

IMPACT REPORT 2005-2025

20 Years of Healthy Eating Research

Healthy
Eating
Research

January 2026



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Introduction

Healthy Eating Research (HER) has been a pioneering leader in child nutrition and policy research for over 20 years.

Launched by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) in 2005 and led by Mary Story, PhD, RD, Healthy Eating Research (HER) has transformed the field of childhood nutrition and obesity prevention research. At the time, when obesity rates were rapidly rising, little was known about the most effective policies and environmental factors shaping children's eating patterns and weight. HER filled this gap, shifting the conversation from individual responsibility to systemic, policy-driven solutions, recognizing that health is powerfully influenced by our social conditions and circumstances, such as the communities we live in, as well as economic, educational, environmental, structural and corporate factors. HER-funded research has demonstrated that consistent access to affordable, nutritious food is essential for protecting children and families from poor health outcomes.

Over the past 20 years, HER has emerged as a national leader in policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) strategies to promote healthy eating. PSE strategies focus on embedding sustainable changes within communities, reaching more people than traditional education and information programs alone. HER has shaped the research landscape and catalyzed meaningful policy changes to improve nutrition and health equity for children and families nationwide. Through timely and strategic grantmaking, HER has responded quickly to emerging nutrition challenges and helped ensure research is aligned with real-world decision-making.

From influencing national policies such as the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act to shaping child care and food bank nutrition guidelines, HER's impact touches families in every community across the country. HER expert panels have produced widely cited recommendations that guide nutrition policy and practice, and HER's strategic dissemination work ensures that research findings are accessible and actionable.

HER's influence extends beyond funding, playing a pivotal role in building and nurturing a vibrant, interdisciplinary field of researchers committed to equity and systems-level change. The program has supported the professional development of hundreds of diverse and early career scholars committed to conducting policy-relevant research.

As we celebrate two decades of progress, this report highlights HER's achievements, including more than \$35 million invested in over 400 studies, papers, and expert panels that have shaped critical nutrition policies and programs and work groups that support diverse networks of researchers.



Key Impact Areas

- **Shaping the Field:** HER has pioneered the growth of research on PSE strategies to improve U.S. child and family nutrition and weight status, transforming the field and inspiring widespread funding shifts.
- **Building the Evidence Base:** Through nimble funding mechanisms such as rapid-response funding, HER has supported time-sensitive research that informs policy and advocacy efforts.
- **Fostering Research Networks:** HER has built a vibrant, diverse network of researchers by providing technical assistance to grantees, promoting research collaborations, and providing field-building opportunities.
- **Guiding Policy:** HER's research has been instrumental in shaping policies that support healthier environments for children and families, from improved school meal standards to establishing national food bank nutrition guidelines.

Our Mission

To support and disseminate research on policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) strategies that promote healthy eating and advance nutrition and health equity.

Our Goals

- 1 Build a research base for PSE strategies that advance health and nutrition equity in the areas of healthy food access and security, diet quality, and healthy weight.
- 2 Foster a vibrant, inclusive, interdisciplinary field of research and a diverse network of researchers.
- 3 Communicate and disseminate evidence-based research findings that promote healthy eating and advance nutrition and health equity.

HER by the Numbers



\$35 MILLION

Invested in research

\$9.50

Additional funding leveraged for every \$1 invested by HER



400+

Grants funded

500+

Publications



170

Researchers supported through Early Stage Investigator Work Group

19

Annual grantee meetings



45,000+

Times HER-funded research has been cited in peer-reviewed literature

4X

Social media following quadrupled over the past decade

Impact Highlights

Over the past two decades, Healthy Eating Research has become a cornerstone of childhood nutrition research and a key driver of evidence-based nutrition policy. HER's comprehensive approach combines rigorous and innovative research, field building, and strategic dissemination to drive lasting impact.

BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE

Shaping the Field

For over two decades, HER has filled a critical gap in the research ecosystem by delivering high-quality, policy-relevant research that quickly responds to the needs of advocates and policymakers. By generating strategic, policy-relevant research, HER's work has helped shift narratives, shape program and community practices, and catalyze upstream changes to drive lasting improvements in nutrition access and equity.

For example, HER has been a pioneering leader in building the evidence on PSE strategies to improve child and family nutrition in the U.S. While our initial focus was on addressing child obesity via nutrition policies and programs, we quickly recognized that access to healthy food was directly linked to broader social determinants of health and system inequities. Today, our research also examines non-nutrition policies and the interaction of social, political, economic, and familial influences and environments on nutrition and health equity, food access, and healthy eating.

"We can thank much of the current understanding and policy developments in the recent years to the growing body of work funded and inspired by the Healthy Eating Research program."

– RWJF program officer

Leading the Way in Strategic Science

HER identifies research priorities through deep engagement with field leaders, funders, and policymakers to ensure we're funding the studies most crucial for nutrition policies and decision-making. HER has invested over \$35 million in more than 400 scientifically rigorous, solution-oriented research studies.

Competitive open calls for proposals allow for the submission of investigator-initiated projects and attract a diverse pool of applicants from across the country. HER selects the strongest proposals through a rigorous and equitable review process.

An innovative rapid-response funding strategy supports smaller, time-sensitive studies and papers addressing research gaps identified by HER and our partners. This mechanism allows us to be nimble with a quick turnaround time and is highly responsive to the needs of communities, advocates, policymakers, and other decision-makers. These studies have often been highly influential in the field.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, HER awarded \$3.25 million to support *timely research* examining the pandemic's effects on food security, diet quality, and child health outcomes. HER briefed USDA staff and policymakers on findings from these studies related to *SNAP*, *WIC*, and school meal programs, which helped to inform the expansion of nutrition assistance programs during this time of crisis. Additional information about these studies and other impact examples can be found in the Case Studies section.

"By making grants small, focused, and doable in a short period, the results seem to be having a catalytic impact, creating a foundation for more extensive research and informing policies that can't wait for a three-year research project."

– Funder



Research in Action

HER's work on healthy food access has impacted tribal communities and small retailers nationwide and has been used to inform Farm Bill efforts to improve access to healthy foods.

In one of HER's first [*studies*](#) to focus exclusively on American Indian communities, researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill used community-based participatory research (CBPR) to improve access to healthy foods within American Indian tribal communities. Researchers developed a partnership with the NC Commission of Indian Affairs and seven state-recognized tribes and created tools and technical assistance to motivate and mobilize tribal leaders to improve food access in their communities, including healthy food retail. The evidence base and action strategies from this work were shared with the Let's Move campaign during their development and dissemination of the [*Let's Move! in Indian Country*](#) special initiative. The research team also shared drafts and discussed process and products with Indian Health Services.

In January 2023, HER partnered with the Center for Science in the Public Interest and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health to convene food and beverage retailers and manufacturers, SNAP participants, and public health researchers, practitioners, and advocates to develop evidence-based policy recommendations for supporting healthy food retail and healthy food marketing in stores and online. Recommendations largely focused on opportunities that could be leveraged via SNAP and the Farm Bill and are summarized in the report, [*Recommendations to Promote Healthy Retail Food Environments: Key Federal Policy Opportunities for the Farm Bill*](#). The idea for this project came from an [*HER-led convening*](#) with the same groups to produce a research agenda for healthy retail, which set national research and programming priorities to advance healthier food marketing and access in stores.

Expert Panels

HER convenes national panels of experts on complex issues to review research, develop comprehensive recommendations on timely and relevant topics, and inform healthy eating policies at the local, state, and national levels. This multidisciplinary approach fosters consensus-building on topics where guidelines or recommendations have yet to be developed. To date, HER has convened 10 [*expert panels*](#), listed below, whose recommendations have been widely used by advocacy groups, food assistance programs, health care practitioners, and parents and caregivers. Two of these panels involved partnering with leading national health and nutrition organizations to achieve consensus on children's beverage recommendations, which led to the additional development of practice and policy recommendations to support implementation.

- 1 Recommendations for Healthier Beverages
- 2 Recommendations for Responsible Food Marketing to Children
- 3 Minimum Stocking Levels and Marketing Strategies of Healthful Foods for Small Retail Food Stores
- 4 Feeding Guidelines for Infants and Young Toddlers: A Responsive Parenting Approach
- 5 Healthy Beverage Consumption in Early Childhood: Recommendations from Key National Health and Nutrition Organizations
- 6 Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System
- 7 Evidence-Based Recommendations and Best Practices for Promoting Healthy Eating Behaviors in Children 2 to 8 Years
- 8 Evidence-Based Recommendations to Mitigate Harms from Digital Food Marketing to Children Ages 2-17
- 9 Healthy Beverage Consumption in School-Age Children and Adolescents: Recommendations from Key National Health and Nutrition Organizations
- 10 Developing Recommendations for Policies to Regulate Ultraprocessed Foods in the United States—releasing in 2026

Expert Panel Impact

Industry Engagement

After the 2015 release of HER's [Recommendations for Responsible Food Marketing to Children](#), over 6,800 letters were sent urging Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) member companies to adopt the recommendations. This led to a meeting between HER leadership, expert panel members, and CFBAI staff and member companies to discuss food marketing self-regulation and opportunities for moving the HER recommendations into practice.

Hunger-Relief Policy

HER's 2020 [Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System](#) were endorsed by Feeding America and have been used by influential organizations including the American Heart Association, Partnership for a Healthier America, and USDA's SNAP-Ed program. These guidelines have replaced Feeding America's Foods to Encourage and are now shaping the food sourcing and distribution strategies of food banks nationwide.

Federal Rulemaking

HER's report on [Minimum Stocking Levels and Marketing Strategies of Healthful Foods for Small Retail Food Stores](#) was cited in comments on USDA's 2016 proposed rule to update SNAP retailer standards. Comments advocated for a broader variety and greater depth of stock of healthy foods in SNAP-authorized stores.

Dietary Guidelines for Americans

HER's [Responsive Feeding Guidelines for Infants and Young Toddlers](#) and [Beverage Consensus Recommendations for Kids Ages 0-5](#) were included in the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans Committee Report, which marked the first inclusion of infants and toddlers in the guidelines.

Professional Practice Updates

HER convened leading health organizations [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD), American Academy of Pediatrics, American Heart Association] to develop recommendations for [Healthy Beverage Consumption in Early Childhood](#) in 2019 and [Healthy Beverage Consumption in School-Age Children and Adolescents](#) in 2025. Since their release, the early childhood beverage recommendations have been adopted into AAPD's reference manual, which is the primary resource used by pediatric dentists in the U.S., incorporated into continuing education modules with the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, incorporated into the American Heart Association's policy bottom lines for states working to pass beverage policies, and adopted by the Pan American Health Organization. Validated sugar-sweetened beverage screener questions have also been integrated into the EPIC Electronic Health Records platform, allowing providers nationwide to easily assess patients' sugary drink consumption patterns. Additionally, resources from this panel and [Evidence-Based Recommendations and Best Practices for Promoting Healthy Eating Behaviors in Children 2 to 8 Years](#) are widely used by WIC providers through the WIC Hub.

CULTIVATING A NETWORK OF RESEARCHERS

“My Healthy Eating Research grant gave me resources, support, visibility at my institution, and networking, which all led to new collaborations, new grant applications, and stronger skills to apply for grants.”

– HER grantee

Grantee and Research Meetings

HER’s annual grantee meetings have been critical for sharing research and fostering connections among researchers, practitioners, and advocates. Annual meetings typically bring together current and former grantees, funders, government employees, policy specialists, and other collaborators and cover emerging or timely topics in food and nutrition, provide skill-building workshops, and valuable networking opportunities. Grantees consistently say it’s one of their favorite meetings to attend.

HER has convened thought-leading conferences on emerging issues in food, nutrition, and obesity—often in collaboration with other funders and government agencies. These convenings have sparked new ways of thinking and shaped national conversations.

One landmark event, the Wingspread Conference (2007), was the first to unite public health and agricultural experts to examine the connections between U.S. agriculture policy, childhood obesity, and healthy eating. It helped reframe food, nutrition, health, and agriculture as components of a sustainable, health-based food system—informing policy analysis for future farm bills and related legislation.

Building on this foundation, the Airlie Conference (2009) advanced the dialogue by focusing on food systems and public health. It addressed critical topics such as: how we can promote healthy, sustainably produced, locally sourced foods aligned with national dietary priorities; how we can ensure equitable access to affordable, healthy food across all communities; and what policy, governance, and practice shifts are needed to drive this transformation.

These convenings exemplify HER’s role in fostering cross-sector collaboration and shaping the national agenda on food systems, nutrition, and health, laying the groundwork for strategic policy change.

Working Groups

HER supports research work groups designed to build networks of researchers and support professional development and collaborative projects. In the early years of the program, work groups were small and consisted exclusively of HER grantees. Today, they have expanded to include non-HER researchers, practitioners, and partners working on food and nutrition policy or programs. Current groups are larger and function in collaboration with other organizations, strengthening the strategic science pipeline. We attribute this growth to years of field-building efforts by HER, RWJF, federal funders, and other partners.

Over the last 20 years, HER has developed and supported 14 work groups; currently seven groups are active. Work groups have published journal articles and special issues, presented at national conferences, and contributed to policy development through issue briefs, meetings with federal agency members, and comments to the federal registrar.

“HER is unique because the researchers are provided support to collaborate via work groups and meetings. I have met dozens of researchers around the country, which has led to numerous research and policy communication opportunities directly due to my involvement with HER.”

– HER working group participant

HER currently leads three work groups:

- Early Stage Investigators
- Food Labeling
- Strategic Research Collaborative

HER co-leads four additional work groups with CDC’s Nutrition & Obesity Policy Research Evaluation Network (NOPREN):

- Healthy Food Retail
- Early Childhood
- Resilient Food System and Nutrition
- WIC Learning Collaborative

Partnerships and Collaborations

As a leader in the nutrition research field, HER has established significant partnerships across the country and is often sought out as a reliable and trusted source for current research. HER collaborates with other organizations working in the field of child nutrition such as the American Heart Association, Partnership for a Healthier America, Feeding America, Nemours Children's Health, Share our Strength, and Salud America.

In addition, HER works closely with other funders. HER has co-sponsored workshops and conferences with NIH, USDA, CDC, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and invites representatives from other funding organizations to attend our annual grantee meeting each year to talk with attendees about future funding opportunities.



Funding a New Generation of Early Stage and Diverse Researchers

Bringing new, diverse, and early career researchers into our network is a priority for HER. For nine years, HER partnered with the RWJF New Connections program, providing dedicated funds for 15 early career researchers from underrepresented and historically disadvantaged backgrounds. When this program ended, HER identified new avenues to connect with early career researchers, including conducting targeted outreach to ensure our funding opportunities reached new junior researchers and providing additional technical assistance to early career grantees.

Our commitment to developing the field and providing opportunities for early career researchers goes beyond grantmaking. In 2021, we launched the Early Stage Investigator *Work Group*. This group is designed specifically for early career researchers to support professional development and facilitate collaboration. Since its launch, the group has supported five annual cohorts reaching 170 investigators, most of whom are new to the HER network. HER has awarded grants to members for small rapid-response research papers and studies, with technical assistance provided throughout their projects.



HER's Impact on Career Trajectories of Grantees

Grantees consistently cite the importance of HER funding and facilitation of relationships and collaboration in their careers.

"I just wanted to share the good news that I received tenure and promotion this morning. The grant that we received from HER for our competitive food study has played such an important role in my career (not just the research, but also the opportunities at the HER meetings to be inspired by others' research and to develop new collaborations). Thank you for everything."

"I have recently received a notice of award for my R01 application that builds directly on my HER-funded project from 2020 on online grocery shopping among SNAP families! HER has been instrumental in my career, and this is just one example. Thank you!"

"HER's contributions to my career has been nothing short of life-changing. There are few other networks I could point to as concretely as HER in terms of providing key opportunities to advance my career."

"HER has had a significant positive impact on my career development. The provision of education in food policy topics and introduction to new methods have been impactful, without question, but the collaborators, colleagues, and friends I have gained through HER have been career changing."

"As a post-doc, this \$100,000 grant was one of my first grants as a PI. Applying for HER and other grant funding is very competitive, and you're often competing against very senior researchers, so to have a pot of money set aside for early investigators was critical to my success."

COMMUNICATING FINDINGS TO DRIVE IMPACT

Translating Research Into Action

Over the years, HER has successfully bridged the gap between scientific research and policymaking by distilling research findings into accessible briefs, infographics, and shareable products disseminated through coordinated strategies to maximize reach and uptake.

Through a variety of communication channels, HER ensures that its research reaches the right audience at the right time.

- Peer-reviewed journal articles and technical reports ensure scientific credibility and engagement with researchers.
- Policy briefs and reports distill complex findings into digestible and actionable insights for researchers, advocates, and policymakers.
- Presentations at local, state, and national levels bring research to the forefront of policy debates.
- Press releases and social media campaigns allow HER to engage with broader audiences like parents and caregivers.

Collaborative projects have played a pivotal role in influencing state and federal nutrition policies. For example, research funded by HER and conducted by California Food Policy Advocates helped shape California's law AB 2084, signed into law on September 30, 2010, which set nutrition standards for beverages served in licensed child care facilities. The research team conducted interviews and held a convening with key stakeholders, including child care program administrators, advocates, and other child care leaders, to discuss the findings of their research and develop policy recommendations.

Berkeley Media Studies Group, Center for Digital Democracy, and American University promoted policy change in food marketing practices through several grants from HER. Investigators worked collaboratively across grants and institutions and have been prolific in their dissemination activities and connecting with key decision-makers. They provided data to the Federal Communications Commission for its initiative on interactive TV and marketing to children, testified before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee, participated in the Children's Advertising Review Unit conference to address self-regulatory marketing policy, provided evidence to help draft bipartisan legislation designed to protect youth digital privacy, informed the Interagency Working Group preliminary recommendation to address digital marketing, delivered a briefing on digital marketing at the request of the Institute of Medicine, and served as panelists to discuss digital food marketing at Federal Trade Commission workshops.

Strong relationships and open communication between HER staff and government agencies have also been instrumental in driving policy change. In response to FDA's 2023 announcement to conduct consumer research on front-of-package (FOP) labeling, HER mobilized our Food Labeling Work Group to host a scientific briefing with FDA officials, sharing the latest evidence on front-of-package labeling schemes and offering input on their study design. The briefing also surfaced key evidence gaps, prompting HER to commission several new studies and papers to inform a future proposed rule. Preliminary findings from this research were submitted to FDA in July 2025 as part of the public comment process for the proposed rule, "Food Labeling: Front-of-Package Nutrition Information" (Docket No. FDA-2024-N-2910). HER is currently planning a follow-up briefing to present updated findings with the goal of continuing to inform FDA's regulatory process.

Additional examples of policy impact can be found in the Case Studies section.

"[HER] provides support for grants with a clear focus on translating findings into policy that impact the communities we work in."

– Partner organization

Optimizing Digital Platforms as a Dissemination Tool

HER's website has long been our best digital dissemination tool. In 2021, we redesigned the site to be more user-friendly on mobile devices, with a refreshed overall look that also meets federal web accessibility guidelines. As we have developed more resources for parents, caregivers, and health care professionals, we added the "Tips for Families" page to house these new consumer-facing resources.

Following the success of our expert panels, HER also began communicating directly to parents and caregivers via social media platforms. In 2021, HER launched an Instagram page to engage with parents directly and share expert recommendations for healthy kids. We have since worked with parent influencers on numerous campaigns and the platform has become an important tool for amplifying our research.

HER's nutrition and feeding guidelines have reached millions of parents and caregivers.

- HER began working with influencers in 2021 as an innovative strategy to reach parents and caregivers with new healthy eating recommendations. HER released guidelines for picky eating and feeding kids ages 2-8 in 2021, partnering with 11 diverse national influencers who posted content on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. This partnership led to over 13.4 million potential impressions and over 525,000 views of posted videos.
- In 2025, HER partnered with five influencers to help promote the release of new healthy beverage recommendations for kids ages 5-18. This partnership led to 2.3 million potential impressions and 21,418 views of video content. These recommendations were also featured on the Today Show, which enhanced our reach on digital platforms.

Leveraging Media Engagement

HER is seen as a leading voice and a trusted source of reliable data, allowing us to successfully generate press coverage on key issues related to children's health and nutrition. HER's Director Mary Story and Deputy Director Megan Lott are seen as expert sources for nutrition and food policy reporters at top-tier outlets such as The Washington Post, New York Times, and CNN. Through these relationships, HER has been able to

highlight urgent policy issues, including the impact of beverage labeling and food marketing to children, which have been major topics in recent years. For example, *HER-funded research* on how sugar-sweetened beverage health warning labels influence parents and which labels are most effective led to significant media attention, influencing local and state policymakers to consider similar policies in their jurisdictions. In 2025, HER released healthy beverage recommendations for children ages 5-18. Megan Lott served as a spokesperson for this release, which was featured nationwide on the Today Show and NPR. In total, we garnered 243 pieces of TV and radio coverage, with 6.6 million views, 3.5 million listens, and 81 pieces of print and digital coverage with 3.7 million views.



Case Studies

These case studies highlight HER's ability to drive transformative change through rigorous research, strategic partnerships, and an unwavering commitment to equity.



Case Studies

TRANSFORMING SCHOOL NUTRITION

HER's work has informed school meal nutrition policies that benefit millions of children. Over the last two decades, HER has developed a large body of credible research that has been used numerous times in local, state, and federal debates to inform policy and environmental changes in the school setting. HER-funded research played a critical role in shaping the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010, a landmark policy that improved the nutritional quality of meals served to millions of children in U.S. schools. HER proved essential evidence to support stricter nutrition standards for school meals and—for the first time—nutrition standards for *competitive foods*, now known as Smart Snacks. Following these landmark policy updates, studies have shown reductions in sodium and sugar intake and increased consumption of *healthier foods* among U.S. schoolchildren.

HER supported many schools in the implementation of these new requirements by funding the development of the *Wellness School Assessment Tool (WellSAT)* in 2006. This online evaluation tool was the first of its kind providing a quantitative assessment of how well school wellness policies addressed nutrition education and promotion, physical activity, physical education, school meals, and competitive foods. By 2013, the website was in use across all 50 states and by policymakers, local advocates, and researchers to evaluate school wellness policies. Over the years, HER has funded updates to the tool, which now reflects the latest school meal federal policy updates and includes a tool to assess written district wellness policies (WellSAT Policy) and a valid, reliable policy implementation measure (WellSAT Practice). HER funded a new grant in November 2024 to further *update and synchronize national measures of school wellness policies and practices*. This work is in progress and is centered on synchronizing two measures: the WellSAT and CDC's School Health Index (SHI), which is a self-report measure of school-based practices.

Despite research showing that updated nutrition standards have led to healthier school meals, there have been multiple attempts to scale back these policies. HER has conducted two pivotal Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) to inform federal school meal policy. In 2020, HER's *Health Impact Assessment* revealed the harmful effects of proposed USDA rollbacks to nutrition standards—particularly for low-income and marginalized communities—helping to galvanize public response and contributing to the decision not to implement the changes. In 2023, HER led a second *HIA* to assess proposed updates aligning school meals with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. This research provided strong evidence for limiting added sugars, strengthening sodium and whole-grain standards,

expanding training and technical assistance to support implementation of these updated standards, and reinstating universal free school meals nationwide.

HER's recent research on added sugars and universal free meals have shaped landmark policy changes and supported advocacy efforts for evidence-based nutrition guidelines in schools. A *study on added sugars* in school meals informed *CSPI's School Meals Corporate Report Card* and was used to inform the first-ever added sugar nutrition standard for reimbursable school meals. HER-funded *research on Universal Free Meals* showed the cost-effectiveness of these programs, influencing legislation such as the *Universal School Meals Program Act*. While the bill was never adopted, nine states have since passed their own laws to provide free meals at school to all students, and other states have taken action to widen access to free meals or are considering legislation.



Case Studies

RESPONDING TO A GLOBAL CRISIS

As the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted food systems across the country and exacerbated nutrition inequities, HER swiftly adapted to address these emerging challenges. Through rapid-response funding and strategic collaborations, HER ensured *timely research* and policy recommendations to mitigate the pandemic's impact on vulnerable populations. HER awarded \$3.25 million to support timely research examining the pandemic's effects on food security, diet quality, and child health outcomes. This included five research papers and five small studies focused on SNAP and WIC online purchasing pilots, WIC remote services, and Pandemic EBT and school-meals-to-go policies. The research focused on USDA Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs serving children and families, with the goal of informing decision-making regarding innovative policies and/or programs during and after the pandemic.

In collaboration with NOPREN, HER established a work group to connect researchers, advocacy organizations, and practitioners who were evaluating strategies to protect diet quality, food security, and overall health for children and families during and after the pandemic. What began as a small group of about 20 researchers quickly grew to more than 500 members meeting biweekly to discuss rapidly evolving research

needs addressing the broader implications of COVID-19 on food and nutrition policies and programs. The work group leadership received an award for group contribution to policy change from the Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior (SNEB) in September 2021.

This group was fast growing and led to numerous collaborations. After the federal Public Health Emergency declaration ended in May 2023, the group pivoted to focus on the broader impact of global environmental change, hazards, and disasters on food and nutrition security. It is now the Resilient Food Systems Work Group.

Through the work group, HER connected with USDA to set up briefings to share the findings of our rapid-response grants with USDA staff prior to journal publication. HER hosted three research briefings on *SNAP*, *WIC*, and School Meals/Child Nutrition Programs, with excellent turnout among USDA staff. HER Deputy Director Megan Lott was also invited to present on these research studies at a congressional briefing hosted by RWJF.



Case Studies

INFORMING HEALTHY DRINK CHOICES

From birth, what children drink can have big impacts on their health. But with so many options, making healthy choices can be difficult.

To ensure that parents, caregivers, and providers have the information they need to make healthy drink choices, HER convened two expert panels to develop healthy beverage recommendations for children from birth to age 18. Members from four key organizations—the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Heart Association—took part in those panels, marking the first time that these influential groups have collaborated on a joint consensus statement.

The first expert panel set forth comprehensive, evidence-based recommendations (published in 2019) to ensure that health care providers, public health practitioners, and parents and caregivers know what young children (0-5) should drink to support good health. The recommendations have driven changes in organizational practices, policies, and health care guidance to reduce consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and improve young children's beverage intake.

Building on the success of the 0-5 project, HER convened another expert panel of representatives from the four key national health and nutrition organizations to develop a consensus statement on what children and adolescents ages 5 to 18 should drink as part of a healthy diet. The expert panel report, *Developing A Consensus Statement on What Children and Adolescents Should Be Drinking as Part of a Healthy Diet*, was released in January 2025, along with a scientific report and other supporting materials. The consensus statement from this effort was based on the best available scientific evidence. It addresses key questions and concerns about sugar and caffeine, two ingredients of growing concern due to the health harms of consuming too much in childhood and adolescence.

Both sets of recommendations were widely disseminated via professional conferences and meetings and in numerous print, radio, TV, and social media outlets. The HealthyDrinksHealthyKids.org website has had nearly 180,000 unique visitors and now offers more than 40 consumer-facing materials, including infographics, mini-graphics, social media graphics, one-pagers on specific beverage types, 11 videos, and a partner toolkit. Many of these materials are available in multiple languages.

The recommendations have been widely shared with providers and practitioners and have already led to significant changes in standards of practice and policy changes.

Notably, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry endorsed the recommendations and included them in the *Reference Manual for Pediatric Dentistry*, the primary practice resource for pediatric dentists in the U.S. HER also worked with the National WIC Association to support uptake of the recommendations across WIC clinics nationwide, exploring opportunities for including the 0-5 recommendations in WIC nutrition education visits.

HER and the four partner organizations submitted public comments to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services, urging incorporation of the beverage recommendations in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The 0-5 guidelines were cited in the final 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines.

HER has also used the guidelines as evidence in other opportunities to improve federal nutrition programs. For example, HER urged alignment with the 0-5 beverage recommendations as the USDA undertakes its congressionally mandated 10-year review for revising WIC, urging the removal of the state option to allow flavored milk in the WIC package. The 5-18 beverage recommendations were also instrumental in informing sugar limits for flavored milk served in school meals.

Given the focus of the recommendations on what beverages children should drink to support a healthy diet, as well as what to avoid, additional opportunities to inform future policy and systems changes abound.



Conclusion

Over the past 20 years, Healthy Eating Research has redefined the landscape of nutrition policy and research. HER has funded more than 400 research grants and convened 10 expert panels—resulting in more than 500 publications, landmark policy wins, and widespread adoption of HER guidelines. Through impactful and innovative research and fostering collaboration, HER has supported practice and policy changes that benefit millions of children and families.

As we look to the future, HER remains steadfast in our mission to promote health equity and ensure that all children can grow up healthy and nourished. HER has been a leader in times of uncertainty, producing rigorous, policy-relevant research when the stakes are high and driving bold, actionable guidance when others cannot. In our next chapter, we will continue to commission studies to accelerate critical research, translate research into tools for change, lead expert panels, and generate consensus among the field. Now is the moment to continue this momentum.



Program Staff



Mary Story PhD, RD serves as Program Director and is a Professor of Global Health and Community and Family Medicine at Duke University. She provides overall leadership and oversight to shape HER's vision and direction.



Megan Lott, MPH, RDN serves as Deputy Director and is based at the Duke Global Health Institute. In this role, she leads the development and execution of HER's strategic plan, manages collaborative initiatives, directs grant solicitations and selections, secures and oversees funding, represents the program at national forums and with key stakeholders, and organizes annual grantee conferences and meetings.



Senthil Ananthan, MPH, MBA serves as Research Analyst and is based at the Duke Global Health Institute. In this role, Senthil manages the HER commissioned research portfolio, assists with review processes for HER's funding opportunities, and coordinates the HER working groups.



Lauren Dawson, MPH serves as Senior Communications Manager and is based in the Division of Epidemiology and Community Health at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. In this role, Lauren manages HER's communications channels, including the website and social media accounts, program communications and dissemination activities, and the provision of communications-related technical assistance to grantees.



Erin Escobar, MPH serves as the Director of Operations and is based at the Duke Global Health Institute. In this role, Erin oversees scientific, administrative, and financial processes—including the grant application process—and provides ongoing technical assistance to grantees.



Lindsey Miller, MPH serves as Senior Research Analyst and is based at the Duke Global Health Institute. In this role, Lindsey provides leadership and expertise in the planning and organizing of research activities to support the mission of HER, overseeing commissioned research and HER special projects. She also assists with review processes for HER's funding opportunities and coordinates the HER working groups.



Vivien Needham serves as Program Coordinator and is based at the Duke Global Health Institute. In this role, Vivien provides administrative and operational support to the program and leads HER's fee for service, research support service, and scope of work contracts and agreements.