

A SUMMARY



What Covid-19 has revealed

The images of the past few months have been both shocking and heartbreaking. Families out of work and newly struggling with nutrition insecurity waiting in long car lines for a day's or a week's worth of food. School nutrition professionals—wearing whatever protective equipment they or their schools could provide—putting their own health at risk to meet the rising demand for food in their communities. Meat and poultry plant workers suffering disproportionate rates of Covid-19 infections while facing mandatory return-to-work orders. And farmers, with none of their usual buyers in a position to purchase, out of economic necessity dumping millions of gallons of milk, onions, beans, eggs, and more.

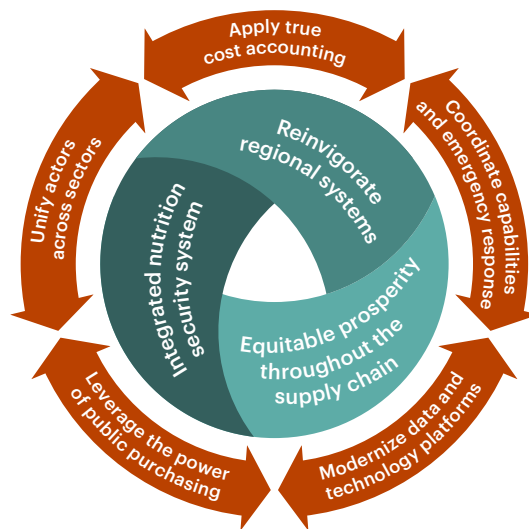
These images tell a powerful story of the economic and public health consequences of poor nutrition, with 94 percent of deaths from Covid-19 among individuals with an underlying condition, the majority of which are diet-related. They tell an equally powerful story of a food system struggling to respond to the disruptions wrought by Covid-19.

Fundamental change needed in the U.S. food system

Working together, we have the opportunity and the obligation to transform the U.S. food system to make it more efficient, equitable, healthy, and resilient, both in good times and bad. Accomplishing this objective will require three significant shifts:

SHIFT 1

We need a more **integrated nutrition security system** which assures not just that all people have access to food, but that they have dignified access to affordable, healthy food, with greater overall efficiency and accountability. All food access programs—whether part of the public safety net, or private and philanthropically funded—should be operationally aligned and co-located to reach people where they are: at their schools, health care facilities, faith-based centers, and



other trusted community-based organizations. Such a shift must acknowledge that investing in healthy and protective diets will allow Americans to thrive and bring down our nation's suffocating health care costs, support public schools in their essential role in ensuring children are nutrition secure, streamline public benefits enrollment, and reimagine charitable food programs.

Immediate actions we need to take:

1. Strengthen nutrition benefit programs to ensure children and families are fed.
2. Invest public and private funding in school food programs as anchors of community feeding.
3. Expand Food is Medicine.

SHIFT 2

We need a better-balanced, sustainable, and resilient nationwide food system that includes **reinvigorated regional systems** and diverse, agile, local food chains alongside a robust global chain, designed to serve all communities from rural to urban. Such a system must take into account the true costs and benefits

of infrastructure, policy, and economic decisions at these different scales. Whereas heavy reliance on a few, highly consolidated value chains leaves the food supply vulnerable to shocks, a diverse mix of local, regional, national, and global sourcing provides the flexibility and redundancy needed to pivot and ensure that shocks do not create lasting disruption to food access or enduring harm to individuals throughout the food chain. Moreover, research has shown that diverse, agile, equitable, and prosperous local and regional food chains are associated with: job growth and increased prosperity for small and medium-sized farmers,¹ and improved access to fresh foods in low-income urban areas.^{2,3,4} This shift should prioritize engagement with grassroots organizations (many are led by Black, Indigenous, or people of color) that are already leading the work to support thriving regional food systems across the United States.

Immediate actions we need to take:

1. **Ensure relief and stimulus policies improve the resilience of supply chains and strengthen local systems.**
2. **Direct the purchasing power of large institutions along a values-based (equitable, ethical, sustainable) supply chain.**

SHIFT 3

We need a system that eliminates racial disparities and delivers fair returns and benefits to all stakeholders—building more **equitable prosperity throughout the supply chain**. The country's food system should embody a shared value approach that delivers fair returns and a chance for improved prosperity to a broader range of “stakeholders,” including workers, customers, taxpayers, communities, shareholders, and the environment. Such a shift must include equitable distribution of profits to farmers, enforcement of anti-trust laws, support for business innovation, increasing the purchasing power of people and families through wage increases, and more. Transformation of the food system needs to engage the private sector, which must be part of the solution. We should consider policies to support business innovation and incentivize companies to advance nutrition security.

Immediate actions we need to take:

1. **OSHA must set and enforce mandatory guidelines to keep workers and the food supply safe.**
2. **Provide credit, loan servicing, and debt relief for farmers and ranchers.**
3. **Increase prosperity of farmers, ranchers, and fishers by more equitably distributing risk and profit.**

Five capabilities we need to build into the food system

To realize these three interrelated shifts in transforming the U.S. food system, we need to strengthen and activate a set of cross-cutting capabilities that have not been adequately built into the system. Among the capabilities needed to accomplish the three shifts described above are:

1. **Apply true cost accounting**—the consideration of not only immediate and direct costs, but also extended and indirect costs—in policy, legislative, and programmatic decision-making and in public messaging;
2. **Ensure public purchasing generates more public good** out of every public dollar spent on food, health, and nutrition;
3. **Invest in coordinated federal, state, and local capabilities and emergency response plans** to increase the flexibility and resilience of the food system;
4. **Modernize data and technology platforms** to provide the tools needed to operate the system more efficiently in normal operation and under stress;
5. **Unify actors across multiple sectors**—health, education, environment, labor, nutrition, agriculture—into a collaborative advocacy movement.

Meeting this moment

While Covid-19 and the resulting economic downturn made the negative consequences of the food system worse and more obvious, the pandemic did not create them and its end will not solve them. The pandemic has, however, increased both the **imperative** and the **opportunity** to address them once and for all.

Success will require numerous changes to policies, practices, and norms. To accomplish this, we must work together across the food system and beyond. We look forward to hearing your voice in the collaborative and sustained effort needed to “reset the table” and transform the U.S. food system to be what this country and its people need it to be.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/local-food-systems-clarifying-current-research>
- 2 <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/local-food-systems-clarifying-current-research>
- 3 <https://www.newventureadvisors.net/the-role-of-food-hubs-in-food-access/>
- 4 <https://cefs.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/research-based-support-for-local-food-systems.pdf>