



THE HEALTHY
LIVING COALITION

Healthy Living Coalition

Food systems terminology

In order to create a movement of sustainable change, we must first ensure that the language we're using to discuss the issues of food access prioritizes people, dignity, and empathy.

We recognize the words we use have an impact on how knowledge is shared and learned.

As part of our goal to shift the narrative and educate on issues of food justice and nutrition security, the Healthy Living Coalition put together a short list of terms that may be useful as you start to have important conversations about food and nutrition access in your own community.

DEFINITIONS

1. Food security: A state or condition when all people at all times have physical, economic, and social access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food. This food should also meet their food preferences and dietary needs for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life.¹

- **Food insecurity** is experienced where there is a lack of regular food access at mild, moderate, and severe levels. This includes being uncertain in your ability to obtain food, having compromised or reduced food quality or quantity, or going without food for 1+ days, and more.²

2. Nutrition security: Having consistent access to, and availability and affordability of, foods that promote well-being, while preventing and/or treating disease.³ This term incorporates all aims of food security, but also has an additional emphasis on the accessibility of wholesome, healthful, nourishing foods.

- **Nutrition insecurity** is experienced when there are limitations and/or barriers placed on that access.

3. Hunger: The uncomfortable, painful physical sensation caused by insufficient consumption of dietary energy. Note: there is a difference between hunger and food insecurity. Hunger refers to a physical sensation, while food insecurity refers to a consistent lack of access to food.⁴

4. Malnutrition: Deficiencies, excesses, or imbalances in a person's intake of dietary energy (calories) and/or nutrients.

- This definition encompasses two broad conditions: The first is **undernutrition**, which includes stunting (low height for age), wasting (low weight for height), or a lack of important vitamins/minerals. The second is **overweight, obesity and diet-related noncommunicable diseases**.⁵

5. Food access: The ease and availability to sources of healthy food, measured by factors like distance to a store or number of stores in an area, personal income, vehicle/public transport availability, and neighborhood resources, and more.⁶

- **Food apartheid:** Man-made social inequities—including intersectional root causes like racism, economic disparities, etc.—that have created areas of low food access.⁷

6. Food justice: A holistic, rights-based view of the food system that acknowledges the socio-economic pressures, structural barriers, and inequities that prevent food access and contribute to poor health outcomes in underserved communities.⁸

- **The Food Justice Movement:** A grassroots movement that supports communities in exercising their right to grow, sell and eat nutritious, fresh, affordable, locally produced and culturally appropriate food.⁹

7. Food sovereignty: The right to food, adequate nutrition, and resources necessary for each person to be able to feed themselves with dignity in culturally appropriate ways.¹⁰

8. Food system: All actors involved in the production, harvesting, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal (loss or waste) of food products and the outputs generated at each step. This includes the agriculture, livestock, forestry, fisheries, and food industries, as well as farming communities, pre-production actors such as input industries producing fertilizers or seeds. Other actors include: science, technology, data, innovation actors, public and private quality and safety control organizations.¹¹

9. Food waste: Any food that is lost, discarded, or disposed of that is or was at some point fit for human consumption.¹² Common examples of food waste include wasting blemished produce at the retail-level or overbuying/cooking at home and tossing the excess.¹³

10. Emergency food system: The network of food-assistance programs that facilitates supplying food to people in need on a temporary and supplemental basis.¹⁴

- **Food bank:** A non-profit organization that safely stores and delivers millions of pounds of food to local food programs, including food pantries.
- **Food pantry:** Supplied with food from a food bank, this non-profit organization distributes food directly to people and families in need.¹⁵

11. Federal nutrition assistance programs: Run by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, these programs work to end food insecurity and obesity.

- **SNAP:** The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides low-income families with additional income to help them purchase food to meet nutritional needs.¹⁶ This program was formerly known as “food stamps.”
- **WIC:** The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) provides federal grants for supplemental foods, healthcare referrals, and nutrition education for pregnant/postpartum women and children under 5. ¹⁷

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