

# Wellness Check: Food Insecurity among Families with Infants and Toddlers

*Findings from the Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey*

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Food insecurity, defined as limited or uncertain access to nutritious food because of a lack of resources, is a significant risk for many families with infants and toddlers. Early childhood is a critical period for a child's physical growth and development, as well as a time when child-related expenses on necessities like diapers, formula, or child care are high. Food may be one of the first expenses families forgo when budgets are already stretched thin, raising concerns about long-term consequences for young children.

We turned to data from the Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey to understand the extent to which families of young children continue to experience food insecurity despite an improving economy.<sup>1</sup> This nationally representative survey of adults ages 18 to 64 was conducted in December 2017/January 2018 and again one year later.

Among parents of infants and toddlers, the survey finds the following:

**More than one in four (26.6 percent) parents and just over half (50.9 percent) of low-income parents reported experiencing food insecurity in the 12 months before the survey.<sup>2</sup>**

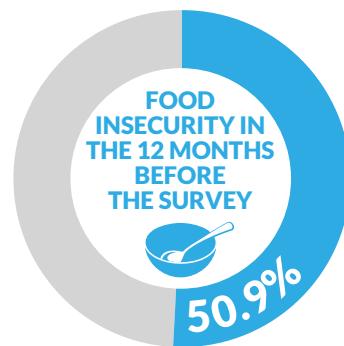
**Among low-income parents who reported food insecurity,<sup>3</sup> more than 3 in 10 (31.7 percent) also reported serious psychological distress.**

**Among low-income parents reporting food insecurity, more than half (54.2 percent) reported having very low food security, characterized by skipping meals or going without food for an entire day.**

## How Does Household Food Insecurity Affect Young Children?

Household food insecurity affects infants and toddlers both directly and indirectly. Directly, a child may not receive the nutritional intake he or she requires at a critical time for cognitive development and physical growth. Young children who are food insecure are at greater risk of being in fair or poor health, being hospitalized, and experiencing developmental delays.

**LOW-INCOME PARENTS REPORTING...**



**AMONG LOW-INCOME PARENTS REPORTING FOOD INSECURITY, MORE THAN 3 IN 10 ALSO REPORTED SERIOUS PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS.**



Young children may be affected indirectly by difficult trade-offs caregivers make between food and other basic needs. Adults—and older siblings—in the household may reduce their food intake or skip meals altogether to ensure infants and toddlers are fed and cared for. These situations can contribute to serious emotional distress, depression, anxiety, and poor health among parents, compromising the caregiving relationship.

Primary caregivers who are food insecure may have less energy to nurture, positively engage with, and provide stimulating activities for infants and toddlers. Research shows that increasing levels of food insecurity experienced by mothers resulted in both higher levels of maternal depression and anxiety and behavior problems exhibited by their children.

## How Can Policymakers and Providers Support New Parents?

New parents, particularly those with limited incomes, need effective supports to mitigate the effects of food insecurity. Here are steps policymakers and providers can take.



### Expand food insecurity screenings

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that health care providers screen families for food insecurity, but widespread adoption in clinical and nonclinical settings requires additional training and referral options.



### Support federal nutrition programs

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) serves all eligible household members, regardless of age, and has been shown to reduce food insecurity. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Toddlers (WIC) provides food assistance and nutrition counseling to young children and pregnant and postpartum mothers, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program reimburses food expenses at child care settings.



### Increase SNAP and WIC uptake and purchasing power

SNAP and WIC uptake is high among families with young children, but not all eligible people participate. Even among families who participate, benefit calculations do not account for geographical variation in food prices. Factoring in price variation would help families maximize their benefits.



### Pair healthy foods with family-friendly distribution strategies in the charitable feeding system

Charitable feeding may be especially critical for families whose incomes make them ineligible for federal nutrition programs. Healthy foods can be distributed where families already seek services, such as primary care clinics and child care settings.

## Additional Reading

**The Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey**  
Urban Institute <https://urban.is/2HmcOQa>

**Addressing Food Insecurity: A Toolkit for Pediatricians**  
American Academy of Pediatrics and Food Research & Action Center <http://frac.org/aaptoolkit>

**Child Food Insecurity Increases Risks Posed by Household Food Insecurity to Young Children's Health**  
John T. Cook, Deborah Frank, Suzette M. Levenson, et al. <https://bit.ly/2XwXvay>

**Food Insecurity and the Risks of Depression and Anxiety in Mothers and Behavior Problems in Their Preschool-Aged Children**  
Robert C. Whitaker, Shannon M. Phillips, and Sean M. Orzol <https://bit.ly/2PqVdXV>

<sup>1</sup> The Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS) uses the six-item short form of the US Department of Agriculture's Household Food Security Survey Module in its questions about food insecurity. The WBNS shows a higher estimate of household food insecurity than other surveys, including the Current Population Survey. This may owe to survey mode effects. Despite the WBNS's higher estimates, the survey response patterns were generally comparable to those found in the Current Population Survey.

<sup>2</sup> Total sample size of parents living with children under age 3 surveyed in December 2017/January 2018 and December 2018/January 2019 was 1,131. Some respondents participated in both rounds of the survey. The data were pooled over two years to provide a sufficient sample to closely analyze families with infants and toddlers. Neither all adults nor the sample of parents of young children in the WBNS experienced significant changes in household food insecurity between 2017 and 2018.

<sup>3</sup> "Low income" is below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.