

Feeding America's Low-Income Children

Sheila R. Zedlewski and Kelly Rader

The federal government offers a wide array of nutrition assistance programs to help low-income families with children meet their food needs. Nonetheless, official statistics indicate that nearly one in five children in the United States lived in a food-insecure household in 2002 (Nord, Andrews, and Carlson 2003). The rate of food insecurity among poor and near-poor families (income below 130 percent of the poverty level) is more than double that for all children, and more than one in ten near-poor children live in families that experience hunger during the year.

The private sector has initiated a movement to end hunger by 2015 in response to the lingering, high rates of food insecurity and hunger among low-income families. The Blueprint to End Hunger (National Anti-Hunger Organizations 2004) calls for a strengthening of the nation's nutrition safety net programs, including increasing program access and participation among low-income families.

This brief examines the potential for existing programs to cast a broader and tighter safety net and improve food security among children. It begins with an overview of the nutrition safety net, focusing on the largest federal programs (food stamps; School Lunch and Breakfast; and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC) and private food assistance programs. The brief presents data from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families to show how many low-income children actually receive benefits from current programs. The concluding section discusses the implications of current participation patterns for efforts to end hunger among children.

The results show that the nutrition safety net has considerable room to expand. Only 5 percent of low-income families with

children under age 5 receive help from all the available government and private food assistance programs, and 27 percent receive help from two assistance programs. Also, the safety net fails to reach three out of ten low-income young children. Surprisingly, almost one in five poor children receive no nutrition assistance. Use of the nutrition safety net also varies significantly by work status of the parents and across the states.

The Nutrition Safety Net for Children

Food stamps, school meals, and WIC are the three largest food assistance programs. In fiscal year 2003 they provided \$37 billion in nutrition assistance for low-income families. The federal government pays the lion's share of the cost of these programs; state governments only contribute to their administrative cost.

The core nutrition safety net programs vary in their reach, eligibility criteria, benefit structures, and delivery systems (table 1). The Food Stamp Program (FSP) offers the only near-universal benefit for families that are both income- and asset-poor. The FSP targets all low-income individuals except illegal immigrants and legal immigrants that have lived in the United States for less than five years. Also, able-bodied adults without children may face time limits. Benefits are administered through a local welfare office that requires extensive documentation of families' living circumstances, income, and assets. The monthly benefit (a maximum of \$370 a month for a family of three) usually is paid through an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card that works like a debit card, except that purchases are restricted to food. Three other assistance programs target

Surprisingly, almost one in five poor children receive no nutrition assistance.

TABLE 1. *The Core Programs in the Nutrition Safety Net for Children, 2004 Law*

Program Features	Food Stamps (1964)	WIC (1974)	School Lunch (1946)	School Breakfast (1966)
Universality	All except adult immigrants in U.S. less than 5 years ^a	Congress sets annual budget cap	95% of public schools	70% of public schools
Eligibility				
Age criteria	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pregnancy/health criteria	No	Yes	No	No
Asset tests	Yes	No	No	No
Automatic eligibility	None	Income-eligible if receive Medicaid, food stamps, or TANF	If in homeless family; in some states, qualify through food stamps, Medicaid, or TANF	Same as school lunch
Cash income/poverty test	130% gross income, 100% net income	185%	< 130% free; 130%–185% reduced	< 130% free; 130%–185% reduced
Citizenship requirement	Yes	No	No	No
Income/recertification	Depending on state, can vary from 3 to 12 months	Agencies may consider annual or current (weekly or monthly) income	Annual, with parents required to report changes during year	Same as school lunch
Work requirements	Yes	No	No	No
Benefits (per unit in 2004)	EBT card: \$370 a month for family of three	Voucher for food package: average value \$120 a month for mother and infant; \$35 a month per child ^b	\$2.40 a lunch free; \$2.00 a lunch reduced	\$1.20 a breakfast free; \$0.90 a breakfast reduced
Program cost (federal FY 2003)	\$23.7 billion	\$4.5 billion	\$7.2 billion ^c	\$1.6 billion
Beneficiaries (average a month in FY 2003)	21.3 million	7.6 million	15.9 million	6.9 million
Administrative locus	Welfare office	Clinics ^d	Schools	Schools

Notes: Represents law in effect before 2004 reauthorization. Reauthorization mandates phase-in of eligibility for school nutrition programs for families participating in other safety net programs, directs school authorities to maintain school nutrition eligibility for one year, and allows states to lengthen WIC certification for breastfeeding women from six to 12 months.

a. Adults without dependents are limited to three months of food stamps if not working and not living in an area with a high unemployment rate exemption.

b. Food package includes milk, cheese, eggs, cereal, infant formula, and beans.

c. Includes government subsidy of \$0.20 for all school meals.

d. WIC clinics may be found at county health departments, hospitals, community centers, public housing sites, migrant health centers, mobile clinics, and Indian Health Service Facilities.

pregnant and lactating women and children. WIC aims to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk by providing nutritious foods to supplement diets, information on healthy eating, and referrals to health care.¹ The School Lunch and Breakfast programs target school-age children. WIC and the school nutrition programs differ from food stamps because benefits are delivered outside a welfare office, income limits are higher, and there are no assets tests.

Special nutrition assistance programs also are not universal. Each year Congress sets a budget cap for total WIC spending. School lunch programs are available in nearly all (95 percent) public schools, but breakfast programs are available in only 70 percent of public schools. The WIC program provides a package of benefits worth about \$120 a month for a pregnant mother and her infant, and the school nutrition programs pay all or part of the cost of breakfast and lunch, depending on whether the

family qualifies for free or reduced-price meals.

Private food banks augment government nutrition assistance.² Food pantries distribute food for use in families' homes and are distinct from emergency kitchens (soup kitchens) that provide prepared food to eat at the site. Most of the food distributed by food pantries comes from private sources (individuals or food companies), but the federal government supplements these resources through The Emergency Food Assistance

Program (TEFAP). Recent government estimates show that TEFAP provided about 12 percent of all food distributed at pantries and kitchens.³

Program Effectiveness

While programs that offset families' food costs obviously boost families' purchasing power, their effect on nutrition and health status is less clear. Winicki, Jolliffe, and Gundersen (2002), for example, estimate that adding the value of food stamps to families' cash income reduces child poverty by 4 percent and reduces the child poverty gap by 20 percent. However, the same authors report that the most recent, careful studies find that food stamp recipients are no more likely to be food-secure than nonrecipients with the same characteristics. Also, some argue that food stamps lead to overconsumption because families with food stamps spend more on food than when equivalent benefits are provided in cash (Besharov 2003). This conclusion is based on an experiment that "cashed out" the value of food stamps and found that poor families with food stamps spent 10 percent more on food than those with cash benefits, without any additional, measurable nutritional benefits (Breunig et al. 2001).

WIC and the school lunch and breakfast programs have more demonstrable, positive effects on nutrition and health. Children in families with WIC consume more key nutrients, even after controlling for the possibility that health-conscious parents may be more likely to participate in the program (Oliveira and Gundersen 2000). Other researchers have found that infants and children in WIC have better health outcomes than children outside the program (Lee, Mackey-Bilaver, and George 2000), and studies report that participation in the school breakfast program reduces breakfast skipping and improves student nutrition (Food Research and Action Center 2004).

Recent research also discounts the claim that government food assistance programs may contribute to rising obesity in this country. For example, participation in school

nutrition programs and food stamps reduces obesity among girls and has no effect on boys (Jones et al. 2003). In recent years the USDA has been improving the nutrient content of meals in the child nutrition programs and expanding the nutrition educational component of the programs.

Reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Safety Net

In 2004, Congress reauthorized the Child Nutrition and WIC programs through 2009. Reauthorization strengthened the programs' emphasis on nutrition and facilitated families' access to these benefits. All states eventually will be required to certify children for school nutrition benefits without further application if their parents receive WIC, food stamps, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits. Also, families with more than one child in the same local education authority need fill out only one application for all children, and school nutrition eligibility will remain valid for one year. The Act also allows states to lengthen the WIC certification period for breastfeeding women from six to 12 months (or until a woman stops breastfeeding, if earlier).

Data and Methods

We use the 2002 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) to detail participation in the nutrition safety net programs.⁴ The NSAF asked families whether they or their children received food stamps, WIC, "free or reduced-cost breakfasts at school" and "free or reduced-cost lunches at school" in 2001. These results line up quite well with administrative data and census surveys that record participation in these programs.⁵ The NSAF also asked families whether they received assistance from a local food bank or pantry during the past 12 months. The nutrition assistance questions were asked along with a detailed battery of questions about all sources of income received during the prior year.

In families with multiple children of different ages, we cannot identify

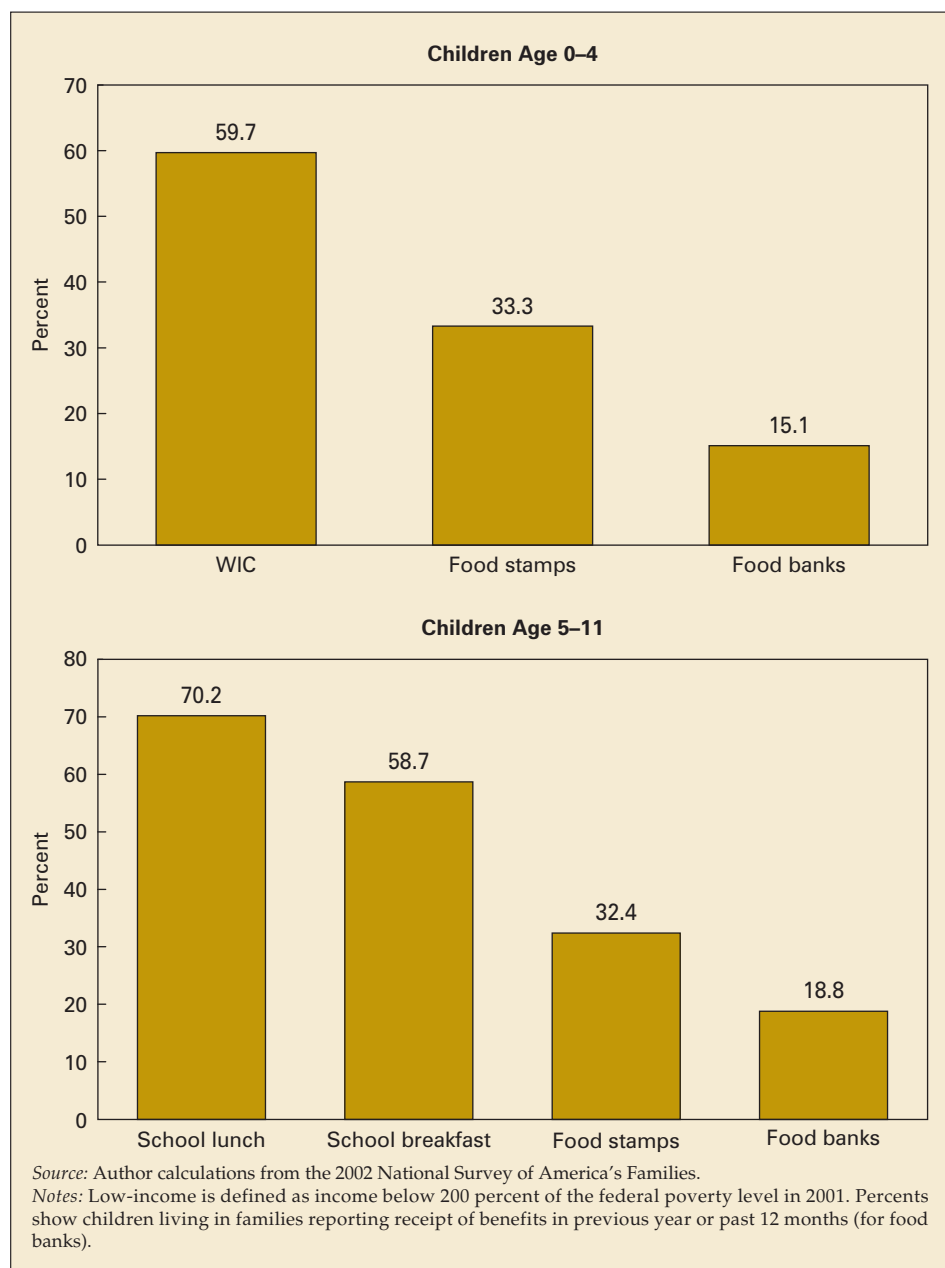
precisely whether each child in the family received the nutrition benefits. Consequently, we concentrate our analysis on children most likely to receive the assistance. That is, we show WIC receipt for children under age 5 (the eligibility cutoff for WIC), and assume that families with multiple children under age 5 that report WIC benefits receive assistance for all those children. Identification of children benefiting from school lunch and school breakfast is more problematic because participation might vary within the family depending on each child's particular grade in school. For families that report receiving school lunch or breakfast benefits, we assign participation to all children under age 12. The procedure may overstate the percent of children receiving school nutrition benefits if families with both elementary and middle school-age children have enrolled only one of these children in a school nutrition program.

Children's Participation in the Nutrition Safety Net

Nationwide, low-income children are much more likely to receive assistance through school meals and WIC than through food stamps or food banks (figure 1). About 60 percent of young low-income children (under age 5) live in families that report WIC benefits, and 60 to 70 percent of low-income school-age children (age 5 to 11) report receiving free or reduced-price school breakfast and lunch benefits. Only about 33 percent of low-income children live in families that receive food stamps, and 15 to 19 percent receive help from food pantries. These participation patterns generally reflect differences in the programs' income limits and accessibility.

Participation in multiple nutrition safety net programs is the exception rather than the rule (table 2). Among all young low-income children, about 32 percent receive two or more benefits, 38 percent receive assistance from one program, and 29 percent receive no nutrition assistance. Children in families with incomes below the poverty level are more likely to receive help from mul-

FIGURE 1. Children in Low-Income Families Receiving Food Assistance



multiple programs. Still, only 8 percent of young children receive assistance from all three sources, and about 39 percent receive two benefits (most often WIC and food stamps). Surprisingly, 18 percent of young children in poor families receive no nutrition assistance.

Almost 36 percent of low-income school-age children receive assistance from multiple programs (including 25.9 percent that receive two benefits and 9.8 percent that receive three), and 42 percent receive help from one

program (usually school nutrition). Despite the near universality of school lunch programs in public schools, about one in ten school-age children living in poverty and one in five children in families with incomes between 100 and 150 percent of the poverty level (clearly within the income eligibility range) receive no assistance.

Private food banks are more likely to complement receipt of government assistance than serve as a primary source of families' nutrition

support. For example, only about 2 percent of children live in families that report their only help is through a food bank, but about 13 percent of young children and 17 percent of school-age children live in families that combine help from food banks with government assistance.

Use of Assistance Varies by Parents' Work Status

Children with parents that have a strong attachment to the labor force (an average of 1,000 or more work hours per parent last year) are less likely to receive nutrition assistance than children with parents that have a weaker labor market attachment (table 3). For example, 34 percent of young children and 26 percent of school-age children in low-income families with a strong work attachment do not receive nutrition assistance, compared with 19 percent of young children and 13 percent of school-age children with parents working fewer hours. Also, larger shares of families with strong work attachment confine their participation to one program.

Poor children's receipt of nutrition assistance also varies with their parents' work status. Poor children with parents that work more hours are less likely to receive multiple benefits, and school-age poor children are more likely to be outside the nutrition safety net than children whose parents work less.

The significantly lower participation among children in families with parents working more hours compared with children whose parents work less could either reflect a higher level of parents' confidence in their ability to provide sufficient nutrition for their children or indicate greater difficulties accessing these programs as parents' working hours increase. Families with greater work attachment, for example, may have incomes that fluctuate closer to the income cutoffs during the year, making it harder to maintain eligibility. Parents working more also have less time to seek nutrition assistance, especially from programs like WIC and food stamps that typically

TABLE 2. Children in Families Receiving Multiple Types of Food Assistance by Family Income and Children's Ages

	< 100% of FPL	100%–149% of FPL	150%–200% of FPL	All low-income
Children age 0–4 (percent)				
No assistance	17.7*	28.4	46.2*	29.1
One benefit	34.7*	42.9*	39.2	38.4
WIC	25.3*	35.0*	32.9	30.3
Food stamps	8.3*	5.2	3.3*	6.0
Food banks	1.1*	2.7	3.0	2.1
Two benefits	38.7*	24.1	11.8*	26.6
WIC and food stamps	29.3*	16.6*	6.8*	19.1
WIC and food banks	5.3	5.0	3.7	4.7
Food stamps and food banks	4.1*	2.5	1.3*	2.8
All three benefits	8.3*	4.0	2.6*	5.4
N (000)	3,219	2,130	2,237	7,586
Children age 5–11 (percent)				
No assistance	12.4*	22.1	34.8*	22.1
One benefit	34.5*	45	47.9*	41.5
School nutrition	29.8*	40.1*	43.7*	37.0
Food stamps	3.9*	1.7*	1.9	2.6
Food banks	0.8*	3.2	2.3	1.9
Two benefits	37.8*	23.3	12.3*	25.9
School nutrition and food stamps	30.2*	15.2*	7.0*	18.8
School nutrition and food banks	6.2	6.2	5.2	5.9
Food stamps and food banks	1.4	1.9	0.1*	1.2
All three benefits	14.5*	8.6	4.8*	9.8
N (000)	4,303	3,030	3,257	10,589

Source: Author calculations from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Notes: Low-income is defined as income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level in 2001. Percents show children living in families reporting receipt of benefits in previous year or past 12 months (for food banks). Percents do not always add to 100 because missing responses are excluded from the table. School nutrition refers to free or reduced-price school breakfast and/or lunch.

* Significantly different from all low-income families at least at the 90 percent confidence level.

require applying during the work day.

Use of Assistance Varies across States

Participation in the nutrition safety net varies by state (figure 2). For example, reliance solely on government assistance programs is higher in California, Mississippi, and Texas. Low-income children living in California and Texas also are significantly more likely to receive some nutrition assistance than other children. Child poverty also is relatively higher in these states (18, 26, and 21 percent for California, Mississippi,

and Texas, respectively, compared with 14 percent for the nation). Interestingly, children living in Mississippi and Texas are less likely than other children to receive help from a food pantry (either alone or in combination with government help). The relatively low use of food pantries could reflect either the higher participation in government assistance programs or a more limited private food safety net in these states. Interestingly, Alabama is also a relatively high-poverty state (21 percent) but its participation patterns do not differ from those across the country.

Children living in Minnesota, Washington, and Wisconsin are also

more likely to receive assistance from government and private sources than the nation as a whole. These states have below-average poverty rates (7 percent in Minnesota and 11 percent in Washington and Wisconsin) but apparently more developed food pantry networks than other states. The results for Colorado also suggest a relatively well-developed or at least well-accepted private nutrition safety net. Colorado is the only state where the percent of families using private assistance alone exceeds the rate for the nation, yet its use of government programs alone falls below the rate for the nation.

Summary and Implications

The nutrition safety net plays an important role in low-income families' lives. Seven out of ten young children and almost eight out of ten school-age children living in low-income families receive some nutrition assistance. Children most often receive WIC and school nutrition benefits either alone (30 and 37 percent for young and school-age children, respectively) or in combination with government or private food assistance (29 and 35 percent, for young and school-age children, respectively). Yet only 5 to 10 percent of low-income children receive assistance from all safety net programs during the year, and 22 to 29 percent receive no nutrition assistance.

Poor children have higher rates of participation than children in near-poor families, but their participation still falls far short of the full potential of the nutrition safety net. About 68 percent of poor young children receive WIC benefits either alone (25 percent) or combined with other assistance (43 percent). Similarly, over 80 percent of poor school-age children receive help through the school nutrition programs. Only about half of poor children received food stamps. A significant share of poor children (18 percent of young children and 12 percent of school-age children) receives no nutrition assistance.

There is considerable room for expanding the use of existing nutrition assistance programs. While WIC

TABLE 3. Children in Families Receiving Multiple Types of Food Assistance by Family Income and Work Attachment

	Poor		All Low-Income	
	Strong work attachment	Weak or no work attachment	Strong work attachment	Weak or no work attachment
Children age 0–4 (percent)				
No assistance	20.6	15.5	34.1	19.4*
One benefit	39.2	31.1*	41.1	33.0
WIC	29.3	22.2*	33.5	24.1*
Food stamps	9.1	7.6	5.2	7.4*
Food banks	0.8	1.3	2.4	1.5
Two benefits	35.0	41.7*	21.6	36.4*
WIC and food stamps	24.9	32.8*	14.8	27.4*
WIC and food banks	4.4	6.0	4.1	5.9
Food stamps and food banks	5.7	2.9	2.7	3.1
All three benefits	4.2	11.5*	2.5	11.1*
N (000)	1,404	1,815	4,999	2,588
Children age 5–11 (percent)				
No assistance	15.4	9.2*	25.8	13.1*
One benefit	36.1	33.9	44.6	34.4*
School nutrition	31.6	28.6	40.1	29.6*
Food stamps	3.7	4.1	2.3	3.5
Food banks	0.8	1.2	2.2	1.3
Two benefits	36.4	39.3	22.2	34.6*
School nutrition and food stamps	27.9	32.8	15.5	26.7*
School nutrition and food banks	7.2	5.0	6.0	5.6
Food stamps and food banks	1.3	1.5	0.7	2.3*
All three benefits	11.7	17.6*	6.8	17.0*
N (000)	2,263	2,040	7,480	3,110

Source: Author calculations from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Notes: Low-income is defined as income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level in 2001. Percents show children living in families reporting receipt of benefits in previous year or past 12 months (for food banks). Percents do not always add to 100 because missing responses are excluded from the table. In families with strong work attachments, respondents and their spouses report working at least 1,000 hours per person in 2001.

School nutrition refers to free or reduced-price school breakfast and/or lunch.

* Significantly different from families with strong work attachments at least at the 90 percent confidence level.

and the school nutrition programs have the highest participation rates among all assistance offered, a significant share of poor children do not receive this help. Also, there is especially ample opportunity to increase the use of school breakfast programs by increasing the number of schools offering breakfast and the number of children enrolled. Food stamps, which offer the largest benefit (in monetary value) to low-income families, provide the greatest opportunity to improve nutrition and reduce hunger among children. The program

has the lowest participation rate among the government programs in the nutrition safety net.

Resistance to participation in nutrition programs, especially food stamps, should be curtailed. Working poor families are less likely to accept all types of nutrition assistance, yet they report food insecurities and sometimes hunger. Policymakers must continue to work on policies that increase knowledge about the benefits of nutrition assistance for children and reduce parents' reluctance to accept help. Sustained out-

reach in places frequented by parents (schools, churches, and stores) and simpler, less stigmatized applications should be the rule rather than the exception.

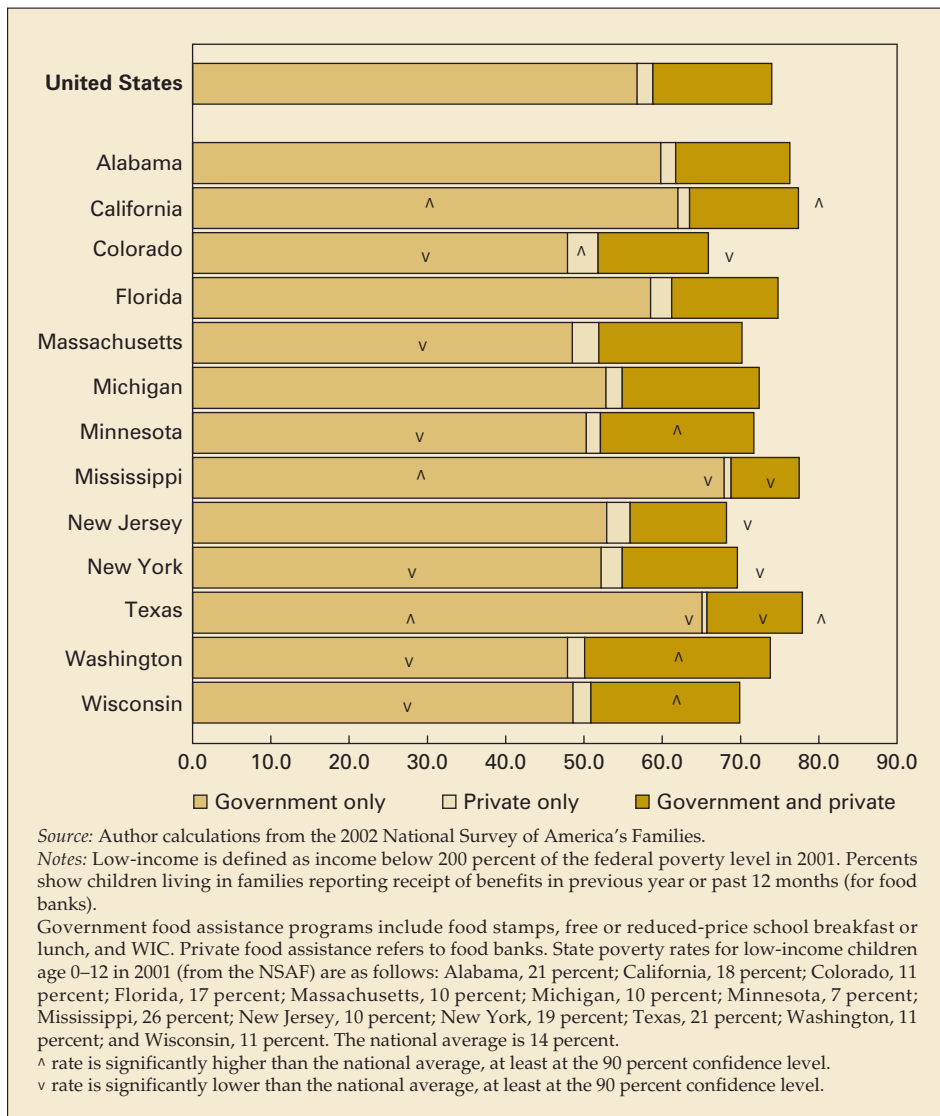
Schools probably offer the best opportunity to end hunger among children. Reauthorization of the school nutrition programs included requirements that states automatically confer eligibility for school nutrition and WIC benefits on families receiving food stamps or Medicaid. A reverse programmatic linkage—that parents with children enrolled in school nutrition or WIC automatically receive notification of their possible eligibility for food stamps—might help open the door to this assistance.

These results also highlight the complementary role played by private food assistance. The poorest families with children turn to this assistance, usually in combination with some other government assistance. Food pantries usually offer information about government assistance and some offer help with applications. In fact, this may be one of the most important services that pantries provide, because fuller participation in the food assistance safety net could reduce hunger and food insecurity among children over the long term.

Notes

1. Few income-eligible women and children do not qualify on the risk criteria (National Research Council 2003).
2. The federal government also provides nutrition assistance through the Summer Feeding Program and Child and Adult Care Food programs, which supplement assistance for children outside the regular school year or younger children in day care. These programs cost \$2.2 billion in 2003 (including about 3 percent of the total dollars that went to parents).
3. See Nord et al. (2003).
4. The NSAF is a nationally representative survey of about 40,000 households. It oversamples 13 states so estimates can be shown separately for their low-income families. See Abi-Habib, Safir, and Triplett (2004).
5. For example, the NSAF reports 15.9 million children age 6–17 live in families that receive free or reduced-price school lunches, compared with 15.9 million in an average

FIGURE 2. Low-Income Children Receiving Government and Private Food Supports in 13 States



month from the administrative data for 2002 and 14.4 million in the March 2002 Current Population Survey. Also, 8.1 million persons on the NSAF reported living in families with WIC benefits in 2001, compared with about 7.4 million persons on the program in an average month according to administrative data from the Food and Nutrition Service.

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This series presents findings from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered in each round from more than 42,000 households with and without telephones that are representative of the nation as a whole and of 13 selected states (Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin). As in all surveys, the data are subject to sampling variability and other sources of error. Additional information on the NSAF can be obtained at <http://newfederalism.urban.org>.

The NSAF is part of *Assessing the New Federalism*, a multiyear project to monitor and assess the devolution of social programs from the federal to the state and local levels. Olivia A. Golden is the project director. The project analyzes changes in income support, social services, and health programs. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies child and family well-being.

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