



# How adequately are food needs of children in low-income households being met? <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Food security—consistent access to adequate food for active, healthy living—is an important foundation for children's good nutrition and health. This paper provides an overview of recent research and statistics on the extent and severity of food insecurity in low-income households with children. We summarize research evidence on the determinants of food insecurity and its consequences for children's health and development and identify strengths and gaps in the current monitoring systems and research.

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## 1. Introduction

Food security—consistent access to adequate food for active, healthy living—is an important foundation for children's good nutrition, health, and development. The Federal Government invests billions of dollars each year to support and enhance the food security of the Nation's children. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) monitors the food security of households with children in an annual, nationally representative household survey. Food security data are collected in several other national surveys to enable research on the causes and consequences of food insecurity among children.

In this article, we first give an overview of the main U.S. Government programs that support children's food security. We describe briefly the survey measures of food insecurity most commonly used in the U.S. Then we provide an overview of the current state of the art in each of three areas:

- Monitoring and reporting on the food security of households with children
- Determinants of food security and food insecurity in households with children
- Consequences for children of living in food-insecure households.

For each area, we describe and assess the data available, summarize the current evidence-based knowledge, and identify gaps that exist in data or research.

## 2. Programs and policies to support and enhance children's food security

USDA in collaboration with State and local government agencies operates a suite of food and nutrition assistance programs that either target children specifically or include children among their beneficiaries. Policies that set eligibility criteria and benefit levels for these programs are important factors affecting the food security of children in low-income families. The three largest programs are:

- The Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called the Food Stamp Program, FSP) provides monthly benefits for eligible low-income households to purchase approved food items at authorized food stores. Clients qualify for the program based on available household income, assets, and certain basic expenses. In an average month of fiscal year 2008, SNAP provided benefits to 28.4 million people in the United States. The average benefit was about \$102 per person per month, and total Federal expenditures for the program were \$37.5 billion. Almost half of SNAP participants were children.
- The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) operates in about 100,000 public and nonprofit private schools and residential child-care institutions. All meals served under the program receive Federal subsidies, and free or reduced-price lunches are available to low-income students. In 2008, the program provided lunches to an average of 31 million children each school day. About half of the lunches served in 2008 were free, and an additional 10% were

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provided at reduced prices. Lunches for children from higher-income households are also slightly subsidized.

- The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a preventive nutrition program that provides grants to States to support distribution of supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and nonbreastfeeding postpartum women, for infants in low-income families, and for children in low-income families who are younger than 5 years old and who are found to be at nutritional risk. Most State WIC programs provide vouchers that participants use to acquire supplemental food packages at authorized food stores. In fiscal year 2008, WIC served an average of 8.7 million participants per month at an average monthly cost of about \$44 per person.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, about half of all births in the U.S. were to mothers who received WIC benefits.

Several smaller Federally funded programs such as the School Breakfast Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the Summer Food Service Program, and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations also support the food security of large numbers of children. The Emergency Food Assistance Program provides assistance to community food assistance agencies such as food banks and food pantries that complement the Federal food and nutrition assistance programs.

In addition to programs specifically designed to support food security, several other Federal and State policies and programs have important effects on children's food security. Cash assistance and related employment and training programs for low-income parents (much of it supported by the Federal Government's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families block grants) provide general financial support for families with children. Other targeted assistance programs such as housing and energy assistance programs and Medicaid may free up household resources that can then be used for food. Tax policies such as the size of the child tax credit, the refundable Earned Income Tax Credit, and State income and sales tax policies also affect resources that low-income households with children have available for food.

### 3. Measuring food security and food insecurity in households with children

Most household surveys that currently collect food security information use the 18-item U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) or a subset of items from it (see Nord & Hopwood, 2007, for a review of these and other food security measurement methods). The impetus to develop the HFSSM and its associated food security scales grew out of the re-emergence of hunger as a public policy issue in the 1980s. Two high-visibility reports—one by the President's Task Force on Food Assistance (1984) and the second by the Physicians' Task Force on Hunger (1985)—noted the lack of a reliable measure of the number of people experiencing poverty-related hunger and the problem for policy making caused by this lack.

The U.S. Food Security Measurement Project, a collaboration among Federal agencies, academic researchers, and both commercial and nonprofit private organizations was tasked with developing such a measure (Carlson, Andrews, & Bickel, 1999; Olson, 1999). The Project, led by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service and the Department of Health and Human Service's National Center for Health Statistics, was established in response to the National Nutrition and Related

Research Act of 1990. The Ten-Year Comprehensive Plan developed under the Act established the project to "Recommend a standardized mechanism and instrument(s) for defining and obtaining data on the prevalence of "food insecurity" or "food insufficiency" in the U.S. and methodologies that can be used across the [national nutrition monitoring program] and at State and local levels." The measurement methods developed by the Project drew on more than a decade of research by social scientists in government, academic, and nonprofit institutions (Hamilton et al., 1997a,b; Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2009, Appendix B).

The questions in the HFSSM ask about conditions and behaviors known to characterize households having difficulty meeting basic food needs. Each question asks whether the condition or behavior occurred at any time during the previous 12 months and specifies a lack of money or other resources to obtain food as the reason. Voluntary fasting or dieting to lose weight is thereby excluded from the measure.

The HFSSM supports three measures:

- Household Food Security Scale (based on all 18 items);
- Children's Food Security Scale (based on the 8 child-referenced items);
- Adult Food Security Scale (based on the 10 adult- and household-referenced items).

Each of these scales identifies households as food secure or food insecure (with respect to all household members, children, or adults, depending on the specific scale). Food-insecure households are further identified as having either low food security or very low food security.

Food-insecure households lack access, at times during the year, to enough food for active, healthy lives for one or more household members. Typically, these households reduce the quality, variety, or desirability of their diets. In the subset of food-insecure households with very low food security, food intake of one or more members is reduced and their eating patterns are disrupted at times during the year. In households with very low food security among children, food intake of one or more children is reduced and their eating patterns are disrupted at times during the year. In all households classified as having very low food security among children, the respondent reports either that children were hungry, skipped a meal, or went a whole day without eating because there was not enough money for food.

### 4. Monitoring and reporting on the food security of households with children

#### 4.1. Data

The primary data source for monitoring the food security of U.S. households is the annual Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS), sponsored by USDA and conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The CPS-FSS is a nationally representative survey of about 50,000 households including about 16,000 households with children ages 0–17. USDA uses CPS-FSS data as the basis of its annual reports on the food security of the nation's households (Nord et al., 2009). These reports provide statistics on the food security status of households with children at the national level and disaggregated by household composition, race/ethnicity, income, metropolitan residence, and Census region.

#### 4.2. Conditions and trends

In 2008, 21.0% of households with children were food insecure, and 1.3% (506,000 households) were classified as having very low food security among children (Fig. 1). Rates of food insecurity were substantially higher than the national average for single mothers with children, households headed by Blacks and Hispanics, and households

<sup>1</sup> The average benefit to recipients is somewhat higher than the average per-person program food costs because the program negotiates a discount on the cost of infant formula.

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