

Stable Food and Housing Are Essential to Women's Health

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Programs that support the material conditions of women and families with lower incomes are particularly effective at improving health outcomes. This fact sheet describes three of these efforts – the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and housing assistance – and their impact on the health and well-being of women and families.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP is the nation's largest anti-hunger program. Using federal funds, SNAP allows recipients to procure food at grocery stores, convenience stores and some farmers markets. This program is invaluable in providing necessary nutrition to families. SNAP also funds education programs to inform recipients about the importance of incorporating good nutrition into their lives.

In 2016, SNAP provided 44.2 million beneficiaries with food assistance.¹ Overall, 65 percent of SNAP participants are children, elderly adults or non-elderly adults with disabilities.² Sixty-three percent of adult SNAP beneficiaries are women.³

- ▶ **SNAP benefits women's mental health.** Food insecurity is associated with an increased risk of depression. A recent Children's HealthWatch study found mothers in food insecure families that received SNAP were 122 percent less likely to experience symptoms of maternal depression than mothers experiencing similar scarcity who did not receive SNAP benefits.⁴
- ▶ **SNAP alleviates the food insecurity that disproportionately affects Black families.** Between 2001 and 2016, while 16.5 percent of all households with children experienced food insecurity, 22.5 percent of Black households with children did.⁵ Access to SNAP prevented 1.2 million African Americans from entering deep poverty in 2016.⁶
- ▶ **On average, SNAP participants incur 25 percent less in medical care costs than non-participants at similar income levels.**⁷ People experiencing food insecurity are more likely to suffer adverse health outcomes than people who are food secure, making it harder to manage and prevent disease. At the same time, those who experience food insecurity are more likely to forgo medical care due to cost.⁸

However, SNAP recipients are more likely than non-recipients facing similar challenges to visit the doctor for care that positively correlates with good health.⁹ SNAP helps families avoid being forced to choose between purchasing food and addressing health care needs.

- ▶ **Women who receive SNAP benefits have fewer doctors' visits** and are less likely to need to use sick days than non-recipients.¹⁰
- ▶ **SNAP improves infant and childhood health outcomes.** Receiving SNAP benefits is correlated with having a lower incidence of low and very low birth weight.¹¹ Adults who received SNAP benefits as children were six percent less likely to experience stunted growth, five percent less likely to experience heart disease and 16 percent less likely to experience obesity compared to peers who did not.¹²

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

Pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding women who have low incomes and are nutritionally vulnerable qualify for WIC. This federally funded program also covers infants and young children up to age five.

WIC serves approximately 7.3 million women and children each month, including 53 percent of all infants born in the United States.¹³ The program disproportionately serves women of color with low incomes: Nearly 42 percent of participants are women or families of color.¹⁴

By providing nutritious foods, counseling on healthy eating, breastfeeding support and health care referrals, WIC plays a crucial role in promoting lifetime health for women, infants and children. WIC works to combat food insecurity in partnership with other programs like SNAP.

- ▶ **Mothers report that WIC has helped them make positive changes in how they feed themselves and their families.**¹⁵ WIC is also uniquely positioned to help prevent pregnant women from gaining excessive weight in pregnancy, which can lead to poor health outcomes during pregnancy, such as gestational diabetes and preeclampsia, and chronic diseases later in life, including heart disease and hypertension.¹⁶
- ▶ **WIC improves health outcomes for women and children.** Pregnant women who participate in WIC:¹⁷
 - ▶ Have fewer premature births;
 - ▶ Have fewer low-birth-weight babies;
 - ▶ Experience fewer fetal and infant deaths;
 - ▶ Seek prenatal care earlier in pregnancy; and
 - ▶ Consume more key nutrients such as iron, protein, calcium, and vitamins A and C.
- ▶ **WIC reduces infant mortality disparities.** The mortality rate among Black infants in the United States is more than twice that of white infants.¹⁸ A 2010 study in Ohio

found that prenatal WIC participation was associated with lower infant mortality rates generally, and specifically found a lower infant mortality rate among Black WIC participants (9.6 deaths per 1,000 live births) than Black non-WIC participants (21 deaths per 1,000 live births). These results demonstrate WIC's role in significantly reducing the infant mortality disparity between Black and white infants.¹⁹

- ▶ **WIC is the largest public health breastfeeding promotion program in the nation.** Breastfeeding promotion and support is integral to WIC's work to improve maternal and infant health. WIC has successfully encouraged and supported women with breastfeeding and helps mothers breastfeed for a longer duration.
- ▶ **WIC leads to better health, fewer adverse health outcomes and reduced health care costs.** Recent studies have shown that prenatal WIC participation is associated with lower Medicaid costs. For every dollar spent prenatally on WIC, Medicaid costs have gone down by as much as \$4.21.²⁰

Federal Housing Assistance Programs

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) manages housing assistance programs that offer affordable and stable housing to millions of women and families. In fact, federal housing assistance supports approximately 5 million families, most of which are women-headed, Black and Latinx households.²¹

- ▶ **Increasing access to affordable housing improves women's health and reduces health disparities.** Affordable housing frees up household resources for health care and healthy food, which leads to better health outcomes for women and children.²² Additionally, women and families living in subsidized housing are more likely to have health insurance and less likely to have unmet medical needs than others.²³
- ▶ **Housing instability is associated with an increased risk of adverse health outcomes.** Families with unstable housing are at higher risk for poor caregiver health, poor child health, maternal depression, and food and energy insecurity, compared to families with stable housing.²⁴
- ▶ **Stable and affordable housing also supports women's and children's mental health** by limiting stressors related to financial burden or frequent moves, or by offering women an escape from domestic violence.²⁵ Many women face the choice between staying with an abusive partner and becoming homeless. According to one 2010 study, over a 12-month period, women who experienced housing or food instability were four times more likely to experience rape, physical violence or stalking than women who did not experience housing or food insecurity.²⁶ Housing insecurity also affects the mental health of women's families. Staying in one residence for longer periods of time is associated with lower levels of anxiety among children and adolescents.²⁷

Policies that combat food and housing insecurity are critical for improving the health and well-being of women and families. Policymakers should consider these nonclinical needs as they seek to improve health outcomes and reduce health disparities.

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The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, reproductive health and rights, access to quality health care and policies that help women and men meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at NationalPartnership.org.

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