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*Measuring Food Security in the United States*

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# Household Food Security in the United States, 2001

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*Food Assistance & Nutrition  
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## **Abstract**

Eighty-nine percent of American households were food secure throughout the entire year 2001. 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 because they lacked sufficient money or other resources for food. The prevalence of food insecurity rose from 10.1 percent in 1999 to 10.7 percent in 2001, and the prevalence of food insecurity with hunger rose from 3.0 percent to 3.3 percent during the same period. This report, based on data from the December 2001 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 United States spent 32 percent more than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and household composition. About 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 19 percent of food-insecure households—2.8 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—declined in the United States from 1999 to 2001.<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of food insecurity increased by 0.6 percentage points and the prevalence of hunger by 0.3 percentage points during the period.

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 89.3 percent of U.S. households were food secure throughout calendar year 2001. "Food secure" means they had access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. The remaining 10.7 percent of U.S. households (11.5 million) were food insecure. At some time during the 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 (3.5 million, or 3.3 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 prevalence of hunger on any given day was much lower than the annual rate; on a typical day in 2001, about 0.4 to 0.6 percent of households

were food insecure with hunger. Children were hungry at times during the year in 211,000 households (0.6 percent of households with children) because the household lacked sufficient money or other resources for food.

The amount households spend for food is an indicator of how adequately they are meeting their food needs. In 2001, the typical (median) U.S. household spent \$37.50 per person for food each week. Weekly food spending by the typical household was about 32 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 35 percent more than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, while the typical food-insecure household spent 2 percent more than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan.

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:

- 51.5 percent received help from one or more of the three largest Federal food assistance programs—food stamps, free or reduced-price school lunches, or WIC—during the month prior to the survey;
- 18.6 percent obtained emergency food from a food pantry, church, or food bank during the 12 months prior to the survey; and
- 2.8 percent had members who ate at an emergency kitchen sometime during the 12 months prior to the survey.

Some 3.0 million households—2.8 percent of all U.S. households—reported getting emergency food from food pantries, churches, or food banks one or more times during 2001.

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<sup>1</sup>The rates of food insecurity and hunger observed in 2001 were only slightly higher than those observed in 2000. Comparisons of 2001 statistics are made to 1999 rather than to 2000 because seasonal effects related to the month in which the surveys were conducted may bias comparisons between 2000 and 2001. Further information on this issue is detailed in section 1.