

## Special Issue: Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

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## Special Issue: Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

Susan Rice\*

Everyday millions of Americans face barriers to accessing food, housing, and other supports—making the impossible decision of whether to put food on the table or cover other essential needs. Food insecurity and diet-related diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes, affect people of all ages and in all communities. It was for this reason that the Biden-Harris Administration hosted the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health in September 2022. As the President said at the Conference, “No child should go to bed hungry. No parent should die of a disease that can be prevented.” It will require all of us to take these challenges head on in the coming years. This special issue of the *Journal of Food Law & Policy* extends the critical conversation conducted at the Conference to reduce diet-related diseases and make hunger a thing of the past.

Before the Conference—the first in more than 50 years—President Biden set a goal of ending hunger in America and improving healthy eating and physical activity by 2030 so fewer Americans experience diet-related diseases, all while reducing disparities. The Biden-Harris Administration released its National

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Rice was most recently a Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow at American University’s School of International Service and a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. Prior to the start of the Biden Administration, she was a contributing opinion writer for the New York Times.

Previously, Rice served as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for African Affairs, and Director for International Organizations and Peacekeeping at the National Security Council under President Clinton from 1993-2001.

Ambassador Rice received her master’s degree and Ph.D. in international relations from Oxford University, where she was a Rhodes Scholar, and her B.A. with honors in History from Stanford University.

Strategy in tandem with the Conference, laying out a roadmap with bold actions for achieving this goal. The Conference and strategy could not have come at a more important inflection point for our country.

In 2021, 1 in 10 households experienced food insecurity, meaning their access to food was limited by lack of money or other resources.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, diet-related diseases such as heart disease and diabetes are among the leading causes of death and disability in the U.S.—with heart disease consistently being the number one killer, surpassing COVID-19 related deaths.<sup>2</sup> As with so many issues, the toll of food insecurity and diet-related diseases is not distributed equally. They disproportionately impact communities of color, people living in rural areas, people living in territories, people with disabilities, older adults, LGBTQI+ people, military families, and Veterans.<sup>3</sup> Their consequences are also significant and far reaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Alisha Coleman-Jensen et al., *Household Food Security in the United States in 2021*, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC. (Sept. 7, 2022), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=104655>.

<sup>2</sup> *Leading Causes of Death*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION (Jan. 18, 2023), <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/leading-causes-of-death.htm>; Farida B. Ahmad et al., *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION (Apr. 29, 2022), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7117e1.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Alisha Coleman-Jensen et al., *supra* note 1; *Military Family Support Programming Survey 2019 Results*, MIL. FAM. ADVISORY NETWORK, <https://www.mfan.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/MFAN2019SurveyResults.pdf>; Alisha Coleman-Jensen & Laura Hales, *Interactive Charts and Highlights*, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/interactive-charts-and-highlights/#disability>; *National Diabetes Statistics Report 2020: Estimates of Diabetes and Its Burden in the United States*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/pdfs/data/statistics/national-diabetes-statistics-report.pdf>; Nat'l Ctr. for Chronic Disease Prevention & Health Promotion, *Rural Health Preventing Chronic Diseases and Promoting Health in Rural Communities*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION (Feb. 22, 2023), <https://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/resources/publications/factsheets/rural-health.htm>; Yechiam Ostchega et al., *Hypertension Prevalence Among Adults Aged 18 and Over: United States, 2017–2018*, NAT'L CTR. FOR HEALTH STAT. (Apr. 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db364-h.pdf>; Thom File & Joey Marshall, *LGBT Community Harder Hit by Economic Impact of Pandemic: Household Pulse Survey Shows LGBT Adults More Likely to Report Living in Households With Food and Economic Insecurity Than Non-LGBT Respondents*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU (Aug. 11, 2021) <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/lgbt-community-harder-hit-by-economic-impact-of-pandemic.html>; Milken Inst. Sch. of Pub. Health, *Survey Finds 40 Percent of Puerto Rican Families Reporting Food Insecurity Due to COVID-19*, THE GEORGE WASH. UNIV. (Sept. 23, 2020)

Food insecurity and diet-related diseases undermine academic achievement, mental health, and workforce productivity, all while increasing health care costs.<sup>4</sup> A web of complex factors cause food insecurity and diet-related diseases yet, with multi-faceted solutions, they are largely preventable.

Our National Strategy includes actions the federal government will take administratively, proposals that require congressional action, and a call to action for how the private sector, philanthropy, state and local governments, community-based organizations, and civil society can contribute to bringing about the changes necessary to meet our goals. To achieve our goal of ending hunger and reducing diet-related diseases and disparities, we must: ensure Americans have the resources to put food on the table; shift our health care system to focus on prevention not just treatment; make the healthy food choice the easier choice; allow everyone to have the same opportunity to be physically active; and bolster nutrition and food security research.

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<https://publichealth.gwu.edu/content/survey-finds-40-percent-puerto-rican-families-reporting-food-insecurity-due-covid-19>; Seung Hee Lee-Kwan et al., *Healthful Food Availability in Stores and Restaurants — American Samoa, 2014*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION (Mar. 20, 2015) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4584804/>.

<sup>4</sup> *Impacts of Food Insecurity & Diet-related Diseases: Individuals and Societal Costs*, COMMUNICATEHEALTH, INC. (Sept. 16, 2022); T. Burrows et al., *Is there an association between dietary intake and academic achievement: a systematic review*, 30 J. HUM. NUTR. AND DIET. 117 (2016); Sarah R. Dash et al., *Diet and Common Mental Disorders: The Imperative to Translate Evidence into Action*, FRONTIERS IN PUB. HEALTH (Apr. 29, 2016), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4850164/#B21>; Joseph L. Dieleman et al., *US Health Care Spending by Payer and Health Condition, 1996-2016*, JAMA NETWORK (Mar. 3, 2020) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32125402/>; Di Fang et al., *The association between food insecurity and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic*, BMC PUB. HEALTH (Mar. 29, 2021), <https://bmcpublishing.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-021-10631-0>; Andrea Goettler et al., *Productivity loss due to overweight and obesity: a systematic review of indirect costs*, BMJ OPEN (Oct. 5, 2017), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5640019/>; Cindy W. Leung et al., *Household Food Insecurity Is Positively Associated with Depression among Low-Income Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participants and Income-Eligible Nonparticipants*, 145 J. OF NUTR. 622 (2015); Donald S. Shepard et al., *Hunger in America: Suffering We All Pay For*, CTR FOR AM. PROGRESS (Oct. 5, 2011) <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/hunger-in-america/>; Salim S. Virani et al., *Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics—2020 Update: A Report From the American Heart Association*, CIRCULATION (Jan. 29, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1161/CIR.0000000000000757>.

There is a role for everyone to play in meeting our bold goal, and the legal community must be a key partner in bringing about these changes. Federal agency general counsels, for instance, interpret statutes, review draft regulations and defend Administration policies in court. There are exciting opportunities for law students to get involved, too. The next generation of food lawyers can join a food law organization, get hands-on experience at a food law clinic, or intern at non-profits, law firms or governmental entities working on food law. Good food lawyers can translate complex legal and policy issues into easy-to-absorb information, helping people, businesses, and others understand how they are impacted and empowering them to advocate for changes.

We have the policies and ideas to accomplish our goal—from “food is medicine” interventions, to increasing access to food in underserved communities, to providing a stronger safety net through federal assistance programs. Many of these ideas are discussed in this special issue.

As we have made clear, the White House Conference was not the end of our work on these issues. It was the launch. We must now maintain our momentum, including by continuing to partner with and rally commitments from stakeholders to build on the work outlined in our National Strategy. We know we have a long road in front of us. But, with the concerted effort of Americans across the country, we can lay the foundation for the future President Biden envisioned—a nation where no child goes to bed hungry and no parent dies of a disease that can be prevented.