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Food Insecurity in Households With Children

Food Assistance Research Brief

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Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report Number 34-13

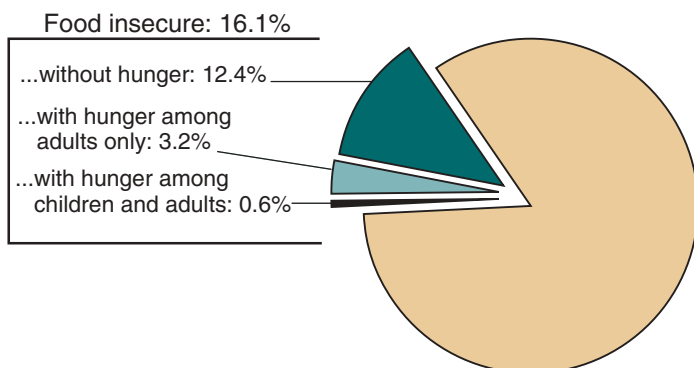
July 2003

Issue: To what extent are diets and eating patterns of American children disrupted because their families cannot always afford enough food?

Background: Household food security—access at all times to enough food for active, healthy living—is taken for granted by most American children. However, some parents do have difficulty at times getting enough food for themselves and, more rarely, for their children.

A nationally representative December 2001 food security survey indicated that 16 percent of households with children were food insecure at some time during the year (fig. 1). “Food insecure” means that the household did not have always have access to enough food for active, healthy living for all household members because they lacked money or other resources for food. Most food-insecure households obtained enough food to avoid hunger, in some cases by relying on a few basic foods and reducing variety in their diets, participating in Federal food assistance programs, or getting emergency food from community food pantries. But 3.8 percent were food insecure to the extent

Figure 1. Children in U.S. households are usually shielded against hunger even when an adult in the household is hungry



Source: Calculated by ERS based on data from Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, December 2001.

that one or more adults in the household were hungry, at least some time during the year, because they could not afford enough food. (Hunger, as measured by this survey, refers only to involuntary hunger that results from not being able to afford enough food. Those hungry only because they were dieting to lose weight, fasting for religious reasons, or just too busy to eat are excluded from the count.)

This issue brief examines the extent to which children’s eating patterns and food intake were affected by the food insecurity of their families.

Findings: Children—especially younger children—were almost always shielded from hunger even in households where adults were sometimes hungry because they lacked money for food. Only 0.6 percent of households with children reported food access problems so severe that any children in the household were hungry at any time during the year.

However, the prevalence of hunger among children does not fully represent the extent to which children’s diets and meals are disrupted by their families’ food insecurity. Disruptions less severe than those resulting in hunger among children occur with greater frequency. For example, among food-insecure households with children:

- 81 percent reported that at times during the year they had relied on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed their children because they were running out of money to buy food, and 19 percent reported that this had occurred often.
- 52 percent reported that at times they could not afford to feed their children balanced meals.
- 25 percent reported that at times their children were not eating enough because the family could not afford enough food.

Food Security Is Linked to Income and Household Composition

Food insecurity is, of course, strongly related to household income. In 2001, food insecurity was 6 times more prevalent, and food insecurity with hunger among children was 14 times more prevalent, in households with annual incomes below 185 percent of the poverty line than in households with incomes above that range.¹

Food security is also linked to household structure. In 2001, among households with children:

- 10.7 percent of those headed by a married couple were food insecure and 0.3 percent were food insecure with hunger among children.
- 31.9 percent of those headed by a single woman were food insecure and 1.4 percent were food insecure with hunger among children.
- 15.9 percent of those headed by a single man were food insecure and 0.6 percent were food insecure with hunger among children.

These differences resulted in part from income differences associated with household structure, but even when the effects of income are accounted for, single women with children are more likely to be food insecure than married couples or single men with children.

Food Security of Households with Children Improved between 1995 and 2001

The prevalence of food insecurity among households with children declined from 17.4 percent in 1995 to 14.8 percent in 1999, then rebounded to 16.1 percent in 2001. The prevalence of hunger among children declined even more sharply, falling from 1.1 percent of households in 1995 to 0.6 percent in 1999 and remaining at this level through 2001. Declines in the prevalence rates of hunger among children were substantial for some of the more food-insecure groups, such as households headed by single women and by Blacks and Hispanics. However, improvements in children's food security for these groups appears to have been dependent on the strong economy of the late 1990s, and progress slowed or reversed as the economy weakened in 2001.

Consequences of Food Insecurity for Children

Good nutrition is important for children's health and development. Of course, food security does not guarantee

¹ The Federal poverty line for a family of two adults and two children in 2001 was \$17,960.

Frequently Asked Questions about Food Security

What do food security and insecurity mean at the household level?

Food security means that all household members had access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food insecurity means that a household had limited or uncertain availability of food, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

We all get hungry now and then. What does hunger mean in this brief?

The physiological phenomenon is the same, but hunger as described in this brief is involuntary hunger that results from not being able to afford enough food.

Where do we get information about food insecurity and hunger in U.S. households?

Data for these statistics come from the Current Population Survey (CPS), a nationally representative survey of about 50,000 households that also provides data for the Nation's monthly unemployment statistics and annual poverty rates. Food security status is assessed by a series of 18 questions that ask about behaviors and experiences known to characterize households that are having difficulty getting enough food.

good nutrition, but it is difficult for families to prepare healthy, nutritious meals for their children unless they have consistent access to enough food. Food insecurity has also been found to have deleterious effects on children's psychosocial development and learning, although research into these relationships has so far established only their general outlines.

Summary: Hunger among children is rare in U.S. households, even in households that are food insecure. However, in most food-insecure households, children's eating patterns are disrupted to some extent, and in about one out of four food-insecure households, children's food intake is reduced because the household cannot afford enough food.

Information Sources:

Nord, Mark, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson. 2002. *Household Food Security in the United States, 2001*. FANRR-29. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. Available at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodsecurity>

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