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Household Food Security in the United States in 2012

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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 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. Food and nutrition assistance programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) increase food security by providing low-income households access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education.

USDA also monitors the extent and severity of food insecurity in U.S. households through an annual, nationally representative survey sponsored by USDA's Economic Research Service. Reliable monitoring of food security contributes to the effective operation of the Federal programs as well as private food assistance programs and other government initiatives aimed at reducing food insecurity. This report presents statistics from the survey covering households' food security, food expenditures, and use of food and nutrition assistance programs in 2012.

What Did the Study Find?

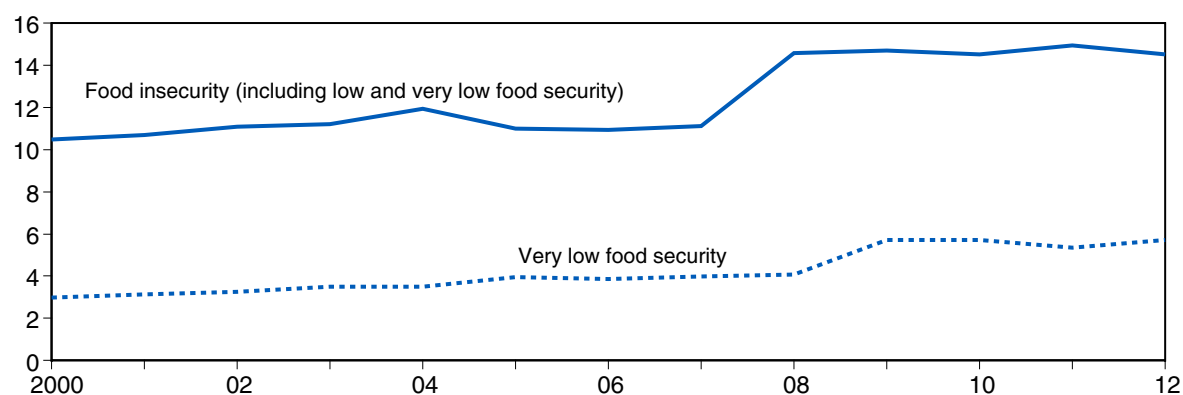
The percentage of U.S. households that were food insecure remained essentially unchanged from 2011 to 2012. The percentage of households with food insecurity in the severe range—described as very low food security—also was unchanged.

- In 2012, 85.5 percent of U.S. households were food secure throughout the year. The remaining 14.5 percent (17.6 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 change from the 2011 estimate (14.9 percent) was not statistically significant, meaning that the difference may be due to sampling variation. The prevalence of food insecurity has been essentially unchanged since 2008.
- In 2012, 5.7 percent of U.S. households (7.0 million households) had *very low food security*. 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. The prevalence of very low food security was unchanged from 2011 (5.7 percent).
- Children were food insecure at times during the year in 10.0 percent of households with children. These 3.9 million households were unable at times during the year to provide adequate, nutritious food for their children. The percentage of households with food-insecure children was unchanged from 2011 (10.0 percent).

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.

The prevalence of food insecurity has been essentially unchanged since 2008

Percent of households



Source: Calculated by USDA, Economic Research Service using Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data.

- While children are usually shielded from the disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake that characterize very low food security, both children and adults experienced instances of very low food security in 1.2 percent of households with children (463,000 households) in 2012, essentially unchanged from 2011 (1.0 percent).
- 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 exurban areas around large cities.
- Typically, households classified as having very low food security experienced the condition in 7 months of the year, for a few days in each of those months.
- The typical food-secure household spent 26 percent more for food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and composition, including food purchased with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (formerly the Food Stamp Program).
- Fifty-nine 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 food and nutrition assistance programs (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children or 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 a supplement to the monthly Current Population Survey. USDA's Economic Research Service sponsors the annual survey and compiles and analyzes the responses. The 2012 food security survey covered 43,942 households comprising a representative sample of the U.S. civilian population of 122 million households. The food security survey asked one adult respondent in each household a series of questions about experiences and behaviors of household members that indicate food insecurity, 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. The food security status of the household was assigned based on the number of food-insecure conditions reported.