

Household Food Security in the United States in 2018

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What Is the Issue?

Most U.S. households have consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living—they are food secure. But some households experience food insecurity at times during the year, meaning their access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources. USDA’s food and nutrition assistance programs aim to increase food security by providing low-income households access to food for a healthful diet, as well as nutrition education. USDA monitors the extent and severity of food insecurity in U.S. households through an annual, nationally representative survey sponsored and analyzed by USDA’s Economic Research Service (ERS). This report presents statistics from the survey that cover household food security, food expenditures, and use of Federal food and nutrition assistance programs in 2018.

What Did the Study Find?

Main findings:

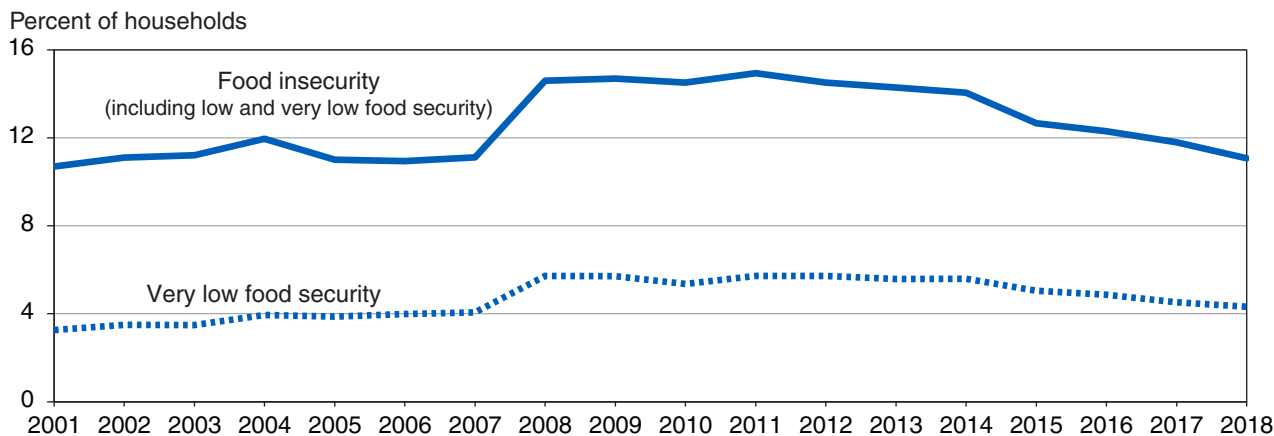
- The 2018 prevalence of food insecurity declined, for the first time, to the pre-recession (2007) level of 11.1 percent.
- In 2018, 88.9 percent of U.S. households were food secure. The remaining 11.1 percent (14.3 million households) were *food insecure*. Food-insecure households (those with low and very low food security) had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources. The decline from 2017 (11.8 percent) was statistically significant and continued a decline from a high of 14.9 percent in 2011.
- In 2018, 4.3 percent of U.S. households (5.6 million households) had *very low food security*, not significantly different from 4.5 percent in 2017. In this more severe range of food insecurity, the food intake of some household members was reduced and normal eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year due to limited resources.

Findings for households with children:

- Children were food insecure at times during 2018 in 7.1 percent of U.S. households with children (2.7 million households), not significantly different from 7.7 percent in 2017. These households with *food insecurity among children* were unable at times to provide adequate, nutritious food for their children.

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

Prevalence of food insecurity in 2018 is down from 2017



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

- While children are usually shielded from the disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake that characterize very low food security, in 2018 both children and adults experienced instances of very low food security in 0.6 percent of households with children (220,000 households), essentially unchanged from 0.7 percent in 2017. These households with *very low food security among children* reported that children were hungry, skipped a meal, or did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.

Findings for population subgroups and States:

- Rates of food insecurity were higher than the national average for the following groups: households with incomes near or below the Federal poverty line, all households with children and particularly households with children headed by single women or single men, women and men living alone, Black- and Hispanic-headed households, and households in principal cities.
- The prevalence of food insecurity varied considerably from State to State, ranging from 7.8 percent in New Hampshire to 16.8 percent in New Mexico in 2016-18. (Data for 3 years were combined to provide more reliable State-level statistics.)

Findings for food spending and Federal nutrition assistance participation:

- The typical (median) food-secure household spent 21 percent more for food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and composition. These estimates include food purchases made with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
- About 56 percent of food-insecure households in the survey reported that, in the previous month, they had participated in one or more of the three largest Federal nutrition assistance programs (SNAP; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and National School Lunch Program).

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 the December supplement to the monthly Current Population Survey. ERS sponsors the annual Food Security Supplement survey and compiles and analyzes the responses. The 2018 survey covered 37,300 households, comprising a representative sample of about 130 million U.S. households. The survey asked one adult respondent per household questions about experiences and behaviors that indicate food insecurity during the calendar year, such as being unable to afford balanced meals, cutting the size of meals, or being hungry because of too little money for food. The food security status of the household was assigned based on the number of food-insecure conditions reported.