



**To: Hon. Chair King, Vice-Chair Ferguson, and Members of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee**  
**Re: Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 218 – Summer SNAP for Children Act**  
**Date: February 6, 2019**

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Chairman King, Vice Chair Ferguson, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. My name is Ronette Briefel and I am a Public Health Nutritionist and Senior Fellow at Mathematica Policy Research. I have studied nutrition and children’s health for more than 35 years, first in the federal government researching national trends in food insecurity<sup>1</sup> and the relationship between hunger and health outcomes, then at Mathematica studying the impact of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—or SNAP—benefits and children’s food security, including differences between food security status during the summer and the school year. I am also a parent and have lived in Maryland for 37 years.

As the committee considers Senate Bill 218 – Summer SNAP for Children Act, I hope my insights, informed by years of study related to food security and SNAP, will inform your decision making. Today, I will focus on three key points:

1. The association between food security and children’s health, and the consequences of food insecurity
2. The association between SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs and food insecurity in very low-income households with children
3. The association between SNAP benefits or spending and the local economy

### **1. Food security is critical to children’s health**

Nutrition is vital to children’s health and well-being, beginning before birth in the prenatal period and continuing through all life stages. Children require good nutrition for optimal growth and development, readiness to learn, and school performance. In addition, eating habits in childhood set the stage for eating habits and health later in life. However, many low-income families lack the resources to buy or access enough food to lead an active, healthy lifestyle. Known as food insecurity, this lack of access to nutritious food can result in a range of negative outcomes in children. There is a large body of research

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<sup>1</sup> Food insecurity is defined as the disruption of food intake or eating patterns because of lack of money and other resources. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) divides food insecurity into two categories: (1) low food security: “Reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake;” and (2) very low food security: “Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.”

documenting the consequences of food insecurity and hunger in children. These consequences range from clinical nutrition problems (such as iron deficiency anemia, poor growth, overweight, and poor dental health), to poor cognition and mental health problems (such as anxiety and depression), and social and behavioral problems.<sup>2</sup>

According to national data from the Current Population Survey, one in five households with children at or below 130 percent of the poverty level (which is also the income eligibility level for SNAP or free school meals) have children who experienced food insecurity in 2017.<sup>3</sup> Taking a snapshot of low-income households with school-age children in a given month (the past 30 days), about 12 to 16 percent of households receiving SNAP benefits or free or reduced-price school meals would have food-insecure children.<sup>4</sup> And for households below the poverty level, the prevalence of food insecurity in children may be even higher. Therefore, targeting SNAP households with children who are eligible for free school meals is an appropriate strategy to target those most at risk of food insecurity.

## **2. How school meals, SNAP, and summer feeding programs address food insecurity among children**

Studies by Mathematica and others show that school meals improve the diet quality of participating students. Summers and school breaks (when school is out of session) may be challenging times for low-income families because they need to provide the meals that students consume at school when school is in session.<sup>5</sup> As a result, students may not have access to as many meals as they do when school is in session, or the quality of their diets may suffer.

Research also shows that the risk of food insecurity is often highest among very low-income families receiving multiple forms of nutrition and other assistance (such as school meals and SNAP).<sup>6</sup> When benefits are lost or not available (such as when students do not receive free school breakfast and school lunch in the summer), short-term nutrition assistance may help bridge the gap and reduce the risk of food insecurity.

In the SNAP Food Security Study, the largest, most rigorous national evaluation of the impact of SNAP on food security to date, Mathematica found that six months of SNAP participation was associated with a

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<sup>2</sup> Alaimo, K., C.M. Olson, E.A. Frongillo, Jr., and R.R. Briefel. "Food Insufficiency, Family Income, and Health in U.S. Pre-School and School-Aged Children." *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 91, no. 5, 2001, pp. 781-786. Coleman-Jensen, Alisha, William McFall, and Mark Nord. "Food Insecurity in Households with Children: Prevalence, Severity, and Household Characteristics," 2010-11. (ERS Economic Information Bulletin No. 113). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, May 2013. Cook, J.T., and D.A. Frank. "Food Security, Poverty, and Human Development in the United States." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, vol. 1136, no. 1, 2008, pp. 193-209. Hanson, Karla L., and Leah M. Connor. "Food Insecurity and Dietary Quality in US Adults and Children: A Systematic Review." *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, vol. 100, 2014, pp. 684-692.

<sup>3</sup> Coleman-Jensen, A., M.P. Rabbitt, C.A. Gregory, and A. Singh. "Household Food Security in the United States in 2017." ERS Report No. 256. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, September 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Ralston, Katherine, Katie Treen, Alisha Coleman-Jensen, and Joanne Guthrie. "Children's Food Security and USDA Child Nutrition Programs." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, June 2017. Available at <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84003/eib-174.pdf?v=42905>.

<sup>5</sup> Nord, Mark, and Kathleen Romig. "Hunger in the Summer." *Journal of Children and Poverty*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2006, pp. 141-158, DOI: 10.1080/10796120600879582. Nord, Mark, and Mark Prell. "Food Security Improved Following the 2009 ARRA Increase in SNAP Benefits." ERR-116. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, April 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Coleman-Jensen et al. (2018).

one-third decrease in food insecurity among children.<sup>7</sup> Other studies have reported similar estimates of SNAP benefits reducing food insecurity.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the Evaluation of Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children, which collected data on 52,000 low-income households in 16 localities in 10 states, found that a monthly summer benefit of either \$30 or \$60 per eligible child reduced very low food security by one-third (from 9 percent among those with no summer benefit to 6 percent among those with the summer benefit).<sup>9</sup>

In Maryland, the Summer Food Service Program provides summer meals and snacks to low-income children, but the program is not universally available in all communities, especially in rural areas. In addition, sponsors of local program sites do not typically cover the entire three months of summer (four to eight weeks is a more typical summer session). Overall, about 25 percent of children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals in Maryland participate in the Summer Food Service Program, but this varies widely across the state, from three percent in Frederick and Calvert counties to 39 percent in Baltimore City.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. Boosting local economies through SNAP**

In an economic downturn, SNAP benefits can help low-income families meet their food needs, while boosting the local economy. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, nearly 3,900 authorized SNAP retailers redeemed about \$1.1 billion in SNAP benefits in 2017 in Maryland.<sup>11</sup> The USDA estimates that every dollar in new SNAP benefits results in \$1.80 in total economic activity.<sup>12</sup> Many very low-income families face challenges balancing monthly costs for food, housing, medicine or health care, child care, and other basic needs. By redeeming their SNAP benefits, families not only purchase food to feed their family, but they also free up resources that can be used to purchase other items, such as gasoline to get to work, diapers, medicine, rent, home repairs, and utilities.

#### **Achieving a public health goal for all Maryland children**

Based on the current body of evidence, the Senate Bill 218 – Summer SNAP for Children Act could help to improve the food security of low-income children (and their families) throughout the state. As I’ve

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<sup>7</sup> Mabli, James, and Julie Worthington. “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Child Food Security.” *Pediatrics*, vol. 133, 2014, pp. 1–10.

<sup>8</sup> Nord, M., and M.A. Prell, 2011. Ratcliffe, C., S.M. McKernan, and S. Zhang. “How Much Does the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Reduce Food Insecurity?” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, vol. 93, no. 4, 2011, pp. 1082–1098.

<sup>9</sup> Briefel, Ronette, Ann Collins, Anne Wolf, Anne Gordon, Charlotte Cabili, and Jacob Klerman. “Nutrition Impacts in a Randomized Trial of Summer Food Benefits to Prevent Childhood Hunger in U.S. School Children.” *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2018, pp. 304-321. Collins, Ann, Jacob Klerman, Ronette Briefel, Gretchen Rowe, Anne Gordon, Christopher Logan, Anne Wolf, and Stephen Bell. “Impact of a Summer Nutrition Benefit on Low-Income Children’s Food Security and Diet Quality.” *Pediatrics*, vol. 141, no. 4, 2018, e20171657.

<sup>10</sup> Maryland Open Data Portal. “Summer Food Service Program Participation.” Available at <https://data.maryland.gov/Health-and-Human-Services/Summer-Food-Service-Program-Participation/adfi-nfw7>. Includes data from Partnership to End Childhood Hunger in Maryland, January 15, 2019 compilation handout.

<sup>11</sup> Wolkomir, Elizabeth. “SNAP Boosts Retailers and Local Economies.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. April 6, 2018. Available at <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-boosts-retailers-and-local-economies>. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. “SNAP Is an Important Public-Private Partnership.” Maryland Fact Sheet. April 6, 2018. Available at <https://www.cbpp.org/snap-is-an-important-public-private-partnership#Maryland>.

<sup>12</sup> USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. “Profile of SNAP Households: Maryland.” Available at <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/Maryland.pdf>.

mentioned, we know that SNAP improves diet quality, food security, and health outcomes. SNAP reduces children's and households' food insecurity by about one-third based on national studies. Intervention studies have demonstrated that summer SNAP benefits reduce very low food security among children by about one-third and food insecurity among children by about one-fifth.

We also know that targeting low-income households participating in SNAP during periods when school-age children may not have access to free school meals or summer meals improves children's food security and helps families feed their children at home. Even something as basic as a few snow days of school closings can impact the food security of a low-income family.

Statistics can provide a sense of the extent of the problem in Maryland, but statistics alone cannot portray the level of stress many parents feel while trying to feed their children three healthy meals each day. For many years, I've heard from parents about how they cope—some skip meals for themselves so their children can eat, especially at the end of the month when SNAP dollars run out; some shop at numerous grocery stores to take advantage of sales and coupons; others send their children to eat at relatives' homes or resort to extreme measures, like selling their own blood to buy food. Children also feel these effects, like having to eat at friends' houses so their younger siblings have more food at home, or hiding food to eat later. The research suggests that providing nutrition assistance during the summer months may reduce this burden. Doing so will go a long way toward promoting good nutrition and the future health and well-being of families throughout Maryland.