



## THE RECESSION AND FOOD SECURITY

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### Overview

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines household food security as access by all household members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. At minimum, food security entails the ability to obtain nutritionally adequate and safe food in socially acceptable ways (as opposed to stealing food, for instance).<sup>56</sup> Conversely, food insecurity occurs when a household or any of its members have limited or uncertain access to enough nutritionally adequate and safe food to meet essential dietary needs.<sup>56</sup> Notably, in recognition of the importance that quality nutrition plays in overall well-being, these definitions hinge on consistent access to healthy foods rather than on hunger.<sup>57</sup>

Controlling for income, employment, and other confounding variables, food insecurity is strongly related to adverse outcomes for children of all ages. Poor nutrition resulting from food insecurity has been linked with behavioral problems in preschoolers;<sup>58, 59</sup> lower educational performance among kindergarteners;<sup>60</sup> generally poorer cognitive and psychosocial development among children of various ages;<sup>61, 62</sup> and adverse health outcomes such as more frequent hospitalizations, particularly among young children.<sup>63, 64</sup> Studies have also found strong

associations between maternal nutrition and infant and child health,<sup>65</sup> suggesting that food insecurity can begin to affect children even prenatally.

While sustained or frequent periods of food insecurity increase the likelihood that a child may experience lasting impact, research shows that even temporary household food insecurity can have a long-term impact on children.<sup>60, 66, 67</sup> Given the rapid pace of brain development during childhood, even brief periods of food insecurity – such as those resulting from the sudden job loss of a family member or other conditions associated with economic recessions – may have lifelong implications. For children who experience food insecurity at both the individual and household level, the potential adverse effects are intensified.<sup>64</sup>

One facet of food insecurity that demands greater attention is its potential contribution to childhood obesity. Food insecurity is heavily concentrated among low-income families<sup>68</sup> who may experience economic barriers to obtaining healthy, nutrient-dense foods due to the comparatively high cost of these items.<sup>69</sup> It is



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thus plausible that increasing rates of food insecurity and advancing rates of obesity are not entirely distinct phenomena.

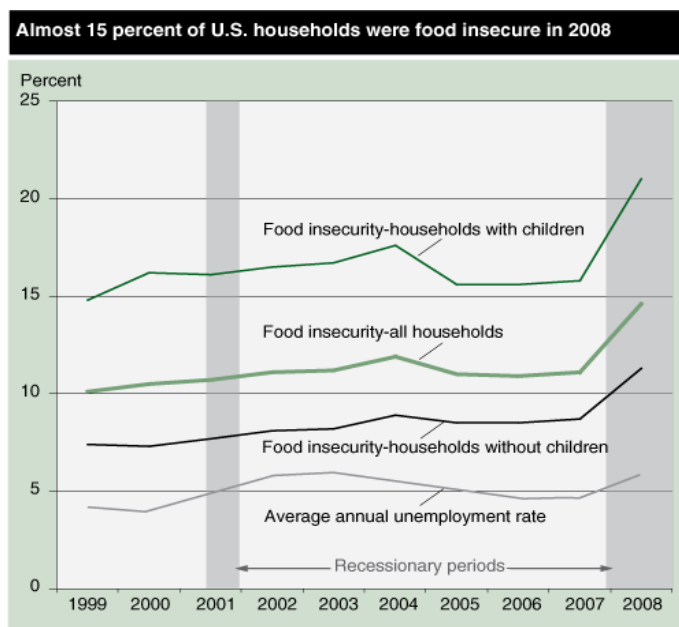
**Prior Recessions**

In 1995, the USDA began monitoring food security using a *Household Food Security Scale* developed in conjunction with the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The measure assesses the relationship between households' economic conditions, hunger, and food access as part of the United States Census Bureau's annual *Current Population Survey* (CPS), and includes questions about both adult and child nutrition.<sup>57</sup> Food security status is determined by the number of food-related problems experienced during a twelve-month period. Examples of hardships include: difficulty obtaining enough food; anxiety about whether or not there will be enough money for food; reductions in food intake; and reductions in the quality of diet.

In 2000, a specific *Child Food Security Scale* was added to the survey. This additional measure was created to reflect the fact that while child food security is related to household food security, the nature of that relationship may vary depending upon a number of factors, most notably age.<sup>70</sup> For one, school-age children living in food insecure households may have access to school-based food and nutrition programs that adults and younger children do not.<sup>71</sup> Second, particularly when it comes to younger children, parents may sacrifice their own nutritional needs to ensure that their children's are met. Thus, living in a food insecure household does not necessarily mean that a child does not receive sufficient food.<sup>70, 72</sup> The inclusion of the *Child Food Security Scale* allows the USDA to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the effect of food insecurity on children.

Given the relative newness of the *Household* and *Child Food Security Scales*, it is difficult to draw comparisons between the recent economic recession and earlier

FIGURE 3:



Source: Andrews M, Nord M. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, *Food insecurity up in recessionary times*, 2009.

economic crises with respect to the issue of food security. In fact, the 2001 recession is the only recession for which comparison data are available.

As might be expected, the level of food insecurity among all households and households with children trends similar to unemployment levels. From 1995 to 1999, as the national economy expanded, the percentage of food insecure households with children decreased from 17.4 percent to a low of 14.8. However, with the onset of the 2001 recession, the percentage of food insecure households with children rose to 16.1 percent [See Figure 3].<sup>72, 73</sup>

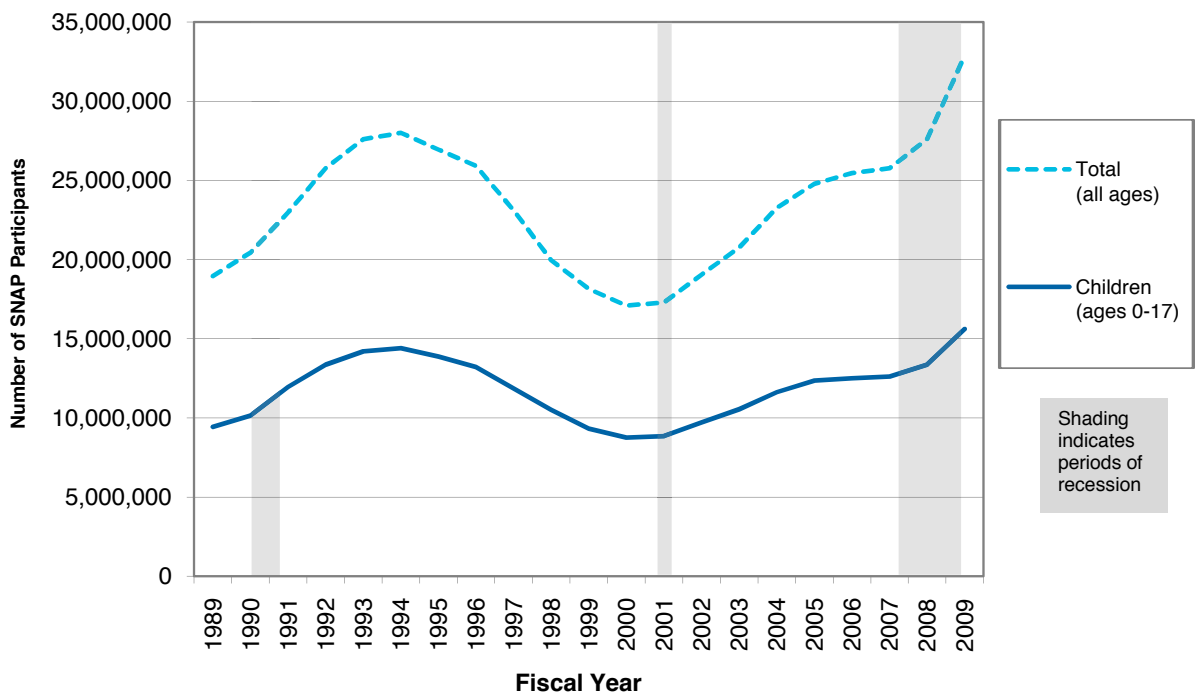
What is perhaps less intuitive is that the number of food insecure households continued to increase even as the economy recovered. Food insecurity among households with children rose sharply in the years immediately after the recession, peaking at 17.6 percent

in 2004.<sup>74</sup> This lag between the end of the recession and improvements in food security is generally thought to reflect the slow pace of the recovery with respect to unemployment.<sup>73, 75</sup> While employment does not guarantee food security, unemployment is a known contributor to food insecurity. As is reflected in Figure 3, the unemployment rate did not improve until well after the end of the 2001 recession.

### Trends in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

In addition to fluctuating unemployment rates, food insecurity levels are also influenced by changes in food and nutrition assistance programs available to families.<sup>76</sup> Participation in programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) can improve nutritional outcomes among children,<sup>77</sup> and these programs often function as a lifeline for

FIGURE 4:  
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Participation, 1989-2009



Source: Based on data from *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program households: Fiscal Year 2009*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2010.

low-income families dealing with food insecurity.<sup>75</sup> SNAP, which until October 2008 was known as the Food Stamp Program, is intended to “permit low-income households to obtain a more nutritious diet” by providing an EBT card (similar to a debit card) that can be used to purchase food.<sup>76</sup> Although growth in SNAP participation rates may result from increased enrollment among eligible households as a result of outreach efforts and state administrative policies, large shifts in participation often reflect households that are newly eligible by virtue of reduced income and assets. In this respect, SNAP serves as a useful barometer of economic need, particularly for children, who make up approximately 50 percent of all recipients.<sup>79</sup>

During the 2001 recession, growth in food stamp participation occurred both because more people became eligible for SNAP and because more eligible individuals enrolled in the program.<sup>4,76,78</sup> In 2000, the participation rate among eligible households was approximately 50 percent. Over the next several years, the number of eligible households increased from 14 million to 18 million while the economy recovered.<sup>74</sup> During that same period, states and the federal government made active efforts to encourage participation, and by 2005, the number of eligible households participating in SNAP had increased to over 60 percent. Notably, the pattern of children’s enrollment in SNAP has historically mirrored the household participation trends. Figure 4 shows the percentage of child SNAP recipients increasing substantially between 2001 and 2004 before beginning to stabilize somewhat between Fiscal Years 2005 and 2007.<sup>80</sup>

The trend in SNAP caseload growth after the 2001 recession is also evident in prior recessions dating back to the early 1990s. In each instance, enrollment increased during and in the aftermath of recession. Although the particular features of each recession

as well as policy and program changes over time undoubtedly impacted participation,<sup>81</sup> the general pattern of recession-associated increases in the number of eligible and enrolled individuals has remained consistent.

## Recent Recession

While it is not yet possible to assess post-recession trends in food security for the recession that began in December 2007, the basic patterns appear similar to previous economic downturns. As economic indicators such as unemployment levels have worsened, food security has declined and enrollment in SNAP and other USDA food and nutrition assistance programs has increased. However, there is a critical difference between earlier recessions and the recent economic crisis: magnitude. The number of children living in food insecure households went from 16 percent in 2007 to 21 percent in 2008, making it the most dramatic single-year spike in food insecurity since the USDA began measuring it in 1995.<sup>73</sup>

### *The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)*

A similarly unprecedented year-to-year increase can be seen in SNAP enrollment. The number of people receiving SNAP benefits grew by 24 percent – approximately 7 million people – between August 2008 and August 2009.<sup>79</sup> Given that roughly half of all SNAP recipients are children, this means that in August 2009, approximately 3.4 million more children were receiving nutritional assistance than only one year earlier.<sup>79,80</sup> Further, the data suggest that this particular spike in enrollment is primarily driven by increases in the number of low-income eligible households, rather than increases in the number of eligible households participating.<sup>75,76,79</sup> Such analyses are underscored by data showing that the states and regions hardest hit by the recession in terms of unemployment and increases

in child poverty rates are, for the most part, the states in which SNAP enrollment has increased the most.<sup>79</sup> In 19 states, 25 percent or more of all children were enrolled in SNAP at some point during 2009.<sup>82</sup> In June 2009, there were over 100 counties across the United States in which between 50 and 74 percent of all children received SNAP benefits.<sup>83</sup>

### *The National School Lunch Program (NSLP)*

While SNAP provides the vast majority of nutritional assistance in the United States, school-based nutritional programs play a critical role in the food security of school-aged children. Participation in the USDA National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which like SNAP is an entitlement program that expands in response to need, has also increased during the recent recession. Enrollment in free lunch programs rose by 6.3 percent to 16.5 million children – an all time high – between February 2008 and February 2009.<sup>84</sup> Recent changes in USDA policy are likely to further increase enrollment in NSLP. As of the start of the 2009-2010 school year, if anyone in a household receives benefits through SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), all children in that household will be categorically eligible for free school lunches.<sup>80, 85</sup>

### *The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)*

For children who are not yet of school age, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides nutritional education and support to low-income pregnant and postpartum women and their children.<sup>86</sup> Because WIC is not an entitlement program, participation does not necessarily expand and contract with demand as SNAP and NSLP do; however, enrollment figures suggest that the program provided increasing nutritional assistance

to low-income women and children during and in the aftermath of the recent recession. Between Fiscal Year 2008 and Fiscal Year 2009, average annual participation in WIC rose from 8.7 to 9.1 million, and estimates for Fiscal Year 2010 to-date put the number at 9.3 million.<sup>87</sup>

### *Expanded Federal Support*

Food and nutrition assistance programs appear to have been relatively responsive to dramatically expanding needs.<sup>75, 78</sup> The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) enhanced benefits for SNAP recipients; as of April 2009, SNAP households saw a 13.6 percent increase in their monthly benefits.<sup>88</sup> For a family of four, this translated into an \$80 per month maximum increase in their SNAP allotment.<sup>89</sup> ARRA also included approximately \$300 million over two years to help states cope with the administrative demands associated with rising caseloads.<sup>10</sup> However, recent reports suggest that even with the additional administrative funds, some states have had to cut back on staff, a potential hindrance to the program's effectiveness.<sup>4</sup>

What these numbers do not necessarily tell us is whether and to what degree the expansion of crucial food and nutrition programs such as SNAP translates into improved well-being for children. Although there is evidence that higher household food expenditures are associated with higher quality diets in general,<sup>69, 90</sup> the full effects of enhanced benefits on child nutrition are not yet known. In the past, food stamp programs have been shown to reduce, but not alleviate, the adverse health outcomes associated with food insecurity, but again, research specific to children is limited.<sup>77, 91</sup> USDA programs aimed at providing families with better access to nutritional foods – for instance by licensing local farmers' markets to accept SNAP benefits<sup>92</sup> – are promising, but there is not yet sufficient research to determine how this has affected child health. In general and particularly as it relates to obesity, it is important to

know whether or not increased expenditures on and participation in food and nutrition assistance programs, such as SNAP and the school lunch program, translate into better nutritional and overall health outcomes for children.

### **Key Points:**

#### **The Recession & Children's Food Security**

- In 2008, one year into the recent recession, 21 percent of all households with children were estimated to be food insecure, the highest percentage since 1995.
- While participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is up since the start of the recent recession, whether these programs have sufficiently met the increased needs of families remains unknown.
- Limited affordability of and access to nutritious foods as a result of food insecurity has important implications with respect to children's health, particularly as it relates to the growing childhood obesity epidemic, and demands increased focus.

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