

Summary and Conclusions

In 1997 and 1999, about 10 percent of families with children under age 13 were food insecure and 90 percent were food secure, according to estimates from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Although the average food insecurity of American families with children under age 13 changed only slightly between 1997 and 1999, the food security status of individual families did change substantially. This report has focused on factors found to be associated with the prevalence of food insecurity, whether food-insecure families persisted in being food insecure, and whether food-secure families became food insecure during the 2-year period.

In contrast to other research, this research examines how changes in family situations over time affect changes in reported food insecurity, using a large, representative national data base of families with children under age 13. The report has two limitations. First, the data set was not large enough to also examine changes in the incidence of hunger. Second, the report focuses solely on families with children under age 13. The findings should not be generalized to all families or to individuals.

Nine out of 10 families were food secure in 1997. Indicators of family structure and composition were consistently linked to families with children under age 13 *being* food secure in 1997 and 1999 and to food-secure families *becoming* food insecure over the 2-year period. These indicators held up, even when adjusting for other household characteristics simultaneously. In particular, families with older, more educated heads, two parents, and fewer and older children were more likely to be food secure initially and less likely to become food insecure. These families have more potential wage earners, experience, and human capital with which to earn income and fewer children who depend upon that income. Families headed by a disabled parent were less likely to be food secure and more likely to become food insecure between 1997 and 1999. Their sources of income are greatly restricted. The food security status of immigrant families is precarious. Immigrants are much less likely to be food secure and are more likely to become food insecure than nonimmigrants, even after adjusting for differences in social and economic characteristics.

About 1 out of 10 families was food insecure in 1997. About half remained food insecure in 1999, presumably because the conditions that led them to be insecure in the first place had not changed. Only three demographic factors were linked to becoming secure after we simultaneously controlled for all the factors we measured: educational level of family head, number of children, and single-parent status. Food-insecure families headed by a better educated head were significantly less likely to remain food insecure between 1997 and 1999. Food-insecure families headed by a single parent in both 1997 and 1999 were very likely to remain insecure. Larger families were also likely to remain insecure.

One of the key economic variables that affects food insecurity is low income. *Changed economic circumstances allow families to escape food insecurity.* The multivariate results showed that families with low incomes in only one year or in neither year were less likely to become food insecure by 1999 than families with low incomes in both years. In fact, families with low income in neither year or only in 1997 were 71 percent less likely to become food insecure than families that reported low income in both years. *Changed economic circumstances can also reduce the*

chances of leaving food insecurity. Food-insecure families that became low income were more likely to remain food insecure.

Food stamp benefits help relieve the unmet food needs of food-insecure families. Because households with greater unmet food needs are more likely to apply for food stamp benefits, food stamp recipients are more likely to be food insecure than nonrecipients. Additionally, food-insecure families consistently receiving food stamps were more likely to remain insecure than those not receiving food stamps. However, food stamp recipients who were food secure in 1997 and who stopped receiving food stamp benefits between 1997 and 1999 were significantly more likely to report being food insecure in 1999 than those who did not receive food stamps in either year. Their rate of entry into food insecurity increased 81 percent. One puzzle is why food stamp program participants who were food insecure in 1997 left the program between 1997 and 1999 since half were still food insecure in 1999. Research shows that, in general, most exits from the FSP result from increased income, which makes participants ineligible (Zedlewski and Brauner, 1999; Zedlewski, 2001). But income remains at a relatively low level following exit from most cash assistance programs (Cancian et al., 2002; Danziger et al., 2002; Loprest, 2001).

The dynamics of food insecurity reflect the composition and financial circumstances of families. Adding children and removing adults make families more likely to become food insecure. Increasing income increases the likelihood of becoming food secure. While food stamp benefit participation is generally a response to a severe food need, the results show that food stamps help to relieve that need. Leaving the Food Stamp Program is associated with a greater chance of becoming food insecure and a greater chance of staying food insecure. This report, a first examination of the dynamic interdependence of food assistance, food insecurity, and a variety of family characteristics over time, demonstrates the critical contribution of changing family circumstances to food insecurity.