

Household Food Security in the United States in 2016

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What Is the Issue?

Most U.S. households have consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living—they are food secure. But some American households experience food insecurity at times during the year, meaning their access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources. USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs increase food security by providing low-income households access to food for a healthful diet and nutrition education. USDA monitors the extent and severity of food insecurity in U.S. households through an annual, nationally representative survey sponsored and analyzed by USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS). This report presents statistics from the survey that cover household food security, food expenditures, and use of Federal food and nutrition assistance programs in 2016.

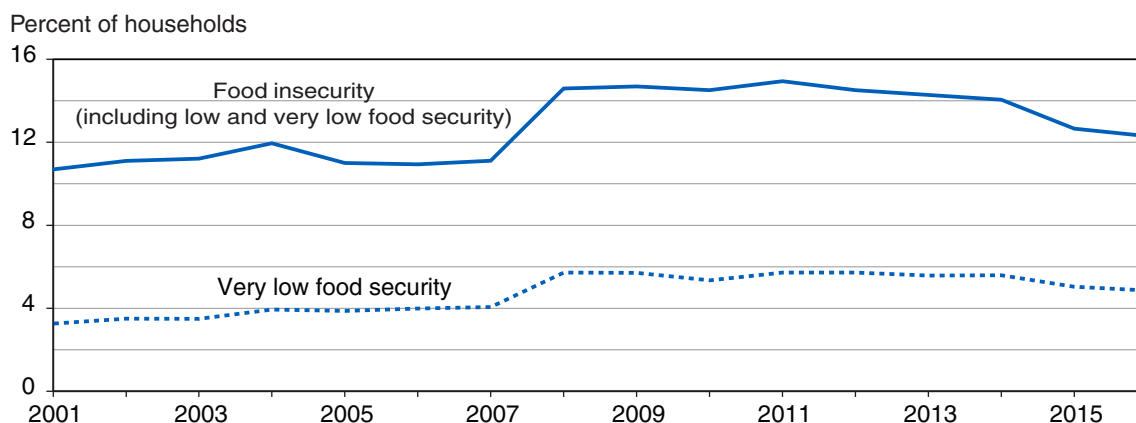
What Did the Study Find?

The estimated percentage of U.S. households that were food insecure in 2016—12.3 percent—was essentially unchanged from 2015 (12.7 percent), but continued a downward trend from a high of 14.9 percent in 2011. Both the cumulative decline in food insecurity from 2011 to 2014 (14.9 to 14.0 percent) and the year-to-year decline from 2014 to 2015 (14.0 to 12.7 percent) were statistically significant, and the downward trend, though slower, continued through 2016. However, the 2016 prevalence of food insecurity was still above the 2007 pre-recession level of 11.1 percent.

- In 2016, 87.7 percent of U.S. households were food secure throughout the year. The remaining 12.3 percent (15.6 million households) were food insecure. Food-insecure households (those with low and very low food security) had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources.
- In 2016, 4.9 percent of U.S. households (6.1 million households) had *very low food security*, essentially unchanged from 5.0 percent in 2015. In this more severe range of food insecurity, the food intake of some household members was reduced and normal eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year due to limited resources.
- Children were food insecure at times during the year in 8.0 percent of U.S. households with children (3.1 million households), essentially unchanged from 7.8 percent in 2015. These households were unable at times during the year to provide adequate, nutritious food for their children. As in 2015, the 2016 prevalence of food insecurity among children was near the pre-recession level of 8.3 percent in 2007.

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.

Prevalence of food insecurity and very low food security in 2016 essentially unchanged from 2015, continues downward trend



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

- While children are usually shielded from the disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake that characterize very low food security, in 2016 both children and adults experienced instances of very low food security in 0.8 percent of households with children (298,000 households), essentially unchanged from 0.7 percent in 2015.
- Rates of food insecurity were substantially higher than the national average for households with incomes near or below the Federal poverty line, households with children headed by single women or single men, women and men living alone, Black- and Hispanic-headed households, and households in principal cities and nonmetropolitan areas.
- The prevalence of food insecurity varied considerably from State to State, ranging from 8.7 percent in Hawaii to 18.7 percent in Mississippi in 2014-16. (Data for 3 years were combined to provide more reliable State-level statistics.)
- The typical (median) food-secure household spent 29 percent more for food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and composition. These estimates include food purchases made with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) benefits.
- About 59 percent of food-insecure households in the survey reported that, in the previous month, they had participated in one or more of the three largest Federal nutrition assistance programs (SNAP; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and National School Lunch Program).

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data for the ERS food security reports come from an annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau as a supplement to the monthly Current Population Survey. ERS sponsors the annual survey and compiles and analyzes the responses. The 2016 food security survey covered 41,186 households, comprising a representative sample of the U.S. civilian population of 126 million households. The food security survey asked one adult respondent per household questions about experiences and behaviors that indicate food insecurity, such as being unable to afford balanced meals, cutting the size of meals, or being hungry because of too little money for food. The food security status of the household was assigned based on the number of food-insecure conditions reported.