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Resource Review: Child Food Insecurity: The Economic Impact on Our Nation

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Child Food Insecurity: The Economic Impact on our Nation. A report on research on the impact of food insecurity and hunger on child health, growth and development commissioned by Feeding America and The ConAgra Foods Foundation.

Authors: John Cook, PhD, Project Director, and Karen Jeng, AB, Research and Policy Fellow

Published: Feeding America, 2009, www.feedingamerica.org.

<http://feedingamerica.org/SiteFiles/child-economy-study.pdf>

The publication *Child Food Insecurity: The Economic Impact on our Nation* provides an overview of the effects of food insecurity and hunger on children in the United States. Through this review of the literature, three major themes emerge: (1) child hunger is a health problem; (2) child hunger is an educational problem; and (3) child hunger is a workforce and job-readiness problem. Using the framework of human capital theory, the report presents evidence that food insecurity can negatively affect the U.S. economy through increased health costs that, paradoxically, include obesity and overweight. Child hunger is also shown to negatively impact educational and lifetime earning potential. Finally, estimated costs associated with food insecurity, both direct and indirect, are also presented.

The report begins with a background section that includes key definitions related to food insecurity, including information about the U.S. Food Security Scale (FSS), an instrument used to classify both household and child food insecurity. Understanding how food insecurity is operationalized and contextualized is important for interpretation of the literature review, since most of the studies in this review include a variation of this measure. The background section also includes a discussion of the link between food security/insecurity and hunger, as well as how these concepts are linked with poverty. Interestingly, although poverty is the primary cause of food insecurity and hunger, not all households who are poor are food insecure.

The effects of food insecurity and child hunger are presented in terms of human capital theory, which posits that individuals form 'human capital' comprised of employment, earning capacity, and lifetime earnings. Human capital is a function of genetic potential together with educational and health status. Households can increase human capital by providing

healthy and nurturing environments and activities that allow children to achieve their maximum potential. Lack of adequate food during critical developmental periods in a child's life can lead to deficits that often persist. In particular, the harmful effects of child food insecurity and hunger on cognitive development of the child during the prenatal, neonatal and early childhood (ages 0 to 3) years are highlighted.

The links between child obesity/overweight and food insecurity are examined in a separate section of the report. Although the association of obesity/overweight with child hunger may seem counterintuitive, it has been documented in many studies. In addition to the health consequences of obesity, the associations between child obesity and increased risk for depression are reviewed. The remainder of the report includes sections on research linking both health and educational attainment with child food insecurity, as well as economic costs associated with these factors.

Major conclusions of the review focus on the effects of food insecurity and hunger on infants and toddlers, and present food insecurity as an 'invisible epidemic' that is widespread and serious, but preventable. The effects of food insecurity and hunger on older girls are also highlighted, as these differ from those seen in boys, and are, in general, more severe. Nutritional insult to girls has the potential to affect future generations as these girls approach their childbearing years. Since food insecurity is easily measured and preventable and affects work productivity and health care costs both now and in the future, it behooves policymakers to support food assistance programs, and to enlist the aid of American business leaders and advocates. Physicians support the idea that adequate nutrition can 'vaccinate' or prevent hunger in children; however, the dose provided by current nutrition assistance programs is not necessarily strong enough to prevent the negative effects of child hunger. Private efforts such as the Food Bank network can help augment governmental and private efforts.

Overall, this report is a relatively comprehensive review of the literature. Framing the problem as development of human capital is especially appropriate, given that supplemental feeding programs address a chronic condition in which consistent efforts are necessary to avert negative consequences. The lifespan approach provides context to the report, and fits in well with the concept of development of human capital. The latter sections of the report are better referenced than the initial sections, and would be helpful to advocacy groups in the development of one-pagers or informational presentations to stakeholders and policymakers.

Although this report is a valuable resource for those interested in child food insecurity and hunger, there are a few limitations. The report and conclusions are well-referenced, but concrete suggestions and a better defined 'call to action' would be a useful addition to the report. For example, a more specific economic impact analysis would provide stronger data for encouraging legislative action in support of food assistance programs in a time of budget tightening and competing resources. Several figures were included in the report, but additional illustrations would make the report easier to read and comprehend, especially for those stakeholders without a research background.

It should be noted that information in this report was current as of 2009, and does not include the most recent research or trends in hunger and food insecurity. Nevertheless, the information still provides good background information that is still highly relevant.

With the upcoming reauthorization of the Farm Bill, which funds the majority of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps), it is important to access and use data which can illustrate the value and potential benefits that the investment in food assistance programs, as well as other programs such as the Food Bank network and private assistance programs, can provide to vulnerable populations. In addition, it is crucial to highlight the economic consequences of inaction, especially to the business sector, which depends on a robust, healthy and well-educated workforce. This report provides an essential resource in achieving these goals.