

Nutrition Supports Issue Brief

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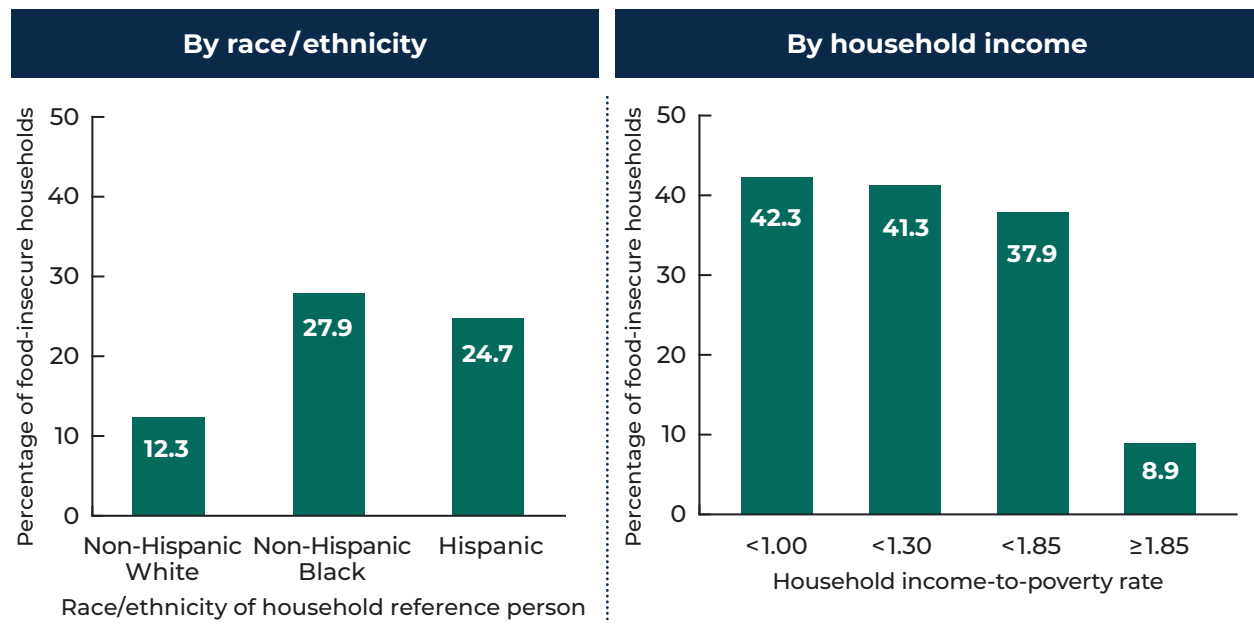
Strategies to Increase Access to Nutrition Supports

Food insecurity—a lack of access to enough food for an active, healthy life—affected about 17 percent of households with young children in the United States in 2022 (Rabbitt et al. 2023). Several government assistance programs helped to buffer food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the combination of these programs expiring and rising prices due to high inflation has worsened food insecurity as the pandemic support has wound down (Waxman et al. 2022). Food insecurity is detrimental to the health and well-being of children because it is associated with less intake of fruits and vegetables, higher

medical costs, and poorer academic performance (Martinez et al. 2020; Litton and Beavers 2021; Berkowitz et al. 2018).





Families with children and households that are low income or headed by a person of color had a higher prevalence of food insecurity in 2022 than the national average (Rabbitt 2023; Exhibit 1). Children in these households are also less likely to eat nutrient-dense foods such as whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, and are at higher risk for obesity (Larson and Story 2015).

Exhibit 1. Disparities in food insecurity among families with young children, 2022



Source: Rabbitt et al. 2023.

Exhibit 2. Overview of key nutrition supports

	SNAP	WIC	CACFP
 Description	Provides benefits to supplement household resources for purchasing food	Provides benefits redeemable for specific foods, nutrition education, and breastfeeding support	Provides reimbursement for snacks and meals served in participating child care and before and after school programs and emergency shelters
 Number of participants	41.2 million people; about 13 percent are children younger than 5	6.2 million people; about 77.6 percent are infants and children younger than 5	4.7 million children
 Eligibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Households must meet income and asset tests Gross income up to 130 percent of federal poverty level Some households are categorically eligible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women, infants, and children up to age 5 with income up to 185 percent of federal poverty level or who are categorically eligible Determined to be at nutritional risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children in households up to 185 percent of federal poverty level Low-income status of provider or community (for family day care homes)
 Annual cost	\$119.5 billion in FY 2022; average monthly benefit is \$230 per person	\$5.7 billion in FY 2022; average food cost per person \$47.72	\$3.9 billion in FY 2022

Sources: Burwick and Paulsell 2018; USDA 2023a, 2023b; Toossi and Jones 2023.

Note: Figures are for fiscal year 2022. Categorical eligibility is a policy granting households eligibility for a program because they qualify for other benefits, such as Medicaid or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Several federal nutrition programs serve families with low income and young children (Exhibit 2), and these programs have the potential to help address these disparities by reducing food insecurity and improving the nutritional quality of foods consumed by families. These programs include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides benefits to supplement household resources for purchasing food; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which provides benefits redeemable for specific foods, nutrition education, and breastfeeding support; and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), which provides reimbursement for nutritious meals and snacks served to eligible children enrolled in participating child care and before and after school programs,

children residing in emergency shelters, and adults enrolled in participating adult day care facilities.

Unfortunately, there are barriers that prevent or deter families from accessing these nutrition supports. Only about half of all people eligible for the WIC program participate, and family participation declines as children age (Trippe et al. 2018). Moreover, pregnant individuals who are Black or Hispanic participate in WIC at lower rates than those who are White (Hall and Neuberger 2021). Similarly, although the rate of participation in SNAP among those eligible is high (82 percent), participation can be interrupted, with families frequently exiting and reentering the program. One study found almost 30 percent of households receiving SNAP benefits experienced an interruption in a given year (Mills et al. 2014).

Finally, CACFP reaches relatively few children from families with low incomes because these children often receive care in settings that do not qualify for CACFP, such as parental care or care from family, friends, or neighbors (Gordon et al. 2011; Heinz et al. 2023). These types of child care that do not qualify for CACFP enroll a disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic families (Center for Law and Social Policy 2022).

This brief presents findings from research on equitable access to nutrition supports. The work was conducted by six grantees of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Equity-Focused Policy Research grant program (Exhibit 3). The research (Exhibit 4) highlights changes to policy and practices that could help address inequalities (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 3. Equitable access and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Equity-Focused Policy Research grant program

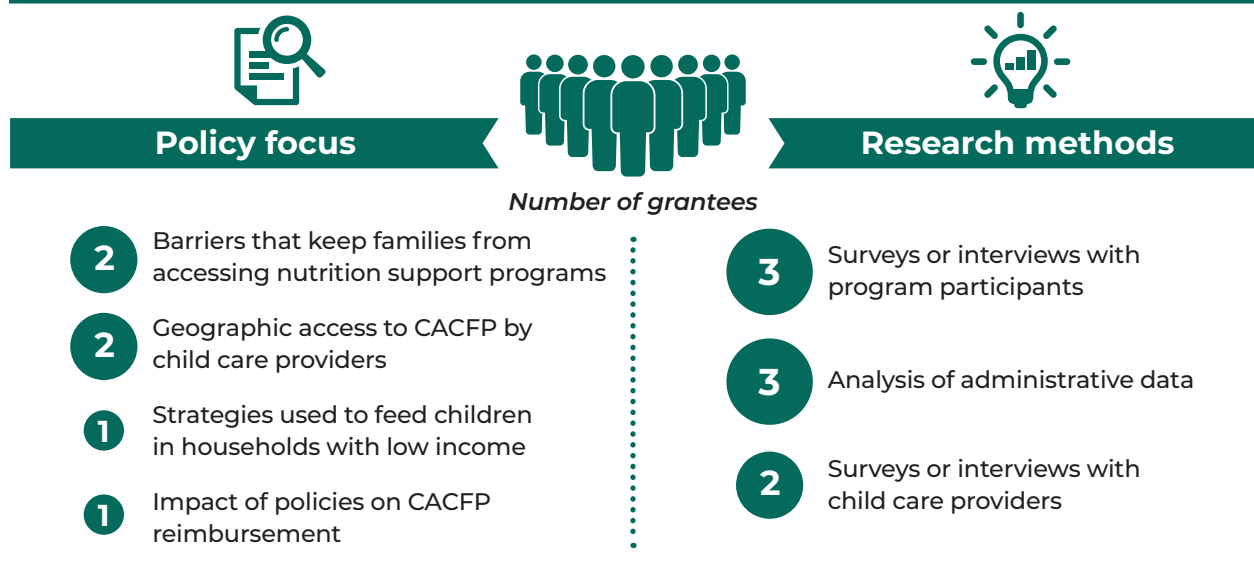
Equitable access means all families—regardless of race, ethnicity, geography, or other factors—have equal access to supports that promote children’s well-being. Promoting equitable access involves addressing specific barriers faced by families who have the most difficulty accessing supports.

The **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Equity-Focused Policy Research** grant program funded action-oriented research to build on strategies to increase equitable access to supports for families with young children. This brief focuses on grantees’ research on nutrition supports. Other grantees focused on income supports and early care and education.

Studies incorporated principles articulated by the **Equitable Evaluation Initiative**. According to these principles, evaluations should advance equity; answer questions about the drivers of inequity, the effects of policies on different populations, and the role of cultural context; and be valid multiculturally and encourage participant ownership.

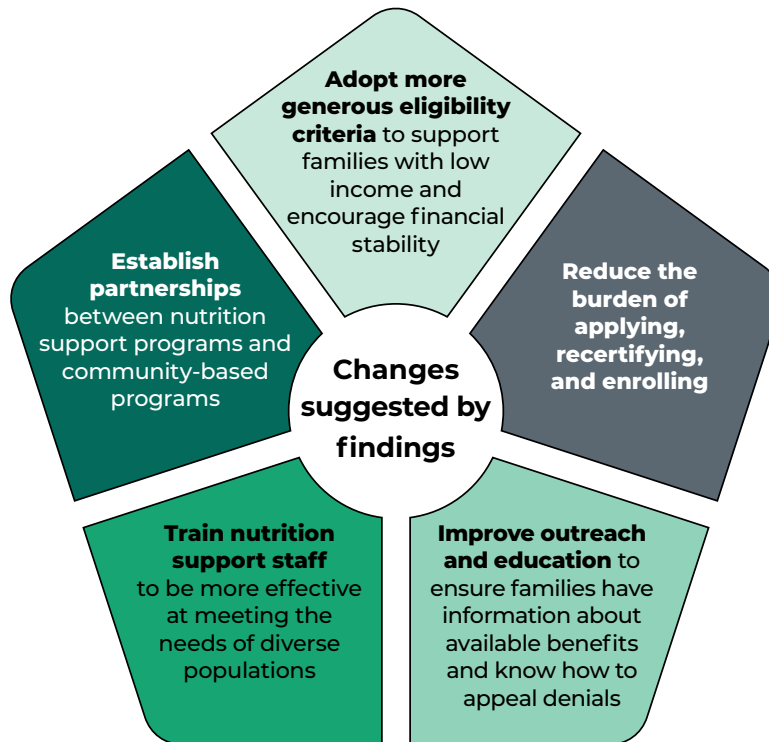
Appendix Table 1 is a summary of the projects presented in this brief. See <https://www.equitableeval.org/> for details on the Equitable Evaluation Initiative.

Exhibit 4. Policy focus and methods of the grantee research



Note: Projects can have more than one policy focus and method.

Exhibit 5. Changes suggested by findings



Adopt more generous eligibility criteria to support families with low income and encourage financial stability

Federal rules establish eligibility criteria for SNAP, and states have the flexibility to adjust some of those criteria, such as limits on household gross income, net income, and assets (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2022). The grantees’ research revealed that certain states have restrictive policies that limit access among those who would benefit from the nutrition programs, and that deter households that receive benefits from accumulating savings because they would risk losing benefits.

Encourage states to raise limits on gross income and assets and exclude income of other household members. Adjusting income and asset limits for SNAP would expand SNAP eligibility while incentivizing households to save, ultimately

Strategies identified by grantee research

Adopt more generous eligibility criteria to support families with low income and encourage financial stability

- Encourage states to raise limits on gross income and assets and exclude income of other household members

stabilizing their financial condition. Some states maintain strict criteria, restricting eligibility and disincentivizing saving. For example, Indiana limits SNAP involvement to households with gross income at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level, and requires adults ages 18 to 22 who still live at their parents’ home to claim their parents’ income. The state also requires grandparents who have custody of their grandchildren to claim the children’s income on SNAP applications. In contrast, Illinois and Michigan have less strict limits for gross income at 165 and 200 percent of the federal poverty level, respectively (Suttles et al. 2022; Suttles et al. 2021).

Reduce the burden of applying, recertifying, and enrolling

Applying for, enrolling in, and being recertified for nutrition support programs can be time-consuming and confusing for families. This is particularly true for non-English-speaking families and those with limited or no access to technology. Caseworkers may also struggle to verify employment when it is hard to reach applicants, and they must overcome their own challenges with processing a large volume of applications. The grantees' research highlights strategies that could improve equitable access to nutrition supports during the application and enrollment process.

Develop new technologies and processes to streamline applications, enrollment, and recertifications.

Families with limited resources might not have the postage, technology, or transportation needed to submit their documentation. Extensive paperwork can deter them from pursuing nutrition supports (Suttles et al. 2022). It would help to allow applicants to submit documents through online web portals or provide prepaid postage and conveniently located drop boxes (Suttles et al. 2022). Furthermore, developing an online web portal that can act as a universal application for SNAP, TANF, and health coverage would reduce the administrative burden on applicants. Finally, although families in urban Tribal communities may prefer in-person meetings, providing alternative ways to communicate with caseworkers such as video, email, and phone may alleviate transportation issues (All Nations 2022). The strategies used during the COVID-19 pandemic as a replacement for in-person interviews could be sustained. The administrative burden on applicants could also be lessened by extending the time between recertification periods (Suttles et al. 2022).

Provide training and technical assistance to child care providers. Not all child care providers can access CACFP to subsidize snacks and meals for children in their care, and barriers to applying for or enrolling in CACFP may be particularly challenging for those in rural communities that may not be

Strategies identified by grantee research *Reduce the burden associated with applying, recertifying, and enrolling*

- Develop new technologies and processes to streamline applications, enrollment, and recertifications
- Provide training and technical assistance to child care providers

granted as broadly "eligible areas" (Koester et al. 2022) or for child care providers who struggle with navigating applications given limited internet access and digital literacy (Heinz et al. 2022). Training child care providers on CACFP requirements and offering support with applications and enrollment processes may improve access to the program, particularly among those with language- or technology-related challenges.

Improve outreach and education to ensure families have information about available benefits and know how to appeal denials

Families with low income and vulnerable populations such as refugees and unhoused individuals may lack information about how to apply for nutrition supports and appeal application denials. Grantee research highlighted opportunities to support them.

Provide application assistance and information on how to appeal denials. Applicants whose net monthly income and assets may have qualified them to receive SNAP benefits could be denied those benefits if they are missing documentation (for example, proof of income, bank statements, or child support documents) or if they have not completed an interview with a caseworker. Populations that are frequently denied include seniors, refugees and individuals from other countries, the unhoused, and individuals with disabilities (Suttles et al. 2022). Families could also use help with responding to denials. This includes proactively identifying applicants and increasing outreach that emphasizes application assistance and gives clearer information on how to appeal a denial.

Increase awareness and usability of lesser-known nutrition support programs. Smaller programs like Double SNAP Dollars are underutilized, leading to missed opportunities for food-insecure families as evidenced by interviews with Tribal communities (All Nations 2022). Double SNAP Dollars incentivizes recipients to purchase fresh, local food from farmers markets by matching the SNAP benefit dollars spent, which doubles available benefits. Programs could build awareness of lesser-known support programs like these because grantee research suggests their underuse is due to lack of awareness. Efforts to increase awareness should focus on communities that are most in need of additional nutrition supports.

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Train nutrition support staff to be more effective at meeting the needs of diverse populations

Individuals from diverse backgrounds may find it challenging to establish trusting relationships with caseworkers. Grantee research revealed some possible reasons for distrust and opportunities to improve these relationships.

Hire staff from the same populations as the individuals they serve. Applicants may withhold personal information during interviews with caseworkers due to a lack of trust, leading to delays in processing applications or denials (Suttles et al. 2021). Given their experiences of discrimination, individuals in Tribal communities prefer more Native American representation among SNAP and WIC staff (All Nations 2022). Taking steps to hire individuals who are representative of the communities they serve could help all program

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Train nutrition support staff to be more effective at meeting the needs of diverse populations

- Hire staff from the same populations as individuals they serve
 - Emphasize cultural competency skills, and train program staff on them
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applicants and recipients feel more comfortable interacting with program staff and sharing personal information.

Emphasize cultural competency skills, and train program staff on them. Applicants may feel vulnerable when they share personal information and may be wary of prejudgment or discrimination (All Nations 2022). Programs can prioritize customer service, cultural competency, and communication skills when hiring and training program staff. In addition, programs can provide individuals with an official channel they can use to report discrimination (All Nations 2022).

Establish partnerships between nutrition support programs and community-based programs

Grantee research revealed that those at highest risk for food insecurity—families with young children and families of color—may struggle to provide themselves and their families with adequate nutrition even when they have better access to nutrition supports. Stronger partnerships with nutrition programs could strengthen equitable access to these programs.

Encourage and strengthen partnerships between sponsors and community-based programs. Many families piece together multiple nutrition supports, such as SNAP, WIC, and food pantries, to feed themselves. This role is often taken on by mothers and involves cognitive, emotional, and physical hardship (Hughes et al. 2022). Families with low incomes and young children might still be responsible for providing food for their children while they are in child care because many home-based child care settings do not qualify

for CACFP (Heinz et al. 2022). Child care programs can strengthen partnerships with local food banks and community-supported agricultural initiatives to augment benefits from federally funded programs, and caseworkers can provide families with lists of nontraditional food outlets (such as farmers markets) that accept benefits. Programs can also work with (1) state officials and sponsors to provide information on temporary waivers (such as the Grab-n-Go waiver available during COVID-19¹) through existing outreach channels, (2) local food businesses to drive down food costs, and (3) local food providers such as school districts to increase purchasing power and establish a support network (Thiede et al. 2020; Schermbeck et al. 2022).

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Conclusions

Research conducted by nutrition support grantees generated important new findings on barriers to accessing nutrition support programs and on strategies to address these barriers so families can support their children’s healthy development. The research revealed opportunities to improve policies and practices to develop more equitable nutrition supports in the United States.

¹ This waiver allows noncongregate feeding in CACFP, including offering meals off site or via a grab-n-go option, and through delivery.

This brief was created by Mathematica through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to support synthesis and dissemination for the Equity-Focused Policy Research program.

Two other briefs from this project describe grantee research on [increasing equitable access to early care and education](#), and [increasing equitable access to income supports](#).

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Thiede, Kendall, Yuka Asada, Rebecca Schermbek, Rosie Hanneke, and Jamie Chriqui. "Scoping Review of a Critical Food Safety Net Program: Factors Influencing Implementation of the Child and Adult Care Food Program." Graduate Student Presentation for UIC School of Public Health Research Day, 2020.

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Appendix Table 1. Summary of grantee projects

Grantee	Research focus	Summary of project based on dissemination products
All Nations	WIC, SNAP, Double SNAP Dollars	Conducted surveys and interviews with Native American/Alaska Native individuals living on Tribal lands in Montana to assess participants' experiences accessing and using nutrition support programs
Indiana University	SNAP	Analyzed SNAP administrative data and developed surveys based on focus group data to examine barriers to successful SNAP participation among food-insecure households in Indiana
Rice University	SNAP, WIC, other nutrition supports	Interviewed mothers with low incomes in a high-poverty, historically Black neighborhood in Houston, Texas, to understand strategies mothers used to feed their families while experiencing poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic
University of Illinois at Chicago	CACFP	Interviewed key informants who were providers from family child care homes eligible for CACFP and sponsors in low-income census tracts in Illinois to examine barriers to and facilitators of access to and retention in CACFP
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	CACFP	Used geographic analysis of CACFP providers' addresses to identify urban and rural CACFP providers in Illinois; administered a survey and interviewed a subset of providers to explore the effect of policies related to urbanicity on CACFP reimbursement amounts
University of New Mexico	CACFP	Conducted a mixed-methods study using New Mexico State administrative data and semi-structured interviews with CACFP sponsors and providers in New Mexico to explore access to CACFP at the child and family, provider, and county levels

Note: This summary is based on dissemination products we received from six of the seven grantees.