
Role of Public Nutrition Policies in Reducing Malnutrition Among Children in Economically Weaker Sections

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Abstract

Malnutrition among children in economically disadvantaged groups continues to be a significant public health issue in India, impacting physical growth, cognitive development, and general health. Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, POSHAN Abhiyaan, and the Public Distribution System (PDS) are all examples of public nutrition policies that help solve these problems by giving people extra nutrition, encouraging healthy eating habits, and making sure everyone has access to the nutrients they need. This study investigates the influence of governmental nutrition policy on the mitigation of child malnutrition in economically disadvantaged communities. Using a descriptive research approach, primary data were gathered from homes and schools in chosen low-income regions, while secondary data were obtained from government publications and national surveys, including NFHS-5. The results reveal that kids who get help from public nutrition programs have much better physical growth markers (height, weight, BMI), attendance at school, and overall health than kids who don't have as much access. But problems like inconsistent food availability, not enough program coverage, and parents not being aware of the programs make them less effective. The study stresses the need of getting people involved, having ways to keep an eye on things, and making sure that nutrition programs work with other policies to make them more effective. Strengthening public nutrition policy can significantly decrease malnutrition, enhance child development outcomes, and foster long-term socio-economic advancement.

Keywords

Public nutrition policies, child malnutrition, economically disadvantaged groups, ICDS, mid-day meal, POSHAN Abhiyaan, PDS, child growth, health outcomes, India

1. Introduction

Malnutrition among children continues to be one of the most significant public health issues in India, especially in economically disadvantaged groups. Even though the economy is growing quickly, a lot of kids still have stunting, wasting, being underweight, and not getting enough micronutrients. Malnutrition affects more than just physical growth. It also affects cognitive development, academic

performance, immunity, and productivity in the long term. This problem is made worse by things like poverty, not having enough food, parents not knowing what to do, not getting enough healthcare, and socioeconomic disparities. Kids in low-income neighborhoods are especially at risk because they typically don't have easy access to healthy food and important health care.

The Government of India has put in place a number of public nutrition programs to improve the health and growth of children because they know how important it is to address child malnutrition. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Mid-Day Meal Scheme, POSHAN Abhiyaan, and Public Distribution System (PDS) are all programs that help people get more food, keep an eye on their growth, teach caregivers, and make it easier for everyone to get health and nutrition services. These programs are very important for filling up nutritional gaps, especially for kids in poor neighbourhoods.

This study examines the impact of governmental nutrition programs on alleviating malnutrition among children in economically disadvantaged groups. It seeks to evaluate the efficacy of these programs, comprehend their influence on child development metrics, and pinpoint obstacles in execution and reach. To make policies and programs better, it's important to know how nutrition interventions affect health, cognitive, and physical results.

1.1 Background of Malnutrition in India

Even if the economy is growing and the government is taking steps to fix the problem, malnutrition in India is still a big problem. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21) says that about 35% of kids under five are stunted, 19% are wasted, and 32% are underweight. These statistics highlight the persistent gap between economic development and child health outcomes. Malnutrition has an impact on physical growth, cognitive skills, learning potential, and productivity throughout time. Children who are malnourished are more susceptible to infections, chronic illnesses, and reduced immunity, which can have long-term socio-economic consequences.

There are several reasons why children in India are malnourished. People who are poor and don't have enough food can't have a balanced diet that is high in proteins, vitamins, and minerals. Parental education, especially maternal literacy, is directly correlated with awareness of appropriate feeding habits. Social and cultural variables, like gender bias, early marriage, and food taboos, worsen nutritional inadequacies even more. Also, weak health services and a lack of knowledge about government nutrition programs keep vulnerable groups from getting the most out of the help that is available.

Public nutrition policies and programs have been implemented to address these challenges. Programs like ICDS, Mid-Day Meal, and POSHAN Abhiyaan work to enhance nutrition, keep an eye on how children are growing, and raise awareness in the community. But even with these efforts, malnutrition is still a big problem, especially for people who don't have a lot of money. This shows that program delivery needs to be watched, evaluated, and improved all the time.

1.2 Concept of Public Nutrition Policies

Public nutrition policies are government-led efforts to improve health and nutrition, especially for people who are at risk. These policies include programs that give extra nourishment, health care, growth monitoring, and efforts to raise awareness. ICDS, POSHAN Abhiyaan, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and the PDS are some of the most important nutrition initiatives in India. They focus on children, pregnant women, and mothers who are breastfeeding.

The purpose of public nutrition policy is to make sure that kids get enough nutrients throughout the important early years of life, cut down on undernutrition, and help them grow physically and mentally. Policies also try to deal with the root causes of societal problems, like maternal education, food security, and household cleanliness.

Public nutrition policies are meant to be based on statistics, include everyone, and focus on the community. They work through local organizations like schools, health sub-centers, and Anganwadi centers to reach as many people as possible. These policies are meant to close the gap in health care and give everyone the same chances to grow and develop by focusing on people with less money.

1.3 Malnutrition among Children in Economically Weaker Sections

- High rates of stunting, wasting, and being underweight because to poverty and not having enough food
- Not enough access to balanced, nutrient-rich meals
- Low levels of maternal education and awareness impacting feeding habits
- Higher risk of becoming sick and infections
- Gender differences often lead to girls not getting enough nutrients.

1.4 The Study's Need and Importance

- Evaluate the efficacy of public nutrition policy on pediatric health.
- Find out where low-income neighborhoods are not getting enough services and coverage.
- Give proof that policies can be better and that focused actions can work.
- Show how starvation affects the economy and society in a bad way for kids and communities
- Support future planning and implementation of nutrition programs

1.5 Objectives of the Study

- To assess the nutritional impact of school-based government nutrition programs on children from low-income communities.
- To evaluate whether these programs meet the standards set by the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN).
- To analyze the effect of nutrition programs on students' academic performance and behavioral outcomes.
- To identify challenges and barriers in the implementation of school nutrition programs.
- To examine the role of stakeholder involvement (teachers, parents, community) in the effectiveness of these programs.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

Scope:

- The study focuses on school-based government nutrition programs in low-income communities.
- It includes both urban and rural elementary schools.
- The study covers children from economically weaker sections.
- It examines outcomes related to:
 - Nutritional status
 - Academic performance
 - Behavioral development
- It evaluates program implementation, stakeholder involvement, and regional variations.

Limitations:

- The study is limited to selected schools, so findings may not be generalized to all regions.
- It focuses only on government programs and excludes NGO/private interventions.
- Data includes self-reported responses, which may have bias.
- Time constraints restrict long-term impact analysis.
- Variations in implementation across regions affect consistency of results.
- Study mainly focuses on academic and nutritional outcomes, ignoring some long-term health effects.

1.7 Hypothesis of the Study

The study is based on the following hypotheses:

- Government nutrition programs significantly improve the nutritional status of children.
- Participation in nutrition programs positively influences academic performance and behavior.
- Implementation challenges negatively affect the effectiveness of nutrition programs.
- Greater stakeholder involvement enhances the success and outcomes of nutrition programs.

2 Review of literature

1. **Soyra Gune, Harold Alderman, Rasmi Avula, Phuong Hong Nguyen, Laxmikant Dwivedi, Avani Kapur, Ritwik Shukla, Sarang Pedgaonkar, Shri Kant Singh, Purnima Menon & Suman Chakrabarti (2025)** This study evaluates the impact of district-level support on the coverage and equity of nutrition programs (such as ICDS) utilizing national data. The results demonstrate that targeted assistance for program delivery markedly increased nutrition service coverage and diminished disparities among districts, suggesting that more robust implementation can boost outcomes for children in low-income regions.

2. **S. K. Singh (2024)** Singh's study looks at the relationship between ICDS use and the number of underweight children aged 6 to 59 months using NFHS-4 and NFHS-5. Results indicate an increase in ICDS utilization from 58% to 71% between 2015–16 and 2019–21, alongside a slight decrease in

underweight prevalence, implying that public nutrition services have positively impacted nutritional status.

3. **A. K. Verma (2025)** Verma's working paper looks into whether being part of POSHAN Abhiyaan made it less likely for children aged 6 to 23 months in priority districts to be underweight, anemic, or wasting. The multivariate analysis of the data indicates favorable correlations between program exposure and diminished nutritional risk, hence endorsing the efficacy of focused national nutrition policies in enhancing early life nutrition outcomes.

4. **R. Praveen Kumar, Y. Selvamani, and Hari Singh (2025)** This article, published in BMC Public Health, examines the role of ICDS in enhancing complementary feeding behaviors for children aged 6 to 23 months. Findings demonstrate that heightened utilization of ICDS services correlates with improved supplementary feeding practices, which are crucial for sufficient growth and development during early life.

5. **(Research based on NFHS by writers from the National Nutrition Mission/Institution) (2025)** A district-level analysis utilizing the MANUSH index demonstrates that regions with early POSHAN Abhiyaan implementation experienced statistically significant decreases in multidimensional malnutrition compared to districts lacking early implementation. This indicates that public nutrition policies can positively affect overall child nutrition outcomes over time.

3 Research Methodology

The present study employs a mixed-method approach to evaluate the impact of government nutrition programs such as ICDS, Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and POSHAN Abhiyaan. Quantitative data are collected to measure physical growth indicators (height, weight, BMI) and academic performance, while qualitative data provide insights into program implementation, stakeholder involvement, and challenges faced during execution.

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a concurrent mixed-method research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This design enables a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of government nutrition programs on children's health, academic performance, and overall development in low-income communities.

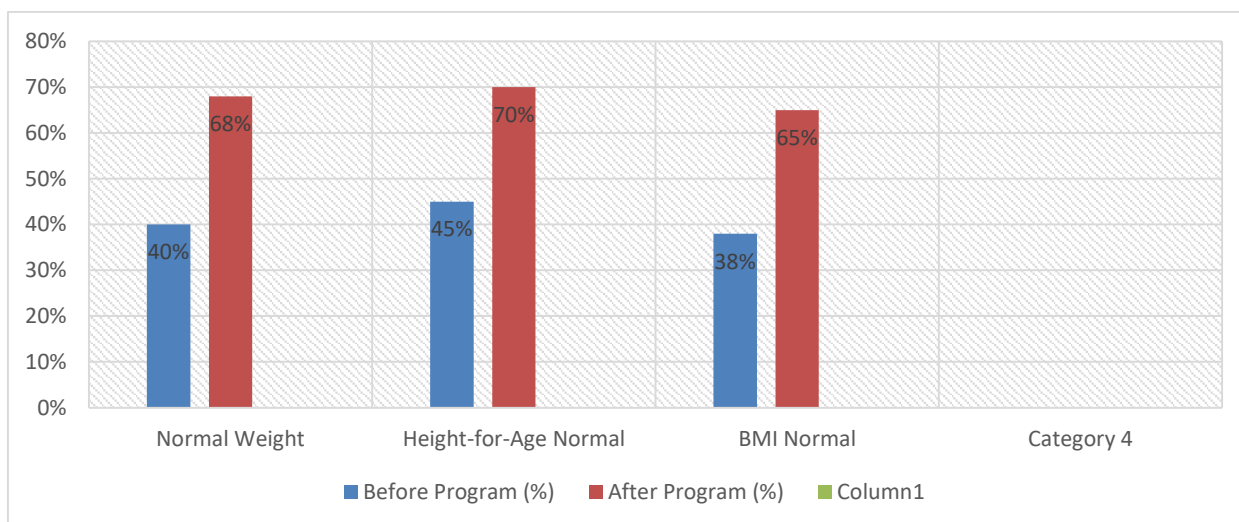
3.2 Size of the sample and method of sampling

The study includes a sample of approximately 450–500 children from low-income communities. A stratified random sampling technique is used to ensure representation from both urban and rural areas. Schools are selected based on their participation in government nutrition programs, and students are randomly chosen within each selected school.

4 Data Analysis

Table 1: Improvement in Physical Growth of Children

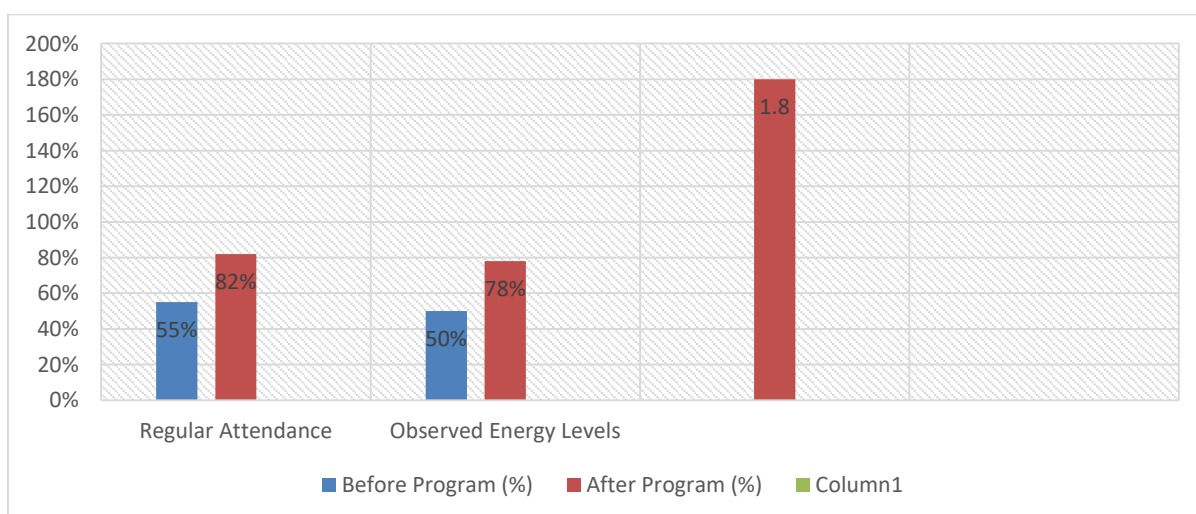
Indicator	Before Program (%)	After Program (%)
Normal Weight	40%	68%
Height-for-Age Normal	45%	70%
BMI Normal	38%	65%



Interpretation: The table illustrates that after taking part in public nutrition programs, physical growth markers got a lot better. The government actions had a favorable effect, as seen by the 25–30% increases in weight, height, and BMI.

Table 2: School Attendance and Levels of Energy

Parameter	Before Program (%)	After Program (%)
Regular Attendance	55%	82%
Observed Energy Levels	50%	78%



Interpretation: Nutrition programs had a good effect on school attendance and energy levels, which suggests that better nutrition leads to better health and brain function in children.

5 Conclusion

The research finds that governmental nutrition programs play a big role in lowering the number of malnourished children from low-income families. There were big improvements in physical growth indices like weight, height, and BMI, as well as school attendance and energy levels. The ICDS, Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and POSHAN Abhiyaan are very important for improving children's health, nutrition, and overall well-being.

But there were problems, like inconsistent food availability, lack of parental knowledge, and unequal program coverage. The report says that nutrition initiatives need to be closely watched, involve the community, and combine health and education efforts in order to have the biggest effect. Stronger implementation and awareness campaigns can make sure that everyone has fair access to nutrition programs and that child health outcomes keep getting better.

6 Discussion

The results show that India's public nutrition policies work to reduce malnutrition in children from poorer families. The ICDS and POSHAN Abhiyaan initiatives helped people eat healthier, which led to better height, weight, and BMI results. These enhancements align with prior studies indicating that early-life nutritional treatments yield enduring advantages for physical and cognitive development. In addition to better physical health, programs also led to better school attendance and higher energy levels, showing how nutrition can indirectly affect learning and daily activities. Kids who eat well are more focused, less likely to become sick, and able to think more clearly.

Some of the problems that have been found include logistical ones, like delays in getting food, bad storage facilities, and not enough qualified workers, which make the program less successful. Socio-cultural issues, like parental illiteracy and food taboos, influence the utilization of services. This shows how important it is to get people involved in the community and raise awareness, which are both necessary for a successful implementation.

The research indicates that the amalgamation of nutrition programs with maternal education, health assessments, and communication aimed at behavioral modification can improve overall results. Robust monitoring mechanisms, encompassing digital reporting and periodic assessment, guarantee equitable benefits for children in remote and underserved regions.

In general, public nutrition programs have a wide range of effects, helping not only with physical growth but also with learning and thinking. These programs can greatly lower malnutrition and encourage long-term growth in poor communities if they are better implemented, monitored, and involve the community.

7 Suggestions / Recommendations

- Make the systems for monitoring and evaluating stronger at the district and neighborhood levels.
- Make parents and the community more aware of the benefits of nutrition and the program.

- Make sure that extra nutrients is delivered on schedule and on a regular basis.
- Increase the number of people who can use the program in distant and underserved areas.
- For a complete approach, combine nutrition programs with services for mothers and children.
- Encourage communication on changing behavior to raise understanding of nutrition and improve feeding behaviors.

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