



Find the full report at  
[www.ers.usda.gov/  
publications](http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications)

# Children's Food Security and USDA Child Nutrition Programs

Katherine Ralston, Katie Treen, Alisha Coleman-Jensen,  
and Joanne Guthrie

## What Is the Issue?

Food insecurity among children has been associated with negative health, social, and academic outcomes. USDA school meal programs and other child nutrition programs are intended to improve food security. They do so both by augmenting overall household resources and by providing children with a regular source of nutritious meals. Understanding the role that school meal programs play in the dietary adequacy of children at risk for food insecurity is helpful for assessing program effectiveness.

Recent developments in food assistance for school-age children may provide additional protection against food insecurity. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act authorized the Child and Adult Care Food Program to offer afterschool suppers in all 50 States. The Act also established the Community Eligibility Provision as a new option to provide universal free meals under the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program in schools in high poverty areas that lowers the administrative burden associated with household applications.

ERS monitors food security in U.S. households using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement to classify the food security level of U.S. households. Food-insecure households are those reporting difficulty at some time during the year providing adequate, nutritious food for all their members due to a lack of resources. In this report, we present updated statistics on the prevalence of food insecurity among school-age children (ages 5-17) for 2014 and 2015. We then summarize the results of recently published research on the effects of school meal programs on children's food security and diets.

## What Did the Study Find?

- In 2015, 16.6 percent of households with children were classified as food insecure (adults, children, or both were food insecure). Children were reported to be food insecure in 7.8 percent of all households with children.
- Among households with children and incomes below the Federal poverty line during the 2-year period 2014-15, 44 percent experienced food insecurity among any members and 23 percent experienced food insecurity among children specifically.

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

- Food insecurity was more prevalent in households with older children than in households with younger children. Children were food insecure in 4.3 percent of households with only young children ages 0 to 4. Children were food insecure in 10 percent of households that included teenagers.
- Low-income food-insecure households with school-age children are more likely to participate in school meal programs than are low-income food-secure households with school-age children.
- Most studies of the National School Lunch Program, Summer Food Service Program, and Child and Adult Care Food Program found that the programs were associated with significantly lower rates of food insecurity for households with children, after accounting for assistance program eligibility and increased likelihood of food insecurity among low-income households. Effects of School Breakfast Program availability were significant for marginal food security but not for food insecurity.
- Studies also found that child nutrition programs improved diet quality and academic performance for children in low-income and food-insecure households.

## **How Was the Study Conducted?**

This study includes updated statistics on food insecurity for households with children and a literature review of the effects of child nutrition programs on food insecurity. For background, we cite estimates of food insecurity for households with children and the prevalence of food insecurity among children, based on the 2015 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS) and reported in the ERS report, *Household Food Security in the United States, 2015*. New statistics on food insecurity in households with school-age children combine data from 2014 and 2015 to produce a larger sample of households with school-age children and more reliable estimates of food insecurity. For all prevalence estimates, households were classified by food security status based on responses to questions on experiences of food inadequacy in the CPS-FSS. Measures of food insecurity included experiences over the past 12 months as well as the past 30 days before the December survey.

In reviewing studies of the effects of school meals on food insecurity and diet outcomes, we gave greater weight to studies that addressed selection bias with statistical techniques that account for the greater likelihood of program participation among children from food-insecure households.