

Nutrition

Building a Healthy, Equitable, and Sustainable Food System via the Farm Bill

For most of human history, hunger was by far the most pressing nutrition challenge. As recently as the 1960s, one in three people worldwide was chronically undernourished—hungry because they did not get enough calories. **Today, the global hunger rate is about one in 10 people.**¹

Malnutrition, the world’s leading cause of poor health,² is a different kind of nutrition challenge. Globally, one person in three has at least one form of malnutrition—undernourishment, or what we commonly refer to as “hunger”; vitamin and mineral deficiencies; and overweight and obesity—and based on current trends, by 2030 it is expected to rise to one in two.³



Although malnutrition is common in people of all ages, the most important window for human nutrition is the earliest—from a woman’s pregnancy to her child’s second birthday. This period, often called the 1,000 Days, is the time to ensure that children get the nutrients they need.

Currently, **one in five of the world’s children under 5 is stunted due to chronic malnutrition during the 1,000 Days.**⁴ Stunting scars people for life, impairing children’s physical and cognitive development and making them more susceptible to disease.



Access to adequate amounts of nutritious food cannot be taken for granted even in a wealthy country such as the United States, where the food insecurity rate stood at 10 percent in 2021, the most recent year official data is available.⁵

“**Food insecurity**” is an awkward term that emphasizes what people do not have: a living situation where all members of the family are able to eat an adequate diet throughout the entire year. It results in families buying less expensive, less nutritious foods so that they can at least avoid gnawing hunger pangs. At times, family members may have to skip meals or go without eating for an entire day. Not surprisingly, people who are food insecure have higher rates of overweight and obesity than the rest of the U.S. population.



Nutrition challenges are more complex than ever. When the only problem in sight was hunger, governments subsidized the production of staple grains, which was the simplest and cheapest way to boost food supplies. This strategy doesn't work for the other forms of malnutrition. The poor quality of diets everywhere requires **fresh thinking about systemic causes and how to respond to them**, and that includes the types of assistance governments provide to combat malnutrition and the types of crops farmers are incentivized to grow.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has served an average of 40 million people in recent years, nearly one in seven people living in the United States. SNAP helps families put food on the table but is rarely enough to ensure an adequate amount of healthy food. SNAP recipients, on average, consume lower amounts of fruits and vegetables than the average American.⁶

The Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) is an indispensable enhancement to SNAP by providing additional benefits to purchase fruits and vegetables. GusNIP helps people use their SNAP dollars to eat more healthy foods often out of reach to them—and it works. SNAP recipients, on average, consume lower amounts of fruits and vegetables than the average American⁷; however, SNAP recipients who receive GusNIP consume higher amounts of fruits and vegetables than the average American.⁸ The problem is funding levels for GusNIP are scarcely enough to reach more than a small percentage of SNAP recipients.



¹ <https://www.who.int/news/item/06-07-2022-un-report--global-hunger-numbers-rose-to-as-many-as-828-million-in-2021>

² <https://www.thelancet.com/commissions/global-syndemic>

³ <https://www.bmj.com/content/364/bmj.l296>

⁴ <https://data.unicef.org/topic/nutrition/malnutrition/>

⁵ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-security-and-nutrition-assistance/#:~:text=The%20prevalence%20of%20food%20insecurity,had%20very%20low%20food%20security>

⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4466151/>

⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4466151/>

⁸ <https://www.nutritionincentivehub.org/media/fjohm2n/gusnip-ntae-impact-findings-year-2.pdf>