

FRAC

Food Research and Action Center

Federal Nutrition Programs: Vital for the (Economic) Health of Rural America

In Brief

Federal nutrition safety net programs contribute greatly to the health and well-being of Americans, but are especially important to rural Americans. They supplement low wages, promote nutrition, and improve educational attainment. They foster activity and development in rural economies. Maximizing their utilization is integral to any strategy to improve economic conditions for rural Americans.

SNAP, child nutrition and WIC benefits are disproportionately important in rural America, given the greater incidence of poverty and economic hardship in these communities. They help foster opportunity, innovation and quality of life in rural communities in several ways.

SNAP provides meals to millions of low-income rural residents. WIC gets rural babies off to a healthy start. School meals programs help rural children be ready to learn. Summer and afterschool meals programs and the child care food program help rural working families have access to safe and quality care and nutrition for their children when preschoolers or out of school. SNAP and other nutrition program resources help disaster victims during recovery.

And these nutrition programs are building blocks for rural economies and community institutions. SNAP benefits flow through local grocery outlets and farmers' markets; each \$1 in federal SNAP benefits generates nearly twice that in economic activity. School meals are associated with educational achievement and the strong schools that are essential for communities to attract and retain young families. And, as the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity has noted, promoting participation in the federal nutrition programs is a key part of an anti-obesity agenda.

While SNAP, child nutrition programs, and WIC already play important roles in serving rural America, strategies to maximize their supports should be incorporated into comprehensive approaches to promote opportunity, innovation and quality of life in rural America.

Challenges in Rural Communities

Poverty and hunger are more prevalent in rural America; the recession has exacerbated rural jobs deficits and economic hardship; educational attainment and wage levels are generally lower in rural America; and attracting and retaining young families – while also serving an increasingly aging population – remains challenging for rural communities.

Poverty

Although we often equate poverty with distressed urban areas, in fact, nearly 90 percent of the U.S. counties that are persistently poor are non-metropolitan counties. In 2009, 16.6 percent of the population, or nearly 8.1 million people, living in rural (non-metropolitan) areas were poor. This poverty rate is significantly higher than the rate for metropolitan areas (13.9%) and also is higher than the national average of 14.3%. For children, the situation is even more severe, with 23.5 percent of children living outside of metropolitan areas living in poverty.

Seniors living in rural areas also suffer disproportionately compared to their metropolitan counterparts. Fourteen percent of those living in non-metropolitan areas are seniors (age 65 or older) and 9.9 percent of them live in poverty compared to 8.7 percent of seniors in metropolitan areas.

Hunger and Food Access

In 2009, according to the Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Agriculture, 14.2 percent of rural households experienced food insecurity, almost the same rate as the metro area rate (14.8 percent). The rates for households with children are even higher: twenty percent of rural households with children are food insecure.

Food insecurity damages the early development and learning of children and the health of children and adults. It harms adult productivity. It damages the rural economy and the fiscal health of states and local governments.

The intervention of the federal nutrition programs, however, greatly lessens this harm:

- SNAP (food stamps) lift millions of people out of poverty and out of food insecurity. It is the single most effective program in lifting children out of extreme poverty (family income below 50 percent of the poverty line). Families using food stamps score higher on a “Healthy Eating Index,” and food stamps buffer young children from the health consequences of food insecurity.
- The school lunch and breakfast programs reduce hunger and obesity, provide a substantial share of the key nutrients children need each day, reduce school nurse visits and improve attendance, student behavior, educational achievement, and test scores.
- The out-of-school time nutrition programs (summer food and afterschool food) draw hungry children into school-based and community-based programs that keep them safe and engaged, reduce obesity, and provide basic nutrients at key times when children can’t get them from school meals programs.
- Participation of women, infants and young children in the WIC program boosts rates of prenatal care, reduces low birth weight and infant mortality, reduces childhood anemia and obesity, and saves money in health systems.

Low-income residents of rural communities also face unique challenges relating to food access, including limited access to grocery stores, limited availability of healthful, affordable foods, and substantial travel distances and costs to obtain affordable, healthy foods.

Nutrition Programs Make a Positive Impact in Rural America

Many rural Americans participate in the federal nutrition programs and are benefitting directly from these important services. Further, federal food programs contribute to the economic development in rural areas by generating purchases of food, more agricultural demand, and jobs administering the programs. SNAP (food stamps), school meals, child care food, afterschool and summer nutrition programs and WIC benefits also are important generators of economic activity and opportunity.

SNAP impact in rural communities

Rural Americans are more likely than other Americans to participate in SNAP. According to a Carsey Institute analysis of federal data for 2006, for example, 16 percent of Americans lived in nonmetropolitan areas, but 21 percent of food stamp beneficiaries lived there. Children accounted for 25 percent of the rural population but were 40 percent of the rural population participating in SNAP.

Child nutrition program impact in rural communities

As with SNAP, many rural households depend on the federal child nutrition programs to provide healthy food for their infants and children – at home (through WIC), in child care settings, at school (through the national school lunch and breakfast programs), and in afterschool and summer programs. In the largest programs, rural participation is higher than metro participation.

According to a Carsey Institute analysis of 2007 federal data:

- 22.4 percent of households in rural America had children participating in the National School Lunch Program, versus 17.1 percent of the total national population of households with children.
- 18.3 percent of rural households had children participating in the National School Breakfast Program, compared to 13.2 percent of the total population of households with children.
- 9.4% percent had children participating in the WIC program compared to 6.8 percent of the total population of households with children.

Economic impact of nutrition programs

The federal nutrition programs make very substantial contributions to the economic viability of rural communities:

- The dollars spent on food purchases (by individuals on SNAP or WIC at local stores and markets or by schools or nonprofits through their purchasing) boost demand for agriculture products and create jobs on farms, in food distribution and in other businesses.
- The USDA Economic Research Service estimates that every \$1 in SNAP expenditures generates an increase in economic activity of \$1.79. ERS estimates that each \$1 billion of SNAP benefits generates 8,900 to 17,900 full-time equivalent jobs.

Using Nutrition Programs to Promote Greater Opportunities, Innovation and Quality of Life in Rural America

The federal nutrition programs like SNAP, school meals and WIC provide a set of well-proven strategies to improve economic conditions and the quality of life for millions of rural Americans. However, one in four eligible rural residents is not enrolled in the SNAP program. Similarly, the Carsey Institute reports that out of the estimated 2.8 million income-eligible rural households with children, about 43 percent do not participate in any of the four child nutrition programs.

Increasing the use of SNAP, child nutrition and WIC programs not only directly addresses the hunger and food hardship facing many people living in rural America, but just as importantly provides good jobs in their communities and helps strengthen the educational outcomes so critical to long-term economic opportunity.

In any economic period, but especially in this economic downturn, jobs serving the community such as preparing and serving healthy school meals, providing nutrition education to WIC mothers, administering SNAP benefits, and work in grocery stores where SNAP participation is increasing sales can anchor a farm family's income as well as provide a sense of community and service. And more participation among eligible people in these programs, of course, also boosts agriculture demand, creating more farm jobs and income.

Local communities, state governments and federal agencies can work together to expand the use of these programs to all those who are eligible by simplifying applications, better using technology and coordinating benefits between programs. They can collaborate in private/public partnerships to implement best practices and choose program options that have been shown to improve the effectiveness of the programs. And they can work together to protect and build on the structural strengths of SNAP and the child nutrition programs which are vital to ensuring the programs can respond to need as it arises, whether due to increases in unemployment or natural disasters.