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## Food Insecurity in Households with Children

### Prevalence, Severity, and Household Characteristics

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Most U.S. households with children have dependable access to adequate food for active, healthy living for both adults and children—they are food secure. However, some households experience periods of food insecurity, including times when children as well as adults are affected. 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, with special attention to households with children.

#### *What Is the Issue?*

Food security is especially important for children because their nutrition affects not only their current health, but also their future health and well-being. Previous studies that used various data sources suggest that children in food-insecure households face elevated risks of health and development problems, compared with children in otherwise similar food-secure households. USDA's domestic food and nutrition assistance programs improve children's food security by providing low-income households with access to healthful food, as well as to nutrition education. Knowledge about the extent of food insecurity in households with children—and the household characteristics associated with food insecurity—contributes to effective operation of these and other programs that support the well-being of children. This report describes the prevalence and severity of food insecurity in households with children as of 2007, the trends since 1999, and characteristics of households affected by food insecurity.

#### *What Did the Study Find?*

In 2007, 84.2 percent of households with children were food secure throughout the year, meaning that they had consistent access to enough food for active, healthy lives for all household members. The remaining 15.8 percent of households with children were food insecure at some time during the year. In about half of those households, only adults were food insecure, but in 8.3 percent of households with children, one or more of the children were also food insecure at some time during the year. In 0.8 percent of households with children, one or more of the children experienced the most severe food-insecure condition measured by USDA, very low food security, in which meals were irregular and food intake was below levels considered adequate by caregivers.

Job opportunities and wage rates, along with work supports available to working households (such as earned-income tax credits, child care subsidies, and supplemental nutrition assistance), are likely to be key determinants of children's food security in low-income households. A large majority—about 85 percent—of households with food-insecure children have one or more adults in the labor force, including almost 70 percent with one or more full-time workers. However, fewer than half of households with food-insecure children include an adult with education beyond high school, and only 10 percent include an adult with a 4-year college degree. Thus, employment opportunities and wage levels for less skilled or less educated workers are particularly important factors in the food security of dependent children.

In 2006-07, Federal food and nutrition assistance programs provided benefits to four out of five food-insecure households if the household had an income of less than 185 percent of the poverty line. Children in about 70 percent of low-income households received free or reduced-price school meals, about 40 percent of the households received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and about 20 percent received benefits from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Many households received assistance from two or all three of the programs, although one-third reported receiving only free or reduced-price school meals. Low-income households that did not receive assistance from any of the programs were less likely to be food insecure (11 percent) than those that did receive assistance (19 to 32 percent, depending on the mix of programs). This difference suggests that the primary reason for nonparticipation of eligible households is that they do not feel they need food assistance, rather than factors such as inadequate program outreach.

Food insecurity among children was more likely in households that had left SNAP during the previous year than in those currently receiving benefits. This finding suggests that some households leave the program even though their economic resources are not yet adequate to meet their food needs.

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

Data for the study came from annual food security surveys sponsored by USDA and conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau as supplements to the monthly Current Population Survey. Respondents to the survey were a representative sampling of the U.S. civilian population and included between 15,000 and 18,000 households with children each year. 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 or cutting the size of meals or being hungry because there was too little money for food). The food security status of children in the household was assessed by responses to a subset of questions about the conditions and experiences of children. Survey respondents also reported whether they had used food and nutrition assistance programs. To provide information on how children's health and development may be affected by food insecurity, peer-reviewed studies on those topics by other researchers were reviewed and summarized.