

Food Benefits Ended; Child Welfare Work Got Harder

A new study links the end of pandemic SNAP boosts to rising substantiated child maltreatment in some counties.



An office desk shows a case folder, groceries, and a benefits card representing the link between food assistance and family services.

A new study found that U.S. counties where **pandemic**-era SNAP Emergency Allotments ended saw increases in substantiated child maltreatment, according to reporting by Phys.org on research published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. SNAP is the Supplemental **Nutrition Assistance** Program, the federal food assistance program many households use to buy groceries. Emergency Allotments were extra SNAP **benefits** authorized during the COVID-19 pandemic. Child maltreatment means harm to a child through abuse or **neglect**; “substantiated” means an investigation found enough **evidence** under the child welfare agency’s rules to confirm the case.

The study matters because it treats food assistance not only as a grocery program, but also as a condition that can affect family stability. Researchers looked at nationwide child welfare data from 1,153 U.S. counties between January 2021 and February 2022. During that period, 10 states ended the expanded SNAP benefits while other states continued them. That gave researchers a way to compare counties where the **policy** changed with counties where it did not change at the same time.

The 10 states in the study period were Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Tennessee. The study ended before a later group of states stopped the emergency allotments. The researchers used NCANDS, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, which is a federal administrative data system containing case-level records from child maltreatment investigations and child welfare services reported by states. Administrative data means records created while an agency does its work, not surveys filled out later for a research project.

The key finding was not that every report to a hotline suddenly increased. Phys.org reports that maltreatment reports did not significantly go up. Instead, substantiated maltreatment increased, including neglect and physical abuse, and the increases appeared gradually after the benefits ended. That detail is important for anyone thinking about **casework**, intake, or public benefits administration. A policy change may not show up as an immediate surge at the front desk. It may build over time as rent, utilities, groceries, transportation and child care compete for the same **household** money.

For career and technical education pathways in human services, health science, public administration, or social work support, this is a story about the work behind the policy. Benefit eligibility workers help households understand and maintain public benefits. Child welfare investigators respond to reports, interview people, review conditions, document evidence and make findings under agency rules. Case managers connect families with services and track follow-through. Data analysts and program evaluators study agency records to see whether a policy is linked with outcomes. None of those jobs is just “helping people” in a vague way; each depends on process, documentation, judgment and ethics.

The study also shows why trade vocabulary matters. Food **insecurity** means not having reliable access to enough food. Neglect, in the child welfare context, can involve a caregiver’s inability or failure to meet a child’s basic needs; it is not the same thing as a family simply being poor. Policy de-implementation means ending or rolling back a policy that had been in place. The researchers focused on de-implementation because public debate often studies what happens when a program starts, but families and agencies also feel the effects when a program stops.

For workers, that changes how the job is done. If reports do not rise but substantiated cases do, an agency cannot judge risk only by the number of incoming calls. Supervisors may need to look at investigation outcomes, repeat contacts, time since a benefit change and patterns across counties. A caseworker may need to ask careful, nonjudgmental

questions about food, bills and support systems. A benefits worker may need to explain a change clearly, because confusion can make a stressful month worse. A data worker needs to know the limits of the dataset: NCANDS can show recorded investigations and services, but it cannot show every family stress that never reached an agency.

The study does not announce a new hiring rule for these fields. Its workplace lesson is about competencies. People trying to enter human-services work need accurate recordkeeping, respect for confidentiality, the ability to read policy instructions, and the communication skill to talk with families without assuming the worst. People aiming at public health or government data work need to understand how a benefit rule becomes a measurable change in a database, and how to avoid claiming more than the data can prove. The researchers found an association, meaning the two things moved together in a way the study could analyze; that is not the same as proving that every individual case was caused by the SNAP change.

The larger point for the workplace is that child welfare prevention is not only the job of child welfare agencies. Nutrition assistance, public health, schools, courts, nonprofits and county offices can all touch the same household at different points. When one part of the system changes, another part may see the workload later. That is why a front-line worker’s notes, an eligibility specialist’s explanation and a data analyst’s caution can all matter in the same story.

Written from reporting by Phys.org.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. If a county has limited money, should it prioritize direct food benefits, more child welfare investigators, or better data systems first? Defend a choice and address the trade-off.

A strong answer: A strong answer should weigh prevention, response capacity, evidence quality, and the risk of shifting costs from one agency to another.

2. The study found increases in substantiated cases without a significant rise in reports. How should that change the way an agency judges whether families are under more stress?

A strong answer: A strong answer should question overreliance on hotline volume and discuss outcomes, timing, hidden need, and data limitations.

3. What should an entry-level human-services worker be trained to do when a benefit program changes, and what would be outside that worker's role?

A strong answer: A strong answer should distinguish communication, documentation, screening and referral from making legal findings or setting policy.

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ASSISTANCE

BENEFITS

CASEWORK

EVIDENCE

HOUSEHOLD

INSECURITY

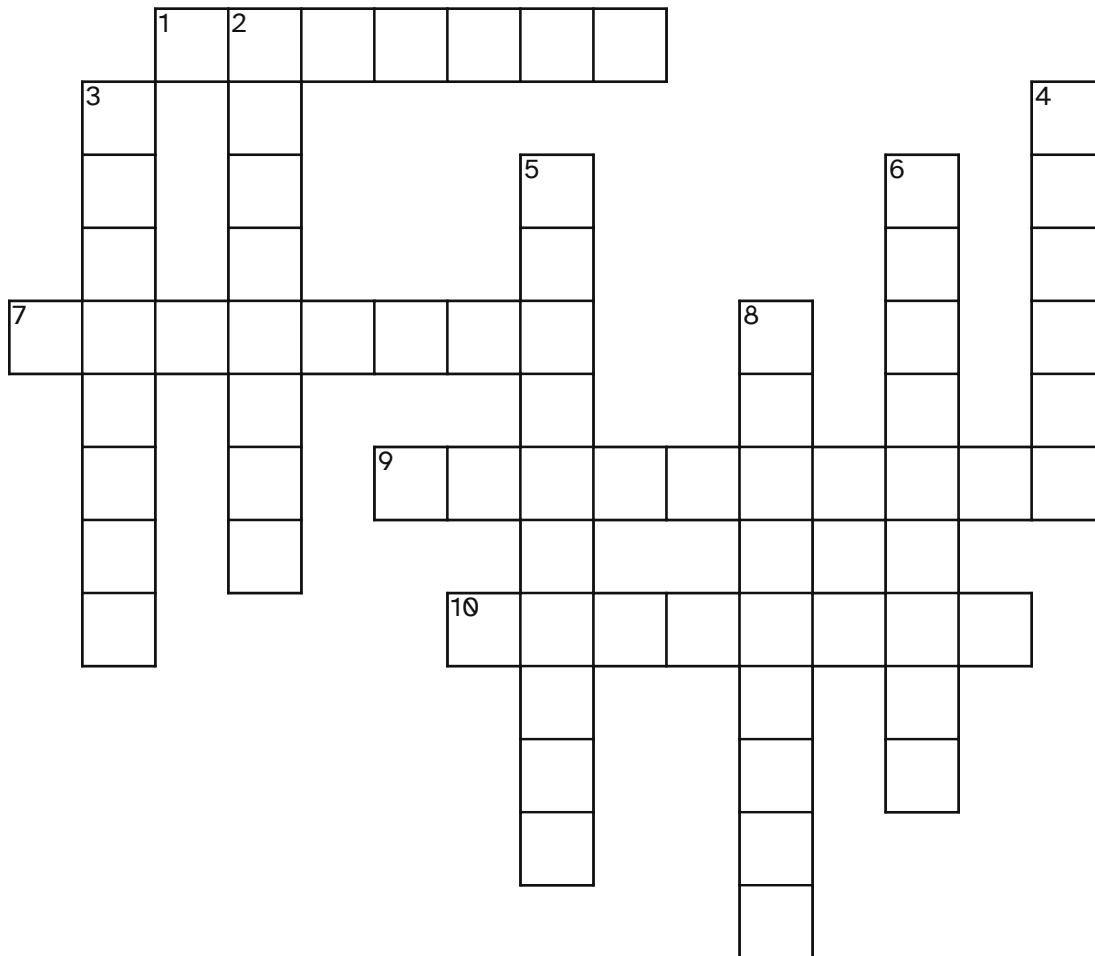
NEGLECT

NUTRITION

PANDEMIC

POLICY

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ACROSS

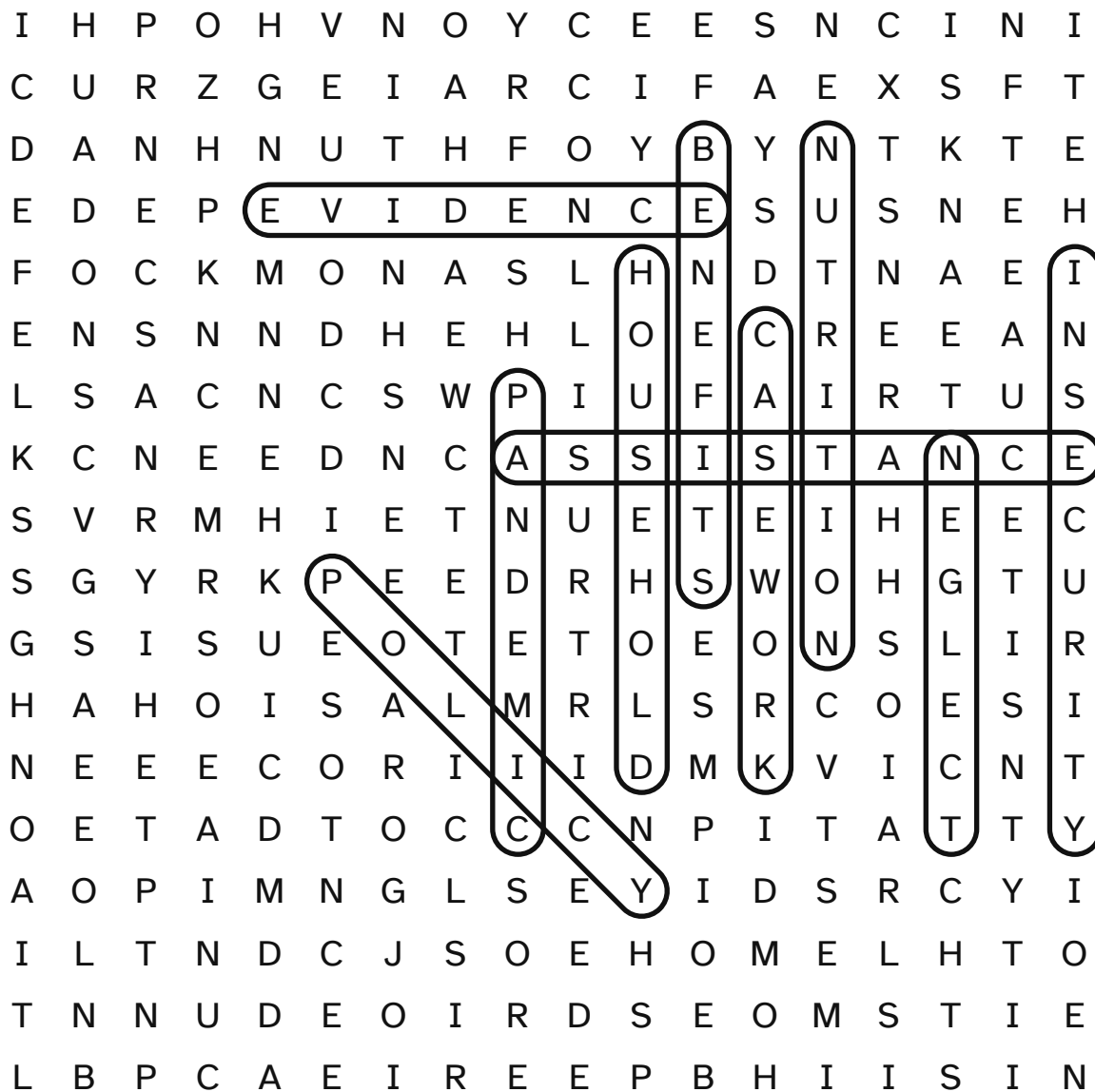
- 1 Lack of needed care, supervision, or basic necessities for a child
- 7 Public-program aid for eligible people or families
- 9 Unreliable access to enough food for a healthy, active life
- 10 Infectious outbreak spreading across many regions or countries

DOWN

- 2 Information supporting a finding in an inquiry or review
- 3 Professional help connecting individuals or families with services
- 4 Official plan or rule guiding an agency's decisions and actions
- 5 Government help for food or other basic needs
- 6 Food and nourishment supporting health and growth
- 8 People living together and sharing expenses

Food Benefits Ended; Child Welfare Work Got Harder

— answer key



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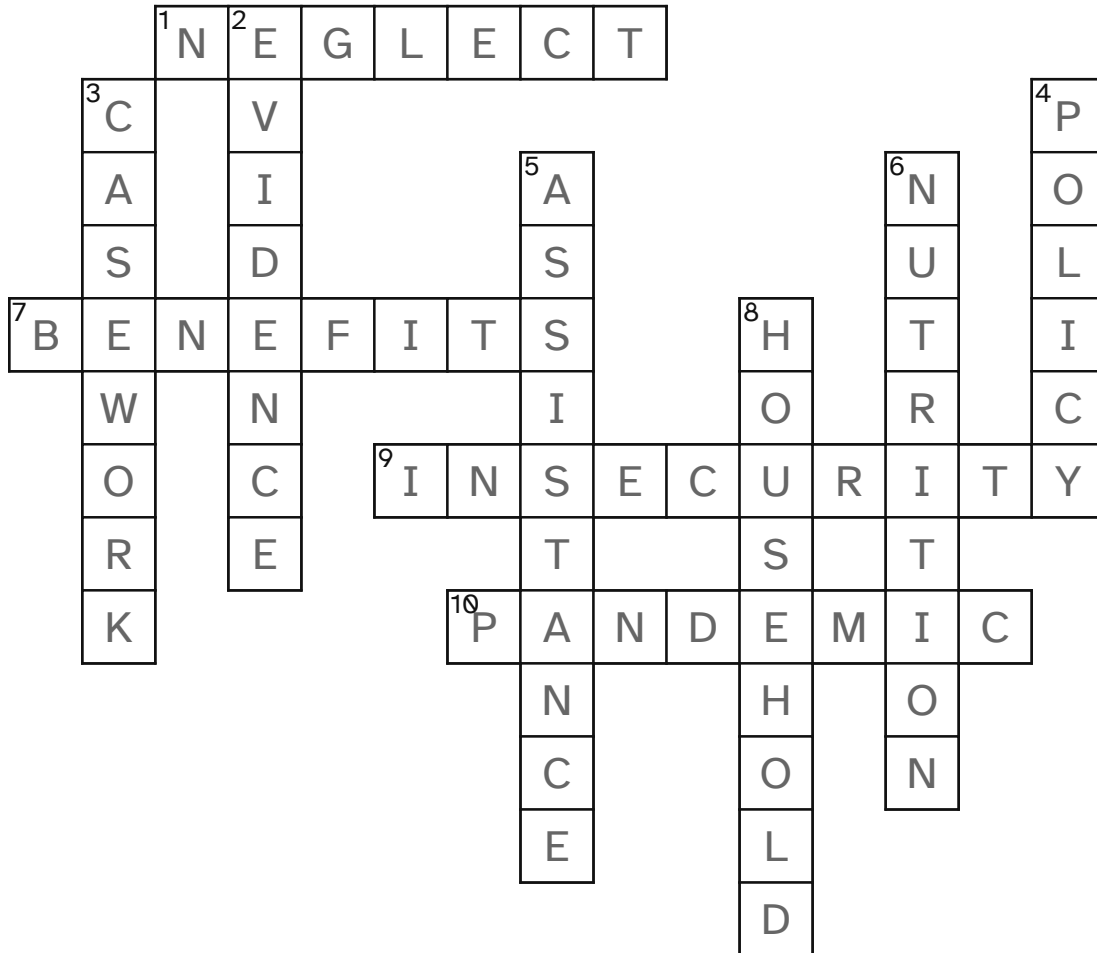
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Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

Phys.org

“End of COVID-era SNAP emergency food assistance linked to increased child maltreatment rates”

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<https://phys.org/news/2026-10-covid-era-snap-emergency-food.html>

WHAT IS IN THIS PACKET

The article with a note on each question, a word search, a crossword, and the answer key to both.

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