

Child nutrition problem hungry for solutions

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The list of reasons for New Yorkers to worry about is long and getting longer: The economy is in shambles, the cost of living is sky high and now even the subway fare is rising.

In case that's not enough, research released Thursday by Feeding America, the nation's main hunger relief charity, reveals that more people are in need of food assistance than ever before in [New York State](#). Worse, many of them are children.

The report shows that New York State has the country's third highest number of food-insecure children - kids who don't consistently get adequate amounts of nutritious food. The numbers are alarming: 668,000 children between newborn and 17 years old are either hungry or at risk of being hungry.

Hunger is not a new problem in the city. Lines outside soup kitchens and food pantries have been around for so long that they are practically part of the city's landscape. But it becomes more worrisome when it increasingly affects children.

"Hunger in the city has extended into many more people's lives than ever before," said [Lucy Cabrera](#), president and CEO of the Food Bank for New York, the city's largest hunger-relief group.

Research conducted by Cabrera's group found that as of 2007, 397,000 children, or more than one out of every five, depend on soup kitchens and food pantries - a whopping 48% increase since 2004.

If there is any good news here, it is that this is a problem that can be solved - if there is the will to do it.

"It will take a strong commitment from the public and private sectors working together," Cabrera said.

According to the Food Bank report, food insecurity in children have long-term consequences. Since the first three years of life are the most critical for brain growth and development, a child who does not get the proper nutrients will never reach full potential.

Lack of food negatively affects both mental and physical health as well as developmental and academic achievement. Hunger also weakens children's immune systems and makes them vulnerable to illness. Children living in food-insecure households have a hard time concentrating in school.

Child food insecurity is not, of course, an exclusive New York problem, as the Feeding America findings make clear. Nationally, the report said, it affects 3.5 million children ages 5 and under, and more than 12 million children in total.

It is a critical situation that demands immediate solutions.

"We urge Congress to make adequate investments of at least \$20 billion over five years and support policy improvements in the Child Nutrition Reauthorization bill this year," Cabrera said.

The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act must be reapproved by Congress every five years. It includes federal child nutrition programs such as the national school lunch and breakfast programs, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and many others. The current act was approved in 2004 and will expire Sept. 30, which makes Cabrera's appeal to Congress all the more urgent.

With the country in deep recession and involved in two seemingly never-ending wars, it may be hard for Congress to approve the necessary funds. But ending hunger - particularly in children - is a long-term investment.

"It's hard to imagine a higher budget priority than ensuring that all families have enough to eat," said [Joel Berg](#), the executive director of the New York Coalition Against Hunger.

aruiz@nydailynews.com.