

Barriers That Prevent Low-Income People From Gaining Access to Food and Nutrition Programs

I. BACKGROUND

HISTORY OF THE NUTRITION PROGRAMS

In 1969, President Nixon convened a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health and pledged “a national commitment to put an end to hunger and malnutrition due to poverty in America.” The years following the conference saw the creation and rapid expansion of the Food Stamp Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program and WIC. These programs joined the National School Lunch Program, which began in 1946, to form the nutritional safety net that combats hunger in the United States.

Today these programs in the aggregate provide more than \$40 billion per year to help ensure that low-income households have access to the nutrition they need. They have helped to decrease substantially the depth and breadth of hunger in the United States. In 1977, a team of physicians funded by the Field Foundation to survey the state of nutrition among the nation’s poorest communities reported that:

Our first and overwhelming impression is that there are far fewer grossly malnourished people in this country today than 10 years ago. . . This change does not appear to be due to an overall improvement in living standards or to a decrease in joblessness. . . . But in the area of food there is a difference. The Food Stamp Program, the nutritional component of Head Start, school lunch and breakfast programs, and to a lesser extent Women-Infant-Children (WIC) feeding programs have made all the difference.

Yet, in spite of the growth in participation in the programs over time, 34.9 million people in 2002 still lived in hungry or “food insecure” households (defined as households that do not always have access to enough food for an active healthy life for all household members because they lack money or other resources). This was an increase of more than four million people since 1999 – hunger is still sensitive to economic conditions.

Many, many more people in the United States would be included in the nation’s ranks of hungry and food insecure if they did not have access to the nutrition programs, which provided support for 1.9 billion meals in the average month in 2000. (Emergency food providers distributed an additional 198 million meals each month.) Indeed, the Food Stamp Program alone has such a dramatic impact on hunger and food insecurity that, when Congress made most legal immigrants ineligible for food stamps in 1996, their hunger and food insecurity rates soared. Subsequent studies found that adults in one of three Latino and Asian immigrant households skipped meals, one in ten recalled not eating for at least one whole day during the past six months, and one in four cut the size of children’s meals due to inadequate resources. (Congress has since restored food stamp eligibility to most legal immigrants.)

It is a national tragedy that we still are not taking full advantage of the federal nutrition programs. Unfortunately, a number of barriers continue to limit participation, thereby contributing to the continuing presence of hunger and food insecurity in the United States.

RECENT SUCCESSES IN REDUCING BARRIERS

The structure and scope of the federal nutrition programs have not remained static. Congress occasionally changes eligibility or benefit amounts, or ease of access. Non-legislative activities, such as outreach initiatives, improving federal and state administrative rules and practices, and changing public opinion, can have dramatic effects on participation in nutrition programs as well. During the last few years, both legislative and non-legislative activities have helped to increase participation substantially in some of the nutrition programs.

Since July 2000, the number of food stamp recipients has risen by 6.1 million persons, more than one-third. This increase is not only due to the economic slowdown of the last few years. After a period of significant food stamp decline, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), under both President Clinton and President Bush, has undertaken important outreach and expansion efforts. The 2002 Farm Bill expanded the food stamp program even further, restoring eligibility for many legal immigrants, slightly increasing benefits, and making access for low-income working families easier. Some of the child nutrition programs have had impressive increases as well. Congressional action in 1998 and since expanded the reach of nutrition programs in homeless and domestic violence shelters, and in afterschool programs. The new afterschool initiatives are feeding more than one million children at 25,000 afterschool programs.

In the last 15 years, participation in the School Breakfast Program has doubled due to: effective expansion campaigns by anti-hunger advocates, USDA, and state child nutrition agencies; demographic change; policy changes in the program that make it easier for schools to provide breakfast; and public awareness of the growing body of research that illustrates the tremendous impact school breakfast has on learning, student achievement, behavior, and attendance.

PARTICIPATION IN THE PROGRAMS IS FAR FROM ADEQUATE

Even with the recent expansion of some of the programs, as outlined above, none of the programs reaches everyone it was designed to serve, and a number of the programs – the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) in family child care – do not even reach half of those who are potentially eligible. School breakfast serves only two of every five children who receive free or reduced-price school lunches. Summer food programs only do half as well as school breakfast, reaching one in five. In 2001, food stamps reached 62 percent of those eligible, leaving millions of eligible families unserved by this critical program.

Even though the nutrition programs have different rules and are designed to provide different types of support in different venues and to target groups, many of the same barriers limit participation in all the nutrition programs. They include:

- Lack of awareness that the programs exist or who is eligible
- Perception of stigma applied to participating in the programs
- Benefit inadequacy that lessens the attractiveness of the programs
- Unnecessary administrative burdens and red tape that make it difficult for program providers and recipients to participate
- Federal, state or local eligibility criteria or other access barriers that keep out low-income people

II. BARRIERS AT THE NATIONAL, STATE AND LOCAL LEVELS

In each area below we describe a few examples of the most problematic barriers.¹

1. LACK OF AWARENESS

The Food Stamp Program and WIC

Many families simply do not know that the Food Stamp Program or WIC exists, or they do not know that they would be eligible to participate, or how to access the programs. A recent study conducted by Abt Associates on Food Stamp Program access found that about half (48 percent) of those eligible but not participating were not aware they could participate.

The 1996 welfare law had unintended consequences for participation in the food stamp program. Prior to the 1996 welfare law, food stamps had come to many low-income families as a package with cash assistance and Medicaid. After 1996, as many left TANF (cash assistance) for low-income work, they were unaware that they were still eligible for food stamps and dropped out of the program. Participation rates among low-income working families are even lower than for other families, with a lack of awareness of eligibility again a prominent cause.

The Child Nutrition Programs

Unlike food stamps and WIC, whose benefits go directly to eligible families, the School Breakfast Program, the National School Lunch Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and the Summer Food Service Program all require an intermediary organization (a school, a non-profit, a child care provider) to participate in the program in order for children to gain access to the nutritious meals and snacks available. (Intermediary organizations that participate in summer food or CACFP are commonly called “sponsors.”)

The National School Lunch Program, and to a lesser extent the School Breakfast Program, are relatively well known to traditional public schools, but it is likely that many charter schools, parochial schools, and other non-traditional schools do not know that the school nutrition programs are also available to them. Summer food, afterschool food, and child care food are less recognizable and visible, and as a result reach fewer children. Many potential sponsors of these programs, in areas in which they are desperately needed, do not know that the programs even exist. A recent survey conducted by Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families found that almost 40 percent of Arkansas child care providers who were not participating in the child care food program did not know the program existed.

Even when the programs are offered, children and their parents need to know that they are available and how they help children. This is particularly true of school breakfast, afterschool food, and summer food because children are not necessarily already at school (before classes) or at an afterschool or summer program. They must physically get to the feeding site. Many children do not know that afterschool and summer food are available to them, let alone where the programs are in their community. As a result,

¹ Even though WIC is commonly considered a child nutrition program and a public health program, it provides benefits directly to individuals, as does the Food Stamp Program, and requires them to apply at a WIC office for the program, much as a family is required to do to participate in food stamps. On the other hand, the other child nutrition programs – the School Breakfast and National School Lunch Program, the Summer Food Service Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program – generally provide meals and snacks to children while they are outside the home, through non-profit and public organizations. For clarity in the discussion of the barriers within the nutrition programs, food stamps and WIC are considered together, and the challenges related to the other child nutrition programs are considered together.

the sites that do exist often are not serving as many children as their capacity would allow. A USDA study found that one-third of the 2001 summer food sites could have served more than 50 additional children each. Twenty-six percent of sites identified lack of publicity about the program as the primary reason they were not operating at full capacity.

2. STIGMA

The Food Stamp Program and WIC

Many people do not participate in food stamps simply because they do not want anyone to know that they need help, or because applying for the benefits is a degrading experience. (This is much less frequently a factor in WIC.) Within the Food Stamp Program, some states require applicants to be fingerprinted, which makes many families in need of help feel like criminals. The fear that people might look down on you at the grocery store for participating in the Food Stamp Program or using WIC coupons can be enough to keep many from participating. In this regard, great strides have been made to decrease the stigma attached to the Food Stamp Program, primarily through the use of an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card, which looks and functions like a bank debit card, instead of actual food stamp coupons. USDA and a number of states also have made important efforts to make the receipt of food stamps a more acceptable experience for low-income families. USDA has a media campaign built around the concept and slogan “Food Stamps Make America Stronger.”

The Child Nutrition Programs

Summer food and child care food provide meals to all the children who come to a site, but some families still hesitate to accept a “free” meal. Many anti-hunger groups have removed the word “free” from their outreach materials, because families have stated that it acts as a deterrent. Instead, materials will talk, for example, about “summer fun and food.”

In the school lunch and breakfast programs there is a federal requirement that schools eliminate the identification of students as receiving a free or reduced-price meal. Most schools have come a long way from the days when students lined up in the cafeteria based upon whether or not they were eligible for free or reduced-price meals. But some schools continue to identify children overtly, in essence ignoring a federal rule and subjecting students to the potential stigmatization of being identified as poor.

Even in the absence of identifying lines or cards, school breakfast continues to be thought of by many as a program only for poor children. During lunchtime, all the students are in the cafeteria, but at breakfast only those who want the meal show up in the cafeteria early. Many children, especially as they get older, do not want to be seen going in or out of the cafeteria for breakfast – they don’t want their peers to think they are poor. Breakfast participation drops sharply in high school.

3. INADEQUACY OF BENEFITS AND ARBITRARY ELIGIBILITY RULES

The Food Stamp Program and WIC

The Food Stamp Program provides critical help to low-income households, but typically does not provide enough to ensure that the household is food insecure. A family of four is eligible for up to \$471 per month (the equivalent of nearly a 50 percent boost to the monthly earnings of a full time employee making \$7 per hour), but as income rises benefits fall. On average food stamps provide only 90 cents per meal per person. Senior citizens and other single adults often receive only the minimum amount available through the program – \$10 a month, an amount unchanged since 1977 – which barely makes participation worthwhile if administrative “hassles” or stigma seem significant.

The Child Nutrition Programs

Since each child nutrition program requires an organization such as a school or public or private non-profit group to operate it, the reimbursement rates need to be high enough to cover the cost of operating the program, which is often not the case. This is particularly a problem in the summer and afterschool food programs. In 1996, Congress cut the reimbursement rates for the Summer Food Service Program by 10 percent. A recent USDA study found that 72 percent of the summer food sponsors (in 2001) did not expect to break even based on the current reimbursement rates.

Lack of resources for student transportation is another important barrier for the nutrition programs that provide food after school and during the summer, especially in rural communities where children are spread out over large geographical areas. In 2002, state child nutrition directors told FRAC that the absence of transportation funding is one of the top obstacles to summer food participation. Because the reimbursement rate is too low to cover substantial transportation costs, the Summer Food Service Program used to offer special grants to help with transportation and other outreach and expansion costs. These grants were eliminated by Congress in 1996.

The financial challenges of operating the summer food program have a real impact on children's access to the program. Across the entire country, only 30,000 summer food sites operate, compared to the 97,000 schools that provide school lunch during the school year, leaving many low-income children without access to summer nutrition. And, most of the sites that do operate are not open the whole summer, meaning that in most areas there are several weeks where no summer food is available.

Within the family child care part of CACFP, legislation in 1996 changed the reimbursement structure, resulting in dramatic cuts to the reimbursement certain homes received. Numerous homes, especially those that served children from both low and moderate-income families, dropped out of the program, causing many low-income children to lose access to the meals provided through CACFP.

4. UNNECESSARY ADMINISTRATIVE BURDENS AND RED TAPE FOR FAMILIES AND SPONSORS

The Food Stamp Program and WIC

Depending on the state, the food stamp application a family is required to fill out can be long and burdensome, and call for extensive supporting documentation from the applicant household. Anyone who comes to the food stamp office without all the required documentation will have to make at least one more trip to complete the application. In addition, recipients often are required to return frequently to the food stamp office in order to be re-certified for the program, until recently as often as every three months. These barriers particularly interfere with low-income working families' access to the programs. A recent report identified restricted food stamp office hours as having a negative effect on participation, but the report determined that only about half of food stamp recipients were served by offices offering extended office hours.

Even though the application process is less burdensome for WIC, it still requires visits to the WIC office both to enroll initially and to participate in the nutrition education that is part of the program. Employed recipients find it especially difficult to visit the WIC or food stamp office, which are seldom open during non-traditional hours. With many more low-income mothers of very young children working, this has become a growing program.

Both WIC and the Food Stamp Program can do much more in this Internet age to let applicants and recipients manage at least parts of their relationship with the agency on line. Technology could be used more effectively to limit the number of office visits and make participation easier for families.

The Child Nutrition Programs

Because of the changing needs of low-income working families, schools, other government agencies, and local non-profit organizations are expanding their services to provide more before-school, afterschool, summer, and early childhood programs, which makes the organizations eligible to operate multiple child nutrition programs. In fact, a school could participate in up to four different nutrition programs – the School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program to feed children during the school day; CACFP to feed children in its Head Start or preschool program and to provide meals in its afterschool enrichment program; and summer food to feed children during summer vacation. Each program has a different application, eligibility rules, reporting forms, and monitoring requirements for the school or other operator, which create a substantial administrative burden on organizations operating multiple nutrition programs. (Any changes made to reduce this excessive administrative burden must maintain the strength of the current federal framework and the availability of the current programs.)

Even looking at the programs independently, there is still far too much paperwork. The application for the organization (commonly called a sponsor) that participates in summer food or child care food can be inches thick. It is all too common for interested organizations to attend a state’s training program on operating one of these programs only to become so overwhelmed by the application that they never submit it. Those that do complete the application must create procedures to ensure that meals are properly tracked, menus are posted, and all paperwork is kept as required. Otherwise they risk not being reimbursed, a frightening prospect for many organizations that operate on a shoestring budget.

Even a sponsor that makes it through the application process and operates the program can find it difficult to manage the paperwork and ultimately may drop out of the program. A recent USDA study found that 8 percent of summer food sponsors dropped out of the program in 2001 because of “inadequate reimbursement rates and time-consuming paperwork.”

Reducing paperwork has been shown to have a positive effect on participation. Indeed, a Summer Food pilot passed by Congress in 2000 on the basis of a FRAC analysis substantially reduced paperwork and thereby increased participation in its first year by 9 percent in the 13 pilot states (compared to a 3 percent decline in the rest of nation).

Community-based organizations find the overwhelming paperwork and administrative requirements for afterschool and summer food more difficult to overcome than do schools, which administer school breakfast and school lunch programs and are more used to filling out the paperwork and following the requirements. Not surprisingly, the 8 percent of summer food sponsors who dropped out in 2001 were disproportionately small or new sponsors, and disproportionately non-profit organizations (rather than schools).

5. BUDGET BARRIERS AT THE STATE ADMINISTRATIVE LEVEL

The federal nutrition programs have their basic rules set by federal law, but are administered at the state level by a designated state agency. Usually, the state department of human services administers food

stamps, the health department oversees WIC, and the state education agency administers the other child nutrition programs.

Within the federal rules, states have significant discretion in administering the programs. States typically design their own applications and reporting requirements, and determine the extent of program outreach. In the case of the child nutrition programs, local sponsors also rely on the state child nutrition agency for training and technical assistance. This means that the ease of accessing the nutrition programs can vary dramatically from state to state. Some do an excellent job of minimizing paperwork, providing quality customer service, and, in the case of the child nutrition programs, offering superior training, support and technical assistance to sponsors. Others are not as pro-active in minimizing barriers and ensuring that the programs reach the intended recipients, or are limited by staffing constraints.

The Food Stamp Program and WIC

While the federal government pays for 100 percent of food stamp benefits, the cost of administering the food stamp program is divided equally between the federal government and each state. With many states in the middle of their worst budget crises since World War II, it is extremely difficult for them to afford their share of the current administrative costs, much less find the capacity to improve access and reach more eligible persons using positive new options for working families that Congress made available in 2002 legislation. A growing number of states are closing food stamp offices due to budget constraints.

Because of the nature of the WIC program, negative state practices have less impact. Although, a number of states that used to dedicate state dollars to support WIC have cut or eliminated that funding due to budget constraints. Staffing at the state level has not been a major issue, because most WIC clinics are run by local entities that contract with the state. Also, WIC is considered more of a health program.

The Child Nutrition Programs

Generally speaking, federal funds cover state administrative costs in the child nutrition programs, albeit at a bare bones level. But states' budget crises are still creating staff shortages – there are state hiring freezes and efforts to trim the state workforce even though there are federal dollars to pay those employees' salaries. Without enough staff, sponsors of the child nutrition programs do not receive the technical assistance they need to successfully participate in the programs; the approval of sponsor applications is slowed; and very little if any outreach is conducted.

6. BARRIERS AT THE LOCAL ADMINISTRATIVE AND OPERATIONAL LEVEL

The Food Stamp Program and WIC

Access to the Food Stamp Program really occurs when an eligible person walks into the local food stamp office and successfully files an application. In too many localities, the experience a person has at the food stamp office is not positive, which causes people to opt out of the application process, or to discourage their friends and neighbors. They may be treated disrespectfully, be given misinformation, be forced to wait an excessive amount of time, or be required to return multiple times.

Others cannot even get to the food stamp office to apply, which is also a problem in the WIC program. In too many areas, the closest food stamp or WIC office requires the recipient to travel long distances. Many low-income families do not own vehicles, and public transportation is generally available only in urban centers, if there. If offices are only open during normal work hours, many low-income working

parents cannot get to the office to apply without losing pay or even risking their jobs and fewer families participate. A recent study also indicates that food stamp offices that do not accommodate children accompanying their parents are creating additional barriers.

The Child Nutrition Programs

As noted earlier, an eligible local government agency, school, or private non-profit must sponsor the program in order for children to have access to the food available through the child nutrition programs. But these organizations often do not participate because of the barriers outlined previously: they do not know that the program exists, the reimbursement rate is too low to cover their expenses, or the paperwork is too overwhelming.

A range of local barriers and program choices further exacerbate access problems. For example, even though the summer food program was designed to run the entire summer, very few sites actually open the day after school closes for summer vacation and close the day before the school year begins. There are long gaps in coverage. Another local barrier limiting participation in school programs is that students often do not have enough time to eat. School districts rarely design their bus schedules to afford all students enough time to eat breakfast at school. Lunch is often quick, not allowing students enough time to eat. And schools with multiple lunch shifts create patterns that do not work for children's health and well-being. A recent article reported that sixth graders at Cole Middle School in Denver eat lunch at 9:38 in the morning, two hours into their seven-hour school day.

CONCLUSION

There is broad support for ending hunger in the United States. The importance voters place on this issue, as evidenced in polls and focus groups, along with the recent investments and initiatives from both Democratic and Republican political leaders, illustrate that there is still widespread desire to get good nutrition to children and to end hunger. Because the federal nutrition programs provide the critical framework for combating hunger and food insecurity, removing barriers that limit participation is one of the best ways to alleviate hunger in the United States.

Prepared by: Crystal Weedall FitzSimons, James D. Weill, and Lynn Parker
Food Research and Action Center
1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 540
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 986-2200
cfitzsimons@frac.org