

Amidst bitter cold and rising energy costs, new concerns about energy insecurity

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With many regions of the country braced by an unrelenting cold snap, the problem of energy insecurity continues to go unreported despite its toll on the most vulnerable. In a new brief, researchers at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health paint a picture of the families most impacted by this problem and suggest recommendations to alleviate its chokehold on millions of struggling Americans. The authors note that government programs to address energy insecurity are coming up short, despite rising energy costs.

Energy Insecurity (EI) is measured by the proportion of household energy expenditures relative to household income. Lower-income families are more likely to experience EI because they tend to live in housing that has not benefited from the structural improvements that wealthier Americans can afford. "While economic energy insecurity is experienced across the spectrum, it disproportionately affects those who are poorest, who are nearest the [poverty line](#)," says Yumiko Aratani, PhD, acting director for health/mental health at the National Center for Children in Poverty. "We hope that our discussion of energy [insecurity](#) will galvanize policy-makers to study this problem further and take steps to ameliorate its affects."

The brief, Energy Insecurity among Families With Children, uses the latest and most comprehensive data available to describe the extent of EI by family income, demographic characteristics, and geographic area. The authors define economic EI as the disproportionate share of [household income](#) allocated to energy expenses among families with

children. Those with more than 10 percent of energy burden are characterized as "energy insecure."

Some key findings from the report:

- More than half of families affected by economic EI are living in poverty (under 100% of the federal poverty level) and about one third are extremely poor.
- Approximately half of all households facing economic EI are Black/African American, and about one-third are hite.
- Geographically, the largest proportion (46%) of children in households with economic EI resides in the South.
- Over half of families with economic EI are renters; 41 percent are homeowners.

The authors note that the main safety net program for EI, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), covers only a fraction of the overall need. Of the estimated 10-15 million homes eligible for benefits in 2012, a mere 5.5 million were served. This stems in part from a lack of awareness that the program exists. The program is also hampered by lack of funding despite rising energy prices; during the years 2011-2013, the program suffered a \$1.2 billion budget cut.

"When we took a hard look at LIHEAP, the main safety net program for energy assistance, we found multiple constraints. In addition to funding shortfalls, the program is designed to provide rate discounts, debt forgiveness and different types of waivers when what this population desperately needs is energy-efficiency retrofits and interventions," says Diana Hernández, PhD, assistant professor of Sociomedical Sciences at the Mailman School of Public Health. According to Dr. Hernandez, a co-author of the study, drastic spending cuts in the aftermath of Stimulus Funding have also impacted the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP).

"Our country has embraced energy conservation heartily but we have not put nearly enough emphasis on serving low-income populations who urgently need assistance," says Renée Wilson-Simmons, DrPH, director of the National Center for Children in Poverty. "This study will shine a light on families who are burdened by disproportionate energy expenditures."

On a positive note, the study points to private foundations and non-profit organizations, such as the Green and Healthy Homes Initiative (GHHI), that are addressing the needs of low-income populations in innovative ways. "We were pleased to discover the many benefits of this program for underserved households because its benefits are tangible and well-documented. For instance, we discuss significant reductions in asthma related emergency room visits in Baltimore after a six month intervention," says Yang Jiang, PhD, a family demographer at the National Center for Children in Poverty. "Clearly more can be done for families struggling to meet basic [energy](#) needs."

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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