

ACHIEVING FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOLUTIONS

Food and nutrition insecurity are interrelated challenges that threaten America's health, economy, productivity, and national security.

Nearly **34 million Americans** experience **food insecurity** (about 10% of U.S. households). This burden **disproportionately falls on people of color** and **people living in rural communities**. In addition to mental and financial stress, food insecurity also perpetuates health inequities through a cycle of poor nutrition and **higher risk** of developing diet-related diseases like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.

In addition, **nutrition insecurity** is widespread throughout the United States. Based on the Healthy Eating Index (HEI), an indicator of overall diet quality, Americans have a failing grade on nutrition: an average score of **58 out of 100** for the population ages 2 years and older. Youth ages 5 to 18 years have HEI scores below the population average, and no single population subgroup in the nation (i.e., **age, sex, income, or race/ethnicity**) has an average score above 65.

- Poor nutrition is the **number one cause** of poor health in America, causing more than 500,000 annual deaths due to diet-related cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and cancers.
- Poor nutrition is estimated to cause **\$1.1 trillion** in annual economic losses due to healthcare costs and lost productivity from diet-related diseases.

- **Food insecurity:** a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food
- **Nutrition insecurity:** lack of consistent, equitable access to healthy, safe, and affordable foods that promote optimal health and well-being

Need for a Joint Policy Focus on Food and Nutrition Security

These interrelated challenges call for sensible, actionable, “double duty” strategies that promote both food and nutrition security.

National organizations such as the **American Heart Association**, the **American College of Physicians**, and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics have called for improving nutrition security to increase the health and well-being of all Americans. **USDA** and **CDC** are also prioritizing actions to advance nutrition security in the United States, such as through providing nutrition support throughout all stages of life; connecting all Americans to healthy, safe, affordable food sources; developing, translating, and enacting science through partnership; and prioritizing equity.

It's time to leverage existing federal investments that can jointly improve food and nutrition security.

To address the issue of food insecurity in the United States, the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers 16 **nutrition assistance programs** for qualifying individuals and families. The three largest of those programs are:

- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which serves around **41 million** individuals each month. SNAP includes the **Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program** (GusNIP), which conducts pilot produce prescription programs and other evaluations of nutrition incentives.
- The National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, which serve more than **30 million** and **14 million** children, respectively, each year. Stronger nutrition standards and the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) – which allows schools with high poverty rates to offer free breakfast and lunch to students – allow these programs to increase student access to nutritious meals.
- The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, serving 6.2 million individuals each month, includes a cash value benefit program that provides participants with additional dollars to spend on fruits and vegetables each month, helping to advance food and nutrition security.

Numerous barriers – including mental and financial stress, lack of broadband access and lack of proper program outreach and education, and more – prevent these programs from reaching all who qualify, and the programs would benefit millions more Americans if all eligible individuals were able to participate.

Example: Opportunity for Jointly Promoting Food and Nutrition Security

The Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (**GusNIP**) provides incentives for SNAP participants to purchase fruits and vegetables with their Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) benefits.

Only **3.7%** of SNAP beneficiaries participate in GusNIP due to the requirement that GusNIP grantees match all federal resources with local resources, the need for increased technical assistance for applicants and programs, consumer confusion, and other factors. If the program's reach increases, total fruit and vegetable consumption is expected to increase substantially.

KEY POLICY SOLUTIONS FOR FEDERAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS:



- USDA and Congress should improve federal nutrition program convenience and benefit flexibilities for participants of EBT-based programs (e.g., SNAP and WIC) to increase participation and allow the programs to better promote food and nutrition security including by permanently making SNAP online purchasing available in all states and by approving a **proposed rule** to remove barriers to internet-based transactions, expanding food delivery technologies in WIC.



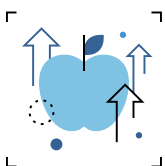
- Congress should allocate at least double the funding for the GusNIP program and decrease or eliminate the non-federal matching requirements for grantees in lower-resourced communities in order to encourage additional participation.
- Congress should require that USDA regularly collect, analyze, and report SNAP purchasing data in order to analyze the nutritious value of food acquired by participants and non-participants at state and national levels, and to identify the levels of nutrition security, nutrition insecurity, and very low nutrition security among participants and non-participants.
 - A biennial collection of data using science-based metrics, collected at the aggregate level and made available for public use with all participant and store-level identifiers removed, will help policymakers and researchers understand the impact of efforts to support nutrition security, and adjust and improve those efforts as appropriate.



- USDA should further strengthen and align school meal nutrition standards with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) by finalizing provisions in the 2023 proposed rule, Child Nutrition Programs: Revisions to Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, such as those that establish new added sugars standards and gradual reductions on sodium limits in school meals.



- USDA, possibly in partnership with NIH, should examine relationships between each of the federal nutrition programs and nutrition and health outcomes and use the findings to strengthen these programs.



- USDA and Congress should encourage and fund multiple rigorous pilot programs in SNAP to evaluate methods to both reduce food insecurity and increase nutrition security. Pilot programs should seek to establish collaboration between the public and private sectors and should consider options including:
 - Combining incentives for healthy food purchases and disincentives for unhealthy food purchases (e.g., piloting a fruit and vegetable incentive combined with a sugary beverage reduction strategy at the point of purchase). A combination of incentives and disincentives is cost neutral for the program, providing a practical budgetary solution to improve nutrition security while maintaining choice among SNAP participants.
 - Allowing the purchase of hot and prepared foods consistent with DGA recommendations.
 - Increasing use of mobile technology and online-remote retail applications.



Pilots should consider the perspectives of SNAP participants in both the design and evaluation, including assessment of reach, interest in enrollment, stigma, dignity, satisfaction, food security, nutrition security, health, program costs, and health care utilization.

- Congress should provide free, nutritious school meals for all children in K-12 schools, eliminating stigma for students and burdensome paperwork for schools. Congress and USDA can also increase access to healthy school meals by expanding CEP eligibility, converting reduced price eligibility to free meals eligibility, and supporting school kitchen equipment and culinary training for scratch cooking.