

Earlier this week [on this blog](#), Dan Farber made the excellent point that although the average American is neither malnourished nor obese, both persist as significant problems revealing deep failures in our food system. But his juxtaposition of statistics regarding obesity with those regarding malnourishment reflects a common misunderstanding of malnourishment, which is often equated with undernutrition and below average weight. This is an incomplete definition. The [World Health Organization](#) and other research institutions, such as Johns Hopkins, define malnutrition as following from either undernutrition (the diet “does not provide adequate calories and protein for growth and maintenance”) or overnutrition (the consumption of “too many calories”). Thus obesity itself is a risk factor for malnutrition. The [Johns Hopkins Children’s Center](#) estimates that the risk of malnourishment from overnutrition is increased by being more than twenty percent overweight or by consuming a diet high in fat and salt. Malnourishment is just one of many diet-related health problems that can show up in people of all shapes and sizes. Others include diabetes and heart disease.

Dan is right that we have a serious nutrition problem in this country. Obesity, food insecurity, and prevalence of diet-related diseases are all evidence of this. And this is a public health crisis with both equity and environmental facets. On the equity side, according to the [CDC](#), the nutrition problem falls disproportionately on those with the least resources. The poor suffer disproportionately not only because they have less money to purchase quality food and health care but also because many social determinants of health, including those relating to diet, are place-based (try finding affordable and appealing fresh vegetables in South LA) (for more detail on the geography issue, see this excellent [PolicyLink report](#)).

On the environmental side, the hunger crisis dovetails with the travesty of food waste. The Natural Resources Defense Council released a groundbreaking 2012 [report](#) on food waste. They observe that about forty percent of food in this country is wasted (by producers, transporters, retailers, restaurants, and consumers). Consider what this means for the environmental impacts of food production, a serious source of both air and water pollution and a massive user of resources such as fuel, land, and water. If food were managed more efficiently, we could actually produce less of it, reducing the scope of those environmental impacts. Consider also what it means for food insecurity—more efficient food distribution systems could redirect this food to those in need. Some of this is happening. I spent the evening before Thanksgiving this past year driving damaged food that would otherwise have been thrown away (slightly bruised fruit, dented cans, etc.) from a Whole Foods in downtown Boston to a food bank. And many people devote entire careers to redirecting food from landfills. But such efforts hardly scratch the surface. Food waste isn’t the only nutrition/sustainability nexus. In a [2010 report](#) to the United Nations General Assembly,

former Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, argued that degradation to ecosystems resulting from farming practices posed a serious threat to future ability to maintain levels of food production adequate to feed a growing world population.

Dan concludes by observing that “the first step toward recovery is, as always, recognizing that you’ve got a problem.” I agree. But I would argue that we have already done this. From Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move campaign, to Representative Jim McGovern’s (D-Mass.) heroic and ongoing efforts to elevate the issue of domestic hunger in Congress, to UCLA’s own Global Food Initiative, food policy is in the spotlight. To be sure, more awareness couldn’t hurt. But scholars and policy makers are already grappling with the tough questions: how can we ensure fair and equitable access to adequate and healthy food? How can we do so in a way that also promotes environmental sustainability in food production? Who should pay for this? A national conversation has begun, and experimentation at the state, local, and federal level is paving the way for systemic change.