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Babies' hunger reflects inflation

Poor nutrition rises with the cost of food. It impedes brain growth, especially in toddlers.

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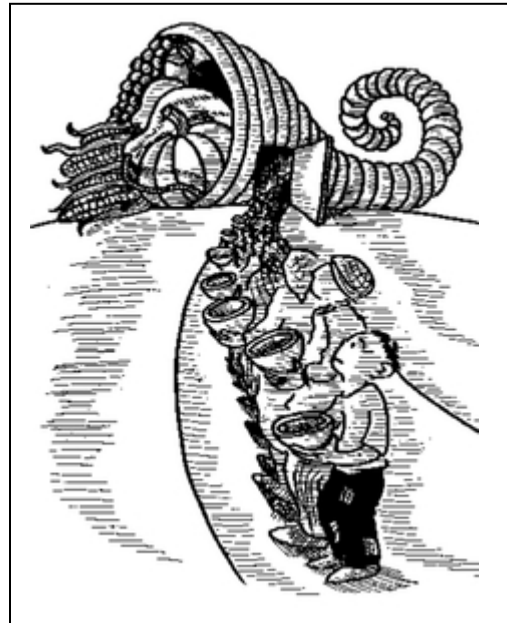
As pediatric researchers, we don't need the morning paper to tell us about rising food and fuel prices. We see the evidence every day on the bodies of babies in the emergency room at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children. Young children arrive anemic and underweight; some even require hospitalization to treat the health effects of inadequate nutrition.

Recent news coverage confirms what health professionals have been seeing all year: The current inflation in food and energy prices is taking a toll on America's most vulnerable children. The Labor Department reports grocery prices up 5.1 percent over last year.

The picture is worse for many staple items: Bread is up 12 percent, milk 17 percent, and eggs a staggering 25 percent since February 2007. With oil prices sitting steadily above \$100 a barrel for the first time in our nation's history, experts agree that food prices will continue to climb significantly in the coming year.

While an inadequate diet jeopardizes health and learning at any age, the implications are particularly grave for children under 3. Poor nutrition during what science has proved to be the critical period of brain growth has lifelong implications for children's ability to learn. It compromises children's school readiness, limits educational achievement and, in the long run, impairs their ability to participate in the workforce.

Before the current spike in food prices, in 2006, the government found that 12.6 million children in the United States were living in households lacking access to enough food for an active and healthy life. The government calls this "food insecurity." Most of us would think of it as hunger. Research on more than 27,000 infants and toddlers by the Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (www.c-snap.org) finds that food insecurity has serious health consequences for babies and toddlers. It puts them at risk for poor health, increased hospitalizations, and developmental delays, which can jeopardize their mental and physical readiness for school.



The impacts of hunger on the health of poor children are seen every day in Philadelphia. About 15 percent of the families we interview are food insecure. This is significantly higher than the national rate of 11 percent. One child out of every three in our city arrives at kindergarten already behind in the skills they will need to learn to read. Many arrive hungry.

Research in four Philadelphia neighborhoods by the Real Cost of a Healthy Diet Project has shown that food stamps, which are intended to shield children from hunger, are inadequate to purchase a healthy diet. Even if low-income families receive the maximum food-stamp benefit, they cannot purchase the Thrifty Food Plan - or what the U.S. Department of Agriculture considers to be an adequate diet. The actual cost of the TFP is almost 35 percent higher than the maximum food-stamp benefit. In other words, if a family of four received the maximum food-stamp benefit and tried to follow the TFP, it would still be about \$2,000 in debt at the end of the year.

Our children need Congress to pass a farm bill that includes food-stamp benefits that accurately reflect the cost of food in today's markets.

It is not only up to parents, pediatric researchers, and scientists to ensure that the brains of babies and toddlers have the essential nutritional building blocks for school readiness. It is also up to our policymakers and political leaders. In the height of an election season, during an economic downturn where the pinch on the wallet is felt at the grocery store and in the bellies and brains of our children, policies that help low-income children succeed belong on the agendas of all of our candidates.

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http://www.philly.com/philly/hp/news_update/20080401_Babies__hunger_reflects_inflation.html