



A nutritious diet at a minimal cost? Not in Boston.

World Food Day Update

The Real Cost of a Healthy Diet Research Team, Boston Medical Center

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Food Stamps Decreasing in Market Value

This month the weekly Food Stamp benefit level for a household of four increased by 4.4% over the previous year's weekly benefit level. While this might initially sound like good news, it translates into **just an additional seven cents per person per meal**. This paltry increase is even less impressive when considering inflation and the escalating costs of food and other necessities nationwide:

- From January 2005 to August 2007 **overall food prices increased by 14.8%**.
- Over the same period, energy prices increased by 57.4%, housing by 19.3%, and medical care by 36.2%.
- Over this same period, **average weekly earnings increased by only 4.7%**.

Food stamps have been losing purchasing power for a decade – **the current average benefit allots just \$1 per person per meal per day**. This is an amount that keeps families living on the financial and nutritional edge.

The Real Cost of a Healthy Diet

Using the April 2007 revision of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), researchers at Boston Medical Center (BMC) sought to determine whether the TFP reflects actual prices in low-income communities in Boston. As part of the **Real Cost of a Healthy Diet Project**, BMC researchers and local teenagers visited sixteen food stores in Boston neighborhoods between April and August to price each item in the TFP market basket and find out if the TFP lives up to its motto – **'a nutritious diet at a minimal cost.'**

Preliminary results: Food Stamp benefits fall far short

Preliminary results show that families in Boston trying to buy the TFP with food stamp benefits would come up short.

- The average price of the TFP across sixteen stores in four Boston communities is \$166.55 per week.
- On average, families trying to purchase the basic TFP market basket on a food stamp budget would fall short by \$31.05 per week (\$124.20 per month).
- Families dependent on small corner stores or bodegas for their grocery needs would have an even more difficult time purchasing a basic market basket, falling short by an average of \$41.36 per week (\$165.44 per month).
- Even the maximum benefit is not enough - the maximum weekly benefit of \$135.50 was sufficient to purchase the Thrifty Food Plan in *only two* of the sixteen stores surveyed.

Prescriptions for Policy

Legislators currently have several opportunities to change course and start protecting our youngest citizens.

Massachusetts

The Massachusetts legislature is considering a bill (**House 84 and Senate 667**) to **restore food stamp benefits to documented immigrants**, allowing vulnerable families and children access to this vital 'medicine'. C-SNAP research shows that **even when citizen children are eligible, if their immigrant parents are not, the children are 32% less likely to receive food stamp benefits**. Contact House bill sponsor Antonio Cabral (617-722-2140) and Senate bill sponsor Mark Montigny (617-722-1440) and urge them to:

- Support restoration of food stamp benefits to documented immigrants.

Nationwide

On the national stage, this year's **Farm Bill** offers a prime moment to change the course of the health of this country's youngest citizens. We need to **stop the erosion in the value of food stamp benefits**; contact Senator Edward Kennedy (202-224-4543) and Senator John Kerry (202-224-2742) and urge them to:

- Support a strong Nutrition Title in the Farm Bill
- Increase the standard deduction and other features of the benefit calculation *and* index them for inflation
- Increase outreach and education about the FSP

Nutrition Assistance Improves Child Health and Development

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is an essential support for low-income Americans, in particular for children. Food stamps buffer children from an array of food insecurity's negative consequences. Our colleagues at BMC's Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (C-SNAP) have demonstrated that by reducing food insecurity, **food stamps reduce a child's risk of:**

- hospitalization
- poor health
- iron deficiency anemia
- deficits in cognitive development
- behavioral and emotional problems

However, **food stamps can only reduce food insecurity if they are available at levels that allow families to purchase nutritious meals.** The Real Cost of a Healthy Diet research indicates that this is not the case for low-income families in Boston.

At-a-glance: Food Stamp Statistics

In Massachusetts:

- In 2004, 659,000 people in MA were eligible for food stamps
- While MA has been recognized for greatly improving its food stamp participation rate since 2004, it is still has the third lowest state participation rate in the country.

Nationwide:

- Each month, nearly 26 million low-income people - approximately 1 in 11 Americans - participate in the Food Stamp Program; half of these are children.
- In FY 2004, the average monthly FSP benefit was about \$86 per person and about \$200 per household
(<http://www.fns.usda.gov/>)

On World Food Day we must remember that **the Food Stamp Program is America's first line of defense against hunger.** Now is the moment to make a difference for millions of children and their families by restoring benefits to documented immigrants and supporting a strong Nutrition Title in this year's Farm Bill.

The Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (C-SNAP) is a national network of pediatricians and public health researchers whose original, clinical research focuses on the public policies that affect the health and well-being of children ages 0 to 3 years old. The program has collected data on **over 28,000 children** in frontline healthcare settings since 1998. www.C-SNAP.org

For Additional Information Please Contact:

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FAQ

The Thrifty Food Plan

The maximum food stamp benefit – as well as national poverty guidelines – are based on the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), a cost-specific food plan determined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to represent the **national standard for a "nutritious diet available at minimal cost."** The cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, and the maximum food stamp allotment for a household with two adults and two children is **\$135.50 per week.**

Food Insecurity

Limited or uncertain access to enough nutritious food for all household members to lead an active and healthy life; A **technical term for hunger**

US Department of Agriculture, Household Food Insecurity in the United States, 2005.