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# Reset the Table

Transforming the U.S. Food System

Messaging Guide  
Research Findings



The  
ROCKEFELLER  
FOUNDATION

February 2021

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The Rockefeller Foundation gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Metropolitan Group to the development of the narrative and messaging described here and of Global Strategy Group for supporting the research that informed it.

# Introduction

In late 2019, The Rockefeller Foundation began a journey to develop a new initiative focused on transforming the food system in the United States to be more nourishing, equitable, and sustainable.

Little did we know that less than a year after embarking on this effort, a global pandemic would aggravate and make more visible the very challenges in the food system that we intended to address, and make the impact of those challenges more striking, urgent, and glaringly disproportionate. As nutrition insecurity skyrocketed in the spring and summer of 2020, it became clear that Covid-19 and the resulting economic downturn would exact a devastating toll that would weigh more heavily on communities of color and Indigenous communities.

In shifting our focus as a Foundation to respond to the immediate needs created by Covid-19, we did not want to lose sight of the need for long-term, fundamental change in the United States food system. We recognized that the very inequities and challenges our long-term work identified were made more evident by the pandemic. In our engagement with diverse stakeholders, it was clear that addressing immediate needs during the pandemic and economic downturn—and rebuilding a better and more equitable food system as we recover from them—would both require and drive systemic changes.

One of the consistent needs we've heard expressed by those seeking to transform the food system is a shared narrative to motivate and sustain the needed changes in the system. Drawing on national qualitative and quantitative research conducted in late 2019 and early 2020 (to be shared later in this document), we articulated a narrative and message framework focused on the long-term transformation needed in the food system. In this guide, we introduce the narrative and message framework we developed and have deployed, and we describe the research we conducted and what we learned from it. We are sharing the results of our narrative work to help support efforts by diverse champions, organizations, and coalitions to make our food system more nourishing, equitable, and sustainable.

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**One of the consistent needs we've heard expressed by those seeking to transform the food system is a shared narrative to motivate and sustain the needed changes in the system.**

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We also adapted and iterated that framework, and developed and field-tested messages throughout 2020, responding to the evolving circumstances presented by the pandemic, economic downturn, and racial justice reckoning being experienced in the United States. This kind of adaptation and iteration is not unique to our present circumstances; it is a tried-and-true approach to create and refine narrative and message frameworks that are designed to advance long-term change while providing flexibility to respond to changing realities.

We share all of this—including our formative research—in the hope that others will take advantage of what we've learned—and the messaging resulting from it—to support their own efforts to transform the U.S. food system to be nourishing, equitable, and sustainable for everyone.

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# Narrative and Messaging

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# Defining narrative and messaging

In our exploration of narrative and messaging to support efforts to transform the food system in the United States, we were supported by Metropolitan Group, a strategic and creative consulting agency, in applying their social impact approach to narrative and message framing.

Their approach\* recognizes that narratives are an articulation of a particular way of seeing the world, issues, other people, and more that is accepted and adopted by a critical mass of people. Narratives can reflect the full range of ideologies and perspectives. For example, in the context of the current pandemic, one narrative posits that wearing a mask is an act of patriotism, while another reflects the belief that it represents government intrusion on individual liberty.

The narratives we accept—and those we reject—reveal something about what we believe and the core values that drive us. They also play a key role in whether we believe information that is presented to us and our likelihood of taking action.

Narratives are advanced by storytelling, which can occur both literally (via social media, pop culture, word-of-mouth, and tradition handed down from one generation to another) and figuratively (through the built environment in what is memorialized in statuary, how cities are planned, the policy choices determining public investment in some communities and disinvestment in others, etc.).

In our case, we set out to identify a core idea to serve as the foundation for our narrative, and then to articulate a message framework to advance that narrative. Recognizing that the most successful narratives are those that inspire organic storytelling from many directions that aggregates to advance the same core idea, we are hopeful that the narrative and messaging in the pages to follow will inspire others to share their own stories in ways that reflect this core idea.

While there are many different approaches to developing a message framework, we employed an approach that identified the following:

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<b>Core</b>	The core takeaway message we wanted to leave with people.
<b>Problem</b>	A definition of the problem facing the country as a consequence of the deficiencies in the U.S. food system.
<b>Impact</b>	Explanation of the impact of the food system on people and the planet.
<b>Solution</b>	Identification of the solution to the problem previously defined.
<b>Call to action</b>	A general call to action to advance the identified solution.

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\* [www.metgroup.com/ideas/voice-shifting-narratives-to-create-a-just-and-sustainable-world/](http://www.metgroup.com/ideas/voice-shifting-narratives-to-create-a-just-and-sustainable-world/)

# Recommended narrative and messaging

The narrative and message framework articulated below reflect both foundational elements identified in the research and lessons learned from real-world application of the messaging in the course of 2020, as the pandemic, economic downturn, and racial reckoning continued.

The narrative reflects core elements that research showed resonated most powerfully in increasing understanding of the importance of our food system and the need to make fundamental changes to it. Described in more detail on Pages 17–26, the **key takeaways from the research** include the following:

- The **core values** of **family** and **community, equity** and **fairness**, and **legacy** and **stewardship** resonate and provide the context in which information about the food system is considered.
- The **food system is generally understood**. As a result, it was not necessary for us to define the food system in the context of the message framework.
- The notion of **healthy food resonates** and is broadly defined and well understood.
- **People are deeply connected to food**. They believe it is important; often have personal and cultural associations with it; and a significant portion of the population is ready to be activated or is persuadable to be activated to transform the food system.
- While there are deep concerns about the efficiency and level of waste in the food system, **people want to believe that change in the food system is possible**.
- There is **concern about hunger and affordability** when it comes to food, but much **less concern about nutrition** (which is seen as an individual responsibility). To motivate systems change, narrative, and framing for nutrition efforts must focus on community and shared responsibility.
- While the public can easily **understand the connection between the food system and health**, there is much **less understanding about the impact the food system has on our natural resources** and the environment. For this reason, we felt it was important to include content that made that connection more explicit.

The message framework also reflects a spirit of hope and a call to collective action that resonated powerfully across our research.



## Narrative

Working together, we can transform our food system to promote the health of all people and our planet.

## Message framework

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### Core

Every child and every community deserves a food system that delivers affordable, nutritious food that protects their health and our natural resources.

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### Problem

But today, much of the food system we rely on is failing us. Too much of our food is unhealthy, goes to waste, or doesn't get into the hands of people who need it most. And it's produced by a system that favors profits over people, promotes too many unhealthy foods, and produces food in ways that put people (including those who work in our food system) and our natural resources at risk.

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### Impact

That hurts all of us, our economy, and our planet. Today, the food system increases the risk of chronic disease, cuts years off our lives, puts a strain on our healthcare system, and raises health costs for everyone. The system keeps frontline food workers in poverty and drives small family farmers, farmers of color, and Indigenous farmers out of business and off their land. And the way food is produced is a huge contributor to the environmental challenges we face.

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### Solution

All over the country, people and communities are taking steps to make our food system work better for everyone, and to make sure the food it provides is healthy, accessible, and affordable for all.

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### Call to action

Working together, we can transform the food system to meet the challenges we face today, while ensuring a stable, equitable, and sustainable supply of healthy food for our children and grandchildren.

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Each element of the narrative and message framework was intentionally designed to reflect the findings from the research conducted, including the key takeaways referenced above, as shown below relative to the narrative statement:

## **Working together, we can transform our food system to promote the health of all people and our planet.**

- Reflects the identified core values of **community**, **equity**, and **stewardship**.
- **Communicates that change in the food system is possible.**
- **Connects to strong motivation for changes in the food system to positively impact health and understanding of the health benefits those changes can manifest.**
- **The reference to the planet serves to increase understanding of the impact of the food system on our natural resources.**





Below we provide **data from the research that supports the narrative:**



For a more detailed explanation of how research informed each layer of the message framework, please see Pages 27-31.

# Applying the narrative to specific issues

The language employed in the message framework presented on Page 7 is intended to provide guidance and inspiration for the development of communication content (e.g., blogs, social posts, policy papers, press releases). It is not necessarily expected to be used verbatim, although it can be. The framework can also be used to inspire messaging on specific issues, as reflected in the examples below:

## School meals

**Core** Every child and every community deserves a food system that delivers affordable, nutritious food that protects their health and our natural resources.

**Problem** But today, much of the food system we rely on is failing us. Too much of our food is unhealthy, goes to waste, or doesn't get into the hands of people who need it most. And it's produced by a system that favors profits over people, promotes too many unhealthy foods, and produces food in ways that put people (including those who work in our food system) and our natural resources at risk.

**Impact** That hurts all of us, our economy, and our planet. Today, the food system increases the risk of chronic disease, cuts years off our lives, puts a strain on our healthcare system, and raises health costs for everyone. The system keeps frontline food workers in poverty and drives small family farmers, farmers of color, and Indigenous farmers out of business and off their land. And the way food is produced is a huge contributor to the environmental challenges we face.

**Solution** All over the country, people and communities are taking steps to make our food system work better for everyone, and to make sure the food it provides is healthy, accessible, and affordable for all.

**Call to action** Working together, we can transform the food system to meet the challenges we face today, while ensuring a stable, equitable, and sustainable supply of healthy food for our children and grandchildren.

## Racial justice and equity

<b>Core</b>	The pandemic and resulting economic downturn exposed the persistent and deeply damaging inequities in the U.S. food system that we must address as a country.
<b>Problem</b>	Since the pandemic began, food insecurity in the United States has increased in all communities, but more so in communities of color and Indigenous communities. Black, Latinx, and Indigenous farmers often cannot access the credit, loans, or subsidy programs on which so many small farm owners rely to survive and provide for their families. And fast food and junk food are more aggressively pushed to communities of color and Indigenous communities, and affordable healthy food is less accessible.
<b>Impact</b>	People of color and Indigenous people are more likely to suffer negative health outcomes because of the food system, increasing their risk of chronic disease and early death. In the food industry, Latinx and Black workers report earning lower wages and encountering more barriers to accessing jobs. These economic inequities cause families of color to be twice as likely to struggle with food insecurity as white families.
<b>Solution</b>	We must make fundamental changes in our food system to ensure racial justice and equity for consumers, food system workers, and farmers from communities of color and Indigenous communities.
<b>Call to action</b>	Together we can create a more equitable food system that promotes shared prosperity throughout the system. Providing fair wages and more robust workforce protections, access to credit and debt relief, and stimulus relief to workers and farmers from communities of color and Indigenous communities are essential steps in that direction.

## Food is medicine

<b>Core</b>	Every person deserves the opportunity to access the healthy food they need to lead a healthy life.
<b>Problem</b>	Our current food system puts healthy food out of reach for tens of millions of families due to their higher cost, and it promotes unhealthy foods that put people at greater risk of diet-related illnesses.
<b>Impact</b>	Today, the food system increases the risk of chronic disease, cuts years off our lives, and is the leading cause of death and disability worldwide. It puts an immense strain on our healthcare system and raises health costs for everyone, adding up to hundreds of billions of dollars every year.
<b>Solution</b>	By ensuring that everyone has access to affordable, healthy food, we can promote healthier people and communities while reducing the burden on our healthcare system.
<b>Call to action</b>	Together we can support produce prescription programs; require healthier food through major institutional purchasers, like school and hospital systems; integrate the concept of food as medicine into health care; and incentivize the production and consumption of healthier food. Doing this will create a healthier future for our children and grandchildren.

## Food system workforce and farmers

<b>Core</b>	Food system workers are on the front lines in promoting health in ways that directly address the key challenges we face today, and they deserve to be protected and treated equitably.
<b>Problem</b>	Farm and food industry workers are among the most vulnerable to being negatively impacted by chronic disease and Covid-19, downturns in the economy, social and racial injustice, and accelerating climate change.
<b>Impact</b>	Because of low wages in the agriculture, retail, and foodservice sectors, food system workers are twice as likely as other workers in the United States to rely on SNAP and other nutrition security programs to feed their own families. And in a system that favors profits over people, small family farmers, farmers of color, and Indigenous farmers are put out of business and forced off their land.
<b>Solution</b>	By transforming the food system to ensure greater equity and shared prosperity throughout the system, we can protect the health of frontline food system workers and the livelihoods of our country's farmers.
<b>Call to action</b>	Working together, we can support living wages for these essential workers, enforce safety regulations, provide credit and debt relief to farmers and ranchers, and link local and regional producers to existing nutrition programs in their communities.

## Environmental sustainability

<b>Core</b>	We all deserve a food system that protects our health and the health of our planet.
<b>Problem</b>	Today, the food system hurts not just the health of people, but also the sustainability of our natural resources. Beyond the fact that one-third of the food produced in the United States goes to waste, food production, processing, and transportation has become one of the primary causes of the environmental damage being done to our planet.
<b>Impact</b>	The current design of our food system is responsible for widespread deforestation, loss of biodiversity, water pollution, and up to 25 percent of greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change not only threatens our planet, it also makes food insecurity worse and deepens existing inequities in the food system.
<b>Solution</b>	We can build a more sustainable and resilient food system by reinvigorating and reinvesting in regional and local food systems, and by creating and enforcing policies that more effectively protect our natural resources and reduce the environmental impact of the food system.
<b>Call to action</b>	Adjust policies to support changes to the food system that promote both human and environmental health, including reductions in carbon emissions and investment in the resilience of local and regional food systems to shorten distribution chains and reduce the impact of transportation.

# Examples of the narrative and messaging in action

The message framework can also be used to develop social posts, quotes for news releases, fact sheets, blogs, etc. Here are a few examples from the Foundation's own communications:

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In *Reset the Table: Meeting the Moment to Transform the U.S. Food System*, this sentence captures the essence of the narrative statement of our message framework.

**“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.”**

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This *blog post* from The Rockefeller Foundation captures both the core value of our message framework (“should be available to every child and family”) and the problem statement (namely, that “access to affordable healthy food is not universally available”).

**“Access to affordable healthy food should be available to every child and family. Tragically, it is not, even here in one of the richest countries on earth.”**

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The Rockefeller Foundation's *Facebook post* at right reflects the core value of the message framework (“every child should have access”), the problem statement (“rising levels of hunger”), the solution (“enabling schools to provide free meals to all children”), and a call to action (“share this message with your friends”).

**“Whether or not schools reopen for in-person classes this fall, every child should have access to the nourishing food they need to be healthy and succeed academically. Enabling schools to provide free meals to all children is a critical step to fight rising levels of hunger across the U.S. Share this message with your friends to raise your voice to help ensure that children and families are fed.”**

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This *tweet* articulates the core value of the message framework (“every child deserves access”), acknowledges the solution (“school lunch waivers”), and delivers a call to action (“let's aim for a true universal school meal program”).

**“Last week's @USDA announcement of extended school lunch waivers was a great victory. Every child deserves access to healthy school meals. Now let's aim for a true universal school meal program that can serve all children with healthy, sustainable, and equitably sourced food. #NSLW2020”**

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In addition to the Foundation’s own messaging, the narrative and core message framework shown on Pages 6-9 builds on messaging already being used by organizations in the field to promote transformation in the U.S. food system. Here are some examples of similar messaging that has been employed by others:

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In describing its *vision*, the HEAL Food Alliance expresses a universal core value (“all people and all communities should have the right”), and defines the problem (“exploitation”) and the solution (“nutritionally and culturally appropriate food produced in harmony with the rest of the natural world”).

**“We believe that all people and all communities should have the right to produce, procure, prepare, share, and eat food that’s nutritionally and culturally appropriate, free from exploitation of themselves and any other people, and to be in their full power in harmony with the rest of the natural world.”**

In its *blog post*, “How Racism Shows Up in the Food System,” FoodCorps powerfully documents the disparities and inequity in the food system and the impact of those inequities on the food system and farmworkers, and on farmers themselves, that inspired the problem and impact statements in our message framework.

**“To this day, migrant workers make up a majority of farmworkers, where they are chronically underpaid, forced to work in unsafe conditions, and often unable to put food on their own tables. Industries like meatpacking plants are primarily staffed by BIPOC, whose role in the professional hierarchy leaves them unable to advocate for fair wages or safer working conditions. Even BIPOC farmers face economic obstacles and racist discrimination while trying to navigate increasingly complex supply chains, particularly those breaking into large-scale farming.”**

This *tweet* by the Urban School Food Alliance also reflects the core value of the message framework (“ensure all students have a healthy future”), identifies the problem (“we put the financial burden on children”), and states the solution (“Break the stigma & ensure all students have a healthy future”).

**“In the US, we put the financial burden of #schoolmeals on children. We need #UniversalFreeMeals to break the stigma & ensure ALL students have a healthy future.”**

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In describing its *Food is Medicine Initiative*, the Aspen Institute uses language that advances several aspects of the suggested message framework, including the problem (the connection between food and chronic disease), the impact of the problem (“millions of lives and billions in healthcare costs”), and the solution (introducing food and nutrition interventions at scale).

**“Though food is the culprit, it can also be the cure. Food and nutrition interventions can aid in prevention and management, and even reverse chronic disease. Introduced at scale, proven interventions could save millions of lives and billions in healthcare costs each year.”**

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In this *tweet*, the Food Research & Action Center addresses the inequity in the food system (reflected throughout the message framework) and delivers a call to action (“strengthen the federal nutrition programs & other proven solutions”).

**“As we begin a new year, we look forward to working with Congress and the Biden-Harris Administration to strengthen the federal nutrition programs & other proven solutions that help address our nation’s long-standing inequities.”**

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In describing its *purpose*, Danone North America employs language that inspired the message framework, including the problem (“our food system is in need of repair”), the solution (“a more sustainable path forward”), and the call to action (making decisions to benefit future generations and the planet).

**“It is increasingly clear that our global food system ... requires a more sustainable path forward. As a result, many of us are giving more thought to what we eat and drink—and understanding how it impacts our health, the environment and the communities around us. We make decisions with the long-view of future generations in mind to benefit people and the planet.”**



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# Formative Research

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# Research methodology

The narrative and message framework described in this guide were developed based on input and insights from a comprehensive research process undertaken by the Foundation in late 2019 and extending into the first quarter of 2020.

This research included the following:

<b>Literature review</b>	Comprised of over 90 documents from internal and external resources, as well as documents discovered during online exploration. See appendix for a list of resources reviewed.
<b>Executive interviews</b>	Seventeen interviews were conducted with a range of practitioners, advocates, policymakers, and researchers whose perspectives provided insights on institutional purchasing, public health, health systems, research, narrative change, social justice, policy, environmental justice, and more.
<b>National survey</b>	An online survey was conducted with 1,587 U.S. adults nationwide with an aim of understanding how Americans prioritize nutrition and food-related issues and uncovering compelling language to support the Foundation’s mission of advancing a more nourishing and sustainable food system. The survey was designed, fielded, and analyzed by Global Strategy Group.
<b>Focus groups</b>	Six focus groups, each with 10-12 participants, were conducted in three locations: Los Angeles, Calif., Greensboro, N.C., and St. Paul, Minn. Two groups were held in each location: one group with participants who identified as being active in their communities and having taken action on issues of importance to them, and a second group with grassroots influencers who work in sectors relevant to issues of nutrition and the food system (e.g., health care, restaurants, supermarkets, food industry, farming and agriculture, education).

The narrative and messaging recommended in this guide should be viewed as they were originally intended; namely, as the foundation for communication to be deployed over a 5- to 10-year time frame in motivating transformation of the U.S. food system. Since the research to inform this narrative was completed in mid-February 2020 (before the likely impact of Covid-19 was fully understood), it provides a benchmark and likely more evergreen perspective on awareness and understanding related to the food system before the pandemic drew heightened attention to the food system resulting from food shortages and increased food insecurity.

In addition, police brutality of late spring and early summer 2020 increased the focus on systemic racism throughout the country, including the food system. It would be prudent at some point to revisit this research to test whether the issues explored are seen in a different light based on the dramatic changes experienced by people and communities related to the food system and inequity and racial injustice in 2020.

The tailoring of messaging to meet specific moments, and evolution of the framework to respond to changing realities (e.g., a global pandemic), are both expected and beneficial in any narrative change effort. The application of this narrative through 2020 took into account the current context, and message frames were refined to be relevant to the moment.

# Key findings from the literature review, interviews, focus groups, and national survey

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**People are deeply connected to food and want to believe that change in the food system is possible.**

Overall, there is a bankable sense of hope that change within the food system is possible, despite the fact that people see the system as big and complex. Focus group participants and many executive interview participants noted a sense of generational hope, and perceive the younger generations to be more connected to, knowledgeable of, and passionate about addressing the negative human and environmental impacts the food system has caused.

- **“There is a more conscious and socially focused younger generation that makes me feel very hopeful. We don’t have to live in a food system this way.”**
  - Los Angeles focus group participant, grassroots influencer
- **“People are generationally more interested in nutrition now ... and the generations younger than me are getting so revved up about climate change ... they have more of a social justice framework too, systems thinking. ...”**
  - Executive interview participant

The bottom line is that everyone cares about food: It’s personal, cultural, and connects to deep heritage and traditions. There is an incredible opportunity to educate around who and what is part of the food system, and to reposition nutrition and food as a joyful, tasty, and exciting issue that we are capable of transforming.

- **“Nutrition from a healthcare perspective is lackluster—uninspiring—and it’s associated with messages of restriction rather than joy and sustainability around food. How can we make nutrition an appealing and joyful thing?”**
  - Executive interview participant

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**41% of people are primed to take action to transform the food system.**

Analysis of our survey data shows that approximately 41% of the population whose values, level of concern, and likelihood to take action are in line with this effort are primed to transform the food system. People who fall into this “base stakeholder” category are more likely to reflect one or more of the following demographic characteristics:

- Black/African American and Latinx individuals
- Women, particularly Black women and mothers, over the age of 45
- Democrats
- People who live in the Western United States

**Another 26% of the population is persuadable to take action to transform the food system.**

The survey also revealed that there is a group of people who are ready to take action, and for whom exposure to the messaging increases their likelihood to engage on the subject. People who fall into this “persuadable” or “swing” category are more likely to reflect one or more of the following demographic characteristics:

- People living in rural areas
- People over the age of 55
- Non-college graduates
- Independents/Moderates
- People who live in the Northeast

**Equity and family/children rise to the top of core values associated with the need to make changes in the food system.**

The survey was the first piece of research that revealed the values that people identify with, connect to, and that motivate action related to the food system. These values were explored more deeply in the executive interviews and focus groups, and held up throughout the research. The two most prominent values were equity/fairness and protection of care and children, high priority U.S. values that in our experience cross ideological lines.

- 74% of base stakeholders and 53% of respondents overall find it very convincing that we owe it to our children and grandchildren to update the way we produce and distribute food in this country to ensure we have a stable supply of healthy and nutritious food for the future.

Overall, the equity frame was what tested the strongest and generated the most movement in a positive direction in the survey in terms of perceived importance around updating the food system.

- 72% of base stakeholders find it very convincing that every child and every community deserves the opportunity to access healthy food at affordable prices.

Most effective solution statements	“Very convincing”		
	Overall	Swing	Base
(FAMILY/CHILDREN) We owe it to our children and grandchildren to update the way we produce and distribute food in this country now to ensure we have a stable supply of healthy and nutritious food for the future.	53%	47%	74%
(FAIRNESS) The way we produce and distribute food can make it harder for some children and communities to access healthy and nutritious food, and that’s unacceptable. Every child and every community deserves the opportunity to access healthy and nutritious food at affordable prices.	52%	51%	72%

Equity and family/children rise to the top of core values associated with the need to make changes in the food system. (cont.)

Most effective solution statements	“Very convincing”		
	Overall	Swing	Base
(EFFICIENCY) We can make better use of the billions of tax dollars we currently spend on our food system to produce food that is not only healthier for us but better for the environment. At the same time, we could reduce the billions spent today on health care, lost productivity, and environmental impact associated with our current food system.	49%	46%	67%
(COMMON SENSE-PERSONAL HEALTH) It makes sense that producing and distributing food in a way that emphasizes food grown locally, while using cleaner technology and more natural processes, would be helpful for us. To make that possible, we need to update our current food system.	49%	53%	67%

Other values that were prominent across the research include community (people often think about the issues they face not just in terms of themselves and their families, but in terms of their community), a “back to basics”/common sense value, and efficiency (food waste, enough food being produced but not getting to all people, etc.).

**When talking about the issue and probing on what motivates people to engage, the economic framing (e.g., the financial burden on health care that the food system causes) is found to be compelling evidence across the political spectrum.**

(The general public focus groups were intentionally recruited to include a diversity of political perspectives, and we saw positive responses from all participants using this framing.)

- **“Coming from a healthcare background of 22 years, I do see ... (that) the healthcare costs and things compound, and they’re getting more, and it is a drain on the healthcare system when we’re back in and back out of the hospital.”**  
– St. Paul focus group participant, grassroots influencer
- **“We spend \$1 billion a day. Every day we spend \$1 billion on preventable health care. It would behoove us to take a fraction of that money to make sure people can eat healthily.”**  
– Los Angeles focus group participant, grassroots influencer

**The general public has a basic understanding of the food system even though it's not top-of-mind.**

In both the national survey and in focus groups, when people were asked what comes to mind when they hear “food system,” it is clear that the concept is generally understood, even though (as reflected in the survey) it may not be top-of-mind for most.

- **“The elements of food distribution that start at the farm and go through processing, harvest, packaging, and distribution to stores”**  
– Survey respondent
- **“From farm to table, the entire agricultural network that goes through intermediaries like grocery stores and food banks, etc.”**  
– Survey respondent

The word cloud below represents the words commonly used when survey participants were asked to describe the food system in the United States.



Interestingly, research revealed that everyone has a different definition of the food system, and although people can produce a relatively comprehensive and accurate definition of it, what people often miss is how the food system impacts the people working within it.

- **“The cheapness of food in front of us is not seen by most Americans in terms of the poor communities that are incurring that cost. We pay a dollar for an avocado, but we don’t see how that cheap avocado translates to the people who bear the cost. People are disconnected from the food they eat and impact it has on their environment and communities.”**  
– Executive interview participant

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**The notion of “healthy food” resonates and is broadly defined and well understood.**

We tested a variety of ways of referring to food including “healthy,” “nutritious,” “protective,” etc. Of these, “healthy” foods resonated strongest and evoked the widest understanding of what was meant. For example, in focus groups, when people were asked what foods they thought of when they heard the term “healthy” foods, the following items were listed frequently:

- Greens
- Beans (sometimes referenced as legumes broadly)
- Fish
- Fruit
- Nuts and seeds
- Whole grains

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**People understand how the food system impacts health, but have a hard time connecting the food system to the environment.**

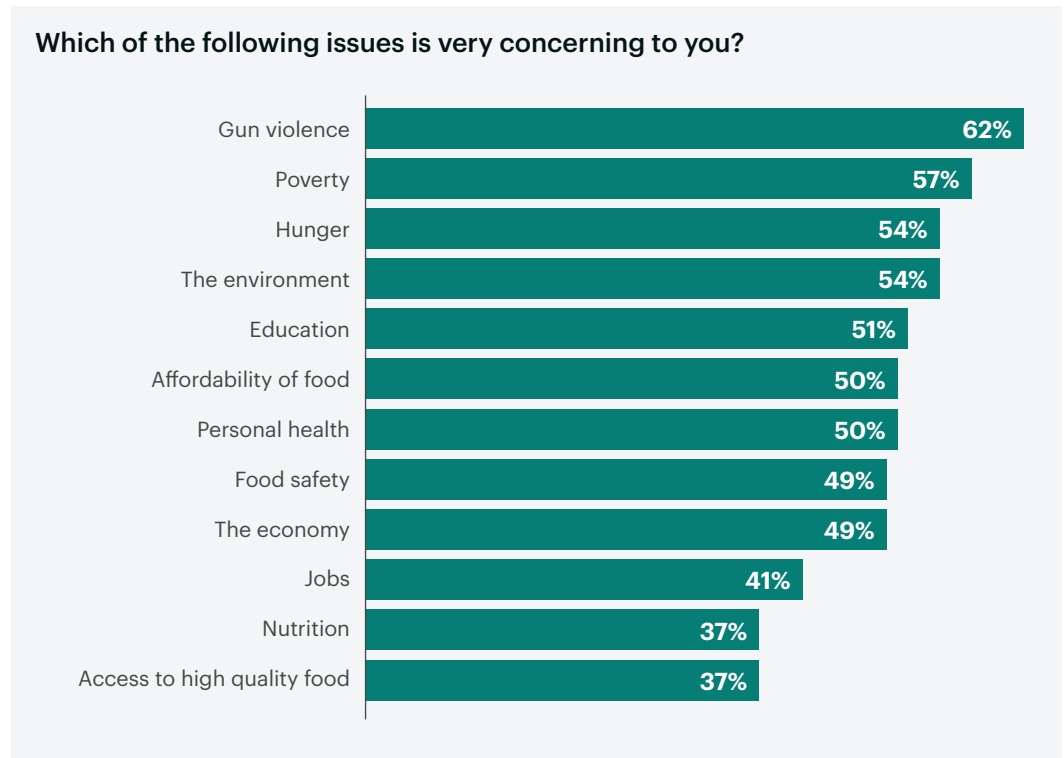
Broadly speaking, the connection between health impacts and food/the food system is understood and compelling to people. Although much less referenced than health, people also made connections between the food system and waste, and honed in on inefficiency and waste as the reason why the food system is perceived to be broken.

The research also shows that the connection between the environment and the food system is much less understood and compelling. While there was general agreement that the food system is not meeting our needs and should be updated, the negative impact on the environment was not a primary driver for the reason why.



**There is concern about hunger and affordability of food, but much less concern about nutrition and accessibility.**

The survey gauged people’s perceptions of hunger, nutrition, the environment, food safety, and more. When asked to indicate level of concern toward a particular issue, both poverty and hunger were found to be much more concerning issues than nutrition or access to high quality food—the two topics with the lowest rankings. It is important to note that the survey was conducted before the Covid-19 pandemic and economic downturn had taken place. It is possible that nutrition and access to high quality food became more of a concern as 2020 progressed and the pandemic and economic downturn worsened.



Perhaps connected to this, the research showed that general confusion exists around food and nutrition, rooted in a lack of nutrition science, the presence of changing fad diets, and “silver bullet” foods that make us healthy. Connected to this generalized confusion, people are unclear about who to trust and what information is accurate.

- **“One of the main narratives I hear is around “silver bullet fixes,” or people thinking: If I do one thing different with my diet, then I will fix my health, like eat paleo, plant-based, vegan...”**
  - Executive interview participant
- **“People hold their own beliefs about food and it doesn’t matter what science says. ... Science is complicated and it always changes in terms of what’s good for me, bad for me, right, wrong...”**
  - Executive interview participant

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**Affordability is seen as a key problem in the current food system and the biggest barrier to making changes in consumption.**

People perceive affordability by and large to be the biggest barrier to achieving transformation of the food system. When people spoke about affordability, it reinforced the prominent equity frame that surfaced in the survey; thinking about the cost of food moves people away from a focus on individual responsibility and puts them in a mindset of thinking about the system in which they live and operate.

- **“I’ve got two boys that are teenagers and I’ve got to figure out ways to feed them on a budget. ... I don’t know how anyone can afford to buy organic food.”**

– St. Paul focus group participant (general public)



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**The government and food industry are perceived negatively overall.**

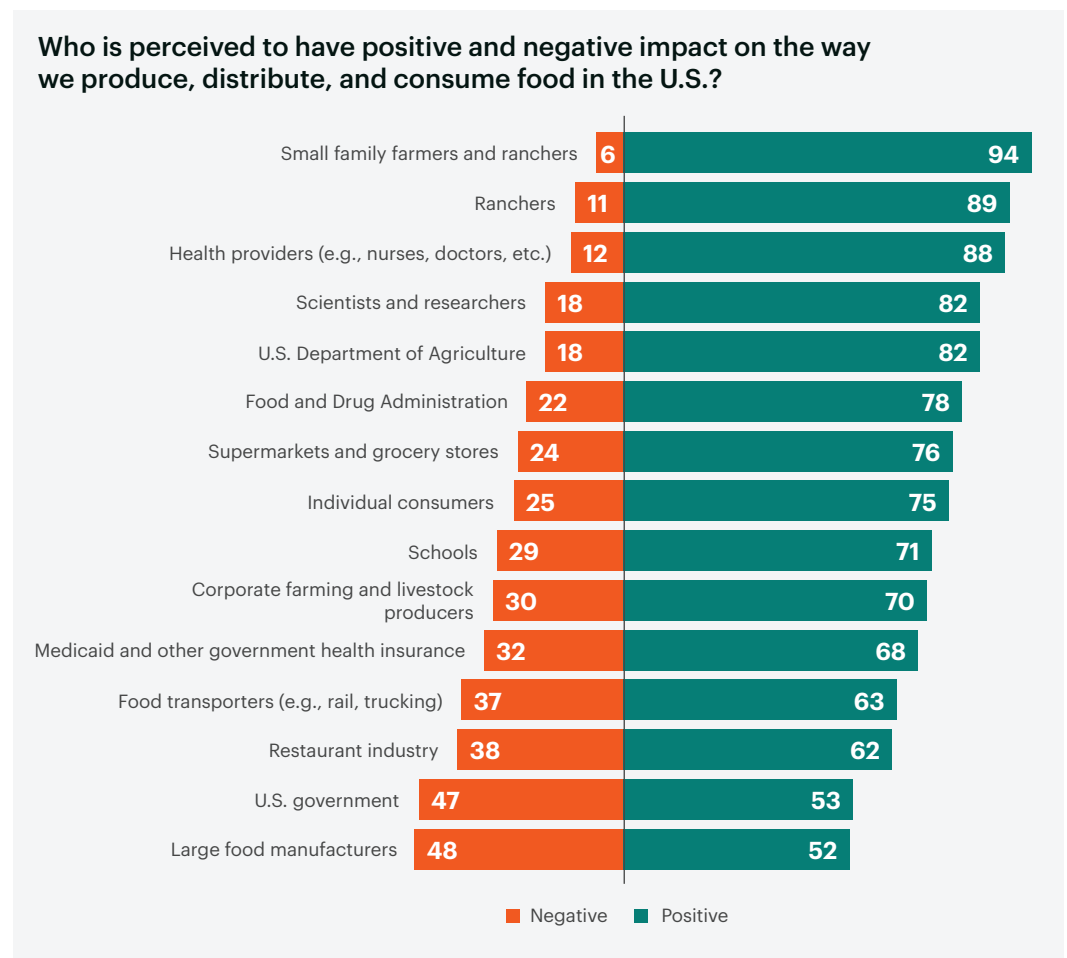
As reflected in the chart on Page 25, small family farmers and ranchers, health providers, and scientists and researchers are seen to have the most powerful impact on the way we produce, distribute, and consume food in the United States. The U.S. government and key players in the food system (i.e., large food manufacturers, the restaurant industry, and food transporters) are seen as much more negatively. In focus groups, people described large-scale agricultural food corporations as the problem, and at times referred to corporations using vilifying language.

- **“Profits over people, profits over health.”**  
– Los Angeles focus group participant, general public
- **“Companies that are producing food, they want to do it as cheaply as possible, so they can make a good profit. They might not be as concerned about what they’re putting in the food, just to make more money.”**  
– Los Angeles focus group participant, general public
- 68% of base stakeholders and 50% of survey participants overall strongly agree that special interests and lobbyists in the food system are focused solely on maximizing their own profits.



While perceptions of the U.S. government’s impact is almost evenly split between positive and negative, some specific government entities (i.e., the USDA and the FDA) are perceived to have much more positive impact. Importantly, **the government is also seen to be a key part of the solution.**

- As shown in the chart below, 52% of those surveyed believe government funding or subsidies for healthy food would help a lot to promote our health and the environment.
- Across the focus groups, “The government should subsidize foods that are healthier for us” and “The government should subsidize foods that are healthier for the environment” were both solutions that tested extremely well (76% of respondents selected the first option as a solution they agreed with, and 64% of respondents selected the second option as a solution they agreed with).



**Systemic solutions are seen as important, although the notion of individual responsibility is powerful.**

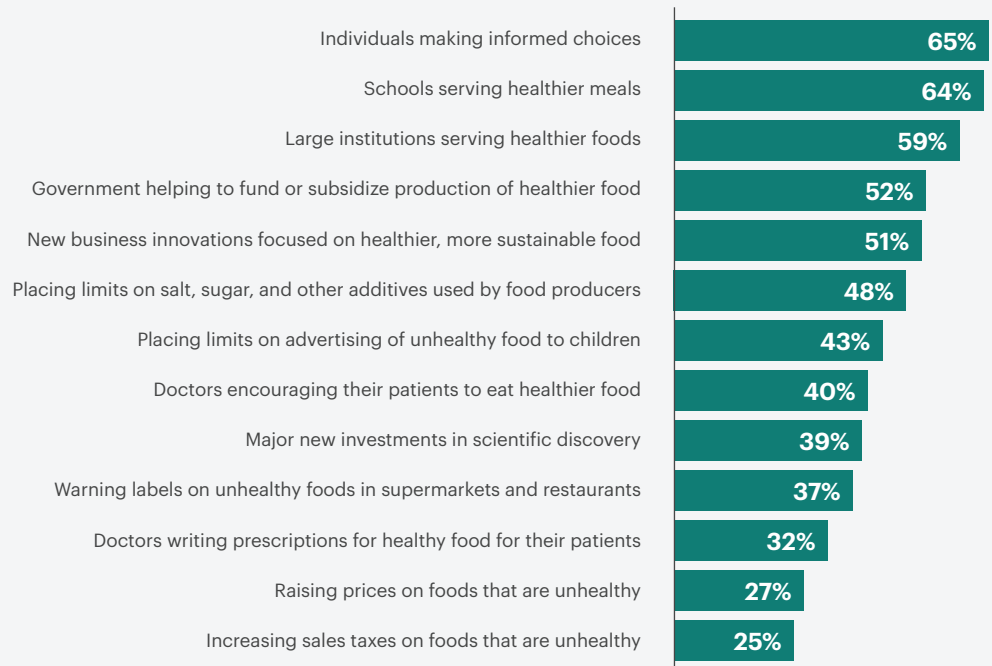
Individual responsibility is a powerfully resonant idea in the United States, reflecting deep-seated values of privacy and freedom and mirrored in meta-narratives about “Big Brother” and the “nanny state.” When the concept of individual responsibility is triggered, it is extremely difficult to shift the focus to systemic causes or solutions.

In our research, the concept of individual responsibility arose time and again, mostly in the context of diet (a term we avoided since it inevitably led to a default to blaming individuals) and nutrition. As shown in the chart below, “individuals making informed choices” was seen as the best way to promote our health and the health of the environment. In focus groups, when the conversation was framed more explicitly around systemic challenges in the food system and the need for a comprehensive approach to address them, the default to individual responsibility was less reflexive.

Nevertheless, there was strong endorsement of more systemic solutions, including schools serving healthier meals to children and in low-income schools; healthier food purchasing by large institutions (e.g., school systems, hospitals, corporations); and government subsidies for foods that are healthier for people and the environment.

Some systemic solutions (e.g., authorizing healthcare providers to write prescriptions for healthy produce) were met with skepticism, mostly because they were not widely known or understood. When provided with additional context and explanation, support was seen to increase for these systemic solutions.

**Which of the following would help a lot to change the way we produce, distribute, and consume food in the U.S. to promote our health and the environment?**



# Research findings applied to message framing

As described on Page 9, each concept articulated in the narrative and message framework is grounded in the research described on previous pages. Below, we note data from the survey and focus groups we conducted to justify key elements of the message framework. Key words/concepts and their supporting data are shown in the same colors.

## Core message



## Problem

80% of survey respondents say the word “wasteful” defines the country’s food system well and that food doesn’t get into the hands of people who need it most.

75% of survey respondents believe too much food is highly processed and unhealthy, leading to poor and inadequate nutrition.

“I feel like our food system ... is kind of broken.”  
– Focus group participant, Minneapolis

64% of survey participants exposed to the “reliance” message said it was very convincing in making the case for making changes in the food system.

But today, much of the food system **we rely on** is **failing us**. Too much of our food is **unhealthy**, goes to **waste**, or **doesn’t get into the hands of people who need it most**. And it’s produced by a system that **favors profits over people**, **promotes too many unhealthy foods**, and produces food in ways that put people (including those who work in our food system) and **our natural resources at risk**.

90% of survey respondents agree that the food industry is focused solely on maximizing their own profits and is putting our health at risk in the process.

88% of survey respondents agree that the food industry cares more about profits than the environment.

91% of survey respondents agree that the overproduction and over-marketing of processed foods with little or no nutritional value—especially to children—is one of the biggest public health challenges we face as a country.

## Impact

Messaging grounded in the core value of equity generates the strongest movement in a positive direction in terms of perceived importance of updating the food system.

91% of survey respondents agree that the over-production and over-marketing of processed foods with little or no nutritional value—especially to children—is one of the biggest public health challenges we face as a country.

87% of survey respondents agree that our food system costs us billions in health care, lost productivity, and environmental impact.

That hurts **all of us**, our economy, and our planet.

Today, the food system increases the **risk of diabetes and chronic disease, cuts years off our lives, puts a strain on our healthcare system, and raises health costs for everyone**. The system keeps frontline workers in poverty and drives small family farmers, farmers of color, and Indigenous farmers **out of business and off their land**.

And the way food is produced and transported is a **huge contributor to the environmental challenges** we face.

94% of survey respondents agree we need to do more to support small family farms, and current policies favor big food and agriculture companies over smaller family operations.

87% of survey respondents agree that the food system produces and transports food in ways that are bad for the environment.

88% of survey respondents agree that the food industry cares more about profits than the environment.

## Solution

77% of survey respondents were convinced that innovation and ingenuity could make our food system better to meet today's needs.

While focus group participants were generally skeptical of being able to change something as complex as the food system, they wanted to believe there was something that could be done, and were energized by examples of how consumers have driven changes in the food system.

All over the country, **people and communities are taking steps** to make our food system **work better for everyone** and to make sure the food it provides is **healthy, accessible, and affordable for all**.

87% of survey respondents agree that we can make better use of the billions we spend on our food system to produce food that is not only healthier for people, but also better for the environment.

Concern about the affordability of healthy food was observed across the research.

86% of survey respondents agree that every child and every community deserves the opportunity to access healthy and nutritious food at affordable prices.

## Call to action

63% of base stakeholders strongly agree that working together, we must take control of the food system.

Focus group participants are skeptical that any one person could make a meaningful difference, but they recognize the power of collective action.

52% of survey respondents selected “transforming” as the preferred verb to describe the change that needs to happen to the U.S. food system.

• **Working together**, we can **transform** the food system to meet the **challenges we face today**, while ensuring a **stable, equitable, and sustainable supply of healthy food for our children and grandchildren.**

This language is a reflection of the increased recognition of the impact of the food system on health, equity, and the economy as a result of the global pandemic.

90% of survey respondents are convinced that we owe it to our children and grandchildren to update the way we produce and distribute food in this country to ensure we have a stable supply of healthy and nutritious food for the future.

80% of survey respondents are convinced that the food we produce should be made and grown in ways that protect our natural resources and the environment.

75% of survey respondents are convinced that we should expect the food produced by our food system to be healthy and nutritious.

