



This report summarizes how the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is leveraging its existing authorities, resources, and touchpoints to support nutrition security with a primary focus on activities from the USDA Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services Mission Area. We look forward to working with stakeholders to achieve this vision through improving diet quality, strengthening the public health impacts of the Federal nutrition assistance programs, and advancing racial equity.

Promoting both food and nutrition security is a core priority for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and supports the Biden administration's whole-of-government approach to improve health and wellness, reduce diet-related chronic diseases, and advance health equity.

## WHAT IS NUTRITION SECURITY?

Nutrition security builds on food security, emphasizing the co-existence of food insecurity and diet-related diseases and disparities.

A household is [food secure](#) if all members, at all times, can access enough food for an active, healthy life.<sup>1</sup> At a minimum, food security includes:

- Readily available nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and
- The ability to acquire those foods in socially acceptable ways (without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies).

Nutrition security, in turn, means consistent access, availability, and affordability of foods and beverages that promote well-being, prevent disease, and, if needed, treat disease, particularly among racial/ethnic minority populations, lower income populations, and rural and remote populations including Tribal communities and Insular areas.<sup>2</sup> Nutrition security is an emerging concept that complements efforts to increase food security while also:

- Recognizing that Americans, in general, fall short of an active, healthy lifestyle, aligned with our Nation's dietary and physical activity guidelines, and
- Emphasizing that we apply an equity lens to ensure our efforts to promote access, availability, and affordability to foods and beverages serve all populations and address the connection between food insecurity and diet-related chronic diseases.

## WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM?

Poor nutrition is a [leading cause](#) of illness in the United States and is responsible for more than 600,000 deaths per year, or more than 40,000 each month.<sup>3</sup> More than 4 in 10 American adults have obesity.<sup>4</sup> One in two has diabetes or prediabetes.<sup>5</sup> And the problem is getting worse. Obesity and type 2 diabetes are rising among children,<sup>6</sup> with current estimates indicating most American children will have obesity by the time they are 35 years old.<sup>7</sup>

Poor nutrition is widespread. The overall diet quality score for Americans is [59 out of 100](#), indicating that the average American diet does not align with Federal dietary recommendations.<sup>8</sup> However, the resulting health burden is [not equally shared](#).<sup>9</sup> Certain populations are at greater risk for diet-related disease. For example, Black and Indigenous children are more likely to have obesity than their white peers. Those who face food insecurity are also at greater risk.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond the effect on health, poor nutrition and diet-related diseases have far-reaching impacts including decreased academic achievement<sup>11</sup> and increased financial stress.<sup>12</sup> That translates to societal impacts as well – lower productivity,<sup>13</sup> weakened military readiness,<sup>14</sup> widening health disparities,<sup>15</sup> and skyrocketing health care costs.<sup>16</sup> For example, approximately [85 percent of current health care spending](#) is related to management of diet-related chronic disease.<sup>17</sup>

To make progress on these problems, Americans will need access to healthy foods that promote well-being in an equitable way.



## WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN FOOD AND NUTRITION INSECURITY?

There is a strong association between food insecurity and poor nutrition, with individuals who report being most food insecure also at a higher risk of developing diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. Food security focuses on ensuring that everyone has enough to eat, while nutrition security ensures that everyone receives and consumes calories that contribute to their overall health. Moreover, estimates suggest that as many as a third of cancer cases could be prevented with diet and nutrition alone. USDA's nutrition assistance programs can play an important role in decreasing that risk.

## WHY NOW?

The COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic brought health disparities and the vital need for access to healthy food to the forefront.<sup>18</sup> In 2020, 1 in 10 households – or more than 38 million Americans – experienced food insecurity, with rates among Black (21.7 percent) and Latinx (17.2 percent) households triple and double that of white households (7.1 percent).<sup>19</sup> Further, [one study](#) estimated that nearly two-thirds of COVID-19 hospitalization in the United States were related to obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and heart failure,<sup>20</sup> all of which are chronic diseases associated with a lack of access to and consumption of healthy foods.<sup>21</sup>

However, health disparities have been around since long before the pandemic. They exist largely because of long-standing structural racism and policies that have increased disease risk and reduced opportunities for a healthy life among certain populations.<sup>22</sup> One example is the maternal morbidity and mortality disparities that Black women face, which are among the highest in the developed world and driven in part by factors like limited access to quality maternal care and lower rates of health insurance.<sup>23</sup> Another example is access to quality food, which is a much larger problem in neighborhoods where the residents are predominantly those with lower incomes and/or racial/ethnic minorities.<sup>24</sup>

Given the breadth and severity of the impacts of diet-related diseases and corresponding disparities, this is, fundamentally, a problem we simply cannot ignore. Without question, promoting food and nutrition security is critical to recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, improving health outcomes, and addressing health disparities to help give all Americans a chance for a healthy future.

## WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

USDA aims to leverage all of our assets, in conjunction with those of other Federal agencies, to support progress towards healthier eating patterns in an equitable way. Specifically, we are working within USDA and across the Federal Government with partners such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to elevate and promote nutrition security to help ensure *all* Americans have consistent access to the safe, healthy, affordable food essential to optimal health and well-being.

## WHAT ARE WE DOING?

USDA's work to advance nutrition security focuses on four pillars. Research and evaluation are critical components of each of these pillars, ensuring all that we do is driven by research, grounded in science, and informed by analysis and evaluation. This commitment is woven into our policies, informs each of our decisions, strengthens our management of the Federal nutrition assistance programs, and most importantly, impacts every life we touch.

In addition, FNS is committed to furthering our collective understanding of these key issues around the co-existence of food insecurity and diet-related diseases by continuing to make public-use datasets for its major studies available to the research community and working with its Federal partners to support additional opportunities for analysis and learning.

### MEANINGFUL SUPPORT: PROVIDING NUTRITION SUPPORT THROUGHOUT ALL STAGES OF LIFE.

USDA is fostering healthy eating for our program participants across all life stages—with a special focus on young children – through actions like:

- **Ensuring benefits are adequate to support healthy eating patterns.** USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) reevaluated the [Thrifty Food Plan](#), which serves as the basis for calculating Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. This action resulted in the first **permanent increase to the purchasing power of SNAP benefits** since the Thrifty Food Plan was introduced 45 years ago and will better support healthy eating.
- **Updating program nutrition standards to reflect the latest nutrition science.** USDA's National School Lunch Program, Summer Food Service Program, and Child and Adult Care Food Program **provide critical nutrition to tens of millions of children every day**, while exposing them to healthy foods and nurturing healthy habits they can carry throughout their lives. FNS is working to update the nutrition standards in school meals to reflect the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025 (DGA)*. We are also updating the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food package based on the latest DGA and to implement recommendations by the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to **ensure the food package continues to provide high-quality nutrition** to women who are pregnant and postpartum, infants, and children up to 5 years of age who are at nutritional risk. Together, these actions will ensure the foods that participants receive through WIC and the child nutrition programs facilitate nutrition and good health.



### WHY IS IT CRITICAL TO ESTABLISH GOOD NUTRITION HABITS EARLY?

Establishing healthy behaviors to prevent diet-related disease is easier and more effective during childhood and adolescence than trying to change unhealthy behaviors during adulthood. Until recently, young children and teens almost never developed type 2 diabetes, which is why it used to be called adult-onset diabetes. Now, about 1 in 5 American youth have obesity, a problem closely related to the increase in children with type 2 diabetes. Research indicates that COVID-19 led to accelerated increases in children's weight. This is likely attributed to lower participation in the USDA school meals programs, increased sedentary behaviors, and less physical activity during school closures.

## MEANINGFUL SUPPORT: PROVIDING NUTRITION SUPPORT THROUGHOUT ALL STAGES OF LIFE. (CONT.)

- **Delivering high-quality nutrition education.** FNS funds various nutrition education efforts that reflect the recommendations of the DGA. For example, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) provides direct education to SNAP-eligible populations. SNAP-Ed also supports activities intended to shape policies, practices, and physical environments to support healthy eating. Such efforts are widely considered the most effective strategies for creating large-scale improvements to the food environment and addressing food security, reducing chronic disease, and promoting health equity. **SNAP-Ed is available in all 50 States, the District of Columbia, and 2 U.S. territories (U.S. Virgin Islands and Guam) and is delivered through a network of 168 implementing agencies, leveraging approximately 37,000 local partnerships.** In fiscal year (FY) 2021, SNAP-Ed allocated \$431 million to States with the goal of helping those participating in or eligible for SNAP lead healthier lives.
- **Providing breastfeeding promotion and support.** Breastfeeding is the best source of nutrition for most infants and could also reduce the risk for certain health conditions for both infants and mothers. In FY 2021, WIC provided nutrition counseling and breastfeeding promotion and support to about 1.4 million breastfeeding participants through 9,000 WIC clinics across the country. **In the last two decades, the percentage of infants participating in WIC who were breastfed increased from 50.2 percent to 71.8 percent.** The percentage of women enrolled in WIC who initiate breastfeeding has also increased significantly over the last two decades; however, disparities persist. For example, the breastfeeding rate among Black women continues to be about 10 percentage points lower than white women. Continued efforts are needed to eliminate this racial disparity by removing any barriers to the supports provided by WIC.

## HEALTHY FOOD: CONNECTING ALL AMERICANS WITH HEALTHY, SAFE, AFFORDABLE FOOD.

Improving what Americans eat significantly reduces diet-related chronic diseases and disparities. Therefore, USDA is expanding access to and increasing consumption of healthy and nutritious food for all Americans through tactics like:

- **Promoting and supporting fruit and vegetable consumption.** Eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables can help reduce the risk of many leading causes of illness and death, such as type 2 diabetes and obesity. However, only [1 in 10 adults](#) get enough fruit or vegetables. In FY 2021, the American Rescue Plan Act temporarily increased the WIC monthly cash-value benefit, used to purchase fruits and vegetables, to \$35 for women and children for up to 4 months. The FY 2022 Continuing Resolution extended that increase, shifting the amounts to \$25 for children, \$43 for women who are pregnant and postpartum, and \$47 for women who are fully and partially breastfeeding, substantially higher than the standard amount of \$9 for children and \$11 for women. **This boost increases the purchasing power of WIC participants so that they can buy and consume more healthy fruits and vegetables.** In addition, the **Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP)** provides free fresh fruits and vegetables to children at eligible elementary schools during the school day as well as nutrition education. The program introduces kids to a variety of produce they otherwise might not have the opportunity to try. Students at schools that participate in FFVP consume approximately one-third of a cup more fruits and vegetables on FFVP days than their peers at schools not participating in FFVP.<sup>25</sup> FNS provided **more than \$230 million to State agencies** to support FFVP in FY 2022.
- **Using incentive programs to promote access to healthy eating.** USDA administers several incentive programs to encourage the purchase of nutritious foods, including the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) and the Healthy Fluid Milk Incentive pilot program. In the second year of GusNIP, participants redeemed **more than \$20 million in nutrition incentives.** GusNIP participants also reported increased fruit and vegetable intake and improvements in food security. In addition, USDA's Rural Development administers the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which provides resources to retailers to help them overcome the higher costs and initial barriers to selling healthy foods in areas with inequitable access.
- **Providing USDA Foods directly to people in need.** FNS provides **nutritious, 100 percent domestic USDA Foods** for use in several nutrition assistance programs, including The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, and the school meal programs. **FNS helps participants select and use the healthy options provided by these programs** through a wide range of educational products such as culturally appropriate recipes, information sheets, and resource libraries.

## COLLABORATIVE ACTION: DEVELOPING, TRANSLATING, AND ENACTING NUTRITION SCIENCE THROUGH PARTNERSHIP.

USDA is working to integrate nutrition science into policy, systems, and environments to set people up for success. In doing so, we are collaborating with health professionals, the food and retailer industry, and other key stakeholders to create and maximize partnerships that leverage nutrition science in increasingly culturally relevant and contextually sensitive ways such as:

- **Updating and building the evidence base for dietary guidance.** FNS and its partners at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services regularly update the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* – which form the basis of Federal nutrition policy, education, outreach, and food assistance – to reflect the latest nutrition science. The 2025-2030 edition of the DGA will be released by the end of 2025. As we work toward that goal, we also recognize that in America, dietary guidance has historically been built on a population-wide approach, with little distinction between the needs of specific subpopulations and life stages. Therefore, **we are exploring existing opportunities and new research investments to enhance our understanding of the diversity of nutritional needs and their relationship to health.**
- **Translating the latest DGAs into information consumers can use.** Effective nutrition education materials that lead to increased knowledge and/or a change in behaviors requires meeting people where they are with messages that are clear, relevant, and appropriate for the intended audience. Shop Simple with MyPlate is a web-based tool that **helps Americans save money while shopping for healthy food choices.** Consumers can use this tool to quickly find savings in their local area by entering their zip code and discovering new ways to prepare budget-friendly foods based on MyPlate, the consumer-friendly translation of the DGA.
- **Equipping child nutrition program operators.** FNS's Team Nutrition initiative provides training, technical assistance, meal planning resources, and grants to enable child nutrition program operators to prepare and serve nutritious meals that appeal to children. In FY 2021, Team Nutrition awarded **\$5.5 million in grants to help 21 States increase local foods in school meals.** The FY2022 Team Nutrition Training Grants will be awarded to help States equip the school nutrition workforce to provide appealing and nutritious school meals that support the latest nutrition standards through mentoring, training, nutrition education, and more. In addition, the **Child Nutrition Recipe Box** provides program operators with recipes to prepare healthy and delicious meals that meet school nutrition requirements. Team Nutrition recently released four new training presentations for the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). These presentations, available in English and Spanish, are interactive 30-minute trainings that can be used by State agencies, sponsoring organizations, and others to train providers, operators, and menu planners on the CACFP meal requirements. FNS is also proposing **a new \$100 million grant program to incentivize healthy school food.**
- **Working with industry to help tailor products to our programs.** The food industry plays a critical role in strengthening access to nutritious foods for school meals. To help facilitate updates to the school meal standards, **FNS is engaging with industry to support the production of nutritious foods for the K-12 market,** including, for example, products meeting the updated targets for sodium and whole grains.

## EQUITABLE SYSTEMS: PRIORITIZING EQUITY EVERY STEP OF THE WAY

Disparities in diet-related diseases are rooted in long-standing historical inequities. To help tackle these systemic issues, USDA is advancing nutrition security in an equitable way that supports resilient, sustainable food systems for *all*. USDA's efforts support President Joe Biden's [directive](#) to pursue comprehensive approaches to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality.<sup>26</sup> USDA is accomplishing this with efforts such as:

- **Strengthening support to Native American/Tribal School food programs.** FNS is collaborating with the Institute of Child Nutrition to identify needs and strategies for **trainings and resources for school nutrition professionals working with Tribal Nations and communities.** USDA's Office of Tribal Relations also recently launched the [Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative](#), which promotes traditional food ways, Indian Country food and agriculture markets, and Indigenous health through foods tailored to American Indian/Alaska Native dietary needs.



### WHAT ARE THE INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN NUTRITION SECURITY AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY?

Historically underserved and marginalized communities experience disproportionately higher rates of food insecurity, and as a result, may lose important connections to traditional and cultural foods.

Food sovereignty refers to a community's ability to restore self determination over the quantity and quality of the food they eat by controlling how their food is produced and distributed. This creates closed loop, resilient food systems that can sustain communities independently. Farm to table, community gardening, and farm to school programs are all examples of food sovereignty initiatives and can help support long-term health, economic stability, and cultural preservation.

USDA fosters food sovereignty through efforts including the USDA Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative, which supports Tribal Nations' efforts to build and protect the Indigenous food systems that have long sustained their citizens, communities, and cultures.

This includes promoting traditional food ways, Indian Country food and agriculture markets, and Indigenous health through foods tailored to their specific dietary needs.

## EQUITABLE SYSTEMS: PRIORITIZING EQUITY EVERY STEP OF THE WAY (CONT.)

- **Expanding online shopping options for SNAP and WIC participants.** People who live in [food deserts](#) have limited access to affordable, nutritious food. Online ordering is a way to help expand access to healthy food for these individuals. It also helps break down barriers for marginalized communities who fear facing discrimination or stigma with in-person shopping. As of March 2022, **SNAP benefits can be used online in 47 States and the District of Columbia**, and we continue to work closely with our partners to add more States and retailers and increase convenience. Additionally, USDA is working to **expand online ordering and transactions in WIC to bring these shopping innovations to participants, improving the overall shopping experience and increasing equity in the program.**
- **Bridging language barriers to nutrition education resources and recipes.** FNS is doubling down on efforts to ensure key nutrition education resources are available in other languages. For example, we're developing **63 Spanish-language publications** for child nutrition operators and **80 standardized recipe resources** to facilitate meals that meet our nutrition standards. We're also working with the Institute of Child Nutrition to launch **a Spanish-language version of the popular Child Nutrition Recipe Box website** for schools and childcare providers, supporting additional translation resources for WIC, and working on translating a **Start Simple with MyPlate tip sheet into 21 languages.**
- **Reaching underserved populations.** Access to food can be difficult or out of reach for some historically underserved or marginalized populations. FNS is working to support efforts to expand the reach of the emergency food network in remote, rural, Tribal, and/or low-income areas that are underserved by the program through the \$100 million **TEFAP Reach and Resiliency Grants**. We are also working with Puerto Rico, Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands and American Samoa to ensure their nutrition assistance programs address their needs and preferences.
- **Bringing together diverse partners to foster healthy food options.** SNAP-Ed's multisector partnerships have a **meaningful impact on local food policies and systems.** Partners who understand the lived experiences of their communities can come together to advance access and equity in nutrition security in a way that works best for those they serve. For example, during the pandemic, groups of farmers, producers, healthcare, and charitable organizations formed "food hubs" to distribute locally grown, nutritious foods.

## WHAT IS NEXT?

USDA is committed to engaging with all its partners and stakeholders to identify opportunities to increase nutrition security and promote equity. These ambitious and crucial goals cannot be achieved alone, but together, through a whole-of-government approach and within all levels of society, we can make progress that will change lives and ensure a healthier, more prosperous future for *all* Americans.

For ongoing updates of USDA's actions across the Department, please visit <https://www.usda.gov/nutrition-security>.

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