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Measuring Food Security in the United States

Household Food Security in the United States, 2005

Mark Nord
Margaret Andrews
Steven Carlson



*Food Assistance & Nutrition
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Household Food Security in the United States, 2005

**Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews,
and Steven Carlson**

Abstract

Eighty-nine percent of American households were food secure throughout the entire year in 2005, meaning that they had access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. The remaining households were food insecure at least some time during that year. The prevalence of food insecurity declined from 11.9 percent of households in 2004 to 11.0 percent in 2005, while the prevalence of very low food security remained unchanged at 3.9 percent. This report, based on data from the December 2005 food security survey, provides the most recent statistics on the food security of U.S. households, as well as on how much they spent for food and the extent to which food-insecure households participated in Federal and community food assistance programs. Survey responses indicate that the typical food-secure household in the U.S. spent 34 percent more on food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and household composition. Just over one-half of all food-insecure households participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food assistance programs during the month prior to the survey. About 22 percent of food-insecure households—3.5 percent of all U.S. households—obtained emergency food from a food pantry at some time during the year.

Keywords: Food security, food insecurity, food spending, food pantry, hunger, soup kitchen, emergency kitchen, material well-being, Food Stamp Program, National School Lunch Program, WIC

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Summary

Most U.S. households have consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living—they are food secure. But a minority of American households experience food insecurity at times during the year, meaning that their access to enough food is limited by a lack of money and other resources. About one-third of food-insecure households have very low food security, meaning that at times the food intake of some household members is reduced and their normal eating patterns are disrupted. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) monitors the food security of U.S. households through an annual, nationally representative survey and has published statistical reports on household food security in the United States for each year since 1995. This report presents statistics on households' food security, food expenditures, and use of food assistance for 2005.

What Is the Issue?

USDA's domestic food assistance programs increase food security by providing children and low-income people access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education. Reliable monitoring of food security contributes to the effective operation of these programs as well as that of private food assistance programs and other government initiatives aimed at reducing food insecurity. USDA's annual food security report provides statistics that guide planning for Federal, State, and community food assistance programs.

What Did the Study Find?

Throughout the year in 2005, 89.0 percent of U.S. households were food secure, up from 88.1 percent in 2004. Food-secure households had consistent access to enough food for active, healthy lives for all household members at all times during the year. The remaining 11.0 percent (12.6 million households) were food insecure. These households, at some time during the year, had difficulty providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources.

About one-third of food-insecure households (4.4 million, or 3.9 percent of all U.S. households) had very low food security. In households with very low food security, the food intake of some household members was reduced and their normal eating patterns were disrupted because of the lack of money and other resources. The prevalence of very low food security remained unchanged from 2004 to 2005. The other two-thirds of food-insecure households obtained enough food to avoid substantial disruptions in eating patterns and food intake, using a variety of coping strategies, such as eating less varied diets, participating in Federal food assistance programs, or getting emergency food from community food pantries or emergency kitchens.

Children, as well as adults, experienced very low food security in 270,000 households (0.7 percent of households with children). This rate has remained between 0.5 and 0.7 percent (statistically unchanged) since 1999.

The number of households with very low food security on a given day was a small fraction of the number that experienced this condition “at some time during the year.” Converting annual into daily statistics takes into account how long those conditions lasted in the typical household. On average, households with very low food security at some time during the year experienced the condition in 7 months of the year and for a few days in each of those months. In about one-third of households with very low food security, the condition occurred as just one or two brief episodes during the year. A similar proportion experienced frequent episodes of very low food security.

On a typical day in November 2005, for example, an estimated 531,000 to 797,000 households (0.5-0.7 percent of all U.S. households) experienced very low food security. Children are usually shielded from disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake even when resources are inadequate to provide food for the entire family. Nevertheless, children experienced these conditions in 32,000 to 43,000 households (0.08 to 0.11 percent of all U.S. households with children) on a typical day.

The prevalence of food insecurity varied considerably among different types of households. Rates of food insecurity were substantially higher for households with incomes near or below the Federal poverty line, households headed by single women with children, and for Black and Hispanic households. Geographically, food insecurity was more common in large cities and rural areas than in suburbs, and in the South than in other areas of the Nation.

Food secure households spent more for food than food-insecure households. In 2005, the typical (median) U.S. household spent \$40 per person for food each week—about 26 percent more than the cost of USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan, which is a low-cost food “market basket” that meets dietary standards, taking into account household size and the age and gender of household members. The typical food-insecure household spent 1 percent less than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, while the typical food-secure household spent 33 percent more than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, or 34 percent more than the typical food-insecure household of the same age and gender composition.

Some food-insecure households turn to Federal food assistance programs or emergency food providers in their communities when they are unable to obtain enough food. Just over half of the food-insecure households surveyed in 2005 said that in the previous month they had participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food assistance programs—the National School Lunch Program, the Food Stamp Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). About 22 percent of food-insecure households obtained emergency food from a food pantry at some time during the year, and 3.6 percent ate one or more meals at an emergency kitchen in their community.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data for the ERS food security report come from an annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau as a supplement to the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS). USDA sponsors the survey and ERS

compiles and analyzes the responses. The food security supplement covers about 50,000 households, and is a representative sample of the U.S. civilian population of 114 million households. The food security survey asks one adult respondent in each household a series of questions about experiences and behaviors that indicate food insecurity. The food security status of the household is assessed based on the number of food-insecure conditions reported. Households with very low food security among children are identified by responses to a subset of questions about the conditions and experiences of children. Survey respondents also report the amounts their households spent on food and whether they used public or private food assistance programs.