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Heading Off Hunger: *A Snapshot of Child Nutrition in Newark*



A KIDS COUNT SPECIAL REPORT



Giving Every Child A Chance

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Advocates for Children of New Jersey is the trusted, independent voice putting children's needs first for more than 30 years. Our work results in better laws and policies, more effective funding and stronger services for children and families. And it means that more children are given the chance to grow up safe, healthy and educated.

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Giving Every Child A Chance

Introduction

A nutritious diet is one of the most important foundations children need to grow up healthy and able to succeed in school and later in life. Hunger, food insecurity, obesity and an unhealthy diet can all lead to serious health risks for children.

Children who lack proper nutrition are typically in poorer health and are more likely to be developmentally at-risk than children who have enough nutritious food to eat. Hungry and under-nourished children are sick more often, more likely to have been hospitalized and suffer growth and developmental impairments that may preclude them from reaching their full potential. Studies have also shown that food insecurity and unhealthy eating habits are associated with higher risks of behavioral problems and being overweight.

Advocates for Children of New Jersey, with support from the New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, set out to collect and analyze data in this report to improve understanding of the nutritional needs of Newark children and to identify ways to meet those needs, with the goal of improving the health and well-being of children in New Jersey's largest city.

We discovered that a limited amount of consistent, comprehensive data exist to measure both need and progress toward meeting those needs. (Data sources for this report are listed in the Appendix).

Instead, what emerged was a disjointed system of nutritional programs and services — many of which are effective at providing critical supports — but that are not connected and working together to leverage resources and most effectively improve the nutritional health of Newark children. While there are pockets of programs in Newark working to promote this important issue, most are not city-wide or even school-wide.

The data did, however, reveal some concerning trends.

Key Findings

- Newark children are increasingly living in families earning at or below the federal poverty line, making it more likely that parents are forced to choose between paying the rent and feeding their children
- Newark preschoolers are more than twice as likely to be overweight or obese than their peers across the nation.
- Just 18 percent of Newark mothers are breast-feeding when they leave the hospital — nearly half the state rate of 34 percent.
- Despite rising poverty, participation rates in certain critical child nutrition programs is on the decline, including school breakfast, lunch and WIC. Food Stamps, now known as NJ SNAP, is an exception. This program has seen a 27 percent increase in recent years, likely due to more effective outreach.
- Certain meals programs reach just a fraction of children most likely to be hungry. Especially under-utilized are the after-school snacks and dinner programs and meals provided in child care settings.
- While more students are receiving fresh fruits and vegetables at school, thanks to a relatively new federal program, only a small percentage of Newark schools participate, again limiting the impact of an available and critical nutritional support.



Photo courtesy of Philips Academy Charter School, Newark, NJ

healthy food, which is believed by many to be more expensive than unhealthy food.

It is clear that much work is being done in Newark to give children the nutrition they need to grow, learn and become productive members of their communities. It is equally clear, however, that a sustained, collective effort to coordinate, streamline and expand these efforts could result in more Newark children growing into healthy, successful adults.



The Nutritional Needs of Newark Children

Growing child poverty means that many Newark families struggle to make ends meet and often have to choose between paying the rent and feeding their children. In 2012, an alarming 71 percent of Newark children were growing up in low-income families — a family of four earning below \$46,100 per year — compared to 32 percent statewide.

Even more sobering, a growing number of these children were living in families earning far less. Twenty-three percent of Newark children lived in extreme poverty (\$11,525 for a family of four), a 35 percent increase since 2008. At the same time, 44 percent lived at or below poverty (\$23,050 for a family of four), also a substantial increase since 2008.

Newark families struggle economically in other ways, as well. Median income for the city’s families has declined in recent years and remains much lower than the state average. More than half of Newark renters and nearly three-quarters of homeowners spend more than the federally-recommended 30 percent of income on housing, according to U.S. Census data.

In addition, nearly all children who attend Newark public schools, both charter and traditional schools,

qualify for free- or reduced-price school meals. In the 2012-13 school year, 88 percent of students lived in families with income low enough to make them eligible for subsidized meals, up from 81 percent in 2008-09. The number of eligible children rose 13 percent during this time to nearly 41,000 students in 2013.

As economic conditions worsen for Newark children, there is a growing need to ensure these children have adequate and nutritious food.

Unfortunately, the true nutritional needs of Newark children are unknown. While many families struggle financially, food insecurity and the quality and nutritious value of the food that the city’s children consume is difficult to measure.

Few data exist that comprehensively examine the food situation for the city’s 73,000 children. However, according to Feeding America, Essex County had the highest incidence of food insecurity in the state, with 19.2 percent in 2012, compared to 13 percent statewide. Food insecurity means people in a household are hungry or at risk of being hungry. More than 150,000 Essex County residents were food insecure. It is likely that many of them were Newark children.

Percentage of Newark Children in Poverty, Under 18

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	% Change 08-12
Extreme Poverty (Below 50% of FPL)	17	17	21	19	23	35
Poverty (Below 100% of FPL)	35	33	44	44	44	26
Low-Income (Below 200% of FPL)	65	65	70	70	71	9

Total Students Eligible for Free- or Reduced-Price School Meals

	2008-09	2009-10*	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	% Change 09-13
Newark	36,269	36,240	34,238	36,989	40,843	13
Essex	62,132	59,062	59,483	63,163	69,914	13
New Jersey	416,612	445,064	447,292	477,104	506,474	22

Percentage of Students Eligible for Free- or Reduced-Price School Meals

	2008-09	2009-10*	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	% Change 9-13
Newark Total	81	81	86	85	88	9

* For the 2009-10 school year, the number of students eligible for free- or reduced-price school lunch for Gray Charter School, Discovery Charter School and Newark Educators Charter school were left blank in the Department of Education enrollment data.

Nutritional Health of Newark Children

Despite the severity and importance of child nutrition, little is known about the nutritional health of Newark's children. One of the few studies that looked at this issue was a 2010 study by the Center for State Health Policy at Rutgers, which found that 45 percent of Newark children between the ages of 3 and 5 were overweight or obese. Children 6 to 11 fared even worse, at 47 percent overweight or obese, while 42 percent of children ages 12 to 18 were overweight or obese. These were much higher than national averages, with preschoolers having the greatest gap (see chart below and sidebar, p. 11)

Breastfeeding is one of the most effective preventative health measures for both infants and mothers, and helps to ensure that babies get the nutrients necessary for their growth and development. In 2010, the most recent year that data are available, just 18 percent of Newark mothers were breastfeeding their babies when they were discharged from the hospital after giving birth. While this is a positive increase from 9 percent in 2006, this is still much lower than the statewide average of 34 percent.

Newark Childhood Weight Status: Newark Public Schools, 2010

	Ages 3 - 5	Ages 6 - 11	Ages 12 - 18
Obese	27%	27%	24%
Overweight	18%	20%	18%
Not Overweight	55%	53%	58%

Newark Public Schools vs. U.S. Weight Status, 2010

	Ages 3 - 5	Ages 6 - 11	Ages 12 - 18
Newark Overweight or Obese	45%	47%	42%
U.S. Overweight or Obese	21%	35%	34%

Mothers Breastfeeding at Hospital Discharge

	2006		2007		2008		2009		2010		% Change 06 - 10	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Newark	424	9	399	8	627	13	694	15	759	18	79	109
Essex	2,246	19	2,241	19	2,509	21	2,530	22	2,593	25	15	31
New Jersey	38,782	34	38,325	33	37,012	33	36,395	33	36,204	34	-7	0
Newark's % of Essex	19		18		25		27		29			
Newark's % of NJ	1		1		2		2		2			

Note: Percent is of all mothers discharged from the hospital in each year.

Nutritional Supports for Newark Children

Without a firm understanding of the nutritional needs of the city's children, it is impossible to know the level of supports that might be required. Despite this, many supports and programs exist throughout Newark to aid and enhance the nutritional health for children. However, few of the programs are comprehensive or city-wide. While there are pockets of work being done to enrich children's health and well-being in regards to food, physical activity and nutritional education, many programs are only available to small subsets of the child population.

One available program is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). WIC is available to eligible pregnant, breastfeeding and postpartum women, infants and children up to the age of five. Those enrolled in WIC may receive healthcare referrals, immunization screenings, nutrition counseling and a monthly food stipend to purchase specific nutrient-rich food at authorized WIC vendors and stores. To be eligible, families must meet certain parameters and annual income cannot exceed \$28,694 for a family of two and \$43,568 for a family of four.



Photo courtesy of Philips Academy Charter School, Newark, NJ

Despite growing poverty, WIC enrollment actually declined 1 percent from 2009 to 2013. In 2013, approximately 13,500 women, infants and children were receiving benefits from the program in Newark.

While WIC enrollment has dropped slightly, the number of children receiving assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — NJ SNAP (formerly Food Stamps) has risen 27 percent from 2009 to 2013. More than 34,000 children were receiving this benefit in 2013, up from roughly 27,000.

Women, Infants and Children Receiving Nutritional Benefits

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	% Change 09-13
Newark	13,732	13,614	13,379	13,857	13,552	-1
Essex	24,797	24,543	23,802	24,324	23,849	-4
New Jersey	187,865	189,116	186,247	189,399	185,097	-1
Newark's % of Essex	55	55	56	57	57	
Newark's % of NJ	7	7	7	7	7	

Children Receiving NJ SNAP (formerly Food Stamps)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	% Change 09-13
Newark	27,008	31,649	33,436	32,255	34,215	27
Essex	45,180	54,011	58,414	61,225	64,362	42
New Jersey	253,684	317,819	368,173	395,999	419,410	65
Newark's % of Essex	60	59	57	53	53	
Newark's % of NJ	11	10	9	8	8	

School Meals

Hunger is a major barrier to learning. The federal school meals program is designed to ensure that students have the nutrition they need to concentrate, learn and succeed in school. Newark's growing poverty is reflected in the increasing number of students eligible for free- or reduced-price school meals, which has risen 13 percent since 2008-09.

While Newark has long been a leader in providing breakfast to its students and has served as a model for other districts across the state, the district is now losing ground on this front. As the number of eligible children continues to climb, the percent of eligible students receiving breakfast declined from 68 percent in 2010-11 to 59 percent in 2012-13. Recent administrative changes within the Newark Public Schools have allowed principals to discontinue "breakfast after the bell" programs.

This is a serious concern, as Newark's past success in providing school breakfast lies in the fact that the district has, for years, served this morning meal to all students during the first few minutes of the school day, rather than before school when most students have not yet arrived.

Breakfast after the bell significantly boosts student participation in this critical child nutrition program, giving more



kids the healthy start to the school day that can help them concentrate and learn. Not only does this benefit students, but it brings federal dollars into the district to feed hungry children, thus leveraging the significant investment the state makes in the education of Newark students. Newark should reclaim its position as a state leader on this front by reinstating its previous practice of uniformly serving breakfast after the bell to all students.

Newark has also seen a drop in the percent of eligible students eating a subsidized lunch at school. While the actual number served has climbed, the average monthly participation has dropped from 86 percent in 2010-11 to 73 percent in 2012-13.

Number of Students Receiving Free- or Reduced-Price School Breakfast

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	% Change 09 - 13
Newark	21,764	21,547	23,292	23,205	24,278	12
Essex	29,039	31,836	33,347	33,185	35,193	21
New Jersey	119,030	127,939	135,813	147,846	171,555	44

Percentage of Eligible Students Receiving Free- or Reduced-Price School Breakfast

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	% Change 09 - 13
Newark	60	59	68	63	59	-1
Essex	47	54	56	53	50	8
New Jersey	29	29	30	31	34	19

Number of Students Receiving Free- or Reduced-Price School Lunch

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	% Change 09 - 13
Newark	25,882	24,773	29,441	29,294	29,856	15
Essex	45,659	45,635	51,210	51,550	53,888	18
New Jersey	324,699	346,762	363,262	380,488	396,286	22

Percentage of Eligible Students Receiving Free- or Reduced-Price School Lunch

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	% Change 09 - 13
Newark	71	68	86	79	73	2
Essex	73	77	86	82	77	5
New Jersey	78	78	81	80	78	0

After School and Summer Meals

Many Newark families rely on the nutritional supports provided in school to give their children healthy diets. So it is critical to look at what is available for these children after school and during the summer. Afterschool and summer meal programs provide children with the nutrition they need to enhance their academic, social and emotional learning during a typical school day and year.

The federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act provides funding for the At-Risk Afterschool Meal Program, which offers healthy food to children in afterschool programs in communities of need. In 2010, New Jersey's afterschool programs became authorized to participate in this

program, which is part of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) operated by the United States Department of Agriculture and administered at the state level by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture.

A program is eligible to participate in this program if it is located in an "at-risk" community, defined as within the attendance boundary of a school where 50 percent or more of its students are eligible for free- or reduced-price school meals. Once a program is eligible and participating, it can serve an after-school snack or dinner to all children and receive the highest rate of reimbursement for all meals served, regardless of a student's individual eligibility for school meals.

All Newark schools qualify for this program, so all 43,000 charter and traditional school students are eligible for this critical nutritional support. Yet, just a fraction of students are actually being fed through the program. In fact, just 21,000 snacks and dinners were served in all of 2013. Potentially, this program could serve tens of thousands more meals to hungry students. This is not a funding issue since the program is supported through federal dollars. The problem is that many schools and community agencies simply do not offer the meals.

Also of concern is the fact that Newark experienced a one-year decline in the number of snacks and dinners served from 2012 to 2013. Newark, however, is doing better than the county and state as a whole in this area. In 2013, Newark accounted for the majority of subsidized dinners served in both Essex County and the state.

Without access to school meals, summer can be a particularly difficult time for families to meet their children's nutritional needs. The Summer Meal Program, operated by the Newark Public Schools, is aimed at addressing that need. Participating sites or schools can serve both breakfast and lunch to students. Most of the students who receive the meals are also enrolled in a summer enrichment program operated by the district. However, each site has the option of allowing other children in the community to join in and receive

breakfast, lunch or both. Whether meals are available to students not enrolled in a particular summer program is up to school administrators.

In the summer of 2013, this program served roughly 72,000 breakfasts and 92,000 lunches during the months of July and August, for a total of 164,000 meals. However, this total is a 10 percent drop from the number of meals served through this program during the summer of 2009.

Another program that reaches children during the summer is the SuNup Food Program, run by the City of Newark and funded by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture. This program provides breakfast and lunch to children throughout the city and consists of two feeding programs. The first program provides meals during the summer months to Newark children from birth to age 18. The second provides funding to non-profit organizations that offer after-school activities and child care to help feed the children in their programs.

In 2013, the summer SuNup Food Program had 137 different sites serving breakfast and lunch to children across the city. According to the Newark Department of Child & Family Well-Being, a total of 386,087 breakfasts and lunches were served during the summer of that year.

At-Risk After-School Meal Program

	2010		2011		2012		2013		% Change 10 - 13	
	# Dinners Served	# Snacks Served								
Newark	0	0	0	296	22,224	22,520	20,774	21,070	N/A	N/A
Essex County	0	0	0	296	23,212	22,902	22,703	21,666	N/A	N/A
NJ	0	2,413	721	3,537	26,400	29,613	32,762	27,649	N/A	1,046
Newark's % of Essex	N/A	0	0	100	96	98	92	97		
Newark's % of NJ	N/A	0	0	8	84	76	63	76		

Meals Served Through the Newark Public Schools Summer Meals Program

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	% Change 10 - 13
Breakfast	75,217	70,060	85,761	51,728	72,121	-4
Lunch	108,068	84,376	116,401	140,319	91,930	-15
Total Meals	183,285	154,436	202,162	192,047	164,051	-10

SuNup Summer Meal Program 2013

Number of Sites Serving Meals	137
Breakfasts Served	124,518
Lunches Served	261,569
Total Meals Served	386,087

Child Care Meals

Nutrition is especially critical to young children, as the brain grows most during a child's first years. Many of young Newark children attend child care during their earliest years in various settings. In 2013, there were 183 licensed center-based child care centers in the city, with a capacity to serve nearly 16,000 children. In addition, 159 Newark providers were registered with the state to provide child care in their homes in 2014. Unfortunately, little is known about the nutrition these children receive while in these different child care settings.

While state officials were able to provide statistics on the number of meals served in licensed child care centers statewide, they were unable to break these data down specific to Newark due to an inability of their current data system to sort data by city.

However, information is available on the meals served to children in family child care homes. The federally-funded family child care food program is also administered through the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, but is housed in a different office than the one that administers the school meals programs.

Under this program, family child care providers are reimbursed for meals served to children in their care. In order to participate, homes must be registered with the state to provide child care. The home is evaluated to ensure that it meets basic standards for safe meal

preparation. Child care providers are also invited to a training that introduces them to the program requirements. Meals must meet basic USDA guidelines for reimbursement.

Unfortunately, this program, too, suffers from low participation. Of Newark's 159 family home providers, just 43 participated in the child care meals program, with 231 children enrolled in the program in those homes. The number of family child care homes participating in the program has decreased 16 percent since 2010, when 51 homes participated. As a result, the number of children enrolled in the program also dropped 18 percent during that time.



Family Child Care Meals

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	% Change 10 - 14
Number of Family Child Care Homes in Newark	226	204	160	160	159	-30
Number of Family Child Care Homes in Newark Participating in the CACFP (Child and Adult Care Food Program)	51	48	48	43	43	-16
Number of Children in Family Child Care Homes in Newark Enrolled in the CACFP	283	253	254	238	231	-18

Programs that Support Nutritional Health

Numerous programs throughout the city aim to support the nutritional health of Newark children. These programs may be operated in Newark schools, community programs and hospitals.

The Newark school district operates the Federal Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP), which provides a fresh fruit or vegetable snack to all students in participating schools. The goal is to increase the variety of fruits and vegetables children consume, create healthier school food environments and positively impact the nutrition of not only the students, but their families.

Elementary schools with at least 50 percent of students eligible for free- and reduced-price meals can apply to participate in this program. Top priority is given to the schools with the highest proportion of low-income students. Once a school is chosen, the entire student

population must have the opportunity to participate at no cost.

The USDA also recommends that schools provide accompanying nutrition education, but funds provided for the program do not cover these costs. Schools must use volunteer or other resources for this part of the program, if they are able to provide it.

Since 2011-12, the number of Newark schools participating in this program has increased from just four to 18 schools in the 2013-14 school year. During that year, more than 8,500 Newark students received fresh fruits and vegetables. While this increase is positive, just 25 percent of all Newark District schools and students currently participate in the program, so there is significant room for growth.

Schools Participating in the Federal Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	% Change 12 - 14
Number of Newark District Schools Participating	4	4	18	350
% of Newark District Schools Participating	5	6	25	363
Number of Students Participating	1,514	2,122	8,579	467
% of all Newark District School Students Participating	4	6	25	476

Other programs exist throughout Newark to enhance child nutrition and well-being. Many of these programs, such as those through the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, Greater Newark Conservancy and Activity Works, just to name a few, are operated in some Newark schools. Kids Fit is a pediatric wellness and weight management program that is run by Newark Beth Israel Medical Center and began in the hospital's pediatric health center to address pediatric obesity. It is now also part of the curriculum at two Newark schools.

There are also community programs throughout the city that aim to educate children and parents on nutrition, physical activity and healthy eating habits. For example, The Healthy U/CATCH (Coordinated Approach to Child Health) program, run through the Newark

YMCA, brings schools, families and communities together to teach children how to be healthy.

The Healthy U program is New Jersey's largest and most comprehensive, statewide initiative to address childhood obesity in after-school settings. It uses the CATCH program curricula to enforce healthy behaviors in the classroom, cafeteria, through physical education, after school and in the home. Again, though, the program is only currently operating in one Newark school, limiting the number of children currently benefitting from it.

A more comprehensive, coordinated approach to providing these programs and services could go a long way toward meeting the health and nutritional needs of Newark children.

The Food and Physical Activity Environment in Newark

Families can buy food at many stores throughout Newark. It is impossible, however, to get a comprehensive picture of all stores, as no data are collected specifically for grocery stores, supermarkets, corner stores and bodegas. Newark is also home to farmers markets and community gardens. While Newark residents appear to have a fairly broad array of food shopping options, the quality and availability of fresh and healthy food needs to be further examined.

For the more than 34,000 Newark children receiving NJ SNAP benefits in 2013, their families had 359 different stores throughout the city at which to shop. Half of all stores that accept SNAP benefits in Essex County are located in Newark.

However, the 13,500 women, infants and children receiving WIC benefits do not have as many options to purchase nutritious food. Just 52 stores in the city accepted WIC benefits. Federal regulations establish that an urban area, such as Newark, can have seven WIC authorized vendors per 1,000 participants in the program. Using these criteria, Newark can have up to 88 authorized stores that accept WIC benefits.

Statewide, there is a waiting list for stores that want to become WIC authorized. State health officials say they are working on processing applications to increase the number of vendors available to Newark residents.

Stores Accepting Benefits

	SNAP	WIC
Newark	359	52
Essex	712	98
New Jersey	6,253	910
Newark's % of Essex	50	53
Newark's % of NJ	6	6



Food Banks and Pantries

Newark children and families who may be hungry can also visit various food banks and pantries throughout the city. This is another area, however, where it is impossible to get an accurate picture of the reach of these programs and whether they are able to meet the needs of Newark families.

These pantries operate in many different ways. Some are more formal, such as those sponsored by the Community Food Bank of New Jersey and M.E.N.D. (Meeting Emergency Needs with Dignity). However, many informal places serve as food pantries. Some collect no data on the number of meals served or the number of people who are fed. Those that do collect statistics do so in different ways, so there is no uniform reporting of these statistics.



Rutgers Study Examines Nutritional Health of Newark Children

Newark children are more likely to be overweight or obese, often consume fatty and sugary foods and frequently do not get enough exercise, according to a 2010 report by the Rutgers Center for State Health Policy.

The New Jersey Childhood Obesity Study, funded through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, was aimed at providing critical information for planning, implementing and evaluating ways to prevent childhood obesity in five New Jersey municipalities: Camden, Newark, New Brunswick, Trenton and Vineland. These five communities are being supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids program to plan and implement policy and environmental change strategies to prevent childhood obesity.

The following findings are based on a household survey of 400 Newark families with children 3- to 18-years old, data on heights and weights measured at Newark public schools and assessment of the food and physical activity environments using objective data.

Key findings include:

- **Weight:** Newark children are more likely to be overweight or obese compared to their national counterparts. Children ages 6 to 11 had the highest obesity/overweight rate in the city at 47 percent, compared to 35 percent nationally. But young children, ages 3 to 5, saw the largest difference between Newark and the national rate, with 45 percent of Newark's preschoolers overweight or obese, compared to 21 percent nationally.
- **Veggies:** The majority of survey respondents said their children — 81 percent — do not eat the recommended amount of vegetables. Many also

frequently consume unhealthy foods, such as fast food, sugar-sweetened beverages and sweet and salty snacks. Non-Hispanic black children tend to consume these types of foods most often.

- **Food Shopping:** Although most Newark parents surveyed said they shop at supermarkets and superstores and report having no difficulty getting to these stores, less than half reported limited availability of fresh produce and low-fat items at these stores. In addition, half of non-Hispanic black families said they did not shop in their neighborhood. Cost and quality were reported as major barriers to buying healthy foods.
- **Exercise:** About 70 percent of Newark children did not engage in the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical exercise, the survey found. In addition, 61 percent said they spent more than two hours a day watching television, using the computer and playing video games.
- **Parks, Playgrounds:** Although most Newark neighborhoods have sidewalks and parks, nearly one-third of Newark respondents said their children do not use these facilities to walk, run, bike or play. Roughly half of parents surveyed cited traffic and criminal activities as barriers to kids playing outside.

The report found that addressing these issues will require changes in the neighborhood environment by creating new opportunities, improving existing features and addressing barriers associated with practicing healthy behaviors. Efforts are also needed to raise awareness about the issue of childhood obesity and associated behaviors among parents and caregivers. A new study is underway to provide updated and expanded information.

Issues and Recommendations

Children need good nutrition, healthy food and physical activity as they grow and develop into adults. Newark children are especially at risk for failing to receive this nutrition, as a growing number are living in families earning too little to meet their needs and participation in key programs is on the decline.

The following actions would both inform efforts to craft responses to this issue and drive efforts to expand access to critical child nutrition supports.

■ **Increase gathering and availability of information and data.**

The lack of comprehensive information and data around food and nutrition for Newark children makes it difficult to formulate effective solutions. City leaders and stakeholders need more information and data on a variety of topics, such as access to food, the quality of food, the extent of hunger and overall child health related to nutrition, including child obesity and physical activity. Data need to be collected consistently on a city level to understand the current need and track any future progress.

Along with data collection, Newark would also benefit from the creation of a city-wide guide on all programs related to child health and nutrition. This would help to avoid duplication and to educate parents, schools, stakeholders and the community on what is available for their children.

Mapping would also be advantageous to city families. Maps that include all supermarkets, corner stores/bodegas, fresh produce, food banks, pantries, community gardens and other places where residents can purchase food would help both city leaders and residents to better understand what is available and what is needed.

■ **Establish city-wide coordination of child nutrition.**

City-wide coordination and commitment around the issue of child nutrition is necessary to understand and address this very complex issue. The City of Newark should create a formal council or taskforce on child health and nutrition. This council should include representation from the city, Newark Public Schools, charter schools, food pantries and soup kitchens, health care professionals and the various community agencies and programs that already work on this issue, among others.

A city-wide commitment to enhancing nutrition for children can help to bring stakeholders together to better understand the issues, identify ways to collect data, look at the totality of the situation and understand where limited resources can be used most effectively.

■ **Streamline data systems and food programs.**

Currently, different food programs, such as the At-Risk After School Meal Program, child care meals and school meals, are operated out of different parts of state government that have different data systems. While the school meals program is administered through the School Nutrition Program in the Department of Agriculture, after school and child care meals are administered through the Child and Adult Care Food Program, also within the Department of Agriculture. Although located in the same department, the two agencies do not uniformly share information and maintain different data systems to track meals and receive reimbursement.

While the school breakfast and lunch program has an online data tracking system, no such data system exists for the school dinner, snack and child care programs. For these programs, schools and sites often have to fill out paperwork that needs to be handwritten. Not only does this make data collection and information hard to track, it is also burdensome for schools administrators and program leaders who may lack the staffing resources to take on this task. Some programs have reported their hesitation to participate in the program due to this issue.

It would be more efficient if all meals could be tracked in compatible data systems within the same agency.

■ **Increase participation in the At-Risk After School Meal program.**

Every Newark student is eligible for a free dinner and/or snack through the At-Risk After School Meal program. Despite federal funding for these meals, only about 21,000 dinners were served to Newark students in 2013 – when thousands more children could have benefitted from this nutritional support. Outreach to Newark parents should be conducted to raise awareness of this program and assistance should be provided to schools and programs to launch programs and increase participation.

■ **Increase participation in the child care food program.**

Like the after school and dinner programs, the child care feeding program for family child care homes is underutilized. Child care providers again report bureaucratic difficulties in accessing the program. As for licensed centers, the state is currently unable to provide information on participation. City and state officials should work together to address both the data and participation issues in the child care meal program.

■ **Issue specific guidance on food and nutrition for Newark schools.**

In keeping with state rules, the Newark Public Schools has a nutrition policy that includes some general guidance on what types of food can be served in schools across the district and each school has a wellness council. However, schools within the district may choose to opt in or out of many of critical child nutrition programs. In fact, most schools do not participate in the Federal Fresh Food and Vegetable Program and other school-based nutrition and exercise programs that are available.

More specific guidance and direction should be provided on the district level to principals and other administrators. While there are certainly benefits to allowing schools to tailor programs based upon their specific student populations, there should be requirements for schools to choose certain programs that fit their students needs.

In particular, Newark schools should be required to serve “breakfast after the bell,” which had been the district’s practice for many years but has recently been eroded, resulting in a decline in the percent of low-income children receiving this all-important morning meal. The district should mandate that all schools serve breakfast during the first few minutes of the school day, typically in the classroom. This approach significantly boosts student participation.

In addition, the district’s wellness policy should be strengthened to further promote child health and nutrition across all of the schools in the district and support should be given to encourage and increase participation in effective programs.

Last, Newark is home to more charter schools than nearly any other area of the state. Despite this, little is known about the wellness and nutrition in many of the charters. While there are shining examples of child nutrition, such as Philips Academy Charter School, there has been no comprehensive assessment of what occurs in most of the charter schools. Such an assessment should be completed to better understand the landscape, need and whether additional state guidance is required.

■ **Increase stores that are able to accept WIC benefits in Newark.**

Based upon enrollment and federal regulations, Newark can have up to 88 stores that accept WIC benefits. Currently, the city has just 52, and there is a waiting list of stores in Newark and statewide that want to become authorized. Families need access to more stores where can they use their WIC benefits. While the New Jersey Department of Health is taking steps to address this issue, the goal should be to eliminate any waiting lists and ensure prompt certification of qualified stores. In addition, the decline in WIC enrollment is concerning. Additional outreach strategies should be developed and implemented at the city level.

■ **Promote breastfeeding among new mothers.**

In 2010, just 759 mothers were breastfeeding their babies at time of discharge from the hospital. Breastfeeding has proven health and nutritional benefits to both the mother and baby. While some improvement has occurred, and efforts continue to expand this healthy practice, more work needs to be done to promote breastfeeding through proven policies and practices.

Data Sources and Technical Notes

Nutritional Needs of Newark Children

Percentage of Newark Children in Poverty, Under 18, 2008-2012. As reported by the US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, chart b17024.

Total Eligible for Free- or Reduced-Price School Meals, 2008-09 – 2012-13. As reported by the NJ Department of Education, Enrollment Data. Data include traditional public schools and charter schools. Data are as of October for each year.

Percentage of Children Eligible for Free- or Reduced-Price School Meals, 2008-09 to 2012-13. As reported by the NJ Department of Education, Enrollment Data. Data include traditional public schools and charter schools. Data are as of October for each year.

Nutritional Health of Newark Children

Newark Childhood Weight Status. As reported by Rutgers Center for State Health Policy, *New Jersey Childhood Obesity Survey, Chartbook, Newark, Summer 2010*. Susan Brownlee, Punam Ohri-Vachaspati, Kristen Lloyd, Michael Yedidia, Dorothy Gaboda and Jolene Chou.

Mothers Breastfeeding at Hospital Discharge, 2006-2010. Mothers who are only breastfeeding their babies at time of hospital discharge after giving birth, as reported by the NJ Department of Health and Senior Services, Center for Health Statistics, New Jersey State Health Assessment Data.

Nutritional Supports for Newark Children

Women, Infants and Children Receiving Nutritional Benefits, 2009-2013. Number of women, infants and children receiving WIC benefits, which include health care referrals, immunizations, screenings, nutritional counseling and a monthly food stipend. Reported by the NJ Department of Health and Senior Services, Division of Family Health Services Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Data are as of June 30 each year.

Children Receiving NJ SNAP (formerly Food Stamps), 2009-2013. As reported by the NJ Department of Human Services, Division of Family Development. Data are from June of each year.

Children Receiving Free- or Reduced-Price School Breakfast, 2008-09 – 2012-13. As reported by the NJ Department of Agriculture. Includes children in traditional public schools and charter schools. Data are average daily participation for October for each school year.

Percentage of Eligible Children Receiving Free- or Reduced-Price School Breakfast, 2008-09 – 2012-13. Rates calculated using eligibility data from the NJ Department of Education, Enrollment Data, and participation data from the NJ Department of Agriculture. Includes children attending traditional public schools and charter schools. Data are average daily participation for October for each school year.

Children Receiving Free- or Reduced-Price School Lunch, 2008-09 – 2012-13. As reported by the NJ Department of Agriculture. Includes children in traditional public schools and charter schools. Data are average daily participation for October for each school year.

Percentage of Eligible Children Receiving Free- or Reduced-Price School Lunch, 2008-09 – 2012-13. Rates calculated using eligibility data from the NJ Department of Education, Enrollment Data, and participation data from the NJ Department of Agriculture. Includes children attending traditional public schools and charter schools. Data are average daily participation for October for each school year.

At-Risk After School Meal Program, 2010 – 2013. As reported by the NJ Department of Agriculture, Division of Food and Nutrition, Child and Adult Nutrition Program. Includes dinners and snacks served through the program.

Meals Served Through the Newark Public Schools Summer Meals Program, 2009-10 – 2013-14. As reported by the Newark Public Schools, Office of Food & Nutrition Services. Includes breakfasts and lunches served in both July and August through the NPS summer meals program.

SuNup Summer Meal Program, 2013. As reported by the City of Newark, Department of Child & Family Well-Being.

Family Child Care Meals, 2010 – 2014. As reported by Program for Parents, which is designated as the Child Care Resource and Referral Agency for Essex County by the NJ Department of Human Services.

Programs that Support Nutritional Health

Schools Participating in the Federal Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, 2011-12 – 2013-14. As reported by the Newark Public Schools, Office of Food & Nutrition Services. Rates of Newark District Schools participating and Newark District students participating are calculated using enrollment and school data from the NJ Department of Education.

The Food and Physical Activity Environment in Newark

Stores Accepting SNAP Benefits, 2014. As reported by the NJ Department of Health, Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children. Data are as of May 2, 2014.

Stores Accepting WIC Benefits, 2014. As reported by the US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, SNAP Retailer Locator. Data are as of April 30, 2014.



Giving Every Child A Chance

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