

Improving Food Security in the United States

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Abstract: A small proportion of the U.S. population is food insecure in any given year, and, in most cases, this is not a chronic condition. In 2001, 10.7 percent of U.S. households were food insecure at some point during that year. The U.S. food security measure classified households as food insecure, or food insecure with hunger, even if the condition occurred only for a brief period during the year. Food insecurity is affected by economic conditions in the business cycle. Therefore, long-term patterns of improvement in food security are likely once economic growth resumes. However, job transitions, layoffs, and family disruptions result in temporary periods of low income and vulnerability to food insecurity. Over the past century, the United States has developed many economic-assistance and food-assistance programs to protect households' food security in circumstances where the market economy may fail to do so. The core food-assistance programs, managed by USDA, include the Food Stamp Program, the school meals program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and commodity distribution programs.

Keywords: United States, food security, hunger, surveys, food-assistance programs.

The United States faces domestic food security issues that differ somewhat from those faced by most low-income countries. Only a small proportion of the U.S. population is food insecure in any given year, and, in most cases, their food insecurity is occasional or episodic, not chronic. Undernourishment as a result of poverty is rare. Indeed, health problems resulting from overweight are much more widespread than stunting or wasting resulting from undernutrition.

Nevertheless, food security has not yet been achieved by all U.S. households. Each year, a small proportion of the country's population is food insecure—without assured access to enough food for an active, healthy life—and a smaller number experience hunger at times because they cannot afford enough food (see box on What Does It Mean To Be Food Secure). Mounting evidence indicates that even the food insecurity that exists in the United States—in most cases occasional or episodic occurrences of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake—

can have deleterious effects on nutrition, health, and children's psychosocial development and learning.

The U.S. Government's planning toward reducing the global incidence of undernutrition has focused primarily on reducing food insecurity in low-income countries, where most of the world's undernourished people live. However, the Government has also committed itself to reducing food insecurity at home. A nationally representative food security survey conducted in 1995 indicated that about 12 percent of U.S. households were food insecure at some time during the year, including 4 percent in which one or more household members were hungry at times during the year because of the households' food insecurity. The Government, as a part of its response to the 1996 World Food Summit, set an objective of reducing the prevalence rate of food insecurity in the country by half—from 12 percent to 6 percent—by 2010. This objective was also adopted as part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' *Healthy People 2010* initiative.

This article outlines the methods used to measure and monitor the food security of U.S. households. Then, drawing on data from annual food security surveys sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), it reports prevalence rates of food insecurity and hunger from 1995 to 2001 and assesses progress toward the Government's objective of reducing by half the prevalence rate of food insecurity among U.S. households. Finally, the article describes social safety net programs, including public and private food assistance programs that contribute to food security.

Measuring and Monitoring Food Security

In the late 1980s, the U.S. Government recognized that effective policy dialogue about hunger, and programs to reduce it, was hampered by the lack of an adequate measurement and monitoring methodology. In 1990, Congress mandated a planning process for national nutrition monitoring. The resulting plan called for the development of a standardized methodology for measuring food insecurity that could be used across the national nutrition monitoring system as well as for measuring food security at State and local levels.

Currently, USDA monitors household food security through an annual food security survey. The survey is conducted for USDA by the U.S. Census Bureau as an annual supplement to its monthly Current Population Survey (CPS), the same survey that provides data for the Nation's monthly unemployment statistics and annual poverty rates. A nationally representative sample of about 43,000 households responds to questions about food expenditures, use of Federal and community food programs, and whether they are consistently able to meet their food needs.

The food security status of a household is assessed by its responses to 18 questions about food-related behaviors, experiences, and conditions that are known to characterize households having difficulty meeting their food needs. The questions cover a wide range of severity of food deprivation. For example, the least severe question asks whether household members worried if their food would run out before they got money to buy more; the most severe question asks whether any child in the household did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food. Each question specifies a lack of money or other resources to obtain food as the reason for the condition or behavior, so the household's measured food security is not affected by hunger due to voluntary dieting or fasting.

Based on the number of food insecure conditions they report, households are also classified into three categories for monitoring and statistical analysis of the food security status of the population. The categories are "food secure," "food insecure without hunger," and "food insecure with hunger." The proportions of households in these categories are estimated and reported annually to monitor progress in reducing the incidence of food insecurity.

The food security survey and the household data it generates provide a cost-effective solution to the need for timely monitoring of food insecurity and hunger. Fielding the survey as a supplement to a large, representative, ongoing national survey provides a sufficiently large sample for reliable estimates of the prevalence of food insecurity and hunger for demographic and geographic subpopulations. These data also provide a basis for research to increase understanding of the causes of food insecurity and conditions or resources that may ameliorate it.

Overview: Food Security in the United States in 2001

In 2001, nearly 9 out of 10 U.S. households were food secure throughout the entire year, while 10.7 percent of households were food insecure at some time during the year (fig. A-1). Most food-insecure households obtained enough food to avoid hunger, but 3.3 percent of 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. Food insecurity and hunger are not usually chronic conditions for the U.S. households that are affected by them. The U.S. food security measure classified households as food insecure, or food insecure with hunger, even if the condition occurred only for a brief period during the year. Thus, the rates of food insecurity and hunger on any given day are far below the measured annual rates. For example, the prevalence of hunger on a typical day in 2001 was estimated to be less than one-fifth the annual rate, or about 0.5 percent of households.

Some types of households appear to be more protected from food insecurity than others. In 2001, rates of food insecurity and hunger were relatively low for households with elderly members and for married-couple families with children (fig. A-2). In contrast, rates of food insecurity were substantially higher than the national average for the following household types:

- Households with incomes below the official poverty line
- Households with children, headed by a single woman
- Households headed by Black or Hispanic persons

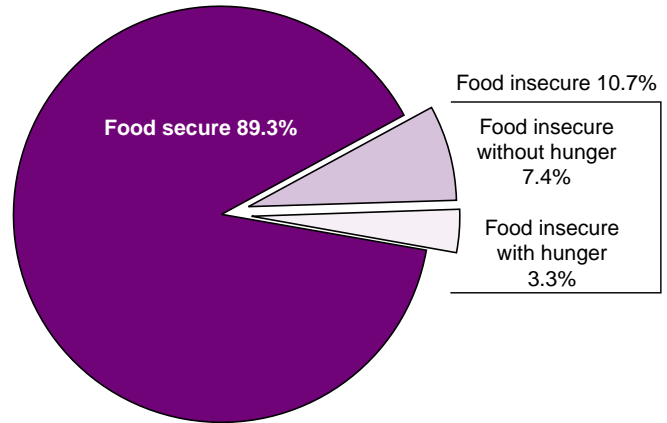
Also, food insecurity is more of a problem for households located in central cities and nonmetropolitan areas and in the southern and western regions of the country.

Progress Toward Reducing Food Insecurity

Based on the first food security survey, conducted in April 1995, USDA estimated that nearly 12 percent of U.S. households were food insecure, including 4.2 percent classified as food insecure with hunger. Food insecurity declined during the late 1990s, reaching a level of 10.1 percent in 1999 (fig. A-3). This decline amounted to 0.4 percentage points per year, which is

Figure A-1

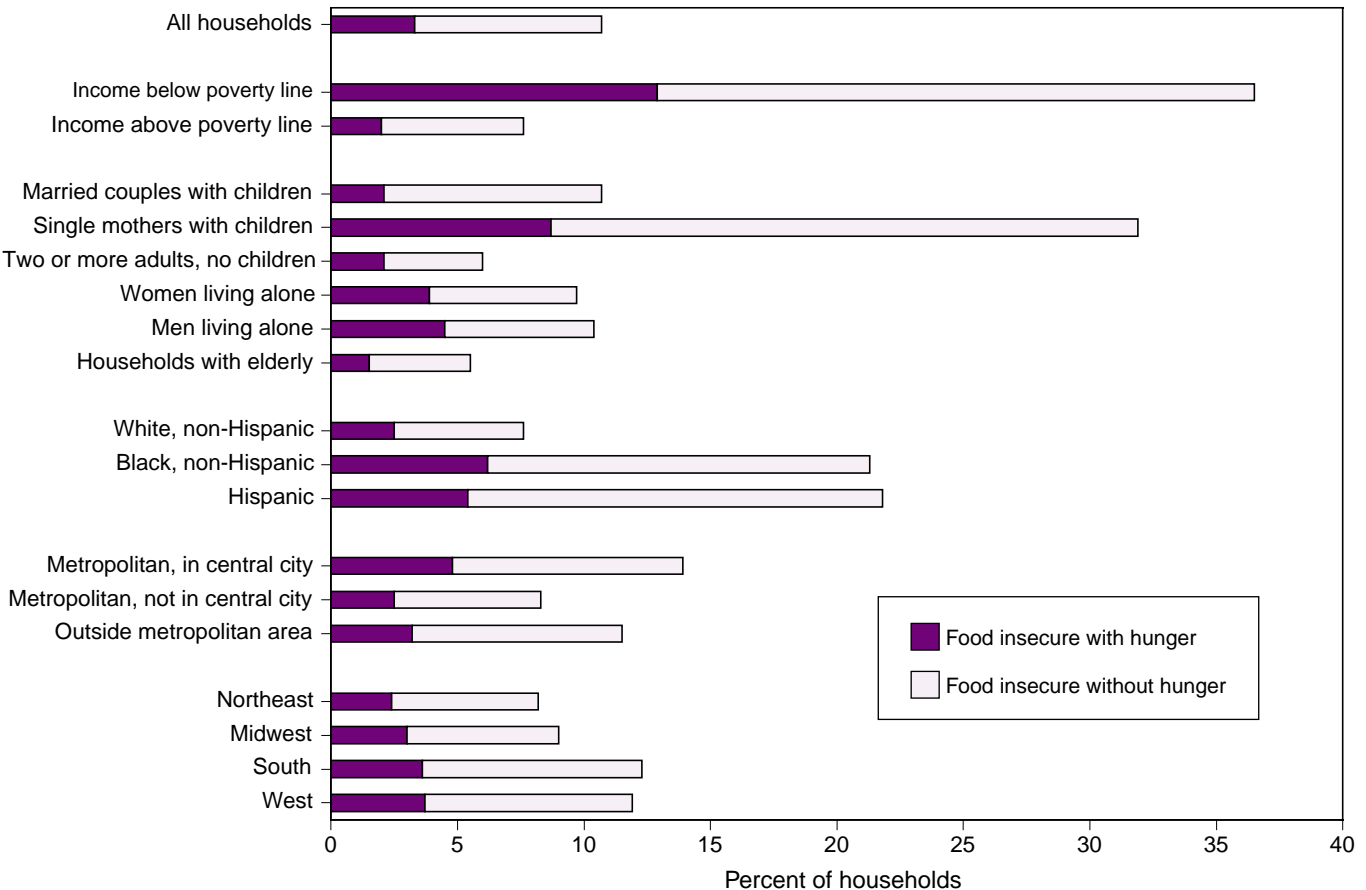
A large majority of U.S. households were food secure throughout the year in 2001



Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, December 2001.

Figure A-2

Food insecurity in 2001 was highest for low-income households, for single mothers with children, and for Black and Hispanic households



Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, December 2001.

What Does It Mean To Be Food Secure? Food Insecure? Food Insecure With Hunger?

Food security for a household means access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum (1) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and (2) an assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (that is, without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies).

Food insecurity is limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

Hunger is the uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food, or the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to food. In this article, this refers only to involuntary hunger that results from not being able to afford enough food. People are not counted as “hungry” for these statistics if they were hungry only because they were dieting to lose weight, or were fasting for religious reasons, or were just too busy to eat.

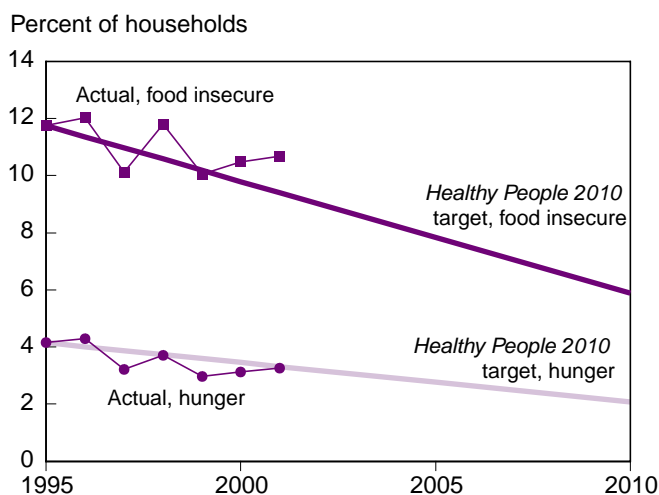
Source: American Institute of Nutrition, Life Sciences Research Office, “Core Indicators of Nutritional State for Difficult to Sample Populations,” Andersen, S.A. (ed.), *Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 120, 1990, pp. 1557S-1600S.

exactly the annual reduction required to achieve the *Healthy People 2010* objective. Over the same 4-year period, the prevalence of food insecurity with hunger fell from 4.2 percent to 3.0 percent, a decline of 0.3 percentage points per year. This rate of decline, had it continued, would have reduced the rate of hunger to half of the 1995 level several years before 2010.

However, food insecurity and hunger both increased between 1999 and 2001 (although they remained below the 1995 levels). ERS analysis finds that rising incomes from 1995 to 1999 contributed strongly to the reduction in food insecurity during that period, and, to a lesser extent, to the reduction in hunger. Given the recent economic slowdown, which has lowered incomes for many households, it is not surprising that food insecurity increased from 1999 to 2001.

Figure A-3

Progress toward the *Healthy People 2010* objective of reducing food insecurity by half was slowed by the recession in 2001



Note: Comparisons of rates should be made across 2-year or 4-year periods rather than from one year to the next. Measured rates include a seasonal effect in alternating years due to collection of data in different months. Prevalence rates for 1996 and 1997 were adjusted for screening differences in order to be comparable to the unadjusted rates for 1995 and 1998-2001.

Source: Calculated by ERS based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data.

Programs and Policies That Promote Food Security

The recent mild economic slowdown in the United States demonstrates that food security is still affected by economic fluctuations over the business cycle. Even though the long-term patterns of improvement in food security are likely to continue once economic growth resumes, job transitions, layoffs, and family disruptions result in temporary periods of low income and vulnerability to food insecurity. Over the past century, the U.S. has developed a broad array of economic-assistance and food-assistance programs to protect households' food security in circumstances where the market economy may fail to do so. These programs help reduce vulnerability to food insecurity during economic downturns in the business cycle. Individuals with longer term needs resulting from chronic illness, disability, or old age also rely on these assistance programs to maintain food security.

Federally sponsored economic security programs in the United States were first enacted in response to the depressed economic situation in the 1930s. The Social Security Act of 1935 established two social insurance

programs on a national scale to help prevent deprivation associated with old age and unemployment: a Federal system of old-age benefits for retired workers who had been employed in industry and commerce, and a Federal-State system of unemployment insurance. The Social Security Act also provided Federal grants to States for means-tested programs for the aged, blind, and disabled to supplement the incomes of persons who were either ineligible for Social Security or whose benefits could not provide a basic living. In 1972, these grants were replaced by the Federally administered Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program.

The original Social Security Act also provided for grants to enable States to extend and strengthen maternal and child health and welfare services. This provision evolved into the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, which was replaced in 1996 with a new grant program to States for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

U.S. workers with dependent children are given deductions in the computation of their Federal income tax liability. In addition, since the enactment of the Earned Income Tax Credit in 1975, the working poor receive an additional reduction in their tax liability and, in some cases, a wage supplement.

U.S. agriculture and nutrition policy includes an array of food assistance and nutrition programs that also contribute to the social safety net as well as promoting human capital investment and agricultural support goals. The core programs, managed by USDA, include the Food Stamp Program, the school meals programs, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and commodity distribution programs. Today, these USDA programs serve one in every six Americans at some point during the year. USDA relies on a wide range of State and local, public, and private agencies to administer, and in some cases contribute to the funding of, its food assistance efforts. In addition to ensuring food access, USDA is also interested in promoting healthy diets for all Americans through its food and nutrition assistance programs.

The Food Stamp Program is the foundation of the food assistance safety net. It provides benefits to qualifying families while supporting the markets for agricultural products. With program costs of \$17.8 billion in fiscal 2001, it is the country's largest food assistance program. Using normal retail marketing channels, the Food Stamp Program empowers needy households with increased

food purchasing power to acquire food. The Food Stamp Program has been a pioneer in the innovative delivery of benefits to clients through the use of Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT). EBT allows clients to pay for food purchases from their food stamp account using a card that is essentially identical to a bank card or debit card. Such systems increase program efficiency, are preferred by clients, and better enable program administrators to detect and deter waste, fraud, and abuse.

The National School Lunch Program provides nutritionally balanced lunches free or at low cost to more than 27 million children each schoolday. In 1998, the program was expanded to offer snacks to children in after-school programs. Since 1972, the School Breakfast Program has also supported provision of breakfasts at schools. School districts and independent schools that choose to participate in one or more of the school meals programs receive cash subsidies from USDA for each meal they serve. In return, they must serve meals that meet Federal requirements, and they must offer free or reduced-price meals to low-income children.

Established in 1972 as a pilot program, WIC has grown rapidly and matured into a core component of the U.S. nutrition safety net. The program aims to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children (up to age 5) who are at nutritional risk. WIC achieves this objective by providing (1) nutritious foods to supplement diets; (2) information on healthy eating; and (3) referrals to health care. It seeks to provide early intervention during critical times of growth and development that can help prevent future medical and developmental problems. In fiscal 2001, the program served an average of 7.3 million participants per month. Almost half of all infants and about one-quarter of all children age 1-4 in the U.S. participate. Federal program costs totaled \$4.2 billion in fiscal 2001, making WIC the country's third largest food assistance program, behind the Food Stamp Program and the school meals programs (\$7.9 billion).

The private emergency food assistance system (EFAS) is a component of the food assistance safety net that is small relative to the major USDA programs, but is nonetheless vital for some households. Private, nonprofit food banks, food pantries, emergency kitchens, and food rescue organizations in the EFAS system together help ensure adequate nutrition for low-income people who may not be eligible for, or who may find it difficult to participate in, the Federal means-tested food assistance programs. While only about one-

eighth the size of USDA's programs, EFAS's community-based structure and flexibility allow it to work in tandem with public food assistance, providing more comprehensive food assistance than either could provide by itself. USDA provides partial support to the EFAS through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). In fiscal 2001, TEFAP supplied \$229 million in surplus commodities and \$100 million in purchased foods to States, which administered delivery of the food to local agencies that distributed them to soup kitchens and food pantries in the EFAS.

Looking toward the future, the long-term prospects for improving food security are likely to be driven by the same general forces shaping the U.S. economy—globalization of markets and cultures; advances in information and technology; and fundamental changes in the workforce and family structure. Recognizing that changes in farm and food policy may be necessary to address these challenges, USDA has given new attention to the kinds of changes that may be needed to guarantee continued improvements in food security. In a recent USDA publication, *Food and Agricultural Policy: Taking Stock for the New Century*, the following set of basic principles for nutrition and food assistance was laid out to guide future policy and program initiatives:

- Continue to provide a national nutrition safety net
- Guarantee stable funding of nutrition safety net
- Encourage the consumption of healthy and nutritious diets
- Simplify program rules

- Support modern technologies
- Develop and utilize outcome-based performance measures

Summary

The United States has made encouraging progress in reducing the rate of domestic food insecurity. Progress from 1995 to 1999 was on track toward achieving the Government's objective of reducing food insecurity to half of its 1995 level by 2010. However, this improvement in food security was largely the result of rising household incomes associated with the strong economic growth of the late 1990s. Progress slowed or reversed during the recent economic downturn.

Given the large-scale effects of general economic performance on food security, renewed economic growth will be critical for improving the food security of U.S. households over the long term. Targeted policies and programs that improve employment and earnings opportunities for the types of households that are most vulnerable to food insecurity—especially those with less skilled or less educated workers and those headed by single women with children—can also contribute to improving food security. Achievement of the targeted reductions in food insecurity and hunger will also require continued Federal, State, and private commitments to the country's food assistance safety net. Innovative and principled improvements to the economic and nutrition safety-net programs can further improve the likelihood of reaching food security goals.

Adapting U.S. Food Security Measurement Methods for Use in Low-Income Countries

Research is underway on adapting the U.S. food security measure for use in other countries, including several low-income countries. For example, USDA's Economic Research Service helps facilitate communication among these researchers, who work in a broad range of educational, nonprofit, and government institutions, and provides technical assistance to several of the projects. Implementing this type of a survey-based measure may be practical and cost-effective if a country already has an appropriate periodic survey to which the food security questions can be added. In addition, such a measure of food deprivation may serve to "calibrate" indirect measures, such as those based on income distribution. To adapt

the U.S. food security measure to another culture, language, and economic context will require repeating much of the qualitative research and statistical analysis through which the questions in the U.S. measure were developed. A survey module for use in very low-income settings may need more questions about the severe range of food insecurity and about the frequency and duration of reduced food intake. Undernutrition, the primary food security concern of lower income countries, is more likely to be associated with severe, chronic food insecurity than with the occasional or episodic food insecurity to which the U.S. measure is sensitive.