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*Measuring Food Security in the United States*

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# Household Food Security in the United States, 2008

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*Food Assistance & Nutrition  
Research Program*

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# Household Food Security in the United States, 2008

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## Abstract

Eighty-five percent of American households were food secure throughout the entire year in 2008, meaning that they had access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. The remaining households (14.6 percent) were food insecure at least some time during the year, including 5.7 percent with very low food security—meaning that the food intake of one or more household members 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 up from 11.1 percent and 4.1 percent, respectively, in 2007, and were the highest recorded since 1995, when the first national food security survey was conducted. The typical food-secure household spent 31 percent more on food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and household composition. Fifty-five percent 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 2008 survey.

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

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## 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 in 2008.

### 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 2008, 85.4 percent of U.S. households were food secure throughout the year. 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 14.6 percent (17 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. The prevalence of food insecurity was up from 11.1 percent (13 million households) in 2007 and was the highest observed since nationally representative food security surveys were initiated in 1995.

About one-third of food-insecure households (6.7 million households, or 5.7 percent of all U.S. households) had very low food security, up from 4.7 million households (4.1 percent) in 2007, and the highest level observed since nationally representative food security surveys were initiated in 1995. In households with very low food security, the food intake of some household members was reduced, and their normal eating patterns were 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 506,000

households (1.3 percent of households with children) in 2008, up from 323,000 households (0.8 percent of households with children) in 2007.

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.” Typically, households classified as having very low food security experienced the condition in 7 or 8 months of the year, for a few days in each of those months. On an average day in late November or early December, 2008, for example, an estimated 1.1 million to 1.4 million households (0.9-1.2 percent of all U.S. households) had members who experienced very low food security, and children experienced these conditions in 86,000 to 111,000 households (0.22 to 0.28 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 or single men, and Black and Hispanic households. Food insecurity was more common in large cities and rural areas than in suburban areas and other outlying areas around large cities. Regionally, food insecurity was most prevalent in the South, intermediate in the Midwest and West, and least prevalent in the Northeast.

Food-secure households spent more for food than food-insecure households. In 2008, the median U.S. household spent \$43.75 per person for food each week—about 14 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 18 percent more than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, while the median food-insecure household spent 10 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. Fifty-five percent of the food-insecure households surveyed in 2008 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, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, the new name for the Food Stamp Program), and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). About 20 percent of food-insecure households obtained emergency food from a food pantry at some time during the year, and 2.6 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 annual survey, and USDA’s Economic Research Service (ERS) compiles and analyzes the responses. The 2008 food security survey covered about 44,000 households comprising 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 of too little money for food, or being hungry because of 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.