health and economic equity improvements.

* The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines household food security as "access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life." Nutrition security, although not officially defined by USDA, has been described as "having consistent access, availability, and affordability of foods and beverages that promote well-being and prevent (and if needed, treat) disease, particularly among our nation's most socially disadvantaged populations."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Force makes the following 13 policy recommendations for strengthening the child nutrition programs to improve food and nutrition security:

Strengthening Food and Nutrition Security in School

- Ensure all children, regardless of household income, have access to nutritious foods to allow them to learn and grow by providing school breakfast, school lunch, afterschool meals, and summer meals to all students at no cost.
- Strengthen nutrition in the school nutrition programs.
- Strengthen nutrition education, including experiential learning, in schools.
- Support investments in kitchen equipment and infrastructure through loans or grants that help schools meet or exceed nutrition standards and provide appealing and culturally relevant meals to students.

Strengthening Food and Nutrition Security Out of School

- Expand access to out-of-school nutrition programs (Summer Meals Programs/ Child and Adult Care Food Program).
- Make Summer EBT a permanent program and allow students to access EBT benefits during school breaks, holidays, closures, and other emergencies.

Strengthening Food and Nutrition Security in Pregnant and Postpartum Women and Young Children Through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

- Improve nutrition security in the WIC population by enhancing the value of the WIC benefit, expanding program eligibility, streamlining certifications, and strengthening nutrition and breastfeeding supports.
- Utilize technology to modernize service delivery, increase program participation and retention, improve the WIC shopping experience, and make redemption of WIC benefits easier for participants and retailers.

Strengthening Food and Nutrition Security Across Programs

- Maintain, and if possible, strengthen nutrition standards for all programs to better align them with the latest *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.
- Streamline and facilitate eligibility, enrollment, and data sharing across programs that address food and nutrition insecurity and other social determinants of health.
- Support an increase in the accessibility, affordability, and intake of fruits and vegetables to improve nutrition security.
- Strengthen research investment and data collection at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) to identify rates of and interconnections between food and nutrition insecurity, diet quality, child nutrition program participation, academic performance, chronic disease, and later performance in the workforce and eligibility for the military, as well as barriers to participation in child nutrition programs among populations at disproportionate risk.
- Improve children's food and nutrition security in the health care sector through congressional, government agency, and private sector actions by collaborating on data sharing, implementing demonstration projects, improving access to nutrition-focused health care professionals, and increasing focus on prevention initiatives.

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For additional information and references, please see the policy brief *Strengthening the Child Nutrition Programs* at <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/child-nutrition-programs/> or contact press@bipartisanpolicy.org.