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Research Note: Nearly 2 Million Young Children in the U.S. Lived in Food-Insecure Households in 2023

By Joseph Llobrera and Luis Nuñez

Food is an essential human need, and even more so for infants and toddlers during the critical early months of rapid growth and development. The United States has the resources to ensure everyone has enough to eat. Yet millions of people across the U.S. experience food insecurity, meaning they struggle to afford enough food for an active, healthy life year-round. In 2023, the most recent data available, 33.6 million adults and 13.8 million children — including nearly 2 million children under 3 years old — lived in food-insecure households, meaning more than 1 in 8 households (13.5 percent) in the U.S. had difficulty acquiring food due to lack of resources.¹

Households with young children are more likely to experience food insecurity. More than 1 in 7 (15.5 percent) households with infants and toddlers under 3 were food insecure in 2023, compared to 11.9 percent of households without children and 13.5 percent of all households. Nationally, more than 1 in 6 (17.1 percent) children under 3 lived in food-insecure households in 2023 and this share varies across states. (See Table 1.) These shares also vary by race and ethnicity, with children under 3 in American Indian or Alaska Native (30.3 percent), Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (26.3), Black (25.9), and Hispanic (22.4) households more likely to live in food-insecure households than those in Asian (5.5) or white (10.9) households.²

Roughly half of the children under age 3 who lived in food-insecure households didn't experience food insecurity themselves, but the adults in those households were food insecure. Parents often

FIGURE 1

Millions of Children in Households Struggling to Afford the Basics



Nearly 2 million children under 3

lived in food insecure households in 2023.

That's more than 1 in 6.

Source: CBPP analysis of 2023 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement

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¹ Matthew P. Rabbitt *et al.*, “Household Food Security in the United States in 2023,” USDA Economic Research Service, September 2024, <https://ers.usda.gov/sites/default/files/laserfiche/publications/109896/ERR-337.pdf>.

² CBPP analysis of 2014-2023 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

find ways to maintain normal meal patterns for their children, even when they are food insecure themselves; these families often face other challenges as a result of their precarious financial circumstances. And in many households, food insecurity among children is so severe that caregivers report that children were hungry, skipped a meal, or did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.

Children are especially vulnerable to poverty, financial strain, and hardship. For infants and young children, the lack of access to good nutrition can lead to less favorable life-long outcomes. Caregivers' struggles paying for food and other bills are linked to worse child outcomes.³ Material hardship such as the lack of food also increases the risk for child welfare involvement due to neglect and abuse.⁴ There is growing awareness among researchers that the consequences of adversity — poverty, abuse or neglect, parental substance use disorder or mental illness, housing instability, and exposure to violence — during the early years of life can extend well beyond childhood and affect people's physical, mental, and economic well-being as adults.⁵

Conversely, when public policies provide economic security for their families, children tend to have better educational, health, and behavioral outcomes.⁶

Positive Health and Well-Being Effects of SNAP and WIC Last a Lifetime

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) delivers more nutrition assistance to low-income children than any other federal program, making it the nation's largest child nutrition program. In 2024, SNAP helped about 16 million children each month — about 1 in 5 U.S. children — including 2.8 million children under the age of 3.

³ Ajay Chaudry and Christopher Wimer, "Poverty is Not Just an Indicator: The relationship Between Income, Poverty, and Child Well-Being," *Academic Pediatrics*, Vol. 16, No. 3, April 2016, [https://www.academicpediatrics.net/article/S1876-2859\(15\)00383-6/fulltext](https://www.academicpediatrics.net/article/S1876-2859(15)00383-6/fulltext); Elizabeth T. Gershoff *et al.*, "Income Is Not Enough: Incorporating Material Hardship Into Models of Income Associations With Parenting and Child Development," *Child Development*, Vol. 78, No. 1, January/February 2007, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2835994/>; Joan P. Yoo, Kristen S. Slack, and Jane L. Holl, "Material Hardship and the Physical Health of School-Aged Children in Low-Income Households," *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 99, No. 5, May 2009, <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdfplus/10.2105/AJPH.2007.119776>; Afshin Zilanawala and Natasha V. Pilkauskas, "Material hardship and child socioemotional behaviors: Differences by types of hardship, timing, and duration," *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 34, No. 4, April 2012, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740912000230>.

⁴ Aditi Shrivastava and Urvi Patel, "Research Reinforces: Providing Cash to Families in Poverty Reduces Risk of Family Involvement in Child Welfare," CBPP, May 1, 2023, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/income-security/research-reinforces-providing-cash-to-families-in-poverty-reduces-risk-of>.

⁵ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, "From Best Practice to Breakthrough Impacts," May 2016, https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/From_Best_Practices_to_Breakthrough_Impacts-4.pdf.

⁶ Sarah Jane Schwarzenberg and Michael K. Georgieff, "Advocacy for Improving Nutrition in the First 1000 Days to Support Childhood Development and Adult Health," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 141, No. 2, February 2018, <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/141/2/e20173716>; Hilary W. Hoynes, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Douglas Almond, "Long-Run Impacts of Childhood Access to the Safety Net," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 106, No. 4, April 2016. An earlier version of the paper is at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18535>; Arloc Sherman and Tazra Mitchell, "Economic Security Programs Help Low-Income Children Succeed Over Long Term, Many Studies Find," CBPP, July 17, 2017, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/economic-security-programs-help-low-income-children-succeed-over>.

While SNAP provides only a modest benefit — just \$6.20 on average per person per day — it forms a critical foundation for the health and well-being of children in the U.S., lifting millions of families and their children out of poverty and improving food security. Food insecurity among children fell by roughly a third after their families received SNAP benefits for six months, a USDA study found.⁷

For young children in particular, SNAP’s benefits last a lifetime. Studies have found children have improved birth outcomes and better health, education, and employment outcomes as adults if they had SNAP access during early childhood or if their parent had SNAP access during pregnancy.⁸ Access to SNAP among families with children is associated with reductions in child maltreatment reports and child welfare involvement.⁹ Emerging evidence also suggests that SNAP helps decrease decades-long racial inequities in food security, reducing the gap between white households and Black and Hispanic households, who are more likely to experience food insecurity because of starkly unequal opportunities and outcomes in education, employment, health, and housing.¹⁰

The federally funded WIC program — more formally known as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children — also improves lifetime health for low-income pregnant and postpartum parents, their infants, and young children. Among other health and developmental improvements, WIC participation is associated with reduced risk of premature birth, low birthweight, and infant mortality. This is especially important because pregnancy-related complications and mortality, as well as infant mortality, are higher for families of color than for white families, again due to unequal access to health care and broader inequities in health, economic, and other systems for people of color.

Despite these benefits, only about half of all people eligible for WIC were enrolled in 2022. Less than half (46 percent) of eligible pregnant parents participated in WIC. Only 64.1 percent of eligible

⁷ James Mabli *et al.*, “Measuring the Effect of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Participation on Food Security,” Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, 2013, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/measuring-effect-snap-participation-food-security-0>.

⁸ Douglas Almond, Hilary Hoynes, and Diane Schanzenbach, “Inside the War on Poverty: The Impact of Food Stamps on Birth Outcomes,” *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 93, No. 2, May 2011, <https://direct.mit.edu/rest/article-abstract/93/2/387/58599/Inside-the-War-on-Poverty-The-Impact-of-Food>; Hilary Hoynes, Diane Schanzenbach, and Douglas Almond, “Long Run Impacts of Childhood Access to the Safety Net,” *American Economic Review*, Vol. 106, No. 4, April 2016, <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.20130375>; Martha Bailey, Hilary Hoynes, Maya Rossin-Slater, and Reed Walker, “Is the Social Safety Net a Long-Term Investment? Large-Scale Evidence From the Food Stamps Program,” *The Review of Economic Studies*, Vol. 91, No. 3, May 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdad063>.

⁹ Michelle Johnson-Motoyama *et al.*, “Association Between State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Policies, Child Protective Services Involvement, and Foster Care in the US, 2004-2016,” *Pediatrics*, Vol. 5, No. 7, July 2022, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2794169>.

¹⁰ Laura Samuel *et al.*, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Access and Racial Disparities in Food Insecurity,” *JAMA Network Open*, June 26, 2023, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.20196>. The authors defined household racial composition (entirely Asian, entirely Black, entirely White, and multiple races or multiracial) based on categories in the Survey of Income and Program Participation; Alfonso Flores-Lagunes *et al.*, “Moving policies toward racial and ethnic equality: The case of the supplemental nutrition assistance program,” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, May 4, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajae.12402>.

infants and children under the age of 3 participated.¹¹ And participation declines as children grow older. While nearly 4 in 5 (78.4 percent) infants eligible for WIC participated in the program in 2022, the rate drops to 65 percent, 50 percent, 44 percent, and 25 percent among children 1 to 4 years old, respectively.¹²

There are many opportunities for state agencies to reach more eligible families with low incomes, and these efforts are showing promise, with take-up and participation increasing in recent years. While data on WIC coverage rates for 2023 and 2024 are not yet available, nationwide average monthly participation increased by 7.1 percent between fiscal years 2022 and 2024, suggesting that coverage rates may have increased modestly.¹³

Increasing WIC take-up across the board — and for pregnant parents of color and their infants in particular — can be an important part of a strategy to improve pregnancy-related and child health, mitigate the large pregnancy-related health disparities affecting these communities, and advance racial equity in other aspects of pregnancy-related and child health and food security.¹⁴

Megabill Cuts Threaten Access to Nutrition Assistance

The harmful Republican megabill, H.R. 1, enacted on July 4, 2025, will dramatically raise costs and reduce food assistance for millions of people by cutting federal funding for SNAP by \$187 billion (about 20 percent) through 2034, the largest cut to SNAP in history. These cuts will increase poverty, food insecurity, and hunger, including among children.

The bill includes a major structural change that will cut billions in federal funding for most states' basic food benefits, with a new requirement that most states will have to pay between 5 and 15 percent of SNAP benefits. This amounts to billions of dollars each year that states across the country would now be required to pay. If a state can't or won't make up for some or all of these massive federal cuts with tax increases or spending cuts elsewhere in its budget, it will have to cut its SNAP program or it could opt out of the program altogether, terminating SNAP food assistance entirely in the state, including to households with young children.

If children lose SNAP, they will also experience harmful ripple effects in other child nutrition programs, such as free school meals and summer EBT, due to the loss of automatic eligibility that comes from receiving SNAP. To make up for the federal cuts and avoid cutting nutrition assistance as well as other priorities affecting young children, such as health care or education, state

¹¹ CBPP analysis of underlying data of interactive graphic 1 in Courtenay Kessler *et al.*, “National- and State-Level Estimates of WIC Eligibility and WIC Program Reach in 2022,” USDA Food and Nutrition Service, August 2024, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/wic/ee-2022>.

¹² Kessler *et al.*

¹³ Sonya Schwartz *et al.*, “State Medicaid Agencies Can Partner With WIC Agencies to Improve the Health of Pregnant and Postpartum People, Infants, and Young Children,” December 20, 2023, <https://www.cbpp.org/medicaidwicopportunities> and Zoë Neuberger, Luis Nuñez, and Linnea Sallack, “WIC’s Critical Benefits Reach Only Half of Those Eligible: States Miss Out on Opportunity to Improve Pregnancy-Related, Child Health,” May 8, 2025, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/wics-critical-benefits-reach-only-half-of-those-eligible-0>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

policymakers will need to either raise new revenue or rollback recent tax cuts to raise the funds needed to prevent harmful cuts.

TABLE 1

Nearly 2 Million Children Under 3 Years Old Lived in Food-Insecure Households, Thousands Across Every State

State	Children Under 3 Years Old in Food-Insecure Households	
	Number	Share
Alabama	38,000	21%
Alaska	5,000	16%
Arizona	55,000	23%
Arkansas	21,000	20%
California	172,000	13%
Colorado	27,000	14%
Connecticut	17,000	15%
Delaware	5,000	16%
District of Columbia	3,000	11%
Florida	102,000	16%
Georgia	60,000	16%
Hawai'i	6,000	13%
Idaho	14,000	19%
Illinois	45,000	10%
Indiana	45,000	17%
Iowa	15,000	12%
Kansas	16,000	14%
Kentucky	39,000	25%
Louisiana	35,000	20%
Maine	8,000	21%
Maryland	28,000	12%
Massachusetts	25,000	12%
Michigan	63,000	19%
Minnesota	32,000	14%
Mississippi	21,000	20%
Missouri	38,000	17%
Montana	5,000	14%
Nebraska	15,000	19%
Nevada	18,000	18%
New Hampshire	NA	NA
New Jersey	35,000	13%
New Mexico	16,000	22%

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State	Children Under 3 Years Old in Food-Insecure Households	
	Number	Share
New York	95,000	14%
North Carolina	67,000	18%
North Dakota	6,000	17%
Ohio	59,000	14%
Oklahoma	29,000	20%
Oregon	19,000	15%
Pennsylvania	58,000	16%
Rhode Island	NA	NA
South Carolina	28,000	16%
South Dakota	5,000	14%
Tennessee	34,000	14%
Texas	237,000	19%
Utah	23,000	15%
Vermont	NA	NA
Virginia	36,000	11%
Washington	36,000	13%
West Virginia	11,000	18%
Wisconsin	27,000	15%
Wyoming	5,000	23%
Total	1,808,000	16%

Note: Sum does not equal total due to rounding. Counts are rounded to the nearest 1,000, and shares to the nearest whole number. "NA" refers to states whose sample size was too small to calculate reliable estimates. These estimates rely on ten years of data due to small sample sizes in many states. However, for the 13 states that had large enough sample sizes, their five-year estimates of the share of children under 3 in food-insecure households were similar to the ten-year estimates presented here.

Source: CBPP analysis of 2014-2023 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement