

Food Insecurity and Afterschool Programs



A Briefing Paper

By Sam Piha and Samantha Fasen

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Sam Piha (he/him) has served as founder and president of Temescal Associates since 2007. Sam began his career in 1974 as an afterschool worker, an experience that led to 13 years of classroom teaching and work as a child and family counselor and school social worker. Between 1989 and 2006, Sam managed school-based youth programs at the regional and national levels. He later founded Temescal Associates and The How Kids Learn Foundation, both dedicated to improving the quality of afterschool programs. Sam served as editor and contributing author of several important practice guides and journal articles on afterschool programming. Sam holds a master's degree in Social Welfare.



Samantha Fasen (she/her) joined Temescal Associates and the How Kids Learn Foundation in 2019 and has fully embraced her work with the afterschool field. She helps to coordinate and develop marketing campaigns and multimedia elements to reach a wider audience and share with people the importance of out-of-school time and youth development.



Ren Daraio (they/them) brings over 35 years of experience working in the field of youth development as a facilitator, trainer, and coach. She has experience training and coaching diverse audience groups, from afterschool practitioners and parents to funders and technical assistance providers. Prior to her work with Temescal Associates, Ren was the Deputy Director at the Community Network for Youth Development and a consultant for the Institute for Research and Reform in Education.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

[Temescal Associates](#) is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development.

[The How Kids Learn Foundation](#) (HKLF) is a 501(c)(3) organization. It is dedicated to improving the effectiveness of settings that support the education and healthy development of youth. This includes schools and out-of-school time programs. The HKL Foundation provides educational and training activities. Examples of activities include conferences, speaker forums, screenings of relevant films, training sessions, coaching sessions, the awarding of digital badges to acknowledge exemplar programs and the learning that happens within these settings. Activities also include the development and distribution of educational materials (papers, self-assessment tools, videos, program guides, etc.). You can see a [catalogue of the resources](#) we've produced for the afterschool field.

FRONT COVER PHOTOS: Top left, top right and bottom left are from www.unsplash.com. Bottom right is from www.pexels.com.

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Food Insecurity and Afterschool Programs



Source: www.pexels.com

INTRODUCTION

The government shutdown and the freezing of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits put a spotlight on hunger in America.

There is no possible excuse for children to go hungry in this country. Yet it happens - every day, in every community. – [No Kid Hungry, Texas](#)

This paper explores food insecurity in America and how afterschool programs can help. For a more comprehensive understanding of food insecurity, we recommend [the USDA's annual report on Household Food Security in the United States](#).

“FOOD INSECURITY” DEFINED

The defining characteristic of very low food security is that—at times during the year—food intake of household members is reduced and their normal eating patterns are disrupted because the household lacks money and other resources for food. Very low food security is characterized in terms of the conditions that households in this category typically reported in annual surveys.

KEY HUNGER STATISTICS

Below are some key hunger statistics from FY 2023:

- “13.5 % of U.S. households (18.0 million households) were food insecure at some time during the year, a statistically significant increase from 12.8% in 2022. Approximately 47.4 million people lived in these households.
- 5.1% of households (6.8 million) experienced "very low food security," where food intake was reduced due to limited resources.
- 17.9% of households with children were food insecure, with 8.9% of these households seeing both children and adults affected.

IMPACT OF FOOD INSECURITY ON YOUTH

There are many impacts of food insecurity on youth. Below are some:

- “Food insecurity harms young children’s [cognitive, emotional, and physical](#) development.
- [Research indicates](#) that food-insecure children are almost twice as likely to be in fair or poor health when compared to food-secure children, and are significantly more likely to be hospitalized.
- The most affordable food is often the most unhealthy – especially in [food deserts](#), where finding healthy food at an affordable price can be particularly difficult. Food-insecure households are much more likely than food-secure households to report eating unhealthy foods.”³

Socio-Emotional and Behavioral Factors

“Aside from the mental and physical consequences of food insecurity, a child’s social and emotional health are also at risk when he or she is not adequately nourished. This can lead to behavioral issues that affect not only home life, but school life as well.

- Research shows that [mental health problems](#), such as depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems among children (and their mothers) increase as food insecurity increases.
- Food insecurity often prevents children from functioning normally in social settings due to a [poorer physical quality of life](#). Specifically, food-insecure students are often not fully engaged in daily activities such as social interactions with peers at school. They also have [greater difficulty](#) getting along with other students.
- By the time they are teenagers, food-insecure children are [twice as likely](#) as their peers to have seen a psychologist or to have been suspended.



Source: No Kid Hungry

Education

In addition to the cognitive, emotional, mental, and physical consequences of food insecurity and poor nutrition, a wide body of research indicates that these consequences follow children into the classroom, often resulting in poor academic performance.

- Children from homes with persistent food insecurity have shown [smaller gains in both reading and math](#) than their food-secure counterparts.

- Food-insecure children and teenagers [have been shown](#) to miss school more frequently, and are more likely to repeat a grade than food-secure children.
- Food insecurity has been shown to [reduce a child's chances of graduating](#) from high school.
- Growing up food-insecure has consequences even beyond K-12 education. [Research shows](#) that workers who experienced hunger* as children 'are not as well prepared physically, mentally, emotionally or socially to perform effectively in the contemporary workforce.'

There is no doubt that a child who grows up without adequate nutrition will face significant barriers to academic achievement. The various physical, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive costs of food insecurity make it extremely difficult for these students to reach their full potential. Although programs like the [National School Lunch Program](#) and the [Summer Food Service Program](#) have been providing meals to income-eligible students for years, [research indicates](#) they may not be enough on their own to mitigate the damaging effects of food insecurity on students.

Although the burden to provide a solution to child food insecurity cannot fall on the public school system and afterschool programs alone, they may be an important mechanism to help provide both academic and non-academic supports for students to help ensure that they reach their full potential.”⁴

AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM EFFORTS TO REDUCE HUNGER

Afterschool programs are well positioned to address youth food insecurity in their local community. In particular, young people regardless of age, enjoy working to help others. Afterschool programs can work directly to address food insecurity or volunteer at food banks or other organizations in the community.

“Youth programs can address hunger through direct food provision, education, and advocacy. By providing meals in stigma-free environments and offering opportunities for involvement, these programs ensure immediate relief while also developing long-term skills and advocating for systemic change.

Youth programs can address hunger through a combination of direct food provision, community empowerment, and policy advocacy. By integrating food with recreational or educational activities, these programs reduce the social stigma often associated with food assistance.

Afterschool Programs Can Provide Direct Food Access

- **On-site Meals and Snacks:** Programs can offer free, healthy meals and snacks as part of their regular activities, such as afterschool or during the summer, reducing the stigma often associated with seeking food assistance.
- **Gift Cards/Vouchers:** Providing gift cards to grocery stores or restaurants offers flexibility and choice, which is important for adolescents gaining independence.
- **Nutrition and Cooking Education:** Offering cooking or home economics classes helps youth learn to make healthy choices and prepare nutritious meals, especially when resources are limited.

Youth-Led Initiatives:

Empower youth to lead projects, such as community garden creation, organizing food drives, or starting their own non-profits like 'Dancing Against Hunger', builds leadership skills and community impact. Youth can:

- Volunteer at local food pantries/banks

- **Application Assistance:** Programs can offer eligibility counseling and enrollment assistance for federal benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and WIC, connecting families to broader support systems.
- **Skill Development:** Beyond food skills, youth programs can incorporate workshops on financial literacy, leadership development, and job skills, addressing some of the underlying causes of poverty and food insecurity.
- **Gift Cards/Vouchers:** Providing gift cards to grocery stores or restaurants offers flexibility and choice, which is important for adolescents gaining independence.
- **Establish school-based, on-site food pantries** provides youth and their families with staples and prepackaged food to take home, with youth involvement in stocking and organizing helping to reduce shame.

Youth Engagement and Advocacy

- **Incorporate Youth Voice** by seeking out and incorporating teens' input on food options, activities, and marketing makes programs more effective and tailored to their needs, increasing engagement.
- Youth can be mobilized to advocate for broader systemic changes, such as universal free school meals, increased minimum wage, or improved access to affordable housing, by writing letters to lawmakers or participating in campaigns.
- **Advocacy for Policy Change:** Youth can be mobilized to advocate for broader systemic changes, such as universal free school meals, increased minimum wage, or improved access to affordable housing, by writing letters to lawmakers or participating in campaigns.

By combining these strategies, youth programs can effectively address immediate hunger needs and contribute to long-term food security and community well-being. For more information, resources are available from organizations like [Feeding America](#) and No Kid Hungry.”⁵ These resources showcase methods youth programs can employ to tackle hunger, focusing on direct food access, skill-building, and leveraging federal nutrition programs.



Source: Feeding America

Examples of Youth-Led Hunger Initiatives

“Students from a class in Milwaukee who turned movie night into something much bigger. In response to a natural disaster that left communities in need of support, the students organized a fundraiser in their school gym. Their idea proves that with creativity, teamwork, and the courage to act, everyone can make a difference.

Benton, a teen who has found his voice in advocacy, helping to make sure hunger is addressed at the policy level. He advocates for [strong nutrition programs and policies at the local, state, and federal level](#), ensuring that kids—and their families—have access to the food they need. From writing letters and meeting with lawmakers, to speaking at events, Benton shows that teens can be powerful advocates for improving our food systems.”⁶ To learn more about examples and tips on youth-led hunger initiatives, check out [Teens Leading the Charge During Hunger Action Month](#).



Source: Teens in the Movement: Cobe, Isaiah and Atticus

CASE STUDY: YOUTH-LED HUNGER INITIATIVE AT LANSINGBURGH BOYS & GIRLS CLUB, TROY, NEW YORK



Jimmy Bulmer

Jimmy Bulmer serves as Executive Director of the Lansingburgh Boys & Girls Club in Troy, New York, where he leads efforts to provide safe, supportive spaces and opportunities for local youth and families. A Troy native and former Club member, Jimmy is deeply committed to strengthening the community that helped shape his own path.

He has spent more than a decade working with Boys & Girls Clubs across the Capital Region in roles spanning operations, development, and executive leadership. Today, Jimmy works closely with schools, families, and community partners to address critical issues impacting youth—including food insecurity, access to safe spaces, and workforce development—while ensuring young people have the support and opportunities they need to succeed.

We interviewed Jimmy to learn more about the youth-led hunger initiative at the Boys & Girls Club.

Q: Why did you choose the issue of hunger/food insecurity to address in your program? What actions did your program take?

A: Hunger and food insecurity are real and visible challenges within our community, and they directly impact many of the families we serve. The recent spotlight on SNAP disruptions brought additional awareness and urgency to the issue. As a program that provides daily meals and snacks, we see firsthand how access to food affects a child’s ability to focus, participate, and feel secure. To address this, our program incorporated conversations and activities around food insecurity, organized food collection efforts, and partnered with local organizations to help support families in need. Youth participated in assembling care packages and helping to distribute information about local

food resources. We also used this as an opportunity to educate members on the importance of supporting one another and contributing to community solutions.

Q: Were the youth involved in identifying hunger as a problem and determining what actions you could take?

A: Yes. Our youth were actively involved in discussions about community needs and shared their own observations and experiences related to food insecurity. Through group conversations and guided activities, they helped identify hunger as an issue they wanted to address and contributed ideas on how they could help. Their input shaped the actions we took, ensuring that the project felt meaningful and youth-driven.

Q: What impact did this have on participants?

A: Participants gained a deeper understanding of challenges faced by others in their community and developed a stronger sense of empathy and social responsibility. Many expressed pride in being able to help and felt empowered knowing that even small actions can make a difference. It also strengthened teamwork and leadership skills as they worked together toward a shared goal.

Q: What impact did this have on the community?

A: Our efforts helped raise awareness about local food insecurity and contributed tangible support through collected and distributed items. Just as importantly, it demonstrated that young people care deeply about their community and are willing to step up to help. These experiences build stronger connections between youth, families, and community partners and reinforce the idea that we all play a role in supporting one another.

Q: Is engaging young people in civic engagement/community improvement an important part of your program? Why?

A: Yes, engaging young people in civic engagement and community improvement is a core component of our work at the Lansingburgh Boys & Girls Club. We believe that when youth understand the needs of their community and see themselves as part of the solution, they build confidence, empathy, and leadership skills. It also reinforces that their voices and actions matter. Experiences like service projects, community partnerships, and youth-led initiatives help our members develop a sense of responsibility and connection to the neighborhood they are growing up in.

APPENDIX 1: FEDERAL PROGRAMS TO PREVENT HUNGER



What is SNAP and why is it so important?

“[SNAP](#) (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) is one of the most effective and efficient federal programs, as well as one of the most responsive, providing additional assistance to families during economic downturns. It’s also one of the most-needed: 42 million Americans rely on SNAP benefits to buy food each month, according to the USDA. [Two-thirds of these SNAP benefits go to households with children](#). The SNAP program provides families living on low incomes with money to purchase food each month and serves about 41.7 million people monthly (FY 2024). However, some individuals facing hunger may not qualify for SNAP due to income limits.



WIC Program

One of the largest and most effective federal nutrition programs is the [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\)](#). WIC benefits are primarily for children under the age of five or women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. According to the latest figures from the USDA, in 2023, the WIC program provided benefits to more than 6 million people from households living on low incomes and served 39 percent of all infants born in the United States.

Through WIC, moms can get nutritious foods for their young children, as well as access to important services at WIC clinics, including nutrition education, counseling and referrals to local health and welfare agencies.

Other federal programs that we know can make an enormous difference for kids living with hunger:

- **School Breakfasts-** Making breakfast part of the regular school day, just like lunch, has a powerful effect on kids. That’s why we work with educators, political leaders and local nonprofits across the country to change the way schools serve breakfast.
- **Summer Meals-** Millions of kids rely on school for regular meals. But in the summer, those meals disappear. No Kid Hungry is helping community leaders with the funding and know-how they need to start [free summer meals sites](#), as well as advocating for needed changes to the national summer meals program. Currently, the national summer meals programs reach just a fraction of the children who need help when school is out of session.
- **Afterschool Meals-**The Afterschool Meals Program, part of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), helps kids get the nutritious meals they need in a safe, supervised location after the school day ends. This program is the newest federal child nutrition program, so No Kid Hungry is working to ensure that more kids, families and teachers know about it and are able to take advantage of it.” - Source: [No Kid Hungry, Facts About Child Hunger in America](#)

END NOTES

- ¹ United States Department of Agriculture, [*Food Security in the U.S. - Key Statistics & Graphics*](#)
- ² United States Department of Agriculture, [*Food Security in the U.S. - Definitions of Food Security*](#)
- ³ Carinne Deeds, [*Food for Thought: How Food Insecurity Affects a Child's Education*](#)
- ⁴ IBID.
- ⁵ Google AI, [*How Can Youth Programs Address Hunger?*](#)
- ⁶ Tara Spiess, [*Teens Leading the Charge During Hunger Action Month*](#)