

# The NSLP has Potential to Impact Students' Health

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## Introduction

Promoting healthy behaviors in childhood is the first step to reducing and preventing the prevalence of diet-related diseases and poor health outcomes in all communities. Food insecurity is a complex, prevalent concern present in our world, country, and community today. To have "nutrition security" means having consistent physical, social, and economic access to enough foods that are safe and nutritious. Unfortunately, even today several children and adolescents are at a high risk of food insecurity and subsequently facing more health disparities and risks to future nutrition/lifestyle related diseases. According to Feeding America, 1 in 6 children may experience food insecurity in 2021. It is also important to note that certain areas/communities are disproportionately affected by this statistic. There have been a plethora of studies linking food insecurity to negative health outcomes, including obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease, all of which can be improved, managed, or prevented with health promoting behaviors.. One area that is set up well for a positive effect is school lunches. School breakfast and lunch programs are a great means to provide children with nutrient dense meals, introduce them to foods that aren't available at home, and teach them positive health behaviors.

## Food Insecurity Links to Poor Health

Individuals, who report being most food insecure, are also at a high risk for developing diet-related diseases

- USDA's nutrition support programs play a vital role in reducing the risk of food insecurity leading to inadequate nutrition and health disparities.
- Poor nutrition is the leading cause of illness in the USA, correlates to 600,000 deaths per year
- Historically underserved and marginalized communities experience disproportionately higher rates of food insecurity

It is crucial to not only address having *enough* to eat, but also providing quality nutrition to help prevent poor health outcomes

## Prevalence & Impact

- The HEI shows the overall diet quality score of 59/100, however this is not equally distributed: Black and Indigenous children are more likely to have obesity than their white peers (CHDIR)
- In America, 1 in 10 households (~38 million) experience food insecurity
- Type II Diabetes and Obesity have become prevalent in children

## NSLP Impact on Health Disparities

Research shows receiving a free or reduced-price school lunch:

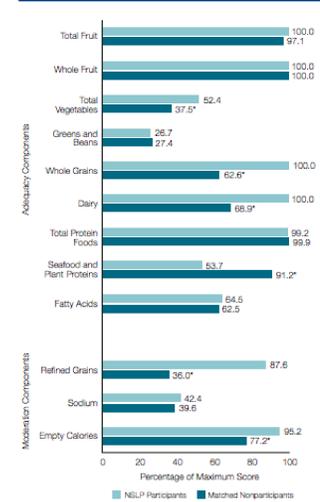
- Reduces food insecurity and "school meal disparities."
- Positively impacts students' health and obesity rates
- Improves dietary intake, specifically increases fruit and vegetable consumption
- Establishes healthy nutrition habits early

Figure 22.

There was a positive and statistically significant association between student participation in the NSLP and the nutritional quality of NSLP lunches as measured by the HEI-2010



Lunches consumed by NSLP participants were more consistent with Dietary Guidelines recommendations than lunches consumed by matched nonparticipants



## Improvements to the NSLP

Research and evaluation is essential to reach the goal to promote healthier eating habits in a more equitable way.

- The NSLP provides nutrition to tens of millions children each day
- FNS is working to update nutrition standards to reflect the most current DGA, therefore integrating nutrition science into PSEs
- In 2021, \$5.5 million was awarded in grants for 21 States to increase local foods in school meals.
- FNS is also proposing a new \$100 million grant program to incentivize healthy school food

## Conclusion

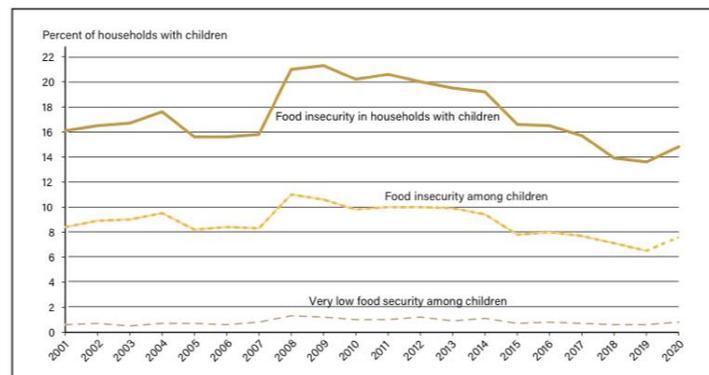
Our goal as Health Professionals is to identify how to utilize the NSLP to help impact children with, or at risk of, food insecurity to develop sustainable, practical health behaviors and provide them with the environment to thrive. The only reliable meals that some children facing food insecurity receive are during school hours, so it is paramount that we take advantage of this opportunity. School meals are accessible and affordable and can be utilized in building a healthy relationship and foundation to learning and living a healthy life. Research has shown that many children have nutrient gaps in their diets, specifically too little fruits, vegetables, and dairy products. School lunches should be a method used to fill in these nutrient gaps. It is crucial that we are providing children with whole, minimally processed foods in their lunches. Promoting a healthy childhood is the first step to reducing and preventing the prevalence of diseases and poor health outcomes in our communities, especially those that are linked to health behaviors.



## References

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Figure 4 Trends in the prevalence of food insecurity in households with children, 2001–20



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2020 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

