



## Improving the Data Infrastructure for Food and Nutrition Policy Research

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The ability to assure nutritious foods and respond to the complex policy issues depends in the creation of knowledge that supports research on the role of food and diet. Science has established strong links between diet and health. Researchers attribute about 300,000 premature deaths in annually to poor diets, with a price tag in the \$120 billion range for health care costs and lost productivity. Obesity and overweight have been described as a national epidemic and may soon cause as much preventable disease and death as cigarette smoking. Even small improvements in the average diet can yield large economic benefits. To accelerate the transfer of benefits from nutrition science to consumers requires investments information systems to better understand the drivers of consumer food choice behavior.

Until recently, the capacity to conduct policy research was severely limited by lack of access to timely and detailed data on food choices. Researchers needed data on how much of which foods consumers purchase, where, and at what prices; how behavior of food assistance program participants differ from others; and how dietary knowledge, or lack thereof, and time affect consumer food choices. To overcome this data gap, the Economic Research Service (ERS) of USDA initiated the Consumer Data and Research (CDR) program in 2006. The program underpins a variety of research on critical policy issues. ERS worked closely with the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) of the National Research Council to solicit feasible and effective strategies for meeting the objectives of the CDR program. The CNSTAT formed a panel of distinguished academics, key industry players, other Federal Agencies and key stakeholders and published the NRC-CNSTAT report "*Improving Data to Analyze Food and Nutrition Policies*" that made specific recommendations: supplement the existing governmental surveys with modules on specific issues 3) integrate and link data from disparate surveys, and 2) rely on proprietary data.

This paper describes the significant improvements that the CDR program has made to the data infrastructure, and covers the research projects and publications that the program has, as a result, enabled on critical policy issues facing the Nation. The published research covers the:

- Diet and health knowledge and behavior
- Households' time resources, access to stores and restaurants, and neighborhood characteristics they live in
- Regional differences in food prices
- Food assistance programs

**Keywords: Food Data Gaps, Data Infrastructure; Food Policy, Diet and Health Knowledge, Time Use, Food Access, Food Environment, Food Prices, Food Assistance Programs**