

Access to affordable healthy food.

research

OBJECTIVE

I am conducting exploratory research into the concept of access to affordable, healthy food.

The goal is to approach this topic holistically. I am not starting with a local environment.

I will compare the situation in the United States to the situation worldwide.

I will approach this with an empty mind. The goal is to see where that will lead.

How does affordability, nutritional literacy and access shape people's ability to obtain healthy food across global, national, and local contexts?

MORE QUESTIONS

- What is healthy food?
- How much does healthy food cost?
- How do people access healthy food globally?
- How do people in the United States access healthy food?
- How do people access the food that they need in your neighborhood?

Food insecurity is complex global problem.

Every part of the world experiences food insecurity in a unique way and for distinct reasons. Food insecurity in the United States has been rising in recent years.

Finding 1

One third of the global population is cannot afford a healthy diet.

Finding 2

Food insecurity in the United States has risen for the third consecutive year.

Finding 3

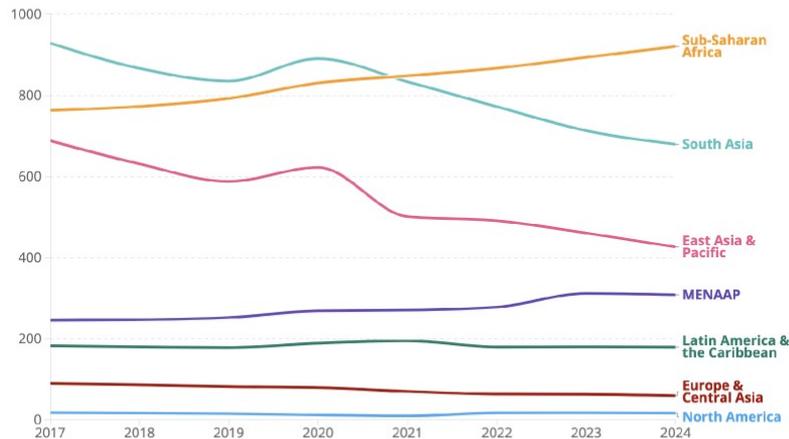
In the United States, the aggregate cost of healthy food is the main barrier to a proper diet.

FINDING 1

“Around 2.6 billion people - 32% of the global population - could not afford a healthy diet in 2024”¹

According to the World Bank, global progress has been made regarding dietary health, but this progress is not consistent across the globe. The primary driver of this disparity is high food price inflation, which is different from regular inflation.

Number of people unable to afford a healthy diet by World Bank regions (millions)



Food Prices for Nutrition Databank • MENAAP (Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan)
Regional classifications follow World Bank definitions, which may differ from those used by the United Nations.



* A Flourish chart

FINDING 1

“The share of people in Africa unable to afford a healthy diet was 64.8 percent. In Asia, the figure is 35.1 percent; in Latin America and the Caribbean, 27.7 percent; in Oceania 20.1 percent; and in Northern America and Europe, 4.8 percent.”⁵

Unsurprisingly, people in lower-income countries tend to experience food insecurity at higher levels than people in higher-income countries.

“In 2022, the number of people unable to afford a healthy diet dropped below pre-pandemic levels in the group of upper-middle- and high-income countries. In contrast, low-income countries had the highest levels since 2017,” the first year for which FAO has published estimates, said Maximo Torero, Chief Economist of FAO.”⁶

There are other many other factors at play besides economics, howe

FINDING 1

“A healthy diet is about much more than calories: we need a wide range of nutrient-dense foods to get all of the vitamins and minerals that are essential for good health. In this post I look at the costs of diets around the world. Healthy diets are expensive; more than four times the cost of a basic, calorie-sufficient one. This is true in every country in the world. As a result, three billion people cannot afford a healthy diet, even if they spend most of their income on food.”⁶

It is not enough to simply have sufficient calories to survive. The ingredients needed for a healthy diet cost different amounts in different places.

“Let’s start with the most basic requirement: getting enough calories. These calories could come in any form, but the cheapest option in most countries is starchy foods and cereals. Living on this ‘energy sufficient’ diet would mean eating only maize flour or rice for every meal, a diet that is severely lacking all other important nutrients. When you look at [people’s diets](#) you see that in poor countries, people get most of their calories from starchy foods.”⁶

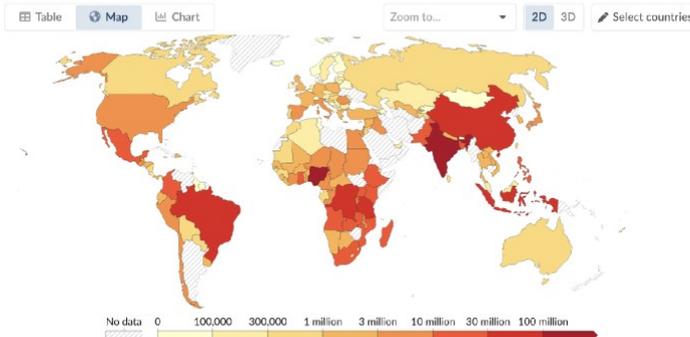
“A person can eat an energy sufficient diet on less than \$1 a day. The global average price for this diet across all countries in the study was \$0.93 per day.”⁶

“Today we might think of this calorie-sufficient threshold as the nutritional equivalent to the \$2.15 [international poverty line](#). It is the absolute bare minimum. It is a very low threshold that allows us to identify those living in the most dire of circumstances.”⁶

Number of people that cannot afford a calorie sufficient diet, 2021

The cost of an energy sufficient diet is the cheapest way that an individual can meet their calorie requirement using available staple foods in each country. A diet is defined as unaffordable when its cost, plus basic non-food needs like housing and transportation, exceeds daily income.

Our World
in Data

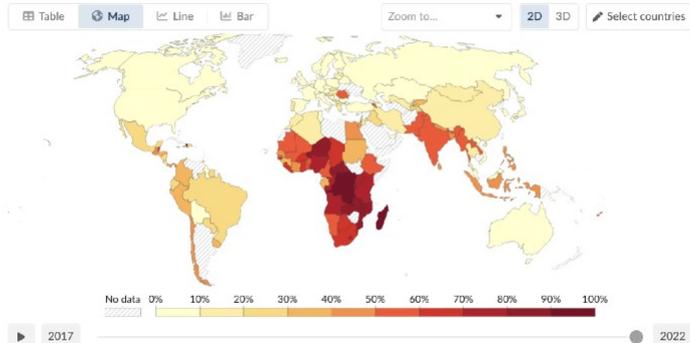


Data source: FAO and World Bank (2024), using data and methods from Herforth et al. (2022) – [Learn more about this data](#)
OurWorldInData.org/food-prices | CC BY

Share of population that cannot afford a healthy diet, 2022

The cost of a healthy diet is the lowest-cost set of foods available that would meet requirements in dietary guidelines from governments and public health agencies. A diet is defined as unaffordable when its cost, plus basic non-food needs like housing and transportation, exceeds daily income.

Our World
in Data



Data source: FAO and World Bank (2024), using data and methods from Bai et al. (2024) – [Learn more about this data](#)
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FINDING 2

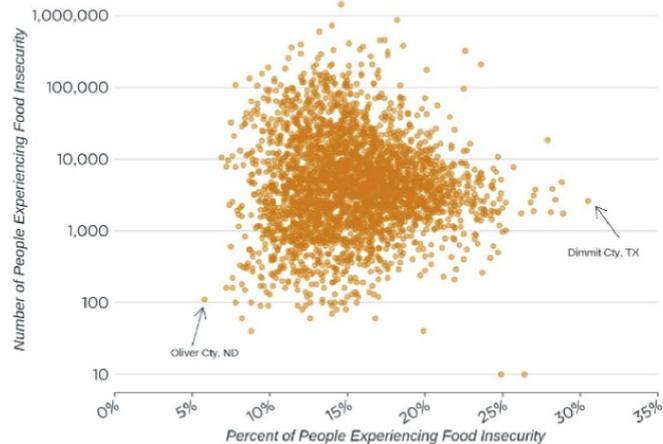
"9 out of 10 counties had higher rates of food insecurity, and reported need among people experiencing food insecurity increased for the third consecutive year, even after adjusting for inflation."²

"100% of counties and congressional districts are home to people facing hunger. Locally, the percentage of the overall population estimated to be food insecure in 2023 ranges from a low of 6% (1 in 17) in Oliver County, North Dakota, to 30% (1 in 3) in Dimmit County, Texas."

Per the Map the Meal Gap 2025 report filed by the Feeding America National Organization, food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition, whereas hunger is an individual-level psychological sensation.

Figure 1. Every County is Home to People Facing Hunger

Estimated percent and number of all individuals in food-insecure households by county in 2023



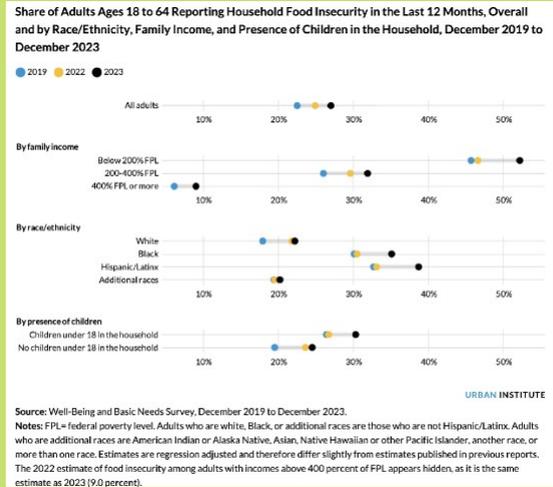
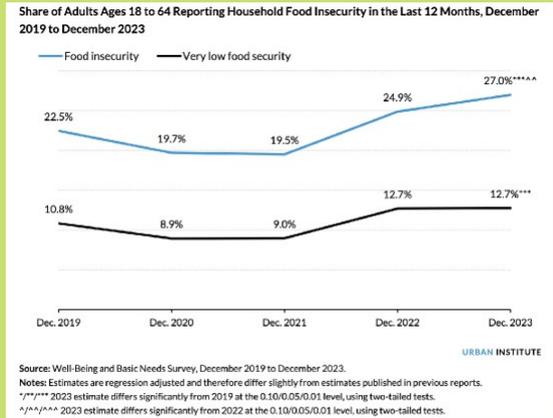
Note: The chart uses a logarithmic scale on the y-axis to visualize the estimated numbers of individuals experiencing food insecurity in all 3,144 counties and county equivalents.

Source: Feeding America.

FINDING 2

“The increase in food insecurity primarily affected lower-income households. The share of adults with family incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level reporting food insecurity increased between 2022 and 2023 (from 46.6 percent to 52.2 percent), while food insecurity was statistically unchanged for adults with higher incomes.”⁸
 Rising food insecurity tends to affect already marginalized communities the hardest.
 “Black and Hispanic/Latinx adults also reported significantly higher rates of food insecurity in 2023 compared to 2022.”⁸

Political and natural events can further exacerbate this complex problem. “Food insecurity increased for the second straight year in 2023. The decline in food insecurity between 2019 and 2021 in the wake of the robust government and private response to the COVID-19 pandemic was followed by a sharp increase in food insecurity between 2021 and 2022, coinciding with expiring aid and rising inflation. Food hardship continued to rise in 2023, Food Insecurity Increased for the Second Straight Year in 2023 Households Faced Continued Pressure from High Food Prices and Fewer Supports with more than one in four adults (27.0 percent) reporting food insecurity, up from 24.9 percent in 2022.5 The 2023 rate exceeds the pre-pandemic level of food insecurity (22.5 percent in 2019).”⁸



FINDING 2

“On average, individuals will get about \$90 less this month in benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known as SNAP. Some households will see a cut of \$250 a month or more, according to an analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a nonpartisan research institute.
“This is a change that will increase hardship for many individuals and families, especially given the modest amount of regular SNAP benefits, which are only about \$6 per person per day, on average,” says Dottie Rosenbaum, director of federal SNAP policy for the institute.”⁹

Political decisions lead to real consequences for people. The consequences will compound into more damaging results over time. Are the savings worth the cost?
“Increased SNAP benefits during the pandemic—particularly emergency allotments—have been credited with preventing a national food insecurity crisis,” said corresponding author Rita Hamad, associate professor of social and behavioral sciences and director of the Social Policies for Health Equity Research (SPHERE) Center. “Our study indicates that more generous SNAP benefits would continue to have a major positive impact for the 41 million families participating in the program.”¹⁰



Additional benefits during the pandemic helped SNAP recipients reduce hunger and buy more expensive, healthy food.

Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

FINDING 3

“As food prices have crept up, eating healthy has gotten tougher for many Americans. An overwhelming majority (90%) of adults say healthy food has gotten more expensive in recent years. And 69% say these price hikes make it more difficult for them to eat healthy. These are among the findings from a Pew Research Center survey conducted from Feb. 24 to March 2, 2025, among 5,123 U.S. adults.”³

As discussed in *Americans on Healthy Food and Eating* by the Pew Research Center, the situation for proper nutrition in the United States is complicated and interrelated, but economic factors are the primary driver of poor nutrition.

Most Americans say the increased cost of healthy food makes it harder for them to eat healthy

% of U.S. adults who say the increased cost of healthy food makes it ___ for them to eat healthy



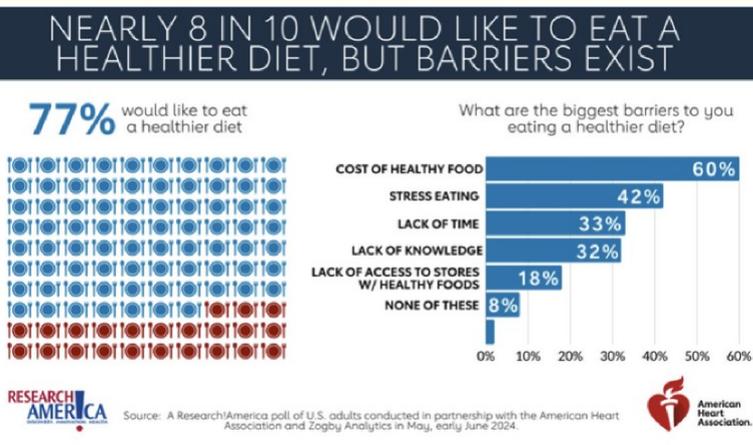
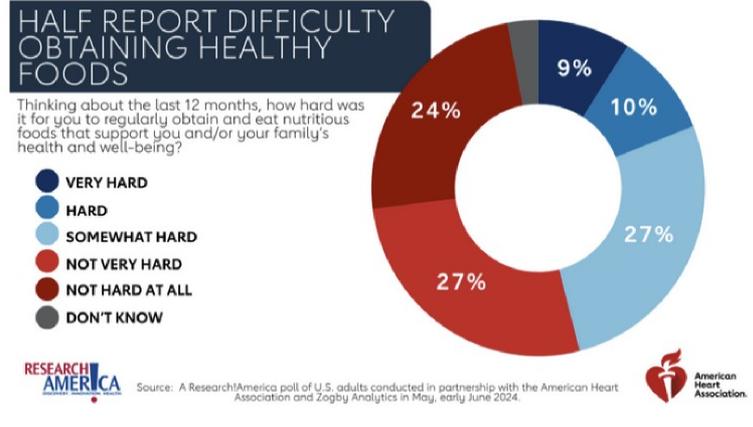
Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Feb. 24-March 2, 2025.
“Americans on Healthy Food and Eating”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

FINDING 3

“Barriers to eating a healthier diet are the cost of healthy food (60%), stress eating (42%), lack of time to prepare healthy meals (33%) and lack of knowledge of what foods are healthy and how to prepare healthy meals (32%).”⁴

There are additional reasons for a poor diet beyond economic ones. Knowledge, mental health, and personal habits can all factor into poor nutrition. In many cases, Americans want to eat healthier, but they do not know how to do so.



FINDING 3

Food Deserts versus Food Swamps

“Food deserts are areas or neighborhoods that have limited access to healthy food choices and may be solely dependent on convenience stores or fast-food restaurants, where going hungry and not having enough to eat may be residents’ biggest concerns. A food swamp, on the other hand, is an area or neighborhood that has access to healthy foods, but these options are outnumbered by much less expensive food outlets with few or no healthy options. Poor diet quality, rather than going hungry, is the primary concern. For someone on a tight budget, the choices are clear, but less expensive often translates to less healthy.”⁷

The term Food Desert has fallen out of popularity. It oversimplifies the problem by equating poor nutrition with a simple lack of access. Food Swamp is a more nuanced idea, where the options exist, but they are not attainable.



If your location impacts your food choices, you may reside in a food desert or swamp. (Dreamstime/TNS)

“Studies have found that living in food swamps or food deserts is associated with increased rates of obesity, stroke (especially in older people), and some types of cancer. One study found that the death rate from cancers overall was 77% greater in counties with high food-swamp scores, meaning areas where fast-food outlets far outnumbered supermarkets and other fresh food options. The death rate from obesity-related cancers (breast, colorectal, endometrial, esophageal, gallbladder, stomach, liver, kidney, pancreas, ovaries, and thyroid) was 59% greater in counties with high food-desert scores, areas where few health food options were available.”⁷

What are the main causes of the global food crisis?

Conflict

"A total 70 percent of the 319 million people facing acute hunger are in fragile or conflict-hit countries. Violence and instability in the Middle East, East, Central and West Africa as well as in the Caribbean, southern Asia and Eastern Europe are particularly concerning. Conflict disrupts food production, forces people from their homes and sources of income, and often hinders humanitarian access to people in most need."¹¹

Climate

"The climate crisis is one of the leading causes of the steep rise in global hunger. Climate shocks destroy lives, crops and livelihoods, and undermine people's ability to feed themselves. Hunger will spiral out of control if the world fails to take immediate climate action."¹¹

Economy

"Sluggish global growth and economic stressors, linked to slow pandemic recovery and fallout from the war in Ukraine, continue to affect low and middle-income countries. This limits investment in social protection programmes, at a time when food prices remain at crisis levels."¹¹

Displacement

"Forcibly displaced people face specific vulnerabilities in relation to food insecurity including limited access to employment, livelihoods, food and shelter, and reliance on dwindling humanitarian assistance. is something we discovered that we didn't know before, along with some context, links, and other detail."¹¹

Recommendation

1. Explore and develop climate resilient agriculture
2. Strengthen and expand social protection programs
3. Invest in rural agricultural development and market access

The issue is systemic

“Due to systemic issues rooted in capitalism and gender and racial discrimination, families face barriers to opportunity resulting in challenges to earning sufficient income. These barriers make it difficult to afford the rising costs of food, housing, healthcare, education, transportation, and more. The result often forces families to make trade-offs that lead to inconsistent access to the nutritious food necessary for everyday life.”¹²

Recommendation

1. Strengthen federal nutrition assistance programs
2. Reduce food waste and improve food recovery
3. Address the root causes through policy

You need to start where you are

“In the Mahoning Valley alone, approximately 90,000 people — or 1 in 6 — struggle daily with hunger and food insecurity — not knowing when and where they’ll find their next meal.”¹⁴

Our core value is that all people deserve the best that the earth has to offer, regardless of socioeconomic status,” said Reverend Catherine Duffy...Health equity depends on good nutrition, and we would very much like to be part of that solution,” Catherine Duffy said.”¹³

Recommendation

1. Expand and subsidize community gardens
2. Implement a mobile market and food delivery initiative
3. Expand year round farmers markets

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