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Measuring Food Security in the United States

Household Food Security in the United States, 2007

Mark Nord
Margaret Andrews
Steven Carlson



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Household Food Security in the United States, 2007

**Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews,
and Steven Carlson**

Abstract

Eighty-nine percent of American households were food secure throughout the entire year in 2007, meaning that all household members had access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. The remaining households (11.1 percent) were food insecure at least some time during the year. About one-third of food-insecure households (4.1 percent of all U.S. households) had very low food security—meaning that the food intake of one or more adults was reduced and their eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year because the household lacked money and other resources for food. Prevalence rates of food insecurity and very low food security were essentially unchanged from those in 2005 and 2006. The typical food-secure household spent 35 percent more on food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and household composition. Just over half of all food-insecure households participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food and nutrition assistance programs during the month prior to the survey.

Keywords: Food security, food insecurity, food spending, food pantry, soup kitchen, emergency kitchen, material well-being, Food Stamp Program, National School Lunch Program, WIC

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Contents

Summary	iii
Introduction	1
Household Food Security	2
Methods	2
Prevalence of Food Insecurity—National Conditions and Trends	4
Prevalence of Food Insecurity—Conditions and Trends by Selected Household Characteristics	10
Food Insecurity in Low-Income Households	14
Number of Persons, by Household Food Security Status and Selected Household Characteristics	14
Prevalence of Food Insecurity by State	19
Household Spending on Food	22
Methods	22
Food Expenditures, by Selected Household Characteristics	23
Food Expenditures and Household Food Security	25
Use of Federal and Community Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs	28
Methods	28
Food Security and Food Spending of Households That Received Food and Nutrition Assistance	31
Participation in Federal Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs by Food-Insecure Households	33
Use of Food Pantries and Emergency Kitchens	33
Use of Food Pantries and Emergency Kitchens, by Food Security Status	33
Use of Food Pantries, by Selected Household Characteristics	34
Combined Use of Federal and Community Food and Nutrition Assistance	36
References	38
Appendix A—Household Responses to Questions in the Food Security Scale	43
Frequency of Occurrence of Behaviors, Experiences, and Conditions That Indicate Food Insecurity	45
Monthly and Daily Occurrence of Food-Insecure Conditions	47
Appendix B—Background on the U.S. Food Security Measurement Project	50
Appendix C—USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan	55
Appendix D—Food Security During 30 Days Prior to Food Security Survey	57

Summary

Most U.S. households have consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living—they are food secure. But a minority of American households experience food insecurity at times during the year, meaning that their access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) monitors the extent and severity of food insecurity in U.S. households through an annual, nationally representative survey and has published statistical reports on household food security in the United States for each year since 1995. This report presents statistics on households' food security, food expenditures, and use of food and nutrition assistance programs for 2007.

What Is the Issue?

USDA's domestic food and nutrition assistance programs increase food security by providing low-income households access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education. Reliable monitoring of food security contributes to the effective operation of these programs as well as private food assistance programs and other government initiatives aimed at reducing food insecurity. This annual food security report provides statistics that guide planning for Federal, State, and community food assistance programs.

What Did the Study Find?

In 2007, 88.9 percent of U.S. households were food secure throughout the year, a level that was essentially unchanged from 2005 (89.0 percent) and 2006 (89.1 percent). Food-secure households had consistent access to enough food for active healthy lives for all household members at all times during the year. The remaining 11.1 percent (13 million households) were food insecure. These households, at some time during the year, had difficulty providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources.

About one-third of food-insecure households (4.7 million, or 4.1 percent of all U.S. households) had very low food security, essentially unchanged from 2005 (3.9 percent) and 2006 (4.0 percent). In households with very low food security, the food intake of some household members was reduced and their normal eating patterns disrupted because of the household's food insecurity. The other two-thirds of food-insecure households obtained enough food to avoid substantial disruptions in eating patterns and food intake, using a variety of coping strategies, such as eating less varied diets, participating in Federal food and nutrition assistance programs, or obtaining emergency food from community food pantries or emergency kitchens.

Even when resources are inadequate to provide food for the entire family, children are usually shielded from the disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake that characterize very low food security. However, children as well as adults experienced instances of very low food security in 323,000 households (0.8 percent of households with children) in 2007, up from 221,000 households (0.6 percent) in 2006.

On a given day, the number of households with very low food security was a small fraction of the number that experienced this condition "at some time

during the year.” On average, households classified as having very low food security experienced the condition in 7 months of the year, for a few days in each of those months. On an average day in November 2007, for example, an estimated 609,000 to 941,000 households (0.5-0.8 percent of all U.S. households) had members who experienced very low food security, and children experienced these conditions in 45,000 to 65,000 households (0.11 to 0.17 percent of all U.S. households with children).

The prevalence of food insecurity varied considerably among different types of households. 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, and Black and Hispanic households. Geographically, food insecurity was more common in large cities and rural areas and, regionally, more prevalent in the South than in the Northeast and Midwest.

Food-secure households spent more for food than food-insecure households. In 2007, the median U.S. household spent \$42.50 per person for food each week—about 20 percent more than the cost of USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan (a low-cost food “market basket” that meets dietary standards, taking into account household size and the age and gender of household members). The median food-secure household spent 24 percent more than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, while the median food-insecure household spent 8 percent less than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan.

Some food-insecure households turn to Federal food and nutrition assistance programs or emergency food providers in their communities when they are unable to obtain enough food. Just over half of the food-insecure households surveyed in 2007 said that in the previous month they had participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food and nutrition assistance programs—the National School Lunch Program, the Food Stamp Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). About 21 percent of food-insecure households obtained emergency food from a food pantry at some time during the year, and 2.7 percent ate one or more meals at an emergency kitchen in their community.

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. USDA sponsors the survey, and ERS compiles and analyzes the responses. The 2007 food security survey covered about 45,600 households and was a representative sample of the U.S. civilian population of 118 million households. The food security survey asked one adult respondent in each household a series of questions about experiences and behaviors that indicate food insecurity. The food security status of the household was assessed based on the number of food-insecure conditions reported (such as being unable to afford balanced meals, cutting the size of meals because there was too little money for food, or being hungry because there was too little money for food). Households with very low food security among children were identified by responses to a subset of questions about the conditions and experiences of children. Survey respondents also reported the amounts their households had spent on food and whether they had used public or private food and nutrition assistance programs.