

## Is the US infant formula shortage an avoidable crisis?



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Since February, 2022, there has been an acute shortage of commercial milk formula in the USA. This shortage is the result of the recall of several products manufactured by Abbott Nutrition, the largest manufacturer of infant formula in the USA, due to bacterial contamination and shutdown of their Michigan plant.<sup>1</sup> The out-of-stock rate for commercial milk formula reached 43% for the week ending May 8, 2022, and in six states more than half of infant formula was sold out.<sup>2</sup> Desperate parents face huge uncertainty and hungry, crying babies. Socioeconomically vulnerable families are hardest hit by this crisis, because Abbott Nutrition is the main supplier of commercial milk formula to low-income families in the USA through state benefit programmes, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). About half of infant formula nationwide is purchased by participants using WIC benefits; therefore, this shortage poses a direct threat to the health and survival of these most nutritionally vulnerable infants.<sup>3</sup>

This crisis has exposed the risk inherent in an infant feeding culture reliant on commercial milk formula produced and marketed by a few consolidated transnational corporations and with considerable political backing.<sup>4</sup> The shortage of infant formula could have been avoided with a more enabling and resilient infant feeding environment.

During the past two decades global formula milk sales have increased, with the industry estimated to be worth US\$55 billion per annum<sup>5</sup> (\$3.6 billion in the USA<sup>6</sup>). This industry growth is linked to exploitative, aggressive, and misleading infant formula marketing practices that negatively impact decisions about infant feeding<sup>5</sup> and have eroded breastfeeding in marginalised and low-income groups.<sup>7</sup>

As far back as 1981, the World Health Assembly adopted the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes (the Code) to regulate the marketing of commercial milk formula. The USA is one of only 14 high-income countries without legal measures to enact the Code.<sup>8</sup> More than 40 years later, uninhibited commercial milk formula marketing, including algorithm-driven targeted digital advertising,<sup>5</sup> contributes to the normalisation of infant formula, the continual increase in formula sales, and the undervaluation of breastfeeding promotion and support.

The USA is the only high-income country with no statutory national paid maternity leave, resulting in many women not initiating or discontinuing breastfeeding before they return to work.<sup>9</sup> This situation is an indictment against one of the most powerful countries in the world. As summarised by the 2016 *Lancet* Breastfeeding Series, “success in breastfeeding is not the sole responsibility of a woman—the promotion of breastfeeding is a collective societal responsibility”.<sup>10</sup> Insufficient support for breastfeeding is a major contributor to the USA having one of the lowest exclusive breastfeeding rates in the world at only 26%, below the WHO target of 50% of infants younger than 6 months.<sup>11</sup>

Most proposed solutions to the commercial milk formula shortage fail to consider measures to increase breastfeeding and access to breastmilk. In a media statement on May 12, 2022, US President Joe Biden announced steps to improve formula supply, including simplifying product offerings, calling on state attorneys general to monitor and address price gouging and predatory behaviour in the market, and increasing imports.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, when the American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) provided tips for what parents should do if they could not find formula, its recommendations included checking smaller stores, buying formula online, switching formula brand, and checking social media groups for advice on where to find supplies.<sup>12</sup> As one of the most influential sources of paediatric information in the USA, the AAP has a stark conflict of interest, since it



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receives substantial financial support from commercial formula producers.<sup>13,14</sup>

These responses to the shortage do not recognise the need to reduce demand for infant formula. They ignore immediately implementable, best practice, sustainable actions such as promoting and supporting breastfeeding, relactation, and scaling up human milk banking. Human milk banking is gaining increased attention with the growing awareness of potential harm from commercial milk formula, as highlighted by lawsuits against Abbott Laboratories and Mead Johnson that claim the companies did not warn about the increased risk of necrotising enterocolitis in preterm infants fed Enfamil or Similac compared with those fed human milk.<sup>15,16</sup> Relactation and increased donation of excess breastmilk to Human Milk Banking Association of North America accredited milk banks would help to minimise the effect of this shortage and are included among the recommendations of the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine.<sup>17</sup>

Breastfeeding has substantial benefits for children, women, society, and the environment. The total future cost (health system, mortality, and cognitive) attributed to not breastfeeding for the USA is estimated at \$115 billion.<sup>18</sup> The costs of burgeoning formula milk manufacture on the environment also need to be considered as global concerns of climate change and water shortage loom large.<sup>19</sup>

Urgent attention to address the upstream determinants of low breastfeeding rates should include efforts to improve maternity protection, legislate breastfeeding-friendly workplaces, and enact tighter regulations on commercial milk formula marketing. The continued commercialisation of infant nutrition is not a sustainable long-term option. For the future health of children, societies, and the planet, the trajectory must shift towards creating a more enabling environment for women to breastfeed and for infants to receive optimal nutrition.

We declare no competing interests.

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