

Household Food Security in the United States, 2002. By Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson. Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 35.

Abstract

Eighty-nine percent of American households were food secure throughout the entire year 2002, 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 10.7 percent in 2001 to 11.1 percent in 2002, and the prevalence of food insecurity with hunger rose from 3.3 percent to 3.5 percent. This report, based on data from the December 2002 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 U.S. spent 35 percent more on food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and household composition. Just over one-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 19 percent of food-insecure households—3.0 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

A large majority of U.S. households were food secure in 2002, but food security declined somewhat from the previous year. Eighty-nine percent of American households were food secure throughout the entire year 2002, meaning that they had access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. The prevalence of food insecurity increased from 10.7 percent of households in 2001 to 11.1 percent in 2002, and the prevalence of food insecurity with hunger increased from 3.3 percent to 3.5 percent.

Food security is one of several necessary conditions for a population to be healthy and well-nourished. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) monitors food security in the Nation's households through an annual U.S. Census Bureau survey of some 50,000 households. The most recent food security survey reveals that 88.9 percent of U.S. households were food secure throughout calendar year 2002. The remaining 11.1 percent of U.S. households (12.1 million) were food insecure. At some time during the year, these households were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food for all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources.

About one-third of food-insecure households (3.8 million, or 3.5 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 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. Children were hungry at times during the year in 265,000 households (0.7 percent of households with children) because the household lacked sufficient money or other resources for food.

On average, households that were food insecure with hunger at some time during the year experienced the condition in 8 or 9 months, but for only a few days in each month. During the 30-day period from early November to early December 2002, 2.7 percent of

U.S. households (2.9 million households) were food insecure with hunger, compared with the annual rate of 3.5 percent. The prevalence of food insecurity with hunger on any given day during that period was much lower than the annual rate, averaging about 0.5 to 0.7 percent of households (517,000 to 775,000 households).

The amount households spend for food is an indicator of how adequately they are meeting their food needs. In 2002, the typical (median) U.S. household spent \$37.50 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-secure household spent 32 percent more than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, while the typical food-insecure household spent 2 percent less than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan.

Some households participate in Federal food assistance programs or turn to community resources such as food pantries and emergency kitchens for help when they lack money to buy food. Among all food-insecure households:

- 54.2 percent received help from one or more of the three largest Federal food assistance programs—food stamps, free or reduced-price school lunches, or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—during the month prior to the survey, up from 51.5 percent in 2001;
- 19.3 percent obtained emergency food from a food pantry, church, or food bank during the 12 months prior to the survey; and
- 2.5 percent had members who ate at an emergency kitchen sometime during the 12 months prior to the survey.

Some 3.3 million households—3.0 percent of all U.S. households—reported getting emergency food from food pantries, churches, or food banks one or more times during 2002.