

Summary

The ability to accurately measure the food security status of children in household surveys is an essential tool for monitoring food insecurity and hunger at the most severe levels in U.S. households and for assessing programs designed to prevent or ameliorate these conditions. A tool for this purpose, the “children’s food security scale” has been developed by USDA. The children’s food security scale is based on 8 questions in the 18-item food security survey module that ask specifically about food-related experiences and conditions of children. It measures the severity of food insecurity among children in surveyed households and identifies households in which children were hungry at times during the previous year because the household lacked enough money for food.

Applied to survey data from the nationally representative Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements, the new measure indicates that during the year ending in April 1999, children were hungry at times in 219,000 U.S. households, or 0.6 percent of all households with children. The corresponding statistic for the year ending in August 1998 was 331,000 households, representing 0.9 percent of all households with children.

To provide more stable prevalence estimates for subpopulations, statistics are averaged across 2 years, 1998-99. The average annual prevalence of hunger among children during this 2-year period was 0.7 percent. The prevalence of hunger among children was higher in single-mother families (1.8 percent) and in families headed by Blacks (1.3 percent) and Hispanics (1.4 percent).

The prevalence rate of children’s hunger declined from 1995, when household food security and hunger were first measured nationally in the United States, to 1999. During this period, the prevalence of children’s hunger declined by about half, from 1.1 percent of all households with children in 1995 to 0.6 percent in 1999. The fall in hunger prevalence among children extended to all major demographic and income categories, including those most vulnerable to hunger.

The children’s food security scale is assessed statistically and found to be adequately reliable and to be stable across years. The scale is compared with the household-level food security scale, and discrepancies between the two scales are found to result from identifiable household characteristics, especially the ages of children. Details are provided on how to calculate the children’s food security scale from the questions in the standard food security survey module.