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Persistence and Change in the Food Security of Families With Children, 1997-99

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Abstract

This report uses data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics to examine the prevalence of and changes in food security between 1997 and 1999 among individual families with children younger than 13. About half of the families that were food insecure in 1997 became food secure by 1999, with the rest remaining food insecure. Meanwhile, about 7 percent of the families who were food secure in 1997 became food insecure in 1999. Although the food security status for individual families changed substantially, the prevalence of food insecurity was relatively stable: In both years, about 1 family in 10 was food insecure. The report also examines families' characteristics, income, and Food Stamp Program participation.

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Summary

On average, about 90 percent of families with children younger than 13 were food secure in 1997 and 1999, and about 10 percent were insecure. Although the food security of these families, on average, changed only slightly between 1997 and 1999, food security changed substantially for individual families. This report presents the results of a study on the prevalence of and changes in food security between 1997 and 1999 among individual families with children younger than 13. The study also examined how family characteristics and changes in the characteristics were associated with changes in food security status of the same families over time. Food security means that all household members have access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.

Using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, a nationally representative study of families that began in 1968, this first examination of the dynamic interdependence of food assistance, food insecurity and a variety of family characteristics over time demonstrates the critical contribution of changing family circumstances to food insecurity.

Other findings on the prevalence of and changes in food security are as follows:

- ◆ Food security changed little over the 2-year period. About 83 percent of families were food secure in both years, 5 percent were insecure in both years, 5.4 percent were food insecure in 1997 but not in 1999 (exited food insecurity), and 6.5 percent were food insecure in 1999 but not 1997 (entered food insecurity).
- ◆ Food insecurity increased slightly. The share of food-insecure families in 1999 only (families that entered food insecurity) exceeded the share of food-insecure families in 1997 only (families that exited).
- ◆ A small share (7 percent) of the families that were food secure in 1997 became food insecure by 1999.
- ◆ About half of the families that were food insecure in 1997, however, became food secure by 1999, with the rest remaining food insecure.

Major findings on the influence of family characteristics on food insecurity prevalence and change are as follows:

- ◆ Family composition and structure were linked to the prevalence of food insecurity. Families with young, single heads and a large number of young children tended either to be food insecure in 1997 or to become food insecure by 1999. Immigrant families were also more likely than nonimmigrant families to be food insecure or to become food insecure, as were families headed by individuals who were less educated or disabled.
- ◆ Families with low incomes in both years were likely either to be food insecure in both years or to become food insecure by 1999.

- ◆ Changes in economic conditions were linked to persistence in food insecurity. Food-secure families that moved into low-income status between 1997 and 1999 were more likely to remain food insecure than those that were in low-income status in both years.
- ◆ Changes in family structure were linked to whether or not food-secure families became food insecure. Families that went from having two parents to one parent between 1997 and 1999 were more likely to become food insecure than those that had one parent in both years. Food-insecure families with two parents in at least one year were less likely to remain food insecure than those with one parent in both years.
- ◆ Families that were food insecure and receiving food stamps in 1997 were more likely to remain food insecure if they left the Food Stamp Program. Likewise, families that were food secure and receiving food stamps in 1997 were more likely to become food insecure if they left the program.