

A POLICY ROADMAP

# Nourish Our Future



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# About Bread for the World Institute

Bread for the World's Policy and Research Institute (PRI) analyzes hunger and strategies to end it. PRI informs Bread's current policy change agenda and advocacy with clear, evidence-based policy solutions that include relevant context and thoughtful analysis. PRI also tracks emerging issues and trends.

# Editor's Note

This report was developed before the recent dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the cancellation of nearly all foreign assistance contracts, and the erasure of the USAID website. The proposed fiscal year 2026 budget, released in May 2025 by the Trump Administration, also defunds critical programs such as Food for Peace and the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program. At the time of writing, the United States remained a global leader in addressing child hunger and malnutrition through programs that provided lifesaving food and nutrition assistance to millions of vulnerable children and families worldwide. The policy recommendations outlined in this report were based on prior funding commitments and strategies that have historically shaped U.S. efforts to combat child hunger.

However, the landscape of U.S. foreign assistance has changed significantly. The recent actions to close USAID and cancel contracts have created uncertainty for the very programs that have long served as a lifeline for communities in crisis. These shifts raise serious concerns about the future of global nutrition and food security efforts, particularly in regions already struggling with conflict, climate change, and economic instability.

Additionally, some references in this report were sourced from USAID's website, which has since been taken down. While we have worked to ensure the accuracy of our analysis, the removal of public access to these resources makes it more difficult to verify past commitments and assess the full impact of recent changes.

Despite these challenges, the urgency of addressing child hunger remains unchanged. While policy environments may shift, the moral and humanitarian imperative to support the world's most vulnerable children persists. It is in this spirit that we present this report, urging continued engagement, advocacy, and innovative approaches to ensuring a future where **no child suffers from hunger.**

# Foreword

When children get the right nutrition at the right time, they are afforded the possibility of flourishing. Research clearly shows that with proper nutrition, children are healthier, learn more in school, and earn higher incomes as adults.

Over the last several decades, the United States has implemented programs, in our country and around the world, which put money and policy into action based on those facts.

In the United States, we have the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which supports nutrition for mothers and young children. We have the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, which is a lifeline when people fall on hard times and need help to eat. Families with children tend to stay on SNAP for about a year – leaving when finances improve. We also have school meals to ensure that children get the energy they need to learn, and the Child Tax Credit to reduce the tax liability of families with children.

The U.S. government also supports nutrition around the world. The McGovern-Dole Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program reduces hunger and improves literacy by providing school meals and teacher training in low-income, food-deficit countries around the globe. Feed the Future has addressed global hunger through agriculture extension and nutrition programs and has helped reduce extreme poverty by 19 percent and hunger by 30 percent in partner countries.

It's especially important to acknowledge, in this political environment, that the work to end hunger has always been bipartisan.

In the late 1960s, President Richard Nixon, a Republican, held the first White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health. A couple years later, Sen. Robert Kennedy, a Democrat, visited Mississippi as part of a national hunger tour. From those two experiences came a host of conferences and studies that ended up creating WIC.

Foreign assistance has traditionally been bipartisan, too. I've written before about the partnership between Sen. George McGovern, a Democrat, and Sen. Robert Dole, a Republican, who, over several decades in Congress together, helped the United States become an international model for efficient and effective foreign assistance.

The U.S. government first sent food aid in 1812. Venezuela had suffered a devastating earthquake, and the United States sent food aid and humanitarian assistance. We had been a country for all of 36 years.

My point is this: People from all political parties, from all parts of this country, since the founding of our nation, have put power behind the notion that the health of our country can be measured by how we handle the vulnerability of others – whether they are vulnerable

because they are children, or because they have just suffered from a natural disaster, or because they needed help rebuilding after a war, or a suddenly lost job, or because of a host of other reasons.

In 2025, America's political environment has undergone major changes. How the American government positions itself in relationship to people in our country and to the rest of the world is shifting.

But Bread for the World's values and theory of change are not. We value our faith, human flourishing, justice, courage and prophetic voice, nonpartisanship, collaboration, and impact.<sup>1</sup>

With these values as our foundation, Bread has launched "Nourish Our Future," a child-centered campaign that seeks robust funding for global nutrition and the strengthening of domestic nutrition through improvements in WIC, SNAP, and the Child Tax Credit, which contribute to human flourishing.

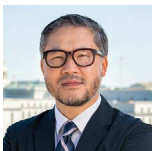
**We seek to embody these values not only in the results that we produce, but in the way that we work together to achieve them.**

We are people who take personal responsibility for living fully into God's call to love our neighbors, whether they be right next door or across the world.

"As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in faith." These words from Colossians 2:6 remind us of the faith that is active in love for our neighbors. We demonstrate that love when we work to see that all people—in our own country and overseas—have the food they need to live a healthy, active life.

When we urge Congress and the administration to sustain and strengthen our nation's foreign assistance and related policies, we demonstrate and live out love for our neighbors on other continents.

I hope you'll be part of "Nourish Our Future" and join me, and our thousands of allies, in fighting for the flourishing of children and families everywhere.



**Rev. Eugene Cho**



# Director's Message

The biblical story of Joseph and his successful management of a famine crisis in the Bible is instructive of what God calls us to do to address hunger. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream that foreshadowed seven years of famine and seven years of plenty. His wise counsel to Pharaoh and Pharaoh's wisdom to take the good food policy advice saved millions of lives in Egypt and many millions more outside of Egypt, including Joseph's family who lived far away in the land of Canaan.<sup>2</sup> Joseph's strategic foresight helped him impact lives and secure allies for his government.

In the same way, 50 years ago, God was working through Rev. Art Simon and an ecumenical group of Christian leaders in New York City. Members of their congregations and communities struggled with food insecurity. This group founded Bread for the World in the basement of a New York City church to build the political will to end hunger in the United States and worldwide.

In the 1970s, famine in Africa and Asia and widespread food shortages led the United Nations to convene an international summit to address communities' urgent need for food. When people look back from the vantage point of 50 years, many may be surprised both at the identity of the official who represented the United States and what that official said. Then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger declared in his speech at the gathering in Rome, Italy that the U.S. was committed to making sure that "no child will go to bed hungry within ten years."<sup>3</sup>

Kissinger called the state of global malnutrition "abysmal." He mentioned how a lack of vitamin A leads to blindness, and iron deficiency anemia leads to low human productivity. He said that particular attention should be devoted to the special needs of young children and mothers and that there is a need to respond quickly to local emergencies affecting these vulnerable groups.<sup>4</sup> He urged the World Health Organization, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the International Children's Emergency Fund (now called UNICEF) to organize an internationally coordinated program in applied nutritional research to help set priorities, identify the best centers for research, and generate the necessary funding to address global malnutrition. In support, he pledged that the United States was willing to contribute \$5 million to initiate such a program.



I have seen the impact of humanitarian and development assistance on the lives of children and their families. My tenure with the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) was at a time when the world was faced with famines in Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan, and Nigeria. I had the opportunity to travel to and work in hunger hotspots<sup>5</sup> where American-grown crops were delivered through the support of USAID to children in refugee camps and their families. It was a sight to behold the joy and laughter the food brought to the faces of the little girls and boys in the makeshift refugee camps.

I could not help but wonder how these moments of care and concern, symbolized in food grown by an Iowa, Florida, or Idaho farmer and delivered by WFP in USAID bags with the support of local partners, instilled in the heart of the child that so many people far away and in the United States cared so deeply that they live and not die of hunger. Indeed, one of the many children I met in a refugee camp said she wanted to be a doctor when she grew up to help protect her community from diseases. Since you cannot dream when you are hungry, the collective work of WFP, USAID, and local partners in nourishing her in her moment of despair gave her hope to dream big dreams that can benefit her community in an impactful way. The collaboration also showcased that addressing child hunger takes a village of caring stakeholders.

Today, millions of children are food insecure due to conflict, corruption, economic inequality, and natural disasters such as fires, floods, and soil erosion. **If allowed to continue, U.S. generosity and leadership can help save their lives and transform their futures to nourish the next generation.**

At Bread, we carry on our legacy by standing in the gap for children and communities who do not know where their next meal will come from. We work to educate, equip, and empower communities and congregations to advocate for laws and policies to help end child hunger in the United States and across the globe. Every one of the voices of our grassroots leaders helps move the needle toward transformational policy change that we know will make a difference for children living with hunger.

Our work demonstrates God's providence, love, and justice and shows that God can use everyone to do Heaven's work on Earth, bringing hope to children experiencing food insecurity. The power to nourish our young people lies within each one of us. Since time immemorial, humanity's most significant and compelling transformations have begun with a singular action or idea from a child, a woman, a man, or a community.

The years ahead will mark the celebration of Bread's 50th anniversary, the Jubilee year declared by Pope Francis,<sup>6</sup> and our country's 250th birthday. From what the data tells us, nourishing the future generation through food and nutrition security is a wise investment in our world's biggest asset: its young people. One life saved from malnutrition can impact millions of lives 50, 100, or 250 years from now and reverberate across generations in all nations. **We believe ending child hunger and pursuing human flourishing is the right**





**and moral thing to do, as well as a smart leadership strategy.** Ending child hunger in the United States and across the globe is in our country's national security interest, as well as an investment in future leaders and trading partners. Our nation can leave a lasting legacy by pursuing policies to help end child hunger.

This policy report is a roadmap for addressing child hunger through strategic policy changes in the United States and globally within the next two to three years. It is a clear-eyed and pragmatic set of policy solutions that, if enacted and implemented, will make a dramatic and meaningful difference in the lives of millions of children in the United States and worldwide. As we carry out our work, we remain steadfast and focused on what the next 50 years can bring through the work of our hands. We will continue to pursue innovative strategies for advocacy that resonate with policymakers across political parties who believe no one and no child should go to bed hungry and who can establish policies that will enable human flourishing and a world without hunger.



*Abiola Afolayan*

**Abiola Afolayan, Esq.**

# Introduction



The familiar song goes, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.” Many grew up hearing this song, and Bread for the World takes these words seriously and strives to act in keeping with them. Yet, more than 1 in 5 U.S. children are at risk of hunger, and around the world, a child dies every 10 seconds from malnutrition.<sup>7</sup> Child hunger is solvable—the world grows enough food to feed every child. However, we need the collective political will to get healthy food to those who desperately need it.

In the United States in 2023, 13.8 million children lived in households that experienced food insecurity—4 million more children than the previous year.<sup>8</sup> These children regularly ate cheaper, lower-quality foods because their families were running out of money for food.

Not all families are affected equally by hunger; it often depends on where they live. **Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Kentucky, South Carolina, West Virginia, Wyoming, and Michigan are the 10 hungriest states in our nation with higher-than-average food insecurity rates.**<sup>9</sup> Children living in rural areas and the South are more likely to experience food insecurity. Black and Hispanic children are also more likely to be affected; their families are twice as likely to be food insecure as their white counterparts.<sup>10</sup>

The disparity and rise in child hunger highlight the importance of federal programs like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Child Tax Credit (CTC), and school nutrition programs. They invest in our children's future by giving them a nutritious start in life.

Malnutrition in all its forms includes undernutrition—such as wasting, stunting, being underweight, or consuming inadequate amounts of vitamins or minerals—along with overweight and obesity and resulting diet-related noncommunicable diseases.<sup>11</sup> Around the world, more than 148 million children are stunted or too short for their age due to undernutrition, and 37 million are overweight or obese.<sup>12</sup>

Globally, nearly 43 million children are suffering from the most devastating form of child malnutrition, which is called severe acute malnutrition or wasting.<sup>13</sup> Wasting results from rapid weight loss or failure to gain weight and happens when a child does not get enough of the right food and nutrition—sometimes the result of a natural disaster, an armed conflict, or another disruption to a family's food source. Children who survive early malnutrition often suffer lifelong health problems and damage to their physical and cognitive development. This is especially detrimental during the 1,000 days from a woman's pregnancy to a child's second birthday. The impacts of malnutrition can begin early in the 1,000 days, meaning during pregnancy or in a baby's first six months, resulting in lifelong physical and mental development impediments.<sup>14</sup>

Parents, local leaders, national leaders, and the global community are keenly aware of the problem of malnutrition. Many countries around the world are struggling with emergency hunger and malnutrition levels. There are multiple countries and territories facing famine, the most severe stage of hunger in a community, at the same time. This means that, after doing everything in their power and receiving all available assistance, families still have an extreme lack of food. The most recent update from the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), covering November 2024 to May 2025, does not mince words describing famine: "Starvation, death, destitution, and extremely critical acute malnutrition levels are evident."<sup>15</sup>

Poverty is the greatest cause of child hunger around the world. Children whose families cannot afford to feed them nutritious foods—

*"Give justice to the  
weak and the orphan;  
maintain the right of the  
lowly and the destitute.  
Rescue the weak and the  
needy; deliver them from  
the hand of the wicked."*

*Psalm 82:3-4 (NRSV)*



or much food at all—are at the highest risk of hunger and malnutrition. In the United States, poverty is often the result of a shortage of jobs that pay a living wage to support a family or, when the national economy is struggling, a shortage of available jobs. Many parents face barriers to employment. Two examples among many are the lack of affordable childcare and employers' hesitance to hire community members with criminal histories.

Globally, people who live in extreme poverty—meaning that they have \$2.15 or less to spend each day—use most of their income, sometimes up to 80 percent,<sup>16</sup> on food. This affects 333 million children.<sup>17</sup> Any increase in food prices creates additional hardship because the family budget has little or no flexibility. This often puts basic grains, much less a diverse and nutritious diet, out of reach. Governments also frequently struggle and lack the resources to help everyone in need, sometimes because of their heavy debt obligations. Changes in the climate exacerbate families' abilities to nourish themselves and their children.

In the Old Testament, God sees, hears, and responds to the cries of poor and vulnerable people. Through Jesus' teachings, God insists that his people care for others who are vulnerable; children are often the most vulnerable among us. Bread heeds God's call and is committed to addressing child hunger in the United States and worldwide. In 2025 and 2026, we seek transformative policy change by investing in programs proven to improve child nutrition and alleviate child hunger.

# U.S. Child Hunger

## Child Tax Credit: Help All Families Afford Food

For many years, Bread members have been steadfast advocates for strengthening the Child Tax Credit (CTC). The tax credit helps families lower their taxable income – leaving them with extra money for living expenses. Eligible families can receive up to \$2,000 annually in tax credits for each child. Up to \$1,700 of the CTC is refundable, which means that families can receive a tax refund if their annual tax liability is low enough. Eligible families include those with children ages 16 and under and those with an annual income of at least \$2,500.

The CTC can make a big difference for families struggling to put food on the table. But it is essential to remember that the CTC is not a “public assistance” entitlement program, nor was it designed specifically for low-income families. Instead, it is a tax break that nearly all families with dependent children can claim.





Yet, two groups are excluded from receiving the full credit. One is the households with the highest incomes—those whose annual incomes are more than \$200,000 for single parents and \$400,000 for married couples. This limit is higher than the incomes of 95 percent of U.S. individual income earners, meaning that those whose incomes are in the top 5 percent do not qualify for the full credit but may be eligible for partial credit. Eventually, though, the amount of the credit phases out as income increases.

The poorest families are the second group excluded. Families who do not earn at least \$2,500 a year are ineligible for any portion of the CTC. Low-income families earning more than \$2,500 a year may be eligible to claim the full or partial credit, but under current law, the amount is phased in based on income. In 2025, for example, families with two children must make at least \$36,000 to receive the full credit for each child.<sup>18</sup> The current CTC structure offsets the costs of raising children for most families except the poorest, adding to income inequality, and the very richest.

**In 2021, food insecurity among children was cut by one-fourth,<sup>19</sup> and the U.S. child poverty rate fell to its lowest rate ever recorded. This rapid improvement was largely due to a temporary expansion of the CTC under the American Rescue Plan.<sup>20</sup>**

In that legislation, Congress temporarily increased the maximum amount of the CTC to \$3,000 annually for children ages 6 to 17, and \$3,600 annually per child for children under age 6, and made the payments monthly rather than structuring the benefit as a lump sum paid as a federal tax refund during tax season each spring.<sup>21</sup> For six months, from July through December, millions of families with children received higher monthly benefits of up to \$300 for each child, including families who had previously been ineligible.

An even more critical provision of the 2021 CTC expansion for our country's lowest-income families was that all families with children, including households whose taxable incomes had previously been too low to be eligible for even a partial credit, could now receive the full, increased CTC amount. An estimated 19 million children lived in these families,<sup>22</sup> many of whom received the full credit for the first time. These children were disproportionately children living in rural areas, children of color, children in single-parent families, and children in several other smaller demographic groups.<sup>23</sup>

Millions of Americans work hard at important but low-paid jobs. Making the CTC available to low-income families benefited an estimated 3 million people classified as essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>24</sup> The 2021 CTC expansion supplemented their earnings, and the impact was immediate: a steep decline in parents reporting that their families did not have enough food.<sup>25</sup> On August 16, 2021, 25 percent fewer parents reported food insufficiency<sup>26</sup> than a few weeks earlier on July 5, 2021.<sup>27</sup>

The data show that the provision most responsible for the rapid progress was making all lower-income families eligible for the credit.<sup>28</sup> This moved 2.9 million children above the poverty line in 2021, significantly improving their food security.<sup>29</sup> The full refundability provision was responsible for 87 percent of the anti-poverty impact. The law's other CTC provisions—an increase in the maximum credit and extending the age limit for eligible children from 16 to 17—moved the incomes of another half million children above the poverty line.

Despite the significant progress in reducing hunger among children—and the rare speed with which it was accomplished—Congress allowed the provisions to expire at the end of 2021. The CTC reverted to its prior structure in 2022, excluding 18 million children from receiving the full amount.<sup>30</sup> Presently, nearly 90 percent of U.S. children living in poverty are excluded from receiving the full benefit, with children living in rural areas, children of color, and children in single-parent families among the most affected.<sup>31</sup> Food insecurity rates rose significantly; the number of children in food-insecure households in which children, along with adults, were food insecure rose by almost half in 2022.<sup>32</sup>

As Bread's President, Rev. Eugene Cho, explained, "The end of pandemic assistance programs coincided with a significant rise in food insecurity in the U.S. Programs such as the expanded CTC, and increased access to [federal nutrition programs] SNAP and WIC, have again been proven to reduce hunger – especially among families with children."<sup>33</sup>

In addition to its essential role in enabling more families to meet their immediate needs, an expanded CTC has a second crucial long-term benefit: contributing to reducing racial, gender, and class disparities in our country. Ending hunger requires policies that help "level the playing field" and allow all people regardless of their socioeconomic background or identity to flourish and access enough nutritious food for good health.

The persistence of economic, gender, and racial disparities means that it is even more difficult for some groups to meet their family's needs than others. Groups with higher rates of food insecurity than the national average include Black, Latino/a, and Native American families, and families with single mothers, among others. Other examples include families with single fathers and families with an adult with a disability.

Children from groups with disproportionately high poverty rates benefited most from the 2021 expansion. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the expanded CTC moved 1.3 million children of single mothers, 1.2 million Latino children, and 716,000 Black children over the poverty line in 2021.<sup>34</sup>

When all families with children are eligible for the full CTC, there is a more significant benefit for families at higher risk of hunger because these dollars make up a more substantial part of their total income. This matters to hunger because lower-income families typically spend more of their income on food. In 2023, the poorest households spent an average of 33 percent of their after-tax income just on food, compared to an average of eight percent among higher-income households.<sup>35</sup>

## **How the U.S. government can respond**

Permanently expanding the CTC is a straightforward solution to reducing hunger among children in the United States and would put more money in the pockets of working parents struggling to put food on the table.

### **Make sure the poorest families can receive the full CTC refund**

Bread believes that no one who works full-time in the United States should go hungry, nor should any child. However, many full-time workers in states nationwide cannot make ends meet. A permanent CTC expansion would enable them to meet their families' needs. Depending on income levels, a mother who lives with her two children in Georgia, Wyoming, or Tennessee could receive different amounts of the CTC credit. For example, if the mother works 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, at the federal minimum wage, her annual income would be \$15,080 before taxes. Because of her low income, she would only receive \$1,887 of the CTC – even though she has two children—while a mother with two children with an annual income of \$199,999 would receive the full tax credit of \$4,000.<sup>36</sup>

Georgia, Wyoming, and Tennessee are three of the seven states whose minimum wage is the same as the federal minimum wage,<sup>37</sup> which is \$7.25 an hour. It has been \$7.25 an hour, with no adjustments for inflation, for 16 years now—since 2009. A CTC that does not exclude the lowest-wage workers would make a big difference in the lives of children whose parents belong to a group often referred to as “the working poor.”

### **Index the CTC amount to inflation**

Many federal programs and tax benefits are indexed to inflation, meaning their value is automatically adjusted to reflect changes in the cost of living over time. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is an example of this. Because the CTC is not indexed to inflation, the real value of the benefit erodes over time—and with it, families' ability to feed their children. For

example, if the CTC were indexed to inflation, the credit would be \$2,500 instead of \$2,000 in 2026.<sup>38</sup> This is especially important during food price inflation. For example, in 2022, food prices increased by 9.9 percent<sup>39</sup>—the same year the CTC expansion expired, and as a result, the families of 18 million children had fewer resources because they were no longer eligible for the full CTC. The periods of food price increases would have less of an effect on child hunger if the CTC were indexed to inflation.

## Provide the CTC as monthly payments

The temporary CTC expansion in 2021 structured the benefit as monthly checks rather than a yearly tax refund. Researchers found that about 90 percent of low-income families newly eligible for the CTC used it to pay for immediate basic needs, such as food, clothing, rent, and utilities.<sup>40</sup> Providing the CTC as monthly payments would mean that parents could feed their children for the entire month rather than going for days, sometimes weeks, without grocery money as they wait for their next payday and/or monthly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit.<sup>41</sup> SNAP prevents millions of Americans from going hungry, but it rarely covers families' grocery budgets for the whole month; participating households very often use up their allotment only halfway through the month. Providing the CTC as monthly payments would give parents the extra resources they need to be able to feed their children for the entire month.

## WIC: Serving Women and Children Effectively

For 50 years, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has improved the health and nutrition of women, infants, and children who might otherwise not be able to afford nutritious food and helped lay the foundation for children's success in school and later in adulthood. WIC serves pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children up to age 5 with financial resources and education to boost their nutrition and health.

WIC grocery benefits are distributed monthly via EBT (electronic benefits transfer) cards, similar to how SNAP works. Foods that are WIC-eligible are labeled in stores. The program follows evidence-based guidelines for early nutrition and is aligned with the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Eligible foods include fruits and vegetables, whole grain cereals, vitamin C-rich juice, eggs, milk, cheese, peanut butter, dried or canned beans and peas, fish, soy-based beverages, tofu, baby foods, and whole-wheat breads and grains, along with iron-



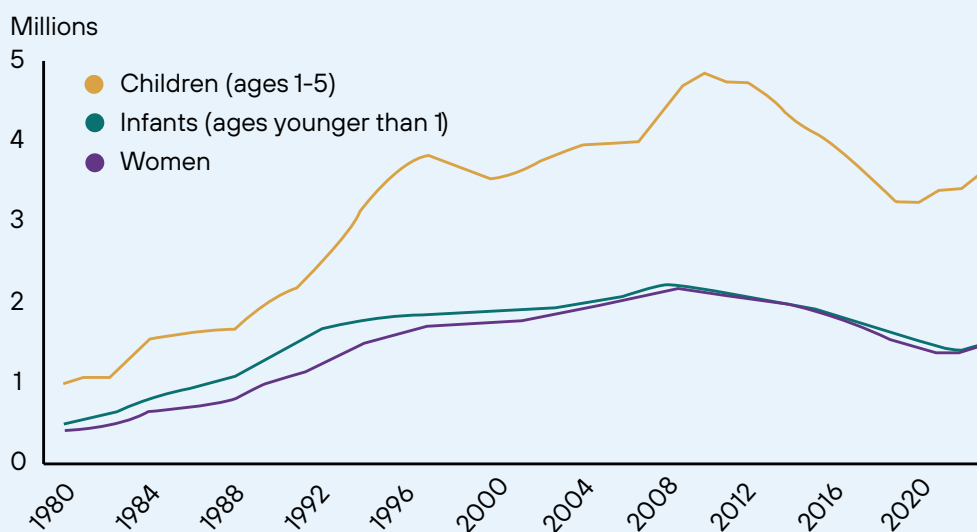
fortified infant formula for babies under age 6 months who are not exclusively breastfed and babies 6 to 12 months.<sup>42</sup> WIC encourages and supports breastfeeding and recognizes that exclusive breastfeeding is the optimal nutrition for infants up to age 6 months.

In addition to providing families with financial benefits to purchase healthy foods, WIC also offers participants nutrition counseling and education services designed to help them make healthy choices about food and lifestyle, including individualized sessions to set and achieve goals to improve nutrition and health.

To be eligible to participate in WIC, a family's income must be at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty threshold. For example, since the poverty threshold for a family of three was \$26,650 in 2025, a single woman with two children could participate in WIC if her income was \$49,302 or less. Some families are automatically eligible because they participate in other federal safety-net programs, including SNAP and Medicaid.

**In 2023, WIC served nearly 6.6 million individuals, including 39 percent of all infants born in the United States** (see figure 1). Participation in WIC is expected to continue expanding: 7 million people are projected to participate in the program in 2025.<sup>43</sup> While WIC

### Average monthly participation in WIC, fiscal years 1980 through 2023



WIC=Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. Note: Data for 2023 are preliminary.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. Data are as of December 2023.

Figure 1

is available to all women and children who qualify, Black and Latina women and their children are more likely to participate in WIC than their white counterparts.<sup>44</sup>

Proper nutrition for women and children, especially in the 1,000 days between pregnancy and a child's second birthday, is essential for lifelong health and well-being. **The evidence shows that WIC is effective.** WIC participants are more likely to receive medical care, including prenatal care and childhood immunizations. Participants also typically eat healthier diets and have higher breastfeeding rates, both essential for giving children the proper nutrition at the right time.<sup>45</sup>

**Every \$1 invested in WIC saves about \$2.48 in potential costs** due to medical and educational consequences and lower productivity.<sup>46</sup> Research shows that WIC results in fewer premature births, fewer babies born at a low birth weight (less than 5.5 pounds at birth), fewer infant deaths, lower rates of iron deficiency anemia among pregnant women, and—years later—higher cognitive test scores.

Reducing the low birthweight rate through WIC's prenatal care programs is one source of these savings. The newborns of women who participate in WIC prenatal services have a 25 percent lower rate of low birth weight. Even more strikingly, they have a 44 percent lower rate of very low birthweight (weighing less than 3 pounds, 5 ounces at birth). Because the cost of care for infants with very low birth weight is 30 percent of all newborn healthcare costs,<sup>47</sup> WIC creates significant healthcare savings for the United States.

In 2021, Congress temporarily modernized and strengthened WIC to offer more remote services, which particularly benefitted individuals living in rural communities. Participants had previously been required to appear in person several times a year—typically once to reconfirm their eligibility and four appointments with WIC nutritionists to monitor their child's growth and receive nutrition education and counseling. In-person visits were significant barriers to participation in the past and became barriers once again when the temporary improvements expired. It is not difficult to see why: working parents must take time off if their work schedules are similar to the WIC office's hours. That time may be unpaid—ironic if that pay was needed as grocery money. People who use buses or public transportation may face the prospect of bundling up an infant and toddler and waiting for a bus in snowy weather or shielding them from the hot sun and humidity during the summer months.

## How the U.S. government can respond

**WIC providers reported a 15 percent increase in child participation between 2020 and 2023 when the temporary flexibility to offer alternatives to in-person appointments was in effect.**<sup>48</sup> In fact, requirements like these are a primary cause of

the dramatic drop in participation in WIC after a baby's first birthday. Therefore, these improvements should be made permanent.

## Make WIC flexibilities permanent

In 2024, U.S. Sens. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Roger Marshall (R-KS), along with U.S. Reps. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA) and Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR), introduced the More Options to Develop and Enhance Remote Nutrition in WIC Act (MODERN WIC Act). The bill would reduce barriers to WIC access by permanently authorizing remote certifications of eligibility, so long as participants receive health and nutrition screening within three months of the certification. Similarly, the bill would permanently allow WIC providers to electronically deliver WIC benefits to participants' EBT cards, removing the barrier of reloading the benefits to the card in person at WIC offices or using paper vouchers.

## Fully fund WIC now and in the future

Given that WIC is a nutrition lifeline for women and children, especially during the first 1,000 days, **Congress and the administration should work together to secure annual WIC funding.** Currently, WIC's budget must be approved by Congress each year, which makes it vulnerable to potential cuts or delays. For example, in 2023, WIC funding hung in the balance when the House Agriculture Committee passed an FY2024 agriculture appropriations bill that included substantial cuts to WIC funding. For months, Congress did not approve the funding WIC needed to serve all eligible participants.

Because disproportionate numbers of Latina and Black women and children participate in WIC, these program cuts would have impacted them more.<sup>49</sup> The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which administers WIC, and state WIC offices started to plan for a funding shortfall, including waitlists for applicants, reduced clinic hours, and suspended benefits for current participants.<sup>50</sup> Finally, in March 2024, Congress allocated \$7.03 billion for WIC, enough to ensure the program cuts did not come to pass.

While Congress has created a contingency fund for the WIC program, which can be used when WIC program costs exceed the amount Congress has appropriated, the fund is insufficient and rarely replenished. Congress should regularly and robustly replenish WIC's contingency fund. Another option would be to make WIC a mandatory program, meaning that Congress must approve the funding needed for all eligible participants. This is how SNAP and Medicaid operate. Either way, it is time to ensure that WIC can serve all eligible women and children in need now and in the future.



### *WIC gives moms a boost for a healthier pregnancy<sup>51</sup>*

"It has been four years since I first stepped into the WIC office and what a blessing they have been to my family! When I first applied for WIC, I was pregnant with my first child. I was working as a preschool teacher and my husband was finishing up graduate school, making us a one-income family. Our grocery budget was very tight, so the food vouchers were a huge blessing to us! Because of the vouchers, I was able to eat good portions of protein, lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, and a variety of whole grains. I have been part of the WIC program throughout my three pregnancies. The nutrition that WIC offers, I believe, really helped me have a healthy pregnancy each time. And now, I have three beautiful children who are continuing to grow and thrive through the WIC program!" - WIC Participant

## Ending College Hunger: Bridge the SNAP Gap

Food insecurity harms students' ability to learn and succeed in school, and college is no different. Studies have shown that college students who experience food insecurity are at greater risk of not completing their studies and report lower academic achievement.<sup>52</sup> In 2020 (the latest year for which we have data), nearly 1 in 4 college students—3.8 million—experienced food insecurity, meaning they reported multiple instances of eating less than they should or skipping meals because they could not afford enough food.<sup>53</sup> This is, in part, due to the SNAP gap – when those who are eligible for SNAP do not access it.



**Students attending college half-time or more (typically defined as six credits or more per semester) may qualify for SNAP if they meet one of the following criteria:**

- 1 Working 20 hours per week
- 2 Aged 17 or younger, or aged 50 or older
- 3 Parenting student caring for a child under the age of 6
- 4 Parenting student caring for child between ages 6-12 and having trouble securing child care
- 5 Single parent enrolled in college full-time and responsible for a dependent child aged 12 or under
- 6 Receiving TANF cash assistance or funded services such as child care
- 7 Participating in a state or federally-funded work-study program, regardless of hours worked
- 8 Participating in an on-the-job training program
- 9 Considered “physically or mentally unfit” to both attend school and work part-time
- 10 Attending college through a job or employment-focused program that is:
  - a local, state, or federally funded SNAP E&T program
  - operated by a state or local government
  - a program under Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014
  - a Trade Adjustment Assistance Program under Section 236 of the Trade Act of 1974

*Source: Temple University Hope Center*

**Figure 2**

Not all college students are at the same risk of food insecurity. Students of color, those who receive multiple forms of financial aid, and those who experience housing problems are more likely to be food insecure.<sup>54</sup> In addition, 21 percent of Black and 26 percent of Hispanic students experience food insecurity. By contrast, only nine percent of white students experience food insecurity.<sup>55</sup>

Food-insecure college students are disproportionately enrolled in private for-profit colleges, historically black colleges and universities, tribal colleges, and certificate or associate degree programs. Three in four food-insecure students are considered “nontraditional,” meaning they may be single parents, have dependents, have delayed college enrollment, and/or are working full-time.<sup>56</sup> Nearly one in five college students have dependent children. Almost all these college students are single parents, and half are food insecure.<sup>57</sup> This puts their children at greater risk of food insecurity as well.

SNAP exists to provide lower-income households with additional money for groceries. Still, college students are ineligible for the program unless they meet specific criteria (see figure 2). Research

by the federal government’s Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that of those college students eligible for SNAP, only 33 percent access those benefits. This is referred to as the college SNAP gap.<sup>58</sup>

Significant obstacles perpetuate the college SNAP gap. Students eligible for SNAP may not be aware they can qualify, may be concerned about the stigma surrounding applying for federal food assistance, and may face bureaucratic obstacles. **When the Hope Center at Temple University in Pennsylvania surveyed food-insecure college students nationwide, it found that most students believed they were ineligible or did not know how to apply.**<sup>59</sup>

As higher education institutions strive to develop emerging leaders and prepare students for their careers, administrators should examine what students need beyond high-quality coursework and professional opportunities. Schools should identify ways to offer nutrition services because food insecurity can harm students’ physical and mental well-being, impact their performance in the classroom, and put them at higher risk of dropping out. It is essential to focus on two groups in particular: students who were previously food insecure (e.g., during childhood or adolescence) and those at higher risk of being food insecure while they are students (e.g., single parents).

**Many colleges and universities already have initiatives to reduce campus food insecurity** (see figure 3). For example, state funding for such initiatives is available to California public colleges. These efforts include establishing programs for students to donate any excess funds in their meal plans to fellow students and providing students with information

### Selected Colleges’ Initiatives to Address Student Food Insecurity



Educating faculty, staff, and students



Nutrition, cooking, and budgeting classes



Food pantries and other food provision



Centralizing student services

- Help applying for benefits
- Counseling
- Disability support services
- Financial aid
- Veterans services



Emergency aid



Research/data analysis

Source: Information from colleges GAO contacted. | GAO-19-95

Figure 3

about SNAP eligibility and benefits.<sup>60</sup> Nine other states have passed legislation to do the same through the Hunger Free Campus Bill—a model bill promoted by Swipe Out Hunger, a national nonprofit powering the movement to end college student hunger—and 12 others have introduced legislation in their state assemblies.<sup>61</sup> A few states have also piloted programs to address the college SNAP gap. A GAO study found that about one-third of state SNAP agencies have programs to inform college students about SNAP and help them access benefits if they are eligible.<sup>62</sup>

## How the U.S. government can respond

Thus far, initiatives are piecemeal and specific to each campus and state. Students need a nationwide solution to college hunger.

### Improve outreach to potentially eligible college students

It was encouraging that in 2024, the USDA and the U. S. Department of Education (DOE) signed an agreement for a joint initiative for outreach to low-income college students eligible for SNAP, explaining the application process.<sup>63</sup> They agreed to provide clear guidance to colleges and students on SNAP eligibility and application processes. **This was a significant step forward and Congress should enact into law a requirement that the USDA and the DOE provide clear guidelines for college students' eligibility for SNAP and how to apply.**

Multiple bills concerning hunger among college students have been introduced in Congress. The Opportunity to Address College Hunger Act<sup>64</sup> and the Closing the College Hunger Gap Act<sup>65</sup> would direct colleges and the departments of Education and Agriculture to implement best practices for outreach to students potentially eligible for SNAP.

### Expand SNAP eligibility for college students in need

SNAP benefits cannot solve campus food insecurity entirely, even if all eligible college students access them. GAO research found that fewer than two in five food-insecure students meet the eligibility criteria for SNAP. SNAP's stringent criteria for college students means that many college students who struggle to feed themselves are still not eligible for SNAP.<sup>66</sup>

The restrictions on college student eligibility for SNAP were established by Congress in 1980. They are the legacy of a time when students were generally from higher-income families. Today, the landscape of college students has changed significantly. Almost three-quarters of college students are considered "nontraditional," and nearly one in three live in poverty.<sup>67</sup>

As mentioned earlier, nontraditional students may be single parents, have dependents, have delayed college enrollment, and/or work full-time.<sup>68</sup> **Congress should expand SNAP eligibility for college students who are food insecure.** It is not enough to only raise awareness of potential SNAP eligibility and help students apply for benefits.

One possible change is to allow students who work in unpaid internships or as volunteers in their field of study to count those hours toward work requirements. The GAO study found that working 20 hours a week or more can reduce students' chances of completing their degrees since many of these jobs are unrelated to students' areas of study.<sup>69</sup> Expanding the categories SNAP permits to fulfill work requirements could provide food-insecure students with grocery money while supporting their future careers. The case for making this change must be supported by additional research to identify which additional eligibility criteria would reach more students with food assistance while retaining SNAP's integrity.

### *Success story: Student needs hubs see results*

Student Statements from GAO Site Visits at Selected Colleges:

"[The college's centralized benefits hub, which offers food and assistance applying for federal and state benefit programs] has helped me so much. I visit [it] probably two times a week and they helped me get my SNAP benefits. When I am hungry, I can't concentrate on school or pay attention to my studies.

The entire basement level of the student center is being turned into a basic needs hub. In addition to the food pantry, the hub will also include the student SNAP office, the student environmental resource center [which is a partner in building sustainable and equitable food systems on campus], and other student benefits services. Services on this campus have been very decentralized, and this centralized hub will provide one location for students to go to get assistance with their basic needs—it's going to be a big help having everything in one place."

*Source: GAO interview and discussion group with students at selected colleges taking steps to address food insecurity among students. | GAO-19-95*



# Global Child Hunger

## Global Nutrition: Saving Lives and Futures

Ending child hunger involves ensuring children get both enough calories and the right nutrients.<sup>70</sup> Good nutrition is integral to human flourishing. Without sufficient nutritious food, children are vulnerable to illness and have less energy. Three billion people cannot afford a healthy diet, even though their families spend most of their income on food.<sup>71</sup> Hunger crowds out all other priorities and plans, as people's sole concern is obtaining food for themselves and their children.

The understanding that nutrition impacts all aspects of society has been growing. Malnutrition affects not only people's health and energy levels but also their country's healthcare costs and gross domestic product (GDP). According to WFP, malnutrition costs up to 11 percent of the GDP in some Asian countries and as much as 16.5 percent in some African countries.<sup>72</sup>

Malnutrition is damaging to everyone's health, but it is especially devastating and sometimes deadly for pregnant women and young children. In 2008, the British medical journal *The Lancet* published definitive research findings that the 1,000-day period from pregnancy to the child's second birthday is a critically important window for human nutrition and can establish the basis for lifelong good health.<sup>73</sup> Conversely, malnutrition before age two can cause lifelong health problems, irreversible damage to physical and cognitive development, or death.

Nearly five million children under age five die of preventable causes every year, almost half of those due to malnutrition.<sup>74</sup> One significant reason is that illnesses and infections are far more dangerous to malnourished children than they are to well-nourished children. Children with wasting are nine times as likely to die from illnesses as other children who are experiencing the same disease.<sup>75</sup>

It may not seem so from statistics like this or news reports—and the world is not making progress today—but one of the greatest success stories of the past few decades has been reducing the number of children who die of malnutrition-related causes. Families, communities, and countries, often supported by international humanitarian and development assistance, have found solutions to some of the most common causes—usually known as “child survival” efforts.

These initiatives have paid off. In 1990, a newborn had a 9 percent chance of dying before his or her fifth birthday.<sup>76</sup> In 2022, that risk had been reduced by more than half.<sup>77</sup> There are still far too many preventable deaths, but far fewer than nearly 40 years ago. The fact is that 132 million people are alive today who would have died if they had been born in 1990.<sup>78</sup> The world has proven that it can rapidly progress on a problem that has plagued humanity throughout recorded history.

What made this progress possible? It was largely a matter of political will, with dozens of countries implementing strategies that responded to the conditions in their local communities that were contributing to preventable deaths. It was partly a matter of improved knowledge, understanding, and capacity to reach even the most isolated communities with “game-changers” like childhood vaccination campaigns. Childhood vaccines currently save 4 million lives every year.<sup>79</sup>

Despite all the evidence of the costs of malnutrition—in millions of lives, not to mention lifelong health problems and disabilities, reduced GDPs, and numerous other impacts—as well as their cost-effectiveness, global nutrition remains vastly underfunded compared to the needs.<sup>80</sup> Bread President and CEO Rev. Eugene Cho points out that when it comes to nutrition, “Our actions do not match our words. Nutrition is vastly underfunded globally and is often an afterthought in health and food programs. In fiscal year 2023, the nutrition account was only 1.5 percent of U.S. global health funding.”<sup>81</sup>

Despite increasingly generous contributions from the philanthropic community in past years for emergency lifesaving nutrition assistance, the fact is that global needs have grown even faster. Current estimates are that the COVID-19 pandemic erased about 15 years of gains against hunger, sending the world back to 2009 hunger levels.<sup>82</sup> The World Bank’s most recent data show that 66 countries confront childhood stunting rates of 20 percent or higher, and 19 countries have a wasting prevalence of 10 percent or higher.<sup>83</sup> These percentages translate to everyday children living with the devastating consequences of malnutrition.

**Global nutrition programs need more funding to help stop the erosion of the significant progress made in the past few decades and end child malnutrition.**

Preventing and treating childhood malnutrition is a broad and complex topic, but thanks in part to Bread members’ faithful advocacy over the decades, the U.S. government has historically invested in evidence-based, cost-effective nutrition actions for women and children in their 1,000 days. In 2014, several years of advocacy by Bread grassroots members and others paid off when USAID adopted a global nutrition strategy, elevating nutrition as a priority and putting in place measures to fully integrate nutrition into the broader programs, such as those in agriculture and water, sanitation, and hygiene.<sup>84</sup>

In October 2022, the Global Malnutrition Prevention and Treatment Act (GMPTA) became law, directing USAID to prioritize nutrition actions that have proven highly effective in preventing and treating malnutrition for those at highest risk of developing it, particularly women and children. Since then, USAID focused on ensuring that pregnant women had access to prenatal vitamins, providing skilled breastfeeding support, distributing vitamin A supplements to children regularly, promptly diagnosing and treating wasting, promoting diverse diets for women and children, fortifying foods with micronutrients, and improving food safety.<sup>85</sup> In 2023, USAID reached more than 39 million children and women with nutrition programs.<sup>86</sup>



## How the U.S. government can respond

Humanity has learned much about malnutrition, its causes, and how to prevent and treat it. Often, straightforward actions, like iodizing salt or providing iron supplements to pregnant women, make the greatest difference. Sometimes, there are a few extra steps, such as training community health workers to provide care and refer patients to physicians when necessary and teaching parents who are concerned that their child is becoming malnourished what to look for. Another step is to show parents how to use a special tape measure to measure their child's arm, a reading that guides their community health workers in developing a malnutrition treatment plan. Sometimes, it is harder to save lives, such as when people are trapped amid armed conflict. However, modest investments can ensure that children grow up healthy and able to help their communities move forward. USAID's global nutrition funding has saved lives, helped ensure that children grow up to be healthy parents and workers, and trained educators and counselors who can continue the work in their communities.

### Fully fund nutrition in global health programs

More funding is needed to sustain and expand the U.S. government's nutrition impact for women and children, but **if Congress were to provide global nutrition funding at \$165 million each year, the impact on maternal and child nutrition would be enormous:**

- Saving the lives of nearly 8,000 children and 250 mothers
- Ensuring more than 34,000 children are free from stunting
- Averting over 61,000 episodes of child wasting
- Supporting 110,000 mothers to breastfeed their children
- Preventing anemia in more than 97,000 children and 185,000 women<sup>87</sup>

Improving nutrition also relies on robust investments in maternal and child health, food

security, and agriculture, among other development programs, and U.S. foreign assistance should reflect this reality. For several years U.S. civil society has sought annual appropriations of \$1.15 billion for global maternal and child health programs. These programs focused on expanding access to quality maternal and newborn care, improving access to safe drinking water and sanitation, and strengthening routine immunization systems. Over the last decade, USAID's maternal and child health and nutrition programs have saved more than six million lives.<sup>88</sup>

## Fully fund Feed the Future

The Global Food Security Act, which Bread members worked hard to get passed, authorizes \$1.2 billion for Feed the Future, but in 2024, Congress decreased Feed the Future funding for the first time since it was established. Feed the Future has worked in 20 countries to increase agricultural productivity, reduce hunger, and improve nutrition. The funds have also supported research by more than 80 U.S. universities and colleges that partner with academic institutions in Feed the Future countries<sup>89</sup> and partnerships with over 50 U.S. companies to scale up innovative solutions to address hunger and poverty.<sup>90</sup> **Flat funding of \$960 million for Feed the Future would allow the program to continue to serve millions of women, children, and farmers in future years.**

## Fully fund Food for Peace

Food for Peace has been the U.S. government's flagship food and nutrition aid program for over 70 years. Before 2025, Food for Peace provided food assistance to the most vulnerable communities during emergencies—such as communities affected by conflicts and wars—and also in non-emergency circumstances, such as communities struggling to escape extreme poverty. In 2023, Food for Peace spent nearly \$867 million of its budget to prevent and treat malnutrition.<sup>91</sup> **Even flat annual appropriations of \$1.62 billion for Food for Peace would make a significant impact given heightened global food and nutrition needs.**

## Fully fund the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program

Finally, the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program has been vital for improving global maternal and child nutrition. McGovern-Dole has provided U.S. agricultural commodities and financial and technical assistance to low-income, food-insecure countries to establish school feeding programs for preschool and primary school children. The program has also sought to increase access to safe water and improved sanitation and has worked with local farmers to bolster sustainable production of nutritious foods. These



programs have benefited more than 31 million children and families in 48 countries and provided more than 5.5 billion school meals.<sup>92</sup> **For several years, the advocacy community has sought annual appropriations of at least \$240 million for McGovern-Dole.**

### *Success story: Zambia's Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative<sup>93</sup>*

Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months—which means giving babies only breastmilk, no other food or water—saves lives in lower-income countries. Breastmilk is the optimal nutrition for the youngest children because it is the only food whose composition changes according to babies' needs as they grow and develop. Additionally, it does not need to be mixed with possibly contaminated water, and there is no risk of families having to cut the amount of food given when the budget is tight.

Esnart Siyanga knows this well. As the nutritionist at Bauleni's Urban Clinic in Zambia's capital city, Lusaka, she provides daily nutrition counseling sessions for pregnant women. She also provides group sessions and individual consultations as a professional contributing to Zambia's Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative.

While working one day with Phebbby Tembo, whose newborn was underweight, Siyanga provided guidance on correct positioning and attachment. She also explained the importance of not giving the baby water, broth, or other foods and answered Tembo's questions. Esnart was trained through a program funded by USAID that provided nutrition counseling to nearly 312,000 pregnant women in FY2023. That year, USAID also supported health facilities where 408,000 babies were born.

# Notes

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> WHO (n.d.). "Malnutrition in all its forms." Accessed 14 March 2025. <https://www.emro.who.int/nutrition/double-burden-of-nutrition/malnutrition-in-all-its-forms.html>.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Berkeley Public Health (2023). "A critical window: Early malnutrition sets stage for poor growth and even death, researchers find." Accessed 14 March 2025. <https://publichealth.berkeley.edu/news-media/research-highlights/early-malnutrition-sets-stage-for-poor-growth-and-even-death>.

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<sup>26</sup> Food insufficiency and food insecurity are similar in that they are due to a lack of economic resources. The key difference is how they are measured. Food insufficiency covers a shorter period and typically reflects a more severe form of food deprivation during that interval.

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<sup>37</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures (2025). "State Minimum Wages." Accessed 26 March 2025. <https://www.ncsl.org/labor-and-employment/state-minimum-wages#:~:text=Currently%252C%252034%2520states%252C%2520territories%2520and,wage%2520below%2520%25247.25%2520per%2520hour>.

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# Acknowledgments

**Rev. Eugene Cho** | President and CEO

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