



Child Safety and Access to Food Assistance Programs

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THE ISSUE

According to the most recent estimates, 20% of children in the United States—almost 14 million children—face hunger and food insecurity (Rabbitt et al., 2024). Food assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), provide critical supports to families struggling with food insecurity. SNAP is our nation's second-largest anti-poverty program for children (after the Earned Income Tax Credit) and the most important program for reducing deep child poverty (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2019).

SNAP and WIC are two examples of cost-saving programs that pay future dividends by improving participants' short- and long-term outcomes and providing benefits to society at large (Farr et al., 2024). Research has shown that access to these food assistance programs is associated with improved child cognitive development and academic achievement (Jackson, 2015) and translates into lasting effects on human capital, health, economic self-sufficiency, and overall well-being (Bailey et al., 2024).



Nearly 40%

of SNAP participants are children (USDA, 2025a)



More than 5 million

infants and children under age 5 participate in WIC (USDA, 2025b)

THE EVIDENCE

ECONOMIC AND CONCRETE SUPPORTS & CHILD WELFARE INVOLVEMENT

The central role of economic hardship as a driver of child welfare system involvement underscores the importance of addressing the concrete needs of families and promoting economic stability (Casanueva et al., 2024; Conrad-Hiebner & Byram, 2020). In addition to income poverty, material hardship is a consistent predictor of child protective services (CPS) contact, above and beyond family characteristics (Thomas & Waldfoegel, 2022). Yang (2015) found that caregivers experiencing material hardships—generally defined as difficulty paying for necessities such as food, medical care, housing, or utilities—are more likely to become involved with CPS.

Other research has found that communities experiencing higher food insecurity have higher child maltreatment reporting rates and, over time, increases in food insecurity within communities have a particularly strong association with child maltreatment reporting rates in small rural and urban areas (Kim et al., 2022). Moreover, families who experience economic shocks, such as an unexpected job loss, are strongly associated with an elevated risk for child welfare system involvement, and receipt of public benefits effectively buffers against risk of maltreatment (Cai, 2022).

A large body of evidence demonstrates the positive effects of an array of economic and concrete supports (ECS) as protective factors in reducing family risk for child maltreatment, involvement with CPS, foster care placement, and significant injury or death due to maltreatment (Forston et al., 2016; Cusick et al., 2024). This evidence spans macroeconomic supports (tax credits, minimum wage, paid family leave, unemployment benefits), concrete supports (childcare, housing, and health care), and public assistance programs (Medicaid, CHIP, TANF, SNAP, WIC) ([APHSA & Chapin Hall ECS Policy Tool](#), 2023).

FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS & CHILD WELFARE INVOLVEMENT

As demonstrated by the research cited below, policies that increase access to SNAP and WIC are associated with improved child safety and reduced risk for child welfare system involvement.

- Johnson-Motoyama et al. (2022) found that states that implemented more policies to expand access to SNAP¹ experienced large reductions in CPS reports accepted for investigation (reduction of 352 reports per 100,000 children) and reductions in CPS and foster care caseloads between 2004 and 2016. States that adopted policy options to expand access to SNAP had lower rates of CPS and foster care outcomes for all forms of child maltreatment and specifically for neglect.
- Austin et al. (2023) found that states that adopted both policies to expand SNAP eligibility under broad-based categorical eligibility—increasing the income limit for eligibility and eliminating the asset test—were associated with decreases in the number of CPS-investigated reports between 2006 and 2019 (on average, 9.3 fewer investigated reports per 1,000 children each year).
- Lee & Mackey-Bilaver (2007) found that children from low-income families who participated in SNAP or WIC, jointly or alone, had lower rates of substantiated maltreatment reports, compared to children from low-income families who did not participate in either program.
- Piña et al. (2024) found states' implementation of policies expanding SNAP eligibility from 2005 to 2019 was associated with reduced rates of reported and substantiated maltreatment for children under age 3.

CONCLUSION

Food assistance programs play a critical role in safeguarding child well-being by reducing economic hardship and assisting families struggling with food insecurity. Research shows that participating in food assistance programs, such as SNAP and WIC, is associated with lower risk for child welfare system involvement. These findings underscore the importance of food assistance programs to promote child safety and family stability.

[For additional resources on the relationship between economic and concrete supports and child safety, see: A Key Connection: Economic Stability and Family Well-being – Chapin Hall](#)

¹ This included policies that: (1) increase the gross income limit for applicants under broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE), (2) exclude legally obligated child support payments from the payer's total income, (3) provide transitional SNAP benefits to families leaving TANF or state-funded cash assistance programs, and (4) use the simplified reporting option, which reduced requirements for reporting changes in household circumstances.

Statement of Independence

[Chapin Hall](#) is an independent policy research center that provides public and private decision-makers with rigorous research and achievable solutions to support them in improving the lives of children, families, and communities. We partner with policymakers, practitioners, and philanthropists to construct actionable information, practical tools, and, ultimately, positive change for families. Chapin Hall's areas of research include child welfare systems, community capacity to support children and families, and youth homelessness. Learn more about the principles that drive our work in our [Statement of Independence](#).

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