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CLASP
The Center for Law and Social Policy

Affordable and Accessible Food

For millions of families, the high cost of food is becoming out of reach. Congress must strengthen federal nutrition programs while also investing in local and regional food systems that make healthy food more affordable and accessible.

Introduction: The Problem and Solution

Families across the country are finding it increasingly difficult to afford groceries. Food prices remain significantly higher than they were before the pandemic, forcing millions of households to make difficult choices between food, rent, child care, transportation, and health care. For many families, the challenge is no longer simply whether food is available—it's whether they can afford it and whether their communities have reliable places to buy healthy food.

Meeting this challenge requires that Congress do more than protect federal nutrition programs. Lawmakers must also invest in the community food systems that make healthy food affordable, accessible, and available. Strengthening these systems through an approach known as food sovereignty can improve food access to affordable retailers, support local economies and food infrastructure, help farmers, and build more resilient communities while ensuring families are better protected when economic conditions shift or federal nutrition policies change. These investments can reduce food insecurity, improve affordability, and create a more resilient food system for future generations.

The Food Affordability Crisis

For millions of families, the high cost of food is becoming out of reach. Even families with steady employment are having difficulty paying for basic necessities.

AFFORDABILITY CRISIS IN PRACTICE

$930+
A MONTH FOR FOOD · FAMILY OF THREE



A FAMILY OF THREE



BALTIMORE CITY, MARYLAND

Consider a family of three in Baltimore City. They earn approximately $54,640 a year, which puts them at 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. According to the Economic Policy Institute's Family Budget Calculator,[1] average monthly costs include approximately **$1,600 for rent**, **$1,096 for child care**, and more than $2,000 for transportation, utilities, health care, and other basic necessities. **Together, these expenses exceed the family's monthly income even before they have bought a single bag of groceries.** When food prices continue to rise because of inflation, tariffs, and the war in Iran, families are often left with a series of bad choices: to stretch meals, purchase less nutritious foods, skip meals, or rely on credit cards to put food on the table.[2]

Increasingly, these difficult choices are reflected in national trends. More families are carrying credit card debt to pay for groceries and other everyday necessities, underscoring that food insecurity is increasingly an affordability crisis.[3]

This crisis will not be solved through current federal nutrition assistance programs or by placing additional restrictions on what families can purchase through these programs. Instead, Congress must strengthen federal nutrition programs while also investing in local and regional food systems that make healthy food more affordable and accessible.

Why Food Sovereignty Matters Now

Congress has an opportunity to move beyond managing hunger and begin addressing the conditions that make families and communities vulnerable to food insecurity in the first place. That requires both strengthening federal nutrition programs and investing in community food systems.

Food sovereignty is the right of people and communities to help shape the way in which their food is produced, distributed, accessed, and consumed. It recognizes that food access is about whether food is

available, who has power within the food system, whose knowledge and cultural practices are valued, and whether communities have the resources and infrastructure to meet their own needs. Food sovereignty can include community gardens, urban agriculture, cooperatives, food hubs, farmers markets, mutual aid networks, Tribal food systems, local growers, neighborhood retailers, and other community-led approaches to feeding and caring for one another.

Food security, food justice, and food sovereignty are interconnected but distinct. Food security generally focuses on whether people have enough food. Food justice examines the structural and racial inequities that shape who has access to food, land, capital, and opportunity. Food sovereignty builds upon these goals by ensuring that communities have meaningful influence over the policies, investments, and institutions that shape their food environments.

This broader vision is especially urgent now. In 2024, 18.3 million households—13.7 percent of all U.S. households—experienced food insecurity.[4] The burden was not shared equally. Black, Latino, American Indian and Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, and multiracial households have consistently experienced food insecurity at rates above the national average.[5] Food insecurity also increased in Black households between 2023 and 2024, meaning more families experienced disrupted eating patterns or reductions in the amount of food they consumed.[6] Given the significant reductions to federal nutrition assistance and other supports enacted through **H.R.1**, food insecurity is likely to affect more people, particularly those already facing economic hardship. These disparities reflect longstanding inequities in income, wealth, land ownership, neighborhood investment, transportation, and access to full-service grocery stores.

18.3 million

U.S. households experienced food insecurity in 2024 — 13.7 percent of all households

Congress' cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, are already disproportionately affecting communities of color. According to an analysis by UnidosUS, the number of people participating in SNAP fell by 5.3 million between April 2025 and April 2026.[7] An estimated 65 percent of those losing SNAP were people of color, including approximately 1.6 million Latinos and 1.2 million Black people, along with nearly 300,000 Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander people and at least 60,000 Native Americans.[8] As states absorb a greater share of SNAP costs and consider additional measures to reduce program spending, access could become increasingly restricted, especially for communities of color.

5.3 million

fewer people participating in SNAP between April 2025 and April 2026 — an estimated 65 percent of them people of color

Families are also navigating food costs that remain significantly higher than before the pandemic. Food prices continued to increase in 2025 and are projected to rise again in 2026.[9] Families do not experience inflation solely as a percentage change from one year to the next; inflation shows up in the cost of groceries and rising housing, child care, transportation, and health care expenses.

Federal nutrition programs are essential to meeting this challenge. SNAP, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), school meals, and other nutrition programs reduce hunger, support health, and provide stability during periods of economic hardship. SNAP also supports farmers, retailers, and local economies by directing federal dollars into communities.

Recent declines in participation across federal nutrition programs underscore the importance of understanding access barriers, not assuming that reduced enrollment reflects reduced need. Declining participation can mean that families who still need assistance are losing access because of policy changes, administrative burdens, or other barriers that make programs harder to navigate. When families lose connection to programs that help them afford food, the consequences extend beyond individual households to local retailers, farmers, and communities. For example, when fewer families can use SNAP at a neighborhood grocery store or farmers' market, those businesses lose revenue too, affecting the local food economy and the availability of food in the community.

Current publicly funded programs cannot carry the entire food system. SNAP can help a family purchase groceries, but it cannot bring a full-service grocery store into a neighborhood, create reliable transportation to food retailers, preserve local farmland, build cold-storage infrastructure, or ensure that a community-based grower has access to land and capital. Likewise, emergency food systems can help families through immediate crises. But charitable food distribution systems like food pantries cannot correct the structural inequities that continue to produce hunger.

Federal policy has too often treated these systems as separate: nutrition assistance for families, agricultural policy for farmers, economic development for businesses, and community development for neighborhoods. In reality, they are parts of the same food ecosystem. When families lose purchasing power, grocery stores and neighborhood retailers lose revenue. When retailers close, families have fewer places to use their benefits. When small and historically underserved farmers lack reliable markets, communities lose local sources of food and wealth. Disrupting one part of the ecosystem affects every other part.

Congress should therefore pursue a dual strategy: strengthen SNAP and other federal nutrition programs so families can afford food today, and make sustained investments in the community infrastructure, local producers, and neighborhood institutions that can expand food access over time. This approach would treat food affordability, nutrition, agricultural opportunity, racial equity, and community development as interconnected priorities rather than isolated policy concerns. Public benefits should provide a strong foundation of stability while federal policy also creates pathways for communities to build lasting food security and collective well-being.

Strengthening Community Food Ecosystems

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), farmers markets, food hubs, food-value chains, farm-to-institution programs, urban agriculture, cooperatives, aggregation, processing, and distribution are interconnected components of local and regional food systems.[10]

Communities across the country are already developing solutions with this interconnectivity in mind. The next Congress should expand support for locally led initiatives that includes access to land, water, and soil testing and remediation, equipment, training, and technical assistance.

Federal agencies should also identify and remove rules that unnecessarily prevent residents from growing food on publicly supported land, including in and around public housing. Residents should not face federal barriers to developing gardens or food-growing projects that improve neighborhood access, strengthen relationships, and provide culturally relevant food.

Funding should be designed so that smaller and community-based organizations can participate without navigating overly complex applications or competing against large institutions with dedicated grant-writing staff. Planning grants, start-up resources, multi-year operating support, and simplified reporting requirements would help communities develop sustainable projects rather than short-term pilots that disappear when initial funding ends.

A strong community food ecosystem connects the people who produce food with the institutions, retailers, and families that purchase it. It includes not only farms and markets, but also the infrastructure needed to aggregate, process, store, transport, prepare, and distribute food. It also includes the community organizations and local leaders who understand residents' needs, cultural preferences, transportation realities, and trusted sources of information.

Making Healthy Food More Affordable

Making healthy food more affordable requires addressing both the price families pay at the checkout counter and the structural conditions that shape what food is available in their communities. Food prices increased sharply in 2022 and continued to rise in each subsequent year.[11] The USDA projects that grocery prices will rise again in 2026, including significant increases in the price of fresh vegetables.[12]

The consequences are visible in persistent levels of food insecurity. In 2024, 7.2 million households had limited resources, causing household members to reduce their food intake or disrupt their normal eating patterns.[13] The typical food-secure household spent approximately 11 percent more on food than a household of the same size and composition that was experiencing food insecurity.[14] This finding reinforces a simple reality: affordability is one of the strongest determinants of whether families can consistently access enough nutritious food.[15]

Federal nutrition policy too often focuses on changing individual behavior without addressing the financial and structural barriers that shape food choices. Many families already want to purchase more fruits,

vegetables, and other nutritious foods but face high prices, inadequate SNAP benefits, limited transportation, inconsistent retailer access, and a lack of full-service grocery stores in their communities. Policies that restrict what people can purchase with SNAP do not address these barriers; instead, they increase stigma, complicate program administration, limit participant autonomy, and reinforce the harmful assumption that people with low incomes cannot be trusted to make decisions for their own households.

Rather than restricting choice, federal policymakers should prioritize making healthy food more affordable by ensuring SNAP benefits reflect the actual cost of food and the realities families face, including regional food prices, household composition, dietary needs, transportation limitations, and the time available to shop for and prepare meals. Strengthening benefit adequacy would not only help families afford nutritious food but also support retailers, farmers, and local economies that depend on consumer purchasing power.

Federal investment should also expand nutrition incentives that increase the value of SNAP benefits when participants purchase fruits and vegetables. Programs such as the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program, commonly known as GusNIP, provide federal funding for nutrition incentive projects that are implemented by nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and various partners at the local, state, Tribal, and regional levels.[16] These include locally operated initiatives such as Double Up Food Bucks, which operates at participating grocery stores, farmers markets, and other retailers across the country. These programs reduce cost barriers while preserving participant choice.

> *They are grounded in a simple but important principle: healthier purchasing becomes more attainable when families have more resources, not when the government narrows their options.*

Evidence from the USDA's Healthy Incentives Pilot demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach. In Hampden County, Massachusetts, 7,500 SNAP households were randomly selected to receive a $0.30 incentive for every SNAP dollar spent on eligible fruits and vegetables. Participants consumed nearly a quarter cup more targeted fruits and vegetables per day than nonparticipants, representing a 26 percent increase.[17] They also spent more of their SNAP benefits on fruits and vegetables and reported greater availability of produce in their homes and improved overall diet quality.[18]

> **26%** **increase in targeted fruits and vegetables eaten by SNAP households in USDA's Healthy Incentives Pilot**

Federal Priorities

Congress must invest in policies that support access to affordable and healthy foods. These investments must move beyond short-term demonstration projects and toward durable systems that communities can sustain over time. As Congress considers legislation, it must not only reverse cuts to food assistance, but deeply invest in a system that ensures families across every zip code have access to affordable food. Supporting increased funding for programs such as GusNIP brings us closer to ensuring families can afford food during this affordability crisis.

CLASP supports the following principles as critical to an ecosystem that guarantees affordable food for all. For more details, see our brief, "Food Sovereignty: Why Food Assistance Can't Stop at Just SNAP and WIC."[19]

1 Strengthen Federal Nutrition Programs and Expand Flexible Nutrition Incentives

- Increase SNAP benefit adequacy, simplify access, reduce administrative barriers, and protect SNAP, WIC, school meals, and other nutrition programs from funding cuts and restrictive eligibility policies.
- Increase and stabilize funding for GusNIP, Double Up Food Bucks, produce prescription programs, and other initiatives that make fruits and vegetables more affordable without restricting participant choice.

2 Invest in Community-Based Food Production, Support Farmers, and Expand Reliable Local Markets

- Provide grants and flexible funding to support community-based food production and initiatives.
- Expand equitable access to land, credit, grants, technical assistance, conservation programs, land-retention support, and reliable markets for Black, Indigenous, and other historically underserved farmers.
- Expand incentives beyond farmers markets to supermarkets, independent grocers, cooperatives, neighborhood stores, and mobile markets.
- Sustain and expand federal programs that connect local producers with schools, child care programs, hospitals, universities, senior programs, and food banks.

3 Build the Infrastructure That Moves Food Through Communities

- Review and eliminate federal rules that unnecessarily limit community gardens, and food-growing projects.
- Create permanent structures for residents, farmers, retailers, Tribal leaders, and community organizations to shape federal funding priorities, program rules, implementation, and evaluation.
- Immediately restore USDA's annual Household Food Security Survey and report so policymakers, researchers, and communities can measure food insecurity, identify disparities, and evaluate the effects of federal policy decisions.[20]

ABOUT THIS BRIEF · ABOUT CLASP

This brief is part of A Stronger Foundation, CLASP's recommendations for the 120th Congress, and is designed to be read and shared as a standalone brief. CLASP is a national, nonpartisan anti-poverty organization advancing policy solutions that work for people with low incomes. · clasp.org

Endnotes

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