

Nutrition & Food Access

A significant portion of the U.S. population is at risk of malnutrition and hunger because they are poor or have limited means and of those who can afford enough food, the broad trend has been towards less healthy diets. While diets of all income groups have shown increased fat intake, this has been especially true among lower income groups. Concerns of hunger and poor nutrition more generally are important social and agricultural issues for California.

Federal and state policies have addressed concerns about food and nutrition for many decades. Recently these policies have also begun to pay more attention to encouraging broadly healthy diets. In most cases reduced rates of hunger can be achieved through government food programs or income transfers. Shifting diets towards more nutritious meals may be possible through these food programs, when combined with educational outreach programs that emphasize nutrition.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has several programs to assist those most prone to nutrition deficiencies. Almost two thirds of federal food assistance is provided through the food stamp program now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Even before the current recession, about 28 million people received assistance through SNAP (USDA 2008). SNAP also acts as an automatic economic stabilizer. For every 1 percent rise in the unemployment rate, it is estimated that 700,000 people seek SNAP assistance in the short run and 1.3 million in the long-run (ERS 2009).

To determine SNAP benefits, the USDA developed a new Thrifty Food Plan, meant to emphasize ways of achieving a healthy diet on the limited resources provided. According to the plan, 40-50 percent of food dollars should be spent on fruits and vegetables. The actual range for most families is 16-18 percent. Meats, fish, eggs and poultry make up about a quarter of the average family budget for food (ERS 2009).

Other large federal food programs include the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (known as WIC) and the National School Lunch Program. Over half of the infant formula purchased in the United States is through WIC. In 2007, 55 percent of schoolchildren participated in the National School Lunch Program and most meals provided through the program were provided free-of-charge (USDA 2008).

Over 4 million Californians (about 17 percent of the total population) live on incomes of less than 130 percent of the Federal poverty level and are therefore eligible for SNAP assistance (Cunnyngham, Castner and Schirm 2009). However, only about two million Californians actually participate in SNAP (Kaiser and Lamp 2007). In California, about 60 percent of recipients are children, a higher share than the national average (CDPH 2007). Using mostly federal funds, California's SNAP food program is supervised by the California Department of Social Services and is administered by each County Welfare Department. Through the California Department of Education, the state also administers a small Child and Adult Care Food Program using mostly federal funds. In fiscal year 2007-8, California served only about 190 million meals through the program. Through

the much larger National School Lunch Program, the state also served an average of almost 4.3 million school meals per day, or about 800 million meals per year.

Federal dietary guidelines, another policy instrument, have been shown to influence buyers' decisions and to increase consumption of nutritious foods (ERS 2009). In general, increased dietary knowledge leads to better food choices (ERS 2009). Targeting schoolchildren may prove particularly effective because it may influence life-long dietary behavior. Expanded efforts to enroll eligible beneficiaries and increased SNAP benefits may help reduce the share of the population suffering from hunger.

Diets of most Americans, but especially the poor, fail to meet government dietary recommendations (ERS 2009). Compared to decades past, more families today have two working parents, who tend to work longer hours. Accordingly, the share of food budgets devoted to food away from home has increased, especially for fast-food items. Since foods dense in calories tend to be less nutritious, these households have diets high in fat intake and low in calcium and vitamin A intake (Townsend et al. 2009).

Unhealthy diets have contributed to high rates of obesity, a serious health issue in the United States and California. According to the Center for Disease Control, 37.1 percent of Californians were classified as overweight, 24.2 percent as obese, and about 36.6 as neither obese nor overweight, as measured by body mass index (CDC 2009). Agricultural subsidies have sometimes been fingered as a major cause of the obesity epidemic, but, as Alston, Sumner and Vosti (2007) demonstrate, subsidies affect retail prices of calorie dense foods only slightly and subsidy elimination would not significantly affect obesity.

Among major diet concerns is that average consumption of fruits and vegetables in the United States is far below recommended levels. For example, to meet minimum recommendations, average fruit consumption in California would need to rise by about 62 percent and vegetable consumption by about 113 percent (Jetter, Chalfant and Sumner 2001).

California producers would benefit substantially if consumption of fruits and vegetables rises. Shifts in U.S. demand for horticultural products would expand California production and increase sales of California produce. According to Jetter, Chalfant and Sumner (2004) such a shift in California consumption would lead to increased sales for California growers of at least \$316 million. Producers of lettuce, processed tomatoes, broccoli, spinach and carrots would likely particularly benefit. Given its comparative advantage in producing healthy foods, California producers gain strongly with more attention to improved diets in general and among food program participants.

— University of California Agricultural Issues Center, July 2009

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