

# Harvard Model Congress Boston 2024

# ADDRESSING NUTRITION IN THE UNITED STATES

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# INTRODUCTION

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) food stamp program within the United States to support lowincome families, lowincome older individuals. etc. to afford food

U.S. Senate
Agriculture
Subcommittee on
Food and
Nutrition,
Specialty Crops,
Organics, and
Research –
subcommittee focusing
on domestic and
international food
initiatives and
nutritional programs

As children, we are told that food is the fuel that powers our body: thus, we should ensure that we are putting healthy, quality food into our bodies. Yet, the United States population, with its reputation of obesity and unhealthy habits, fails to uphold these standards. Within the United States, the three main causes of death are heart disease, cancer, and stroke (National Academy of Sciences, 2010). Furthermore, approximately \$173 billion USD is spent per year on healthcare costs regarding obesity (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2022).

The United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry focuses on a breadth of different issues, with one of the subcommittees being **the U.S. Senate Agriculture Subcommittee on Food and Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Organics, and Research**. Overall, the United States has developed several programs to improve the diet of its country but continues to struggle to create an impact.

# **EXPLANATION OF THE ISSUE**

#### Historical Development

The United States publicly published its first federal diet recommendations in the mid-1890s, with general agencies responsible for guidance on diet being the US Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, the US War Food Administration Office of Distribution, and the US Consumer and Food Economics Institute in the early 1900s (Jahns et al., 2018). Beginning in the

1930s, the importance of vitamins and minerals in promoting a healthy diet for individuals rose as well. Food initiatives were also advanced with the development of the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** as a part of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) in 1933 (SNAP to Health). Later, in 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt called upon the National Nutrition Conference for Defense (National Nutrition Conference for Defense to release the first **Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs)** by the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences (Davis and Saltos, 1996). This first set of RDAs focuses on protein, iron, calcium, vitamins A, vitamin C, vitamin D, thiamin, riboflavin, and niacin.

After World War II, a greater emphasis on healthy eating and diet appeared. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) created the Daily Food Guide, focusing on four main food groups — milk, meat, vegetables/ fruit, and bread/cereal — as well as serving sizes (Jahns et al., 2018). These publications continued throughout the 1970s to emphasize how food meant more than something to eat but also had the ability to "affect the length and quality of [someone's] life" (Jahns et al., 2018).

In the 1980s, the United States developed the **Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs)**. In collaboration with scientists from the USDA and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the first edition of DGAs focused on seven central guidelines: eat a variety of foods, maintain ideal weight, avoid too much fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol, eat foods with adequate starch and fiber, avoid too much sugar, avoid too much sodium, and drink alcohol in moderation (Jahns et al., 2018). In the 1990s, the Food Guide Pyramid was released to suggest the different categories of food for healthy eating, as well as the creation of the Nutrition Facts Label as a part of the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990 (NLEA) (Davis and Saltos, 1996). Publications on the DGAs continue to this day, with changes on the general guidelines to emphasize healthy eating patterns.

# Scope of the Problem

There is a general understanding that nutrition is important and must be prioritized in the American diet. However, there arises issues on the best methodology to transform the American diet, health care costs, as well as allocations of financing towards nutrition and healthy eating.

#### Health Care Costs and Diet

According to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, unhealthy diets and eating account for approximately 20% of the U.S.'s health care costs, from causes including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, etc. ("Poor diets linked to \$50 billion in U.S. health care

#### Required Dietary Allowances (RDAs)

the average daily intake levels sufficient to meet minimum requirements of nutrients



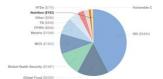
Example of Daily Food Guide published by the USDA

National Library of Medicine

Maternal, infant, and young child nutrition (MIYCN)

– used to describe global effort to improve feeding and nutrition practices for mothers and their families.

Approximately 32.1% of U.S. deaths are due to heart disease



U.S. Global Health Funding (in millions) by sector for FY 2023

costs," 2020). In a statistical analysis conducted by the USDA, heart disease accounted for 32.1% of deaths in the U.S., with stroke accounting for 23.4%, and diabetes mellitus accounting for 2.5% (Frazao, 1998). Even disregarding death, other consequences such as medical expenses, disabilities, mental health, and lost work are severely detrimental to individuals facing them.

Though not heavily discussed, there was a drastic rise in hospitalization due to diet-related diseases during the COVID-19 pandemic. Estimates state that nearly two-thirds of COVID-19 hospitalizations in the U. S. were related to obesity, diabetes, heart failure, or hypertension (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). Furthermore, obesity rates sharply increased during the pandemic as well, which could be due to unhealthy diets and lack of exercise due to quarantine.

It is relatively difficult to estimate the entirety of economic costs associated with unhealthy eating since additional causes of disease can be due to other unhealthy lifestyle behaviors, such as smoking or exercise. However, diet being a direct effect has been proven. In an analysis of the effects of the 1993 addition of nutritional facts labeling, a 1% reduction fat and saturated fat intake, as well as a 0.1% reduction in intake of cholesterol would prevent over 56,000 cases of congenital heart defects (CHD) and cancer, avoid approximately 18,000 deaths, and save over 117,000 life-years over 20 years (Frazao, 1998). Health care spending continues to be one of the most prominent issues for Americans, reaching to over \$4.3 trillion in 2021 (Peter G. Peterson Foundation, 2023). Thus, addressing the need to promote healthy diet directly ties into the trends of health care spending within the U.S.

#### **Nutritional Financing**

In the fiscal year 2021, the USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs totaled to costs of \$182.5 billion — 49% higher than the previous fiscal year 2020's total of \$122.8 billion (Economic Research Service USDA, 2022). Despite recent increased federal funding towards nutrition, it remains one of the least funded sectors. Out of the U.S. Global Health funding, amassing to \$13.0 billion in total, funding towards nutrition accounts for \$163 million in the fiscal year 2023, or 1.3% (KFF, 2023). In comparison to other government sectors, the increase in nutrition research is stagnant. Critics of this percentage towards nutritional financing have also mentioned that the federal government does not track or publish the total amount spent researching the relationship between diet and health (Boudreau and Evich, 2019).

Nutritional financing remains a global concern. One of the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Targets for 2025 are to improve maternal, infant, and young child nutrition

(MIYCN). However, to achieve these targets set by the WHO, updated estimate would need an additional 10.8 billion annually over 2022–2030 on top of current spending (Shekar et al., 2021). Official development assistance (ODA) towards basic nutrition has not shown promising growth, and has instead plateaued in disbursements, likely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, from donor-country economies (Shekar et al., 2021).

One of the greatest difficulties with research on diet and nutrition is its feasibility. Diets are completely variable by person, and it is tedious and time-consuming to track people's diets over decades. Additionally, clinical trials observing diet quickly become expensive (Boudreau and Evich, 2019).

#### **Food Insecurity**

More than 38 million Americans, or 1 in 10 households, were found to suffer from **food insecurity** in the United States in 2020. In 2020, about four percent of households experienced a severe range of food insecurity (very low food insecurity, which represents a high extent where eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted, and their food intake reduced because they could not afford enough food (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2022)). Food insecurity is often linked with a low consumption of healthy food groups, such as fruits and vegetables. Even if a person may be meeting their caloric needs, they are not receiving sufficient nutrients due to poor food quality.

Various statistics have been published of how food insecurity affects different populations. Rates of food insecurity for non-Hispanic Black (21.7%) and Hispanic (17.2%) households is triple or double the rates compared to White households (7.1%). American Indian or Alaska Native persons have the highest prevalence of diagnosed diabetes (14.5%) amongst all U.S. racial and ethnic groups, which is then followed by non-Hispanic Black (12.1%), Hispanic (11.8%), non-Hispanic Asian (9.5%), and non-Hispanic White (7.4%) populations. Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between hunger and diet-related diseases, with individuals who report being most food insecure also being at a higher risk of developing diet-related diseases (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

To combat food insecurity, initiatives such as SNAP were developed to allow for families to have easier access to quality food products. However, there have been mixed feedback on whether SNAP has been fulfilling its goals for Americas. In a study focused on youth ages 4-17 from low-income families, food assistance programs were associated with an increase in body size for low-income food secure youth but did not show the same correlation for food insecure youth (Morales and Berkowitz, 2018).

Official
development
assistance (ODA) –
governmental aid to
help economic
development in
developing countries.

Child and Adult
Care Food
Program (CACFP)

– federal program
providing
reimbursements for
eligible children and
adults on nutritious
meals and snacks.

Food Insecurity – state in which a household is unable to have access to sufficient food or food of a sufficient quality in order to meet basic needs.

#### Congressional Action

Within the USDA, the **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** is a federal program providing reimbursements on nutritious meals and snacks for eligible children and adults. Additionally, the program participates in emergency shelters, afterschool care programs, and various other locations. CACFP has proven successful, providing over 4.2 million children and 138,000 adults with healthy meals and snacks (Food and Nutrition Service USDA, 2023). Furthermore, the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 was enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives and represents one of the leading actions Congress has passed in the recent years. The Act focuses on alleviating malnutrition through SNAP to increase food purchasing power (Food and Nutrition Service USDA, 2019).

Congress has taken various actions towards improving nutrition for youth. The Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act was introduced to the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress — addressing sustainability, strengthening nutrition standards, food insecurity for youth during the summer, and special nutrition programs for youth and women (Rep. Scott, 2022). Additionally, the Access to Healthy Foods for Young Children Act of 2021 hopes to strengthen the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) to improve eligibility and increase reimbursement rates (Rep. Casey, 2021).

CACFP provides 4.2 million children and 138,000 adults with healthy meals and snacks.

#### Other Policy Action

Internationally, the United Nations has developed a strong focus on nutrition. The United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN) has been the platform where UN agencies can have fruitful dialogue on nutrition strategies. And in 2020, the UN Network for SUN (UNN) and the UNSCN merged to create the UN-Nutrition, a United Nations inter-agency mechanism (UN-Nutrition, 2023). UN-Nutrition consists of five members: the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the World Health Organization (WHO) (UN-Nutrition, 2023).

Overall, nutrition and healthy eating remain a global issue. Global hunger and accessibility to adequate food are targeted within the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

# **IDEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINTS**

#### Conservative View

It is difficult to determine the exact, singularly conservative ideologies on addressing nutritional concerns within the United States. On studies conducted on general diet lifestyles and political affiliation, strict omnivores identify closer with the Republican party compared to the Democratic party (Borden, 2021). In a 2016 survey conducted by the International Food Information Council (IFIC) conservatives were found to be more likely to view carcinogens or cancer-causing chemicals within food products as a top food safety issue (Food Insight, 2019).

Regarding sustainability, conservatives are likely to target economic reasons as potential concerns. For example, conserving farmland and ensuring food supply affordability were noted as prominent concerns for conservatives in the IFIC Foundations survey. All-in-all, conservatives have stressed importance for sustainability in food products, though within the survey were less likely to pay more for sustainably produced food products compared to liberals.

#### Liberal View

In comparison to conservatives, liberals voiced different concerns and opinions regarding nutrition. Most liberals found that reducing carbon footprint and conserving natural habitats were important environmental aspects of sustainability for food production. Within the FIFC Foundation's survey, over 50% of liberals were found to prioritize buying sustainably produced products (Food Insight, 2019). In contrast to conservatives, liberals were more likely to view pesticides as a top safety food issue.

Regarding increasing prices on food, studies have shown that liberals were more likely to underestimate the increase in food prices, while conservative overestimated the effects of inflation (Koppes, 2022). Liberals are also more likely to lean towards plant-based alternatives and consuming less meat to better support the environment in sustainable food choice decisions. Overall, nutrition remains a concern for both liberals and conservatives, but their perspectives differ in how to approach the issue and which concerns to target.

# **AREAS OF DEBATE**

Though the United States government has developed various solutions to target nutritional concerns, there remains lots of room



Soybean field in January 2011, representative of the important arable land needed to feed Americans GettyImages

for improvements. Overall, there are multiple options one could take to resolve the different concerns in addressing diet and nutritional concerns for Americans.

#### Nutritional Assistance Programs

The most popular method, as demonstrated through SNAP and CACFP, are nutritional assistance programs supported by the federal government. These programs are meant to allow for financial accessibility for low-income families and individuals.

Programs such as SNAP have shown clear benefits and usage: people can have an additional means of support to afford food when purchasing groceries.

However, one of the critiques towards SNAP and other programs is the federal state guidelines for funding. To be eligible for food stamps, you must be under certain federal poverty guidelines. The general rule is that your gross income must be below 130% of federal poverty guidelines, with other percentages for categorical eligibility. However, some who fit these criteria remainineligible for food stamps due to undocumented immigrant status or as individuals on strike ("The Truth about SNAP Food Stamps").

#### Political Perspectives on this Solution

There is a disagreement to whether there should be an increase in supporting these food stamp programs. Out of all government spending, food stamps consisted of a mere 2% in 2015 ("The Truth about SNAP Food Stamps"). In comparison, military spending consisted of 16% of the U.S.'s budget. Conservatives may not lean into decreasing military spending to favor for an increase in food stamp spending. However, there is some belief that food stamps benefits should be increased. In 2018, the average monthly food stamp benefit per person was \$127, or less than \$1.50 per person, per meal ("The Truth about SNAP Food Stamps"). Furthermore, SNAP does not cover the full cost of a meal in 99% of counties in the U.S. ("The Truth about SNAP Food Stamps"). Thus, there is political discussion to whether the eligibility requirements or benefits of food stamps should be increased.

#### "Food is Medicine" Initiatives

With a growing concern of chronic disease arising from unhealthy eating, there has been a rise in "food is medicine" programs. This has been due to a rise in research demonstrating that food and nutrition interventions could help with improve health outcomes and reduced health care costs (Downer et al., 2020). There are three popular interventions utilized: medically tailored meals, medically tailored groceries, and produce prescriptions. Medically tailored meals are fully prepared meals designed based on individual

In 2018, the average monthly food stamp benefit per person was \$127, or less than \$1.50 per person, per meal

"Food is medicine"

- phrase to describe
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produce as a means to
prevent and treat diet-

related diseases

assessment; medically tailored groceries are non-prepared grocery items selected as part of a treatment plan; produce prescriptions are vouchers or debit cards for free or discounted produce (Downer et al., 2020). All these different programs are meant to target patients and increase their diet quality.

Arguments for adopting this solution are that these interventions can help people adapt to new dietary recommendations, allowing for healthy eating and accessibility to recommended foods despite financial barriers. Many patients already face financial burden due to health care costs, causing many patients to neglect seeking healthy produce and food products. Additionally, "food is medicine" initiatives can also help with portion sizing and other nutritional factors to help patients have more healthy diets in the future (Downer et al., 2020).

"Food is medicine" initiatives are relatively new, so research and clinical knowledge is not as developed in comparison to medical treatments. Within the US, most healthcare professionals receive little to no food and nutrition — less than 1% of lecture hours in medical school are spent on nutrition education (Downer et al., 2020). Additionally, many medical costs are already very high within the US, so making nutritional initiatives an added potential cost may be seen as a waste.

#### Political Perspectives on this Solution

Conservatives may be less leaning to adopt "food is medicine" initiatives. Though "food is medicine" programs are not as addressed in the political sphere, the sustainable support of their costs in addition to other governmental spending could be a topic of issue. Currently, most "food is medicine" programs are funded through philanthropy (Downer et al., 2020). If the U.S. is to create more sustainable support through public health care money or other government funds, there may be hesitance due to the lack of research in the field.

# Improving Nutrition Education

To have people want to improve their diet, there needs to be a greater emphasis on nutritional balance. Thus, the United States has focused on school-based nutrition education, focusing on teaching children and young people about healthy eating habits. This new educational plan focuses on supporting lifelong healthy eating and exercise behavior early in life to promote future behavior. In one study, the criteria for school-based nutrition education included addressing the needs and interests of school community members, relevancy to program goals, acknowledging what children already know, being culturally appropriate, and delivering health education in a way children can understand and teach the skills required to

improve healthy eating decisions (Pérez-Rodrigo and Aranceta, 2002).

With nutrition education programs, students will be able to learn more about a major influence that affects their physical and mental growth, specifically within the learning environment. Various studies support that a healthy diet improves children's wellbeing and potential learning ability, thus leading to healthier lives and better school performance decisions (Pérez-Rodrigo and Aranceta, 2002).

Implementation is the most difficult barrier of teaching nutrition education to students. Teachers are not trained to teach nutrition education, so there are often complaints on the lack of explicit curriculum or training experience (Pérez-Rodrigo and Aranceta, 2002). Additionally, as with all means of awareness, there is a limitation to how much students can be taught and implement these teachings into their daily schedules. Students are frequently not in control of their diet as well, as this becomes the responsibility of their guardians. Thus, nutritional education for students may not be the best method to effectively improve youth diets.

#### Political Perspectives on this Solution

Again, there is not much dispute about the need to focus on nutritional initiatives in the United States. However, alongside the previous proposed policies mentions, concerns surround potential costs and whether these initiatives should be prioritized in comparison to others. There are still various limitations to what nutritional education can do, especially if most initiatives are solely targeted within the school system. Also, there needs to be a focus on process evaluation if there are to be improvements in the nutrition education system.

There could also be a greater focus in nutritional education for teachers, but this would constitute a reworking of the educational system and training for teachers, which could also lean into greater costs, which may deter the support of conservatives.

# **BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS**

As previously mentioned, financial burden is one of the largest concerns for addressing nutrition within the United States. Economic outlooks of various nutritional programs within the United States are provided by the <u>Congressional Budget Office (CBO)</u>. Additionally, to have a visual representation of the changing budget for SNAP benefits, there are graphs and data from <u>Statista</u>.

There is not as much available data to quantify the entirety of federal spending on nutrition programs. However, the <u>following fact</u> <u>sheet provided by KFF</u> notes the U.S. Global Health Budget, including spending in the nutrition sector.



School-based nutrition education continues to be a major intiaitive the U.S. government combats unhealthy eating

USDA

# **CONCLUSION**

Overall, healthy diets lead to healthy lifestyles, and consequently, healthier wellbeings for individuals. If we want to fuel our country's progress, we must start with our own fuel — nutritional food.

In debate, it is important to create cost-efficient solutions so that all governmental leaders will be able to know that governmental spending is not being wasted. Though there are many potential projects that could be implemented, we want to ensure they are effective and not being wasted. Nutrition and diet will continue to be a struggle for various nations around the world as they aim to help people eat healthy foods. As lawmakers, you will be tasked with the major responsibility of ensuring that millions of Americans have adequate and healthy nutrition.

# **GUIDE TO FURTHER RESEARCH**

When trying to find your own research, search for academic journals, governmental documents, reports, and sources found directly from governmental websites. This will ensure that it is that you are finding reputable information from trustworthy sources. You can also observe how different countries have tackled similar problems, or how their food and nutrition organizations are structured.

Ensure you can observe nutritional assistance programs or initiatives that your state has done, or what organizations in your region have done as well.

# **GLOSSARY**

**Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** – federal program providing reimbursements for eligible children and adults on nutritious meals and snacks.

**Food Insecurity** – state in which a household is unable to have access to sufficient food or food of a sufficient quality in order to meet basic needs

**"Food is medicine"** – phrase to describe programs that use efforts such as medically tailored meals and prescribed produce as a means to prevent and treat diet-related diseases

**Maternal, infant, and young child nutrition (MIYCN)** – used to describe global effort to improve feeding and nutrition practices for mothers and their families

**Official development assistance (ODA)** – governmental aid to help economic development in developing countries

**Required Dietary Allowances (RDAs)** – the average daily intake levels sufficient to meet minimum requirements of nutrients

**Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** – food stamp program within the United States to support low-income families, low-income older individuals, etc. to afford food

U.S. Senate Agriculture Subcommittee on Food and Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Organics, and Research – subcommittee focusing on domestic and international food initiatives and nutritional programs

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