

# The Right to Food in the United States

READ OUR FULL REPORT PROGRESSING THE RIGHT TO FOOD IN THE UNITED STATES AT: [WWW.RIGHTTOFOODUS.ORG/RESOURCES](http://WWW.RIGHTTOFOODUS.ORG/RESOURCES)



## The current status of the right to food in the U.S.

“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

- 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. **Nearly 47 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.

## Right to food should be protected by law

- 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**) 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.
- Despite this, **some states are taking steps to implement the right to food locally**. This has left the nation fractured in terms of legal protections.

## Food should be economically accessible for all

- **Food insecurity** has become a chronic issue in the U.S. More than 50 million people annually turn to 60,000+ food banks and food pantries every year for help; more than have of these individuals have at least one employed person in their household.
- Food insecurity is particularly prevalent among **marginalized and/or vulnerable populations**: 23% of Black households and 22% of Latinx households (1.7 times higher than the national average); 17.9% of all households with children; nearly 35% of households with children headed by a single mother; 15% of LGBT adults. **Southern states and rural communities** experience the highest food insecurity rates in the nation.

- **Food and nutrition assistance programs** like SNAP and WIC are critical to protecting against poverty and food insecurity in the U.S., but they are insufficient and inaccessible for many.
- Meals served in prison have become increasingly privatized, lowering costs but sacrificing quality, leading to poor health. Food poisoning cases are six times higher for **incarcerated people**. Fortified foods are often substituted for fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Nine states have established **universal free school meals** for every child. Children in the remaining 41 states do not have these protections.

## Food systems should be controlled by the people

- 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*. 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.
- **Black farmers lost \$326 billion worth of land** in the 20th century. The **percentage of Black farmers in the United States has dropped** from 14% in 1920 to just 1.3% today.
- Small and family-sized farms are underrepresented in subsidies allocated through the farm safety net. **Black farmers receive .06%** of what white farmers receive.
- **Indigenous communities and Tribal Nations** have been historically deprived of land rights, resulting in a loss of 98.9% of their historical land base in the U.S.
- **Four major seed corporations own a majority of intellectual property rights** to some of the most widely grown crops, including 97% for canola and 95% for corn.

## Food systems should be environmentally sustainable

- In 2024, the U.S. food system accounted for approximately **30% of greenhouse gas emissions**. **Food waste occupies a quarter of landfill space** in the U.S. and produces high levels of greenhouse gases, in particular methane.
- 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.

## Recommendations

1. Adopt national and state-level plans to end hunger, built on the principle of dignity, with participation from those most affected by poverty.
2. Protect and increase public spending for food and nutrition assistance programs, and eliminate ineffective income eligibility guidelines.
3. Enact laws to reverse the effects of *Citizens United* and require increased transparency of corporate campaign donations and lobbying on food and agricultural systems.
4. Support, subsidize and incentivize independent and small-scale food producers that implement sustainable, regenerative and agro ecological practices.
5. Protect the fishing, hunting, water and land rights of Indigenous peoples.