

SNAP benefits have been cut and disrupted – causing more kids to go without enough healthy food and harming child development

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Being able to buy nutritious groceries is essential for your family's health.

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About 4 in 10 of the more than 42 million Americans who get Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits are children under 18. This food aid helps their families buy groceries and boosts their health in many ways – both during childhood and once they're adults.

I am a developmental psychologist who studies how stress and nutrition affect kids' mental and physical health during childhood, and how those effects continue once they become adults.

Researchers like me are worried that the SNAP benefits disruption caused by the 2025 government shutdown and the SNAP cuts included in the big tax-and-spending package President Donald Trump signed into law on July 4 will make even more children experience high levels of stress and will prevent millions of kids from accessing a steady diet of nutritious food.

Food insecurity can harm kids – even before they're born

Food insecurity is the technical term for when people lack consistent access to enough nutritious food.

In childhood, it's associated with having worse physical health than most people, including an elevated risk of getting asthma and other chronic illnesses.

It is also tied to a higher risk of child obesity. It seems counterintuitive that lower food access is associated with greater obesity risk. One explanation is that not having access to enough nutritious food may lead people to eat a higher-fat, higher-sugar diet that includes food that's cheap and filling but may cause them to gain weight.

Even temporary disruptions to the disbursement of SNAP benefits can harm American kids. While the effects of brief food shortages can be hard to measure, a study on a temporary food shortage in Kenya suggests that even short-term food shortages can influence both parents and their kids for a long time.

And SNAP spending cuts, including those in what Trump called his “big beautiful bill,” are bound to hurt many children whose families were relying on SNAP to get enough to eat and are now losing their benefits.

A study by researchers from Northwestern and Princeton universities, published in 2025, followed more than 1,000 U.S. children into adulthood. It showed that food insecurity in early childhood predicted higher cardiovascular risks in adulthood. But those researchers also found that SNAP benefits could reduce cardiovascular risks later in life for kids facing food insecurity.

Food insecurity in pregnancy is dangerous too, and not just for mothers. It also poses risks to their babies.

Another study published in 2025 reviewed the medical records of over 19,000 pregnant U.S. women. It found that pregnant women who experience food insecurity are more likely to have pregnancy-related complications, such as giving birth weeks or months before their due date, developing gestational diabetes or spending extra time in the hospital, with their baby requiring a stay in a neonatal intensive care unit.

This same study found that when pregnant women received SNAP benefits and other forms of government food assistance, they were largely protected from these risks tied to food insecurity.

Food insecurity harms children's mental health

A 2021 analysis of more than 100,000 U.S. children led by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, and Kaiser Permanente showed that when kids experienced food insecurity sometimes or often in a 12-month period, they ran a 50% greater risk of anxiety or depression compared to kids who didn't.

Food insecurity in childhood is also associated with more behavior problems and worse academic performance. These mental health, academic and behavioral problems in childhood can put people on a path toward poorer health and fewer job opportunities later on.

Children and babies experiencing food insecurity are more likely to have nutrient deficiencies, including insufficient iron. A review of decades of research that I participated in found that iron deficiency during infancy and early childhood, when the brain is developing quickly, can cause lasting harm.

Other research projects I've taken part in have found that iron deficiency in infancy is associated with cognitive deficits, not getting a high school diploma or going to college, and mental health problems later on.

Food insecurity is often one of many sources of stress kids face

If a child is experiencing food insecurity, they are often dealing with other types of stress at the same time. Food insecurity is more common for children experiencing poverty and homelessness. It's also common for kids with little access to health care.

Research from the research group I lead as well as other researchers have found that experiencing multiple sources of stress in childhood can harm mental and physical health, including how bodies manage stress. These different sources of stress often pile up, contributing to health problems.

Parents experiencing food insecurity often get stressed out because they're scrambling to get enough food for their children. And when parents are stressed they become more susceptible to mental health problems, and may become more likely to lose their tempers or be physically aggressive with their kids.

In turn, when parents are stressed out, have mental health problems or develop harsh parenting styles, it's bad for their kids.

SNAP falls short, even in normal times

To be sure, even before the 2025 government shutdown disrupted SNAP funding, its benefits didn't cover the full cost of feeding most families.

Because they fell short of what was necessary to prevent food insecurity, many families with SNAP benefits needed to regularly visit food pantries and food banks – especially toward the end of the month once their benefits had been spent.

A grocer in my rural hometown in South Dakota posted on Facebook in November 2025 about the effects of food insecurity on families that he regularly sees. He explained that he keeps his stores open after midnight on SNAP disbursement days. Many of his customers, he said, are in a rush to get their “first real food in days.”

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