RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS TO END CHILDHOOD HUNGER

Share Our Strength’s No Kid Hungry Campaign
Across America, one child in six lives in a household that struggles with hunger. Child nutrition programs ensure that these children have access to nutritious meals during the school day and in the summer months. These programs have been demonstrated to decrease hunger and food insecurity. More can be done to strengthen these programs and ensure they are reaching children where they live, learn, and play.

**SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM**

The School Breakfast Program offers children a nutritious breakfast at school so they can start their day ready to learn. Research shows consistent links between school breakfast and success in school. A study by Deloitte found that children who eat school breakfast, on average, score 17.5 percent higher on math tests and attend more days of school per year than those who do not.¹ In addition, children who eat a good breakfast develop healthy eating habits, visit the school nurse less frequently, and are less likely to be obese than those who do not.

However, because of the way breakfast has been traditionally served in schools—in the cafeteria before the start of the school day—only about half of all low-income students who rely on a free or reduced-price lunch at school also eat a school breakfast. Too often, issues such as transportation and busy morning schedules preclude students from arriving at school early enough for breakfast.

The most effective way to increase participation in the School Breakfast Program is to take breakfast out of the cafeteria and make it part of the school day, a practice known as Breakfast After the Bell. Many states and large school districts have begun to require high-need schools to offer Breakfast After the Bell, including Colorado, New Mexico, Illinois, and Nevada. These states have consistently seen some of the strongest breakfast participation increases in the nation.

Breakfast After the Bell has been linked to many positive academic outcomes. An evaluation of the program in Houston found increases in attendance and passing rates for math tests, and a decrease in disciplinary actions.² A study in Colorado found Breakfast after the Bell had a positive effect on chronic absences, excessive tardiness, and office referrals.³ An increase in breakfast participation also brings in additional resources and allows schools to leverage economies of scale to run their school meal programs, including serving more nutritious meals to students.
**Action:** More can be done at the state, congressional, and executive levels to improve school breakfast participation. More states should take steps to require Breakfast After the Bell to ensure that children have access to the food they need to succeed in school. Congress should also provide additional federal funds to support schools in implementing Breakfast After the Bell, a strategy that has shown proven results at the state and local levels. The Community Eligibility Provision has led to strong increases in school breakfast participation, and Congress should build on that success to ensure that breakfast is being served in a manner that makes it accessible to students. Finally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) should set annual goals, track progress toward improving breakfast participation, and hold states accountable for their work on this issue.

**SUMMER MEALS**

Summer is often the hungriest time of year for children from low-income families. During the school year, 21 million children from low-income families eat a school lunch every day. However, during the summer months, only about 1 in 6 of those children receive meals through the federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Summer can add a substantial financial burden on low-income families, who can see their grocery bills grow by $300 each month during the summer in order to replace the meals children were receiving at school. Summer hunger is also connected with learning loss, putting low-income children far behind their peers academically when they return to school in the fall.

The structure of the SFSP—specifically, a requirement that children eat meals on site in a congregate setting—prevents the program from reaching the vast majority of children in need. Issues such as lack of transportation to summer meal sites, inclement weather, and safety concerns make it difficult or impossible to ensure that children have meals during the summer months.

Innovative alternative methods of reaching children with summer meals have been tested and proven with private and public funds across the country. The most successful of these is the Summer Electronic Benefit for Children (SEBT). Authorized by Congress as a pilot program in 2010, SEBT provides low-income families with additional resources to purchase food during the summer months. It has been proven
to reduce the incidence of very low food security among children by up to one-third.

**Action:** To end summer hunger across the country, the SFSP must allow for more options to reach children, including SEBT and noncongregate feeding. SEBT is a proven and effective way to reduce childhood hunger during the summer months. For more children to be reached by this critical program, Congress should appropriate additional funds to expand the availability of SEBT, especially in rural communities, where summer meals are least accessible. SEBT can be a targeted resource to reach the nation’s most underserved communities, and Congress should ensure that funds are available to do so. Additionally, flexibility should be built into the SFSP to allow for the option of noncongregate meals. Many successful pilot programs have demonstrated effective ways of reaching children with meals off site, and states and communities should have the option to operate these programs.

**AT-RISK AFTERSCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM**

The At-Risk Afterschool Meals Program helps students get the nutritious meals they need in a safe, supervised location. Through the At-Risk Afterschool Meals component of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the USDA provides reimbursements for snacks and meals served at after-school programs offering enrichment or education activities.

Many after-school programs already feed students, using money from their own budgets, because they recognize that for many students lunch is a distant memory, and they may not get an adequate healthy dinner at home. Often these programs are also operating summer meal programs. Many are also run by schools. However, having to operate multiple programs can be a time-consuming and expensive hurdle for schools and community groups providing meals for low-income children outside of school hours.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP), CACFP, and SFSP have different regulations and rules, and in some states they are operated by different agencies. This fragmentation creates significant burdens for these programs and can interfere with their ability to serve children in need.

**Action:** In order to most effectively reach children, out-of-school meal programs
should be streamlined and include (1) a provision for after-school meals through the NSLP, similar to the area-eligible snack already authorized for schools, and (2) the addition of At-Risk Afterschool Meals to the SFSP, aligning program rules to eliminate red tape. Congress should ensure that the area eligibility requirement for At-Risk Afterschool Meals is aligned with that of other programs; currently, only after-school programs are mandated to rely on school data as the only option.

ENDNOTES


4. APCO Insight and Share Our Strength, National Summer Meals Survey (Washington, DC: APCO Insight and Share Our Strength, 2013).
Children of immigrants are the fastest-growing group of American children.\textsuperscript{1} Approximately 18 million children in the United States live in a family with at least one immigrant parent,\textsuperscript{2} and an estimated 5 million children (of whom more than 80 percent are U.S. citizens) live in homes with at least one undocumented parent.\textsuperscript{3} According to projections by the Pew Research Center, by the year 2050, 1 in 3 children will be children of either first- or second-generation immigrants.\textsuperscript{4} Immigrant families, whether lawfully present or undocumented, face unique systemic barriers to attaining economic security. These recommendations highlight efforts to reduce these barriers among immigrant families and increase economic mobility for their children.

**KEEP FAMILIES TOGETHER**

Family separation due to deportation increases economic insecurity for immigrant families. Workplace raids often result in the loss of a primary breadwinner for a family, and the loss is compounded when this person is also the primary caregiver for minor children. According to a study of worksite raids by the Urban Institute, for every two adults apprehended, at least one child is impacted.\textsuperscript{5} Children who lose a parent due to sudden deportation or detention often end up in the child welfare system.\textsuperscript{6} Increased isolation and fear of separation create an environment of toxic stress that harms healthy child development and impedes educational achievement.\textsuperscript{7} The effects of toxic stress manifest in a number of ways in a child’s behavior, including problems sleeping, depression, anxiety, and an inability to focus in school due to fear of not seeing parents after school.\textsuperscript{8}

In addition to interior enforcement such as worksite raids, the Trump Administration is separating families at the border as a deterrence tactic to discourage families from seeking refuge in the United States.\textsuperscript{9} This practice has been condemned by both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association due to its unnecessary trauma and harmful effects on children.\textsuperscript{10} Separating families simply because of their immigration status is cruel and hypocritical at a time when states are begging for additional foster care supports due to an increase in children entering the foster care system.\textsuperscript{11} California legislation, the Reuniting Immigrant Families Act of 2013, addresses family separation issues and prioritizes keeping children with their families and out of the child welfare system.\textsuperscript{12}
Immigration policies should be modified to prioritize the unity of families. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security should allow discretion when detaining or deporting parents and caregivers of minor children.\textsuperscript{13} The Urban Institute recommends that Congress modify existing immigration law to allow for minor U.S.-citizen children to petition for lawful presence for their parents. Additionally, the institute recommends that detained parents be allowed to argue hardship on behalf of U.S.-citizen children before immigration judges.\textsuperscript{14} Finally, ending workplace raids will allow hardworking families to provide for the housing and nutritional needs of their children.

MAKE PUBLIC BENEFITS MORE INCLUSIVE, RATHER THAN MORE EXCLUSIVE

Access to housing and nutrition assistance programs are essential to income stability for low-income families regardless of immigration status. Families living from paycheck to paycheck can be devastated by a single trip to the emergency room. Often the working poor are forced to choose between buying groceries and paying other necessary bills. Assistance from public benefits reflects the basic needs of parents who work hard in low-wage positions that do not provide employer-sponsored health coverage or an adequate, living wage for their families.\textsuperscript{15}

Current eligibility for public assistance programs such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) applies only to qualified immigrants—green card holders and asylum seekers who have been in the country for more than five years.\textsuperscript{16} Undocumented immigrants and lawfully present immigrants who have not met the five-year requirement are not eligible.

Due to this restricted federal eligibility, and understanding the important role such programs have in economic stability for families, some states, including California and New York, have developed supplemental benefit programs that provide state funds to go beyond what immigrant families may be eligible for under federal guidelines.\textsuperscript{17} California’s CalFresh food assistance program provides nutrition assistance similar to that of SNAP to qualified immigrants, and New York’s Safety Net Assistance program provides temporary cash assistance for qualified immigrant families who are experiencing financial hardship but ineligible for TANF.\textsuperscript{18} With regard to healthcare,
31 states, including Florida and Utah, have chosen to waive the five-year waiting period for Medicaid and/or Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) coverage for lawfully present immigrant children. California now covers all income-eligible children under 18 in its state Medicaid program, Medi-Cal.

In contrast, a recently leaked draft proposal from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security proposes to punish immigrant families by expanding the term public charge (i.e., burden on the public coffers) in the consideration of an application for citizenship and/or lawful admission. The proposed rule would allow government officials to consider an applicant’s family members’ (including U.S.-citizen children’s) use of direct cash benefits as well as a broader range of services, such as CHIP, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and SNAP. Limiting access to health and nutrition programs for families in poverty will potentially result in increased food insecurity, housing instability, toxic stress, and other consequences that all negatively affect healthy child development and academic achievement. Any of the proposed changes to benefit eligibility rules would no doubt cause a decline in the use of services, regardless of actual eligibility changes. Families would be forced to choose family unity over health and well-being.

Policies and programs designed to safeguard vulnerable, low-income children should continuously aim to be more inclusive, rather than more exclusive. Any proposed policies and practices must ensure that regardless of where a child was born, he or she gets equal access to healthcare, education, proper nutrition, and the support needed to have a fair chance to succeed.

INCREASE ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Evaluations of early childhood education programs show that early education provides educational and socioeconomic mobility for low-income minority children. Although all children, regardless of immigration status, are guaranteed a K–12 education in the United States, English language learners (children whose first language is not English) face significant barriers in achieving educational success. Early education provides significant benefits for these students, including building social and literacy skills that will allow them to reduce the educational gap that often starts in kindergarten. Additionally, studies show that access to early childhood
programs increases the likelihood of stronger contributions to the economy as an adult.\textsuperscript{26} Enrollment efforts must target immigrant populations to ensure that all children have access to early childhood programs in their community. Some ways to do so include creating language-appropriate materials for each community, making connections with local agencies that serve immigrant populations, and educating families on eligibility for and the benefits of the programs offered.\textsuperscript{27}

Similarly, the cost of secondary education has significantly increased over the years, and most U.S.-citizen students rely on federal or state financial assistance to help their families manage these costs. Children of immigrants face barriers to receiving financial assistance to attend higher education institutions. Undocumented students are not eligible for public federal or state grants, and some states (Alabama and South Carolina, as of 2013) completely prohibit undocumented students from enrolling in any higher education institution.\textsuperscript{28} Although Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which made it possible for undocumented young people to attend college,\textsuperscript{29} was highly successful in creating pathways for children of immigrants to gain social and economic opportunities, the Trump Administration ended the program in 2017. Without congressional action, more than 800,000 young people will soon lose their work authorization and access to college.\textsuperscript{30}

Congress must find a legislative solution for DACA recipients to continue their education and work in their communities. Although some states allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition, only four states allow these students to access publicly funded grants.\textsuperscript{31} State legislatures should pass legislation to allow such students access to grants and higher education cost assistance. Increasing the number of potential entrepreneurs and skilled workers in our communities will have a direct economic impact, locally and nationally.

CONCLUSION

Recent studies have shown that the average number of U.S. childbirths has drastically declined since the 1950s while the number of elderly continues to increase.\textsuperscript{32} Therefore, the future cost per worker to support the very young and the elderly is expected to increase.\textsuperscript{33} Similarly, a recent report by PolicyLink\textsuperscript{34} highlights the dramatic increase in the gap between the number of seniors of color and the number of young people of color. The report suggests an urgency in policy response to ensure
that all low-income children of color and English language learners can access the education and supports needed to succeed in the future.

Everyone—regardless of socioeconomic status—benefits from strategies that lift children out of poverty. The Annie E. Casey Foundation cautions that “our future prosperity is in peril if we enact policies that derail these young lives because of their race, ethnicity or country of birth, or a parent’s country of birth.”\textsuperscript{35} If children of immigrants, who now comprise a quarter of the U.S. child population,\textsuperscript{36} are denied the supports they need to grow and thrive, we all lose.
ENDNOTES


8. Ibid.


10. Ibid.


12. Kelly et al., The Foster Care Housing Crisis.


18. Ibid.

20. Ibid.


25. Leseman, Early Education for Immigrant Children.


27. Ibid.


30. Ibid.


33. Ibid.


35. Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017 Race for Results, 5.

36. Ibid.