

## FOOD MATTERS:

# Supporting Poverty Impacted Children's Educational Success

*Could SNAP budget cuts contribute to academic failure and continued economic disadvantage?*

### What is Food Insecurity?

Food Insecurity is a measure of food deprivation defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.” Families considered “food insecure” do not have access to food that is nutritious and safe and are not able to access food in ways that are considered socially acceptable with means that do not include use of food pantries, stealing, or begging for food or funds to purchase food. <sup>1,6</sup>

### Who is Most Vulnerable to Food Insecurity in the United States?

- In 2011, more than 10 million U.S. households (8.4%) were estimated to be food insecure.
- Families with children—especially those headed by single women—are particularly vulnerable.
- 22.4% of children, or approximately 16.7 million children, were food insecure in 2011 (Table 1).
- Food insecurity in the U.S. increased following the 2008 recession.

CATEGORY	TOTAL CHILDREN	CHILDREN LIVING IN FOOD INSECURE HOUSEHOLDS	
		Number	Percent
All Households With Children	74,508,000	16,658,000	22.4%
With Children Under 6 Years Old	38,096,000	9,332,000	24.5%
HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD TYPE			
Single Female Head	18,498,000	7,324,000	39.6%
Single Male Head	4,953,000	1,304,000	26.3%
Other Households With Children	849,000	180,000	21.2%
Married Couple Families	50,208,000	7,850,000	15.6%

Table 1: Number of Individuals by Food Security Status of Households and Selected Household Characteristics, 2011<sup>1</sup>

## How Does Food Insecurity Affect Children?

Food insecurity has devastating effects on children's overall wellbeing:

- ▶ Childhood food insecurity is associated with poor health, emotional distress, and mental health challenges.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ Food insecure children experience more psychosocial difficulties and are less likely to establish and maintain social relationships, especially in adolescence.
- ▶ Food insecure children are less engaged in school, score lower in math and reading, and are more likely to be absent and experience school failure.<sup>3,4,5</sup>

## McSilver Investigates the Association between SNAP, Economic Hardship, and Child Educational Outcomes:

McSilver has prioritized studies focused on creating new knowledge that addresses the root causes and consequences of poverty. Thus, McSilver is funding a set of projects examining issues related to food insecurity to provide an evidence base for family-centered policy and programmatic solutions.

The following sections summarize results from a recent McSilver investigation examining the link between economic hardship, food insecurity, and school performance. McSilver examined data drawn from the 2011 administration of the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH). The NSCH is a cross-sectional survey sponsored by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the Health Resources and Services Administration that collects data about the physical and emotional health of a nationally representative sample of children, ages 0-17 years of age (n=95,677).<sup>7</sup>

McSilver investigators identified a subsample of families within the larger dataset living under the Federal Poverty Line (FPL). This subsample includes all families that would be eligible for SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which provides monthly benefits for eligible low-income households to purchase approved food items at authorized food stores.<sup>7,8</sup> The final poverty-impacted subsample represented 16% (n = 14,380) of those participating in the study in 2011.

Bivariate and multivariate analysis revealed the following findings:

### Who Participates in SNAP?

- ▶ 70% of eligible families participate in SNAP (n=9,960)
- ▶ SNAP participants reported more difficulty meeting their family's basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, shelter) relative to those families who qualified for the program, but chose not to participate.
- ▶ SNAP participants are significantly more likely to:
  - have children who have been exposed to serious traumatic life events (see Figure 1),
  - have more dependent children,
  - have fewer adults in the household, and
  - live in a female-headed household.

### Prevalence of Trauma among Families Eligible for Snap

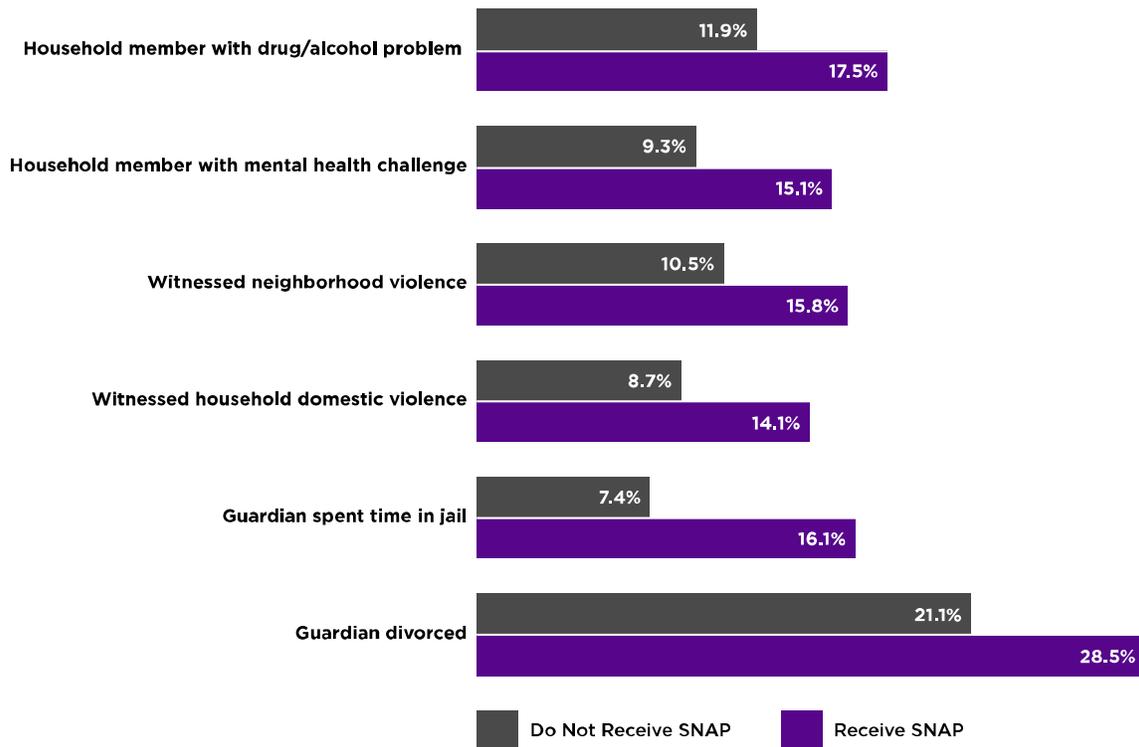


Figure 1. Prevalence of Trauma among Families Eligible for SNAP

## Analysis Finds that Severe Economic Hardship Impacts School Achievement

Children in families experiencing severe economic hardship:

- ▶ completed less homework
- ▶ were more likely to miss eleven or more days of school,
- ▶ cared less about doing well in school, and
- ▶ were more likely to repeat a grade.

In McSilver’s analysis of NSCH data, a significant association between family difficulty affording basic necessities—including food—and failing in school persisted, even when holding constant the number of children and adults in the household, single parent household status, and race/ethnicity.

## Does SNAP Participation Mitigate the Impact of Poverty on School Performance?

When families participated in SNAP, however, McSilver found *there was no longer a significant association between difficulty affording basic necessities and repeating a grade*. Thus, further longitudinal studies should examine the possibility that participation in SNAP could have a preventative effect on school failure.

## Summary & Implications for McSilver Research, Policymakers, and Youth Serving Systems

**SNAP cuts increase economic hardship and food insecurity.** The SNAP expansion as part of the 2009 Recovery Act expired on November 1, 2013. This reduction in benefits affected millions of program participants and put children and adults at greater risk of food insecurity.<sup>9</sup>

**SNAP reaches families in greatest need that often experience serious psychosocial challenges.** McSilver's analysis found that SNAP recipients are the most economically disadvantaged families below the FPL, which makes the program a critical safety net and funding cuts especially worrisome.

**Food insecurity impacts school achievement.** The educational system sees the effects of economic hardship and food insecurity through student underachievement and the outright school failure of poverty-impacted students.

**SNAP receipt mitigates the impacts of poverty on school achievement.** Findings suggest that in addition to improving overall wellbeing in poverty-impacted families, SNAP receipt is associated with an improvement in school outcomes for America's most vulnerable families.

**Food insecurity is undermining our educational investments.** Policymakers and youth-serving systems must address the interconnection of severe economic hardship, food insecurity, and child outcomes. Currently, systems and programs are fragmented and disconnected. Therefore, closing gaps in support for vulnerable families is critical.

**Further research should address optimal SNAP benefits.** McSilver's analysis highlights the need to examine the optimal level of SNAP benefits to mitigate the negative impact of economic adversity on children—both in terms of overall wellbeing and school achievement.

**The McSilver Institute is dedicated to learning more about food insecurity.** McSilver has initiated a prospective study of families attempting to navigate food support programs, including SNAP. This study, referred to as **Food & Family Matters!**, will incorporate the voices of poverty-impacted families into policy and program recommendations. This study may also illuminate additional barriers to accessing SNAP and inform future interventions.

### References

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- <sup>4</sup> Ashiabi, G. (2005). Household food insecurity and children's school engagement. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 11(1), 3.
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