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ISSUES IN FOOD SECURITY

Food Security Is Improving in the United States

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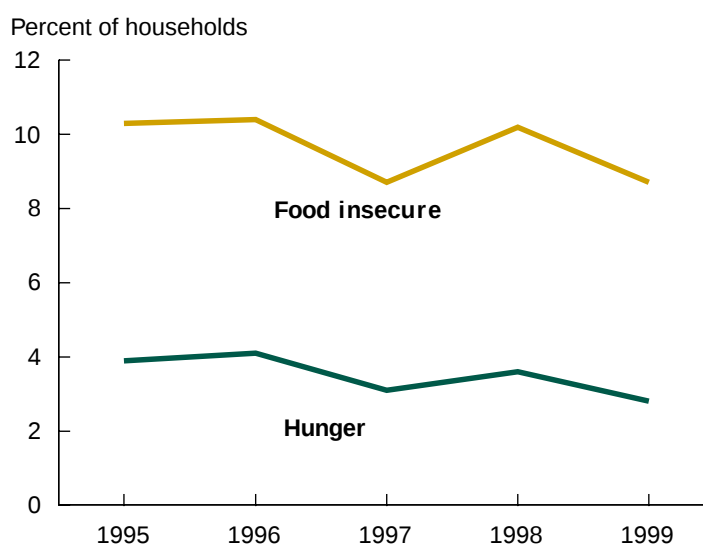
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Issue. Despite the Nation's wealth and abundant agricultural resources, a small proportion of U.S. households is food insecure in any given year, and a smaller number experience hunger at times because they cannot afford enough food. Food-insecure households are defined as those that are uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, food sufficient to meet basic needs at some point during a year due to inadequate resources for food. Households classified as food insecure with hunger have one or more members who restrict food intake and who experience hunger due to inadequate resources at some time during the year. In 1998, the United States exceeded World Food Summit commitments and set a goal to halve the rates of domestic hunger and food insecurity by 2015. Later, in accordance with the Healthy People 2010 initiative, the United States set an even more stringent public health goal to reduce the rate of food insecurity by half by the year 2010.

Background. Between 1995 and 1999, food insecurity and hunger declined in the United States. The prevalence of food insecurity fell 1.6 percentage points (from 10.3 percent of households to 8.7 percent, adjusted) over the period. The hunger rate fell 1.1 percentage points (from 3.9 percent to 2.8 percent). Adjusted for population growth, the number of households experiencing food insecurity fell 16 percent and the number experiencing hunger fell 28 percent. These estimates are based on nationally representative household survey data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau. Survey responses of food-insecure households indicate that, at times during the year, household members were unable to meet basic food needs. Most food-insecure households indicated they avoided hunger by reducing the quality and variety of food they eat, rather than the amount they eat. In households classified as food insecure with hunger, one or more people experienced hunger at times during the year because of insufficient resources. These households reported multiple reductions in food intake, such as cutting and skipping meals, mainly

Prevalence of food insecurity and hunger in U.S. households, 1995-1999



Source: ERS calculations based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements of April 1995, August 1996, April 1997, September 1998, and April 1999. Data are adjusted for cross-year comparability.

for adults, and, in extreme cases, going an entire day without eating.

Between 1995 and 1999, the incidence of food insecurity declined for nearly all household types. Large percentage decreases were observed for female-headed households with children, Hispanic households, and households in central cities. Food insecurity declined for households with income between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty line and was unchanged for households above 185 percent of the poverty line. Households with income below 130 percent of the poverty line, however, experienced an increase in food insecurity. Despite this increase, overall declines in the number of low-income households resulted in 715,000 fewer food-insecure households with incomes below 130 percent of poverty in 1999 than in 1995.

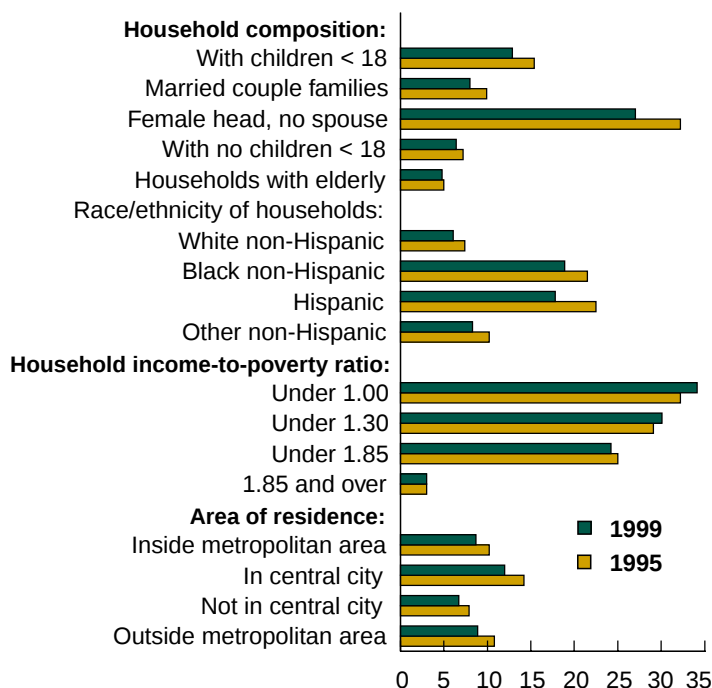
Alternatives. Between 1995 and 1999, the U.S. poverty rate fell by 2 percentage points. As food security is strongly linked to income, much of the decline in food insecurity in that period can be explained by improved economic conditions. Policy and program initiatives in the following eight areas highlighted by the U.S. Action Plan also contributed to the decline in food insecurity:

- Economic security
- Food access
- Awareness of hunger and food insecurity
- Nutrition and food security education
- Sustainable food systems and environment
- Food and water safety
- Monitoring food security and nutritional status
- Research and evaluation

Notable policy initiatives in the area of economic security included increases in the minimum wage and expansion of the earned income tax credit for the working poor. In August 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act replaced the prior system of Federal welfare payments with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant program, or TANF. Many States, implementing welfare programs under TANF, have enacted childcare assistance, health insurance, and other supports for single mothers with children, a population segment especially vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger.

In cooperation with State and local government agencies, the U.S. Government has promoted access to food and consumer education for more than 60 years, primarily through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's nutrition assistance programs. Programs include the Food Stamp Program, the Child Nutrition Programs, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), and other commodity and nutrition education initiatives. Total 1999 spending on these programs exceeded \$35 billion. These and other food-specific assistance programs provide access to food, while supporting work and providing other economic incentives.

Prevalence of food insecurity (with or without hunger), 1995 versus 1999



Source: ERS calculations based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements of April 1995 and April 1999. Data are adjusted for cross-year comparability.

Nonprofit groups, religious organizations, and individual volunteers also contribute to the domestic food safety net that has reduced food insecurity. In the United States, more than 38,000 charitable agencies distribute food to needy Americans. In 1999, these organizations distributed nearly 750,000 tons of food. Nongovernmental institutions also play a vital role in food recovery (the collection or recovery of wholesome food from farmers' fields, retail markets, or foodservice establishments). Recovered food is then distributed to low-income, food-insecure households.

Information Sources. More information can be found in ERS's *Household Food Security in the United States, 1999* <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr8/>>

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