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Massachusetts health-related costs of hunger total \$2.4 billion annually

Q+A

What does the study, "[An Avoidable \\$2.4 Billion Cost](#)" report?

- The [Children's HealthWatch](#) study, sponsored by [The Greater Boston Food Bank](#), reports for the first time how much the health-related costs of hunger and food insecurity are costing Massachusetts.

What is that total figure?

- The study estimates the total costs at \$2.4 billion annually.

How many people are food-insecure in Massachusetts?

- 1 out of 10 MA residents can't afford enough food to lead active, healthy lives or about 700,000 people. For children it's 1 in 7. Our state's food insecurity rate has yet to return to pre-Great Recession levels and remains a critical and costly problem.

How does hunger and food insecurity harm health?

- Not getting enough to eat in children leads to impaired brain development, asthma, iron-deficiency anemia, malnutrition, increased hospitalizations, among other conditions.
- For adults, not getting enough to eat can cause or exacerbate diabetes, heart problems, mental health issues, obesity in women, among other conditions.

How do the \$2.4 billion in avoidable costs breakdown?

The health-related costs of hunger and food insecurity can be broken down into seven main areas:

- Poor General Health \$635.4 million
- Pulmonary Diseases \$572.6 million
- Special Education \$520.3 million
- Type 2 Diabetes \$251.1 million
- Mental Health Conditions \$223.3 million
- Obesity \$132.7 million
- Rheumatology Diseases \$76.9 million

What methodology was used for the study?

The researchers conducted in-depth analysis of peer-reviewed journals on the association of food insecurity and adverse health conditions and then simulated the healthcare and educational costs and lost work time attributable to them, as well as the financial burden these costs place on individuals, families, and healthcare payers.

Have there been any other studies like this for other states or the US?

- The Massachusetts study mirrors a Children’s HealthWatch [2016 report](#) that estimated the U.S. health costs food insecurity and hunger at \$160 billion. This is the first time the authors applied this methodology to a state.

What can we do to address these increased costs for our state?

- Critical steps need to be taken to reduce food insecurity, improve the health of food-insecure Massachusetts residents, and reduce health-related costs for individuals, families and the state. The study makes the following recommendations:
 - **Healthcare providers should screen for food insecurity routinely** using the simple, two-question screening tool, The Hunger Vital Sign™.
 - **Health insurers should reimburse healthcare providers for screening** and reimburse programs providing food resources, such as food pantries, mobile markets.
 - **Maintain current funding and structure of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps)**, the nation’s largest and most critical hunger-relief program.

- **Increase funding of the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP) to \$20 million in FY19** from \$17.4 in FY18. MEFAP enables MA food banks to purchase a consistent supply of healthy food.
- **Create a common application for MassHealth and SNAP.**
- **Mandate high-poverty schools institute breakfast after the bell** to increase participation in the federal School Breakfast Program.
- **Improve access to federal child nutrition assistance programs** administered by the state and increase funding for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).
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- **Conduct further health-related food-insecurity research**, e.g., impact of food insecurity on high-risk populations, intervention studies on impact of food resource referrals after food-insecurity screening, and the association of food insecurity on depression and obesity in children.

[“An Avoidable \\$2.4 Billion Cost: The Estimated Health-Related Costs of Food Insecurity and Hunger in Massachusetts,”](#) a report prepared by John T. Cook, PhD, MAEd, and Ana Poblacion, PhD, MSc, Children’s HealthWatch. Sponsored by The Greater Boston Food Bank.

[Children’s HealthWatch](#), headquartered at Boston Medical Center, is a nonpartisan network of pediatricians and public health researchers with the mission to improve the health and development of young children by informing policies that address and alleviate economic hardships.
www.childrenshealthwatch.org

[The Greater Boston Food Bank](#), the largest hunger-relief organization in New England, distributes the equivalent of more than 50 million healthy meals a year in its mission to end hunger here, feeding more than 140,000 people a month through its network of 525 member agencies—food pantries, meal programs and shelters—across Eastern Massachusetts. www.gbfb.org