



# *The Kid Angle*

*Kid-focused news from First Focus on Children*

---

## **To curb mental health crisis in kids, feed them better**

**October 26, 2023**

Contact: Michele Kayal, VP Media and Communications,  
[MicheleK@FirstFocus.org](mailto:MicheleK@FirstFocus.org)

---

On long days in Congress, like the ones leading up to yesterday's election of a new House Speaker, lawmakers are known to keep up their strength with pallets of pizza and take-out tacos.

Unfortunately, not all kids in this country are as lucky.

New data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) shows that **in 2022, [10% of all U.S. children — or 7.3 million kids — did not have enough food to keep them healthy.](#)** That's a nearly 7% increase over the previous year, when safeguards like the improved child tax credit kept food on families' tables. During the same period, **780,000 children were forced to skip meals — or to sometimes go an entire day without food — because their families simply could not afford it.** The number represents a more than 30% increase over the previous year.

As we've sadly come to expect (accept??), food inequity hits hardest at children of color, with **children in Black households nearly three times as likely to suffer food insecurity** than children in white households. **Children in Hispanic households are more than twice as likely** to experience food insecurity.

**Here's the thing to know:** Food insecurity doesn't just mean that children go hungry, although they often do. It also means that they do not have enough high-quality food to sustain the hard work of development that young minds and bodies are carrying out.

**We tend to focus on the [physical impacts of food insecurity among children:](#)**

Underweight from not enough food, overweight from too much high-calorie, low-nutrition food, such as ultra-processed convenience store products that are often the only option for families in food deserts. Increased rates of asthma and other chronic diseases. More emergency room visits.

But it's time to consciously move mental health impacts to centerstage. [More and more research links good nutrition to good mental health](#). This [connection is especially important in children](#). Research already has shown that food insecurity makes children more [susceptible to anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation](#). It puts them at greater risk of [developing behavioral problems and performing poorly in school](#), which affect their family and social relationships and their long-term economic prospects.

**In pursuing — and remedying — the causes of our youth mental health crisis, lawmakers must begin to heed this connection.**

**That means disconnecting food policy from politics.**

For instance, resolutions such as the one offered recently by Sen. Roger Marshall (R-Kan.), which would [block implementation of USDA guidance that forbids discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation in schools that receive federal school lunch money](#). Such connections are unacceptable and do a disservice to our children and the nation as a whole. **Ideally, Congress would make [universal school meals the standard for all our nation's children](#).**

**Now that there's a Speaker**, Congress will hopefully resume functioning. On its plate, so to speak, will be passing a federal budget and reauthorizing the Farm Bill, which governs child nutrition programs. As they move forward, lawmakers must:

- **Fully fund the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)**, which shores up the food security of children under five and their mothers by providing fruit and vegetables. When lawmakers last talked, many of them eyed cutting WIC as a way to save money, and threatened to cut children's benefits by nearly 60%. Clearly, this move would be counterproductive.
- **Reject work requirements for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**, which falls under the Farm Bill and feeds more than 14 million children.
- **Ensure that the Farm Bill fully funds nutrition programs that feed low-income Native American children and that encourage SNAP participants to purchase fruit and vegetables.**

*For other policy recommendations, please see our most recent fact sheet on [food insecurity](#) and on [the Farm Bill](#) .*

#### **COMING UP:**

**BRIEFING: PEPFAR's Impact on Vulnerable Children**

**Thursday, November 2, 2023 12:00 PM-1:30 PM ET**

*2255 Rayburn Office Building, 45 INDEPENDENCE Ave SW, Washington, DC 20515*

First Focus on Children co-hosts this in-person briefing about PEPFAR, which has done more for the health and well-being of vulnerable children than any other global program. In addition to its ground-breaking "whole child" approach supporting 7.2 million orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) and their caregivers, PEPFAR has ensured that 5.5 million babies have been born HIV-free and has saved the lives of more than 25 million men, women, and children as of 2023. [Register to attend at this link](#).



Photo by [Johnny McClung](#) on [Unsplash](#)

*The Kid Angle is published weekly by First Focus on Children, except during Congressional recesses.*



First Focus on Children  
1400 I Street NW  
Suite 450  
Washington, DC 20005  
United States

If you believe you received this message in error or wish to no longer receive email from us, please  
(Unsubscribing is not supported in previews).