



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



ASCEND

FOR BETTER HEALTH

Agricultural Science Center of Excellence for
Nutrition and Diet (ASCEND) for Better Health

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON FOOD, NUTRITION, & HEALTH

SUMMARY REPORT OF YOUTH SURVEY
AND ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

ABOUT THE [UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE \(USDA\)](#)

USDA provides leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, rural development, nutrition, and related issues based on public policy, the best available science, and effective management. USDA's vision is to provide economic opportunity through innovation, helping rural America to thrive; to promote agriculture production that better nourishes Americans while also helping feed others throughout the world; and to preserve our Nation's natural resources through conservation, restored forests, improved watersheds, and healthy private working lands.

ABOUT [4-H \(HEAD, HEART, HANDS, AND HEALTH\)](#)

4-H is USDA's flagship positive youth development and education program. 4-H is delivered by the Cooperative Extension System through over 110 Land-Grant Universities across the United States and its territories. 4-H uses experiential learning—learning by doing—as a primary teaching approach to learn life skills such as leadership, civic engagement, healthy living, science, technology, engineering and mathematics education, and public speaking. For more than 100 years, 4-H has welcomed young people of all beliefs and backgrounds, giving kids a voice to express who they are and how they make their lives and communities better. The unique partnership with the Cooperative Extension System through Land-Grant Universities and the National 4-H Council empowers young people to lead for a lifetime.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We greatly appreciate the National 4-H Council and 2023 IGNITE Conference planning team for their assistance in integrating USDA into their Program Showcase. We are also tremendously grateful for the youth that participated in the survey and the roundtable discussion.

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The USDA is committed to ensuring all we do is [driven by research, grounded in science, and informed by analysis and evaluation](#). We also aim to ensure our actions are informed by [lived experience](#) and developed in partnership with those we aim to serve. To accelerate our efforts in developing community-informed and data-driven approaches, Secretary of Agriculture Thomas Vilsack announced the launch of the USDA's Agricultural Science Center of Excellence for Nutrition and Diet (ASCEND) for Better Health on December 5, 2022. [ASCEND for Better Health](#) is a virtual science center that brings together scientists, partner organizations, and communities to develop and deliver science-based solutions that improve the health and well-being of every individual, family, and community in this country. The primary goal for ASCEND is to reduce the incidence and burden of diet-related chronic diseases, especially in historically underserved populations.

Critical to the success of ASCEND is engaging with youth to better understand the real-world opportunities and challenges around addressing food and nutrition insecurity and diet-related chronic diseases. We developed two key opportunities to engage youth in our formative stages of ASCEND. The first took place on March 9 through 12, 2023 during the National 4-H Council IGNITE Conference in Washington, DC. During the IGNITE Conference, more than 1,000 high school aged teens from across the Nation were brought together to connect, make memories, and find their spark by exploring the best 4-H has to offer in STEM, Agriscience, Healthy Living, Career Readiness, and Emotional Well-Being. During the Program Showcase, which is an exhibitor-like experience, USDA had opportunities to interact with IGNITE attendees via in-person conversations and online survey mediums.

The second opportunity to engage youth was during the National 4-H Conference held in Arlington, Virginia from April 14 to 19, 2023. The [National 4-H Conference](#) is USDA's flagship youth development opportunity, where young people from across the United States and its territories travel to Washington, DC to share their voice with Federal agencies and congressional committees on a wide range of topics that are important to them and our partners with the goal of impacting change in America. Youth delegates sign up to participate in one of the challenge questions provided by Federal agencies and congressional committees and then work in roundtable groups of about 10 to 15 youth delegates supported by a Collegiate Facilitator to prepare a youth perspective briefing for decision makers. One of the issues they discussed focused on ASCEND, and how we can better engage youth in building trusting relationships that improve diet-related health outcomes for all.

"At USDA we are passionate about learning more about the tools and support communities need to increase access to healthy, safe, and affordable food. Hearing about lived experiences from diverse communities, including youth, is integral to our efforts as we work together with partners like 4-H to retool the way our society approaches healthy eating."

Dr. Chavonda Jacobs-Young
USDA Undersecretary for Research,
Education, and Economics
USDA Chief Scientist



This report summarizes the information captured at the IGNITE Program Showcase and the National 4-H Conference Roundtable discussion.

IGNITE CONFERENCE – SURVEY RESULTS

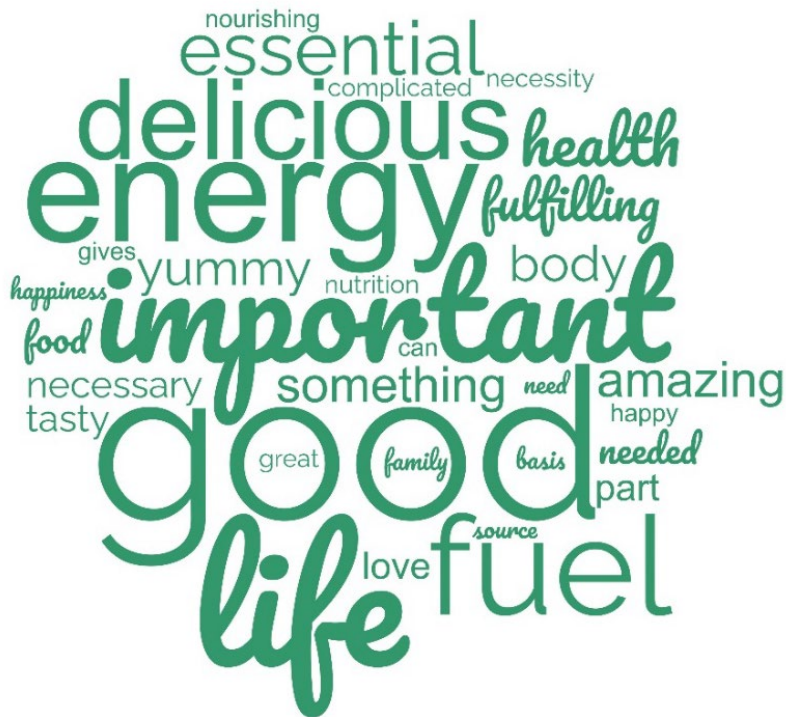
Information Collection and Analysis

An online Microsoft form survey was used to gather feedback from the youth when they stopped by the USDA booth at the Program Showcase. The youth could use the provided tablets, or their own personal cell phone to complete the online survey. The survey was anonymous and asked a total of four questions which are described below. The information collected was reviewed by a small group of staff members and scientists from USDA. The methods used for analysis are described in the descriptions of each question. Figures and graphs are colored 4-H green.

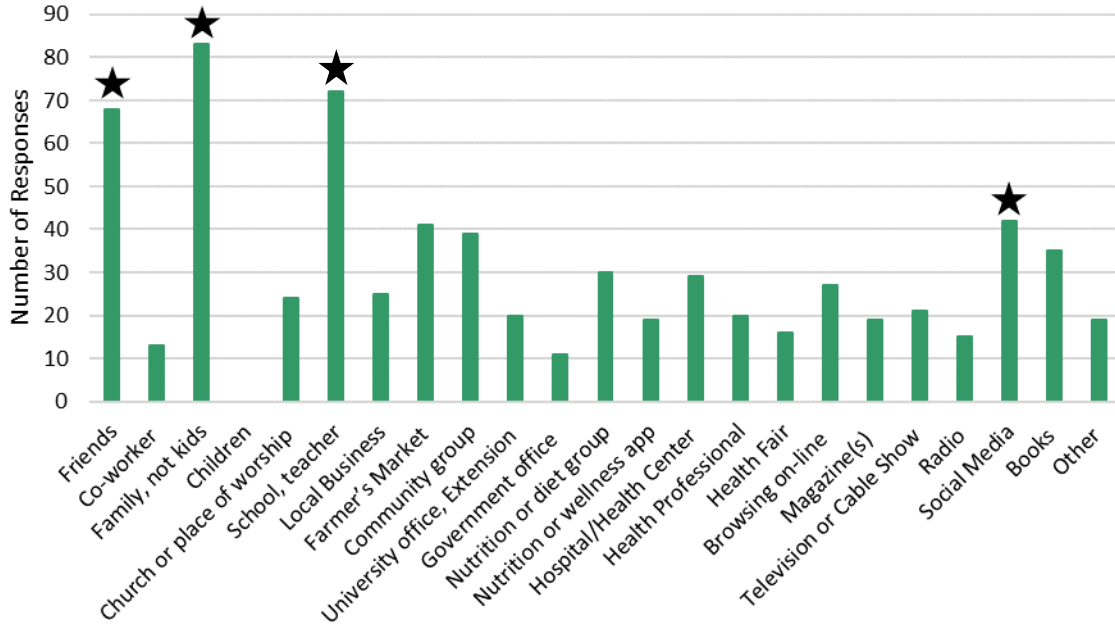


Survey Questions

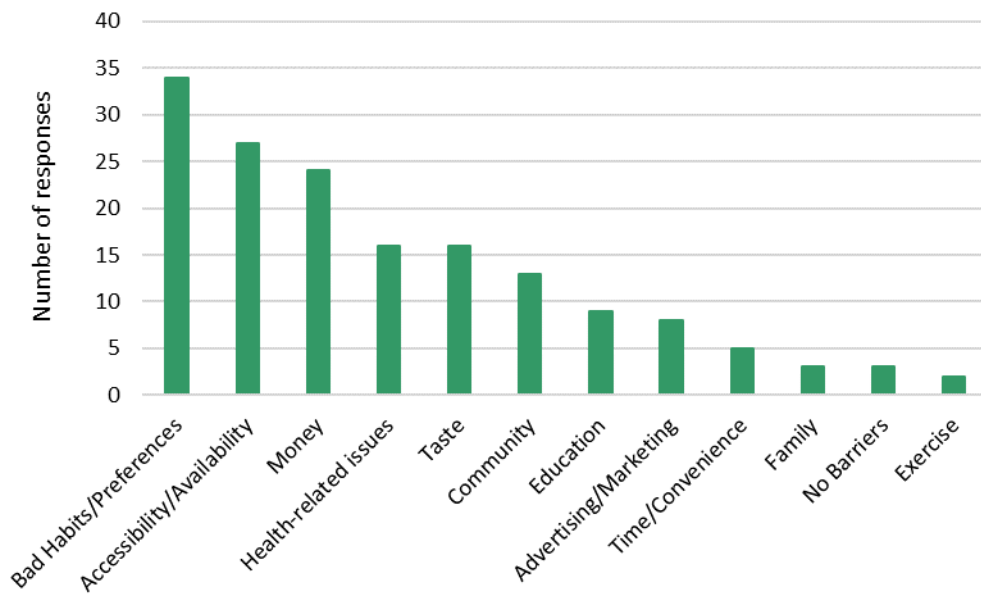
Question 1. Food is... Youth were asked to complete the phrase “Food is...”, then responses were analyzed and presented as a [word cloud](#) (137 responses total). Words mentioned more frequently are listed in a larger font size. Words mentioned just once were removed.



Question 2. Where do you get your information about food and health? Youth were provided with a list of common communication sources and asked to check all those that were used to obtain information about food and health. The graph below shows the number of responses for each category, with the top four sources denoted with stars.



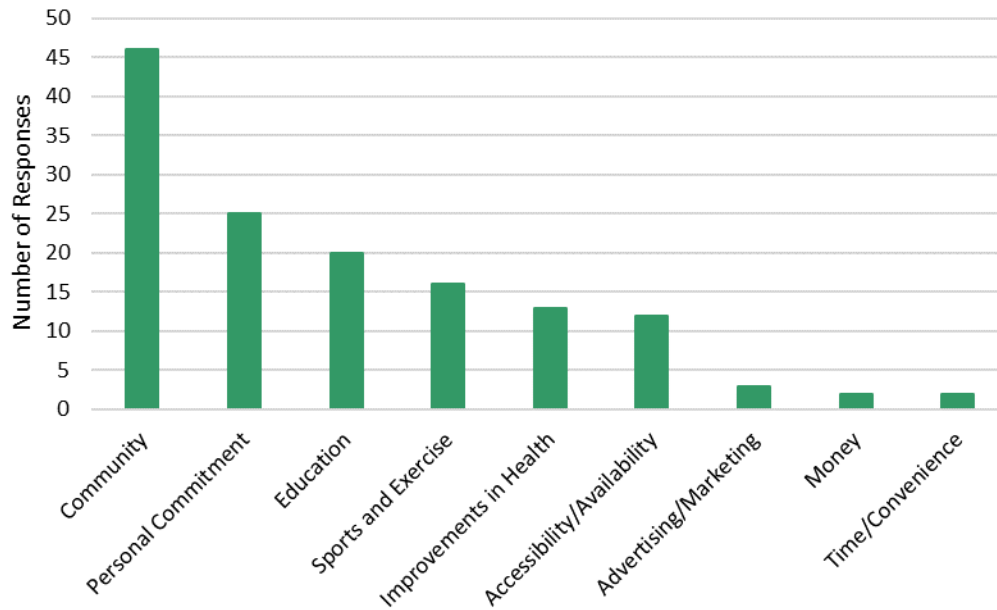
Question 3. What barriers do youth face when eating healthy? Individual responses of a similar type were first organized into topic areas, then within each topic area, responses were represented using summary statements (see table on next page). The topic areas and summary statements are listed in order of most frequently to least frequently mentioned, with the number of responses provided in parentheses. In this manner, the most frequently mentioned topics and summary statements are listed first. The graph below shows the total number of responses in each topic area, organized from highest to lowest number of responses, and the table provides both categories and summary statements.



Topic	Summary Statements
Bad Habits/Preferences (34 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Junk food</u> - It's hard to resist the appeal of junk food, especially when you crave it. (11 responses) • <u>Discipline</u> - Eating healthy food requires focus and discipline. (11 responses) • <u>Preferences</u> - I want to eat what I enjoy eating, not what someone tells me to eat. (7 responses) • <u>Overeating</u> - It's easy to overeat and not consider portion size. (5 responses)
Accessibility/Availability (27 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Lack of options</u> - Healthy food options aren't always accessible or available, including at home. (27 responses)
Money (24 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Expensive</u> - Healthy foods often cost more, which can discourage their purchase. (24 responses)
Health-related issues (16 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Physical/mental health</u> - There may be health-related issues such as eating disorders or food allergies, or negative associations with food leading to problems such as food fears or starvation. (16 responses)
Taste (16 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Not satisfying</u> - Healthy foods often doesn't taste good, have little seasoning, and aren't fulfilling. (16 responses)
Community (13 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Social pressures</u> - Peer pressure and judgment from others can make it hard to eat healthy. (11 responses) • <u>School food</u> - School food might lack healthy options, or the options provided aren't desirable. (2 responses)
Education (9 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Awareness</u> - Knowledge and education about food and nutrition are needed to know what to eat, and how much to eat. (9 responses)
Advertising/Marketing (8 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>More promotion for less healthy options</u> - Unhealthy foods are often advertised more frequently than healthy foods and might be described as "healthy" even when they are not. (8 responses)
Time/Convenience (5 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Expedience</u> - Preparing healthy foods can take too much time; fast foods and snacks are often more convenient. (5 responses)
Family (3 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Family influences</u> - Families can be supportive of healthy eating but might also put pressure on youth to eat what is provided, which might not be healthy, or to eat more or less than is needed. (3 responses)
No Barriers (3 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>None</u> - There are no barriers to healthy eating. (3 responses)
Exercise (2 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Active lifestyle</u> - Sports such as wrestling or weightlifting can help enable healthy eating or burn off calories from unhealthy eating. (2 responses)



Question 4. What helps youth lead a healthy lifestyle? The information was analyzed as described for question 3.



Topic	Summary Statements
Community (46 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Supportive friends and family</u> - Having supportive friends and family is especially important when trying to live a healthy lifestyle. (30 responses) • <u>Role models</u> - Seeing other people live a healthy lifestyle, including role models, adults, and friends. (13 responses) • <u>Being an inspiration to others</u> - Being healthy allows me to help and inspire others. (2 responses) • <u>School meals</u> - School meals provide an opportunity to encourage healthy eating. (1 response)
Personal Commitment (25 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Being disciplined</u> - It's important to be mindful of what you eat and stay disciplined and focused on healthy choices. (20 responses) • <u>Selfcare</u> - Healthy eating is good for you both physically and mentally, and it's important to take care of yourself. (3 responses) • <u>Get motivated</u> - Need to get motivated to eat healthy! (2 responses)
Education (20 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Formal education programs</u> - Need more education on the relationships of food and health to understand why it's important to make better choices. (15 responses) • <u>Proactively searching for information</u> - Provide practical and easily understood information on food and health using mechanisms youth are already using, such as social media, TV, and phone apps. (5 responses)
Sports and Exercise (16 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Benefits of active lifestyle</u> - Exercising and playing sports are great ways to stay in shape, and eating a healthy diet helps you look and perform your best. (16 responses)

Improvements in Health and Quality of Life (13 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Health and quality of life</u> - Seeing improvements in your health and quality of life are strong motivators for healthy eating. (11 responses) • <u>Self-image</u> - Being healthy can also improve your body image. (2 responses)
Accessibility/Availability (12 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Healthy options that taste good</u> - Having a variety of tasty options available would encourage healthy eating. (12 responses)
Advertising/Marketing (3 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Effective promotion of healthy foods</u> - Diverse, healthy foods should be marketed more effectively using communication channels used by youth. (3 responses)
Money (2 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Affordability</u> - Healthy foods need to be more affordable, or additional resources are needed for their purchase. (2 responses)
Time/Convenience (2 responses total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Easy to prepare</u> - Healthy meals should be quick and convenient. (2 responses)

Summary of Survey Results

The survey generated insightful feedback from youth on their perspectives around food, nutrition, and health. Youth viewed food as essential for life, energy, and a source of great joy and fulfillment. They also identified family, school or teacher, friends, and social media as their primary sources of information for food and health. Lastly, they described key challenges and opportunities that youth face around food and nutrition.

Challenges to healthy eating

- Individual barriers
 - Bad habits and preferences towards unhealthy food options.
 - Lack of knowledge about food, nutrition, and health.
 - Healthy foods often cost more or don't taste as good.
 - Existing mental or physical health issues can contribute to unhealthy relationships with food.
- Environmental barriers
 - Lack of healthy food options in restaurants, schools, or at home (or what is provided isn't desirable).
 - Social pressures from peers or family.

Opportunities for improving health through food and nutrition

- Community
 - Having supportive friends and family.
 - Having or being a role model.
- Commitment and education
 - Being motivated to make a change.
 - Knowing what to do, and how to do it.
- Adopting a healthy lifestyle
 - Exercising and physical activity helps you look and feel better.
 - Having access to a variety of healthy, tasty foods would encourage healthier eating.



ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

On Monday, April 17, 2023, 14 youth delegates illustrated below from the National 4-H Conference met with USDA leadership to provide youth perspectives on challenges around food, nutrition, and health. The delegates were asked: How can the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) better engage young people in building trusting relationships that improve diet-related health outcomes for all? Youth delegates worked together to research the issue, discuss current efforts, and recommend new ideas to bring about positive change. A video recording of the meeting is [available](#), and a summary of the discussion is provided below.



Objectives Established by Youth To Plan Their Presentation

- Understand the importance of community health within the schools and citizens.
- Identify the problems that are within the schools and other community programs that hinder the health of the citizens.
- Find solutions to solve the problems at the community, State, and national level.
- Overall improve the health of all the generations within the United States and find solutions to prevent and treat diseases.

Opportunities for Improving Health Through Food and Nutrition

How can we eat healthy?

- Eat Balanced Meals - Make sure you have all your food groups.
- Do Not Skip Meals - Not eating is unhealthy and always backfires.
- Certain Diets Have Benefits - Some diets have been shown to reduce depression and cancer.
- Shop with a Plan - Decreases likelihood of buying processed foods.
- Find Healthy Food You Enjoy - Make it specific to you; eat what you like.

Economics

- Alleviating costs of healthy food for college students.
- Push for healthier food selections through taxing sugary items.
- Strategically managing money from the Federal Government for K-12 schools.

Political/legislative

- Low quality of school lunches.
- Two in three teachers have students come to school hungry.
- Revise nutritional standards.
- Approximately 40 percent of schools do not meet the nutrition requirements given by the USDA.
- Improve health education in public schools.
- Educate about gardening.
- Prioritize nutrition and diet education.

Nutrition - A simple solution to daily health

- Reading labels
 - About 9 percent of people use food labels; 60 percent do NOT use it or comprehend it
 - Key to packaging
 - Posters in grocery stores
 - Health class education
- Personalized nutrition - All bodies are unique; one diet does NOT fit all.

Social issues

- Unequal food accessibility – uneven distribution of food; food deserts; quality of food.
- Lack of public knowledge – healthy vs. pleasure attitude; ability to cook; lack of awareness.
- Possible solutions:
 - Public gardens – rooftop places; community gardens
 - Social media – all platforms for different appeals
 - Youth groups – community clubs or organizations

Education

- Parental/Guardian Education of Healthy Nutrition - Encourage healthier options at home.
- HEALTH Rocks Revamp - Utilize the 4-H and USDA partnership to revamp and include more nutritional education and healthy lifestyle choices.
- Regulation of health class curriculum - Implement more standardized curriculum use within the public school system.
- Required school cooking courses implemented into health courses - Improve nutritional knowledge and cooking recipes.
- Social Media Outreach - Encourage youth to promote healthy lifestyles and nutrition.

Legislation

- Tax on high sugary drinks
 - More than 50 countries around the world have taxes on sugary drinks.
 - Taxing sugary drinks has proved to reduce consumption.
 - Incentive for companies to make healthier drink options.
- Censoring marketing of unhealthy food/drink options - particularly to youth
 - Eliminating fast-food marketing could reduce obesity by 18 percent.
 - Other countries have banned advertisements on kids TV programs.
 - Many countries regulate nutrition ads to ensure accuracy.
- Food banks incentivized for healthier food options

- The USDA has the main overlook of the food banks across America - TEFAP, The Emergency Food Assistance Program.
- Foods are bought by all States for their food banks.
- Minnesota utilizes feedback from recipients to order most liked foods.
- Mandating certain foods will increase healthier options.

Affordability

- Incentivizing youth for working at food banks and donations.
 - One in seven Americans rely on food pantries and meal programs.
 - Encouraging youth to volunteer such as sorting and packaging food for food banks.
- Providing funding to organizations to provide higher quality, healthier food.
 - More work is needed to solve food insecurity than simply the current funds.
 - More funding can increase quality of food for everyone.
- Invest in and incentivize farmers who provide more, healthier food.
 - More incentivization will encourage more production.
- Expand access to food banks/pantries for healthier options for all.
 - Low-income individuals often have difficulty getting to food bank locations.
 - Ensuring food is distributed is an issue for food banks.
 - Providing healthier options can prevent resorting to unhealthier options.

Direct youth involvement

- USDA partners with community groups
- Utilizing HEALTH Rocks - Involving youth in health education
- College Campus implementation of food banks and more nutritious options
- Food Pantries/Banks
 - Youth volunteer involvement
 - Educating youth and users of food pantries
 - Fifty-three million people utilize food banks each year.
- Utilizing Health Courses - Implementation of consistent health education into school curriculum

Conclusions

- Unhealthy eating habits are a critical problem for Americans.
- Lack of access to healthy foods and information about healthy diets hinders America's ability to maintain healthy diets.
- Helping youth to build better relationships with food can be done with...
 - Education - Teaching kids and adults about nutrition.
 - Legislation - Limiting access to unhealthy foods.
 - Economics - Increasing access to healthy foods; Encouraging production and quality.
- Involving youth directly is crucial for solving this issue.

NEXT STEPS - USDA will use the information in this report to inform the development of ASCEND for Better Health to better leverage the power, resourcefulness, and insight of youth in addressing issues of food, nutrition, and health. The information will help inform research, education, extension programs and ensure that USDA's science-based solutions are impactful and relevant to the communities they serve, including youth. We encourage the usage of this information in future reports, publications, grant applications, and other efforts that aim to improve the health and well-being of all Americans.



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