

2 Nutrition Policy in the United States : Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The United States has the distinction of being a major world food producer, having among the highest income per capita, and spending the highest proportion of its gross national product on health care. Despite these distinctions, the majority of Americans suffer from one or more nutrition-related problems such as hunger and food insecurity, sub-optimal maternal and child nutrition and many diet-related chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease, stroke, several cancers and diabetes. These conditions have important social, economic and health consequences. For instance, a report by the U.S. Surgeon General estimated that the above four chronic diseases cost \$ 146 billion in 1985 due to health care expenses and lost productivity.

Despite the recognized health, social and economic consequences of poor nutrition, the U.S. does not have an official nutrition policy. Instead, it has a variety of separate nutrition-related policies and programs, such as public health programs, food assistance programs, fortification of the food supply, nutrition information and food guidance systems, regulation of the food industry, and nutrition surveillance and research. Many of these actions have demonstrated benefit for preventing or alleviating some nutrition-related problems, but the lack of an overall policy framework has contributed to numerous gaps, contradictions and missed opportunities. This presentation will examine the strengths and weaknesses of the U.S. approach to nutrition problems and policies, and draw selected comparisons to the approaches taken in other countries.