

Household Food Security in the United States, 2000. By Mark Nord, Nader Kabbani, Laura Tiehen, Margaret Andrews, Gary Bickel, and Steven Carlson. Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 21.

Abstract

Between 1998 and 2000, food insecurity fell by 11 percent and hunger by 16 percent. The declines were widespread, affecting most regions and types of households. For the year ending September 2000, nearly 90 percent of American households were food secure for the entire year. The rest were food insecure at least some time during the year, meaning they did not always have access to enough food for active, healthy lives for all household members. This report, based on data from the September 2000 food security survey, provides the most recent statistics on the food security of U.S. households, as well as on how much they spent on food and the extent to which food-insecure households participated in Federal and community food assistance programs. The authors estimate that the typical U.S. household spent 36 percent more than the cost of USDA's Thrifty Food Plan, while the typical food-insecure household spent 4 percent more. One-half of all food-insecure households participated in at least one of the three largest Federal food assistance programs in the month before the survey. About 17 percent of food-insecure households—2.4 percent of all U.S. households—obtained emergency food from a food pantry at some time during the year.

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

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Summary

Food security—access by all people at all times to enough food for an active healthy life—improved significantly in the United States from 1998 to 2000.¹ The prevalence of food insecurity fell by 11.3 percent and the prevalence of hunger fell by 15.6 percent, adjusted for population growth during the period. The improvement in food security was general and widespread in all regions of the country and for all household types.

Food security is one of several necessary conditions for a population to be healthy and well nourished. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) monitors food security in the Nation's households through an annual survey of some 40,000 households conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The most recent food security survey reveals that in 2000, 89.5 percent of U.S. households were food secure throughout the year. "Food secure" means they had access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. The remaining 10.5 percent of U.S. households (11 million) were food insecure. At some time during the previous year, these households were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet basic needs of all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources. About one-third of food-insecure households (3.3 million, or 3.1 percent of all U.S. households) were food insecure to the extent that one or more household members were hungry, at least some time during the year, because they could not afford enough food. The other two-thirds of food-insecure households obtained enough food to avoid hunger, 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.

The amount households spend for food is an indicator of how adequately they are meeting their food needs. In 2000, the typical (median) U.S. household spent \$37.50 per person for food each week. Weekly food spending by the typical household was about 36 percent higher than the cost of USDA's Thrifty Food Plan—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-secure household spent 41 percent more than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan. In contrast, the typical food-insecure household spent 4 percent more than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, and the typical household classified as food insecure with hunger spent 2 percent less.

Some households participate in Federal food assistance programs or turn to community resources such as food pantries and emergency kitchens for help when they lack money to buy food. Among all food-insecure households:

- 50.4 percent had help from at least one of the three largest Federal food assistance programs—food stamps, free or reduced-price school lunches, or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—in the month before the survey;
- 16.7 percent obtained emergency food from a food pantry, church, or food bank during the 12 months before the survey; and
- 2.5 percent had members who ate at an emergency kitchen sometime during the 12 months before the survey.

Some 2.5 million households, 2.4 percent of all U.S. households, reported getting emergency food from food pantries, churches, or food banks at least once during the year.

¹The rates of food insecurity and hunger observed in 2000 were slightly higher than those observed in 1999. Comparisons of 2000 statistics are made to 1998 rather than to 1999 because the food security surveys from which these statistics are calculated alternate between spring and fall in successive years. There is strong evidence of a seasonal component in year-to-year food insecurity rates that results from this data collection schedule and biases comparisons between adjacent years. Further information on this issue is detailed in Section 1.