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Measuring Food Security in the United States

Household Food Security in the United States, 2006

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

Abstract

Eighty-nine percent of American households were food secure throughout the entire year in 2006, meaning that they had access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. The remaining households (10.9 percent) were food insecure at least some time during the year. About one-third of food insecure households (4.0 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. The typical food-secure household spent 31 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 USDA's annual Food Security 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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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 2006.

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 2006, 89.1 percent of U.S. households were food secure, essentially unchanged from 2005 (89.0 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 10.9 percent (12.6 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 (4.6 million, or 4.0 percent of all U.S. households) had very low food security, essentially unchanged from 2005 (3.9 percent). 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.

Prior to 2006, households with low food security were described as "food insecure without hunger" and households with very low food security were described as "food insecure with hunger." Changes in these descriptions were made in 2006 at the recommendation of the National Research Council's Committee on National Statistics, in order to distinguish the physiological state of hunger from indicators of food availability. The criteria by which households were classified remained unchanged.

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. Children, as well as adults, experienced very low food security in 221,000 households (0.6 percent of households with children). This rate has remained between 0.5 and 0.7 percent (statistically unchanged) since 1999.

The number of households with very low food security on a given day 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 and for a few days in each of those months. On an average day in November 2006, for example, an estimated 600,000 to 877,000 households (0.5-0.8 percent of all U.S. households) experienced very low food security, and children experienced these conditions in 29,000 to 33,000 households (0.07 to 0.08 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.

Food-secure households spent more for food than food-insecure households. In 2006, the median U.S. household spent \$41.67 per person for food each week—about 28 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-insecure household spent 1 percent more than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, while the median food-secure household spent 32 percent more 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 2006 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 2.2 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 2006 food security survey covered about 46,500 households and was a representative sample of the U.S. civilian population of 115 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.