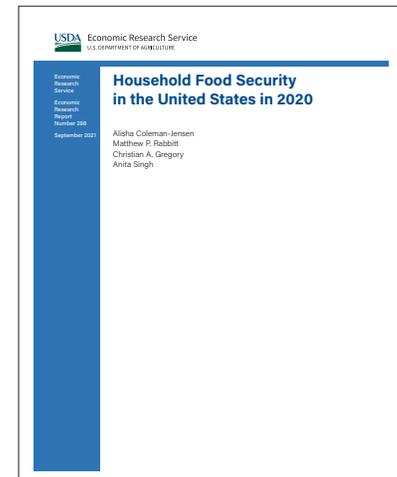


# Household Food Security in the United States in 2020

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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. However, some 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 aim to increase food security by providing low-income households access to food for a healthful diet, as well as 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 nutrition assistance programs in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic began in the United States in 2020 and affected public health and the economy, with resulting changes to Federal, State, and local policies, programs, and benefits; changes to existing and additions of new nutrition assistance programs; and responses by charitable organizations. There was a substantial increase in assistance, including nutrition assistance and other benefits. These many changes may have affected food insecurity in different ways, and this report does not provide an analysis of possible causal impacts.

## What Did the Study Find?

In 2020, 89.5 percent of U.S. households were food secure. The remaining 10.5 percent (13.8 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 because of a lack of resources. The 2020 prevalence of food insecurity was unchanged from 10.5 percent in 2019.

In 2020, 3.9 percent of U.S. households (5.1 million households) had *very low food security*, not significantly different from 4.1 percent in 2019. 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 because of limited resources.

### *Findings for households with children:*

Children were food insecure at times during 2020 in 7.6 percent of U.S. households with children (2.9 million households), up from 6.5 percent in 2019. These households with *food insecurity among children* were unable at times to provide adequate, nutritious food for their children.

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.

While children are usually shielded from the disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake that characterize very low food security, in 2020, children along with adults suffered instances of very low food security in 0.8 percent of households with children (322,000 households), up from 0.6 percent in 2019. These households with *very low food security among children* reported that children were hungry, skipped a meal, or did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.

### ***Findings for population subgroups:***

Some statistically significant changes in the prevalence of food insecurity from 2019 to 2020 occurred for some population subgroups. The prevalence of food insecurity increased for all households with children from 13.6 percent in 2019 to 14.8 percent in 2020 and was also higher in 2020 for married-couple families with children. The prevalence of food insecurity also increased for households with Black, non-Hispanic householders or reference persons (an adult household member in whose name the housing unit is owned or rented) from 19.1 percent in 2019 to 21.7 percent in 2020 and was higher in 2020 for households in the South. The prevalence of food insecurity declined from 2019 to 2020 for a few population subgroups including women living alone, men living alone, households with White, non-Hispanic reference persons, and households in the Midwest.

### ***Findings for food spending and Federal nutrition assistance participation:***

The typical (median) food-secure household spent 18 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) benefits.

About 55 percent of food-insecure households in the survey reported that in the previous month, they 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.

Reported participation in the National School Lunch Program was lower among food-insecure households in 2020 (19.5 percent) than in 2019 (27.6 percent). USDA implemented the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program in 2020 to serve eligible school children affected by pandemic-related school closures. The survey, however, did not measure P-EBT participation.

### ***Findings for labor force participation and food insecurity during COVID-19 pandemic:***

In the 30-day period from mid-November to mid-December 2020, households with a reference person who was not employed (unemployed or not in labor force) had a higher prevalence of food insecurity (8.0 percent) than all U.S. households (5.7 percent), while those with an employed reference person had a lower food insecurity prevalence (4.2 percent).

The prevalence of food insecurity in the 30-day period from mid-November to mid-December was substantially higher than the national average of 5.7 percent for households with a reference person who was unable to work because of the pandemic (16.4 percent food insecure in the 30-day period) and households with a reference person who was not employed and was prevented from looking for work because of the pandemic (20.4 percent food insecure in the 30-day period).

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

Data for the ERS food security reports come from an annual survey conducted by the Bureau of the Census as the December supplement to the monthly Current Population Survey. ERS sponsors the annual Food Security Supplement survey and compiles and analyzes the responses. The 2020 food security survey included 34,330 households that comprise a representative sample of the U.S. civilian population of about 130 million households. The food security survey asked one adult respondent per household about experiences and behaviors that indicate food insecurity during calendar year 2020, 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.