

## **6. Assessment of Household Food Security**

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## 6. Assessment of Household Food Security

### 6.1 Purpose

Accurate measurement of household food security can help public officials, policymakers, service providers, and community groups assess the need for assistance, judge the effectiveness of existing programs designed to help such households, and identify population subgroups with unusually severe levels of food insecurity.

The main question driving this assessment is this: Is household food insecurity a problem that is directly or personally experienced for a significant number of people in the community?

A measurement tool has been developed and used in numerous surveys, both large and small, to gather data on household food security. These data are currently available at the national and State level but generally not for individual counties or communities. The measurement tool itself consists of a standard set of 18 questions (or a reliable subset of 6 questions)(Bickel, et. al., 2000) about several general types of household food conditions, events, and behaviors:

- Anxiety that the household food budget or food supply may be insufficient to meet basic needs.
- Perceptions that the food eaten by household members is inadequate in quality or quantity.
- Reported instances of reduced food intake, or consequences of reduced food intake (such as the physical sensation of hunger or reported weight loss) for adults in the household (omitted in the 6 question subset).
- Reported instances of reduced food intake or its consequences for children in the household.

These questions form the basis for a highly sophisticated, scientifically grounded measurement of the severity of food insecurity as experienced and reported by household members. In addition, a simple scale is easily constructed from the responses to the 18 questions that allows one to estimate the number of households that experience food insecurity and hunger within three broad ranges or levels of severity:

- **Food secure:** households with no or minimal indication of food insecurity.
- **Food insecure without hunger:** households concerned about inadequate resources to buy enough food who have adjusted by decreasing the quality of their family diet with little or no reduction in household food intake.
- **Food insecure with hunger:** food insecure households in which one or more members (mainly adults) have decreased the amount of food they consume to the extent that they have repeatedly experienced the physical sensation of hunger.

As the terms are defined here, household food insecurity and hunger are conditions resulting from financial resource constraints. Hunger, for example, can occur in many situations, including dieting and being too busy to eat. The Federal Food Security Measure, however, is concerned only with food insecurity and hunger that occur because the household does not have enough money or other resources to buy food. (See box 11.) Hunger, in this sense, may be seen as a severe stage of food insecurity, rather than as a distinct or separate condition from the more general experience of food insecurity. Moreover, while this condition is usually associated with poverty, it is not the same thing as general income inadequacy. Rather, it is the condition of deprivation in this one area of basic need.

The best way to collect household food security data for your community is to conduct a representative household food security survey. This process is described in USDA's *Guide to Measuring Household Food Security, Revised 2000* (Bickel et al.). In preparation for conducting such a survey, or as a simpler alternative that can nevertheless help you gather some information on the experiences that people are having with food insecurity, and the coping mechanisms used by community members, we have developed focus group guides and materials (appendix B) and a simplified version of the household food security questionnaire. This abbreviated survey is not meant to replace a larger survey effort, but it can provide you with information on the people participating in the focus group session. The results should never be used to characterize household food security status throughout the community.

Although the relationship between community food security and household food security has not been defined clearly, the two are inter-related. For example, it is clear that the economic conditions of a community affect the likelihood that residents will have adequate financial resources to maintain household food security. Similarly, communities in which food is inaccessible or unavailable are more likely to have a greater number of households experiencing food insecurity than other communities. We do not suggest that household food security status equates to community food security but rather that it is an important indicator of a potential problem.

Clearly, a community cannot be considered food secure if any of its members are experiencing food insecurity directly in their own lives. In this sense when the household food security measure is used in a representative survey of the community, it can provide a solidly quantified "bottom-line" indicator of the state of food security within

#### Box 11

##### **What Does the Federal Food Security Measure Tell Us About Individual Food Security?**

The Federal Food Security Measure measures the food security status of *household members as a group* and not necessarily the situation of any particular household member.

In general, conditions of food insecurity are believed to affect all household members, although not necessarily in the same way. By contrast, hunger is a uniquely individual phenomenon—some members of the household may be hungry while others are not.

Consequently, when the measure classifies a household into the more severe level of food insecurity with hunger, what it tells us is that at least some member, or members, of the household are experiencing hunger due to insufficiency of household resources, but not necessarily all members. As a result, the estimated number and percent of households that are food insecure with hunger need to be interpreted carefully. These are households with evidence to indicate that some member (s) has/have been hungry due to lack of resources at least sometime during the past 12 months, but not necessarily all members and not necessarily in all, or even most, months.

Excerpted from G. Bickel, et al. *Guide to Measuring Household Food Security, Revised 2000*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, March 2000, p.13.

the community, as directly experienced by community members. This makes it a strong tool for community needs assessment and monitoring of the community's progress over time in reducing the prevalence of food insecurity.

## 6.2 Analysis

The analysis of the focus group data that will be collected to assess household food security will be qualitative in nature. It will provide the community with insights into the situation but not specific numbers of how many households experience household food insecurity.

## 6.3 Indicators

The indicators below include those that are incorporated into the abbreviated survey and coping mechanisms that are discussed in the focus group sessions.

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Appendix</b>	<b>Data Collection Tool</b>
Household food security indicators	B	Focus Group on Household Food Security
Coping actions to obtain food (e.g., getting food from food pantries or soup kitchens or using other techniques to make the existing amount of food last longer)	B	Focus Group on Household Food Security