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# Household Food Security in the United States, 2003

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## Abstract

Eighty-nine percent of American households were food secure throughout the entire year in 2003, meaning that they had access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. The remaining households were food insecure at least some time during that year. The prevalence of food insecurity, 11.2 percent of households, was not statistically different from the 11.1 percent observed in 2002. The prevalence of food insecurity with hunger was unchanged at 3.5 percent. This report, based on data from the December 2003 food security survey, provides the most recent statistics on the food security of U.S. households, as well as on how much they spent for food and the extent to which food-insecure households participated in Federal and community food assistance programs. Survey responses indicate that the typical food-secure household in the U.S. spent 34 percent more on food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and household composition. Just over one-half of all food-insecure households participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food assistance programs during the month prior to the survey.

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

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# Contents

<b>Summary</b> .....	iv
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Section 1. Household Food Security</b> .....	2
Methods .....	2
Prevalences of Food Insecurity and Food Insecurity With Hunger—National Conditions and Trends .....	3
Prevalences of Food Insecurity and Food Insecurity With Hunger—Conditions and Trends by Selected Household Characteristics .....	8
Food Insecurity and Food Insecurity With Hunger in Low-Income Households .....	13
Number of Persons by Household Food Security Status and Household Type .....	15
Prevalences of Food Insecurity and Food Insecurity With Hunger by State, Average 2001-03 .....	18
<b>Section 2. Household Spending on Food</b> .....	20
Methods .....	20
Food Expenditures, by Selected Household Characteristics ..	21
Food Expenditures and Household Food Security .....	23
<b>Section 3. Use of Federal and Community Food Assistance Programs</b> .....	26
Methods .....	26
Food Security and Food Spending of Households That Received Food Assistance .....	29
Participation in Federal Food Assistance Programs by Food-Insecure Households .....	31
Use of Food Pantries and Emergency Kitchens .....	32
Use of Food Pantries and Emergency Kitchens, by Food Security Status .....	32
Use of Food Pantries, by Selected Household Characteristics .....	33
Combined Use of Federal and Community Food Assistance .....	36
<b>References</b> .....	38
<b>Appendix A. Household Responses to Questions in the Food Security Scale</b> .....	42
Frequency of Occurrence of Behaviors, Experiences, and Conditions That Indicate Food Insecurity .....	42

**Appendix B. Background on the U.S. Food Security  
Measurement Project** .....50

**Appendix C. USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan** .....54

**Appendix D. Changes in Prevalence Rates of Food  
Insecurity and Food Insecurity With Hunger by State,  
1996-98 (average) to 2001-03 (average)** .....56

**Appendix E. Food Insecurity With Hunger During 30 Days  
Prior to Food Security Survey** .....58

## Summary

A large majority of U.S. households were food secure in 2003, and the prevalence of food security was unchanged from the previous year. The most recent nationally representative food security survey reveals that 88.8 percent of U.S. households were food secure throughout the entire year in 2003, meaning that they had access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. The remaining 11.2 percent of U.S. households (12.6 million) were food insecure. At some time during the year, these households were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food for all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources. The prevalence of food insecurity was not statistically different from the 11.1 percent observed in 2002.

About one-third of food-insecure households (3.9 million, or 3.5 percent of all U.S. households) were food insecure to the extent that one or more household members were hungry, at least some time during the year, because they could not afford enough food. The other two-thirds of food-insecure households obtained enough food to avoid hunger, using a variety of coping strategies, such as eating less varied diets, participating in Federal food assistance programs, or getting emergency food from community food pantries or emergency kitchens. The prevalence of food insecurity with hunger was unchanged from the previous year. Children were hungry at times during the year in 207,000 households (0.5 percent of households with children) because the household lacked sufficient money or other resources for food.

On average, households that were food insecure with hunger at some time during the year experienced the condition in 8 or 9 months, but for only a few days in each month. During the 30-day period from mid-November to mid-December 2003, 2.6 percent of U.S. households (2.9 million households) were food insecure with hunger, compared with the annual rate of 3.5 percent. The prevalence of food insecurity with hunger on any given day during that period was much lower than the annual rate, averaging about 0.4 to 0.6 percent of households (490,000 to 698,000 households).

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) monitors food security in the Nation's households through an annual, nationally representative survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The survey also collects information on households' food expenditures and their use of Federal and community food assistance programs.

The amount households spend for food is an indicator of how adequately they are meeting their food needs. In 2003, the typical (median) U.S. household spent \$38.00 per person for food each week. Weekly food spending by the typical household was about 26 percent higher 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 typical food-insecure household spent 4 percent less than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, while the typical food-secure household spent 29 percent more than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, or 34 percent more than the typical food-insecure household.

Some households participate in Federal food assistance programs or turn to community resources such as food pantries and emergency kitchens for help when they lack money to buy food. Among all food-insecure households:

- 56.0 percent received help from one or more of the three largest Federal food assistance programs—food stamps, free or reduced-price school lunches, or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—during the month prior to the survey;
- 19.7 percent obtained emergency food from a food pantry, church, or food bank during the 12 months prior to the survey; and
- 2.0 percent had members who ate at an emergency kitchen sometime during the 12 months prior to the survey.

Some 3.5 million households—3.1 percent of all U.S. households—reported getting emergency food from food pantries, churches, or food banks one or more times during 2003.