

Power, Policy, Possibility

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STATE of CHILDHOOD OBESITY

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ANNUAL
2023
REPORT

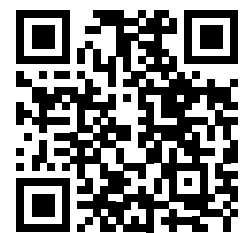


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Find this report and explore interactive data features

on rates of childhood obesity and food insecurity, as well as policies and recommendations for helping all children grow up healthy.



StateOfChildhoodObesity.org



Introduction

Dear Friends,

Every child deserves to live in a community that supports their health and wellbeing. A community with safe, affordable, stable housing and access to healthy food. A community with jobs that pay a fair and livable wage. A community where childcare is readily available and affordable.

But we know that barriers built in front of many families—often driven by issues of race and class—make this difficult.

These barriers are in turn linked with many health challenges, including obesity.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has been working to prevent childhood obesity for 20 years. We know that obesity is one indicator of how our communities can fall short of supporting our health. That's why our work has always centered on reshaping the policies and systems that impact our lives. Since people created these policies and systems, we can change them.

In last year's State of Childhood Obesity report, I shared that we were beginning to evolve our approach to meet these challenges. That evolution continues this year.

We are working to support stronger food systems that promote economic opportunity for all. We are engaging with communities and community-based advocates to build power and acknowledge that community knowledge, experience, and local solutions are critical to advancing health equity. And we are confronting long-term structural inequities, reflected in everything from the strategies we use to address our challenges to the very language we use to describe them.

As we have said before, our targeted commitment to preventing childhood obesity will wind down in 2025. But the evolution of our work, illustrated in part by the expertise and research featured in this report, will set us on a path toward more equitable opportunities for health, long past this milestone.

I hope you find this year's report valuable and inspiring. I'm so grateful to the partners who have contributed their expertise. As always, we welcome your feedback. Please feel free to share it with us at ideas@stateofchildhoodobesity.org. Thanks!

In partnership,

Jamie Bussel

Senior Program Officer, RWJF



Jamie Bussel

Advancing a Narrative to Protect Kids' Health

Every child deserves a fair opportunity to grow up healthy and thrive. But right now, our policies, practices—and our words—place more value on some lives than others, based on race and class.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is working to understand and remove structural barriers to health and wellbeing, including those driven by racism and discrimination. Shifting narratives away from those that create harm to those that foster belonging, health equity, and shared solutions is critical to this work.

This collection of research findings and perspectives offers insights about how stigmatizing words and practices impact our health and highlights promising strategies for advancing more powerful narratives that support health and wellbeing for all.



Talking About Childhood Obesity: We Can Do Better

Since 2005, RWJF has committed more than \$1 billion to preventing childhood obesity and helping kids grow up healthy. During that time, we've learned important lessons from our grantees, partners, and advocates who are working to create opportunities for kids and families to live healthier lives. And in recent years, we've begun to learn more about the inadvertent impact of the language we and others have used to describe the causes and effects of obesity, as well as strategies for preventing it.

We acknowledge that prevailing narratives on childhood obesity—including those we at RWJF have used—have unintentionally contributed to anti-fat bias in children. We know that kids [link](#) feelings of shame, sadness, and embarrassment with terms like “obesity,” “fat,” and “weight problem.”¹ We understand the [limits](#) of using body mass index (a simple ratio of height and weight) to assess individual health and how our overreliance on this measure has caused harm to the children and adults we're trying to help. We also know that the “epidemic/disease” language often used in the clinic, in the media, and across society has

played an important role in raising the profile of the health impacts of obesity—but that these words have also inadvertently created harmful societal connections between larger bodies and diseased bodies.

We can do better. We're working to better understand how obesity and weight stigma are being discussed across our culture. We're investing in message research to build a new, evidence-based narrative that puts people first, focuses on shared values, and communicates a positive vision that empowers us to talk about childhood obesity through the lens of public health, in a way that does not perpetuate stigma and harm.

We know the use of the word “obesity” in our report title will put some people off. For now, we're keeping it to ensure we communicate clearly about this work. But we're changing other things—the stories we tell, the grants we make, and the data we focus on—as we work towards painting a broader perspective about supporting children's health. We are moving forward with humility and are committed to providing meaningful support in ways that will promote healing and inclusion.

Jennie Day-Burget

RWJF Senior Communications Officer





Exploring the Evidence

Racism Increases Children’s Risk for Obesity

All children deserve a fair and just opportunity to reach their best health and wellbeing, no matter their race, ethnicity, or class. But this is not everyone’s reality today. Research shows that racism harms our health, and a study published by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in July 2023 links racism with increased risk for obesity among children.²

The study, which included more than 6,000 children ages 9 to 11, found that children who reported being exposed to racial discrimination were more likely to have a high body mass index one year later. The authors define racial discrimination as “discriminatory actions, attitudes, or prejudices exhibited by individuals toward others based on their perceived racial or ethnic background” and cite a growing body of evidence that links exposure to discrimination with adverse health outcomes. Children participating in the study reported that teachers, other students at school, and adults outside of school were most likely to treat them unfairly because of their race or ethnicity.

Find the full study at jamanetwork.com.



Racism harms our health. We can be an agent of disease and death just by how we treat others—the most important thing we need to do is reduce the occurrence of discrimination.

– David Williams
Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

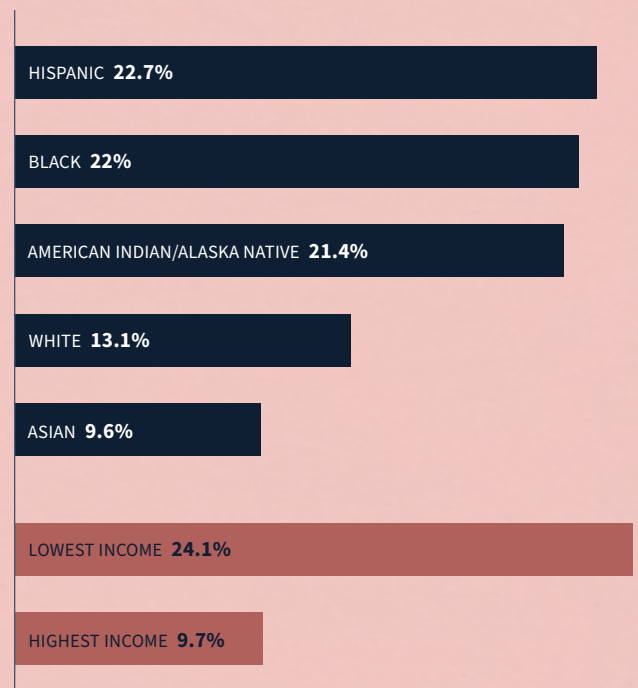


Rates of Childhood Obesity Remain High and Disparities Persist

According to the latest available data from the National Survey of Children’s Health, the national obesity rate for children and youth ages 10 to 17 was 17% in 2021-2022.³

The data, which are based on height and weight reports, show significant disparities by race, ethnicity, and income. Non-Hispanic Asian children had the lowest obesity rate (9.6%) followed by non-Hispanic White children (13.1%). Obesity rates were significantly higher for Hispanic children (22.7%), non-Hispanic Black children (22%), and non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native children (21.4%). Obesity rates ranged from 9.7% among youth in the highest income group to 24.1% in the lowest income group.

Obesity rates by race, ethnicity, and household income among youth ages 10-17 nationwide







Expert Perspective

Kathryn Montgomery, PhD
and Jeffrey Chester, MSW

Center for Digital Democracy

The Digital Marketplace Can Create Inequity, or Confront It

For decades, food and beverage companies have disproportionately and aggressively marketed unhealthy products to kids of color—from snacks and sugary drinks to candy and fast food. Their tactics [are becoming more sophisticated](#), especially in the digital marketplace, where they collaborate with technology companies to target unhealthy ads at kids across every platform: mobile apps, games, streaming video, social media, and more.⁴

Companies see youth of color as a growing demographic of important trendsetters who are key to the success of their brands. They enlist powerful “multicultural” icons of youth pop culture in campaigns and follow youth across different devices to deliver tailored messages based on their geolocation, purchasing and eating patterns, and even the ethnic/racial mix of their neighborhood.⁵

We are working with researchers, policymakers, and advocates to advance equity in the digital marketplace. Some of the strategies we’re exploring include limiting food and beverage companies’ access to consumers’ data. For instance, our research shows that [participants](#)

in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) who use their benefits online, including people with low incomes, people of color, and people with disabilities, are disproportionately at risk of targeted digital marketing for unhealthy foods and beverages.⁶

We are also partnering with international scholars and public health experts to identify successful policy models and to forge global strategies for creating an online marketplace where everyone has equal access to healthy, affordable products.

With collaboration, creativity, and innovative solutions, we can create a more equitable digital marketplace.



It is possible to create a digital marketplace—and a public narrative on food—that supports health instead of harming it.

— Jeffrey Chester



Expert Perspective

Karen Watson

Co-CEO, Kinetic Leaders

Building a Shared Vision for Food Justice

The stories behind our food are complex. What we eat, where we shop, and how much food we have are not simply personal choices. Rather, they depend on what food is produced nearby, our access to a grocery store and reliable transportation, our income, our exposure to marketing, and how much time we have to prepare meals.

These factors shape our personal narratives about food. They also contribute to shared stories that help us understand and address challenges people face when it comes to hunger, malnourishment, and obesity. And while there is a growing movement of community organizers, policymakers, researchers, and funders to advance local solutions for improving people's access to healthy food, there's a disconnect in how we're talking about this work.

For example, my social media feed is full of mentions of "food justice." Those posts cover a wide range of topics, strategies, and approaches: stories about new urban farms, academic papers on local food systems, volunteering opportunities at a community garden, a push to advocate for farm workers' rights, and more. Research by my colleagues and me also finds big differences in how food justice is discussed by academics, community organizations, and younger generations, especially youth of color.

The lack of consistency puts those of us who are working on food justice issues at a disadvantage, making it easy for a positive narrative about solutions to be overpowered by insidious advertising for unhealthy products, which often directly target youth. That's why our team is working to build a shared, positive narrative about improving access to healthy food. How do we create that shared vision?

1. Focus on what motivates people.

If we want people to take action or change behavior, our words must focus on something positive we can gain, not on what we want to avoid.

2. Reach people where they are.

Be more intentional about communicating with youth, including on TikTok and other social platforms that are popular with young people.

3. Collaborate better. Community organizations, researchers, advocates, and policymakers working to advance food justice must come together regularly to align their messages and goals. Strengthening the dialogue among these groups can help ensure that the important messages they share resonate with and reach more young people.



We can build a more cohesive and compelling narrative: that public health depends on healthy food access, and everyone must participate in building a more just food system for all.

—Karen Watson

Making Healthy Food Accessible for All

Every member of our society deserves access to affordable, high-quality, nutritious food. But our current food system is not designed to support this. It places barriers in front of people based on their race, ethnicity, income, or neighborhood and leaves millions of Americans struggling to feed themselves and their families the nourishing food they need to thrive.

We need to support strong local food systems that provide enough nutritious and affordable food for every person. Whether through federal programs, local policy, or grassroots advocacy, transforming our food systems to support health equity requires partners working together to dismantle structural racism and engage community members in building shared solutions, especially people most impacted by barriers to food access.

Read more about how RWJF is working to support food systems that make healthy food accessible for all.



Building Fair, Sustainable Food Systems that Nourish Our Health

What would our society look like if we redesigned our food system with racial equity in mind? So that it served every family, supported every worker, and ensured environmental sustainability, allowing all people to access the nutritious food they need to thrive?

To answer this question, we need to understand the root causes of inequity within our food system, including how structural racism influences the ways our food is produced, marketed, distributed, and consumed. Structural racism continues to have far-reaching impacts on food security in the U.S., [exacerbating](#) economic inequities and health disparities experienced by people of color and their communities.⁷

Racially oppressive policies, limiting access to both land and capital, have been instrumental in shaping rural and urban food environments. This has led to the loss and dispossession of millions of acres of farmland, a dearth of farm initiatives and community gardens led by people of color, and a workforce deprived of the full rights and privileges for meaningful participation in the food system.⁸

It's a lack of grocery stores that provide affordable [produce and other healthy foods](#) and a surplus of fast food outlets and retailers that sell

mainly cheap, [unhealthy products](#) in communities of color.^{9,10}

And it's the restrictions and challenges that prevent people who are eligible for nutrition assistance programs from participating in them. For example, Black individuals and families are more likely than other racial groups to live in communities with structural [barriers](#) to enrolling in SNAP, such as unstable internet access.¹¹

Each of these factors contribute to food insecurity, creating barriers that prevent many families and children from having enough of the nutritious foods they need to be healthy.



Angela Odoms-Young

Associate Professor and Director of the Food and Nutrition Education in Communities Program, Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University



Kim Libman

Vice President of Policy, ChangeLab Solutions



There's a lack of understanding about how racism operates within the food system and impacts health. We must bring together people with lived experiences—from advocates and researchers to policymakers and food workers—to build shared solutions and a more equitable food system.

—Angela Odoms-Young

Exploring the Evidence

We Need Stronger Policies to Help Young Children Access Healthy Food

Kids need a nutritious diet to grow up healthy and strong. And while experts [recommend](#) children eat fruits and vegetables each day and avoid sugary drinks, a recent study underscores the need for strong policies and programs to increase access to healthy foods in places where young children live, learn, and play.¹³

The study, which was released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in February 2023, analyzes data from the 2021 National Survey of Children’s Health. It shows that many young children are struggling to meet recommendations for a healthy diet.¹⁴

Among kids ages 1 to 5, 49% did not eat a vegetable every day, 32% did not eat a fruit every day, and 57% drank at least one sugar-sweetened beverage in the last week. The percentage of children who did not eat a fruit or vegetable daily was higher among those who lived in households with limited food sufficiency and among Black children.

The authors call out important efforts to support kids and families, including the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Child and Adult Care Food Program; implementing nutrition standards in early care and education systems; and regular screening and counseling on food and nutrition security by healthcare providers.

Find the full study at [cdc.gov/mmwr](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr).

The Solution: Integrating Equity Into Our Food System Governance

We can reimagine and redesign our food landscape so that it contributes to the health and wellbeing of every member of our society. Emerging research from Cornell University and [ChangeLab Solutions](#) is beginning to shape shared solutions like these:¹²

- **Include people who have experienced inequity.** People who have experienced the challenges of inequities are also those closest to the solutions. Creating meaningful change and feasible solutions will require bringing together community members, people of color, food workers, and people who have been most impacted by food injustice.
- **Create space for interdisciplinary conversations.** Including researchers with a wide array of expertise on racism, community engagement, health, and food policy is integral to reshaping our food systems and building a society that addresses and dismantles its inequities. Combining that expertise with that of impacted community members and decisionmakers will lead to more paths forward.

- **Empower families who participate in nutrition assistance programs.** For example, we should change administrative policies for WIC, SNAP, and school meals programs to engage participants. Their experiences can help formulate food packages, clarify accessibility, shape the quality of benefits, and establish standards for state and local agencies to solicit feedback.
- **Address the root causes of inequity.** For example, reducing the racial wealth gap may be a key to addressing other inequities. Today, for each dollar of wealth held by White families, Indigenous families have about 8 cents, Black families have about 13 cents, and Latino families about 19 cents. This chasm can drive so many other barriers to health.

Creating a new model for a food system that fully integrates racial equity and economic inclusion is not a simple task, but with hard work, it can be achieved—and the food system and policy landscape that our children participate in tomorrow will be better than the one we have today.



For young people and those who care for them, achieving their full health potential requires access to everything they need to feel safe and well-nourished—from culturally affirming foods to safe schools and neighborhoods, as well as employment with dignity and a living wage. It requires a whole system approach so that families can participate in decisionmaking that shapes their communities and live with joy and security.

– Kim Libman







Grantee Spotlight

Generations United



What Is / What Can Be

Not all families experience the food system in the same way. Today, more than [2.5 million children](#) in the U.S. are growing up in “grandfamilies,” meaning they are being raised by relatives other than their parents, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, or siblings.^{15,16}

Grandfamilies are at increased risk of food insecurity due to poverty, racial discrimination, disability, marriage status, employment status, and other factors. Grandfamilies are disproportionately African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, and, in some areas, Latino. Years of systemic racism and discrimination have led to difficulties accessing support systems and inequitable supports for grandfamilies. A large number of grandparent-headed households also live in rural areas where food sources are often further away from home and transportation options are limited.¹⁷

Generations United is working to change current policies to ensure grandfamily caregivers and the children they raise have access to

adequate nutritious food. Through a new storytelling project, What Is / What Can Be, Generations United invites grandfamilies to share their lived experiences and help us to see, imagine, and create new futures. The project features words and visual expressions of the challenges grandfamilies face and their hopes, dreams, and imaginations about what matters most to them in creating new futures.

Learn more about this project and consider hosting the exhibit at an upcoming event. gu.org/projects/what-is-what-can-be



Food is not just something we use to fill our bellies when we're hungry, food is energy, food is sustenance, food is something we use to connect with each other. But one other thing that food is, is that it is a key part of our health.

– Mauricio, age 15

25%

of households with grandparents raising children experience food insecurity



Creating Communities We Can Thrive In

Every family deserves to live in a community where they have opportunities to reach their best possible health and experience a sense of belonging. That includes the ability to participate in the economy, the power to influence policies that matter to them, and access to essential resources, like safe affordable housing, culturally relevant food, living wage jobs, and so much more.

So how can we create the conditions in our communities to ensure everyone has a fair shot at being as healthy as they can be? It starts with recognizing and addressing the policies and practices that systematically exclude people from opportunities to thrive. It also requires empowering those who are most directly impacted by inequities and aligning solutions that meet their needs and honor their dignity.

Learn about the work we're doing to inform changes like these and strengthen local food systems to better support not only our health but also a healthy economy.





Expert Perspective

Carl Gershenson

Lab Director, Eviction Lab

Solving Our Housing Crisis Can Help Address Poverty and Child Hunger

Every family deserves the opportunity to thrive, and safety net programs can help ensure that opportunity. But if those programs fail to meet families' needs during a time of crisis, we should be asking ourselves why, and how we can fix it.

At the [Eviction Lab](#), we're studying the impacts of America's housing crisis: How the lack of affordable housing is a root cause of poverty, food insecurity, health disparities, and other critical challenges families face. Right now, we're investigating why so many families who rely on food assistance from SNAP lose those critical benefits when they get evicted from their home.

When Housing and Food Insecurity Intersect

[Access to safe, stable, affordable housing](#) is linked to better physical and mental health, improved educational and developmental outcomes for children, financial security, and economic mobility.¹⁸ But there's a nationwide shortage of affordable homes and millions of families spend [50% or more of their income](#) on housing alone.¹⁹ This increases their risk for housing instability and eviction. [Households with children](#), and especially [families of color](#), are disproportionately at risk of eviction.^{20,21}

The hope would be that safety net programs like SNAP would be there to help families who have been evicted get back on their feet as they seek stable housing. That's not the reality for millions of Americans. But we know there are solutions that could protect kids and families from experiencing hunger, poverty, and eviction, including:

- **Reducing barriers to accessing nutrition programs.** Streamline and modernize the enrollment process for SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs with a focus on ensuring all families have equitable access.
- **Investing in policies that put families first.** Universal childcare, a livable minimum wage, paid family leave, and economic supports like the Child Tax Credit are building blocks for healthy, equitable communities where families can thrive.
- **Helping families access stable housing.** Ensure that people who qualify for housing assistance receive it and increase investments in family-friendly, affordable housing.

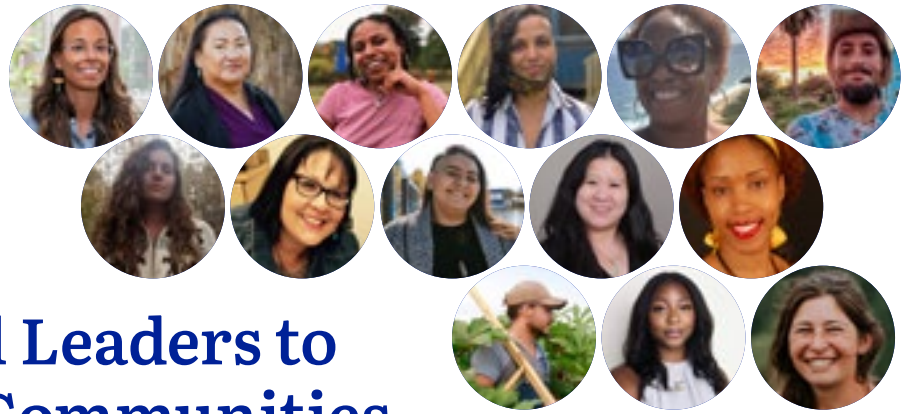
Support for these and other equitable solutions are urgently needed in every community nationwide. Ultimately, we must dismantle the barriers that create unequal opportunity and threaten our shared prosperity to build a better future for everyone's children and grandchildren.



During the pandemic we saw the federal government mobilize quickly to deliver aid where and when it was needed. What if we brought the same urgency to strengthening SNAP, especially to protect families facing a crisis like eviction?

– Carl Gershenson

Carl Gershenson is the lab director at Eviction Lab. Together with Principal Investigator Matthew Desmond, he is conducting research on the link between housing instability and food insecurity through a grant from Healthy Eating Research and RWJF.



Nurturing Local Leaders to Build Thriving Communities

Vital Village Networks Community Food Systems Fellows

The Community Food Systems Fellowship supported by Vital Village Networks creates opportunities for emerging leaders who are committed to food justice, social equity, and improving their local food systems to promote health. The fellows support efforts to shift local power and decisionmaking structures into the hands of communities, particularly those of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color.

Throughout 2022, 14 fellows based around the country partnered with community organizations on research and engagement projects. Fellows also participated in a co-design process to develop a shared vision for community-powered food systems, and the result of this was a roadmap that draws on the deep knowledge and experiences of committed grassroots leaders and their diverse networks.

The roadmap includes strategies for addressing systemic barriers, including efforts to protect food system workers and increase land access. It offers recommendations backed by guiding principles and practices for advancing equity. For example:

Recommendation

Protect and preserve the agency of food system workers and farmers who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color through just distribution of resources, opportunities, and fair compensation for labor.

Sample Guiding Principles and Practices

Allocate sustained local and federal funding to enable food system workers who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color to implement foodways of their own design that reflect cultural, social, and economic culinary practices and traditions of a specific community, geography, or historical period.

Recommendation

Expand food sovereignty by creating pathways for land access, ownership, and repatriation to Black and Indigenous communities and communities of color.

Sample Guiding Principles and Practices

Expand pathways and offer flexible financing for farmers and growers of color, and trusted community-rooted organizations, to transition from leasing to land ownership.



Ojibwe people ask, 'Who are the people who set the pace?' Our elders, children, those living with disability and illness. I look to [them] for direction [by] centering first those most impacted by the food system.

-Kaitlyn Walsh

2022 Community Food Systems Fellow

Learn more and see the full set of recommendations in the Roadmap: [Centering Community Leadership and Power for an Equitable, Sustainable, & Just Food System](#).



Grantee Spotlight

National Farm to School Network

Values-Aligned Universal Meals

National Farm to School Network has a vision for a strong and just food system for all and is working toward this vision through farm to school—the ways kids eat, grow, and learn about food in schools and early care and education settings.

Farm to school is a win for kids when they eat nourishing food in meals and snacks, participate in hands-on activities, and learn about the importance of where our food comes from.

It's a win for farmers when school market opportunities provide reliable and consistent sales and fair pay.

And it's a win for communities when food is grown, distributed, prepared, and consumed for the benefit of every community member.

A policy of universal school and early care and education meals for all kids, embedded with the core values of farm to school, has the potential to radically transform our food system for the better. That's why National Farm to School Network is advocating for [Values-Aligned Universal Meals](#) focused on equity for people who are most impacted across the food system.



Schools engage in “values-aligned” purchasing when they prioritize considerations beyond mere cost-effectiveness while making procurement decisions. The network's efforts are guided by six key values that collectively work to establish a just, equitable food system that promotes the health of all school children and benefits producers, workers, educators, and their communities:

1. Economic justice
2. Environmental justice
3. Health impact
4. Prioritizing racial equity
5. Respecting workers and educators
6. Animal welfare

Find out how you can get involved: farmtoschool.org



Priority Policies and Recommendations

We are in a critical window of opportunity to improve the health and wellbeing of U.S. children and families through effective federal policy. Propelled by the launch of the [White House National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health](#), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposed landmark changes to WIC, the National School Lunch Program, and the School Breakfast Program.³² If enacted, these changes could help millions of children and adults thrive.

At the same time, the federal government undertook numerous changes to SNAP during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic-related policy shifts have ended, leaving many with benefits that still fall short of covering a healthy diet. This section provides a high-level summary of the current policy landscape and offers recommendations from RWJF for how best to strengthen our federal policy approach for ensuring everyone has enough healthy food.





Child Nutrition Policies

Key Moments

In the past 12 months, policymakers have proposed and approved significant changes to critical policies and programs that impact the health of millions of children.

2022

September 28 — **[White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health](#)**

At the second-ever conference dedicated to this topic, the Biden Administration unveiled a [national strategy](#) to end hunger and reduce diet-related diseases in the U.S. by 2030.²²

November 17 — **[USDA Proposes Changes to WIC Program](#)**

The changes would aim to align WIC with the latest dietary guidelines, increase the benefits families can spend on fruits and vegetables, provide participants with more infant formula, and incorporate more culturally relevant foods.

2023

February 7 — **[USDA Proposes Changes to School Meals](#)**

For the first time since 2010, USDA is hoping to update the nutrition standards for school meals, making them healthier and more aligned with the dietary guidelines.

February 28 — **[USDA Ends Extra Pandemic-Related SNAP Benefits](#)**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, SNAP participants received additional benefits to feed themselves and their families. The additional benefits ended at a time when food prices were high from inflation and many families were still struggling to recover financially from the pandemic.

August 7 — **[USDA Announces Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative](#)**

In partnership with Action for Healthy Kids, USDA is awarding nearly \$30 million in grants to ramp up nutrition efforts in small and rural communities.²³ These school districts, which often struggle with unreliable supply chains and insufficient infrastructure, will each receive up to \$150,000 to modernize their operations and serve healthier foods.

Back to School — **[Seven States Offer Free School Meals to All Students](#)**

At the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year, students in eight states have access to universal school meals: [California](#) (passed July 2021), [Colorado](#) (Nov. 2022), [Maine](#) (Aug. 2021), [Massachusetts](#) (Aug. 2023), [Minnesota](#) (Mar. 2023), [Nevada](#) (June 2022), [New Mexico](#) (Mar. 2023), and [Vermont](#) (June 2023).^{24,25,26,27,28,29,30,31}

September 26 — **[USDA Expands the Community Eligibility Provision \(CEP\)](#)**

CEP allows eligible schools to provide free school meals to all their students, thereby reducing stigma for students and cutting down on administrative costs. The policy currently allows schools to participate if 40% of their students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The expansion will lower the eligibility threshold to 25%, enabling millions more students to access free school meals.

September 30 — **[Farm Bill Expires](#)**

Every five years, Congress passes a comprehensive package of legislation called the Farm Bill that funds nutrition and agricultural policy. About three quarters of the bill's cost goes to nutrition, including SNAP and other programs that help families afford healthy food. The 2018 national Farm Bill recently expired before it could be formally renewed. SNAP funding will continue, but full renewal of the Farm Bill remains an important opportunity to recommit to U.S. families by ensuring they have healthy, accessible food to eat.

School Meals

Few programs have as broad an impact on the health of children and families as school meals. They are one of the healthiest [sources](#) of foods for school-age children, which is significant as some children receive up to half of their daily [calories](#) at school.³³ Further, school meal programs are an essential tool to advance health and racial equity because they reach every child in the U.S. who attends public school.

In February 2023, the USDA [proposed](#) updates to school meals to align them with the latest dietary guidance.³⁴ These changes would:

- Implement limits on added sugars, either on certain products or by setting overall weekly limits across meals.
- Gradually reduce sodium levels until they are in line with limits set by the Food and Drug Administration for the food and beverage industry.
- Reduce or eliminate flavored milk, allowing some flavored milk with reasonable limits on added sugars.
- Offer foods that are primarily whole-grain, with the option for occasional non-whole enriched grain products.

In response to the proposal, RWJF submitted [comments](#) urging USDA to implement the limits on sodium and added sugars on a quicker timeline to more fully align with the latest dietary guidelines.³⁵ These [changes](#) could improve students' health and diet quality, help their academic performance, reduce overweight and obesity rates, and decrease food insecurity.³⁶ Healthier meals are also likely to increase student participation in school breakfasts and lunches, which can boost revenue for schools. USDA expects to issue a final rule on this proposal in time for schools to plan for the 2024-2025 school year.





Policy Recommendations

- Make healthy school meals for all children permanent at the federal level. Until then, state-level policies will support access for as many children as possible.
- Finalize the proposed rule to align more closely with the current dietary guidelines by implementing the limits on added sugars and sodium on a faster timeline.
- Ensure schools and districts have adequate training and technical assistance, consistent messaging, and access to updated school kitchen equipment in order to provide healthier meals.
- Reevaluate and regularly increase meal reimbursement rates, taking into account inflation, supply chain issues, and other challenges schools experience.
- Engage with industry providers to ensure that palatable products are made available that meet these standards and are affordable at the available reimbursement rates.
- Monitor and evaluate the impact of these updates on school revenue, policies, operations, and student outcomes.
- Advocate for policies to incentivize local food and values-based purchasing to support meal quality and culturally-relevant school meals that benefit everyone who gets school food to the table.
- If expanding access to free school meals to all students is not feasible in the near term, states can take additional steps to increase meal access:
 - Eliminate the “reduced-price” meal category, which will allow students eligible for reduced-price meals through the National School Lunch Program to get free meals rather than pay 40 cents for lunch and 30 cents for breakfast.
 - Establish state subsidies for CEP to ensure all CEP meals are reimbursed at the “free rate.” These subsidies allow schools eligible for CEP to provide free meals to all students while alleviating the financial burden. This is even more important now that the USDA lowered the threshold for CEP eligibility.





WIC

For decades, WIC has provided food and other critical resources to [millions of families](#).³⁷ In 2022, more than [6.2 million people](#) participated in WIC, including almost half of infants born in the U.S.³⁸ The WIC program plays a key role as a nutrition safety net for these families, including many families of color, who, due to longstanding systemic and structural [inequities](#), experience food insecurity at [rates](#) that exceed the national average.^{39,40}

WIC also helps to keep families with low incomes out of poverty—estimates show that the program contributed to a [2% reduction](#) in the child poverty rate by 2019 compared to what the rate would have been without WIC.⁴¹

In November 2022, USDA [proposed](#) updates for the WIC food packages that aim to help families purchase more nutritious foods, like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.⁴² The proposed changes would:

- Increase the fruit and vegetable benefit, taking it from about \$10 per person per month to \$25 per child and about \$45 per adult.
- Update the food package to align with the latest nutritional science; the last time this was done was almost 15 years ago.
- Allow for a wider range of culturally relevant whole-grain options, like teff, corn meal, quinoa, naan, and more.

RWJF submitted [comments](#) in support of these updates and urged USDA to implement the changes as soon as possible.⁴³ USDA is in the process of reviewing the comments to implement or adjust the proposed rule.



Policy Recommendations

- Extend WIC eligibility to postpartum mothers through the first two years after the birth of a baby and to children through age 6. Enable infants and children to participate for two years before having to reapply.
- As proposed by USDA, make permanent the current increase in the monthly Cash-Value Voucher benefit for purchases of fruits and vegetables and ensure it keeps pace with inflation.
- Reinstate and/or make permanent the pandemic-related waivers that have enabled families to access WIC services during the pandemic, including allowing certification via phone or drive-thru clinics, extending certification periods, expanding the allowable food items for WIC shoppers, and continuing telehealth models.
- Ensure that all women who qualify for WIC based on income and nutritional risk are able to participate, regardless of citizenship or immigration status.
- Advance racial equity in WIC participation, including by making approved foods within the WIC packages more culturally relevant; providing targeted support based on health disparities; and establishing a process for equitable beneficiary participation in program design, implementation, and evaluation.
- Finalize the [proposal](#) to enable participants to use benefits online, implement administrative changes necessary to support that, and provide the resources needed for states to implement these changes as well.⁴⁴
- Ensure updates to the WIC food package continue to be grounded in sound nutritional science and reflect the latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans.





SNAP

SNAP is the nation’s largest nutrition assistance program, helping roughly [42 million people](#) afford food.⁴⁵ SNAP is [proven](#) to increase food security, improve children’s health and academic performance, support economic growth, and lift people out of poverty.⁴⁶ A \$1 billion increase in SNAP benefits during an economic downturn would [increase](#) GDP by \$1.54 billion, support 13,560 new jobs, and create \$32 million in farm income.⁴⁷

Legislation passed during the COVID-19 pandemic increased SNAP funding to cover millions of additional participants and provided a [temporary 15% increase](#) in monthly benefits.⁴⁸ During this period, USDA also updated the formula it uses to determine baseline benefits. By summer 2023, all of the pandemic-related boosts to benefits and administrative flexibilities had expired. Data from the [Census Bureau](#) show that among households impacted by the end of those policies, one in four report “sometimes” or “often” not having enough to eat, even with continued SNAP benefits.⁴⁹

The current federal Farm Bill technically expired on September 30, 2023. SNAP is authorized in the Farm Bill, and its funding continues regardless of the expiration. Full reauthorization of the Farm Bill should ensure that children and families are able to access adequate, affordable, and healthy food.



Policy Recommendations

Work requirements

- Permanently eliminate work requirements for anyone participating in SNAP.

Benefits

- Increase benefit levels to ensure that SNAP benefits cover the cost of a modestly priced meal in every U.S. county.
- Expand availability of resources for programs that support and incentivize the purchase of healthier foods, including additional fruits and vegetables, such as the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP).

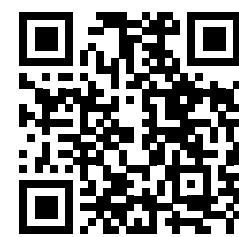
Eligibility

- Streamline eligibility and enrollment processes and focus enrollment efforts on communities with low participation, including immigrants, people of color, and rural residents.
- Broaden SNAP eligibility to cover more college students, unemployed adults without children, and lawfully residing immigrants.
- Eliminate the lifetime ban on SNAP participation for people with felony drug convictions.



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on rates of childhood obesity and food insecurity, as well as policies and recommendations for helping all children grow up healthy.



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