# Prevalence of Hunger Declines in Rural Households

*The proportion of rural households in which people were hungry at times because there was not enough money for food declined somewhat from 1995 to 1998. However, the proportion that were food insecure—that is, they were not consistently and dependably able to get enough food for an active and healthy life—was about the same in 1998 as in 1995. Single-parent families and racial and ethnic minorities had rates of food insecurity and hunger higher than the national average.*

The long-running expansion of the U.S. economy and the continuing strength of the Nation's nutrition safety net have helped a large majority of rural American households achieve or maintain food security. During the year ending in August 1998, 88 percent of rural households were food secure (fig. 1), while 12 percent of rural households—about 2.4 million—were food insecure. Among the food insecure rural households were 0.7 million (3.4 percent of all rural households) in which food insecurity reached levels of severity great enough that one or more household members were hungry at times during the year due to inadequate resources for food.

Households are food secure when they have assured access at all times to enough food for an active healthy life, with no need for recourse to emergency food sources or other extraordinary coping behaviors to meet their basic food needs. They experience food insecurity when they do not have this assured access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times. As food insecurity increases in severity, the quality and variety of meals are reduced and food intake may become irregular. At still more severe levels, insufficient or irregular food intake results in periods of hunger for at least some family members. In households with children, adults usually restrict their own food intake first to provide enough food for the children. Thus, children usually do not go hungry except in households with more severe levels of adult hunger.

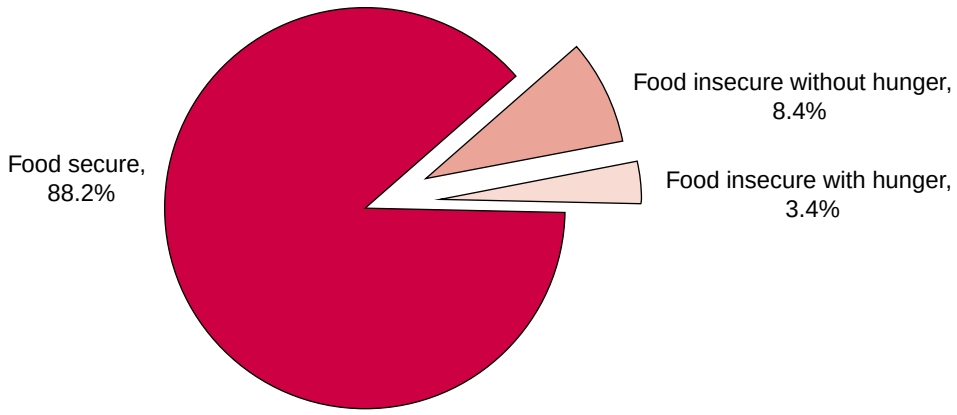
### Prevalence of Hunger Declined, Food Insecurity Unchanged, 1995-98

Last year, *Rural Conditions and Trends* first reported on new survey questions developed by USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services to monitor food insecurity and hunger in the United States (Rural Conditions and Trends, Vol. 9, No. 2, February 1999, pp. 91-96; see "Food Security Data," appendix p. 88). Statistics on food security, food insecurity, and hunger from this annual survey are now available for each year dur-

Figure 1

**Food security, food insecurity, and hunger in nonmetro households, 1998**

*A large majority of rural households were food secure, but nearly 12 percent did not always have access to enough food for active healthy lives, and 3.4 percent had household members who were hungry at times due to a lack of money*




Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, August 1998.

ing 1995-98. The 1998 prevalence rates reported in this article, however, are not directly comparable with those for 1995 reported in last year's issue. Because of refinements in the questionnaire design and changes in the screening of households to reduce the burden on the people who respond to the survey, the data for each year must be adjusted to be comparable across years (see box, "Monitoring Trends in the Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger").

When these adjustments are taken into account, the prevalence rate of hunger in rural areas declined by about half of 1 percentage point from 1995 to 1998, while the prevalence of food insecurity remained unchanged (fig. 2). Trends in rural and urban areas were virtually identical. For example, the lower prevalence of food insecurity and, to a lesser extent, of hunger, in 1997, was similar in both rural and urban areas. This trend was also consistent across regions, racial/ethnic groups, household types, and income categories. Reasons for the lower prevalence of food insecurity in 1997 as well as other year-to-year fluctuations are not yet known.

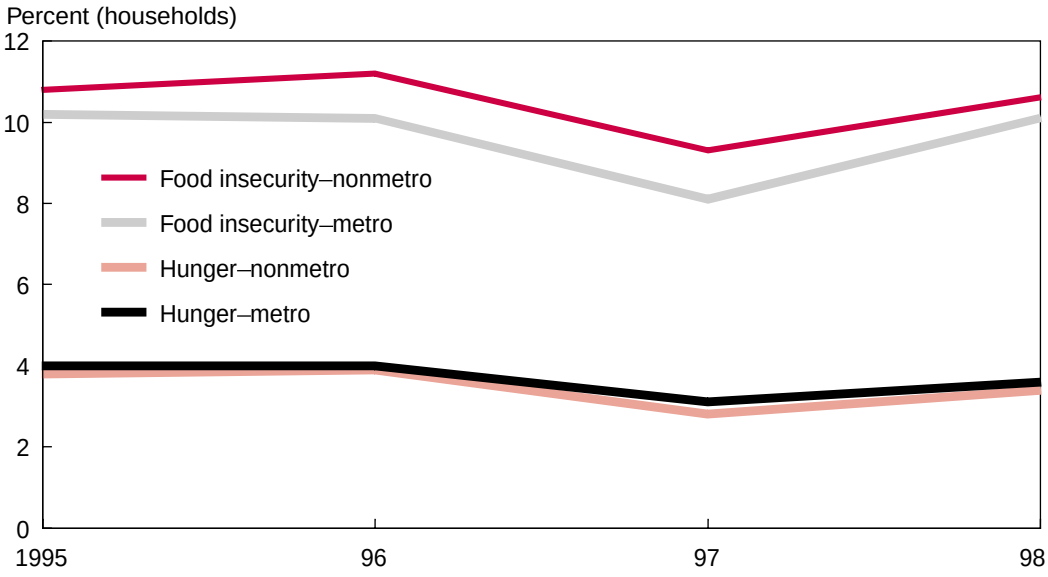
### Food Insecurity Rates Similar in Rural and Urban Areas

The prevalence of food insecurity during the year ending in August 1998 was the same (12 percent) for rural and urban households (table 1). To be classified as food insecure, a household must report at least three indicators of food insecurity, most commonly that (1) they worried that their food would run out before they got money to buy more, (2) the food they bought did not last and they did not have money to get more, and (3) they could not afford to eat balanced meals. More serious indicators, including indicators of hunger, were also reported by many food insecure households. In figure 2, food insecurity appears slightly more prevalent in rural than in urban areas, but this is due to the adjustment of the data for cross-year comparability. The statistics reported in table 1, based on the complete data as collected in 1998, reflect more accurately the food security situations in rural and urban areas.

Figure 2

**Prevalence rates of food insecurity and hunger, by residence, 1995-98**

*In both metro and nonmetro areas, the prevalence of food insecurity was about the same in 1998 as in 1995, while prevalence of hunger declined somewhat*




Note: Prevalences are adjusted for screening differences across years.

Source: Calculated by ERS based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data, 1995, 1996, 1997, and 1998.

## Monitoring Trends in the Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger

An important purpose of the Food Security Survey, fielded annually as a supplement to the Current Population Survey, is to monitor year-to-year changes in the prevalence of food insecurity and hunger. Information on these trends is important to assess the need for, and effects of, USDA's food assistance programs and to target those programs more effectively. Changes in the "screening" of questions in the first few years of the Food Security Survey—the years reported in this article—make the task of monitoring trends more difficult. These changes were made to improve the quality of the data and to reduce the burden placed on respondents, but they make it necessary to adjust the data to avoid biasing comparisons across years.

Screening procedures are used in the survey to reduce respondent burden and embarrassment. Households that give no indication of even slight food stress on a few initial questions skip over the remaining questions and are classified as food secure. However, the screening rules changed somewhat in each of the first 4 years of the survey. Consequently, some households were screened out in one year while, in other years, households with the same responses to the initial questions were asked the full battery of items. Some of these households affirmed enough items to be classified as food insecure. Thus, differences in screening affected the measured prevalence of food insecurity differently in each year.

The trends presented in figure 2 (and reported in Household Food Security in the United States, 1995-1998) are adjusted to a "common screen" for 1995, 1996, 1997, and 1998. Each year's data are recoded so that households that would have been screened out in any of the 4 years are classified as food secure without reference to their actual responses. This assures maximum comparability across years, although at some cost in sensitivity.

All other statistics in this article are based on the full data as collected in the 1998 survey and are, therefore, somewhat higher than those presented in figure 2. Food security surveys in future years will follow the 1998 screening methods, making them directly comparable to the statistics reported in this article.

**USDA Reports on Food Security and Hunger**

The following reports on the Food Security Measurement Project are available from USDA:

*Household Food Security in the United States in 1995: Summary Report of the Food Security Measurement Project*

*Household Food Security in the United States in 1995: Technical Report*

*Household Food Security in the United States, 1995-1998*

*Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger, by State, 1996-1998*

*Guide to Measuring Household Food Security, Revised 2000*

*Household Food Security in the United States, 1999*

Links to these reports and other information on the Federal Food Security Measurement Project are available from the ERS Domestic Food Security Briefing Room on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodsecurity>.

Table 1

**Households with food insecurity, 1998**

*Levels of food insecurity were very similar in rural and urban households; food insecurity was most prevalent in single-parent families with children and among minorities*

| Category | Nonmetro | Metro | U.S. total |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Percent (households) | | |
| All households | 11.8 | 11.8 | 11.8 |
| Census region: | | | |
| Northeast | 9.7 | 10.7 | 10.6 |
| Midwest | 8.3 | 9.6 | 9.3 |
| South | 14.1 | 12.3 | 12.8 |
| West | 14.4 | 13.9 | 14.0 |
| Race and ethnicity (of household head): | | | |
| White non-Hispanic | 9.6 | 7.9 | 8.3 |
| Black | 27.9 | 23.7 | 24.3 |
| Hispanic | 21.2 | 25.4 | 25.0 |
| Household structure: | | | |
| Two-parent families with children | 12.8 | 11.1 | 11.5 |
| Single-parent families with children | 35.4 | 33.1 | 33.6 |
| Multiple-adult households—no children | 5.4 | 5.4 | 5.4 |
| Single men living alone | 12.8 | 12.2 | 12.3 |
| Single women living alone | 9.8 | 10.9 | 10.7 |
| | Percent (persons)[1] | | |
| Age: | | | |
| All ages | 13.7 | 13.4 | 13.5 |
| 0-17 | 20.4 | 19.5 | 19.7 |
| 18-64 | 12.8 | 12.2 | 12.3 |
| 65 and over | 5.0 | 5.9 | 5.7 |

[1]Food security is determined at the household level. In the age breakdown, the numbers represent the percentage of people in each age category living in households classified as food insecure.

Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, August 1998.

Food insecurity was highest in the rural West and South (14 percent) and lowest in the rural Midwest (8 percent). In 1998, 14 percent of the entire rural population lived in food insecure households. This proportion was somewhat higher than the proportion of households that were food insecure because larger families are more likely to be food insecure than are smaller families and persons living alone.

### Food Insecurity Rates Higher for Families with Children

One out of five rural children lived in food insecure households, reflecting the greater economic difficulties faced by many families with children (table 1). Food insecurity was much higher in single-parent families with children than in any other household type. Nationally, one-third of such households experienced food insecurity sometime during the year ending in August 1998, and the proportion was somewhat higher in rural areas (35.4 percent). Even in two-parent families with children, the incidence of food insecurity (12.8 percent) was more than double that in multi-adult households with no children, although much lower than that of single-parent families.

The lowest rate of food insecurity was in multiple-adult households with no children present (5.4 percent) in both rural and urban areas. Food insecurity was more prevalent

among men living alone than among women living alone, even though the poverty rate for women living alone was substantially higher than that for men living alone.

The elderly are less than half as likely as working-age adults to live in food-insecure households, and this was true in both rural and urban areas. However, the questions in this survey may not adequately identify and measure food insecurity among the elderly. Problems not measured by the food insecurity scale, such as mobility limitations and restricted capacity and facilities for food preparation, pose additional challenges for some elderly people.

### Food Insecurity Higher for Minorities

Food insecurity was almost three times as prevalent among rural Blacks as among rural Whites. For rural Hispanics, the rate was about twice that of Whites. These differences reflect the higher poverty rates of racial and ethnic minorities (see "Rural Poverty Rate Declines, While Family Income Grows," p. 62). For Blacks and Whites, food insecurity was more prevalent in rural than in urban areas, while for Hispanics, the reverse was true. The lower level of food insecurity among rural Hispanics is unexpected because they had a substantially higher poverty rate than did urban Hispanics. The reasons for this difference are not known, but the data were consistent with the pattern observed in 1995.

### Hunger Due to Lack of Money Reported in 4 Percent of Rural Households

In about one-third of food insecure households—those in which food shortages were more serious or prolonged—food intake was curtailed to the extent that household members were repeatedly hungry. These households report experiences and behaviors associated with more severe levels of food insecurity. Adults reported eating less than they felt they should and cutting and skipping meals repeatedly due to lack of money for food. Households with children reported inability to feed the children balanced meals and reliance on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed the children because they were running out of money to buy food. At least some household members, mainly adults, in 3.4 percent of rural households experienced such hunger during the year prior to the survey; this proportion was not significantly different in urban areas (table 2).

The pattern of the incidence of hunger across regions, racial-ethnic groups, household types, and age groups followed closely that of food insecurity. In both rural and urban areas, just over 10 percent of single-parent families had episodes of hunger during the year.

### One Percent of Rural Households Report Indicators of Hunger among Children

Although 4.5 percent of rural children lived in households classified as food insecure with hunger (table 2), the children themselves in most of these households were not hungry. In most U.S. households, children—especially younger children—are protected from reductions in food intake unless the level of adults' deprivation is quite severe. Nevertheless, an estimated 1.1 percent of rural households had levels of food insecurity so severe that children were also hungry at times (table 3). Households classified as having hunger among children responded "yes" to at least five of the eight items in the food security survey that asked specifically about children's experiences of food stress. These households typically reported all of the following: they relied on a few kinds of low-cost food to feed the children because they were running out of money to buy food; they couldn't afford to feed the children balanced meals; the children were not eating enough because the family could not afford enough food; they cut the size of the children's meals because there was not enough money for food; and the children were hungry, but the family could not afford more food.

Children's hunger was much more prevalent in single-parent families than in two-parent families. Rates of hunger among children were about the same for rural Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites, but were higher for rural Hispanics. *[Mark Nord, 202-694-5433, marknord@ers.usda.gov and F. Joshua Winicki, 202-694-5448, jwinicki@ers.usda.gov]*

Table 2

**Households with poverty-related hunger, 1998**

*One or more household members experienced poverty-related hunger in 3.4 percent of rural households*

| Category | Nonmetro | Metro | U.S. total |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Percent (households) | | |
| All households | 3.4 | 3.8 | 3.7 |
| Census region: | | | |
| Northeast | 2.0 | 3.5 | 3.4 |
| Midwest | 2.3 | 3.0 | 2.8 |
| South | 4.1 | 4.1 | 4.1 |
| West | 5.1 | 4.3 | 4.4 |
| Race and ethnicity (of household head): | | | |
| White non-Hispanic | 2.8 | 2.6 | 2.6 |
| Black | 7.2 | 8.7 | 8.5 |
| Hispanic | 6.5 | 6.8 | 6.8 |
| Household structure: | | | |
| Two-parent families with children | 2.3 | 2.1 | 2.1 |
| Single-parent families with children | 10.1 | 10.5 | 10.4 |
| Multiple-adult households—no children | 1.8 | 1.9 | 1.9 |
| Single men living alone | 5.6 | 5.5 | 5.5 |
| Single women living alone | 3.7 | 4.4 | 4.3 |
| | Percent (persons)[1] | | |
| Age: | | | |
| All ages | 3.4 | 3.7 | 3.7 |
| 0-17 | 4.5[2] | 4.8[2] | 4.7[2] |
| 18-64 | 3.5 | 3.7 | 3.6 |
| 65 and over | 1.4 | 1.7 | 1.6 |

[1]Hunger is measured at the household level. In the age breakdown, the numbers represent the percentage of people in each age category living in households that registered hunger.

[2]Children are not usually hungry except in households in which adults have more severe and prolonged hunger (see table 3). Thus, the prevalence rates for children shown in this table should be interpreted as the proportion of children living in households with hunger among adults. Most of these children had diets of reduced quality and variety.

Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, August 1998.

Table 3

**Households with poverty-related hunger among children, 1998**

*Slightly more than 1 percent of rural households with children reported hunger among the children*

| Category | Nonmetro | Metro | U.S. total |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Percent (households)[1] | |
| All households with children | 1.1 | 0.8 | 0.9 |
| Race and ethnicity (of household head): | | | |
| White non-Hispanic | 1.0 | .4 | .6 |
| Black | 1.1 | 1.9 | 1.7 |
| Hispanic | 2.8 | 1.4 | 1.6 |
| Household structure: | | | |
| Two-parent families with children | .3 | .4 | .4 |
| Single-parent families with children | 2.9 | 1.9 | 2.1 |
| | | Percent (children)[2] | |
| Children | 1.0 | 1.0 | 1.0 |

[1]Households classified as having hunger among children reported multiple indicators of reduced food intake among children, including cutting the size of children's meals, children not eating enough, and children being hungry because they couldn't afford more food. Households with no children were excluded from the denominator.

[2]Children's hunger is measured at the household level. In the bottom row, the numbers represent the percentage of children living in households in which any children were hungry.

Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, August 1998.