

Food Security

Karen A. Curtis

Since 1995 the U.S. Census Bureau has conducted an annual survey of food security as part of its Current Population Survey (CPS). The Bureau surveys a nationally representative sample of approximately 40,000 families nationwide. It asks them a series of questions about inadequacy in the quantity or quality of food eaten by adults and children in the household; instances of reduced food intake or consequences of reduced food intake for adults and for children; and concerns that the household budget is inadequate to buy enough food. Households are classified as food secure, food insecure, food insecure with hunger according to their answers to these questions.

Households that are classified as hungry are those in which adults have decreased the quality and quantity of food they consume because of lack of money to the point where they are quite likely to be hungry on a frequent basis, or in which children's intake has been reduced due to lack of family financial resources, to the point that children are likely to be hungry on a regular basis and adults' food intake is severely reduced.

Even when hunger is not present, adults in households determined to be food insecure by the survey are so limited in resources to buy food that they are running out of food, or reducing the quality of food their family eats, or feeding their children unbalanced diets, or skipping meals so their children can eat, or taking certain other steps to adjust to their economic problems that threaten the adequacy of the family's diet.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that, based on this survey, 10.5 million households in the United States (or about 10% of all U.S. households) were food insecure in 1999 and that approximately 3.1 million households had experienced hunger at some point in that year. The food insecure households contained an estimated 31 million people, of whom 12 million were children.

The CPS national sample of 40,000 households is too small to provide a good measure of food security and hunger for each state for a single year. However, an average of three years of survey data provides a sample large enough to



Karen A. Curtis is a Past President and current member of the board of the Delaware Housing Coalition and Associate Professor at the Center for Community Research and Service of the University of Delaware.

provide state-by-state household food security and hunger estimates. For the three years spanning 1996-1998, in Delaware, 8.1 percent of the households were food insecure, while 2.9 were food insecure with hunger. In 2001, 11.5 million households in the U.S. (or about 10.7% of all U.S. households) were food insecure, with approximately 3.5 million households experiencing hunger.

These numbers represent a six percent increase in the food insecurity rate (0.6 percentage points) and a ten percent increase in the rate of hungry households (0.3 percentage points) compared to 1999. The food insecure households contain an estimated 33.6 million people, including 12.6 million children. In Delaware, for the three years spanning 1999-2001, 7.3 percent of households were food insecure, while 2.1 percent experienced hunger. These state level changes were not statistically significant.

Impacts of Welfare Reform

A convergence of social/economic and political developments – rising caseload trends, increasing welfare costs, and judgments about the relationship between welfare and poverty – produced a major change in the U.S. welfare system in 1996. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) is the most substantial welfare reform legislation since the establishment of the Supplemental Security Income program and revision and expansion of the Food Stamp program in the 1970s.

The most significant change is the termination of the 61 year-old entitlement to families to cash assistance provided under Title IV-A of the Social Security Act. The 1996 Act converted AFDC, emergency assistance, and work programs to a block grant, the Temporary Assistance for

Needy Families program, with essentially fixed funding and instituted work requirements and a five year maximum life time limit on assistance. PRWORA also included \$27.7 billion in Food Stamp reductions.

One of the harshest of the changes limits individuals between the ages of 18 and 50 who are not raising children to three months of Food Stamp receipt while unemployed in any three year period. PRWORA also denies Food Stamp assistance to legal immigrants. As of July 2000, participation in the Food Stamp program had declined by nearly 40 percent from its peak in March 1994. In 2000, the Food Stamp program reached about 60 percent of individuals who were eligible for program benefits, a significant decline since 1994, when over 74 percent of eligible households were participating in the program. During fiscal year 2001, the program served over 17 million people in an average month at a total annual cost of nearly \$16 billion in benefits. The average monthly food stamp benefit was about \$170 per household.

The Food Stamp Reauthorization Act of 2002 (Title IV of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002) restored eligibility for many legal immigrants and increased benefit levels for larger households. The Act also benefits other groups, such as disabled persons, homeless persons, and responsible non-custodial parents. It gives states new flexibility to administer the program in ways that improve access and benefits. The flexibility allows states to remove barriers that discourage many needy households from applying for, or remaining on, the program. The Act includes an improved homeless shelter deduction which gives states the option of providing a standard homeless shelter deduction to homeless households that incur any shelter expenses.

Resources

- Dean, S. & Rosenbaum, D. (2002) *Implementing New Changes to the Food Stamp Program: A Provision by Provision Analysis of the Farm Bill*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. www.cbpp.org
- Food Research and Action Center (2002) *Good Choices in Hard Times: Fifteen Ideas for States to Reduce Hunger and Stimulate the Economy*. Washington, D.C.: Food Research and Action Center. www.frac.org
- Nord, M., Andrews, M. & Carlson, S. (2002) *Household Food Security in the United States, 2001*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. <http://ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr29>
- O'Brien, D., Pendergast, K., Thompson, E., Fruchter, M. & Aldeen, H.T. (2001.) *The Red Tape Divide: State-by-State Review of Food Stamp Applications*. Chicago: America's Second Harvest. www.secondharvest.org