

APPENDIX B. Background on the U.S. Food Security Measurement Project

This report of household food security in 2000 is the latest in a series of reports on *Measuring Food Security in the United States*. Previous reports in the series are:

- *Household Food Security in the United States in 1995: Summary Report of the Food Security Measurement Project* (Hamilton et al., 1997a)
- *Household Food Security in the United States in 1995: Technical Report* (Hamilton et al., 1997b)
- *Household Food Security in the United States, 1995-1998: Advance Report* (Bickel et al., 1999)
- *Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger, by State, 1996-1998* (Nord et al., 1999)
- *Guide to Measuring Household Food Security, Revised 2000* (Bickel et al., 2000)
- *Household Food Security in the United States, 1999* (Andrews et al., 2000)

The series was inaugurated in September 1997 with the three-volume report, *Household Food Security in the United States in 1995* (Hamilton et al., 1997a and 1997b; Price et al., 1997). The advance report of findings for 1995-98 (Bickel, Carlson, and Nord, 1999) was released in July 1999, and a report detailing hunger and food insecurity prevalence by State for the 1996-98 period (Nord, Jemison, and Bickel, 1999) was released in September 1999. A summary report of findings for 1999 was released in the fall of 2000 (Andrews et al., 2000) and a detailed statistical report for 1995-97 in 2001 (Ohls et al., 2001). Detailed statistical and technical reports for 1998-99 are planned for release later in 2002 (Cohen et al., forthcoming).

The estimates contained in all of these reports are based on a direct survey measure developed over several years by the U.S. Food Security Measurement Project, an ongoing collaboration among Federal agencies, academic researchers, and both commercial and nonprofit private organizations (Carlson et al., 1999; Olson, 1999.) The measure was developed in response to the National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act of 1990. The Ten-Year Comprehensive Plan developed under the Act specified the following task:

*Recommend a standardized mechanism and instrument(s) for defining and obtaining data on the prevalence of “food insecurity” or “food insufficiency” in the U.S. and methodologies that can be used across the NNMRR Program and at State and local levels.*²⁵

Beginning in 1992, USDA staff reviewed the existing research literature, focusing on the conceptual basis for measuring the severity of food insecurity and hunger and on the practical problems of developing a survey instrument for use in sample surveys at national, State, and local levels.

In January 1994, USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) joined with the U.S. Public Health Service, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), in sponsoring a National Conference on Food Security Measurement and Research. This meeting brought together leading academic experts and other private researchers and key staff of the concerned Federal agencies. The conference identified the consensus among researchers in the field as to the strongest conceptual basis for a national measure of food insecurity and hunger. It also led to a working agreement about the best method for implementing such a measure in national surveys (USDA, 1995).

After extensive cognitive assessment, field testing, and analysis by the U.S. Census Bureau, a food security survey questionnaire was fielded by the bureau as a supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS) of April 1995.²⁶ The CPS food security survey was repeated in September 1996, April 1997, August 1998, April 1999, and September 2000. Minor modifications to the questionnaire format and screening procedures

²⁵Task V-C-2.4, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture: Ten-Year Comprehensive Plan for the National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Program. Federal Register 1993, 58:32 752-806.

²⁶The Current Population Survey (CPS) is a representative national sample of approximately 50,000 households conducted monthly by the U.S. Census Bureau for the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Its primary purpose is to monitor labor force participation and employment in the United States and each of the 50 States. Various Federal agencies sponsor collection of specialized supplementary data by the CPS following the labor-force interview. The CPS food security survey has been conducted annually since 1995 as one such CPS supplement, sponsored by USDA. Beginning in 2001, ongoing collection is planned for early December of each year.

were made over the first several years, and a more substantial revision in screening and format, designed to reduce respondent burden and improve data quality, was introduced with the August 1998 survey. However, the content of the 18 questions upon which the U.S. Food Security Scale is based remained constant in all years.

Initial analysis of the 1995 data was undertaken by Abt Associates, Inc., through a cooperative venture with FNS, the interagency working group, and other key researchers involved in developing the questionnaire.

The Abt team used nonlinear factor analysis and other state-of-the-art scaling methods to produce a measurement scale for the severity of deprivation in basic food needs, as experienced by U.S. households. Extensive testing was carried out to establish the validity and reliability of the scale and its applicability across various household types in the broad national sample (Hamilton et al., 1997a, 1997b).²⁷

Following collection of the September 1996 and April 1997 CPS food security data, FNS awarded a second research contract to Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) to reproduce independently the results from the 1995 CPS food security data, to estimate hunger and food insecurity prevalence for 1996 and 1997, and to assess the stability and robustness of the measurement model when applied to the separate datasets. The MPR findings, which will be presented in full in a final report (Ohls et al., 2001), establish the stability of the food security measure over the 1995-97 period. That is, the relative severity of the items were found to be nearly invariant across years and across major population groups and household types.

In 1998, USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) assumed sponsorship of the Census Bureau's annual CPS food security data collection for USDA. ERS and IQ Solutions, working under a contract awarded by

²⁷The food security scale reported here is based on the Rasch measurement model, an application of maximum likelihood estimation in the family of Item Response Theory models (Wright, 1977, 1983). These statistical measurement models were developed in educational testing, where test items vary systematically in difficulty and the overall score measures the level of difficulty that the tested individual has mastered. In the present application, the severity of food insecurity recently experienced by household members is analogous to the level of test difficulty that an individual has mastered.

ERS, have analyzed the 1998 and 1999 data, applying and refining the procedures developed and established for USDA in the Abt and MPR research. These analyses, which will be presented along with detailed statistics for 1998 and 1999 in subsequent reports (Cohen et al., forthcoming), found continuing stability of the measure in those 2 years.

A large number of independent researchers in the academic and nutrition communities also have used the U.S. food security survey module and food security scale to assess the severity and prevalence of food insecurity in various population groups. One general result of these studies has been to verify the consistency of the measurement construct and the robustness of the measurement method in diverse populations and survey contexts. A summary list of many of these studies is available from the Brandeis University Center on Hunger and Poverty (www.centeronhunger.org).

Nonetheless, the following caveats need to be kept in mind when interpreting the prevalence estimates in this report:

- The Current Population Survey, which carries the food security survey as a supplement, is representative of the noninstitutionalized population of the United States. It is based on a complete address list of sampled areas (counties and metropolitan areas), but does not include homeless persons who are not in shelters. This may result in an underestimate of the number of more severely food-insecure persons.
- Case study and ethnographic research suggests that some parents are reluctant to report inadequate food intake for their children even when it has occurred (Hamilton et al., 1997b, p. 88). This may result in an underestimate of the prevalence of children's hunger based on food security survey data.
- Small, random measurement errors, combined with the nature of the distribution of households across the range of severity of food insecurity, may result in a modest overestimate of food insecurity and hunger. False positives (the incorrect classification of food secure households as food insecure) are more likely than false negatives because there are more households just above the food insecurity threshold than in a similar range just below it. The same is true at the hunger threshold (Hamilton et al., 1997a, p. 65; Hamilton et al., 1997b, p. 89).