



POLICY SOLUTIONS TO END HUNGER IN AMERICA

Calling on the White House for Radical Strategy Change

OVERVIEW

For the first time in more than 50 years, the White House will host a Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health. The Biden Administration plans to release a strategy at the conference with the goals of ending hunger by 2030 and increasing healthy eating to reduce rates of diet-related diseases like diabetes, obesity, and hypertension.¹ The last conference hosted in 1969 was a springboard for developing nutrition assistance programs and other anti-poverty measures over the past five decades.² But over the years, these programs have been neglected and their effectiveness eroded. Revolutionizing our strategies is long overdue to meet the challenges we face today. Below we outline the solutions necessary to make true and lasting change through both specific programmatic changes and larger-scale philosophical shifts. Both are necessary to promote health and long-term improvement in food security in the United States.

BACKGROUND

The USDA reports that 38.3 million people (about 10.5 percent of U.S. households), including 6.1 million children (8.4 percent of children) lived in a household that experienced food insecurity in 2020.³

Children, single parent families (especially single mothers), Indigenous, Black, and immigrant families, the elderly, and adults with disabilities are the most likely to experience food insecurity. This causes disproportionate suffering amongst people who experience the greatest discrimination. Hunger is prevalent in every region of

the U.S. but highest in southern states.⁴

Food insecurity has been connected to a number of chronic health conditions including obesity, high blood pressure, and type 2 diabetes. It is estimated that food insecurity results in an additional \$77.5 billion in health care expenditures each year.⁵ Food insecurity also negatively impacts mental health, educational attainment, and work performance which affects all aspects people's lives, especially when they are young.^{6,7,8,9}

WHY IS HUNGER STILL AN ISSUE IN THE UNITED STATES?

Due to systemic issues rooted in capitalism and gender and racial discrimination, families face barriers to opportunity resulting in challenges to earning sufficient income. These barriers make it difficult to afford the rising costs of food, housing, healthcare, education, transportation, and more. The result often forces families to make trade-offs that lead to inconsistent access to the nutritious food necessary for everyday life.^{10,11}

Corporate greed continues to reduce the value of a day's work and raise costs on goods and services. Limiting tax revenue from corporation reduces government support for families to realize their full potential and build a foundation to thrive. Additionally, up until now, people with lived experience of food insecurity have been largely left out of discussions to identify hunger and poverty solutions, evaluate progress, and hold the government accountable.

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

- **Food Insecurity:** Lack of consistent access to sufficient food for all members of a household to live an active and healthy life
- **Living Wage:** A measure which determines the minimum full-time employment earnings necessary to meet basic needs that draws on geographically specific data related to minimum costs for necessities such as food, childcare, health insurance, housing, transportation, clothing, and personal care items, taking into account taxes. Traditional living wage calculations do not factor in unpaid time off (illness, family leave, or vacation), emergency or retirement savings, or other life expenses such as birthday/holiday gifts, television, high speed Internet, and education expenses.

Policy Solutions

The following are the programmatic and deep philosophical policy solutions that must be implemented to address the systemic issues at the root of food insecurity and diet-related illness in America from many different angles. Without these actions, all other approaches will be ineffective, temporary fixes.

DEEP APPROACHES TO POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The first section of solutions provide a framework or lens through which all policy and programmatic efforts to address food insecurity and nutrition-related health should be viewed. These include the overarching philosophical shifts necessary in how we approach the specific programmatic changes that are noted in the second section of solutions. Each solution includes examples of actions that should be taken when embracing these more meaningful changes, though they are not meant to be all encompassing lists.



Formalize the Right to Food

The U.S. must commit to ensuring the right to food and freedom from hunger. The right to food should be the center of the development of all food-related policies. Actions include:

- Codifying in the U.S. constitution that every person has the right to be free from hunger and guarantee food as a fundamental human right
- Developing a national plan to end hunger that is transparent, inclusive, and accountable to the U.S. public and engages all public and private institutions that deal with food, health, and wellbeing to embrace that right

- Creating campaign finance policies that limit the influence of multinational food companies
- Supporting infrastructure to assist the development of small, local, and regional agriculture systems
- Strengthening local food system hubs that support food workers, farmers, and vendors to ensure an adequate standard of living with ample access to potable water and arable land
- Strengthening and holding all parties accountable to supporting healthy ecosystems



Uplift Lived Expertise

Hunger cannot be addressed without the input and leadership of true experts—people with lived experience of food and economic insecurity.¹⁴ They should not just be included in storytelling opportunities but rather should be provided leadership roles at federal and state levels as advisors and experts in the redevelopment of programs and policies. Actions include:

- Implementing human resource practices at all levels to hire past or current public assistance recipients to work in public assistance offices
- Appointing people with lived experience to National Economic Policy Council and/or creating an expert advisory board for the national plan to end hunger



Protect and Repair The Planet

In all policy efforts, we must ensure they contribute not only to human health but to the health of ecosystems and the planet. This includes altering the federal nutrition assistance programs to ensure that food production practices support healthy lands, waterways, and ecosystems. Actions include:

- Prioritizing resources for expanding farmers market involvement in public assistance programs
- Providing increased school meal reimbursement rates for meal providers utilizing local, sustainable food products
- Including attention for healthy ecosystems on equal footing with healthy dietary recommendations in the MyPlate guidelines



Embrace Food Sovereignty

All levels of government must create the economic, social, and zoning conditions that ensure local communities have greater sovereignty over their food systems. Governments must take action to restrict large multinational food companies and factory farms from monopolizing the food system. These monopolies result in decreased food quality and availability and increased corporate influence in policy development and environmental destruction, both of which are negatively impacting our global climate. Actions include:



Employ Two-Generation Approach

Programs do not just affect individuals but have ripple effects in families and communities. Therefore, all programs should consider at least two generations and bonding between caregivers and their children. All programs and policies should resist government tendency to reduce every person to a “unit” that can be administratively separated from others who are important to them. Actions include:

- Providing plentiful and free counseling, technical support, and greater workplace supports for breastfeeding mothers and people with young children
- Establishing federal family leave laws that apply to all employers, regardless of size

Policy Solutions



Support Solidarity And Sharing Economies, Not Charity

A solidarity economy includes various sharing and mutual aid processes such as cooperatives that help people earn a living, share resources, and stay connected. Charity, on the other hand, is predicated on a power dynamic where the wealthy bestow kindness and goodness to others who do not have power. It is a one-way relationship that focuses on the giver rather than the receiver. To join people in solidarity demands that “givers” be accountable to the group by sharing power, decision-making, resources, and trust. Addressing food insecurity long-term requires moving away from traditional emergency food models. Actions include:

- Transitioning food banks and pantries to cooperative models based in solidarity that promote belonging, dignity, and freedom



Embrace Transformative Justice

The criminal justice system does little to heal violence or deter crime but creates more trauma and poverty. Oftentimes, people sit in prison simply because they cannot afford to pay bail. Incarcerated people are set-up for failure the minute they enter the criminal justice system—a system that disproportionately targets Black and Indigenous people. Many face systemic barriers to living wage employment and life-long bans from public assistance programs upon release.¹⁵ Because of this, formerly incarcerated people are twice as likely to face food insecurity as the general population.¹⁶ Actions include:

- Disallowing state bans on public assistance programs for formerly incarcerated individuals
- Prohibiting employers from inquiring about criminal convictions on job applications and in initial interviews, with certain exceptions, or making employment decisions based on arrests that did not result in conviction
- Eliminating the cash bail system, which excessively impacts people with low incomes



Embrace Trauma-Informed, Healing-Centered Programs And Policy

Healing-centered approaches acknowledge how exposure to violence and trauma have broad and long-lasting effects on emotional, physical, and financial health.^{12,13} People who experience poverty or who have little money for housing and food are very likely to have experienced exposure to violence and discrimination. Actions include:

- Creating a position tasked with ensuring the implementation and ongoing evaluation of trauma-informed, healing-centered approach in all government programs, services, and spaces

- Acknowledging trauma and creating goals of healing, as opposed to a culture of compliance and sanction, in the development of all policies and programming, but most especially those that support people with low incomes
- Requiring all staff in state and federal roles to complete trauma-informed training to provide healing-centered service spaces



Undo White Supremacy Culture

White supremacy culture is broad, complex, and oppressive. Its characteristics such as perfectionism, paternalism, power hoarding, and either/or thinking are deeply rooted in U.S. public assistance programs. To overcome it, we must embrace empathy, shared decision-making, diffusion of power, teamwork, and relationship building. Actions include:

- Eliminating the paternalistic, surveillance culture of the public assistance system through means such as outlawing drug testing for recipients
- Expanding public benefit eligibility in all states to include undocumented immigrant and formerly incarcerated communities, including those with drug convictions



Enact Reparation and Rematriation/Repatriation Efforts

Beyond financial remuneration, reparations must also focus on health, healing, education, peace, justice, and cooperation. However, financial reparation is an important component of establishing accountability and supporting people to move out of poverty and improve health and wellbeing.²⁸ The U.S. must acknowledge past violence against Black and Indigenous people and begin a reparations process that includes:

- Following through on the reconstruction-era promise of reparations for enslavement and working in partnership with leaders who have been calling for reparations in contemporary times
- Returning land, waterways, seeds, and human remains to Indigenous peoples and nations to repair past harms, promote food sovereignty, support cultural identity, and improve the financial, social, physical, and spiritual health of all Indigenous people

Policy Solutions

SPECIFIC PROGRAMMATIC ACTION ITEMS

This section of solutions focuses on specific, actionable program and policy changes that are essential to addressing poverty and hunger and supporting the health and well-being of all Americans.



Limit Program Paperwork And Modernize Systems

With a decentralized public assistance network where each program has different eligibility, requirements, and applications, administrative processes can be incredibly confusing for administrators and participants alike, which can deter families from seeking assistance. Many public assistance programs demand lengthy paperwork for administration, eligibility, and ongoing participation. During the pandemic, much of this paperwork was reduced or eliminated, bringing programs into the twenty-first century. The changes must remain and become standard operating procedure, and the system must be simplified by:

- Digitizing all program paperwork and applications through web and mobile applications where recipients check eligibility, maintain benefits, and submit documentation
- Establishing page limits for all applications to ideally no more than two pages
- Ensuring all program websites and applications meet the highest level of user accessibility (screen readers, mobile devices, readability, languages, etc.)
- Prioritizing implementation of EBT access for all programs in all states and territories
- Streamlining systems by utilizing one centralized portal for administration of all federal and state programs and allowing for one application to determine eligibility and create a comprehensive benefits package for each applicant



Improve Nutrition Assistance Programs

Nutrition assistance programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and Child Nutrition Programs have proven effective in reducing food insecurity, but they often fall short in eliminating hunger long-term.¹⁸ Existing nutrition programs must be improved by:

- Implementing nationwide free school breakfast and lunch for all children at all schools and eliminate existing school lunch debt
- Providing an extra \$30 dollars per child per month to SNAP eligible parents to prevent “summer hunger”
- Extending eligibility for SNAP from six months to one year to reduce income volatility and the cliff effect

- Changing the SNAP benefit calculation to accommodate the true cost of housing by adjusting calculations to accommodate regional market rates
- Increasing funding for and expand SNAP Double Up Food Bucks program to all states
- Providing ample recurring funds for Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (indexed for inflation) and assistance directly to Native communities



Improve Worker Protections Through Federal Labor Laws

Low wage workers are one of the single largest groups impacted by food insecurity. The lack of safety and consistency provided by employers more interested in profits than the health of their employees has left the American public to supplement the cost of low wages while greedy CEO’s make record salaries.²¹ The health and safety of American workers must be protected by:

- Increasing federal minimum wage to at least \$15 by 2023 and \$24 by 2025, and indexing to inflation, forever²²
- Allowing state or local municipalities to set higher living wage requirements based on regional cost of living
- Abolishing subminimum tipped minimum wage
- Providing family and medical leave for all employees regardless of whether they work part time or full time
- Establishing national fair work week standards



Improve Social Security And Disability Benefits

The elderly and people with disabilities are much more likely to experience food insecurity and challenges accessing public assistance. Additional efforts must be made to ensure people are protected from food insecurity by:

- Increasing benefit payments to ensure the elderly and people with disabilities remain food secure
- Ensuring application processes are accessible and proper assistance is available to support applicants
- Making necessary changes to social security benefits to ensure program and trust fund reserve sustainability

Policy Solutions



Implement Universal Healthcare

Access to quality healthcare plays a major role in positive health outcomes. When the system fails to support people in meeting their basic needs, their health suffers. This costs the health system, and ultimately the American people, billions of dollars every year. Tying health care to employment is problematic, as was seen during the pandemic. The cost of health insurance, co-pays, and medical debt prevents many people from ever becoming financially and food secure. This can be avoided by:

- Expanding Medicaid to all states immediately
- Establishing long-term plan for universal healthcare and disconnecting health coverage from employment status



Provide Free, Universal Childcare

For many families, the cost of childcare is the largest single household expense - more than even housing.²³ Accessible and affordable childcare would increase the number of women in the workforce and reduce poverty, especially for women of color who disproportionately fill low-wage childcare role by helping them earn the money necessary to meet the basic needs of their families. More must be done to ease the burden childcare places on working parents by:

- Implementing free childcare programs nationwide to support working families
- Ensuring all childcare workers are paid living wages



Implement Universal Basic Income

Direct cash payments, and specifically the Child Tax Credit, as seen during the pandemic, had measurable impact on child poverty and food insecurity.^{24,25} A Universal Basic Income (UBI) program guarantees a set amount of money to every person with no means test or work requirement. It would be paid for by taxing the ultra-wealthy. Over time, UBI would replace means-tested programs, such as TANF and SNAP, that exacerbate and justify stigma against people who are poor.²⁶ In many cases, these programs are subsidizing low wages from wealthy corporations and CEO's who are forcing workers into poverty through sub-living wages.²⁷ Food insecurity could be substantially reduced by:

- Reinstating the Child Tax Credit immediately
- Developing a long-term plan to provide unconditional cash payments (Universal Basic Income) to all residents to replace means-tested public assistance programs
- Creating appropriate tax code to fairly tax the ultra-wealthy and employers to fund UBI

CONCLUSION

To make true and lasting impact on food insecurity in America, and achieve the goal of ending hunger by 2030, profound cultural, societal, and systemic change is required. This change must be rooted in mutuality, solidarity, and care at all levels of government and society for it to be effective and sustainable. This policy brief outlines specific and actionable changes within existing programs and policies. As well, it details the fundamental philosophical shifts needed to undo the ongoing impacts of systemic racism, gender discrimination, and capitalism that underpin the continuation of poverty and hunger in the United States. Without swift and radical change, we will continue to repeat the same ineffective actions while bringing about the same results.

The Center for Hunger-Free Communities is a community-engaged research, service, advocacy, and policy center of Drexel University's Dornsife School of Public Health. The Center offers multi-faceted research and action with the goal of developing innovative, empirically-tested solutions to the challenges of hunger and economic insecurity. In partnership with families, researchers, policymakers, and community leaders the Center seeks to find solutions to hunger and poverty based on both science and the human experience.

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