Poverty clearly remains the leading cause of food insecurity. Yet, even food stamps — which supplement low-income families’ earnings and boost food purchasing power — are not enough by themselves to eliminate food insecurity. In many inner-city neighborhoods, food stamp recipients are still at risk for food insecurity because they have few or no places to spend their food stamps on nutritious and desired food.

The Consequences of Food Insecurity and Inadequate Food Access

Food insecurity commonly leads to a deficiency of nutrients and energy. This can result in serious problems that include extreme thinness, loss of muscle tissue, short stature, and increased risk of infection and disease. In particular, insufficient intake of fruits and vegetables has been linked to cardiovascular disease and some forms of cancer. Vitamins and minerals — including vitamins A, C, D and E, iron, zinc, selenium, copper, and magnesium — are essential for a healthy immune function. Insufficient intake of these nutrients also may lead to increased susceptibility to infection, a compromised immune system.

A lack of access to nutritious foods may also produce obesity. Studies are beginning to show that some segments of the population who may be food insecure — African-Americans, Latinos, and especially low-income minorities — have a high prevalence of obesity, which is increasingly associated with a poorly balanced diet. Obesity is now linked to several health risks and chronic diseases that include cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, some forms of cancer, gallbladder disease, respiratory problems, gout, and arthritis. While obesity is influenced by a variety of factors — such as heredity, eating habits, and a sedentary lifestyle — nutrition experts believe part of the problem among the urban poor is their limited access to stores that sell healthy foods.

Within low-income populations, three groups — infants and children, pregnant women, and older adults — are at heightened vulnerability to the effects of food insecurity because of their increased nutritional needs for growth and healthy immune function. The consequences of undernutrition or malnutrition in children are especially serious. Numerous studies now show a close positive link between adequate nutrition and cognitive skills and academic performance.

Children who are undernourished may be unable to participate fully in learning experiences. They may have trouble with concentration, experience disruptive behavior, and face the risk of poor mental development, slow cognitive growth, and poor social-emotional growth. Children with insufficient nourishment may also have unexpected fatigue and be unable to sustain prolonged physical effort.

Women who are undernourished and underweight prior to pregnancy — or who gain inadequate weight during pregnancy — have a higher risk of delivering low birth weight babies. These babies have more complications, developmental delays, and illnesses than babies born at higher weights, and are at greater risk of stillbirth. Seniors who face food insecurity are at risk for more health complications and, often, serious health problems. Malnutrition can exacerbate disease, increase disability, lower resistance to infection, and extend hospital stays among the elderly. It also raises the cost to caregivers and inflates national health care costs; studies have shown that seniors who experience hunger have up to 100 percent longer hospital stays and compile hospital costs of up to $10,000 per stay.