

Policy Recommendations in Response to the Obesity Epidemic

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The Issue

Despite recent years of unprecedented economic growth in the United States, the number of American families, including children, experiencing hunger has continued to rise. According to USDA, in 1998:

- Over 3.9 million Californians, including children, lived in food insecure households, meaning that their concern over inadequate income for purchasing food resulted in lower quality diets for their families.
- California ranked eleventh worst state for hunger in the country, with 1.3 million people, including children, experiencing frequent, involuntary hunger.
- Hunger was widespread in impoverished homes. Over 35 percent of homes below the poverty line experience food insecurity, and about 20 percent of all children under the age of eighteen (or 14 million children) live in food insecure homes.

Effects of Poverty on Food Choices and Physical Activity - Hunger and food insecurity limit dietary quality and quantity and cause families to make lower quality food choices. Children in low-income homes usually consume insufficient calories. Many families attempt to increase calories by purchasing less expensive, higher-fat foods. Limited household income is associated with low fruit and vegetable consumption, which lowers intake of vitamins, minerals, trace elements and fiber.

Low-income children are not more likely to be overweight, but are disadvantaged when it comes to their ability to play in safe neighborhoods and to engage in regular physical activity.

Effects of Poverty on Health of Children - Those family members who are most adversely affected by poverty and the resulting inability to purchase a nutritionally adequate diet are children. Scientific evidence has shown a clear link between nutrition and cognitive development in children. The longer a child's nutritional and developmental needs go unmet, the greater the likelihood of cognitive impairment. Iron deficiency anemia, which affects nearly 25 percent of low-income American children, is associated with long-term negative effects on brain development and function. Low-income children who attend school without adequate nourishment perform significantly below their peers on standardized tests.

The Opportunities

Research shows that the federal nutrition programs can help protect the health and nutritional status of children, and offset the effects of inadequate nutrient intake on children's capacities to learn and perform in school. Improving the quality of foods and meals offered through these programs could potentially influence rates of obesity among children. The USDA administers a

number of food assistance programs that have a significant impact on the health and nutritional status of participants.

- **Food Stamps**- Nearly 2 million people in California receive food stamps. About 80% of these are families with children. Yet, California has the second lowest food stamp participation in the country with less than half of those eligible participating. USDA studies show that food stamps raise the quantity of food purchased by recipients, and, thus, help to decrease food insecurity and hunger. An arduous application process, low asset limits, finger imaging, and other barriers inhibit those in need from applying.
- **School Lunch**-This program provides participating children with one-third to one-half of the RDA of the most important nutrients. In California, approximately 40% of children receive free or reduced-price meals, with the total reimbursement to California for School Lunch and Breakfast Programs being nearly \$900 million. USDA research shows that the nutritional intake of children who participate in the National School Lunch Program is superior to the intake of those who do not participate, regardless of whether they eat out or bring a meal from home.
- **School Breakfast** – Just over 3/4 of schools offer the program statewide, but not all programs are fully accessible to children. In fact, only 41% of the certified low-income students receive its benefits. Research shows that participation in the School Breakfast Program improves a child’s school preparedness and long-term dietary intake. With only a limited number of students from low-income families protected by the School Breakfast Program, there is much room to expand the program and make it more accessible to children.
- **Summer Food** – Many low-income children rely on the school lunch and breakfast programs for a major portion of their daily nutritional requirements during the school year. These children could continue to have their nutritional needs met through the Summer Food Service Program. Statewide, only 34% of the children who receive free or reduced-price school lunches receive summer meals. All meals are free to participating children, based on income, or regardless of household income, if they live in a low-income neighborhood. However, there are not enough SFSP sites to meet the need; some sites operate for only a few weeks, and many children do not know about the sites that exist.
- **Child Care Food Program**-Nearly 300,000 children in child care homes and centers receive nutritionally balanced meals through CCFP. CCFP funds child care providers to purchase healthy foods and gives nutrition education on how and what to prepare to nourish the children’s growing minds and bodies. Studies show children receiving CCFP meals in child care receive more of the key nutrients for proper physical and cognitive development than those not benefiting from the program. Children in full day care through age six receive more meals through CCFP than they will in K-12 under the school lunch program. Despite CCFP’s benefits, many child care facilities do not participate in CCFP due to inadequate funding and burdensome paperwork.
- **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)** - California has the largest WIC program in the nation, with over 1.24 million women, infants and children served at 650 sites around the state. WIC provides nutritious food, nutrition education, and referrals to health care providers to high risk, low-income women and children up to the age of five. Studies have demonstrated that WIC improves the nutritional status of its participants and is a cost-effective intervention. For every one dollar spent on WIC, over four dollars are saved in medical expenses during an infant’s first six months of life.

- ***Food Banks and Pantries*** - California's food banks distribute over 150 million pounds of food to 5,000 community based agencies each year. These agencies distribute food to over 2 million hungry individuals each month and comprise a highly effective emergency food network. However, income guidelines for participation remain at 135% of the poverty line, restricting the number of needy people who can participate. Federal funding provides for reimbursement for approximately one-half of the cost of storing and distributing food, limiting the amount of food available to participants.

Policy recommendations to improve meal quality

- ***Improve quality by strengthening school meals***
 - *Increase the number of schools participating in all of the federally funded school meal programs.*
 - *Increase participation of low-income students in all of the school meal programs Participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) must be increased so that more students will be eating healthier meals.*
 - *Eliminate competitive foods, especially at the elementary school level.*
 - *Revise current state standards for the sale of competitive foods on school grounds*
 - *Adopt nutritional standards for the sale of any a la carte or competitive foods sold on school grounds. Develop and institute school board policies that do not allow the sale of specific low-nutritive value foods (i.e. candy, soda) on school campuses.*
 - *Properly fund CDE's Nutrition Services Division to enforce nutrition standards.*
 - *Place oversight and authority for all food sold on campus under the school food service director.*
 - *Prohibit or curtail the use of nutrition funds for non-nutrition purposes.*
 - *New schools should be designed with food service as a priority..*
 - *Adopt state or school district policy to ensure children are given at least 10 minutes to eat breakfast and 20 minutes to eat lunch from the time they sit down with their food.*
- ***Improve quality with state funds***
 - *Programs like NSLP, SBP, SFSP and CCFP need to have their reimbursement rates for food and administrative costs increased to reflect California's cost of living.*
 - *Increase funding for the school meal programs (including program startup and expansion grants) with a goal of working toward universal feeding.*
 - *Encourage on-site preparation of food through state funded grants to build or upgrade cafeteria facilities. The state should provide grants for equipment and cafeterias to facilitate healthy eating at school*
 - *Increase the availability of state funded grants for the School Breakfast Program and Summer Food Programs to assist schools in offering breakfast in the classroom and lunch during the summer and building on programs such as Provision 2 and Direct Certification.*
 - *Increase state food and administrative reimbursement rates for the afterschool snack program, CCFP, and SFSP to allow for increased monies for better quality meals*
 - *Establish community-based funds for start-up and expansion grants to government agencies and nonprofits sponsoring afterschool snack and summer lunch programs.*

- *The State should fund the WIC Farmers Market Program to help recipients purchase more fresh fruits and vegetables.*
- ***Improve quality through community focused methods***
 - *Increased access to community-based reimbursable meal and snack programs, including CCFP,*
 - *Improved quality, including fresh produce, in community-based reimbursable meals and snacks*
 - *Increase participation in community-based meals and snacks*
 - *Make changes to the WIC food package to encourage healthier eating*
 - *The food stamp vehicle resource limit should be raised and benefit levels should be increased for working families with modest incomes.*
- ***Make the programs more accessible and more comprehensive to those eligible.***
 - *Food stamps need to be made available to all needy Californians, federal, state and county level barriers to applying should be eliminated*
 - *Encourage local food banks to distribute food at least twice monthly.*
 - *The state and federal governments should develop one application that low-income people could use to access all food and non-food assistance programs.*
 - *The infrastructure of federal nutrition programs should be used to provide other health services. For example, state funds to improve quality child care should be used, in part, to improve nutrition services to CCFP providers as well as give providers training on lead toxicity prevention and preventing other child safety dangers.*
- ***Increase awareness of the programs through outreach***
 - *Low-income Californians should be made aware of all the assistance available to them at whichever venue they access the system. For example, when applying for MediCal, families should be told about Food Stamps, School Meals, CCFP and WIC as well as the Earned Income Tax Credit and housing assistance.*
 - *The state and federal government should fund outreach to potential recipients of assistance.*
 - *The programs should be marketed as facilitating work, “making work pay”—not as welfare programs.*
- ***Increase awareness to build momentum to end hunger.***
 - *Use USDA’s Food Security Measure to assess your community’s hunger and food insecurity levels. Use the data to educate decisionmakers and community leaders that the problem exists and must be addressed..*
 - *Work with the media and community groups to educate people about the prevalence of hunger in California and policy changes that could eradicate hunger in our lifetimes.*
 - *Professional groups such as the California School Food Service Association, PTAs, and the California Dietetic Association must be responsible within their own organizations for increasing hunger awareness.*

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