

ERS *Report Summary*

Economic Research Service

September 2012

U.S. Department of Agriculture



This is a summary
of an ERS report.

Find the full report at
<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err141.aspx>

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.

Household Food Security in the United States in 2011

Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews,
and Steven Carlson

What Is the Issue?

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 adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources. Food and nutrition assistance programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) increase food security by providing low-income households access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education.

USDA also monitors the extent and severity of food insecurity in U.S. households through an annual, nationally representative survey sponsored by USDA's Economic Research Service. Reliable monitoring of food security contributes to the effective operation of the Federal programs as well as private food assistance programs and other government initiatives aimed at reducing food insecurity. This report presents statistics from the survey covering households' food security, food expenditures, and use of food and nutrition assistance programs in 2011.

What Did the Study Find?

The percentage of U.S. households that were food insecure remained essentially unchanged from 2010 to 2011, while the percentage with food insecurity in the severe range—described as very low food security—increased.

- In 2011, 85.1 percent of U.S. households were *food secure* throughout the year. The remaining 14.9 percent (17.9 million households) were *food insecure*. Food-insecure households (those with low and very low food security) had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources. The change from the 2010 estimate (14.5 percent) was not statistically significant, meaning that the difference may be due to sampling variation.
- In 2011, 5.7 percent of U.S. households (6.8 million households and one-third of all food-insecure households) had *very low food security*. In these households, the food intake of some household members was reduced and normal eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year due to limited resources. The prevalence of very low food security returned to the level observed in 2008 and 2009, a statistically significant increase from the 5.4-percent level of 2010.

www.ers.usda.gov

Increases in the prevalence of very low food security were greatest for women living alone, Black households, and households with annual incomes below 185 percent of the poverty line.

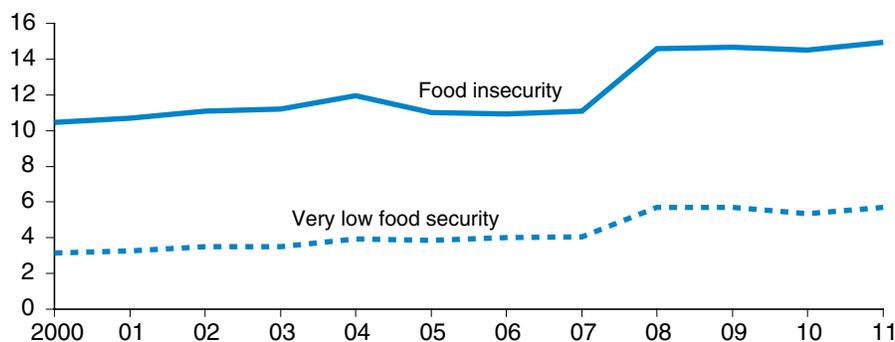
- Children were food insecure at times during the year in 10.0 percent of households with children (3.9 million households), essentially unchanged from 9.8 percent in 2010. These households were unable at times during the year to provide adequate, nutritious food for their children.
- While children are usually shielded from the disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake that characterize very low food security, both children and adults experienced instances of very low food security in 1.0 percent of households with children (374,000 households) in 2011, unchanged from 2010.
- For households with incomes near or below the Federal poverty line, households with children headed by single women or single men, and Black and Hispanic households, rates of food insecurity were substantially higher than the national average. Food insecurity was more common in large cities and rural areas than in suburban areas and other outlying areas around large cities.
- Typically, households classified as having very low food security experienced the condition in 7 months of the year, for a few days in each of those months.
- The typical food-secure household spent 24 percent more for food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and composition, including food purchased with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (formerly called food stamps).
- Fifty-seven percent of food-insecure households in the survey reported that in the previous month, they had participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food and nutrition assistance programs.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data for the ERS food security reports come from an annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau as a supplement to the monthly Current Population Survey. USDA's Economic Research Service sponsors the annual survey and then compiles and analyzes the responses. The 2011 food security survey covered 43,770 households comprising a representative sample of the U.S. civilian population of 119 million households. The food security survey asked one adult respondent in each household a series of questions about experiences and behaviors that indicate food insecurity, such as being unable to afford balanced meals, cutting the size of meals because of too little money for food, or being hungry because of too little money for food. The food security status of the household was assigned based on the number of food-insecure conditions reported.

The prevalence of food insecurity changed little since 2008-09

Percent of households



Source: Calculated by USDA, Economic Research Service based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data.