In Bucks County, like many communities across America, the trend of a widening gap between those at the high- and low-ends of the income spectrum continues. Recovery from the recession has been slow and uneven, making it difficult for some to find jobs that provide family-sustaining wages. As the cost of living continues to rise, many families with children are caught between a rock and a hard place.

When children are suffering from hunger and food insecurity the impact is immediate and lasting. In 2010, Hunger in America found that nationally, “the value of increased poor educational outcomes and lost lifetime earnings as a result of hunger and food insecurity was $19.2 billion.”

With a greater number of families facing a day-to-day struggle to stretch their budgets to cover expenses, Bucks County needs to consider how federal safety net programs intended to protect and support children can reach more families that need them. Ensuring that children grow up healthy and prepared will help assure both the short- and long-term economic stability of the county.
This report is Public Citizens for Children and Youth’s analysis of the economic well-being of children and their access to key supports. We provide data on child poverty, family income, child hunger, and programs that respond to these issues, including Food Stamps (SNAP), school meals, and tax credits for low-income families.

The Basics
Bucks County is home to 136,823 children, just over one-fifth of the county’s 618,640 residents. Twenty-nine percent of children (40,132) are under age six, 32 percent (44,077) are age six through 11, and 39 percent (52,614) are age 12 through 17.

Throughout this report, we use Census figures to show the financial status of children’s families using the terms deep poverty, poverty and low-income. These terms equate to the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Size</th>
<th>Deep Poverty: Income below 50% poverty</th>
<th>Poverty: Income below 100% poverty</th>
<th>Low-Income: 185% poverty</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$7,755</td>
<td>$15,510</td>
<td>$28,694</td>
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<td>3</td>
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Bucks County Children and Family Economic Security
Bucks County children, particularly young children, are more likely to be in poverty than adults. Nearly nine percent of children under the age of six live in poverty. The poverty rate for all children (6.5 percent) is 25 percent higher than that of adults. Not only are children more likely to be poor than adults, the share of Bucks County children living in poverty has grown. While the child poverty rate has fluctuated, nearly 9,000 children living in the county (6.5 percent) are living in poverty. Of the Bucks County children who are in poverty, over one-third (3,000 children) live in deep poverty (less than half the poverty line, or $11,775 annually, for a family of four).
Overcoming challenges created by poverty is an uphill climb, with the journey all the more steep for children who experience deep poverty. The prolonged and difficult economic struggle they endure can result in more severe long-term ramifications as these children grow into adulthood.

**Child Poverty In Bucks County Is On The Rise**

Looking at the low end of the economic spectrum as a whole, the number of children in low-income families has increased 18 percent from 2008 to 2012. This means a larger share of Bucks County families are losing ground and facing greater challenges in meeting children’s basic needs – food, clothing, and shelter. This trend is occurring in a wide range of communities across the county, as can be seen in the rising share of students eligible for free and reduced-price school meals in affluent and less affluent school districts alike.

![Graph showing the number of children in low-income families increased 18% from 2008 to 2012.](chart)

**Child Hunger Impacts 13 Percent Of Bucks County Children**

One of the most tragic results of poverty is hunger. Insufficient nutrition is one of the most basic and formidable challenges standing in the way of children’s well-being. Not having enough nutritious food compromises a child’s healthy development—both physically and psychologically. According to the USDA, food insecurity occurs when people do not have access to enough food to maintain an active and healthy lifestyle. In Bucks County, food insecurity impacts 14 percent of children.9

Children suffer not only the immediate consequences of hunger, but are more likely than their food secure peers to experience higher rates of educational problems including missed days of school, suspension and the need to repeat a grade. These and other adverse outcomes lead to a greater likelihood of school failure or dropping out. Ultimately, food insecurity exacts a huge cost as it contributes to a greater likelihood of limited employability, lessened workforce productivity, poorer job performance, and $260,000 lower lifetime earnings.

To protect children from the damage insufficient access to nutritious food can cause, there are several federal programs that provide them basic nutrition. These programs can help lessen the blow of a widespread recession, but only if children are able to access their benefits. The following is an analysis of Bucks County children’s participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps) and school meals.
From FY 2009-10 to FY 2012-13, the number of Bucks County children served by SNAP increased 43 percent. SNAP met increasing need and provided crucial dollars for groceries for many families that faced unemployment, reduced hours, reduced wages, or some combination of those challenges brought on by the recession. In addition, in 2009 Pennsylvania joined a majority of states in adopting federal options, which were made available in 2002, that allow the program to be more responsive to families whose high housing, medical and child care costs take a large share of their monthly income. SNAP has not only benefitted these families, but also helps support the Bucks County economy. Each dollar of SNAP is estimated to generate $1.73 in economic activity.

As of November 1, 2013, the critical help provided by SNAP benefits was reduced due to the accelerated expiration of the temporary benefits increase provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. A family of four lost about $36 per month, which equates roughly to 21 meals per month. This reduction directly harms the more than 14,800 children served by the program each month, whose families can purchase less – and potentially less nutritious – food, as well as Bucks County’s economy. In the coming year, Bucks County will lose an estimated $3.8 million in Food Stamp benefits - $6.6 million in economic impact – as a result of the SNAP cuts. Despite the reduction in SNAP benefits that has already occurred, Congress is currently negotiating additional cuts to the program that will further imperil the health and well-being of Bucks County’s children.

Children make up less than one-quarter of the county’s population, yet they represent 38 percent of those receiving help from SNAP.

Eligibility For School Meals Increased But Breakfast Participation Lags

For families living on tight budgets, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) make it possible for eligible students to receive a free or reduced-price nutritious breakfast and lunch each school day. USDA research indicates that children who participate in school lunch have superior nutritional intakes compared to those who do not, and that school breakfast supports health and learning for low-income children.

As one might expect from the rising share of Buck’s County children living in low-income families, there has been a 45 percent increase in the share of students eligible for free- and reduced-price school meals between 2008 and 2012. This increase represents nearly 5,700 additional students qualifying for school meals at a free or minimal cost. In addition, the large increases in the number of children enrolled in SNAP (detailed above) have helped schools identify more students who are eligible for school meals without need for burdensome paperwork.
Increased eligibility, however, does not equate to increased access. Despite the very large increase in the share of students eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, county-wide participation in breakfast and lunch decreased between 2008 and 2012. While over 70 percent of qualified low-income students participated in school lunch, far fewer—just 20 percent—received school breakfast in 2012.

The county-wide growth in low-income students eligible for school meals occurred in every Bucks County school district, with even more affluent districts experiencing large increases in the share of their students who qualified for school meals. For instance, while Council Rock School District has a relatively small number of students eligible at 518, this is nearly two-and-a-half times the number of students eligible in 2008. Central Bucks and New Hope–Solebury School Districts had increases of 73 and 89 percent respectively, and of Centennial, Morrisville Borough and Quakertown School Districts had growth of almost 50 percent.
Individual districts also vary widely on reaching eligible students with breakfast without a single district serving more than 30 percent of students who qualify — including Bensalem, Bristol, Bristol Borough and Morrisville Borough despite the fact that each has greater than 45 percent of students eligible. Council Rock and New Hope-Solebury School Districts do not provide breakfast at all. Schools can adopt different approaches to breakfast, such as changing the time, location, and method of service, to help reach more students. Parents also have a role to play, and unfortunately too many may be concerned about the stigma associated with enrolling their children in free- or reduced-price school meal programs and as a result forego this critical public child nutrition program. In all, districts throughout the county have significant room for improvement.

**No Bucks County School District Has More Than 30 Percent of Eligible Students Participating in School Breakfast**

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**Family Income**

The increase in Bucks County children living both in poor and in low-income families is obviously linked to family income. The good news is the County’s median income rebounded above 2008.

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The bad news is that even with this small recovery, those at the lower end of the income scale are still struggling to make economic progress. In 2008, 18 percent of families in Bucks County were earning less than $45,000; by 2012 the share remains slightly higher at 19 percent.
Meanwhile the cost of living – housing, food, utilities, child care, health care, transportation – continued to rise while family income failed to keep pace. Over the past two decades, the price of a house has risen faster than income.\(^28\) Given this, it is no surprise that among Bucks County renters and homeowners earning $75,000 or less annually, housing costs consume a large share of family budgets.

An astronomical 79 percent of renters spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, and 41 percent of homeowners spend this amount. Each dollar a family needs to simply keep a roof over their heads means they have less money available for other basic necessities for their children.

### Earned Income and Child Tax Credits Help Lift Families Out Of Poverty

Families earning low wages can only stretch their budgets so far. While Food Stamps (SNAP) and school meals help families fight hunger, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the refundable portion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) provide critical dollars to those who are working but whose earnings do not keep pace with the rising cost of living. In 2009, Congress made improvements to these credits, recognizing both the greater share of families relying on low-wage employment and the rising expense of raising children.\(^29\) These credits are incredibly effective as anti-poverty measures, having lifted an estimated 116,000 Pennsylvania children out of poverty annually from 2009-2011.\(^30\)

Between 2007 to 2011 the number of families receiving the EITC increased by 15 percent. The number of families receiving the refundable portion of the CTC also increased, by 13 percent. In 2011, nearly 27,000 Bucks County families received an average of $1,786 in EITC. Over 18,000 families received the refundable portion of the CTC, with an average refund of $1,241.

The amount of EITC received by Bucks County families increased over 28 percent from 2007 to 2011, and the amount of CTC by more than 29 percent. These credits are also critical to the Bucks County economy, as low- and moderate-income families are more likely to spend their refunds on immediate needs than high-income families. The Congressional Budget Office confirmed that the provisions affecting low- and middle-income families were much more effective in supporting the struggling economy than those for high-income families. The EITC infused over $48 million into Bucks County in 2011, and the refundable portion of the CTC nearly $22 million.
Conclusion and Recommendations

Forces well beyond the control of Bucks County brought about the recession and have caused serious repercussions for its families and economy. While recovery from the economic downturn is underway, a rising number of Bucks County children are growing up with obstacles to achieving a healthy future. The slow pace of recovery is an enemy to children, as delays in meeting their basic needs can have long-term impact on their growth, development and learning.

The widespread fallout from the recession shows that federal safety net programs are likely to play an important role in family economic security. As tens of thousands of Bucks County families continue to strive for better futures for their children, it is critical that the County work in partnership with social service agencies, community groups, schools and parents to advance these essential strategies to support positive outcomes for children:

- Dramatically increase participation in school breakfast by engaging the entire school community and adopting strategies that highlight nutrition and academic benefits and reduce stigma.
- Pursue outside support and resources for increasing breakfast participation by enrolling in the Pennsylvania School Breakfast Challenge (deadline for entry is Dec. 20, see: www.paschoolbreakfast.org)
- Connect all eligible families to Food Stamps (SNAP) by both increasing awareness of the program and removing barriers to enrollment.
- Increase efforts to connect all eligible families to income and work supports such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit.
- Build county-wide understanding and support for these programs so that they are strengthened and not cut further at the federal level.

Bucks County leadership can’t single-handedly solve poverty, but they can help their families tap the lifesaving supports offered by the federal safety net programs. Investing in strategies to help families improve their economic well-being and achieve stability will pay future dividends not only for children but for communities throughout Bucks County.
Endnotes

1. Hunger in America, the Suffering We All Pay For, Center for American Progress, 2011
2. While 200% of poverty is widely accepted as the level of income families need to make ends meet, we are using 185% of the poverty line as the threshold to align with the eligibility line for school meals.
4. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2012, Table 17024: Ratio of Poverty to Income
5. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2007-2012, Table 17024: Ratio of Poverty to Income
6. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008-2012, Table 17024: Ratio of Poverty to Income
7. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008-2012, Table 17024: Ratio of Poverty to Income
12. Pennsylvania now has a gross income limit of 160 percent of poverty, which is below the maximum of 200 percent set by some states and above a minimum of 130 percent utilized by a majority of states. Applicants still must provide extensive documentation of their income, assets and expenses to show their net income is below the poverty line before benefits are approved.
13. Economic activity estimate based on a study by industry research firm Moody’s Economy.com, see: http://frac.org/initiativesamerican-recovery-and-reinvestment-act/snapfood-stamps-provide-real-stimulus/
15. The temporary increase to SNAP that was passed in the Recovery Act as a means of both responding to family need and boosting the economy expired on Nov. 1, 2013.
16. The maximum grant for a family of four was $608 per month, or $1.85 per meal per person. That family’s grant has been reduced to $632.
18. Loss in SNAP per county estimates provided by Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) using data from the 2011 USDA Administrative Data, PA county participation data, and USDA’s June 2013 Thrifty Food Plan. Economic impact based on loss of SNAP benefits multiplied by $1.73 estimated economic activity previously cited.
20. The eligibility line for free meals is set at 130% of poverty, for reduced-price meals it is 185% of poverty.
21. Through a process called direct certification students who receive SNAP, as well as other benefits (including Medical Assistance in PA), are certified as eligible for free school meals without need for separate application. This is because their families have reported their income and met strict verification requirements for those programs.
24. See more on choosing the right breakfast service model for your school at: http://sbsd.net/phillyhunger/default/page/-/Handout_ChoosingAModel.pdf
28. The three largest components of middle-class expenses that have increased faster than income are: the cost of college, the cost of health care and the cost of a house. See: http://ideas.time.com/2013/10/17/10-reasons-texas-is-our-future/#fixzz2iTSlKf
29. The improvements included making the CTC “refundable” at lower income levels so that more working families with incomes below the poverty line are eligible; substantially reducing the “marriage penalty” that some couples faced under the EITC; and slightly expanding the EITC for families with three children to reflect the greater expenses (the credit had been capped at one level for all families with two or more children).