rwjf robert wood johnson foundation

What Gives Us Hope

20 Years of Shared Impact for Kids' Health

ANNUAL 2024 REPORT

STATE of CHILDHOOD OBESITY

Contents

COVER: Jarritt Jamison, Ashley Price, and their son Carter, 8 months, attend the Taste of Soul Family Festival in Los Angeles, California, on October 21, 2023. Taste of Soul is a free community event on historic Crenshaw Boulevard, which promotes and supports African American culture and the revitalization of South Los Angeles and attracts over 350,000 people annually.

Introduction

Dear Friends,

It's been a generation since the U.S. surgeon general issued a call to action to prevent and decrease obesity. And for nearly 20 years, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has been working alongside grantees, partners, and allies on this issue to address the root causes of childhood obesity and help all children grow up healthy.

What have we achieved together? How are children and families benefiting? What have we learned?

This report helps to answer these questions. It looks back at nearly two decades of collective work, including changes to federal nutrition policies that affect millions of children and major investments that impact communities nationwide and across our home state of New Jersey.

This year's report also highlights current projects and features local leaders who are promoting homegrown solutions that build on their communities' strengths to confront the challenges they face. We also hear from researchers and activists who are using new approaches to advance racial equity, including by measuring assets, instead of just analyzing deficits.

As I look back over the history of our commitment to address childhood obesity, I'm so heartened by all this work. What we have explored, accomplished, and learned together is being carried forward to help every child, family, and community thrive.

Looking ahead, we will announce our final round of grantees in early 2025, representing our last significant investment dedicated to addressing childhood obesity.

Our work on this issue has always centered on reshaping policies and systems to create a world where health is truly for everyone. And as I reflect on our political climate today, it's clear that efforts like this are more important than ever.

At RWJF we believe health is a shared responsibility within our society and that it will take leaders at all levels to achieve health equity. We can work together to rebuild our systems and policies so they support health for all of us, not just a few.

I am grateful to all the experts, leaders, and advocates who contributed to this year's report and excited for the opportunities ahead to build the future we all want for our children and grandchildren.

As always, we welcome your feedback. Please share your thoughts with us at ideas@stateofchildhoodobesity.org. Thank you.

In partnership,

JAMIE BUSSEL

Senior Program Officer, RWJF

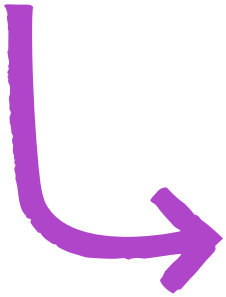
IMPACT

Stronger Nutrition Policies Are Helping Children Thrive

We all want children to grow up healthy, and when nutrition policies are strong, comprehensive, and universal, millions of children benefit.

Over the last two decades, RWJF has been working with grantees and partners to modernize and strengthen key policies at the federal, state, and local levels that shape how children and families access and afford healthy food. And while this report is focused on nutrition-related changes, there have been parallel efforts at all levels to make it easier for children to be active at school and in their communities. These changes are making healthy foods more available in communities, helping more families afford nutritious foods, supporting physical activity, and creating healthier childcare and school settings.

And yet, there have been setbacks and challenges along the way that exclude some children and families, putting them at risk for poor health. Proposals that cut funding for or weaken federal nutrition programs harm children and families. The same is true when states decide not to take up or expand policy efforts that work. Leaders at every level must focus on opportunities to strengthen policies so that all children benefit.



LESSON LEARNED:
Never assume that hard-won progress is secure.

Policy Change at All Levels Improving Kids' Health

FEDERAL

Federal efforts to support child nutrition and improve equity in policymaking have come a long way in 20 years.

- WIC, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, now provides children and families with more money for fruits and vegetables, greater choices of qualifying foods and beverages, and a wider range of culturally relevant foods.[1]
- Nutrition standards for school meals and snacks were updated for the first time in 30 years—and more students are now attending schools that offer free, healthy school meals to all of their students.[2]
- The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* have been updated to reflect the latest science.[3]
- The new Summer EBT program is supporting millions of children, helping to combat summer hunger and improve nutrition.[2]
- We've also seen infusions of funding for and improved flexibility in SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which is the largest federal nutrition program and is linked to improved health outcomes.[4]

In addition to those longer-term changes, the federal government made several important updates during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in response to the barriers that prevent people from accessing healthy food. Leaders gave all students access to free school meals,[4] increased SNAP benefits,[5] added flexibility for WIC[6] participants, and expanded the Child Tax Credit—to incredible results.[7]

Yet, despite the success of these measures in increasing access to affordable healthy foods, some of these successful federal policies were rolled back, and some policymakers have pushed to cut funding, to weaken nutrition standards, or to make it harder for many people to access these programs. Studies on the implications of these potential cuts helped underscore the value of making nutrition programs accessible and equitable.[8]

Federal policies have the power to improve the health and wellbeing of millions of people across the country. That's why it's so critically important that public policy remains supportive of all children and families.

> "If we want to build a healthy future for our country, we need to make sure that all kids have access to the nutrition they need for their health and learning. I'm proud of the work FRAC has done and the role we continue to play in building a nation free from hunger."
>
> **CRYSTAL FITZSIMONS**
>
> Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)

STATE

At the state level, government leaders and advocates have played a critical role in shaping child nutrition policies. They established nutrition standards for school meals, built a farm-to-school network, and expanded enrollment in federal nutrition programs like SNAP and WIC.[3-5] States can act as bridges, helping scale community solutions that are working and stepping up to fill the gaps when federal efforts fall short.

The rollback of the federal universal school meals effort after the pandemic highlighted the importance of state leadership. The clear benefits of offering free meals at school and over the summer drove states to take the helm.[6] In addition to the eight states providing free school meals to kids—California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont—37 states, Washington, D.C., certain U.S. territories, and certain U.S. tribes have opted into SUN Bucks (Summer EBT), a new national program that provides these meals when school is out, too.[7, 8]

As states continue to innovate and fill gaps, they are not only responding to immediate needs but also laying the groundwork for equitable nutrition policies in the future.

> The groundswell of state action on school meals—and especially policies that prioritize farm-to-school programs, local food procurement, and other values-aligned initiatives—provides an inspiring model for what could be achieved for children across the country if universal school meals were reinstated on the federal level.

KAREN SPANGLER

National Farm to School Network

LOCAL

Local communities have been the proving grounds for what can be achieved on a broader scale. Many of today's federal nutrition policies began as successful pilots at the local level. By commissioning research to document this success, RWJF has helped build an evidence base that encouraged policymakers to institute many of these policies nationwide. Examples of this include labeling menus at restaurants, accepting SNAP benefits at farmers markets, and offering incentives to increase access to fruits and vegetables.[9, 10, 11]

Local governments are uniquely positioned to meet the needs of the people in their communities. They are including equitable practices in their policies—like taxes on sugary drinks—and ensuring these policies meet local needs.[12]

These grassroots efforts have improved access to healthy food and sparked broader conversations about the role of local governance in building healthier communities.

> Partnering with communities is essential to creating effective policy change at the local level. By centering their knowledge and needs in every step of the policy process, we can create more equitable and sustainable solutions.

APRIL WALLACE

Voices for Healthy Kids

20+ Years Advancing Policy Wins for Kids and Equity

2001 — U.S. surgeon general issues *Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity.*

2007 — RWJF commits $500 million to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic.


The New York Times

$500 Million Pledged to Fight Childhood Obesity

2009 — The WIC food package is updated to better align with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

2010 — Congress passes the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act*, laying the groundwork to update nutrition standards for school meals and snacks.

2012 — New nutrition standards for school meals take effect.

2015 — RWJF commits additional $500 million to reduce disparities, advance health equity, and focus on those most impacted by obesity.

2018 — Menu labeling requirements in chain restaurants take effect nationwide.

2019 — Studies show school meals are healthier and nearly all schools are meeting the updated standards.[13]

2020 — Updated Nutrition Facts panel goes into effect.

2020 — School meals are provided to every student free of charge to help feed children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2021 — Updates to SNAP, including revisions to the Thrifty Food Plan, go into effect, leading to an increase in benefits for participants.

2022 — White House hosts first Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health in 50 years and releases a national strategy.[14]

2022 — USDA proposes further updates to promote nutrition and equity in WIC.

2023 — USDA proposes permanent updates to school meal standards, and eight states enact universal school meals.[15] Sun Bucks—a summer program providing free meals to students over the summer—rolls out to participating states.[16]

2024 — The proposed updates to the WIC food package go into effect.

HEALTHY KIDS, HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

A former RWJF national program

From 2008 to 2015, Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities supported partnerships and initiatives in 49 communities nationwide to improve hundreds of policies that impact children's health.[i] A comprehensive evaluation of the program found:

715

Healthy eating policy and practice changes to improve access to healthy, affordable food, including:

- Improving nutrition standards in childcare settings.
- More farmers markets accepting SNAP EBT benefits.
- Zoning laws to support community gardens and urban agriculture.
- Healthier food at corner stores, food banks, and grocery stores.

576

Active living policy or practice changes to increase safe physical activity, including:

- Improving physical activity standards in childcare settings.
- More and better park and play spaces.
- Complete Streets policies to support walking and biking.
- Shared use agreements to expand use of fields and parks.

828

Environmental changes to support healthy choices, including:

- Creating farmers markets and community gardens.
- Eliminating food deserts.
- Helping corner stores offer fresh, healthy foods.
- Developing new parks, playgrounds, trails, and sidewalks.

i Bors, Philip, and Mary Beth Powell. 2014. "GROWING A MOVEMENT: Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities Final Report." Active Living By Design. Accessed October 24, 2024. https://healthyplacesbydesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Growing-a-Movement.pdf.

VOICES FOR HEALTHY KIDS

A collboration between RWJF and the American Heart Association

From 2013 to 2023, Voices for Healthy Kids contributed to almost 400 policy wins at the state and local levels, impacting nearly 300 million people in almost every state.[ii] A progress report on the project found:

398

Policy successes to address the root causes of childhood obesity and health inequities, including:

- Investments in SNAP incentive programs.
- All school food meets quality nutrition guidelines.
- State sugary drink taxes to reduce consumption.
- Programs to make local produce more accessible for residents with low incomes.

479

Campaigns funded to increase access to healthy food, including:

- Empowering community leaders to identify barriers to SNAP enrollment.
- Supporting supermarket and healthy food retail development.
- Prohibiting unhealthy food and beverage marketing to students.
- Providing school meals to kids on summer break.

50%

In the first year of Voices for Healthy Kids, states with active grantees signed 50% more bills aimed at reducing childhood obesity than did states without grantees.[17]

ii Voices for Healthy Kids. "Voices for Healthy Kids 10-Year Progress Report." Accessed October 24, 2024 https://voicesforhealthykids.org/progress-report/2023/10-year-progress-report.

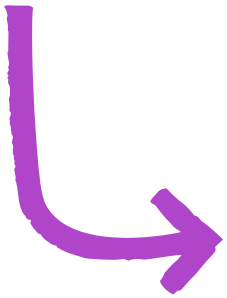
IMPACT

Community Leaders Have Transformed Access to Healthy Food

Where we live has a significant impact on how healthy we can be. In fact, health and opportunity have more to do with your ZIP code than your genetic code.[18] We all want to live in communities with resources that support health, but not all communities have those resources.

Throughout our 20-year effort to prevent childhood obesity, RWJF has been involved with many programs to support healthy, equitable community conditions for children and families, including in our home state of New Jersey. We've invested in community partnerships, collaborated with community leaders and advocates, supported campaigns, and learned from emerging leaders working to improve their local food systems.

This work is about building solutions that promote health, belonging, and economic inclusion for all. Community members have the clearest picture of their strengths and shared challenges. They know what they need and deserve to have a say in shaping the policies and systems that impact their lives.



LESSON LEARNED:
People who are closest to the challenge are also closest to the solution.

EXPERT PERSPECTIVE

In Newark, N.J., Residents Nurture Health From the Ground Up

By **BILAL WALKER**, URBAN EDUCATOR AND URBAN FARMER

Vacant lots are offered through the city of Newark's Adopt-A-Lot program to businesses, residents, and nonprofits that commit to caring for the space. Organizers are using this opportunity to combat gentrification by transforming their lots into gardens and farms for seasonal usage with the hope of purchasing and redeveloping three to four years later. In what were once two vacant lots, my colleagues and I at Al-Munir Consulting worked with local residents to transform the 6,500 square feet of unused land into lush garden beds full of okra, tomatoes, potatoes, collard greens, onions, melons, and herbs.

Leased from the city for just $1 a year, these lots are now home to gardens that help provide 40+ families in the North and South Wards—where many residents face barriers to accessing healthy food—with fresh, culturally relevant produce. But, that is just one piece of the puzzle for us.

The people in our communities know what their needs are, and it's our job to find creative solutions to address those needs—this can be accomplished through collaboration. We know there are longstanding health disparities in pockets of New Jersey—what if we improved people's access to fresh, nutritious food to help change that?

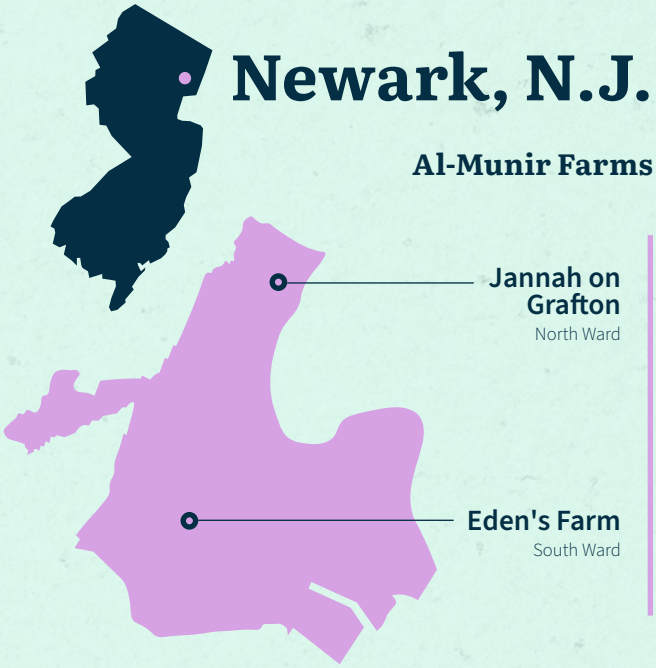
I'm an educator and social worker by trade, and as a Vital Village Community Food Systems Fellow, I take a holistic approach to community wellbeing. I think it's so important to recognize and draw connections between the threads that determine a person's ability to live a healthy life. We need to understand the far-reaching impact that lack of healthy food access can have on a person. For example, asthma—an illness that can be exacerbated by poor diet—is the leading cause of student absenteeism in Newark schools.[19]

This is also why I'm committed to listening to community members. I take the time to respond to their ideas and make space for residents to take on active roles in their own food systems. Al-Munir Farms are powered in part by neighborhood residents, with help from local food justice advocates, collaboratives, and expert gardeners and growers. Our group also conducted research in

the community, where many residents are African American or immigrants from the Caribbean and West Africa, to identify what foods would be most popular.

Fortunately, we are not the only ones working to build a more equitable food system in Newark. Local organizations including the Boys and Girls Club and a community health center help manage more than 60 community gardens across the city. These organizations, and even schoolyards, have gardens contributing to communities across the city.

This is a passion project for everyone involved, and it's about more than the food. When people come into the garden, they are coming into a safe and welcoming space. Just being there and having the freedom to pick their own produce has improved people's wellbeing.



NEW JERSEY PARTNERSHIP FOR HEALTHY KIDS

A former RWJF Statewide program

From 2009 to 2017, the New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids worked with community partners to achieve more than 300 policy and environmental wins to support healthy eating and physical activity for children statewide.[iii]

500K+ — **Residents benefit from Complete Streets Policies** adopted in Camden, Newark, New Brunswick, Trenton, and Vineland.

40K+ — **More children receive school breakfast** thanks to the Advocates for Children of New Jersey's Food for Thought Campaign.

≈200 — **Corner stores or bodegas participate in the New Jersey Healthy Corner Store Initiative** to sell and market healthier foods.

5K+ — **Residents a year visit the Greenwood Ave. Farmers Market**, launched in 2015—and nearly 2,000 take advantage of the health services.

500+ — **Public health professionals**, including social workers, educators, dietitians, and community leaders, learn how they can reshape local policies to advance health equity at the annual statewide "Culture of Health" conference.

iii NJ Partnership for Healthy Kids. "PROGRESS REPORT 2009-2017: Building Healthy Communities by Advancing Environmental, Policy and System Changes in New Jersey." Accessed October 24, 2024. https://www.njhealthykids.org/highlights-report/.

New Jersey's Statewide Commitment to Food Security

By **JACKIE BAVARO**, PROGRAM MANAGER, NEW JERSEY FOOD SECURITY INITIATIVE and **LAMONIKA JONES**, DIRECTOR OF STATE INITIATIVES, FOOD RESEARCH & ACTION CENTER

When it comes to healthy communities, residents know what they need—and what they don't. That's why local and state leaders in New Jersey are working with residents to improve their access to healthy foods.

New Jersey is the only state in the country with an official Office of the Food Security Advocate (OFSA) in the state office. Leaders there are working to understand the aspirations communities have and the challenges they face in accessing healthy food.

Executive Director Mark Dinglasan regularly visits with and listens to local public agencies and service providers in communities to learn more about residents' goals and needs. What he learns is then used to shape the state's efforts to improve access to healthy food.

The New Jersey Food Security Initiative (NJFSI), funded by RWJF, is another example of how the state is proactively seeking input from residents to make nutritious foods more available in every community. When the project launched in 2021, its initial effort was to conduct an assessment to better understand the challenges of hunger in New Jersey and the solutions communities were already implementing to address it.

A critical part of that assessment involved engaging residents who had experienced hunger and poverty in sharing their insights. During the process, the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), which manages NJFSI, conducted more than 150 interviews with local residents as well as New Jersey-based experts in food retail, healthcare, emergency food assistance, transportation, academia, early care and education, anti-hunger advocacy, economic development, social services, waste management, state agencies, government, and more.[20]

"Hearing directly from community members has been critical to making this work successful," said Jackie Bavaro, program manager at the NJFSI. "Spending time with residents and listening to their ideas and suggestions has meant that our approach benefits from their experiences and their expertise. Our hope is that this work will have the staying power it needs to make a real impact."

> "Hearing directly from community members has been critical to making this work successful."
>
> **JACKIE BAVARO**
>
> New Jersey Food Security Initiative

Children play on the outdoor playground at the Light Health and Wellness day care program. Light Health and Wellness provides support programs to Baltimore families impacted by poverty, addiction, mental illness, HIV/AIDS, and other chronic illnesses.

Gathering broad and deep input from so many residents and agencies was essential for shaping the overall strategic approach to break down barriers driving inequity. In 2024, the initiative launched its first group of seven grants—including two core partner grants to OFSA and Hunger Free New Jersey—funding local organizations pursuing a range of different approaches:[21, 22, 23]

- City Green: This is a community-based farming organization working to expand the statewide Good Food Bucks Program and to make it accessible to more New Jersey SNAP participants.
- Communities Revolutionizing Open Public Spaces: This nonprofit addresses food insecurity in Atlantic City, including by conducting surveys to understand residents' food needs, engaging community members, and building local partnerships.
- CUMAC: As part of the Passaic County Food Security Collaborative, this nonprofit hires from the community and partners with families to help them enroll in SNAP and apply for other benefits, provide healthy groceries, and distribute food donations.
- nourish.NJ: This nonprofit works to improve access to SNAP and WIC benefits for underserved communities in Morris County.
- RWJBarnabas Health Foundation: This project represents the first statewide effort to embed SNAP Navigators—professionals who assist with questions and applications for SNAP benefits—directly into the healthcare setting.
- NJ Office of the Food Security Advocate: This grant aims to improve food security, nutrition, and health equity for New Jersey residents through the implementation of a strong, sustainable, and permanent Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer program, known as Summer EBT.
- Hunger Free New Jersey: This nonprofit works to connect more New Jersey families with federal nutrition programs, including SNAP, school meals, CACFP, and Summer EBT.

The vision is that the collective effort of these groups will help improve access to healthy food across the state in ways that are responsive to the voices and needs of each community.

New Jersey Food Security

Initiative Grantees

nourish.NJ
Morris County

CUMAC
Passaic County

City Green
Statewide

RWJBarnabas Health Foundation
Statewide

Communities Revolutionizing Open Public Spaces
Atlantic City

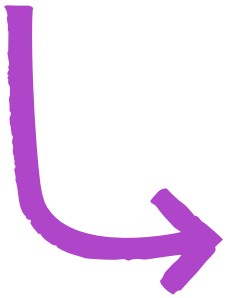
IMPACT

Better Approaches to Data Are Advancing Racial Equity

Growing our knowledge and understanding of how to achieve health equity is a fundamental part of RWJF's approach. RWJF has invested in efforts to better understand how policies and systems need to be changed so that all children can grow up healthy.

We have funded efforts that support hundreds of researchers from different backgrounds and areas of expertise to examine these issues. They have studied settings from childcare to schools to communities, as well as the impact of food pricing, labeling, marketing, and nutrition standards on children's health. RWJF has also collaborated with partners in other sectors, including federal agencies and research academies, to ensure diverse perspectives are working together on shared solutions to shared problems.

Data show that many of the systems and policies that shape our lives and our opportunities to be healthy do not impact all families and children equally. Some were intentionally designed to exclude or harm people of color and people with low incomes. To prevent that going forward, RWJF is working to ensure that the people doing the research bring a diverse range of lived experiences and approaches to their work.



LESSON LEARNED:
When research is inclusive, the innovations benefit everyone.

EXPERT PERSPECTIVE

Leveraging Data in Pursuit of Food Justice

By **DR. GAIL CHRISTOPHER**, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL COLLABORATIVE FOR HEALTH EQUITY

As someone who has dedicated decades of my life to addressing social change, recent developments in the research and data fields are giving me renewed hope.

For the last five years, I've worked as the executive director of the National Collaborative for Health Equity (NCHE). Our mission at NCHE is to help end racial and health inequities. We recognize that assuring access to quality food is a key factor for achieving health equity. We proudly lead efforts to change how experts in the field approach health and food equity research, including rethinking the data we're measuring and what those data are used for.

If we're going to achieve true food justice and really reverse the ever-expanding trend of poor health in children—childhood obesity rates in particular—we have to take a relational approach. We need to recognize that the factors that contribute to this American dilemma have to be viewed systemically and we need to put more value on relationships. By this, I mean relationships within communities across multiple sectors, including the food system.

I give you the Health Opportunity and Equity (HOPE) Initiative as an example of how data related to causal factors and the value of local relationships can be reimagined and reinvigorated. Launched in 2018, the HOPE Initiative was created to start a new conversation about health and health equity, with the belief that every person in the country should have equal opportunity for health and wellbeing. Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the initiative was led by NCHE and Texas Health Institute in partnership with the Center on Society and Health at Virginia Commonwealth University.

With the HOPE data system, our research team took a complete 180 from the traditional view of how 27 indicators of health and wellbeing were being used.[24] Instead of measuring deficits, we measured assets. So, rather than focusing on food insecurity, our experts pivoted and set out to measure food security as well as other social and community factors that influence food security. The HOPE data system enables community leaders and advocates to view food security within the context of other indicators, such as transportation and livable wages. This strategy

allows communities to set aspirational, yet achievable, goals and quantitative ways to measure the opportunity to achieve food security.

For example, HOPE data show that 87% of the U.S. population has food security, with the goal of the initiative being 95%.[25] That means roughly 32 million more people need food security to achieve the goal.

Although ways of achieving better food security may seem obvious, it's important to note that the issue is more nuanced than "do people have enough to eat?" In fact, it's not just about the quantity of food communities have access to. Rather, we have to consider the quality. Researchers must move beyond data models of the past 30 years and begin to parse out those nuances regarding access to nutritious food.

When it comes to solutions, though, I am encouraged. I believe that the path forward calls for creative interventions, local advocacy, and of course, meaningful data.

Let me tell you a story. In one inner city community, a group of motivated young people recognized there was a lack of healthy food options in their neighborhood food stores. They decided to use their cell phones to take photos of the food being offered in the area convenience stores, which were mostly unhealthy options. Community members were able to use those photos to spark a discussion with the store owners about the healthy and unhealthy foods being sold. The result? Store owners changed what foods they purchased in order to make more nutritious choices available to residents.

That positive outcome is the epitome of what we can achieve. Because when we share data with communities, we must reframe it in terms of what is possible, not just repeating the disparities, but reframing the data to reflect expectations for positive change that can be measured as achievable goals. Communities can then use that data, mobilize, and work to achieve those attainable outcomes.

Building Evidence for Equity

How researchers are innovating to reduce barriers to health

RWJF is committed to funding research that advances health equity. That includes supporting researchers who are committed to racial justice and confronting the barriers that exclude people from opportunities to prosper.

Meet some of the researchers who are finding new and better ways to improve our health data. Their efforts are expanding the data on equity and shaping our strategies for building healthier communities where all children and families can reach their full potential.

DR. FRAN FLEMING-MILICI

DIRECTOR OF MARKETING INITIATIVES, UCONN RUDD CENTER FOR FOOD POLICY AND HEALTH

Areas of study: Monitoring the food and beverages marketed to youth and parents of young children, including the amount, type, and nutrition of products promoted.

Key finding: Black and Hispanic youth experience greater exposure to food ads compared to their White counterparts, and companies disproportionately target Black and Hispanic consumers with marketing for high-calorie, low-nutrient products, including candy, sugary drinks, snacks, and fast food.[26]

> “Our research continues to provide policymakers and advocates with evidence to challenge industry practices and inform policies to create a more equitable food environment. With support from RWJF, we are now conducting community-based participatory research working with teens to identify ways to address targeted marketing of unhealthy foods in their community.”

DR. EDUARDO J. GÓMEZ

PROFESSOR, DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE OF HEALTH POLICY AND POLITICS, LEHIGH UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF HEALTH

Areas of study: The politics of global health policy, with a focus on emerging middle-income countries.

Key research: Currently conducting research into food as a human right by doing fieldwork in Brazil, Mexico, and South Africa—three countries that have incorporated access to food as a human right in their constitutions.[27]

> “To address inequities in access to healthy food and avoid chronic disease, our political leaders need to be fully committed to adopting access to nutritious food as a human right within our federal and local laws and the constitution. As seen in Mexico, Brazil, and South Africa, this is a necessary first step to not only ensure equitable health but also to make progress addressing food insecurity while reducing obesity and other related chronic diseases.”

Participants in the Civic Works program survey garden plots during a trip to a Baltimore community garden in Walbrook as part of the organization's introductory programming. Civic Works offers education and skills development to Baltimore communities and youth.

POONAM GUPTA

RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, URBAN INSTITUTE INCOME AND BENEFITS POLICY CENTER

Areas of study: Food security, food access, adequacy of the social safety net, and issues affecting undocumented immigrants.

Key finding: Identified key barriers to equitable SNAP benefits access, including what state SNAP administrators can do to better meet the nutritional needs of SNAP participants.[28]

"SNAP is a critical mechanism in reducing food hardship and improving short-term and long-term health outcomes, but it can be difficult to access. Research can help define priority policies and processes to help states advance equity in benefit access."

DR. SHIRIKI KUMANYIKA

RESEARCH PROFESSOR, DREXEL DORNSIFE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH, FOUNDING CHAIR OF THE COUNCIL ON BLACK HEALTH

Areas of study: Public health nutrition and strategies for achieving equity in the prevention and management of obesity and other diet-related chronic diseases.

Key accomplishment: Developing the "Getting to Equity in Obesity Prevention Framework" to help researchers and practitioners develop equity-oriented obesity prevention strategies.[29]

"The getting-to-equity framework emerged at a pivotal moment in the childhood obesity prevention effort. It is helping researchers, educators, and practitioners account for equity-related factors in the systems and policies we are trying to change."

DR. ANGELA ODOMS-YOUNG

LEAD INVESTIGATOR FOR THE NUTRITION LIBERATION, FOOD SOVEREIGNTY, AND JUSTICE LAB AT THE CORNELL COLLEGE OF HUMAN ECOLOGY

Areas of study: Food justice, particularly the social and structural determinants of dietary behaviors and related health outcomes in populations earning low incomes and among people who are Black or Indigenous or other people of color.

Key finding: Discrimination and structural racism contribute to health inequities and food insecurity, but integrating equity into our food systems can help reduce those risks.[31]

"To really advance health equity, we have to gather better data, including those that measure assets not just deficits across many systems: nutrition, economics, agriculture, and more. If we have more complete data that better measures our aspirations, we can reshape these systems in ways that support health equity."

DR. CYNTHIA OGDEN

EPIDEMIOLOGIST, NATIONAL CENTER FOR HEALTH STATISTICS, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

Areas of study: Nutrition, growth, and obesity, particularly in children.

Key finding: Body mass index (BMI) has its limitations as a measure of health, particularly from a health equity standpoint, with studies showing racial/ethnic differences in distributions of body fat and BMI are not always consistent and may not accurately represent a person's health.[30]

"Data from the National Center for Health Statistics' National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) provide the only source of nationally representative obesity estimates based on physical measurements—which are more accurate than self-report. NHANES also includes full body DXA scans that allow analyses showing the limitations of BMI in measuring body fat across different population groups. NHANES will continue to provide accurate and relevant data to guide actions to improve the health of all Americans."

SOFIA SEGURA-PEREZ, MS, RD

CHIEF PROGRAM OFFICER, HISPANIC HEALTH COUNCIL

Areas of study: Food insecurity, dietary habits, food safety knowledge, diet-related disease, and nutrition support program participation within Hispanic and Latino populations.

Key finding: Using community-based approaches to health and nutrition research is central to breaking down barriers to health equity among communities that experience health disparities.[32]

"By partnering with community members to design and collect research data, we gain insight into their needs and struggles, particularly in accessing healthy, affordable food and quality healthcare. This collaboration empowers us to jointly advocate for policies and solutions that break down health barriers."

DR. QI (HARRY) ZHANG

PROFESSOR, JOINT SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH AT OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY AND CO-CHAIR OF THE HEALTHY EATING RESEARCH NUTRITION AND OBESITY POLICY AND RESEARCH NETWORK WIC LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

Areas of study: Health and behavioral economics, particularly addressing the socioeconomic determinants of health to reduce health disparities in communities of color and among those who earn low incomes.

Key finding: Small program changes like including a calculator on the app that WIC participants use to redeem their benefits in some states can significantly increase program accessibility.[33]

"WIC is a wonderful program that tackles health disparities in low-income women, infants, and children. However, more research is needed to improve the program and better serve the participants. I'm fortunate to work with WIC agencies nationwide on this challenging but rewarding journey."

COMMENTARY

All Children Have the Right to Be Healthy, Regardless of Where They Live

By **SHAMMARA WRIGHT**, INTERIM MANAGING DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC PORTFOLIOS, RWJF

We believe every community in every ZIP code should be a place where people can live their healthiest lives. Regardless of race or income, everyone should have a safe, affordable home, easy access to healthy food, clean water, good job opportunities, and what they need to be well. All of these factors influence our ability to reach our best possible health and wellbeing.

When we envision the communities we want to see in the world, we understand there's no single vision for what a healthy community looks like. The vision should be rooted in and the work driven by the people who call it home.

I'm excited about the work RWJF is doing to help communities across the country realize their own visions. As we continue to learn more and more about what it takes, we remain committed to supporting projects and community leaders who are breaking down barriers to better health and confronting structural racism.

We understand that in order to change policies and systems to better support health for everyone, we must work in partnership and solidarity with local leaders and residents who have the knowledge and experience to advance home-grown solutions in their communities.

Our work to prevent childhood obesity is a good example of this. There are so many ways our work to create healthy communities intersects with the work we've done to prevent childhood obesity and support strong local food systems that promote access to healthy food.

Carrying all we learn with us, it's impossible to imagine a healthy, thriving community where fresh foods are not available to everyone who lives there.

- How can people be healthy if they can't afford or find nutritious foods in their neighborhood?
- How can kids learn and engage at school if they're hungry?
- How do communities create a sense of belonging if some people can't access foods that represent their cultural identity?
- How do families who are struggling financially choose between paying rent or putting food on the table?

We all need healthy food to nourish our bodies and minds. Access to healthy food is not only a basic human need but also an essential part of a healthy community where everyone can flourish.

As our work to prevent childhood obesity has evolved, we've learned that obesity is one indicator of how our communities can fall short of supporting our health, but only one. As we continue to dive deeper into what is needed to live our healthiest lives, we focus on addressing the systemic barriers while also investigating what we can do right now to expand opportunities for health in our communities and serve all people better.

Together we can redesign the systems that currently limit opportunities to be healthy and create new ones that promote inclusion, support health, and heal our communities one neighborhood at a time.

Learn more about the work RWJF is supporting at the intersection of healthy communities and equitable food systems.

Shopping for Access: A New Tool for Improving Food Security in Every ZIP Code

Grocery Gap Atlas offers insights into food access across the U.S.

For some people, it's a quick easy trip to the grocery store when they need bread, milk, fruits, or vegetables. But for millions of Americans, particularly those in rural and non-White communities, that's not reality.

A new tool—the Grocery Gap Atlas—provides advocates with data they can use to spark change and improve food security in their state, city, and even their neighborhood.

When massive grocery store chains merge or buy smaller grocery store companies, they can use their growing market power to charge higher prices and offer fewer choices to consumers. They can also abuse their power to drive smaller grocery stores, especially those in rural and marginalized communities, out of business, creating food deserts where it is much harder for the community to afford all of the food options they deserve.

The Atlas not only includes grocery store locations but also details the parent or holding companies that own those stores. It also brings together measures of food access and corporate concentration, along with socioeconomic disadvantage and residential segregation, to help people better understand how structural racism and unfair markets impact the availability of healthy foods.

This comprehensive data reporting platform empowers people to view reports on the corporate concentration of grocery markets, read case studies about the latest in market trends, and identify socioeconomic disadvantage and residential segregation trends. The tool aggregates multiple data sources across economic and health domains and visualizes information on an interactive map to help stakeholders better understand the grocery landscape in their communities.

The Grocery Gap Atlas is a collaboration between RAFI and the University of Chicago Data Science Institute. It was created for those working to break down barriers that are driving inequities and improve food access for people in every community.

Engaging Communities to Address Structural Racism in Our Food System

How we're building shared solutions to advance health equity

From the global level to the local level, our food systems impact our health, economy, environment, and ability to thrive. Understanding and addressing how structural racism influences the ways we grow, prepare, distribute, and consume food is essential for creating communities that ensure all children have opportunities to live their healthiest lives.

That's why RWJF is bringing together community members, scholars, advocates, policymakers, funders, and practitioners to share promising solutions for confronting barriers to food access and advancing racial justice in Black, Indigenous, and Latino communities. Like in Chicago, where more than 250 people attended a three-day convening to discuss a wide range of issues—from disparities in access to food and exploitation of farmers to food policy and strategies for combating racism in the food system.

Participants emphasized the importance of addressing land restitution, universal basic income, and immigration reform to achieve food justice. They discussed the need for community-led food systems and the importance of autonomy, intergenerational learning, and addressing systemic barriers that hinder progress, particularly for Black farmers.

They agreed food is a fundamental right that should not depend on personal resources. Contributors advocated for equal access to healthy food, valuing agriculture as a career, shortening the supply chain, and holding policymakers accountable for the systems they create.

As part of the Chicago convening, local artists were invited to capture key themes from each discussion in powerful illustrations. Moving forward, learnings from these community conversations will be shared in webinars, policy briefs, and a strategic plan.

▲ Schikea Lindsay and her son Amir Shah, 5, shop for fresh produce. Grand Price Foodland, a local grocery store providing customers with multiple services, including money transfers and fresh produce, which are scarce in the neighborhood, is owned by Robert and Omar Ayar. They took over the business in 2007 after first working there as bag boys as teenagers.

Justice on the Menu

Achieving racial equity in the U.S. food system

All people deserve access to safe, nutritious, and affordable food where they live, but a history of structural racism and oppression prevents countless Americans from realizing their best health. This history can contribute to a wide range of health challenges, including childhood obesity.

That's because food justice is not just about food. It's about the fair distribution of resources, land, and capital; equitable policymaking; and community power. It's about housing, healthcare benefits, and paid sick leave for farm and food workers—the majority of whom are people of color—and cash and food assistance to support the economic security of families with low incomes.

Justice on the Menu, a new report from ChangeLab Solutions, examines the structures and systems causing social and environmental harm to many Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, and those from communities that earn low incomes, and offers recommendations for creating healthier communities and advancing racial justice.

In the report, you'll find stories of communities where laws and policies have been successfully implemented to improve food justice and health equity. From empowering Black farmers to expanding protections for agricultural workers, these efforts have demonstrated the importance of community leadership in building food sovereignty.

The report also includes a policy menu designed to help state and local decisionmakers protect the health, nutrition, and wellbeing of food producers and consumers alike. Whether you're an advocate, researcher, funder, business leader, policymaker, or community leader, we all have a role to play in reshaping our food environment into one that is equitable and racially just.

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