



center for BEST PRACTICES



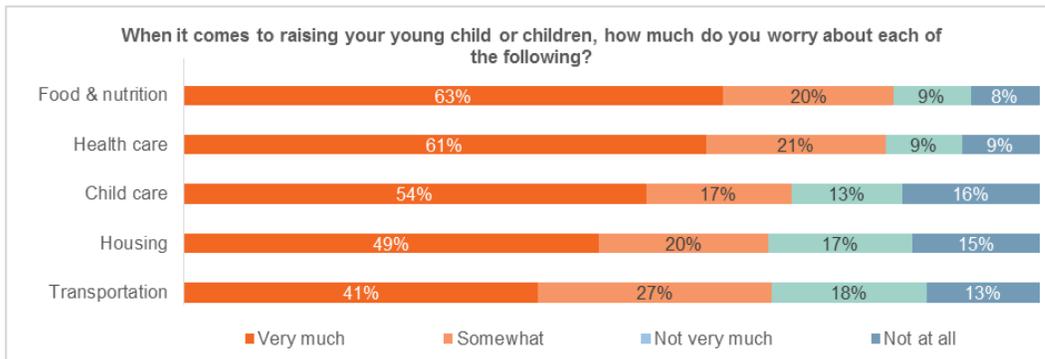
## PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN STRUGGLE TO PROVIDE ADEQUATE FOOD FOR THEIR FAMILIES

### BACKGROUND

Early childhood is a critical period of growth and development. Access to adequate food and nutrition in early childhood is essential and can have long-lasting implications on health and well-being. Share Our Strength partnered with APCO Insight to conduct a national survey among low-income families (less than 185% of the poverty income ratio) who have children five years old and younger (pre-K). Between December 2016 and January 2017, a total of 1,000 parents and caregivers participated in the survey.<sup>1</sup> The survey asked parents and caregivers about their experiences caring for and feeding their young children, as well as sources of support. This brief focuses on challenges parents experience in feeding their families.

### FOOD CONCERNS AND VULNERABILITY

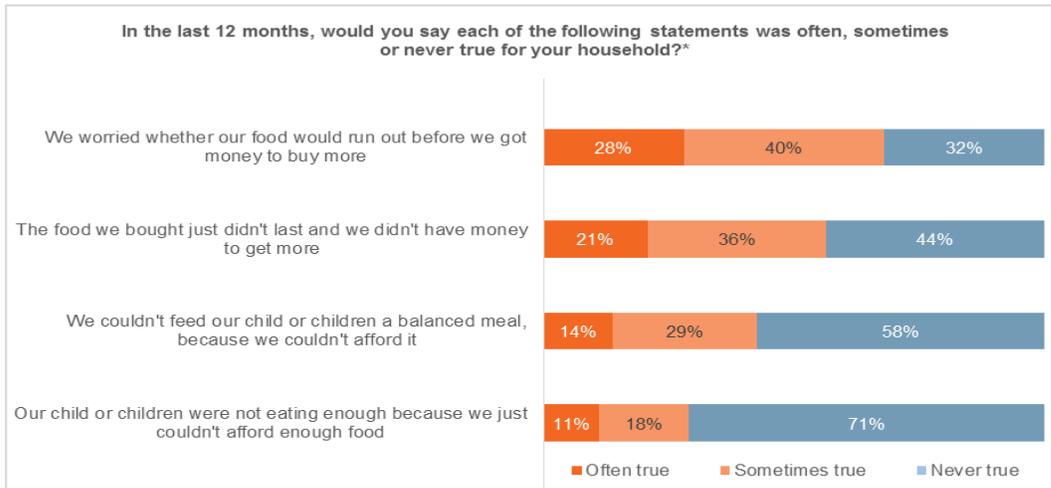
For low-income families with children five years old and younger, concerns about basic needs are central to everyday life. A large majority report worrying about food and nutrition, health care, child care, housing and transportation, in that order. Food and nutrition is a top concern for more than eight in ten low-income families.



When asked about specific incidents in the past twelve months, low-income parents with young children acknowledged experiencing serious food challenges.

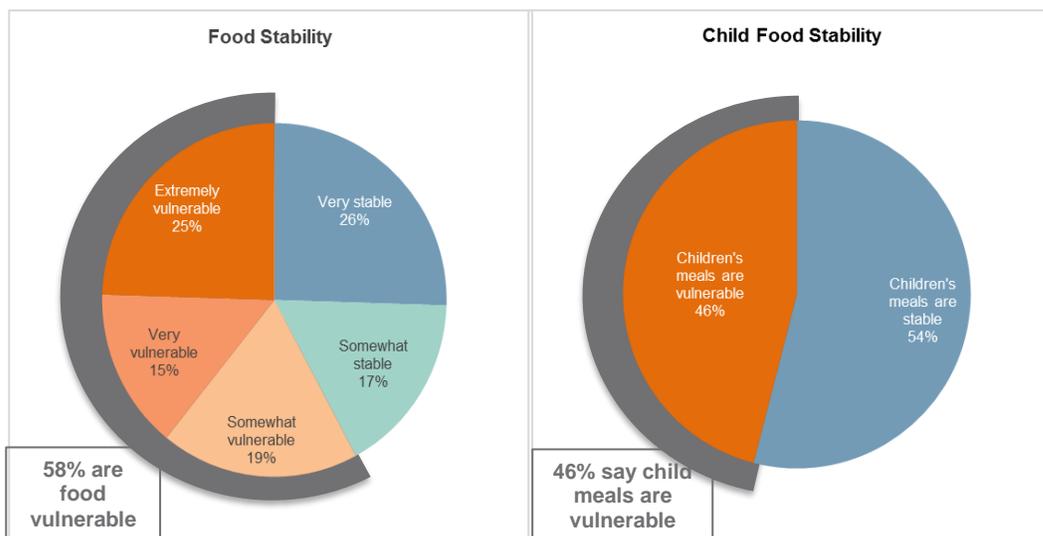
- More than two in three (68%) say they worried their food would run out before they got money to buy more.
- More than half (56%) say the food they bought did not last and they did not have the money to buy more.

- An alarming number of parents report food challenges involving their children, including 42 percent who were not able to feed their child a balanced meal. Nearly one in three (29%) even said their child was not eating enough.



Based on these four food challenges, family and children meals were categorized as food stable or vulnerable.

- **Food Stable:** *Very stable* (answered never true for each of the four scenarios) or *Somewhat stable* (answered sometimes/often true for one scenario)
- **Food Vulnerable:** *Somewhat vulnerable* (answered sometimes/often true for two scenarios), *Very vulnerable* (sometimes/often true for three scenarios), or *Extremely vulnerable* (answered sometimes/often true for all four scenarios)
- **Child Meals Stable:** Answered never true for both scenarios about feeding children.
- **Child Meals Vulnerable:** Answered sometimes/often true for one or both scenarios about feeding children



More than one in two (58%) families and nearly half (46%) of children are food vulnerable. Families that tend to be more vulnerable include families of color, households below the poverty line, families in urban areas, younger parents (18-24 years old), and single or unmarried parents.

Social support and food programs are important to food vulnerable families in helping make ends meet. The parents who most value the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are also more likely to be extremely food vulnerable. However, perhaps due to the extent of their food challenges, the extremely vulnerable are still more likely than other families to say that benefits from programs such as SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) aren't enough to cover their food needs. Six in ten families who don't feel SNAP benefits are adequate have experienced vulnerability with their children's meals.

Moreover, food vulnerable families are more likely than other families to cite barriers to preparing meals from scratch. For example, food vulnerable families are more likely to say cost is a major barrier (43 percent vs 33 percent of families overall). Food vulnerable families also have greater concerns about wasting food their children won't eat (37% vs 31% of families overall).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Hunger is a serious issue among low-income families with young children. Many say feeding their families over the last year has been challenging, with children's meals even being affected. Increasing benefits and access to support programs is critical, especially for food vulnerable families that have the greatest needs. Moreover, increasing access to food skills education can help food vulnerable families make low-cost, healthy meals and identify strategies to address fear of food waste.

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<sup>i</sup> 600 online and 400 by telephone