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Finding: Food & Nutrition Assistance

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Food Insecurity in U.S. Households Rarely Persists Over Many Years

by Mark Nord



R. M. Morrison

Knowing how often and how long households are food insecure is important for understanding the extent and character of food insecurity and for maximizing the effectiveness of programs aimed at alleviating it. Food-insecure households are those that are unable at times during the year to acquire adequate food because they lack sufficient money and other resources. From 2008 to 2011, the percentage of households experiencing this condition remained between 14.5 percent and 14.9 percent. But, were



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these mostly the same households year after year? Or, was food insecurity usually a transient condition?

To answer these questions, ERS commissioned two studies that examined patterns of food insecurity in households interviewed periodically over periods of 5 years or more. The Survey of Program Dynamics (SPD) study analyzed the food security of the same households in 5 consecutive years from 1998 to 2002. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) analyzed the food security of households with children from 1998 to 2007, when the children were in kindergarten and in grades 3, 5, and 8.

Both studies found spells of food insecurity to be generally of short duration. For example, in the SPD study, 16.9 percent of households were food insecure in at least 1 of the survey years. Of those, about half (8.5 percent of households in the study) experienced the condition in only a single year, and only 1.0 percent of households in the study were food insecure in all 5 years of the study. The proportions were similar in the ECLS. In both studies, very low food security, the severe range of food insecurity marked by reductions in food intake below levels considered appropriate, was even more likely to be transient.

A corollary of the extent to which households move in and out of food insecurity is that a considerably larger number of households are exposed to food insecurity at some time over a period of several years than are food insecure in any single year. In the SPD study, the percentage of households that were food insecure in at least 1 of the survey years (16.9 percent) was about 2.5 times the average annual percentage (6.7 percent). The corresponding ratio in the ECLS was 2.3.

USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs face the double challenge of being quick and flexible enough to meet the needs of the large share of food-insecure households that experience food insecurity as a transient condition, yet being able to meet the long-term needs of the smaller proportion of households whose food insecurity results from chronic or persistent conditions.

Half of households that were food insecure at some time during a 4- or 5-year period experienced the condition in just 1 year

Condition	Survey of Program Dynamics, 1998-2002	Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-kindergarten cohort, 1998-2007 ¹
	<i>Percent of households</i>	
Food insecure in at least 1 of the survey years	16.9	20.6
Food insecure in 1 year	8.5	10.8

Food insecure in 2 years	3.6	5.5
Food insecure in 3 years	2.3	3.2
Food insecure in 4 years	1.4	1.2
Food insecure in 5 years	1.0	NA
Food insecure, average across survey years²	6.7	9.0

NA = Data were collected for only 4 years.

¹The food security of children's households was assessed when the children were in kindergarten and in grades 3, 5, and 8.

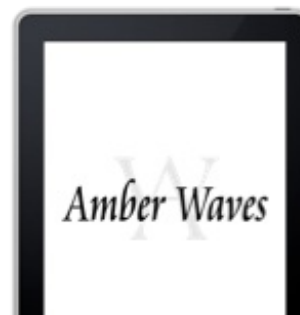
²Average annual food-insecurity rates in these surveys were lower than the national average for the same years due to the character of the samples.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using Ryu and Bartfeld, 2012, and Wilde et al., 2010.

This article is drawn from...

"Household Food Insecurity During Childhood and Subsequent Health Status: The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort," by Jeong-Hee Ryu and Judith S. Bartfeld, American Journal of Public Health, Vol. 102, No. 11, pp. e50-e55, November 2012

"In Longitudinal Data From the Survey of Program Dynamics, 16.9% of the U.S. Population Was Exposed to Household Food Insecurity in a 5-Year Period," by Parke E. Wilde et al., Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 380-398, 2010





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