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Food Insecurity in Households With Children

Prevalence, Severity, and Household Characteristics, 2010-11

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What Is the Issue?

Most U.S. households with children have consistent, dependable access to adequate food for active, healthy living for both adults and children—they are food secure. However, 21 percent of households with children were food insecure at times during the year in 2011, and in some of those households, children as well as adults were food insecure. 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.

Food security is especially important for children because their nutrition affects not only their current health, but also their physical, mental, and social development—and thus their future health and well-being. Previous studies suggest that children living in food-insecure households face elevated risks of many problematic health and development outcomes, 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 a healthful diet and nutrition education. Knowledge about the extent of food insecurity in households with children and the household characteristics associated with food insecurity contributes to the effective operation of these and other programs that support the well-being of children. This report describes the extent and severity of food insecurity in households with children in 2011, food security trends since 1999, and characteristics of households affected by food insecurity in 2010 and 2011. A previous ERS report described the characteristics of food-insecure households with children as of 2007.

What Did the Study Find?

The ERS report *Household Food Security in the United States in 2011* (September 2012) indicated that 79 percent of households with children were food secure throughout the year, meaning they had consistent access to adequate food for active, healthy lives for all household members. The remaining nearly 21 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 10 percent of all households with children, one or more of the children also were food insecure at some time during the year. In 1.0 percent of households with children, one or more child experienced the most severe food-insecure condition monitored by USDA—very low food security. In households with very low food security among children, caregivers had reported that children were hungry, skipped a meal, or did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.

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.

This study, focusing on households with children age 0-17, averaged 2 years of data (2010-11) and found that in households headed by an unemployed adult, the prevalence of food insecurity among children was three and a half times as high as in households headed by one or more adult employed full-time. However, three-quarters of households with food-insecure children had one or more adult in the labor force, either full time (60 percent) or part time (15 percent).

- For households headed by an adult with less than a high school diploma, the prevalence of food insecurity among children was six and a half times as high as for households headed by an adult with at least a 4-year college degree.
- Children were food insecure in about 20 percent of households that included an adult who was out of the labor force because of disability, compared with about 9 percent of households in which no working-age adult had a disability.
- Federal food and nutrition assistance programs provided benefits to 84 percent of low-income households with food-insecure children (low-income households are those with incomes below 185 percent of the Federal poverty line).
- Children in about 70 percent of low-income households with food-insecure children received free or reduced-price school meals in 2010-11, about 42 percent of low-income households with food-insecure children received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and about 25 percent received Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits. Many households received assistance from multiple programs, although about 31 percent reported receiving only free or reduced-price school meals.
- Low-income households not receiving assistance from any of the programs were less likely to be food insecure (12 percent) than those that did receive assistance (approximately 23-30 percent, depending on the mix of programs). This difference suggests that low-income households with greater food security are less likely to choose to participate in food assistance programs.
- Food insecurity among children was more likely for households that had left SNAP during the previous year than for those currently receiving benefits. This finding suggests that some households left the program even though their economic resources were 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's Economic Research Service and conducted by the Department of Commerce's U.S. Census Bureau as supplements to the monthly Current Population Survey. The survey respondents were representative samples of the U.S. civilian noninstitutionalized population and included 13,000-18,000 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, cutting the size of meals because there was too little money for food, 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 in the household. Survey respondents also reported whether, and to what extent, they used food and nutrition assistance programs. Peer-reviewed studies on those topics by other researchers were reviewed and summarized to provide information on how children's health and development may be affected by food insecurity.