At a Glance: Connecting Children’s Obesity and Nutrition

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CHILDREN NEED HEALTHY, NUTRITIOUS FOOD to GROW, DEVELOP, and LEARN.

Poor nutrition can lead to excessive weight gain and obesity. Children who have access to healthy, nutritious food are more likely to succeed academically and economically in adulthood.

They also have better overall health outcomes than children who do not have healthy, nutritious food. Federal nutrition programs play a critical role in providing cost-effective food programs for infants and school-age children throughout the year.

CHILDHOOD OBESITY IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM

Between 2016–2019, nearly 2 in every 5 Hoosier children between ages 10 to 17 were overweight or obese.

Childhood obesity is increasing for all Hoosier children. However, childhood obesity is more common in non-white populations. Although the reasons for these differences are complex, they are likely due to socioeconomic status and environment.

Hoosier youth who are white, non-Hispanic had the lowest obesity rate (33.0%) in 2018–2019 from the National Survey for Children’s Health, followed by Hispanic (42.3%) children. Obesity rates were significantly higher for Hoosier youth who are Black (58.0%).

Households with income 0–99% of the Federal Poverty Level had obesity rates for children ages 10 – 17 (45.4%), 11.9 percentage points higher than households with income 400% or more than the Federal Poverty level (33.5%).

HOOSIER YOUTH EXPERIENCE FOOD INSECURITY

In 2019, 239,540 Hoosier children struggled with food insecurity, hunger or did not know when they would have their next meal. The percentage of counties in Indiana with limited access to healthy foods ranges between 1% and 14%. Those with limited access are low-income individuals who do not live close to a grocery store or have access to a reliable food source.

Proximity to grocery stores is connected to consumption of fruits and vegetables. Those who live within 0.5 miles of a store saw an increase in produce availability by 8.8%. Living in food deserts and swamps can correlate with adult obesity rates. This means the balance among fast-food restaurants, convenience stores, and grocery stores in an area is a significant indicator of aggregate obesity levels.

In 2020, nearly 1 in every 6 Hoosier children experienced food insecurity.
WHAT ARE FOOD DESERTS AND FOOD SWAMPS?

Food Deserts are residential areas with limited access to affordable and healthy foods. They are measured by the distance between residencies and grocery stores.

Food Swamps are neighborhoods where there are more unhealthy food options than healthy alternatives and illustrates access to healthy food is essential.

COVID’S EFFECT ON CHILDREN’S FOOD INSECURITY

The economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated rates of food insecurity. Unemployment negatively affects a household’s food security status because meeting basic household food needs is difficult without a steady income.

In Indiana, 2021’s child food insecurity percentage is projected to decrease to 16.6%.

NUTRITION IN SCHOOLS

Across the nation, children consume up to 50% of their daily calories at school. The options that are available at school significantly influence a child’s overall nutrition.

Students who eat a healthy breakfast at school have higher scores on standardized math tests by 17.5% and attend 1.5 more days of school per year compared to students who do not have healthy school breakfast.

Schools that offer additional fruit options saw a 9.3% increase in fruit consumption among students.

CHILD NUTRITION REAUTHORIZATION

Every five years, Congress reauthorizes the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), and other child nutrition programs through a process called Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR).

These programs were reauthorized in 2010, under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. Congress plans to take up CNR this year.

During 2019-2020, 536,155 students participated in the school lunch program, a 29.0% decrease from 2016 (754,995).

HOW TO LEVERAGE THE DATA:

LOCALY:

- Participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)
- Conduct SNAP education and offer application assistance in schools

STATEWIDE:

- Adapt the Healthy Food Financing Initiative to support projects improving access to fresh, healthy foods in underserved rural and urban areas
- Align state childcare regulations with national standards for serving fruits and vegetables, physical activity, and avoiding sugar among preschoolers

NATIONALLY:

- Maintain COVID-related flexibility waivers in the next Reauthorization
- Allow organizations to operate one meal program all year
- Align the area eligibility requirement for summer feeding and educational programs to allow more learning programs to offer meals in the summer
- Increase CEP investment to allow more high-poverty schools to participate

For more in-depth research, check out the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Data Brief on iyi.org.

*A complete source list is available at iyi.org.*