Three Reasons Child Health Advocates Should Pay Attention to the Farm Bill

Health Equity

Date Posted:

Feb 21, 2018

Amidst the high-profile debates around federal health care laws, another major piece of legislation that affects children is sometimes overlooked by child health providers, researchers and advocates: the U.S. Farm Bill. Many people assume the Farm Bill only impacts farmers or rural communities. However, several key components of the law have a tremendous effect on public health for children and families everywhere.

What is the Farm Bill?

The Farm Bill is a multi-year law that governs all parts of the nation's food supply. It has broad reaching consequences on food prices, access, and safety; federal nutrition assistance programs; conservation and environmental health; foreign trade; rural development; and, of course, agricultural production.

With the current law expiring in September, many groups are informing the legislation that Congress will ultimately write. The President's proposed budget suggests significant cuts and changes to programs incorporated in the Farm Bill. Similarly, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently announced its legislative principles for the new Farm Bill. Final implications for programs and funding in the law will ultimately be decided later in the year by Congress. Because so many diverse stakeholders are involved, and the bill itself is so large, there can often be conflicting interests at play. Bills like this one need broad, collective support from individuals as diverse as economic development specialists, public health officials, scientists, farmers, and doctors – so we all need to be paying attention.

Why is PolicyLab tuned-in?

Here at PolicyLab, our researchers are keeping a close eye on this piece of agricultural policy. Here are three reasons why we as children's health care providers, researchers, and advocates have so much skin in the game:

1) Child Nutrition

The Farm Bill is the primary funding mechanism for our nation's safety-net food programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP), The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) and more. These safety-net programs are proven time and again to reduce poverty, decrease food insecurity, and improve health, with most of these benefits going to children. An estimated one in four (20 million) children participate in SNAP nationwide, and nearly 70 percent of SNAP benefits go to households with children. Our pediatricians know that food insecurity and inadequate nutrition, especially in early childhood, contribute to deficits in cognitive development, behavioral problems, and overall physical health. Study after study shows that food

assistance programs help children do better in school and have long-term improved health and economic outcomes.

These beneficial nutrition assistance programs comprised 80 percent of spending in the last Farm Bill. *Supporters of evidence-based policy solutions for improving child health should understand the funding mechanisms for proven safety-net food programs for low-income children in our country.*

2) Environmental Health

The Farm Bill dictates farming practices that impact our environmental health. Large industrial and corporate farming practices often pollute air, water, and soil. Children are most susceptible to harm from exposure to environmental pollutants. For example, children living near industrial farm animal production or in places downwind of pesticide drift have higher rates of asthma and other respiratory problems. Exposure to increased antibiotics found in meat production practices is causing antimicrobial resistance and untreatable infections in children. Exposure to groundwater contaminated by nitrogen-based fertilizers, particularly found in well-water in rural communities, can be very dangerous for young children.

Notably, exposure to environmental pollutants is higher for communities of color and low-income communities. This is both an environmental justice and a health equity concern. *Advocates for protecting child health should understand the ways in which environmental and food safety protections in policies like the Farm Bill affect child health.*

3) Research Funding for Child Health

The Farm Bill provides funding for the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) which supports research not just on agriculture and biotechnology, but on nutrition, food insecurity, food safety, community vitality, family well-being, economic development, climate change, and more. Much of this funding supports interdisciplinary teams that bring together public health experts, medical professionals, engineers, urban planners, community development specialists, crop scientists and others to address social and environmental determinants of child health. *Those who value the importance of developing a strong evidence base for interventions that improve child health should support funding for unbiased and rigorous research.*

Here at PolicyLab, we're focused on the factors that affect child health within and *outside* the health care system. Social and environmental determinants – like access to healthy, affordable food and the right to clean air and water - are a big part of our patients' lives. That's why we assemble interdisciplinary research teams of doctors, lawyers, social workers, urban planners, statisticians, and other public health professionals to address child health from every angle. We encourage our fellow child health care providers and researchers to understand how the Farm Bill affects children.

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Stay tuned for future posts as we continue to monitor the progress of the Farm Bill.

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