

Household Food Security in the United States in 2017

Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt,
Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh

What Is the Issue?

Most U.S. households have consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living—they are food secure. But some households experience food insecurity at times during the year, meaning their access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources. USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs increase food security by providing low-income households access to food for a healthful diet and nutrition education. USDA monitors the extent and severity of food insecurity in U.S. households through an annual, nationally representative survey sponsored and analyzed by USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS). This report presents statistics from the survey that cover household food security, food expenditures, and use of Federal food and nutrition assistance programs in 2017.

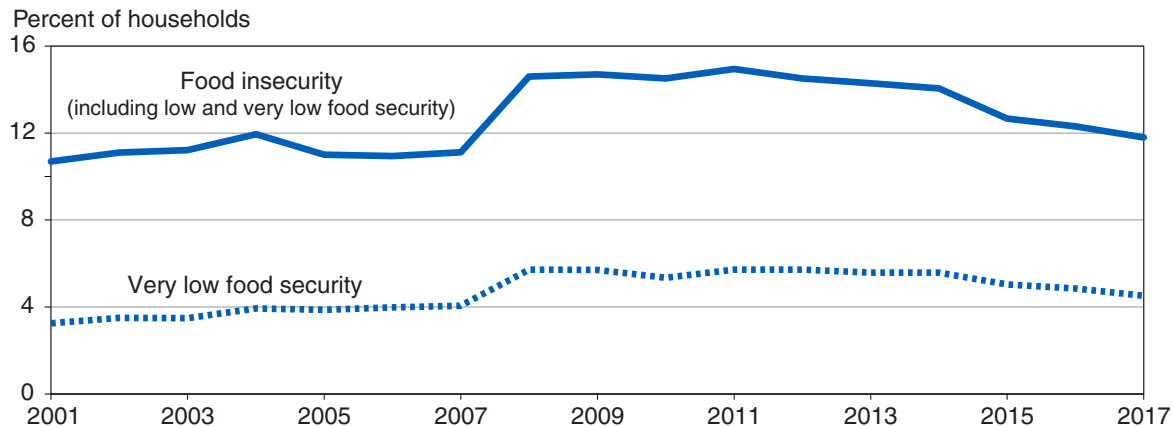
What Did the Study Find?

An estimated 11.8 percent of U.S. households were food insecure in 2017, down from 2016 and continuing a decline from a high of 14.9 percent in 2011, while still above the pre-recession (2007) level of 11.1 percent. The percentage of households with food insecurity in the severe range—very low food security—also declined.

- In 2017, 88.2 percent of U.S. households were food secure. The remaining 11.8 percent (15.0 million households) were food insecure. Food-insecure households (those with low and very low food security) had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources. The decline from 2016 (12.3 percent) was statistically significant.
- In 2017, 4.5 percent of U.S. households (5.8 million households) had *very low food security*, down significantly from 4.9 percent in 2016. In this more severe range of food insecurity, the food intake of some household members was reduced and normal eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year due to limited resources.
- Children were food insecure at times during 2017 in 7.7 percent of U.S. households with children (2.9 million households), essentially unchanged from 8.0 percent in 2016. These households were unable at times to provide adequate, nutritious food for their children. As in 2015 and 2016, the 2017 prevalence of food insecurity among children was near the 2007 pre-recession level of 8.3 percent.

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

Prevalence of food insecurity and very low food security in 2017 is down from 2016



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

- While children are usually shielded from the disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake that characterize very low food security, in 2017 both children and adults experienced instances of very low food security in 0.7 percent of households with children (250,000 households), essentially unchanged from 0.8 percent in 2016.
- Rates of food insecurity were higher than the national average for the following groups: households with incomes near or below the Federal poverty line, all households with children and particularly households with children headed by single women or single men, women and men living alone, Black- and Hispanic-headed households, and households in principal cities and nonmetropolitan areas.
- The prevalence of food insecurity varied considerably from State to State, ranging from 7.4 percent in Hawaii to 17.9 percent in New Mexico in 2015-17. (Data for 3 years were combined to provide more reliable State-level statistics.)
- The typical (median) food-secure household spent 23 percent more for food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and composition. These estimates include food purchases made with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
- About 58 percent of food-insecure households in the survey reported that, in the previous month, they had participated in one or more of the three largest Federal nutrition assistance programs (SNAP; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and the National School Lunch Program).

How Was the Study Conducted?

The annual food security survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau covered 37,389 households, comprising a representative sample of 127 million U.S. households. The survey asked one adult respondent per household questions about experiences and behaviors that indicate food insecurity, such as being unable to afford balanced meals, cutting the size of meals, or being hungry because of too little money for food. The food security status of the household was assigned based on the number of food-insecure conditions reported.