

Age limit for federal food assistance program impacts reading scores, learning

June 19 2018, by Sheena Rice

Nearly 1 million children face food insecurity simply because they were born late in the year. No safety net coverage exists for these children when they age out of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and they are not yet eligible to attend kindergarten. Irma Arteaga, assistant professor in the Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri, has found that not only does the coverage gap impact overall food insecurity, it reduces reading scores at kindergarten entry, a time when children are often placed on learning trajectories. Arteaga says policymakers should consider extending WIC eligibility until children enter school rather than setting an age limit.

"The cutoff age of 5 for WIC is associated with an assumption that this is the normal age at which children enter [kindergarten](#) and become eligible for lunch programs," Arteaga said. "However, not all children who are 5 automatically begin school. State and local rules, not federal, determine the age at which children begin kindergarten. These rules are reliant on some predetermined date—for example, Sept. 1—meaning children born after that date will not enter kindergarten until the following year, thus losing WIC benefits with nothing to replace them."

Arteaga and her team analyzed data for 1,950 children between the ages of 4 and 6½ from a nationally representative data set. The researchers found evidence that children who had aged out of WIC prior to attending kindergarten had lower reading scores compared to their peers when tested at entry. The scores improved when tested again in the spring after

children had access to [food](#) through [school](#) lunch programs.

The findings were consistent with prior MU research that showed an increase in rates of [food insecurity](#) for children who age out of WIC and who have not yet started kindergarten.

"The coverage gap that exists for children who are aging out of WIC is a problem that can be fixed," Arteaga said. "Policymakers should address the unintended consequences facing millions of [children](#) each year who are unlucky enough to be born in the wrong state and in the wrong month."

More information: Irma Arteaga et al, Design Flaws: Consequences of the Coverage Gap in Food Programs for Children at Kindergarten Entry, *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* (2018). [DOI: 10.1093/aepp/ppy009](#)

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