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Household Food Security in the United States, 2004

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Abstract

Eighty-eight percent of American households were food secure throughout the entire year in 2004, meaning that they had access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. The remaining households were food insecure at least some time during that year. The prevalence of food insecurity rose from 11.2 percent of households in 2003 to 11.9 percent in 2004, and the prevalence of food insecurity with hunger rose from 3.5 percent to 3.9 percent. This report, based on data from the December 2004 food security survey, provides the most recent statistics on the food security of U.S. households, as well as on how much they spent for food and the extent to which food-insecure households participated in Federal and community food assistance programs. Survey responses indicate that the typical food-secure household in the United States spent 31 percent more on food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and household composition. Just over half of all food-insecure households participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food assistance programs during the month prior to the survey. About 20 percent of food-insecure households—3.5 percent of all U.S. households—obtained emergency food from a food pantry at some time during the year.

Keywords: Food security, food insecurity, hunger, food spending, food pantry, soup kitchen, emergency kitchen, material well-being, Food Stamp Program, National School Lunch Program, WIC

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Summary

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 enough food is limited by a lack of money and other resources. In about a third of such food-insecure households, one or more household members are hungry at times as a result. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) monitors the food security of U.S. households through an annual, nationally representative survey and has published statistical reports on household food security in the United States for each year since 1995. This report presents statistics on households' food security, food expenditures, and use of food assistance for 2004.

What Is the Issue?

USDA's domestic food assistance programs increase food security and reduce hunger by providing children and low-income people access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education. Reliable monitoring of food security, food insecurity, and hunger contributes to the effective operation of these programs as well as that of private food assistance programs and other government initiatives aimed at reducing food insecurity. USDA's annual food security report provides statistics that guide planning for Federal, State, and community food assistance programs.

What Did the Study Find?

Throughout the year in 2004, 88.1 percent of U.S. households were food secure, down from 88.8 percent in 2003. Food-secure households had consistent access to enough food for active healthy lives for all household members at all times during the year. The remaining 11.9 percent (13.5 million households) were food insecure. These households, at some time during the year, had difficulty providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources. About a third of food-insecure households (4.4 million, or 3.9 percent of all U.S. households) were food insecure to the extent that one or more household members were hungry, at least some time during the year, because they could not afford enough food. The prevalence of food insecurity with hunger was up from 3.5 percent in 2003. The other two-thirds of food-insecure households obtained enough food to avoid hunger, using a variety of coping strategies, such as eating less varied diets, participating in Federal food assistance programs, or getting emergency food from community food pantries or emergency kitchens. Children were hungry at times during the year in 274,000 households (0.7 percent of households with children) because the household lacked sufficient money or other resources for food. The prevalence of food insecurity with hunger among children has remained in the range of 0.5 to 0.7 percent (statistically unchanged) since 1999.

The number of people who were hungry because of food insecurity on a given day was a small fraction of those who were hungry at some time during the year. Converting annual into daily statistics takes into account how long those conditions lasted in the typical household. On average,

households that were food insecure with hunger at some time during the year experienced the condition in 9 months out of the past year and for a few days in each of those months. However, some households experienced just a single brief episode of hunger.

On a typical day in November 2004, for example, there were between 614,000 and 854,000 households (0.5-0.8 percent of all U.S. households) in the Nation in which one or more members were hungry because the household could not afford enough food. Children are usually shielded from hunger even when resources are inadequate to provide food for the entire family. Nevertheless, hunger among children occurred in 41,000 to 50,000 households (0.10 to 0.13 percent of all U.S. households with children) on a typical day.

The prevalence of food insecurity varied considerably among households of various types. Rates of food insecurity were substantially higher for households with incomes below the Federal poverty line, households headed by single women with children, and for Black and Hispanic households. Geographically, food insecurity was more common in central cities and rural areas than in suburbs, and in the South and the West than in other areas of the Nation.

Food-insecure households spent less for food than food-secure households. In 2004, the typical (median) U.S. household spent \$40.00 per person for food each week. Weekly food spending by the typical household was about 25 percent higher than the cost of USDA's Thrifty Food Plan—a low-cost food “market basket” that meets dietary standards, taking into account household size and the age and gender of household members. The typical food-insecure household spent 2 percent less than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, while the typical food-secure household spent 28 percent more than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, or 31 percent more than the typical food-insecure household.

Some food-insecure households turn to Federal food assistance programs or emergency food providers in their communities when the households are unable to buy enough food. Just over half of the food-insecure households surveyed in 2004 said that in the previous month they had participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food assistance programs—the National School Lunch Program, the Food Stamp Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). About 20 percent of food-insecure households obtained emergency food from a food pantry at some time during the year, and 3 percent ate one or more meals at an emergency kitchen.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data for the ERS food security report come from an annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau as a supplement to the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS). USDA sponsors the survey, and ERS compiles and analyzes the responses. The food security supplement covers about 50,000 households and is a representative sample of the U.S. civilian population of 113 million households. The food security survey asks households 18 questions about experiences and behaviors that indicate food insecurity. Based on their responses, households are classified as food secure, food insecure without hunger, or food insecure with hunger. Hunger among children is measured by responses to a subset of questions about the conditions and experiences of children. Survey respondents also report the amounts their households spent on food and whether they used public or private food assistance programs.