

Addressing Food Insecurity: The Impact of Food Policy

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A host of federal, tribal, state and local policies impact the availability and affordability of our food and who has access to food assistance programs such as SNAP and WIC. Through actions, regulations, policies and funding priorities, governments can address food insecurity, improve food access, ensure food safety and promote health equity (Fleischhacker et al., 2019).

All policies, from those within small organizations to international agreements, impact our diets in a multitude of ways. For example, a community agency may adopt a policy internal to their organization that delineates what types of food can be served to their clientele. On a much larger scale, governments implement policy that incentivizes the production and distribution of food.

Although food supply in absolute terms is of sufficient quantity in the United States, people experience food insecurity as it relates to the unequal distribution of food and lack of affordable access. Moreover, policies that are not directly related to food, but those that might directly address education, housing and transportation will often also have implications for food. Where a city decides to build affordable housing and its proximity to grocery stores will have an impact on residents' ability to purchase healthy food. It is helpful to look at policy, even that which is enacted on a small scale, through the lens of food insecurity to see how food and its availability is related to decisions big and small (Gunderson & Ziliak, 2018).

Levels of Policy

Federal policies are those that are enacted at the federal governmental level. They include those passed by Congress and signed by the President and vary in terms of funding levels and enforcement. *State* policies are also governmental policies that are limited in their scope to the state in which they are passed by legislative bodies and signed by governors. *Local* policies are those policies enacted in city councils and county boards and may or may not require mayoral signatures.

Outlined in the table below are a few examples of food policies including how these policies impact the foods we consume. While by no means comprehensive, these examples are designed to illustrate how policy at the federal, state and local levels can have far-reaching implications for food availability and access.

Policy Examples

| Policy | Policy Level | Impacts |
|---------------------------------|--------------|---|
| Farm Bill | Federal | The Farm Bill is the primary food policy tool of the federal government and is a recurring bill that is addressed every five years. It includes 12 titles that impact rural communities and nutrition. The Farm Bill has key implications for SNAP benefits, food security, food access and health promotion. |
| Child Nutrition Reauthorization | Federal | This federal legislation is revisited every five years and provides Congress with the ability to improve child nutrition and school meal programs including WIC, Child and Adult Care Food Programs, Summer Food Service Program, and others. |
| Tennessee Code § 49-6-2307 | State | This bill was signed in 2004 and went into effect in 2008. It requires Tennessee's Board of Education to work with the Department of Health and Department of Education to establish minimal standards for food items sold on school campuses for grades pre-K to 8. |
| City of Knoxville R-202-81 | Local (City) | This resolution by the City of Knoxville supports an effort to improve the quality, availability and accessibility of food delivery systems for all citizens. This led to the establishment of the nation's first food policy council – The Knoxville Food Policy Council. |

Policy makes a difference, and policy impacts peoples' lives in both positive and negative ways. This foundational understanding is critical and must always be at the forefront when we evaluate policy. For example, changes to SNAP policy via the Farm Bill (e.g. implementation of new eligibility requirements or reductions in benefits) can have profound implications for many of the most vulnerable and powerless in our communities.

However, federal, state and local policies are not the only policies with impact. Policies such as guidelines (written or unwritten) implemented by organizations including schools, worksites and faith communities can have an impact on health. These smaller policies can be effective, less labor intensive than crafting federal or state policy and can ultimately lead to significant results and quality of life improvement for real people.

Working with Communities, Coalitions and Partners on Policy Change

Within UT Extension, working with partners to support policies that encourage food security and healthy food access at the local and organizational level can have a great and lasting impact on the participants that we serve. This work should be done in partnership with coalitions and stakeholders including food policy councils, wellness or health councils, local organizational or government leadership, as well as any other group or partner that needs to be at the table.

Types of Policy to Address at a Local Level

Local Policy

A great place to start is to work with local, city or county coalitions and groups with similar goals to inform local policy efforts related to food access. Find out about groups in your community doing work related to food insecurity or food access and volunteer to be a member.

Organizational Policy

To help inform organizational policy, which are policies and rules at senior centers, schools, worksites and others, prioritize partnering with sites that serve limited resource audiences, sites located in low-income communities or sites in areas that qualify as food deserts or food swamps. This will be important to support healthy food access and food security goals.

Where to Get Started

Determine Needs. In order to inform any community change, it is important to understand the needs of the community that the policies are meant to serve. At the organizational level community may include the participants or customers who frequent the organization, such as seniors who regularly frequent a senior center. At the local level it could include citizens of neighborhoods, towns or cities. Working with partners to conduct a needs assessment and reporting findings to relevant community partners can help direct the dialogue on policy changes.

Engage Community Members. Community participation is an important part of guiding policy change and can provide great insight as to why a policy may need to be enacted, amended or revitalized. When considering a policy change include the following people in the conversation:

- Those the policy will impact.
- Those who will enforce the policy.
- Those who directly serve the population the policy is meant to impact.
- Organizations that may gain or lose income or resources as a result of the policy change.
- Public or organizational officials and leaders.

Review Current Policies. Take a look at policies already in-place to address food security and access (either local health policies or wellness policies with a partnering organization). Work with coalitions and partners to ask:

- Are these policies making a difference?
- Are these policies being enforced?
- Are these policies meeting the needs of the people they are meant to serve?
- Are these policies distributing resources equitably?
- What is missing from these policies?

If there are no policies in place that address food insecurity and/or healthy food access, work with your coalition and community to collect data to guide decision making as to whether a policy is needed.

Adopt and Implement. Once a policy change is adopted by an organization or community, it will need to be implemented. The implementation process is important. A well-developed policy that is adopted but not implemented properly may not provide the intended impact. Extension staff can help with the implementation process by providing education or promotion about the change as relevant to their participants. For instance, if a site adopts a policy to ensure half of the items in their vending machines are healthy, UT Extension staff can educate about the change in their nutrition classes and perhaps offer the new healthy options as they relate to class content.

Evaluate. Once a policy is adopted and implemented, it is important evaluate the change to make sure it is having the intended result. Ask if the policy needs to be revised to better meet the needs of the population it is intended to serve.

Role of Extension in Legislative Policy

You may be wondering, should Extension be involved in policy? Because of the mission of Extension to turn research into action, Extension has been informing policy for years. In many cases we partner with community groups to provide policy-relevant data used to develop policy locally and nationally. Examples of this with food assistance programs at the local level could be working with community partners to offer a summer feeding program or to start a food pantry or farmers market. It could be establishing a community or school garden. Extension agents also can work with the community and researchers to create reports that are useful in policy discussions. In many cases you are using evidence-based data in combination with convening and facilitating partnerships and policy dialogue.

Informing policy development should not be confused with lobbying and advocacy. Tennessee defines a lobbyist as a person who communicates, directly or indirectly, with state government officials for the purpose of influencing action by the official for compensation (T.C.A. § 3-6-301). University of Tennessee policy also prohibits lobbying a government official for a policy or legislation as a representative of the University. According to the Office of Government Relations and Advocacy, advocating is typically done as a private citizen on an employee's own time. You can advocate for a policy with government officials "as long as you make it clear that you are expressing your personal views and it is not an official position of the University." Any lobbying or advocating on behalf of the University requires specific prior authorization. An Extension agent would go through the county director and regional director for authorization. If you have any questions about whether your work is considered advocacy or lobbying, discuss this with your county director and regional program leader beforehand.

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