

Corbis

Suppose you were asked to classify your weight as either underweight, healthy weight, overweight, or obese. Do you think your assessment of your weight category would square with that of public health officials?

If it does, you are more realistic than many of us. According to a recent ERS analysis based on 1994-96 data, many American adults misidentify their weight category. Forty-one percent of individuals whom health professionals would classify as overweight, but not obese, did not perceive themselves to be overweight. Among those individuals whom professionals would classify as obese, 13 percent said that their weight is about right or even too low.

ERS researchers used self-reported heights and weights to calculate survey respondents' Body Mass Indices (BMI—weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared). Adults with a BMI of 30 or above are classified as obese by public health officials. Those with BMIs at or above 25 but less than 30 are classified as overweight. ERS researchers gleaned

## What Weight Problem?

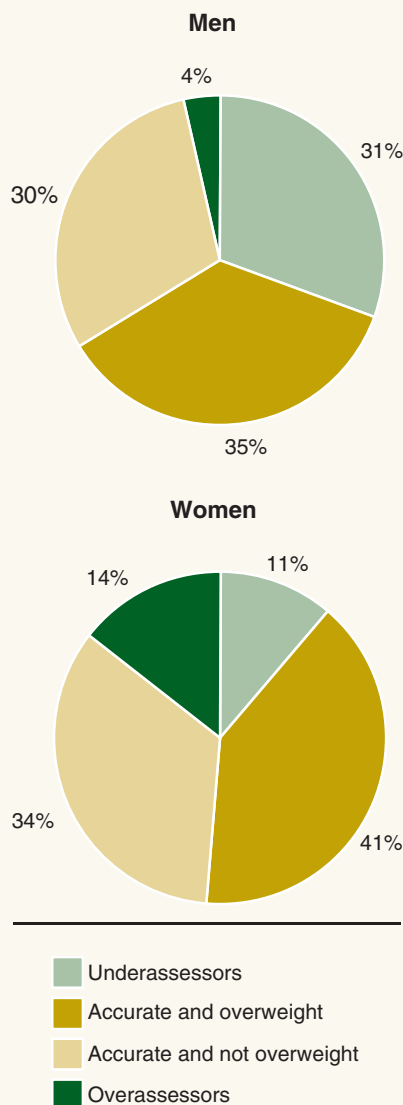
respondents' perceptions of their own weight category by their answer to the survey question: Do you consider yourself to be overweight, underweight, or about right?

Why would economists be interested in a potential mismatch between individuals' perceptions of their weight category and official classifications? It often falls

to economists to determine the cost-effectiveness of potential government programs, such as public information campaigns. This research suggests that designing a campaign to combat overweight and obesity may be difficult because the public may need to be educated not only about the linkage between weight and health, but also about whether they are considered overweight or not.

The design of information programs may be further complicated by the finding that misperceptions of weight category appear to vary by gender and other demographic characteristics. For example, women who were overweight or obese according to official measures were more likely to say they are overweight than men—41 percent of women respondents versus 35 percent of men. Fourteen percent of women respondents (versus 4 percent of men) perceived themselves as overweight when they were not. Individuals who were overweight or obese and perceived themselves to be a healthy weight were more likely to be non-Hispanic Black or Hispanic than Asian or non-Hispanic White. ERS researchers found that accuracy in assessing weight category also varies with education, age, income, and diet and health knowledge. <sup>W</sup>

### Women assess their weight more accurately than men



**Fred Kuchler**, [fkuchler@ers.usda.gov](mailto:fkuchler@ers.usda.gov)  
**Jayachandran N. Variyam**,  
[jvariyam@ers.usda.gov](mailto:jvariyam@ers.usda.gov)

#### This finding is drawn from . . .

"Misperceptions in Self-Assessed Weight Status Vary Along Demographic Lines," by Fred Kuchler and Jayachandran N. Variyam, *FoodReview*, Vol. 25, Issue 3, Winter 2002, pp. 21-27, available at: [www.ers.usda.gov/publications/FoodReview/DEC2002/frvol25i3c.pdf](http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/FoodReview/DEC2002/frvol25i3c.pdf)

# The Dynamics of Food Insufficiency

The United States has an affordable and abundant food supply. Still, a small percentage of the American population experiences food insufficiency (sometimes or often not having enough to eat). Efforts to target assistance programs to meet the needs of this group can be improved through a better understanding of how people move into and out of food insufficiency, who is most vulnerable, and how long people are food insufficient.

Researchers from ERS and The George Washington University used newly available longitudinal data from the Survey of Program Dynamics to study the dynamics of food insufficiency in the 1990s. They found that under 3 percent of Americans in 1997 lived in households that were food insufficient. Moreover, a large number of people had escaped food insufficiency; four-fifths of those in households that were food insufficient in 1994-95 were food sufficient 2 years later. However, people who were in food-insufficient households in 1994-95 were 10 times more likely than others to be in food-insufficient households in 1997. Although food insufficiency was a relatively transient hardship in most



Photo by Ken Hammond, USDA

cases, people are indeed more likely to experience food insufficiency in the future if they experienced it in the past.

Food insufficiency among U.S. households varies along social and demographic lines. Female-headed households are more likely to experience food insufficiency and are more likely to remain food insufficient than are other households. Disability status and changes in household composition, such as a change in the number of household members, are both associated with

entry into food insufficiency. Completing high school increases the likelihood of exiting food insufficiency. ERS research found that food insufficiency depends on more than just poverty status, indicating that poverty and food insufficiency capture fundamentally different dimensions of economic hardship.

This evidence supports the effectiveness of the design of the Food Stamp Program and other food assistance programs as a safety net for low-income people, particularly those who experience unexpected income difficulties. However, for persistently food-insufficient households, more targeted assistance programs may be necessary. *W*

**Karen Hamrick**, [khamrick@ers.usda.gov](mailto:khamrick@ers.usda.gov)

## This finding is drawn from . . .

*Dynamics of Poverty and Food Sufficiency*, by David C. Ribar and Karen S. Hamrick, USDA/ERS, FANRR-36, August 2003, available at:

[www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr36](http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr36)

## Food-insufficient households

Characteristics	1994-95	1997	Both years	Either year
	Percent			
All people	4.3	2.7	0.9	6.1
<b>Race/ethnicity/citizenship</b>				
White	3.7	2.2	0.7	5.1
Black	8.2	6.5	2.1	12.6
Hispanic	12.2	7.7	2.9	17.0
Noncitizen	11.8	6.6	2.8	15.5
<b>Education level</b>				
Less than high school diploma	6.5	4.6	1.7	9.4
High school diploma	3.5	1.9	0.4	4.9
College degree	0.9	0.5	0.2	1.2
<b>Household type</b>				
Married-couple with children	3.3	1.6	0.4	4.4
Female-headed with children	13.6	12.7	4.3	22.0
ABAWD	3.1	1.5	0.3	4.2

Note: ABAWD is able-bodied adults without dependents (whether or not food stamp recipient). Source: Calculated using data from the 1993 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and 1998 Survey of Program Dynamics (SPD). SIPP is a national longitudinal survey conducted by the Census Bureau and designed to capture changes in income, labor supply, household composition, and program participation. SPD is a follow-on to the 1992 and 1993 panels of SIPP.