

## **Vanderbilt Child Health Poll: Nearly half of Tennessee parents said they used some food assistance in the previous week**

Nearly half of parents surveyed in fall 2021 in the annual Vanderbilt Child Health Poll said they used some type of food assistance program in the week prior, and 90% of parents say they support continuing providing lunch and breakfast at school for no cost.

The latest analysis of the poll of more than 1,000 Tennessee parents by the Vanderbilt Center for Child Health Policy explores food security among Tennessee parents and children, and more than 30% report low or very low food security based on [U.S. Dept. of Agriculture standards](#).

“No child should go to bed hungry tonight. This should be a call to action for all of us to do more,” said Stephen Patrick, MD, MPH, director of the Vanderbilt Center for Child Health Policy.

Nearly half of parents reported using some food assistance program in the last week, with nearly a quarter relying on free lunch at their children’s school. Almost 10% of parents polled said they sometimes or often could not afford enough food.

“When children don’t know where their next meal is coming from or are hungry, it affects their health, learning, and mood,” said Shari Barkin, MD, MSHS, William K. Warren Foundation Chair and Professor of Pediatrics and advisor to the Vanderbilt Center for Child Health Policy.

Nearly 90% of Tennessee parents said they support continuing the provision of free breakfast and lunch at school, and the results were consistent across Grand Division and by race and ethnicity.

“Currently the Tennessee legislature is considering making breakfast and lunch free for all children. In our poll, Tennessee parents expressed resounding support free breakfast and lunch at schools,” Patrick said. “Support for free lunch was the most agreed upon issue in our poll this year and I believe this is reflective of how serious parents believe this issue is to Tennessee children.”

Across Grand Division, more parents in East Tennessee said they used the free and reduced meal programs over the last year. More than half of parents in Middle Tennessee (57%) said they used no assistance program in the past year, though less than half of parents in West Tennessee (49%) and East Tennessee (43%) said they utilized no assistance program.

The poll is conducted annually in the fall, and explores a variety of issues that impact Tennessee parents and children, from food security to insurance status, education and mental health.

The poll is funded in part by a grant from the Boedecker Foundation.