

# Recommendations to Promote Racial Equity within Child Nutrition Programs

## Promoting Racial Equity Helps End Hunger

While hunger and food insecurity rates have decreased in the United States, rates are still far too high. People of color are at much greater risk of hunger and poverty than the overall U.S. population because of the impacts of structural racism. Applying a racial equity lens—a concept and practice that focuses on achieving equality for people of color—can help us reduce the impact of structural racism and begin to dismantle it.

In the anti-hunger context, racial equity means that people of color are no more likely to be food insecure than their white counterparts and that they reach optimal nutritional outcomes. While many anti-hunger programs have improved food security and nutrition for U.S. residents, there are still significant opportunities to achieve racial equity and reduce the risk of hunger among people of color.

## How Child Nutrition Programs Promote Equity

Child nutrition programs (CNP) work to improve the nutritional well-being of children around the country. CNPs generally target areas of concentrated poverty—areas with at least 20 percent of households at or near the federal poverty line<sup>1</sup>—and children of color are more likely to live and go to school in these areas. One in two Indigenous people in high-Indigenous counties,<sup>2</sup> one in four African Americans,<sup>3</sup> one in five Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders,<sup>4</sup> and one in six Latino/as live or go to school in high-poverty areas, compared to one in 13 whites.<sup>5</sup>

Several CNP policies seek to make it more equitable:

1. **Automatic eligibility and enrollment for students with the highest needs**, which include children in households that participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or the alternative on Indigenous reservations, children in foster care, and children who are migrants or homeless.
2. **Community Eligibility** provides universal free lunch and breakfast to schools that serve students living in low-income households, without requiring individual household applications.<sup>6</sup>



Joseph Molieri for Bread for the World

## Recommendations: Promoting Racial Equity in Child Nutrition

Child Nutrition Programs could further reduce racial inequalities and hunger by using a racial equity lens:

**Recommendation #1: Expand summer and winter EBT when children are out of school.** Only 3 million of the 20 million children receiving free or reduced-price school meals participate in summer programs.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, children often face barriers in accessing summer meal sites (such as lack of transportation, etc.). The hunger safety net for children in the summer months and other times children are out of school must be strengthened. Congress should expand the summer EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) program, which provides additional SNAP benefits to families with children on summer vacation, and extend this support to winter vacation. According to the Food and Nutrition Service,<sup>8</sup> an increase of summer EBT by \$60 per month reduced the most severe forms of food insecurity by one-third.<sup>9</sup> Increasing the monthly amount by \$180 per month could fully eliminate food insecurity during break times for the most food insecure children, who are disproportionately of color.

### **Recommendation #2: Increase funding for schools and meal sites in low-income communities.**

There are three significant financial barriers among schools and sites that exacerbate inequitable nutrition outcomes for children of color: kitchen equipment costs, kitchen staffing costs, and initial summer feeding start-up costs. Various studies show that increasing funding for kitchen infrastructure improves the school's ability to serve more nutritious meals, including the ability for staff to make more food from scratch.<sup>10</sup> Congress should (1) increase funding for the National School Lunch Program's Equipment Assistance Grant Program, (2) increase school reimbursement



rates for kitchen equipment and staff costs, and (3) make group feeding programs more accessible by allowing states to make grants to sponsors for initial start-up fees. To target children of color, these efforts should prioritize communities in concentrated areas of poverty.

**Recommendation #3: Expand the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP).** Making fresh fruits and vegetables available to children of color is key in combating nutrient deficiencies, which is exacerbated by racially targeted fast food advertising.<sup>11</sup> Currently, schools must apply to FFVP. The program provides free fresh fruit and vegetables to children at elementary schools where at least 50 percent of students are certified to receive free or reduced-price meals. To reach more children of color, Congress should: (1) automatically qualify *all* schools in high-poverty areas, including middle and high schools, and (2) mandate that 80 percent of fruits and vegetables be fresh, rather than canned or dried.

**Recommendation #4: Ensure that nutritional standards and staff education address nutritional deficiencies.** Children of color experience nutritional deficiencies at a higher rate than their white peers—with the largest disparities in Vitamin D and iron.<sup>12</sup> These disparities are largely due to high rates of lactose intolerance among Indigenous and African American children.<sup>13</sup> Congress should work to eliminate deficiencies by: (1) requiring USDA to study and make recommendations as to how child nutrition programs can better address deficiencies in culturally appropriate ways, (2) changing the fluid milk requirement to allow plant-based options fortified with Vitamin D, and (3) mandating cultural humility, competency and sensitivity training for administrators to reinforce the nutritional needs of children of color.

To read the methodology used to analyze how Child Nutrition Programs could promote racial equity, go to [bread.org/racialequitymethodology](https://bread.org/racialequitymethodology).

**Recommendation #5: Establish a process for equitable beneficiary participation in program design, implementation, and evaluation.** Part of racial equity is ensuring that the needs of communities of color are being placed at the center of how policies and programs are designed, implemented, and evaluated. To achieve this, processes should be put in place to engage people of color so that they can tell their own stories. Congress should provide funding for USDA to allow beneficiaries of color to participate in listening tours and focus groups, paying participants for their time. Incentives should be provided for administrators, parents, and children to complete requests for public comments.

**Recommendation #6: Strengthen the collection and disaggregation of data.** Currently, disaggregated data by race and ethnicity on nutrition levels among children participating in CNPs is not publicly available. Anemia rates, vitamin D, and iron levels should be tracked among child recipients. Congress should provide funding and direct program administrators to strengthen data collection and report by race and ethnicity by program. Alternatively, program administrators could identify and coordinate with school districts that already collect this data. Congress should also provide funding to research the impact of specific nutrition interventions on nutrition outcomes for children of color. Researchers, practitioners, and health providers of color should be empowered to design and lead this project.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Fragile Environments, Resilient Communities.” Bread for the World Institute. Hunger Report 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Bread analysis. Refer to full report for more details.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to endnote i.

<sup>4</sup> “Data and Statistics on Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders.” White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

<sup>5</sup> Refer to endnote i.

<sup>6</sup> According to FNS, schools are eligible to operate under CEP if the Identified Student Percentage is greater than or equal to 40 percent.

<sup>7</sup> “Hunger Doesn’t Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report.” Feeding Research and Action Center. June 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children Demonstration: Summary Report. May 2016. Submitted to: USDA, FNS.

<sup>9</sup> “Electronic Summer Benefit Transfer for Children Demonstration: Summer Report 2011-2014 (Summary).” USDA, FNS. May 2016.

<sup>10</sup> “Lee County Elementary School.” PEW Research Center. January 2017.

<sup>11</sup> “Increasing disparities in unhealthy food advertising targeted to Hispanic and Black youth.” Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, the Council on Black Health and Salud America. January 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Lactose intolerance is a condition that often results not being able to receive the proper amount of Vitamin D and is associated with anemia (iron deficiency).

<sup>13</sup> 60-80 percent of African Americans and 80-100 percent of Indigenous people are lactose intolerant. “Lactose Intolerance: Information for Health Care Providers.” HHS. National Institute of Health, and Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.