

Water is Life: Changing the Tide of Family Water Insecurity Amidst the Climate Crisis

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Abstract

Background and Purpose: Household water security is the consistent access to sufficient, safe water that promotes health. Approximately 2 million people in the US cannot realize the human right to water, and the climate crisis exacerbates this issue. Lack of safe drinking water has adverse health effects, especially for pregnant women and infants. This policy analysis investigated options to improve water security among participants in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), whose infants are particularly vulnerable to water insecurity.

Methods: The CDC's Policy Analytical Framework and the Commonwealth Fund's Racial Equity and Policy Framework were utilized to analyze the federal policy landscape related to safe water, climate change, and breastfeeding support and identify possible policy solutions. An advocacy toolkit using the SMART Advocacy Strategy was developed to educate decision-makers.

Results: Infants are physiologically vulnerable to water insecurity. Formula-reliant infants are particularly vulnerable to disruptions to safe water for mixing formula and cleaning feeding equipment. Breastfeeding helps buffer infants against these vulnerabilities but requires structural support. Policies that 1) implement water security data collection, linkage to water testing and filters and scale-up of funding for WIC breastfeeding and safe infant feeding; and 2) incorporate WIC into disaster planning and response efforts would reduce vulnerability, enhance resilience, and improve health equity. An advocacy toolkit accompanies these policy recommendations.

Conclusion: Water insecurity, exacerbated by climate change, harms the health of women, infants, and children. Through WIC, equitable policy solutions exist to help address this issue.

Implications: Water insecurity exists in the US and is magnified by climate change. Policy solutions must consider the vulnerabilities of women and infants to prevent negative health outcomes associated with water insecurity.

Keywords: Water insecurity, climate change, WIC, infant feeding, policy solutions