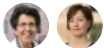


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Can housing assistance help protect children from hunger?



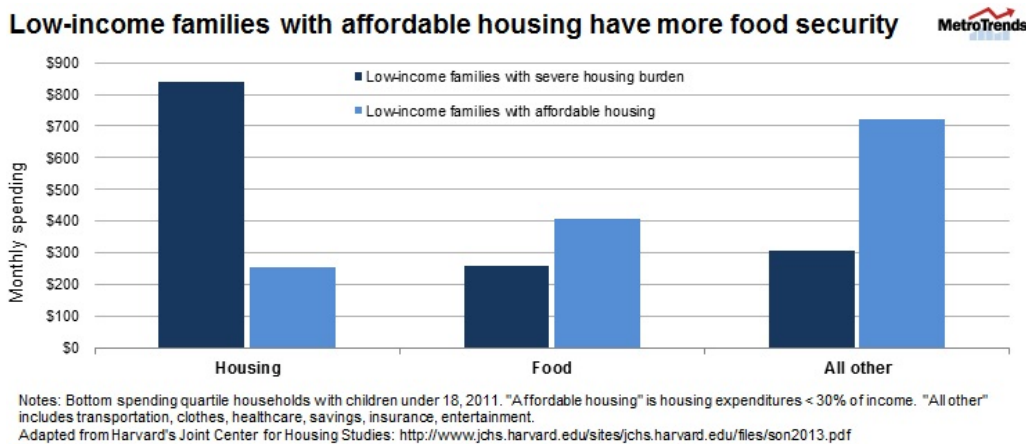
Susan J. Popkin, Lisa Dubay | February 3, 2014

Having to decide between shelter and food seems impossible, but it's a choice some families make every day. It may mean eating what's cheap rather than what's nutritious, or sending children off to school hungry, making it hard for them to concentrate.

Because housing is usually a family's biggest expense, healthy eating often loses out, especially at the end of the month.

Housing assistance, then, may be a way to reach these food-insecure families. Rent subsidies can take off some of the financial burden, freeing up resources to pay for food and other items that promote children's health and development. And public housing can offer a [platform to provide families with consistent](#) help and support.

As the chart below illustrates, low-income families with children that have affordable housing, whether subsidized or not, spend \$151 more a month on food than families with severe housing burdens. Three-quarters of families earning less than \$15,000 face severe housing burdens spending more than 50 percent of their income for housing.



Cutting SNAP while food insecurity is on the rise

About one in five households with children have trouble putting food on the table. The lack of nutrition in these children's

diets can [stunt their physical and cognitive development](#) and leave them with [lifelong health problems](#). Childhood food insecurity has [only gotten worse](#) since the Great Recession, rising 8 percent from 2007 to 2012.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) helps, but benefits were [cut in November](#) and Congress committed to another [\\$8.6 billion in cuts](#) in negotiations over the Farm Bill. These cuts on top of the already high rates of household food insecurity could have long-term effects on children's health.

Housing assistance can lessen the burden

Offsetting the high cost of housing may help families avoid the trade-off between food and shelter, as well as among other basic needs like transportation and health care.

A small body of evidence suggests that, relative to other low-income children, kids in public housing are better off when it comes to food security and health. [Children's HealthWatch found](#) that children living in subsidized housing are more likely to be food secure than children on the housing assistance wait-list. They also found that food-insecure children living in subsidized housing were 52 percent less likely to be seriously underweight than food-insecure children on the wait list. [Another study](#) found that housing subsidies were associated with improved nutrition in children from low-income families.

That's not to say that housing assistance is the ultimate solution. We found that almost 80 percent of families receiving public housing subsidies report being on food stamps, and 75 percent report that their children are receiving free school lunch. Families with housing subsidies are very low-income and highly vulnerable; even with the subsidy, many have trouble meeting basic needs and [are still food insecure](#). Even though these studies suggest that housing assistance may mitigate the harmful effects on children, there is still a need for more targeted approaches to keep kids from going hungry.

Public and assisted housing can also benefit families by serving as a platform for other services. Urban Institute's [Housing Opportunity and Services Together \(HOST\) demonstration](#), for example, provides intensive case management services to parents and children in public and mixed-income housing. While food insecurity is still high among HOST participants, HOST is able to identify the families with the greatest need and link them to emergency food programs.

The housing authorities participating in HOST have also identified creative strategies to help families gain access to nutritious, affordable food, including on-site community gardens, farmers markets, and partnerships with Peapod and other organizations that are willing to deliver food to public housing and even support a grocery store.

However, only a lucky few get housing assistance. Waiting lists are long, and only about a quarter of eligible households qualify. In these strained fiscal times, we need policies that make every dollar work harder. Housing subsidies do just that. They provide shelter, keep families better fed, reduce trade-offs about which basic necessities to purchase, and provide families with a small amount of breathing room.

Even with expanded housing subsidies, sometimes we need to help families make better connections to healthy food. Housing authorities and other housing providers can join forces to increase SNAP benefit levels for the vulnerable families who live in subsidized housing. Affordable housing can also be a platform for uniting services like [backpack programs](#) and summer meal programs to reduce the risk of hunger and ensure that children live healthy lives. We encourage policymakers and practitioners to consider creative ways to leverage housing.

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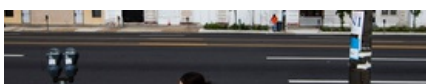
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