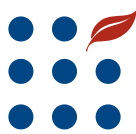




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# Dynamics of Poverty and Food Sufficiency

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## Abstract

This study examines dynamics in poverty and food insufficiency using newly available longitudinal data from the 1993 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and the follow-on Survey of Program Dynamics (SPD). The study uses these data to characterize the incidence and dynamics of poverty and food problems for the entire U.S. population and for different subgroups. It also estimates multivariate, discrete-choice regression models to examine the factors associated with transitions into and out of poverty and food insufficiency, and it analyzes the empirical results in the context of a life-cycle model of income and food consumption. Results indicate that the incidence of food insufficiency in the United States is low—less than 3 percent in 1997. There also appears to be little persistence in food problems; 79 percent of people in households with food problems at the start of the study period were in households without problems 2 years later. The multivariate results indicate that female-headed households face an especially high risk of being food insufficient. Low levels of asset income, an indicator of a household's ability to spread out consumption costs over time, are also associated with food sufficiency problems.

**Keywords:** food sufficiency, food insufficiency, food security, food insecurity, poverty, well-being, hunger.

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## Summary

The incidence of food insufficiency in the United States is low: Less than 3 percent of the population lived in food-insufficient households in 1997. Persistence in food insufficiency appears to be low as well: 79 percent of people living in households with food problems in 1994-95 were in households without problems 2 years later. A household is considered food insufficient if household members either sometimes or often do not have enough to eat. This study examines dynamics in poverty and food insufficiency for the entire U.S. population and for different subgroups—that is, the movement of individuals, families, and households into and out of deprivation.

Policymakers and researchers are interested in the processes that underlie economic hardship in the United States. Considerable research has been done on the incidence and dynamics of income-based measures of poverty and on alternative, consumption-based measures of hardship, such as food insufficiency. However, because data collection has focused on poverty, we know relatively little about the dynamics of food insufficiency.

Understanding the dynamics of food insufficiency has implications for the design and implementation of welfare programs. Identifying conditions associated with long-term food insufficiency would improve targeting and efficiency in assistance programs.

In this study, we use newly available longitudinal data from the 1993 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and the follow-on Survey of Program Dynamics (SPD). We link the data from the two surveys to compare the change in food sufficiency over time within households. We also determine whether changes in poverty and food insufficiency are the same or different processes, what factors contribute to entry into and exit from poverty and food insufficiency, and whether households that are deprived today run a greater risk of future deprivation.

Other study results indicate that:

- Changes in income poverty and food insufficiency are related, but have distinct processes. Poverty and food insufficiency are both indicators of economic hardship, but food insufficiency depends on more than just poverty status, indicating that measures of poverty and food insufficiency capture different dimensions of economic hardship.
- Female-headed households are significantly more likely to enter into food insufficiency and less likely to exit from it than other households. In addition, disability status and changes in household composition both appear to be associated with entry into food insufficiency. On the other hand, completing high school is consistently found to increase the chances of leaving food insufficiency.
- Although the incidence and persistence of food sufficiency problems are low, people who were in food-insufficient households in 1994-95 were 10 times more likely than others to be in food-insufficient households in 1997.

These findings support the design of the Food Stamp Program and other food assistance programs as a safety net for low-income people, particularly those with unexpected income difficulties. However, for persistently food-insufficient households, more targeted assistance programs may be necessary. The evidence that food insufficiency is related to, yet distinct from, poverty indicates the importance of ongoing efforts by USDA to collect and analyze data on food sufficiency to further understand economic hardship.