

Hunger in the United States



USDA Photo/Ken Hammond

I's

Tuesday morning, and 32-year-old Natalie peers into the window of the local food pantry on the way to her mother's house. "I know the pantry's not normally open today," she says, but she had seen a few people gathered there earlier and hoped that a surprise food shipment had come in.

"Sometimes we're lucky and an extra truck stops here," she says. But most times, the local pantry in Shelby, Miss., is not open. It has two food drops a month, and within an hour of a truck arriving, a line of people already has formed down the block.

Natalie explains how she's been out of work now for almost two years, after a manufacturing plant that had employed nearly half the town closed its doors. Her mother watches her two children most days while she registers with temporary placement agencies 45 miles away. She's had on-and-off employment, but nothing that's turned into a permanent, full-time stint.

"It's hard," she says of trying to keep up with the rent and other bills. She calls herself lucky because most of the town is in the same plight, so people are more understanding if she has to pay the rent a bit late. "I worry a lot," she says. "Sometimes I cry. But what are you going to do? I have to keep on for my children."¹

Natalie is just one of the nearly 35 million people in the United States who lives in a household that has difficulty at times during the year putting enough food on the table. To advocates, she is one of millions of Americans fighting hunger. To researchers, she is part of a household that is food insecure.

The word "hunger" conjures images of people severely malnourished and perhaps starving, as still happens in some parts of the world. But this type of extreme hunger or calorie deficiency is rare in the United States, with the exception of a few vulnerable populations such as people who are homeless.

Using the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' (FAO) undernourishment measure, an estimated 2.75 percent of the U.S. population has inadequate calorie intake, as compared to countries like Somalia and Burundi, which have rates over 65 percent. Protein-energy malnutrition also is rare in the United States, with about 400 deaths per year, usually cases of child abuse and neglect or debilitating illness.²

This makes sense given that the United States is both the world's largest exporter and importer of food. A shortage of food is not the problem. But despite this abundance, what this measure fails to reflect is the struggle some people in the United States face in providing themselves and their families adequate food



BPW Photo/S. Burch

Food pantries and soup kitchens, such as this one in Jackson, Miss., help feed more than 13 million people every month, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

at all times – a struggle that has worsened over the past few years.

Hunger has been on the rise in the United States three years in a row. Poverty also is on the rise. The government has promised to cut U.S. hunger and food insecurity in half by 2010.³ But it now has less than seven years to fulfill this promise and reduce by about 20 million the number of people living in homes at risk of hunger.⁴

Measuring U.S. Hunger

The effort to measure U.S. hunger began more than 30 years ago, when reporters and elected officials first found extreme forms of hunger among America's poor farmers and other rural populations, especially in Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta and on Native American reservations. The first attempts to measure hunger were based on definitions of malnutrition, similar to what was being used in developing countries.

But as the national debate evolved, it became clear that hunger in the United States was more of an economic issue; it more often was about people not always having enough money to buy food. In 1990 Congress passed the National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act, which required a plan to be developed for measuring food security.⁵ In 1995 the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) crafted a set of questions to measure food security, which has become part of the Current Population Survey.

One Indiana Family Finds Even Government Help Falls Short of Need

By Melvin Durai

A well-stocked fridge and tidy home may not show it, but these are worrisome times for Larry Dye and Miriam Delgado. Without permanent jobs, the Lafayette, Ind., couple have had to resort to various means – even donating blood plasma – to provide for themselves and three children: their 17-month-old daughter, Chastity; and Larry’s two nieces, Kelly, 6, and Jessica, 3.

“I’m not really concerned about myself,” says Larry, 21, who is taking care of his nieces temporarily while their divorced parents sort out personal problems. “I’m worried about the kids. Their needs come before mine.”

Snacking on orange Jello and bagels, the children look well-fed and healthy, thanks in large part to the \$240 in food stamps the family receives monthly.

“If it wasn’t for food stamps, we’d have it really hard,” Larry says.

The food stamps provide all the necessities, but don’t stretch as far as the couple would like. “Most of the time, it becomes very tight,” Larry says. “It’s just having this many kids – they’re always hungry.”

They try to save money by buying most of their groceries at Aldi, a discount food store. “I like going there, because it’s a lot cheaper,” says Miriam, 19.

During her pregnancy and her daughter’s first year, Miriam received vouchers from WIC, about \$25 a month to buy nutritious food for herself and formula for the baby.

She also has visited local food pantries – during a month when she didn’t receive food stamps because she had missed an appointment to renew them. “I didn’t have transportation to get to the office,” she says.

Both she and Larry have held a variety of blue-collar jobs, most assigned by a temporary-placement agency and paying only minimum wage. Miriam has been a factory worker and receptionist; Larry a roofer, janitor and car washer, among other jobs.

“We make a little money here and there, enough for gas and diapers,” Miriam says.

About once a month, Larry receives a \$25 check for donating plasma, money that helps buy diapers and wipes. “I don’t like doing it that much,” he says, “because it wears me out.”



Larry Dye, Miriam Delgado and their three children (left to right) – Chastity, 17 months; Jessica, 3; and Kelly, 6 – sit outside their home in Lafayette, Ind. Even with the help of food stamps, the family finds it difficult to buy all the food they need every month.



Miriam Delgado feeds her 17-month-old daughter, Chastity, a Jello cup that the girls made the previous day.

Though their expenses rose after Chastity’s birth, they weren’t all that comfortable about seeking food stamps. “We felt kind of odd about it,” Larry says. “It was our first kid. We wanted to do everything right.”

“I felt weird, because I’ve never really asked for help before,” says Miriam.

Her parents are financially secure and give her money whenever she asks. “But I usually don’t like to call them up and say, ‘Hey, I need some money,’” she says.

Despite her misgivings about seeking help, she was forced to turn to Medicaid during her pregnancy and delivery. “I knew I couldn’t afford the medical bills,” she says.

While she and Chastity are covered by Medicaid, Larry lacks insurance of any kind. “If I did, I’d get my teeth taken care of,” he says of his two cavities.

They live in government-subsidized housing, paying only \$25 a month for their small townhouse, which looks ragged outside but clean

and homey inside. On a wire cart beside their circular-glass dining table sit two loaves of bread and a bag of bagels. The refrigerator door displays the children’s alphabet magnets and crayon drawings. Inside, among the milk and eggs, are cups of Jello and a cake, which Miriam and the girls made the previous day, along with Kool Aid and frozen Popsicles.

“They were having a blast,” Miriam says. “They get so happy when we do things like that.”

Melvin Durai is a freelance writer who lives in Lafayette, Ind.

This survey contains a series of 18 questions to gauge the food security status of a household (10 questions for households without children) for the past 12 months (see Figure 2.3).⁶ The first question is subjective, asking whether the household ever worried about having enough food to last the month. The other questions are objective and deal with economic realities of food situations in the house, such as having enough money to eat balanced meals. Essentially, the survey is designed to distinguish between people who consistently have access to enough food (food secure), people who are unable to count on regular, adequate, nutritious meals (food insecure), and people who suffer the physical distress of sometimes not having enough to eat because they can't afford enough food (food insecure with hunger).

USDA defines food security as, at a minimum, the "ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and the assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways."⁷ While the food security survey is a starting point to understanding the depth and degree of hunger, some critics question whether it captures the full extent of food insecurity in the United States.

America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest organization of emergency food providers, interviewed people using its facilities throughout the country and compiled the findings in a report titled, *Hunger in America 2001*.⁸ Based on person-to-person interviews with 32,000 clients and 24,000 questionnaires completed by agency staff, America's Second Harvest determined that it serves an estimated 23.3 million people annually. In any given week, its facilities assist approximately 7 million people.

These findings contrast with USDA's most recent survey, which found only 3.3 million households reporting that they received food from an emergency source, such as a church, food bank or food pantry.⁹ This discrepancy is important because people seeking emergency food assistance essentially are food insecure. The different totals have raised important questions that have researchers looking at possible ways to further improve USDA's food security measure (see related story, p. 32).

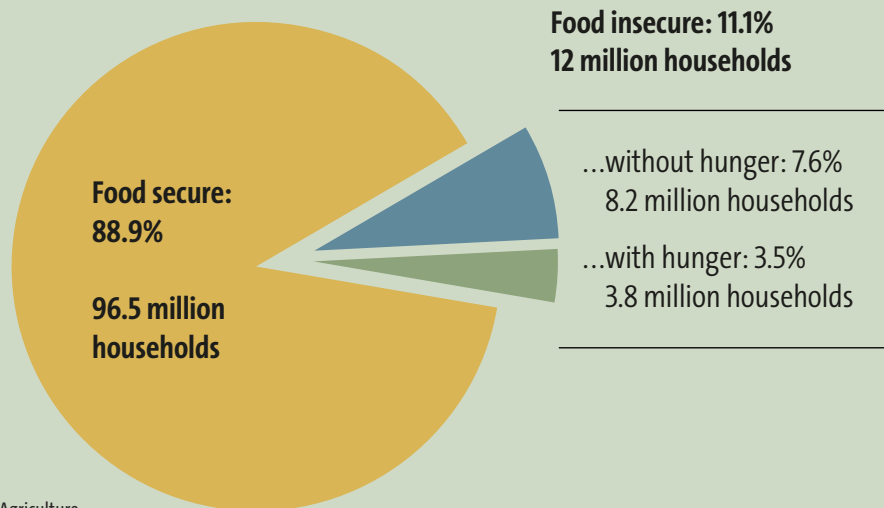
Already, the USDA has followed up with additional research to better understand how food insecure families use emergency services and whether the services complement national food assistance programs. In July 2003, USDA released a study, "The Emergency Food Assistance System – Findings From the Client Survey," which found 13.6 million people used emergency food services in a typical 2001 month. Of these, three out of four people were determined to be food insecure.¹⁰

Additional research is needed to ensure that people are not being missed by the official food security measure. For example, migrant farm workers may seek emergency services, but are not captured in the federal survey. Similarly, nearly all military personnel are excluded from the Current Population Survey and therefore excluded from national food security statistics.

What The Numbers Say

According to USDA's most recent survey, nearly 35 million people lived in households that were food insecure at some time during 2002 – a jump of 1.26 million people. Some 9.3 million people lived in households in which one or more persons were hungry at times during the year because they lacked sufficient money and other resources for food.¹¹

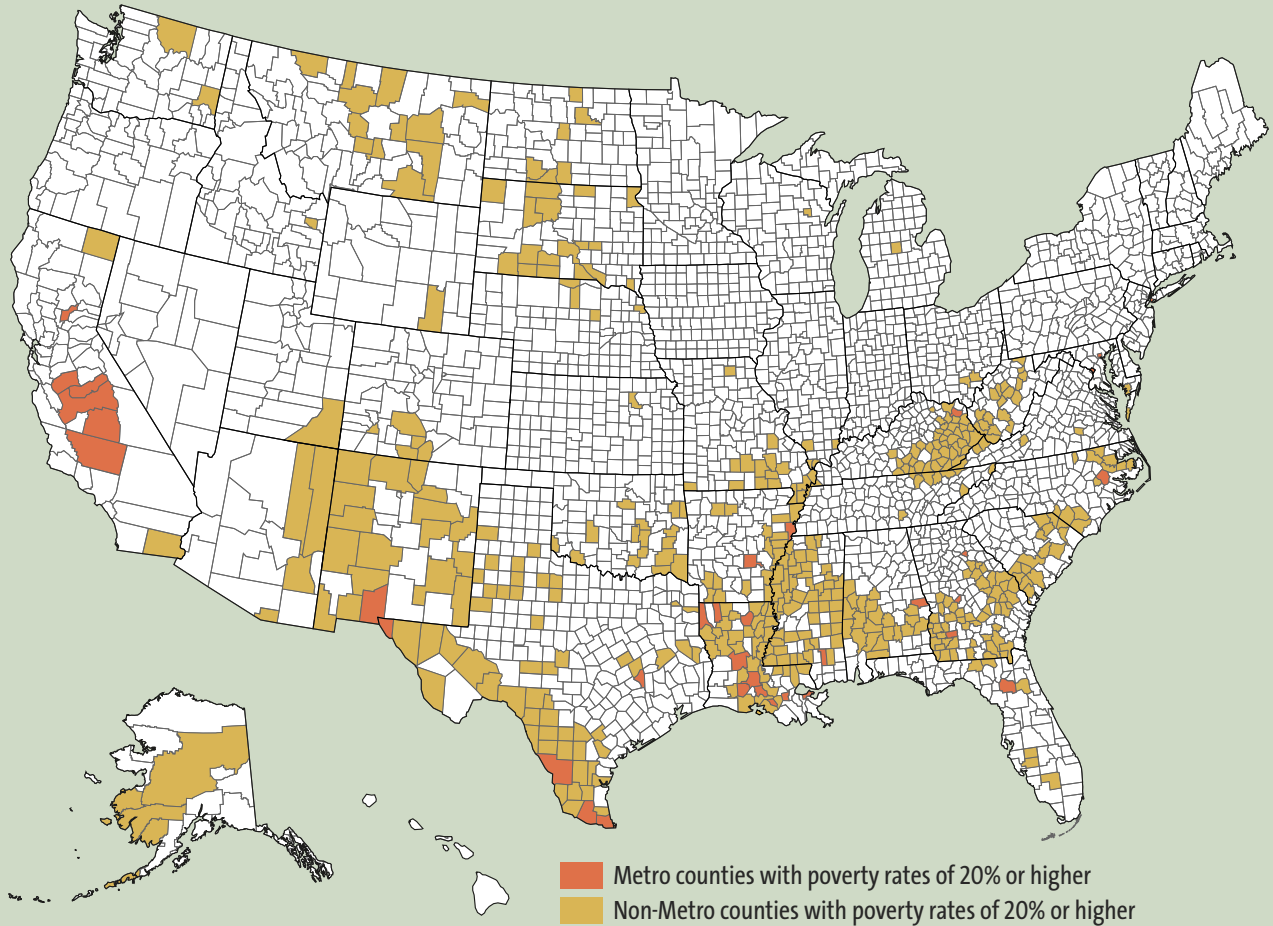
FIGURE 2.1
How Many U.S. Households Are Food Insecure?



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

FIGURE 2.2

High Poverty Counties: Counties with Poverty Rates 20% or Higher in 1999



Map prepared by the RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center, with data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

People who discount that hunger exists in the United States point to these numbers and the food security survey and say that because being considered “food insecure” can mean that a family only had to cut back on what they ate once in a year, most of this measure likely includes people who had just that experience. The food security approach is designed to register occasional or episodic occurrences. And the survey finds that only one in every five food insecure households experience such conditions frequently or chronically.

However, when looking at the more severe experience of food insecurity with hunger, two of every three households experience it on a recurring basis. On average, these households must cut back on what they eat or skip meals eight-to-nine months of the year.¹²

Where Is Hunger?

Broadly speaking, food insecurity and hunger are more prevalent in regions that also have higher poverty rates. While the national food insecurity rate is 11.1 percent, it is highest in the South (12.4 percent) and West (12.1 percent), with the Midwest and Northeast under the national average at 9.6 percent and 9.2 percent, respectively.¹³ Food insecurity with hunger follows a similar pattern.

It would make sense that where there is more food insecurity, there would be more hunger. However, that is not always the case. In 2002 Utah had the highest food insecurity rate at 15.2 percent, followed by Mississippi and Texas, both at 14.8 percent. But Oklahoma and Oregon had the highest food insecurity with hunger rates, at 5.1 percent and 5 percent, respectively.

Other states that have high rates of food insecurity and hunger include Arizona and New Mexico, while some of the lowest rates are found in Delaware, Massachusetts and New Hampshire – all with food insecurity rates below 7 percent.

While greater numbers of people living in urban areas face food insecurity and hunger (9.6 million households), the rates for food insecurity and hunger are slightly higher in rural areas.¹⁴ The food insecurity rate in metropolitan areas is 11 percent while in rural areas it is 11.6 percent, representing 2.4 million households. However, the rates are highest for people living in central cities: 14.4 percent.¹⁵

Pockets of Hunger

The national survey's strength is highlighting some of the general populations that are at risk for food insecurity, but other evidence shows pockets of hunger throughout America as well. These pockets are areas or regions of the country that are experiencing substantially higher rates of food insecurity and hunger than the rest of the nation. These pockets include, but are not limited to, Native American reservations, some parts of Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta and among farm workers mostly in California and the Southwest-border states of New Mexico and Texas.

While 11.1 percent of U.S. households are food insecure, the rate is 22.2 percent in Native American households – twice the general population. Poverty here is not only widespread, but also severe. Five of the top 10 counties for extreme child poverty (below 50 percent of poverty line) are located in South Dakota and contain largely Native Americans.¹⁶ There, hunger was almost three times higher, with 8.6 percent of Native American households experiencing hunger compared to 3.3 percent nationally. With poverty and unemployment rates two-to-three times higher than the national average as well, Native American communities struggle with health and nutrition problems.¹⁷

Native Americans also face problems with obesity. Because of poverty and lower quality food selection, many Native Americans are forced to buy cheap food that is higher in fat and has much lower nutritional quality than other foods. And because money may run out at the end of the month, as happens in many food insecure households, families can fall into a cycle of eating more food at the beginning of a month to compensate for skimping at the end of the previous month.¹⁸

Appalachia also continues to struggle with food insecurity and hunger. The Appalachian region of Kentucky “was significantly more food insecure than other regions” of the state, researchers found in 1999.¹⁹

Migrant farm workers are another sub-population that suffers from nutrition problems: 61 percent of



USDA Photo/Ken Hammond

People who are hungry or food insecure most often are poor or facing economic hardship. Recent hikes in housing and health care costs coupled with high unemployment over the past few years make it even harder for low-income families to cover basic household needs, such as food.

all farm workers live in poverty, with two-thirds of foreign-born farm workers falling below the poverty line.²⁰ According to the California Research Bureau, “Farm workers suffer a higher incidence of malnutrition than any other sub-population in the country.”²¹ Infant mortality rates among migrant farm worker families are more than twice that of the overall population, and their children suffer from deficiencies of vitamin A, calcium and iron at higher rates than most children. The U.S. Department of Education found that more than two in five migrant farm worker families suffered from seasonal food shortages.²²

The Mississippi Delta has been plagued with poverty and hunger for decades. With poverty a major factor influencing food security, the counties that line the Delta in both Louisiana and Mississippi are among the nation's highest in childhood poverty. The Lower Mississippi Delta, including counties in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi, has food insecurity rates (21.1 percent) and hunger rates (6.5 percent) more than twice the national average.²³ According to the Lower Mississippi Delta Nutrition Intervention Research Initiative's 2002 annual report, “Nutrition-related chronic diseases in the [Lower Mississippi Delta] are among the nation's highest,” and the area “is underserved by food and nutrition and other health professionals.”²⁴ In some of these counties, more than 30 percent of children live in extreme poverty or below half the poverty line (see Figure 2.2).²⁵

Better Understanding the Pluses, Minuses of the U.S. Food Security Measure

The Current Population Survey (CPS) contains a series of 18 questions used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to gauge the food security status of a household for the past 12 months (10 questions for households without children).

The first question is subjective, asking whether the household ever worried about having enough food to last the month. The other questions are objective and deal with economic realities of food situations in the house, such as having enough money to eat balanced meals or if anyone in the house had to skip a meal or cut back on how much they normally would eat due to lack of money for food. Households that answered affirmatively (Yes, I have had to skip a meal because of lack of food) to three or more questions are considered food insecure.

Survey Weaknesses

The survey is conducted by phone and based on a list of people with addresses. This means that people without phones or addresses, such as the homeless and seasonal migrant workers, are not surveyed. Some

researchers also have expressed concern that when interviewed, a small number of people may not be willing to admit to running out of food.

In addition to the 11.1 percent of households classified as food insecure, a significant number of households responded affirmatively to one or two of the 18 survey questions. While not technically food insecure (which requires three indications of food insecurity), the food security of these households may have been tenuous at times. Some may be on the brink, perhaps a medical crisis or job loss away, from becoming food insecure. If these households were added to the official totals, food insecurity rates would jump to 37.5 percent of households with children and 14.3 percent of households without children.¹

By confirming even one food insecurity indicator, families affirm that they lacked “assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways,” a condition that the Life Sciences Research Office includes in its definition of food insecurity. Consequently, USDA is examining this group further to better understand its food security situation.



Celia Escudero-Espadas

Early research indicates that the lack of school meal programs during the summer contributes to higher food insecurity rates for low-income families with children.

FIGURE 2.3

How is Food Security Measured? Questions in the Food Security Scale



Source: Mark Nord, ERS, U.S. Department of Agriculture

While the CPS supplemental survey has been used since 1995, it has been used in different months in different years (April 1995; September 1996; April 1997; August 1998; April 1999 and September 2000). Starting in 2001, it has been administered in December every year.²

It would seem that when asked about the past year, it should not matter when people are surveyed – spring or fall. But food insecurity rates were higher when surveyed in the fall than in the spring, by a little more than 1 percent. (Hunger was higher by 0.6 percent.) One explanation could be that people recall recent events more easily than those further in the past.

Another explanation is that people have different household costs, depending on the season. In a recent paper, USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) attributes some of the seasonal fluctuation in food security numbers to families' higher costs of cooling residences during summer months, especially among low-income elderly households.³ In fact many households face high utility bills at both temperature extremes. Some experience a "heat or eat" dilemma in the winter, and even more go without food when they face "cool or eat" in the summer. Tentative evidence also suggests that the lack of school meal programs during the summer contributes to food insecurity among low-income households with children.

The complexity of the food security measure also can be a disadvantage. In educating people about hunger in the United States or reporting on the country's progress against hunger, one has to explain what "hunger" and "food insecurity" mean and how they are measured. That said, the complexity of the measure does reflect the reality that people experience hunger at various degrees, which also is important.

Positive Steps

Having an official, nationwide annual survey of hunger and food insecurity has been a major step forward on the road to ending hunger in the United States. Moreover, these annual surveys are beginning to show revealing trends, such as the impact of utility costs on household budgets. Over time, such analysis will deepen and strengthen our understanding of U.S. hunger.

A significant improvement has been USDA's efforts to standardize data collection and reporting. Still, the agency needs to improve how it releases and publicizes this information. The 2003 report on household food security was published without advance notice or fanfare, and at a time designed to minimize press coverage – late in the afternoon on Halloween Friday.

By setting a predetermined date for the report's release, hunger advocacy groups and the media could do more to make the nation aware of the United States' progress to cut hunger in half.

¹ Though classified food secure, 11 percent of households with children and 6.2 percent of households without children reported affirmatively to at least one indicator of food insecurity; Mark Nord, et al., *Household Food Security in the United States, 2002*. ERS, USDA (Washington, DC: USDA) October 2003, 39.

² Barbara Cohen, Mark Nord, Robert Lerner, James Parry and Kenneth Yang, *Household Food Security in the United States, 1998 and 1999: Technical Report*. ERS, USDA, E-FAN 02-010 (Washington, DC: USDA) June 2002. Found at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan02010/efan02010fm.pdf>.

³ Mark Nord, "Keeping Warm, Keeping Cool, Keeping Food on the Table: Seasonal Food Insecurity and Costs of Heating and Cooling." Unpublished conference presentation, July 7, 2003; Mark Nord and Kathleen Romig, "Hunger in the Summer: Seasonal Food Insecurity and the National School Lunch and Summer Food Service Programs," Unpublished conference presentation, Nov. 5, 2003.

Who Is Hungry?

Race

While most hungry and food insecure people in the United States are white, minorities are more likely to become food insecure or hungry.

In 2002 less than one in 10 white households experienced food insecurity, yet more than one in five Black or Hispanic households was considered food insecure.²⁶ Similar race-based income patterns were found as well. In 2002 the median white family earned \$46,900, whereas Hispanic families earned only \$33,103 and Black families only \$29,026.²⁷

Though food insecurity can be found across all incomes, it is more prevalent among people closer to the poverty line. Of those households that are food insecure, more than two-thirds are at or below 130 percent of the poverty line. Only 5.1 percent are above 185 percent of the poverty line.²⁸

Age

When children and the elderly have to go without food, they are especially vulnerable to health problems. Fortunately, they are most shielded from hunger. Whereas 11.1 percent of all households are food insecure, only 6 percent of households with elderly are. And while 3.5 percent of households experience hunger,

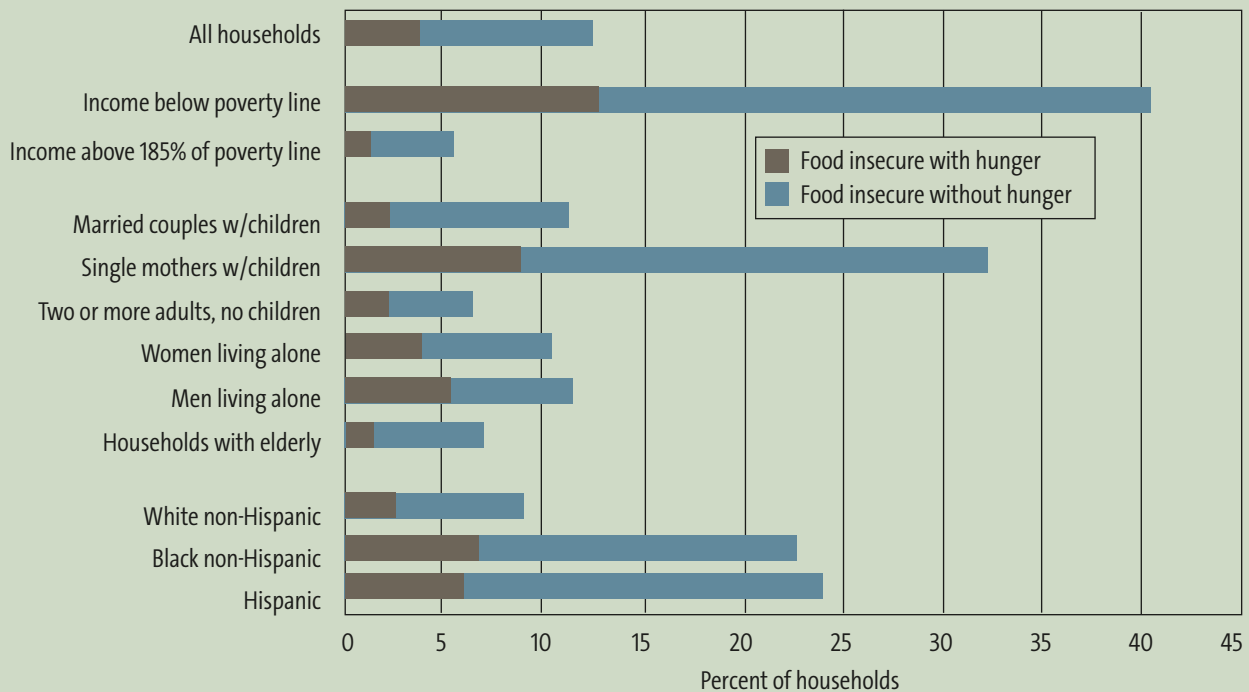
only 1.5 percent of households with elderly do.²⁹ As with other age groups, both food insecurity and hunger are more common among Black and Hispanic elderly than among white elderly.

According to the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS), irregular income – especially sudden drops in income – most contribute to higher food insecurity rates. The elderly have more wealth on average than other age groups. And for those who do not, the United States assists with programs like Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare. These income-boosting measures likely explain the higher food security rates among the elderly.³⁰

Still, service providers and news reports often relay anecdotal evidence that hunger among the elderly may be more prevalent than official reports indicate. In its 2001 survey, America's Second Harvest found that 11 percent of its clients were elderly. Research also has found that elderly who live alone are more likely to be food insecure or hungry.³¹

Moreover, despite qualifying for food stamps, few elderly apply for them. According to ERS, "For the elderly who seek food assistance, community food programs largely substitute for, rather than supplement, the Food Stamp Program."³² Increasing food stamp participation among the elderly could drastically cut this group's food insecurity and hunger rates.

FIGURE 2.4
Who Was Food Insecure?



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture



Margaret W. Nea

Children are most protected from hunger in the United States. In food insecure families, adults cut back on their own meals – and even skip meals – before they reduce the amount of food they feed their children. Still, more than half a million children went hungry at some point during 2002.

On the other end of the age spectrum, research shows that adults in food insecure households usually protect children from hunger, even if it means they forego food. While the elderly have the advantage of stable income to insulate them from hunger, children are protected from hunger by caring parents and guardians. More than 13 million children lived in food insecure households in 2002, yet only 567,000 experienced hunger.³³ In other words, more than 90 percent of children in food insecure households were protected from hunger. Still, nearly all children living in food insecure households suffer some nutritional deprivation, sometimes with lasting consequences.

Children also are helped through various government programs. Low-income children have access to free and reduced-price school lunch and breakfast, at least while school is in session. Unfortunately, the summer months leave many of these children without direct food assistance. In July 2001 the number of children served lunch through the Summer Food Service Program was 2.1 million per day – about 8 percent of the number who received free or reduced-price meals during the school year.³⁴

Young children also are aided through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants

and Children (WIC). WIC is available to pregnant or nursing mothers and parents of children up to age 5. WIC provides vouchers for certain food products that contain nutrients that poor mothers and children often lack, such as milk. Since its inception in the 1970s, WIC has become one of the nation's most popular and effective nutrition programs. In 2003 more than 7.5 million women participated in WIC.³⁵

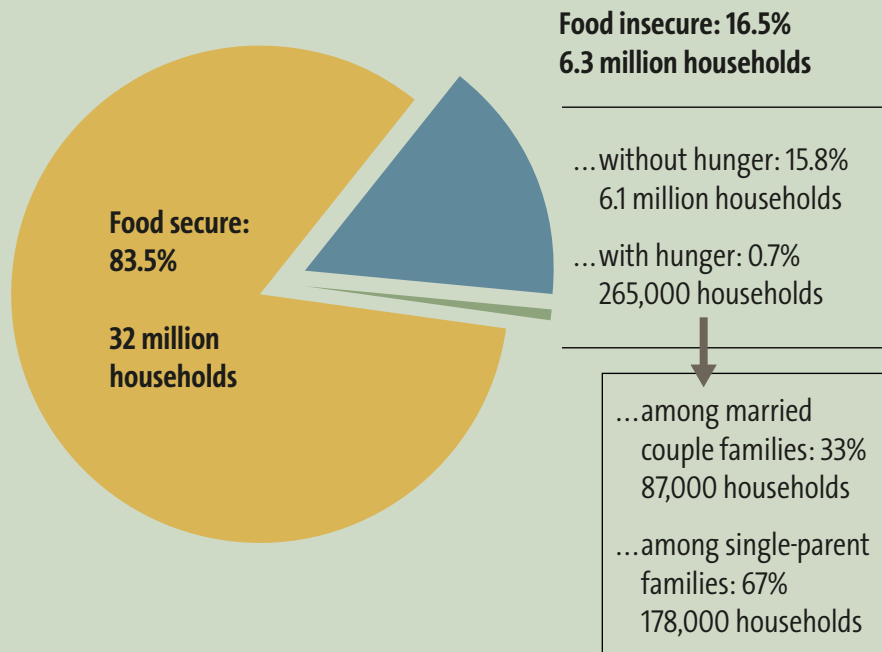
Family Structure

Single-parent households – especially single-mother households – are most at risk for food insecurity. Whereas 16.5 percent of households with children experience food insecurity, nearly one in three (32 percent) households headed by a single mother do. Children in single-mother households are 50 percent more likely than those in single-father households to experience hunger, and three times as likely as children in two-parent households. Over half (57 percent) of children who experience hunger live in homes with single mothers.³⁶

Both Black and Hispanic households with children are more than twice as likely to experience food insecurity (26.5 percent and 27.9 percent, respectively) than their white counterparts (11.9 percent). These households also are three-to-four times as likely to experience

FIGURE 2.5

How Many Households with Children Are Hungry?



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

hunger among children (1.2 percent and 1.5 percent, respectively) than white households with children (0.4 percent).³⁷

In contrast, childless households are much more likely to be food secure, with only 8.1 percent being food insecure and 3.3 percent being food insecure with hunger.³⁸ Men living alone experience more food insecurity and hunger than women living alone, which is surprising considering men typically earn more money than women.³⁹

How People Cope

Food insecurity and hunger in the United States are closely linked to being poor or experiencing periodic financial hardships. Often, hunger is not just about whether a family has enough money to buy healthy food, but whether they have enough to pay rent and utilities, child care and transportation, and if someone gets sick, medical expenses.

The economic slump of the past few years has led to higher unemployment and increasing financial pressures for families. Such pressures are only exacerbated by skyrocketing health care and housing costs. Health insurers keep raising rates, and employers are passing along greater shares of these hikes to employees. Greater numbers of people have no insurance or are declining to be insured. Meanwhile, as federal and state budgets shrink, states are reducing such social services as Medicaid.

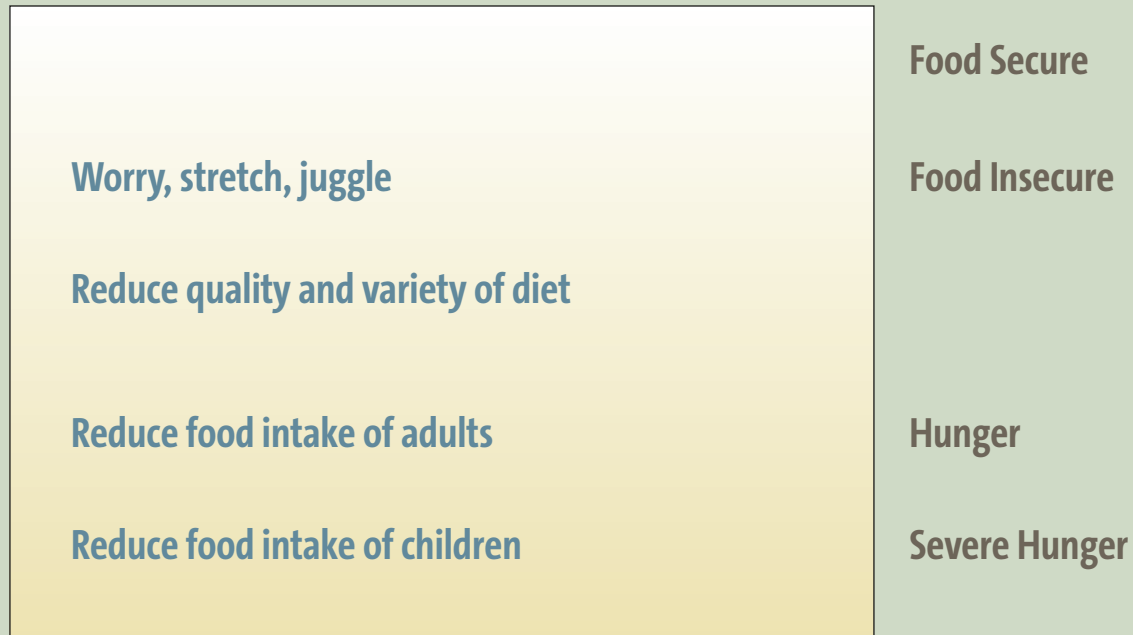
Many families, including middle-class families, are one medical crisis away from poverty. According to a recent study, one-half of all personal bankruptcy claims filed in 2000 were due to “the crushing burden of medical expenses.”⁴⁰ The America’s Second Harvest survey found that 30 percent of people using emergency food services did so after choosing to pay health care expenses over food.

Families also are paying more for housing. The continuing escalation of housing costs, especially rents in urban areas, increasingly are burdening families’ budgets. Housing experts, including those at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), use the term “fair market rent” – rent that does not exceed 30 percent of a household’s income – to determine housing that is affordable.⁴¹ Using this measure, three in four households that qualify for the Food Stamp Program are paying more in rent than they can afford. More than one in two food stamp households spend more than half of their income on housing.⁴²

Unable to afford market rents and often unable to qualify for limited housing assistance, many families are being forced to live in cramped and substandard housing. Increasing numbers of families also are becoming homeless. Inadequate, crowded or costly housing can pose serious problems to children’s physical, psychological or material well-being.⁴³ Between 1978 and 1999, the percentage of families with children paying more than

FIGURE 2.6

What Does Food Security Really Mean?



Source: Mark Nord, ERS, U.S. Department of Agriculture

half of their income for housing almost doubled, rising from 6 percent to 11 percent.⁴⁴ Among very low-income renters – those with incomes at or below half the median family income in an area – nearly 30 percent of families with children experience these severe housing problems.⁴⁵

Utility bills also compete with grocery bills. People who live in poorer neighborhoods often have older, more dilapidated homes or apartments, making it more difficult to keep them warm in the winter and cool in the summer. America's Second Harvest found that 45 percent of its clients were forced to choose between food and utilities.⁴⁶ The "heat or eat" conundrum is not a predicament that people in this wealthy country should face. Yet these are the types of decisions people are making everyday.

* * *

When Natalie thinks about providing a future for her two children, she knows that she likely will have to leave her hometown of Shelby, Miss. The thought scares her. "My family is here," she says. "And with them around, I know I'll always have someone to turn to. But in the city – I wouldn't know anyone."

But if she stays in Shelby she'll have to continue relying on the local food bank and other people for help. Neither is a choice she would willfully make.



BFWI Photo/S. Bunch

Dorothy Grady, a registered nurse and nutritionist, fights hunger in Shelby, Miss., by teaching older women and children how to grow vegetables in local gardens and raise small animals for food.