



**October 2014:  
Food Deserts and Their Impact on Child Well-Being**

**Background**

"Food desert" is a term that too few people are aware of, and, unfortunately, too many are affected by in the United States. Food deserts are communities where residents have limited access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. The United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service has estimated that of the 23.5 million people that live in food deserts in America, over half are low-income families living in all types of communities - including urban, rural, and Tribal. In addition, they found that low-income families with children are more likely to live in a food desert. This is highly problematic since people who live in food deserts are often forced to choose from less healthy food options and are at a higher risk of obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Even with Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to help provide children and families with nutritious food, food deserts have limited access to stores that carry affordable, healthy options so families are more likely to purchase food that is high in processed sugars and fat.

Many national initiatives have drawn attention to this troubling phenomenon in efforts to help bring healthy food options to all families. In fact October is National Farm to School Month, which was first designated by Congress in 2010. The [National Farm to School Network](#) organizes the annual celebration with programs in all 50 states and has expanded to include [Farm to Preschool](#), as well! Another campaign that has led the way is [Let's Move](#), the First Lady's comprehensive health initiative dedicated to helping tackle childhood obesity within a generation. Let's Move empowers children, their families, and the community to work together in helping raise a healthy generation. Both of these initiatives focus on empowering children and their families in making better food choices and strengthening community connections by promoting local food producers.

Many Head Start programs have also created community gardens to promote healthy living and combat childhood obesity. Below you'll find a Growing Guide created by the California Head Start Association that provides wonderful knowledge for other Head Start programs that want to begin a garden of their own. You'll also find the interactive Food Desert Locator map, resources from the initiatives mentioned, and studies that help further our understanding of food insecurity and the impact of food deserts in the lives of the children that we serve. Happy gardening and healthy living!

**Research Blast Readers, we want to hear from you! NHSA has our Research Agenda survey open right now to gather your input about priorities for Head Start research. Please**

take a few minutes to complete it by November 14th at [go.nhsa.org/ResearchAgenda](http://go.nhsa.org/ResearchAgenda).

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## Resources

### [Food Desert Locator](#)

This interactive map is part of the [Let's Move](#) campaign and was developed by the United States Department of Agriculture. It provides a visual overview of food access throughout the United States and can be used for community planning and research purposes. You can use this tool to create maps specific to the census-tract of your choice. Start planning for a healthy future!

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/fooddesert/#.VEUrKlvF9y9>

### [Healthy Food Financing Initiative](#)

The Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) supports projects dedicated to increasing access to healthy food for vulnerable children and their families. Projects are funded in collaboration with the departments of Treasury, Health and Human Services, and Agriculture. For funding opportunities, visit the HFFI page and scroll towards the bottom. Keep us posted on the wonderful projects that your program decides to implement!

### [Farm to School Network](#)

Want to know what is happening in your state during Farm to School Month? Click on the link for your state! Each page includes state resources, policies, and a chance for you to share your story. As just one example of a resource, check out this [Farm to Child Care Curriculum](#) from the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy!

### California Head Start Association

#### [Growing, Eating, Living: A Growing Guide for Head Start](#)

This wonderful gardening guide by the California Head Start Association helps Head Start programs that want to begin a community garden. Useful tips and suggestions range from forming a local garden committee to seasonal gardens. In addition, the guide highlights the best way that kids can care for plants and activities to incorporate learning!

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CB4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fbestpractices.nokidhungry.org%2Fdownload%2Ffile%2Ffid%2F256&ei=w-NHVLW6FoP3yQSItYKoAg&usg=AFQjCNH9AWNmFs7OhTHzndR5HiPucr0YA&bvm=bv.77880786,d.aWw>

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## Research

### **The National Academies Press**

#### [Hunger and Obesity: Understanding a Food Insecurity Paradigm](#)

*By The Institute of Medicine*

The Hunger and Obesity workshop, organized by the Institute of Medicine in 2011, examined the relationship between obesity and food insecurity in the United States. A diverse group of experts added to the discussions, highlighted issues experienced by special populations, and provided research that examined variables through a socio ecological model. This comprehensive book, free to download, provides the reader with a deeper understanding of food insecurity and diet related diseases in the US. In addition, it provides a review of effective government programs that have demonstrated a positive impact and underscores the gaps in the present research.

### **Journal of Children and Poverty**

#### [Understanding the link between poverty and food insecurity among children: Does the definition of poverty matter?](#)

*By Vanessa Wight, Neeraj Kaushal, Jane Waldfogel & Irv Garfinkel*

Did you know that the official poverty measure (OPM) was established in the 1960s? This measure took the cost of minimum food needed multiplied by three. Much has changed since 1960 and the cost of living throughout the US varies, yet the OPM is still used today to determine eligibility for certain government nutrition programs. Therefore to address critics of the OPM, the Census Bureau released the supplemental poverty measure (SPM) in 2011. The SPM attempts to provide a holistic picture of poverty by including information on economic need within a national level and in subpopulations. In this paper, the authors examine the association between poverty and food insecurity among children using both OPM and SPM. The authors found that the SPM provides a better measurement of very low food security among families.

### **Journal of Family and Economic Issues**

#### [Understanding Food Insecurity Among Latino Immigrant Families in Rural America](#)

*By Yoshie Sano, Steven Garasky, Kimberly A Greder, Christine C.Cook, and Dawn E. Browder*

This study examined how low-income rural Latino immigrant families met their food needs over time. The authors used a case study approach to examine ten families selected to represent three groups: food secure, fragile, and consistently food insecure. The authors found that achieving and maintaining food security was a complicated task and a constant struggle for families. Also, success or failure was influenced by factors at multiple levels including family characteristics, access to social networks and community support, and the local economy. This study is a great

resource to inform key decision makers in seeking to identify strategies and policies that will support families in rural America to improve their food security and improve well-being.

## **The Future of Children**

### [Childhood Food Insecurity in the U.S.: Trends, Causes, and Policy Options](#)

*By Craig Gundersen and James P. Ziliak*

This research report from the Future of Children takes a comprehensive look at food insecurity and the various policies and programs in place to help combat the phenomenon. In addition, it underscores the difficulty of ending food insecurity and promotes further research focused on the root cause of food insecurity among children. Most helpful are the analyses of policies, the strategies that families use to cope with food insecurity, and policy considerations. This report is a great resource for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers in helping make a positive impact in the well-being of vulnerable families.

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## **Discussion Questions**

1. Does your Head Start program participate in Farm to Preschool month? What positive impact have you seen in lives of children, their families, and your community?
  2. Use the Food Desert Locator to gather data and examine your community. Are there trends that you were unaware of?
  3. In the study that examined food insecurity in families in rural America, the authors examined the struggles of the families that represented three groups: food secure, fragile, consistently food insecure. How did this study expand your knowledge of the different challenges that families need to overcome? What networks are available for your families to access?
  4. How many families in your program are food insecure? What local partnerships help you meet their needs?
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Do you know of other recent research that may be of interest to the Head Start field? Do you have other questions, comments or concerns? E-mail Emmalie Dropkin ([edropkin@nhsa.org](mailto:edropkin@nhsa.org))