

Progressing the Right to Food in the United States

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on behalf of the following organizations:

American Friends Service Committee
Broad Street Presbyterian Church Food Pantry
Center for Mississippi Food Systems
Coalition for Carceral Nutrition
Doddridge County Family Resource Network
Farmer Frog
Florida Food Policy Council
Food and Agriculture Action Coalition Towards
Sovereignty (FAACTS)
Food Council of Schenectady County
Food for Maine's Future
Food for Soul
Food in Neighborhoods Community Coalition
Food Solutions New England
Grow Food Northampton
Grow For Food
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Iowa Farmers Union
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The Foodshed Network
U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance
Voices of Hunger West Virginia
West Virginia University, Center for Resilient

Communities
West Virginia University Extension, Hancock County
WhyHunger
Women Advancing Nutrition Dietetics and Agriculture
(WANDA)

Who we are

The National Right to Food Community of Practice is a growing network that stimulates shared learning and capacity building among state-level organizers and community-based organizations advocating for the Right to Food. Our network was established in 2021 and develops tools for political education, narrative change and advocacy rooted in a human rights framework that addresses the root causes of hunger at the intersection of racial, housing, climate and economic justice. By framing access to nutritious food as a human right, we work through collective responses that tackle the root causes of hunger and poverty long-term, deepening the conversation beyond short-term emergency food access interventions.

Introduction

“What comes up for me is the deep and persistent inequities in our food system—how access to nutritious, culturally relevant, and dignified food is still a privilege rather than a right for so many. The areas that feel most pressing right now are economic and geographic accessibility. Too many of our neighbors are forced to make impossible choices between food, housing and healthcare, while structural barriers—like the absence of grocery stores in Black and brown communities and the reliance on cars to reach fresh food—continue to uphold food apartheid.” - Survey, Michigan

1. People in the United States have dramatically different experiences of food, depending on their ability to afford food that meets their nutritional, social and cultural needs. There is no scarcity or lack of variety of nutritious food in this country, but it is out of reach for far too many. People with living wages and good working conditions, or who benefit from inherited wealth, generally find it easy to source any food they choose. On the other hand, nearly 48 million (one-in-seven) people live in food insecure households, unable to access the food that meets their basic needs. Housing segregation, redlining and racist policies and practices have contributed to the marginalization of racially “othered” groups, who are more likely to experience hunger.
2. The United States has not ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which is the main human rights treaty explicitly protecting the right to food.¹ Despite its fundamental role in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and obligations to protect the right to food through other treaties, the U.S. federal government does not recognize the right to food as a legally enforceable right that would guide domestic measures.² Only one state, Maine, has amended its constitution to include the right to food.
3. Our food system is designed to support large-scale, industrial agriculture and food production, at the expense of our health, communities, local economies and the planet. Corporate influence and lobbying dominate policymaking, and federal subsidies incentivize commodity foods, animal feed and biofuels through extractive practices. Industrial-scale food waste contributes to greenhouse gas emissions and is redirected through the charitable sector, meeting neither the needs of the planet nor the nutritional, social and cultural needs of our people.
4. During the pandemic and under the Biden Administration, significant strides were made to strengthen the social and environmental protections we need to ensure that people will be able to access the food that meets their needs, now and in the future. Unfortunately, many were temporary provisions that have lapsed or have been reversed with the new administration.
5. We are concerned by the early actions of the Trump Administration to weaken social, economic and environmental protections. These steps threaten the livelihoods of children and families, immigrants, migrant workers, Black and Brown communities, Tribal Nations and indigenous communities, disabled people and LGBTQ+ communities. Actions to dismantle environmental protections and accelerate extractive practices will have immediate and long term environmental and social consequences.

Enforcement and accountability for the right to food

Ratification of international treaties

6. Since the third cycle review, there has been no progress on ratifying international treaties that would enhance protections for the right to food.³ Some progress has been made to strengthen a recognition that the right to food is a necessary part of fulfilling existing legal obligations.

7. The United States remains part of a minority of UN Member States that have failed to ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)⁴ and is the only one to sign but not ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The U.S. has failed to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which, along with ICESCR and the CRC, recognizes the right to food as part of the right to an adequate standard of living, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which recognizes the limited access to food that women in poverty often face.
8. The United States has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). These treaties do not explicitly mention the right to food, but fulfillment of these obligations depends on ensuring a right to food. For example, ICERD recognizes economic, social and cultural rights as part of the “full and equal enjoyment of human rights”.⁵
9. Advocates are increasingly making the case that the right to food is a critical part of delivering on the United States’ existing obligations.⁶ In 2022, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination recognized the disproportionate impact of food insecurity on racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. due to “the disparate rates of poverty and unemployment in these communities, racial wage disparities, and legislation and practices that have a discriminatory effect on the tenure and use of land”.⁷ This Committee recommended the adoption of a “comprehensive and rights-based national plan to end hunger” and encouraged the United States to “take effective measures against hunger, in consultation with all relevant stakeholders, including members of the communities most affected by food insecurity”.⁸

Incorporation of the right to food in State constitutions

10. Despite the lack of progress at the federal level, there has been an increase in legislative activity to incorporate the right to food and the right to a clean and healthy environment into state level constitutions and legislation.
11. In 2021, Maine became the first state to enshrine the right to food in its state constitution.⁹ The amendment was the result of years of local activism, led by small farmers with support from allied lawmakers. Maine legislators continue working to expand protections,¹⁰ and new food sovereignty ordinances have been passed in several towns throughout the state.¹¹
12. Since the successful passage of the amendment in Maine, additional states have expressed interest in enacting right to food legislation. Advocates in California, New York State, West Virginia, Iowa and Colorado have worked with state legislators to draft and present bills to amend state constitutions to include the right to food. Local and state movements provide an opportunity to ensure that food advocacy is tailored to the needs of particular communities, while strengthening local food systems.

Protections vary by geography and political context

13. Progress in some states but not others has left the nation fractured in terms of legal protections. An individual in one state may be entitled to receive food assistance, or to enforce their right to food in court, while someone in the next state is left without access to food and means of state redress. A child in one state may have free access to school meals, while a child in another state may face hunger, even in the classroom. Stronger national policy approaches to address and enforce the right to food would provide consistent protections across the United States.

Food should be economically accessible for all

"I work with people every single day... They can't afford their rent. They can't afford their food. They have to live with other people [to make ends meet]... I work with a family - they have to live together as three of them, in order to even pay the National Grid bill. One pays the rent; the other gotta pay the National Grid, the cable, the internet; and then the others have to, you know, buy food." - Interview, New York

"We're so tied into this hunger alleviation industry that I think the politicians don't feel like they're hearing enough from people about how screwed up the food system is because it's patched up to the degree that at least people aren't rioting in the streets. With the food industry, food bank industrial complex, you know, people are placated enough and get enough calories so that they're not rioting or calling up their politicians every day. So, it really doesn't get on the radar, at least in our local politics." - Interview, Kentucky

Protective measures during the Covid-19 pandemic have expired or been overturned

14. During the pandemic, government relief helped mitigate food insecurity caused by losses of income and an increase in food prices, but only temporarily.¹² These measures were so successful that the poverty rate dropped to a record low of 8%. Households with children and those with SNAP were the main beneficiaries of increased tax credits, social programs and food assistance during this time.¹³ But when Congress allowed these social supports to expire in 2022, food insecurity rose significantly.¹⁴ Pandemic financial benefits ended,¹⁵ 17 states withdrew from receiving extra support from SNAP, and food prices spiked across the country.¹⁶

Persistent food insecurity varies across populations and places

15. Food insecurity has become a chronic issue in the U.S. and has not dipped below 10% of the population for the past four decades.¹⁷ More than 47 million people lived in food-insecure households in 2023 (the most recently published data),¹⁸ representing 13.5% of the population and including 7.2 million children.
16. Food insecurity exists in every county and congressional district in the U.S., though rates vary significantly across populations and places.¹⁹ Southern states²⁰ and rural communities²¹ experience the highest food insecurity rates in the nation. Arkansas, Texas, and Mississippi rates hover at 19%, 17% and 16%, respectively – much higher than the national average.²²
17. Food insecurity is particularly prevalent among marginalized and/or vulnerable populations – 17.9% of all households with children, and closer to 35% of households with children headed by a single mother. The food insecurity rate for Black and Latinx households is 1.7 times higher than the national average, at nearly 23% and 22%, respectively.²³ In 2023, 15% of LGBT adults reported not having enough to eat, compared to 10.4% among non-LGBT adults.²⁴ Rates were even higher for people who identified as transgender or another sexual orientation.²⁵
18. Since the Trump Administration was sworn in, food pantries around the country are reporting a significant decrease in immigrant clients showing up for food aid.²⁶ Many food banks are implementing food distribution strategies that will help ease the increased anxiety that immigrants and foreign-born citizens experience being in public spaces.²⁷

Rising costs of housing, transportation, childcare and healthcare at root of food insecurity

19. Food insecurity is directly connected to low and stagnant wages, coupled with a rise in the cost of living. Healthcare costs are both a cause and consequence of food insecurity - food insecure households experience more chronic illness and pay in healthcare costs than households with enough food, leaving many people to choose between food and medical care.²⁸

20. From 2020 to 2024, the *all-food* Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose 23.6%, a higher increase than the *all-items* CPI, which grew 21.2%. The CPI for housing rose almost as high as that for food, while transportation increased the most at 34.4%. Both housing and transportation are often inflexible expenses for low-income households and, therefore, directly correlated to increases in food insecurity rates.²⁹
21. Nearly all economists agree that punitive tariffs, especially if applied to key trading partners and allies, will raise prices for U.S. consumers and would negatively impact U.S. farmers.³⁰ The U.S. relies heavily on Canada and Mexico for non-durable goods, especially food.

Food and nutrition assistance programs are insufficient, inaccessible and increasingly at risk

22. Food and nutrition assistance programs like SNAP and WIC are critical measures to protect against poverty and food insecurity in the U.S., but they are insufficient to meet people's needs, and inaccessible for many. Tens of millions of people who participate in federal nutrition programs struggle to afford enough nutritious food, despite existing levels of support. These essential programs are at risk of further cuts by the current Congress.
23. SNAP participation is already limited to three months in a three-year period for most adults without children in the home, unless they can demonstrate they are working at least 20 hours per week or qualify for an exemption. Proposed changes would extend the work requirement to more people.³¹ There is a false narrative that recipients do not work, yet more than half of all SNAP recipients are working – just in low-wage jobs with little long-term job security.³² In fact, U.S. Census Data published in 2025 demonstrates that 85% of families receiving SNAP benefits had at least one person in their household working in the past 12 months.³³
24. The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) forms the basis for SNAP benefit levels. The 2021 update to the TFP – the first in 60 years – was based on changes in dietary guidance (specifically linking food to health) and how and where low income families access food. This increase in SNAP benefits lifted more than 2 million people, including nearly 1 million children, above the poverty line at the height of the pandemic, with the greatest impact on Black and Latinx individuals. The Trump Administration has said it will cut SNAP by \$230 billion by rolling back the 2021 update to the TFP and permanently freezing its cost outside of annual inflation adjustments.³⁴

Official Poverty Measurement in need of review and update

25. The way the U.S. measures poverty – the Official Poverty Measure (OPM) - is based on a time when the costs of goods and services were much lower, even when adjusted for inflation. To determine someone's poverty status today, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) still uses this threshold developed in the 1960s to determine eligibility³⁵ requirements to access food and nutritional assistance. A more realistic measure of poverty in today's economic climate is one and a half times the official measure.³⁶
26. The OPM does not reflect the economic reality of today. The calculation doesn't take into account housing, transportation, childcare or medical costs, or geographical differences, even though costs of living vary significantly across the country.³⁷ It also doesn't align with the lived experiences of millions of U.S. residents, especially given that 59% of US adults in 2025 do not have enough in the bank to cover an emergency expense of \$1,000.³⁸
27. Working families are making the choice between purchasing enough nutritious food or paying for medicine. Farmers are choosing between producing food on their land or taking an off-farm job that provides health insurance. People of color are more likely to face these choices than white populations.³⁹

Charitable food access is entrenched as a (false) solution to hunger

28. The charitable food sector is now an institutionalized part of the food system in the United States, distributing the equivalent of more than 6 billion meals per year across approximately 250 food banks and 60,000 food pantries.
29. A 2024 Gallup survey found that among the wealthiest countries in the world, the U.S. had the highest rate of people struggling to afford enough food.⁴⁰ More than 50 million people are forced to supplement their food purchasing through charitable food access and government nutrition programs.⁴¹ While wages stagnate, and costs of living rise, too many people are left with no choice but to rely on charitable support to make up the difference. This over-reliance on charitable aid both obscures the true nature of poverty and food insecurity in the U.S. and is not a sustainable, dignified solution to *ending* hunger.

Food should meet the nutritional, social and cultural needs for all

“Carceral food is a system of harm...The primary problem is that the food is inadequate, because feeding people is a “check-the-box” exercise, without regard to quality or nutrition most of the time, and based on insufficiently low budgets, without any real oversight or standards ... The average food cost per person per day in most jails and prisons is \$2.54.” - Interview, Washington DC

“Food was the biggest thing in my family, right? It truly was my grandma’s love language, and if you would come to visit her, the first thing she would do would be to set the table, and you would have a meal in front of you. It didn’t matter what time of the day you showed up. And so that was the way I was raised... Now, with the scarcity mindset, it’s like - I couldn’t do that now if I tried, because ... I’d never be able to afford to feed somebody else, right? Like, those leftovers in the fridge are for us, you know?” - Interview, West Virginia

School meals are not universally accessible or meeting needs

30. Eight states have established universal free school meals for every child, removing barriers of access and the stigma associated with means tested school meal systems. Children in the remaining 42 states do not have these protections.
31. Work is needed to improve the quality and procurement practices of school breakfasts and lunches. USDA nutritional guidelines, while substantially improved from earlier decades, are not able to ensure healthy school meals. Federal reimbursements for meals served fall significantly short of the costs of producing them.⁴² Challenges include: lack of funding for staff, training and on-site food preparation facilities; lack of small-scale processing facilities to bridge local agriculture and school kitchens; long-term corporate contracts that limit food service directors’ ability to source local foods; state and local public procurement laws that require selection of the lowest bidder; and a lack of political will to invest in children’s health and wellbeing at school.⁴³
32. When the academic year ends, children who are eligible for free or reduced priced meals face an increased risk of hunger. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP, now known as SUN Meals) is designed to address those needs while reducing stress on household food budgets. Many SFSP schools, community centers and camps sites simultaneously support student development via a diverse array of enrichment opportunities for students served. During the public health challenges of the summers of 2020 and 2021, eligibility rules for SFSP were relaxed, and there was more flexibility in the delivery. This resulted in a dramatic increase in participation (5.6 million in 2020, and 5.1million in 2021), up from 2.7 million in 2019.⁴⁴ By 2023, pandemic supports were discontinued, and enrollment decreased to 2.2 million.
33. Learning from the pandemic offers an opportunity to reflect on what worked with summer meal provision - such as enhancing flexibility in delivery options, expanding eligibility requirements and streamlining the application process.⁴⁵ Threats to funding SFSP not only impact access to foods,

but to the many nourishing enrichment programs that have been key partners in providing community-based solutions for at-risk youth and their families.

Lack of independent oversight and accountability for safe and nutritious food in prisons

34. The prison system prioritizes low food costs, relying increasingly on contracts with private corporations to provide meals, sacrificing physical and mental health of people behind bars. Fresh fruits and vegetables, essential to a healthy diet, are a rare addition to prison meals, and calories are often insufficient for most adults.⁴⁶ The federal Bureau of Justice Statistics found that prisoners suffer from higher rates of diabetes and heart disease than the non-incarcerated public. Whether or not prison food causes these diet-related diseases, they are nevertheless exacerbated by it.⁴⁷
35. Incarcerated people who are able to purchase commissary food have some increased agency over what they are eating but are frequently limited by the prohibitive cost of commissary items (much higher than these same items outside of prison⁴⁸) and its high content of sodium, sugar and refined carbs.⁴⁹

Lack of agency and dignity when receiving charitable food

36. Food pantries cannot meet the nutritional, social and cultural needs of the people they are serving. Firstly, accessing food through charity is not socially acceptable in the United States and is accompanied by shame, stigma and a lack of dignity. Secondly, the food banking system is deeply intertwined with large corporations and has become a part of the food waste stream caused by the subsidy system. Though many food pantries and distribution sites have worked towards offering healthy food choices, including through gleaning of fresh fruits and vegetables not sold at market,⁵⁰ food pantries are often provided with low quality, excess food from the industrial food supply chain, which is often used to stretch pantry offerings.
37. People with dietary restrictions, such as food allergies or intolerances, religious requirements or physical barriers to preparing certain foods, often face the difficult situation of having to discard food they receive because it does not meet their needs or reflect their circumstances. This is not an acceptable way to ensure every person in our country accesses food with dignity.

Culturally important food traditions have been eroded and are at risk

38. Dominance of the corporate food system negatively affects our ability to maintain culturally important foods and traditions. Indigenous communities' access to traditional diets has been undermined by the U.S. policy that displaced them from their ancestral lands and food ways and continues to burden them with government-supplied commodities that primarily benefit food and agriculture corporations. Most Indigenous nations now suffer from chronic diseases like diabetes, while their life expectancy is nearly seven years shorter than white Americans.⁵¹
39. Community-driven food models provide critical spaces for people to invest in local businesses and sustain culture through relationships. However, infrastructure for community food programs is fragmented. Funding and support vary by locality and region, and too many people are excluded because of the lack of political will to establish sustainable support for the sector.

Food systems should be controlled by the people

"The system itself is based on a large scale, centralized food system, kind of factory style, food production. Everything we've done, both economically and policy-wise has supported that system. I think the crux of it is the corporate influence over policy." - Interview, Kentucky

"... when I understand and think about the right to food, I have to be able to access it in a way that's not just

via the market, and the market is so consolidated and under complete corporate control that we don't have any ability as individuals... to influence change with our personal dollar." - Interview, Colorado

Corporate lobbying and influence

40. In 2010, corporations were granted the same rights as individuals when the Supreme Court of the United States decided *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*.⁵² Corporations were allowed to endorse, criticize, and make contributions to political candidates and political campaigns with almost no restrictions. Between 2019-2023, agribusinesses and closely aligned industry associations and interest groups spent more than a half a billion dollars to influence the Farm Bill. During this same time frame, annual expenditures by the agricultural industry lobby increased by 22% and every year they spend more on federal lobbying than the oil and gas industry.⁵³ Despite citizen-led campaigns, no progress has been made to overturn the 2010 Supreme Court case *Citizens United*.
41. Unlimited lobbying gives corporations access to the conduct of public affairs that no individual citizen enjoys, including for key federal legislation like the Farm Bill that determines the direction of food production and food assistance.

People are viewed as individual consumers, not collectively as rights-holders

42. Most people in the United States are disconnected from local or regional food production, including the people involved in growing, harvesting, producing and selling our food. The primary way most people access food is through grocery chains, which are increasingly consolidated and have largely displaced independent retailers and local markets.
43. Messaging for how to make changes to the food system has focused on encouraging individuals to use their own purchasing power to affect the market - a common slogan is: 'Vote with your fork'. This leaves people who have fewer financial resources at a disadvantage and excludes them from having their views and priorities heard. Consolidation in food retailers also disrupts people's ability to meaningfully participate in decisions about their food and how the food system works - limiting people's agency to the constraints of their immediate food environments. It heightens disparities between people living in parts of the country where local food economies are supported and thriving, and the vast majority of the country where this is not the case.
44. We do not have a shared conception of food as commons in the United States, nor the understanding that the right to food is a collective right. Human rights in the U.S. are primarily understood as individual freedoms, and this contributes to a weakened sense of collective decision-making and agency. Elected officials and public policy makers are often reluctant to engage with the concept of the right to food because they are concerned about the implications for the budget, how it will be implemented and what accountability measures would be needed.

Lack of access to land, water and local control

45. Systemic racism and displacement of Indigenous communities and people of color from the land and waterways has left a legacy of dispossession and exclusion. Black farmers lost \$326 billion worth of land in the 20th century through a variety of factors linked to structural racism.⁵⁴ The percentage of Black farmers in the United States has dropped from 14% in 1920 to just 1.3% today. While *all* small and family-sized farms are underrepresented in subsidies that are allocated through the farm safety net, Black farmers receive a negligible fraction (.06%) of what white farmers receive. Indigenous communities and Tribal Nations have also been historically deprived of land rights.⁵⁵

46. Access to land and waterways is largely controlled by corporations, which limits the ability of many people to establish and sustain livelihoods. For example, in Colorado, the legal structure for water rights means that newer farmers are often unable to access water needed to produce food, and this is getting worse due to increasing droughts and effects of the climate crisis. More than 40 million acres of U.S. agricultural land is owned by foreign investors and companies - 3.1% of all privately held agricultural land and 1.8% of all land in the United States.⁵⁶
47. As of 2023, four major seed corporations owned a vast majority of intellectual property rights to some of the most widely grown crops, including 97% for canola and 95% for corn.⁵⁷ This not only fuels corporate domination of the food system, but it also harms the environment by severely restricting seed and crop diversity and making organic production more difficult in neighboring areas. Seed saving is a sustainable agriculture solution that allows communities to maintain crop diversity as well as seed and farming autonomy.

Food systems should be environmentally sustainable

“... how can you possibly have the right to food if you don't have adequate and healthy land upon which to grow the food, let alone the policies in place and the infrastructure to keep that food close to where it's been grown?” - Interview, Vermont

“[In the past....] People were growing their own food. People were canning their own food, preserving their own food, and they knew how to cook with it. They knew how to cook for a family and stretch their goods and that kind of thing. They had knowledge of seeds and their climate... there's a lot of narrative around that knowledge being purposefully stripped from us to make us better consumers. And so, when I think about the right to food, too, I also think about the right to knowledge, and what has been stolen and, what work we have on re-educating ourselves and all of those kinds of capacities as well.” - Interview, Colorado

Industrial food system contributing to climate crisis

48. The way our food is grown, produced, distributed and wasted through the industrial food supply chain is highly extractive and destructive. In 2024, the U.S. food system accounted for approximately 30% of greenhouse gas emissions.⁵⁸ Big agriculture has a pollutive impact on soil, water, and air, causing both immediate impacts to nearby communities and long-term impacts on the viability of contaminated soil and water. Industrial food and agricultural entities harm the ecosystem through food production methods that value profitability over sustainability.
49. The corporate food system prioritizes quantity over quality, leading to increased food waste and decreased food quality. Food waste occupies a quarter of landfill space in the U.S. and produces high levels of greenhouse gases, in particular methane.⁵⁹
50. According to the USDA,⁶⁰ in 2022 soil management contributed to 49% of agricultural emissions, enteric fermentation made up 32% of agricultural emissions, and animal manure management led to 14% of agricultural emissions. Taking action to incorporate mitigation techniques into farming practices would tackle these sources, which make up 95% of U.S. agriculture emissions.

Escalating climate related disasters

51. The lack of action to mitigate and adapt to climate change leaves farmers, fishers, food producers and communities more vulnerable. Heavy storms, floods and fires are increasingly threatening the sustainability of food production and the livelihoods of people growing, harvesting and producing food in their communities. In 2024, thousands of people were left without food and water following natural disasters. People have had to rely on federal assistance, which has struggled to keep up in the face of escalating crises.

Failure to invest in localized, agroecological and regenerative practices

52. A true solution is to invest in agricultural practices and community-based food systems that enhance biodiversity, sequestration of carbon and clean water.⁶¹ Prioritizing support for Indigenous communities' stewardship of land, forests and waterways for food production; urban communities' development of urban gardens and food forests; and farmers' use of agroecological practices and values to leave farmland in a better condition for future generations.⁶²
53. Localized food systems can also increase food accessibility and food system resilience in the face of global and national disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and growing climate disasters. Investing in community food systems over corporate control increases community food autonomy as well as strength and resilience in times of crisis.

Progress since Third Cycle review (2020)

54. The failure to make progress on the following recommendations from the Third Cycle is delaying the realization of the right to food in the United States:
- a. Ratify all human rights treaties that the United States has signed.
 - b. Take effective measures to combat discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity.
 - c. Combat climate change and its negative effects on people and the planet.

Suggested Questions

- What steps are states taking to address poverty and end the need for food banks?
- What steps are being taken to reduce ecological footprints of the corporate-controlled food system?
- What plans are in place to protect the rights of children to a clean and healthy environment, both now and in the future?

Recommendations

Enforcement and Accountability

- Ratify ICESCR, CEDAW, CRC and CRPD to protect the right to food and address the needs of everyone, especially vulnerable populations.
- Incorporate the right to food and the right to a clean and healthy environment in state constitutions.
- Develop a rights-based national food policy to strengthen protections for everyone in the United States and address current disparities based on race, ethnicity and residency.

Food should be economically accessible for all

- Adopt national and state-level plans to end the need for food banks, built on rights-based principles of dignity and participation from those most affected by food insecurity.
- Protect workers from financial hardship by raising the minimum wage to reflect a living wage and/or establish a Universal Basic Income, improving working conditions and ensuring gender and racial equity in the workplace.
- Protect and increase public spending for food and nutrition assistance programs, such as SNAP and WIC, and eliminate punitive and unrealistic income eligibility guidelines.

Food should meet the nutritional, social and cultural needs for all

- Provide universal free school lunch and breakfast programs in every state, with an emphasis on nutrition and local food procurement.
- Mandate public transparency and accountability for carceral feeding programs to improve the quality and quantity of food for optimal health and wellbeing.

- Maintain and expand Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program (LFS) and Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA).
- Reduce the tax incentives for donation of nutrient-poor foods and increase incentives for those that support good health and well-being.
- Encourage and support consistent beneficiary participation in determining food choices and guidance for both public and private food programs.
- Provide sustainable funding and infrastructure support for the development of local food action plans, including access to fresh and affordable food in all neighborhoods.
- Secure and protect land access for small farmers and independent producers - particularly people of color, Indigenous communities and women.
- Provide public land access for hyper-local production through community gardens, food forests and urban food producers.

Food systems should be controlled by the people

- Reverse *Citizens United*, regulate corporate influence over research and require increased transparency of corporate campaign donations and lobbying.
- Strengthen and apply anti-trust laws.
- Invest in community-driven models, e.g. community-supported agriculture (CSAs); community food stores, cooperative supermarkets and food hubs; and cooperative land ownership.
- Support and facilitate the development of diverse community food systems and local governance structures.
- Support and fund partnerships between communities and research institutes to ensure participatory action research centers the needs of communities.

Food systems should be environmentally sustainable

- Support, subsidize and incentivize independent and small-scale food producers that implement sustainable, regenerative and agroecological practices.
- Fund and support infrastructure for local, small-scale processing, especially for meat.
- Hold agricultural companies accountable for their role in accelerating climate change and their negative impacts on food production, access, equity and sustainability.
- Develop and support integrated regional policy that recognizes the intersections of food, farming, conservation, healthy soils, land and water access, health, housing, healthcare, racial health and economic disparities.
- Protect the fishing, hunting, water and land rights of Indigenous peoples.

References

- ¹ The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also include the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to food.
- ² <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2017/03/24/u-s-explanation-of-vote-on-the-right-to-food/> “The United States supports the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living, including food, as recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Domestically, the United States pursues policies that promote access to food, and it is our objective to achieve a world where everyone has adequate access to food, but we do not treat the right to food as an enforceable obligation. The United States does not recognize any change in the current state of conventional or customary international law regarding rights related to food.” See also <https://www.cfr.org/blog/international-treaties-united-states-refuses-play-ball>
- ³ “The United States supports the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living, including food, as recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Domestically, the United States pursues policies that promote access to food, and it is our objective to achieve a world where everyone has adequate access to food, but we do not treat the right to food as an enforceable obligation.” <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2017/03/24/u-s-explanation-of-vote-on-the-right-to-food/>
- ⁴ Even though the U.S. has not ratified ICESCR, its signature in 1977 means it has an obligation to refrain from acts that would defeat the object and purpose of the treaty.
- ⁵ ICERD Art 2(2) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-elimination-all-forms-racial>
- ⁶ [Violations of Civil and Political Rights in the United States Stemming from Hunger, Malnutrition, and Violations of the Right to Food: Shadow Report Submission to the Human Rights Committee For the United States Review](#) (2023); Members of the National Right to Food Community of Practice engaged with the country visit to the United States in 2023 by the UN Special Rapporteur on Racism, and her report included a section on the Right to adequate food (paras 34-35) and Recommendations on Ensuring equal access to adequate food (pp-ss): <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/56/68/Add.1>.
- ⁷ <https://docs.un.org/en/CERD/C/USA/CO/10-12>, para 41.
- ⁸ <https://docs.un.org/en/CERD/C/USA/CO/10-12>, para 42.
- ⁹ <https://legislature.maine.gov/legis/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=HP0061&item=1&snum=130>
- ¹⁰ Including An Act to Protect the Right to Food in 2024: https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/display_ps.asp?ld=124&PID=1456&snum=132
- ¹¹ <https://legislature.maine.gov/statutes/30-A/title30-Asec7505.html>
- ¹² In 2022, childhood poverty rates rose to the highest recorded since the US began measuring poverty in 1967 – a precipitous retreat from the historic progress made during the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/expiration-of-pandemic-relief-led-to-record-increases-in-poverty>
- ¹³ [Household Food Security in the United States in 2021 | Economic Research Service](#)
- ¹⁴ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/expiration-of-pandemic-relief-led-to-record-increases-in-poverty> .
- ¹⁵ <https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2023/02/08/snap-emergency-allotments-are-ending>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings/>
- ¹⁷ Byker Shanks C, Calloway EE, Parks CA, Yaroch AL. Scaling up measurement to confront food insecurity in the USA. *Transl Behav Med.* 2020 Dec 31;10(6):1382-1389.
- ¹⁸ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us>
- ¹⁹ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/>
- ²⁰ <https://southernagtoday.org/2024/10/04/the-food-insecurity-challenge-a-snapshot-of-the-southern-u-s/>
- ²¹ <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/food-and-hunger>; Rural Hunger Facts | Feeding America
- ²² <https://www.bread.org/article/rising-expenses-and-food-insecurity-an-american-reality/>
- ²³ <https://www.bread.org/article/rising-expenses-and-food-insecurity-an-american-reality/>
- ²⁴ <https://frac.org/blog/lgbtqia-hunger-2023>
- ²⁵ *Ibid.* LGBTQ+ people also participate in social safety net programs like SNAP at much higher rates than heterosexual counterparts see <https://foodrevolution.org/blog/lgbtq-food-insecurity/>
- ²⁶ <https://www.axios.com/local/washington-dc/2025/02/03/food-pantry-lines-trump-immigration-policy>
- ²⁷ <https://www.kgw.com/article/news/community/food-banks-assure-clients-community-safe-space/283-fca289fc-1cc5-492e-bb47-771109fb78ea>
- ²⁸ <https://www.pbgh.org/food-insecurity-cause-and-effect-of-higher-health-care-costs/>

- ²⁹ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/chart-detail?chartId=58350>
- ³⁰ https://www.wsj.com/opinion/a-letter-to-trump-from-economists-tariffs-policy-protectionism-economy-9a063b69?mod=opinion_lead_pos5
- ³¹ Republicans are proposing changes that would expand work requirements to apply to adults up to age 65, parents and grandparents in households with children aged 7 or older, veterans, houseless people, and youth who have aged out of foster care. https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/millions-of-low-income-households-would-lose-food-aid-under-proposed-house#_edn10
- ³² It is a fallacy that adults receiving SNAP are disincentivized to work and therefore must be required to work or be seeking work to receive nutritional benefits. <https://www.nokidhungry.org/blog/why-more-snap-work-requirements-will-harm-families-and-increase-hunger>
- ³³ <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2023.S2201>
- ³⁴ <https://democrats-agriculture.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=2909>.
- ³⁵ Federal food assistance programs use the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines to determine eligibility for a number of food assistance programs. For instance, in the case of SNAP, the Federal guidance suggests that generally households cannot have a gross income of over 130% of poverty level (and after a review of allowed deductions, a net income of 100% of poverty) to be eligible to enroll in the Program. For eligibility for the Free and Reduced price Meals at Schools cut offs: [Federal Register: Annual Update of the HHS Poverty Guidelines](#)
- ³⁶ <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/testimony-measure-poverty-failing-americans/>
- ³⁷ There is no state in America where the Health and Human Services (HHS) poverty level reflects an adequate income for a family to meet basic needs. The HHS Poverty Level is the same for all 48 continental states, despite wide differences in living expenses. [Federal Register: Annual Update of the HHS Poverty Guidelines](#)
- ³⁸ <https://www.bankrate.com/banking/savings/emergency-savings-report/>
- ³⁹ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-cost-of-being-poor-is-rising-and-its-worse-for-poor-families-of-color/>
- ⁴⁰ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/643598/leader-loser.aspx>
- ⁴¹ <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america>
- ⁴² <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/school-meals/nutrition-meal-cost-study> and <https://schoolnutrition.org/sna-news/sna-releases-2025-position-paper/>
- ⁴³ <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/reports/true-cost-of-food-school-meals-case-study/>
- ⁴⁴ [Child Nutrition Programs - Summer Food Service Program | Economic Research Service](#)
- ⁴⁵ [summer-report-2023.pdf](#)
- ⁴⁶ <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2025/03/08/food-business-michigan-prison-mississippi>
- ⁴⁷ Soble, L., Stroud, K., & Weinstein, M. (2020). Eating Behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison. Impact Justice. impactjustice.org/impact/food-in-prison/#report
- ⁴⁸ <https://theappeal.org/locked-in-priced-out-how-much-prison-commisary-prices/>
- ⁴⁹ <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2025/03/08/food-business-michigan-prison-mississippi>
- ⁵⁰ <https://grist.org/food-and-agriculture/gleaning-the-ancient-practice-fighting-modern-food-waste/>
- ⁵¹ <https://awaken.com/2025/03/indigenous-foods-how-colonized-diets-have-made-native-nations-sick-and-whats-being-done-about-it-today/>
- ⁵² *Citizens United v. FEC*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010)
- ⁵³ https://www.ucsf.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/Cultivating%20Control_white%20paper%20final_May%202010_OG_PDF.pdf
- ⁵⁴ [Lost Inheritance | Union of Concerned Scientists](#)
- ⁵⁵ [Land Theft: The Alarming Racial Wealth Gap in America Today < Literary Hub](#)
- ⁵⁶ <https://www.fb.org/market-intel/foreign-investment-in-u-s-ag-land-the-latest-numbers> and <https://www.landgate.com/news/largest-institutional-landowners-in-the-us>.
- ⁵⁷ <https://www.foodandpower.net/latest/usda-seeds-report-3-23>.
- ⁵⁸ <https://news.asu.edu/20240701-environment-and-sustainability-hidden-cost-american-food-system>.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2024-07/USDA_ClimateChangeMitigation_Brochure_24.pdf.
- ⁶¹ <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003260264>
- ⁶² Union of Concerned Scientists (2015) *Counting on agroecology: Why we should invest more in the transition to sustainable agriculture*. <https://www.ucsusa.org/food-agriculture/advance-sustainable-agriculture/counting-on->

[agroecology#.Wj0SlzdG02w](#). See also DeLonge, M.S., A. Miles, and L. Carlisle (2016) *Investing in the transition to sustainable agriculture*. Environmental Science & Policy 55, Part 1: 266-273.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2015.09.013>