

FOOD INSECURITY

Hunger should never haunt a child's life

David M. Krol *Guest Columnist*

As my children debated what Halloween costumes to wear and wondered what their candy haul will be, a recent report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture reminded me how lucky we are. Many children this Halloween, and many other days throughout the year, didn't get enough food for an active, healthy life.

They suffer from what the Agriculture Department calls a "lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life."

The report found that, last year, over 11 million children — more than one of seven — were in this situation. It's a problem that children in the United States are more likely to face than any other group. And, among U.S. children, those from families that struggle to make ends meet, are African American or Hispanic, or have a single parent are most likely to have difficulty getting enough food. Key factors include inadequate income, parents' poor health and lack of stable housing.

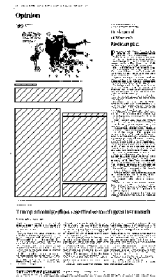
As a pediatrician, much of my job is making sure children grow and develop as expected. It's much harder for that to happen when kids don't get enough to eat — and it goes well beyond feeling hungry. Being unable to get enough food, or healthy food, can lead to malnutrition in the first years of life, which harms physical growth, brain development, and intellectual capacity.

It's no surprise that children who are "food insecure" are less well-prepared for and perform worse in school. This problem also is associated with poor health conditions, and when it leads to severe hunger it can predict chronic illness, depression, and anxiety in preschool and school-aged children.

There is, however, some good news: a six-year trend of declining food insecurity in the U.S. In New Jersey, that still means 1 in 8 children is affected, but we are moving in the right direction.

Even more people in the U.S. wouldn't get enough to eat if not for an array of federal programs.

The Supplemental Assistance Nutrition Program, formerly called food stamps, helps families buy more food and is associated with higher high school graduation rates and better health in adulthood. A program geared toward women, infants, and children — WIC — bolsters children's diets to the point where their intellectual development improves. The National School Lunch Program helps chil-



dren least likely to get enough food, and in the summer is backed up by the Summer Food Service Program.

Unfortunately, about 44% of households that don't get enough food don't get assistance from one or more of the three largest federal food and nutrition assistance programs. So, clearly, there is more to be done.

First, physicians like me should follow the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics by screening all families in our practices to find out if they get enough to eat. Two simple questions are very accurate in determining which families are food insecure: "Within the past 12 months, we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more. (Yes or No)," and "Within the past 12 months, the food we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more. (Yes or No)."

Second, we can all support local food pantries that distribute food to families and food banks that collect, store, and distribute food to pantries. Find a local warehouse at Feeding America's website, which includes a directory of food bank networks, and volunteer or donate. Volunteer or support your local food pantry by going to FoodPantries.org to find one near you.

Third, we should support national and local policies that make enough healthy food available to all children and their families. Some of the most beneficial food security programs, like SNAP and the National School Lunch Program, face significant cuts and restructuring in the president's latest budget. Such changes will harm children.

Not knowing where your next meal is coming from can be scarier than any Halloween costume. It's in our power to make hunger a ghost that never haunts any child's life.

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