



The global nonprofit research and advocacy organization Food Tank held a virtual, interactive listening session to discuss “Dismantling Silos to Strengthen Nutrition and Food Security Research,” the fifth pillar of scope for the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health.

The listening session hosted 358 attendees including those working on the ground within local communities to solve the issues of hunger and food insecurity, as well as those from municipal offices, private industry including entrepreneurs, farmers and producers, grassroots leaders, academia including HBCUs, land-grant universities, and Tribal Colleges, and more.

The event included two brief panel discussions with a wide range of speakers: Riana Lynn, Journey Foods; Marion Nestle, NYU; Tandra Raye Stevenson, WANDA; Teresa Mares, University of Vermont; Erin Lentz, LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin; Adrian Lipscombe, 40 Acres and a Mule Project; Pierre Thiam, Yolélé Foods; Darcy Cooke, Maine Network of Community Food Councils; Angélica Valdes Valderrama, Tufts University; Amelia Gelnett, Johns Hopkins University; Nefera Lawton, Growin' Folx; Molly Anderson, Middlebury College; Colin O'Neil, Bowery Farming; Liz Carollo, GrowNYC; Sarah Smith-Moore, Hunger Free Oklahoma; and Jamie Rahrig, Center for Regional Food Systems at Michigan State University.

Additional organizations represented in the audience included Stanford University, Thrive Alliance, Georgetown Law, AZ Department of Agriculture, Centers for Disease Control, Wasteless Solutions Inc, Ohio State University, San Bernardino County - Department of Public Health, Sustainable Food Center, Urban Roots, Hays County Food Bank, Food Recovery Network, Spelman College, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Boston Farms Community Land Trust, CGIAR, US Food and Drug Administration, Food Bank News, The Patachou Foundation, Blue Apron, NYU Langone, Hungry Harvest, Food Rescue US, Vanguard Renewables, Panera Bread, and the Chef Ann Foundation.

Nutrition research is not accurate or representative

Currently, the United States lacks data and information not only about what is nutritious but also what is culturally appropriate for its communities. Insufficient data is directly shaping food policy that fails to meet the needs of citizens.

According to participants, a lot of the standard research methodologies have been developed by white males, and many researchers lack experience in the field. This means that the findings

influencing policy and resource allocation are driven by those without lived experiences on the ground within communities.

Panelists also said that conversations about the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health fail to ask the right questions to begin with. When talking about hunger in the U.S., poverty and the systemic racism contributing to these issues need to be a larger part of the conversation.

For example, in one program in 2020, the U.S. Department of Agriculture granted loans to only 37 percent of Black applicants but accepted 71 percent of applications from white farmers, according to a POLITICO analysis. Black communities are underrepresented across sectors—less than 3% of registered dietitians are Black, while just over 80% are white—and left out of conversations with decisionmakers.

Panelists agreed on the need for a food democracy. This means bringing everyone to the table for conversations about hunger and food insecurity, especially those impacted by it.

Recommendations for the U.S. federal government

Throughout the discussion, participants agreed that food security is national security, and the federal government should allocate the appropriate resources to reflect that. The government must invest in cultivating a pioneering and innovative nature for our food system, bringing it to the top of its list of priorities.

The power of universal basic income to address poverty was noted multiple times throughout the discussion. Contrary to the common narrative, when those in poverty are given money and the agency to allocate it, they will spend it on food. One panelist pointed to the federal aid during the COVID-19 crisis, which boosted food security across the nation.

Multiple panelists also mentioned universal school meals as a simple yet powerful tool to create change—as well as teaching children how to cook as part of basic school curriculum.

Discussion on the federal government's role in solving hunger and food insecurity focused on inclusivity, democratization of the food system, and trust in local communities. This means being less prescriptive in policies, resources, and recommendations and allowing communities to solve for themselves.

The National Institutes of Health must appropriately distribute its hundreds of millions of dollars in funding towards HBCUs, land-grant universities, Tribal Colleges, and other underrepresented institutions to ensure representation from all communities. Bringing these institutions onto the boards that govern these decisions is another important step to more inclusive decision making.

Shifting food culture also shifts food economies, one panelist said. With a more inclusive food culture in terms of diet and nutrition—such as integrating African and Black foods into the

federal government's nutrition recommendations—more resources and capital can be shifted to historically underrepresented and underserved communities.

Beyond better data collection to ensure those impacted are properly represented, participants said that the federal government must also support entrepreneurship and small businesses—those that understand and are already finding solutions for their own communities. The people on the ground making food for their neighbors have the fastest pathway to positive impact.

Finally, the federal government's "climate smart" agenda should give more attention to the potential for agroecological solutions—those applying ecological principles to agricultural systems and practices to better protect our food supply in the face of climate change.

Recommendations for local, state, territory, and Tribal governments, private sector, nonprofit and community groups

Throughout the discussion, panelists agreed that a transdisciplinary approach to nutrition data collection and research is critical. This means bringing in all voices to better understand the lived experience of the hungry and food insecure, as well as working across sectors.

Researchers cannot understand the way different communities eat without considering sociology, history, culture, and other factors that cannot be represented through numbers alone. Therefore, registered dietitians, nutrition scientists, researchers, and others collecting data on the state of hunger and food insecurity in America must take an interdisciplinary approach to their work.

Participants agreed that research needs to not only look at the number of hungry people but understand the other systems in place that hinder the ability to get nutritious foods. Collecting and considering qualitative and anecdotal evidence, in addition to quantitative evidence, will be critical to achieving this.

Evidence such as storytelling is devalued in the broader conversation about how to address hunger and food insecurity, but panelists said that the nuances of conversation allow for open-ended opportunities to listen to what communities need.

For example, a community may have fewer food-insecure households, but parents within that community's households are going hungry to feed their children more. And data may show a relatively low number of hungry individuals, but that doesn't represent any of the barriers that are making it more difficult for those individuals to get food, such as lack of transportation or fear of going to the grocery store.

More inclusive research can help local governments, industry leaders, and the nonprofit sector alike to take a systems-wide approach to hunger and food insecurity. Participants also emphasized the need for all stakeholders to keep moving past initial research—continually

testing, iterating, and being open to being wrong is critical to meeting the evolving needs of a community.

Finally, local food policy boards must be diverse. One panelist noted that these positions are often recommended by councilmembers and other local government leaders, who do not necessarily have the lived experience of poverty or understand the nuanced needs contributing to food insecurity. Those with the lived experience of hunger and food insecurity should be on the boards deciding what the solutions will be, and the boards should prioritize conversations with those on the ground as much as possible.

Partnerships and collaborations

Participatory and community-based approaches to food and nutrition research are important because, typically, the tools and surveys used to measure food insecurity are not designed with hungry people. Participants pointed to the opportunity to design food and nutrition research with guidance from the communities impacted.

Those working within communities hold the most accurate data available. For example, a lot of people won't self-report in a government survey, but they will talk to their friends and neighbors about their challenges.

Panelists recommended public-private sector collaboration to identify those already doing the work to understand hunger and food insecurity within their communities.

In order to shift the food system, we must value everyone having a seat at the table, according to the panelists. We are not homogenous as citizens, and therefore, nutrition recommendations and hunger solutions are not one-size-fits-all.