

Nourishing Texas' Children

Preventing the twin challenges of childhood hunger and obesity

Hunger and obesity are often seen as separate issues. In fact, disproportionate instances of both occur among low-income children in Texas, suggesting a broader challenge of poor access to nutritious food and other factors of healthy living.

Executive Summary

Children need adequate, nutritious food in order to be healthy and grow. However, too many children in Texas do not know where their next meal is coming from, and, when food is available, it is too often junk food with little or no nutritional value. With Texas having the nation's highest rate of food insecurity in children and also a high rate of child obesity, the overall health, mental wellbeing, and academic outcomes of Texas children suffer.

It is important to examine both obesity and hunger through a prism of access to healthy options. Improving access to nutritious food and opportunities for physical activity stands to benefit children, families, communities, and Texas as a whole. Recommended actions for Texas are:

1. Increase the availability of healthy, affordable food in "food deserts," such as rural areas and isolated inner-city urban communities, where access to produce and other nutritious options is often limited.
2. Improve nutrition and physical activity not only in schools but also in child care environments, where many young children spend much of their day.
3. Promote breastfeeding, which has been linked to better regulation of food intake in children early in life and long-term benefits.
4. Increase participation in and infrastructure to deliver existing nutrition programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps), the National School Lunch Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).
5. Establish stronger linkages between farmers and consumers, building on the Texas Legislature's 2009 creation of a farm-to-school task force, which supports schools' ability to bring fresh, locally grown food into school cafeterias.

Texas children fare worse than children in other states in both food insecurity and child obesity.

Nourishing Texas' Children
Preventing the twin challenges of childhood hunger and obesity

*Alison Little, Health Policy Associate, and
Christen Miller, Policy Intern*

All children need proper nutrition to grow up healthy, yet many Texas children experience food insecurity, meaning they lack consistent access to adequate food. Feeding America analyzed 2005-2007 Current Population Survey data and found 22% of Texas children under age 18 are food insecure—the highest rate of any state in the country.ⁱ Sharp increases in demand reported by community-based food banks across Texas indicate that hunger rates are likely even higher today due to the economic recession.ⁱⁱ When nutritious food, including fresh produce, is unavailable and unaffordable, many families are left to make unhealthy substitutions in their children's diets, some of which bring serious health consequences.

Having inadequate or inconsistent access to nutritious food is dangerous for children, risking impaired development and learning and eroded physical and mental health. Children who experience food insecurity are more likely to face developmental challenges and delays in the areas of growth, speaking, behavior, and movement. Setbacks in these areas can lead to attention, cognitive, and social difficulties later on and result in documented gaps in school achievement.ⁱⁱⁱ (One study of more than 10,000 kindergarten and 3rd grade children, for example, found significant delays in reading and mathematical skill development among food insecure children compared to their peers.^{iv}) The physical and emotional burden of food insecurity may also lead to grade repetition, absenteeism, tardiness, anxiety, aggression, psychosocial dysfunction, and difficulty with social interaction among elementary school-aged children.^v

Children from food insecure households experience poorer health, a diminished capacity to fight off illness, and a 30% higher rate of hospitalization than children from food secure households, research shows.^{vi} Additionally, food insecurity is associated with depressive disorders and suicide in 15-16 year olds, even when controlling for income and other factors^{vii} and with increased irritability, fatigue, and difficulty concentrating in children of various ages.^{viii} Lacking essential nutrients in their diet, food insecure children also risk malnutrition. A study of 1,993 fourth graders in predominantly low-income schools in San Antonio found that 44% did not consume enough calories for healthy growth and experienced deficiencies of important nutrients such as calcium, magnesium, folate, potassium, and phosphorus.^{ix}

Rather than risk seeing their children go without meals, families often make major changes to their food selections to respond to cost constraints,^x opting for less expensive foods that may not meet a child's nutritional needs. Nutrient-dense, low-calorie foods like fruits and vegetables are more expensive than the alternatives.^{xi} Compounding the problem, many rural and inner-city neighborhoods have fewer

supermarkets offering these foods, leaving fast-food restaurants and convenience stores, with their less healthy fare, as sometimes the only option for purchasing food in low-income neighborhoods.^{xii} It is unsurprising then that children who are food insecure have at least comparable rates of overweight as their food-secure peers, with some research identifying an increased risk of obesity among some food insecure children of certain ages and in some race groups.^{xiii} When people seek food to relieve the physical sensation of hunger, calorie-dense foods, including highly processed foods and foods with added fats and sugars, represent the lowest-cost choice to the consumer^{xiv} and sporadic food insecurity can lead to binge-eating behaviors during periods when food is available.^{xv} Overweight and obesity are problems that affect people at all socioeconomic levels, but people with fewer resources face especially high barriers to eating healthfully, as well as getting adequate exercise.^{xvi}

Many food-insecure families use public and charitable nutrition programs, such as school lunches, food pantries, and summer feeding programs, which help them access food and achieve improved outcomes for their children.^{xvii} Children in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program), for example, have been found to experience improved academic achievement in elementary school,^{xviii} and children in Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) have fewer deficiencies of vitamins, minerals, and iron.^{xix} Due to strict nutritional guidelines, children who participate in the National School Lunch Program consume more fruits, vegetables, and milk than nonparticipants. The program also has been shown to reduce obesity among food insecure girls.^{xx}

In February 2010, over 1.8 million Texas children under the age of 17 received SNAP benefits, over a third of whom were under age 5.^{xxi} There were also more than a million WIC participants in February 2010, 75% of whom were infants and children,^{xxii} and more than 2.3 million children in the Texas School Lunch Program.^{xxiii}

Texas is struggling to provide SNAP benefits to all who qualify and wish to participate. Texas has fallen far behind federal standards for timeliness due to inefficiencies and roadblocks in the application and eligibility processes for SNAP, meaning many children who should be receiving these benefits continue to go without assistance. The federal government recently threatened to fine Texas nearly \$4 million for errors and inefficiencies in processing SNAP applications. Federal law requires SNAP applications to be processed within 30 days, but, for many regions in Texas since the recession began, applicants have had to wait up to twice as long just to attend the interview required for application approval.^{xxiv} The Texas Health and Human Services Commission has worked diligently to improve: hiring new eligibility staff, reassigning existing staff to SNAP processing, streamlining training for new SNAP employees, and joining an Outreach and Technical Assistance Workgroup to address eligibility issues alongside advocates and other stakeholders.^{xxv} The State Auditor's office identified among the contributors to the SNAP processing challenges inefficiencies in the eligibility determination process.^{xxvi} The audit outlines several steps needed to address these problems, such as allowing SNAP applicants to track application progress online, moving to electronic case files, and using federal funding for SNAP administration.^{xxvii}

HHSC's efforts to improve eligibility processes are already beginning to pay off. For example, the payment error rate—the percent of households that receive either too many or too few benefits compared to those they are entitled to receive—has decreased from 6.82% at the end of FY 2009 to

1.05% as of April 2010. Also, as of April 2010, all of Texas' 311 SNAP eligibility offices were scheduling interview appointments within 20 days of application receipt, twice the number of offices that met this mark in September 2009. The percent of applications processed within 30 days has also increased from 59% in September 2009 to 76% in March 2010. However, this still falls below the federal standard of 95%.^{xxviii} HHSC is also partnering with the Texas Food Bank Network to reduce eligibility worker caseload and help more families get the benefits they need through a food bank enrollment pilot program. Families can now visit food banks in Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio, and Houston to receive help filling out their SNAP application and complete the required interview simultaneously, further streamlining the eligibility process.^{xxix}

The Summer Food Service Program addresses the nutritional gap that exists during the summer months when food insecure children no longer have access to nutritious meals through the School Lunch Program. The federally-funded Summer Food Service Program is administered by the Texas Department of Agriculture and is operated by independent sponsors such as school districts, nonprofits, and parks and recreation departments in communities where at least half of all children qualify for the National School Lunch Program. Although it is designed to feed each child who is eligible for the School Lunch Program, only one in five of these children accessed Summer Food Program meals in 2008. There are too few sites, especially in rural areas, a lack of awareness about the program, and insufficient meal reimbursement rates, all of which limit access to summer meals.^{xxx} The Texas Department of Agriculture and Texas Impact created toolkits to help mayors and faith groups, respectively, expand Summer Nutrition Programs in their communities.^{xxxi,xxxii}

Policy Recommendations:

1. Increase availability of healthy, affordable food by supporting strategies to increase the presence of full-service supermarkets and farm stands in underserved areas and to create incentives for food retailers of all sizes to offer healthy choices.
2. State and local governments should work with community organizations to expand and improve participation in federal nutrition programs.^{xxxiii} Ways that policymakers can help in this effort include:
 - Improve the eligibility and enrollment system for SNAP and other nutrition programs by following the recommendations of the State Auditor's Office
 - Reduce paperwork for parents, schools, and nonprofit organizations that provide meals in order to reduce stigma and boost participation
 - Support free school breakfast and lunch for all children in schools with substantial numbers of already-eligible children
 - Increase outreach efforts and improve meal reimbursement rates to assist more afterschool and summer programs in feeding hungry children

ⁱ John Cook, *Child Food Insecurity in the United States: 2005-2007*, Feeding America, www.feedingamerica.org/our-network/the.../child-food-insecurity.ashx.

ⁱⁱ Whittaker, Richard. "Hard Times in the Land of Plenty." *Austin Chronicle*, 10/23/09. <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/issue/story?oid=oid%3A898308>.

-
- iii "The Implications of Food Insecurity for Children." Feeding America, <http://feedingamerica.org/faces-of-hunger/hunger-101/child-hunger-implications.aspx>.
- iv Edward Frongillo, Diana F. Jyoti, and Sonya J. Jones, "Food Stamp Program Participation Is Associated with Better Academic Learning among School Children," *Journal of Nutrition* 136, 1077-1080 (April 2006): p.1077, <http://jn.nutrition.org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/cgi/reprint/136/4/1077>.
- v Katherine Alaimo, Christine Olson, and Edward Frongillo, "Food Insufficiency and American School-Aged Children's Cognitive, Academic, and Psychosocial Development," *Pediatrics* 108: no. 1 (July 2001): 44-49, <http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=4767131&site=ehost-live>.
- vi "The Implications of Food Insecurity for Children." Feeding America, <http://feedingamerica.org/faces-of-hunger/hunger-101/child-hunger-implications.aspx>.
- vii Katherine Alaimo, Christine Olson, and Edward Frongillo, "Food Insufficiency and American School-Aged Children's Cognitive, Academic, and Psychosocial Development," *Pediatrics* 108: no. 1 (July 2001): 44-49, <http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=4767131&site=ehost-live>.
- ix "Diabetes risk, low fitness, and energy insufficiency levels among children from poor families." *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 108: no.11 (Nov 2008): p1846-1854.
- x "Learn: Obesity & Hunger," Bread for the World, <http://www.bread.org/learn/us-hunger-issues/obesity-and-hunger.html>.
- xi Drewnowski, Adam and SE Specter. "Poverty and Obesity: The Role of Energy Density and Energy Costs." *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 79: no.1 (January 2004): 6-16, <http://www.ajcn.org/cgi/content/abstract/79/1/6>.
- xiii "Learn: Obesity & Hunger," Bread for the World, <http://www.bread.org/learn/us-hunger-issues/obesity-and-hunger.html>.
- xiii Mark Nord, "Food Insecurity in Households with Children: Prevalence, Severity, and Household Characteristics." Economic Research Service Summary Report, U.S. Department of Agriculture, September 2009p. 7-8.
- xiv Drewnowski, Adam and SE Specter. "Poverty and Obesity: The Role of Energy Density and Energy Costs." *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.
- xv "Hunger and Obesity? Making the Connections," Food Research and Action Center, http://www.frac.org/html/hunger_in_the_us/hunger&obesity.htm.
- xvi William H. Dietz, "Does Hunger Cause Obesity?," *Pediatrics*, 95: no.5 (May 1995): 766-767, <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/95/5/766>.
- xvii "Child Hunger Facts," Feeding America, www.feedingamerica.org.
- xviii Edward Frongillo, Diana F. Jyoti, and Sonya J. Jones, "Food Stamp Program Participation Is Associated with Better Academic Learning among School Children," *Journal of Nutrition* 136, 1077-1080 (April 2006): p.1077, <http://jn.nutrition.org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/cgi/reprint/136/4/1077>.
- xix "The Implications of Food Insecurity for Children," Feeding America, http://feedingamerica.org/faces-of-hunger/hunger-101/child-hunger-implications.aspx#_ednref2.
- xx "Hunger and Obesity? Making the Connections," Food Research and Action Center, http://www.frac.org/html/hunger_in_the_us/hunger&obesity.htm.
- xxi "TANF and SNAP Enrollment Statistics," Texas Health and Human Services Commission, http://www.hhsc.state.tx.us/research/TANF_FS.asp.
- xxii "WIC Financial Participation," Texas Department of State Health Services, <http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/wichd/fin/partfacts.shtm>.
- xxiii "National School Lunch Program," Texas Department of Agriculture, http://www.squaremeals.org/fn/render/channel/items/0,1249,2348_2363_0_0,00.html.
- xxiv Celia Hagert, *Texas' Eligibility System Continues to Fail Needy Texans*, Center for Public Policy Priorities, September 2009, <http://www.cppp.org/research.php?aid=917>.
- xxv Celia Hagert, *Texas' Eligibility System Continues to Fail Needy Texans*, Center for Public Policy Priorities, September 2009, <http://www.cppp.org/research.php?aid=917>.

-
- ^{xxvi} Celia Hagert, *State Auditor's Report on Supplemental Nutrition Provides Blueprint for Fixing Eligibility System*, Center for Public Policy Priorities, March 2010, <http://www.cppp.org/research.php?aid=972>.
- ^{xxvii} John Keel, *An Audit Report on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program at the Health and Human Services Commission*, Texas State Auditor's Office, March 2010, <http://www.sao.state.tx.us/Reports/report.cfm/report/10-026>.
- ^{xxviii} Tom Suehs, "Presentation to the House Select Committee on Government Efficiency and Accountability: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Status and Audit, April 2010, Texas Health and Human Services Commission, http://www.hhsc.state.tx.us/news/presentations/2010/SAO_SNAP_0410.pdf.
- ^{xxix} "Food Bank Pilot Gives Families New Way to Apply for SNAP," *In Touch: News from the Texas Health and Human Services Commission*, March/April 2010, http://www.hhsc.state.tx.us/stakeholder/March_April10/1.html.
- ^{xxx} "Summer Food Programs," Texas Food Policy Roundtable, <http://txfoodpolicy.org/summerfood>.
- ^{xxxi} *Texas Department of Agriculture 2010 Mayor's Challenge: Summer Nutrition Programs Toolkit*, Texas Department of Agriculture, http://netx.squaremeals.com/SNP/summerfood/sponsors/forms/MayorsChallenge_toolkit.pdf.
- ^{xxxii} "Apply to Sponsor the Summer Food Service Program," Health and Strength and Daily Food, <http://texasimpact.org/node/452>.
- ^{xxxiii} *Ending Childhood Hunger by 2015: Strategies for Achieving the President's Goal*, The Food Research and Action Center, July 2009, www.frac.org/pdf/endingchildhunger_2015paper.pdf