

Issue Brief From THE FAMILY BUDGET ESTIMATOR Project

HUNGER & CHILD NUTRITION



WHAT IS THE EXTENT OF HUNGER IN TEXAS?

Texas suffers the third-highest rate of “food insecurity” in the nation and the seventh-highest rate of hunger. Sixteen percent of households (more than 3 million Texans) are food insecure, and 5.1% of households suffer from outright hunger. Families that are food insecure don’t always know where they will get the groceries or money for their next meal. Families with young children are at the greatest risk of being food insecure.

WHY IS ADEQUATE NUTRITION SO IMPORTANT IN CHILDREN?

Research has linked good nutrition to proper brain development in children under the age of three. Malnutrition reduces children’s energy and ability to learn. Poor or overnutrition is also an increasing problem in Texas and across the nation. Over the past 20 years, obesity rates have doubled among children and tripled among adolescents. In Texas, 42% of fourth graders are either overweight or at risk of being overweight. Seventy percent of overweight children will become overweight or obese adults.

WHY IS ADEQUATE NUTRITION SO IMPORTANT TO TEXAS?

Hunger doesn’t just take a toll on the 1.3 million Texas families who experience food insecurity; it costs the state more than \$9 billion a year, according to a Brandeis University study. Researchers estimate this amount by calculating the annual cost for charity, illness, and lowered productivity for the nation related to food insecurity. The rising rate of childhood obesity also comes with a large price tag. The Texas Department of State Health Services projects that by 2040, annual overweight- and obesity-related costs could be as high as \$39 billion. The Comptroller of Public Accounts estimates that obesity cost Texas businesses \$3.3 billion in 2005, and could cost employers \$15.8 billion annually by 2025 if the trend continues unchecked.

WHAT PROGRAMS ARE AVAILABLE TO PREVENT HUNGER AND IMPROVE CHILD NUTRITION?

Most public nutrition programs are funded by the federal government, though many are offered through public-private partnerships. The nutrition safety net includes the following programs and resources:

- **Food Stamps:** The Food Stamp program helps low-income people and families buy the food they need for good health. Benefits are provided on an electronic card that can be used to purchase food at most grocery stores.
- **School Meal Programs:** Congress created the school breakfast and lunch programs to ensure that disadvantaged children get the nutrition they need to succeed in school. Depending on their family’s income, students eat for free or at a reduced price. If at least 10% of a school’s students are from low-income families, Texas law requires the school to offer the breakfast program. As a result, virtually all of Texas schools have a breakfast program.
- **Summer Feeding Program:** This federally funded program provides free meals to children in low-income communities throughout the summer.
- **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC):** This federal program provides coupons for food, nutritional assessments, and health care referrals to at-risk low-income pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children under age 5.

- **Texas Food Bank Association:** Supported by private sector donations, volunteers, and surplus government commodities, this extensive emergency feeding network of 19 food banks and more than 3,600 charities assists more than 2 million Texans each year during periods of crisis.

WHAT IS THE UNMET NEED?

- **Food Stamps:** Fewer than half of the families eligible for Food Stamps—over 2 million Texans—do not participate in the program. Many factors contribute to low participation rates, including a complicated enrollment process that may deter applicants, lack of awareness or outreach, the stigma associated with public assistance, and shortages of caseworkers needed to enroll eligible families. In addition, for many families, Food Stamp don't always last the entire month, forcing families to either cut back on food or buy cheaper, less healthy food. Congress could address this problem by increasing the value of Food Stamp benefits.
- **Emergency Feeding Network:** Low Food Stamp participation and inadequate benefits also place a strain on emergency food providers who must pick up the slack. Across Texas, charities that used to provide food only on an emergency basis report that they have evolved into year-round assistance for families, including working families.
- **School Meal Programs:** Millions of low-income children do not participate in the school breakfast and summer food programs. School districts attribute low participation in the breakfast program to logistical barriers. For example, students don't always arrive at school in time to eat. This barrier could be addressed by making breakfast part of the school day, either by serving breakfast in the classroom, or offering “grab and go” meals to students when they first arrive at school.
- **Summer Food Program:** In the summer food program, low participation is the result of a lack of awareness, not enough feeding sites, and limited transportation, particularly in rural areas. Texas could make the program more attractive to providers by supplementing the federal meal reimbursements with state funds. Research shows that requests for emergency food from families with children soar during the summer months when school is out and energy bills are high, and this program seeks to meet that need.
- **Nutrition:** School food service departments are generally expected to be self-sufficient, which means they don't receive any money from their school district and must depend entirely on the federal meal reimbursements both for food and overhead costs. The lack of resources makes it hard for schools to offer high-quality, fresh, and healthy food to students. Congress could improve overall child health and nutrition by increasing the federal reimbursements for school meals.

FOOD PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES

Commodity Supplemental Food Program: Similar to WIC, this program improves the health of low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and post-partum women; infants and children up to age six; and elderly people 60 or older by supplementing their diets with nutritious USDA commodity foods. The program is available in Dallas, Webb, and Zapata Counties through the North Texas and South Texas Food Banks. www.hhsc.state.tx.us/programs/snp/pgm_facts.html#CSFP

Summer Food Program: Provides free nutritious meals to children under 19 at participating feeding sites in communities where at least 50% of children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. To participate, just show up. www.hhsc.state.tx.us/programs/snp/summerfood/

Texas Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Division: Offers an array of resources to download or order, including printed materials, displays, promotional items, information about Texas nutrition policy, regulations, and program overviews. www.squaremeals.org/

WIC: www.dshs.state.tx.us/wichd/gi/eligible.shtm

Texas Food Bank Network: <http://www.tashfb.org/>