

**Statement of Dr. Mark Nord, Sociologist  
Before the Agriculture Subcommittee on  
Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry  
July 23, 2008  
Hearing on the Short and Long Term Impacts of Hunger**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is Mark Nord, and I am a sociologist with the USDA's Economic Research Service. My main area of expertise is measuring and monitoring household food security—the extent to which households can consistently afford adequate food. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today about how USDA measures household food security and to provide an overview of recent food security statistics. I am accompanied by a representative of USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, who will also be available to answer questions.

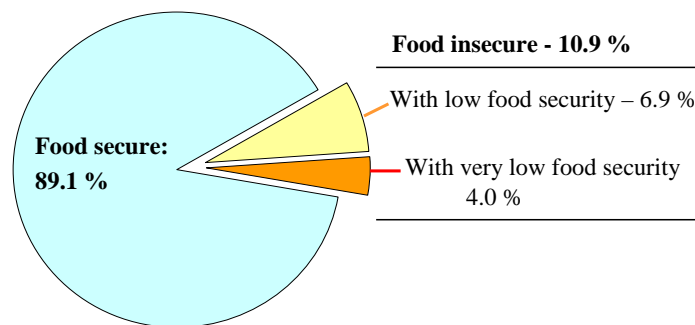
Food security is a foundation for a healthy and well-nourished population—and food security statistics are a measure of the strength of that foundation. Information on unmet food need is of particular interest to USDA because of its responsibility for the Federal food and nutrition assistance programs.

I will begin with two or three salient food security statistics and then go behind those statistics to describe how households' food security was measured. Understanding the specific food conditions households reported in order to be classified as food insecure, or as having very low food security, may provide policy officials the best sense of what the food security numbers mean and how serious the conditions described by the statistics are. I will then conclude with a few further national-level statistics.

**Household Food Security in the United States, 2006**

Most Americans can afford to put enough healthful food on the table each day. USDA estimates that slightly more than 89 percent of U.S. households were *food secure* throughout the entire year in 2006 (figure 1). Food secure households had access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. The remaining 12.6 million households (10.9 percent) were food insecure at some time during the year.

**Figure 1. Food Security of U.S. households, 2006**



Source: Calculated by USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the December 2006 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

About two-thirds of food-insecure households—those with *low food security*—obtained enough food to avoid substantial disruptions in eating patterns and food intake, using a variety of coping strategies such as eating less varied diets, participating in Federal food and nutrition assistance programs, or obtaining emergency food from community food pantries or emergency kitchens. But 4.6 million households (4.0 percent of all U.S. households) had *very low food security*—that is, they were food insecure to the extent that eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and their food intake reduced, at least some time during the year, because they couldn't afford enough food.

### **Behind the Statistics: How Does USDA Measure Household Food Security?**

USDA monitors the food security of the Nation's households through an annual food security survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The survey is administered each December as a supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS)—the same survey that provides monthly employment and unemployment statistics and annual income and poverty statistics. A nationally representative sample of about 45,000 households complete the food security survey each year.

The food security of each interviewed household is assessed by a series of questions about behaviors, conditions, and experiences that are related to households' food access. The questions cover a wide range of severity of food access problems, from worrying that food will run out to not eating for a whole day. Each question asks whether the condition or behavior occurred at any time during the previous 12 months and specifies a lack of money as the reason for the behavior or condition in question so that reduced food intake due to voluntary fasting or dieting does not affect the measure. The series includes 10 questions about food conditions of the household as a whole and of adults in the household and, if there are children present in the household, an additional 8 questions about their food conditions. The food security questions are listed in appendix A.

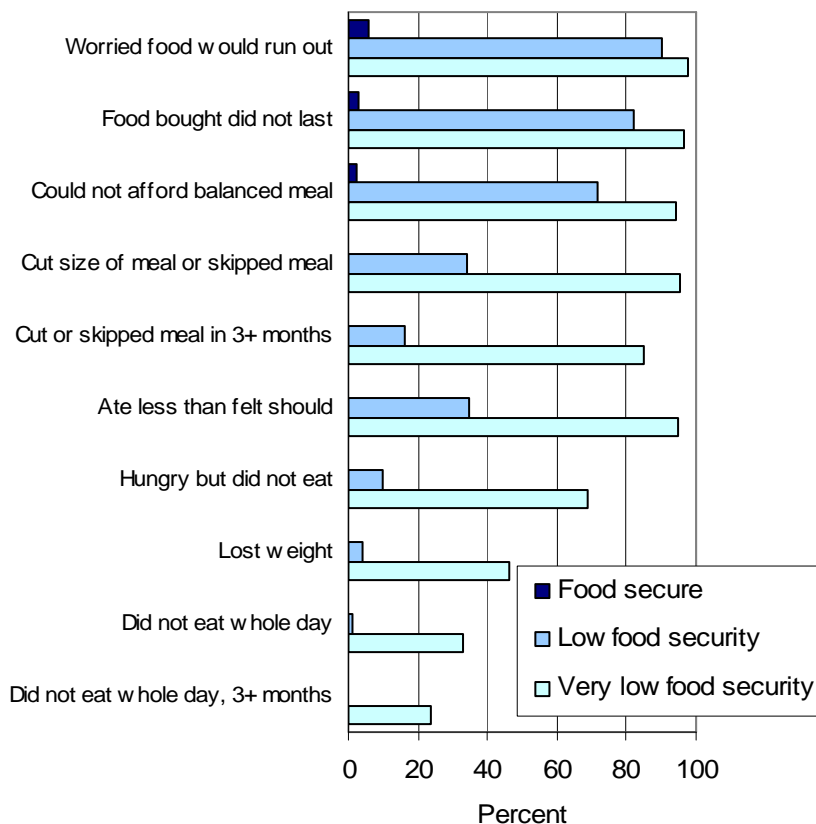
The food security status of each household is determined by the number of food-insecure conditions they report. Households are classified as *food secure* if they report no food-insecure conditions or if they report only one or two food-insecure conditions. They are classified as *food insecure* if they report three or more food-insecure conditions.

Food-insecure households are further classified as having either *low food security* or *very low food security*. Households classified as having *low food security* have reported multiple indications of food access problems and reductions in the quality or variety of their diets, but typically have reported few, if any, indications of reduced food intake. Households classified as having *very low food security* have reported multiple indications of reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns due to inadequate resources for food.

## What Are the Food Conditions in Households with Low and Very Low Food Security?

The responses of households in the December 2006 food security survey clearly reflect the difference between low and very low food security (figure 2). Households with *low food security* (about two-thirds of food-insecure households) reported mainly reductions in diet quality and variety (they could not afford to eat balanced meals) and difficulties and worries about food access. They typically report few if any indications of reductions in quantity of food intake.

**Figure 2. Households reporting each indicator of food insecurity, by food security status, 2006**



Source: Calculated by USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the December 2006 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

The defining characteristic of *very low food security* is that, at times during the year, the food intake of household members is reduced and their normal eating patterns are disrupted because the household lacks money and other resources for food. Households classified as having very low food security in the 2006 survey reported the following specific conditions:

- 98 percent reported having worried that their food would run out before they got money to buy more.
- 96 percent reported that the food they bought just did not last and they did not have money to get more.
- 94 percent reported that they could not afford to eat balanced meals.

- 95 percent reported that an adult had cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food.
- 85 percent reported that this had occurred in three or more months.
- In 95 percent, respondents reported that they had eaten less than they felt they should because there was not enough money for food.
- In 69 percent, respondents reported that they had been hungry but did not eat because they could not afford enough food.
- In 46 percent, respondents reported having lost weight because they did not have enough money for food.
- 33 percent reported that an adult did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.
- 24 percent reported that this had occurred in 3 or more months.

When interpreting food security statistics, it is important to keep in mind that households are classified as having low or very low food security if they experienced the condition at any time during the previous 12 months. The prevalence of these conditions on any given day is far below the corresponding annual prevalence.

### **How Does Food Insecurity Relate to Hunger?**

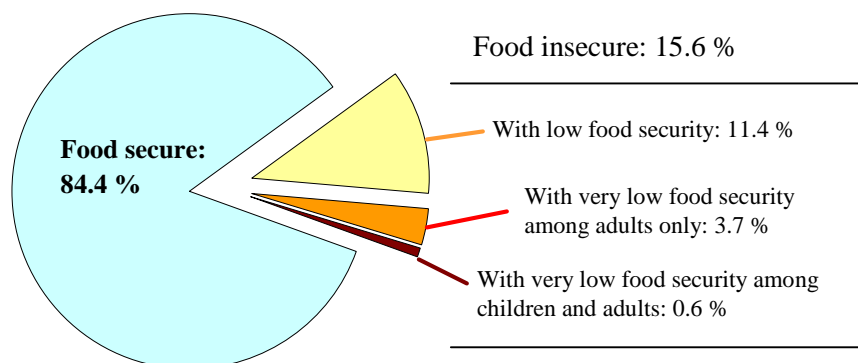
Several years ago, USDA asked the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) of the National Academies to convene an expert panel to ensure that the measurement methods used to assess households' access—or lack of access—to adequate food were conceptually and operationally sound. One of the central issues the CNSTAT panel addressed was the concept and definition of hunger and the relationship between hunger and food insecurity.

The CNSTAT panel recommended that USDA make a clear and explicit distinction between food insecurity and hunger. Food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. Hunger is an individual physiological condition that is a potential, although not inevitable, outcome of food insecurity. By measuring and monitoring food insecurity, USDA provides important information about the social and economic context in which hunger may occur, and contributes to the effective operation of the domestic nutrition assistance programs that provide millions of children and low-income people access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education.

### **Household Food Security in the United States, 2006—A Few More Statistics**

Children in most food-insecure households—even in households with very low food security among adults—were protected from substantial reductions in food intake. However in about 221,000 households (0.6 percent of households with children) one or more children were also subject to reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns at some time during the year (figure 3). In some households with very low food security among children, only older children may have been subjected to the more severe effects of food insecurity while younger children were protected from those effects.

**Figure 3. Food security in U.S. households with children, 2006 (39.4 million households)**

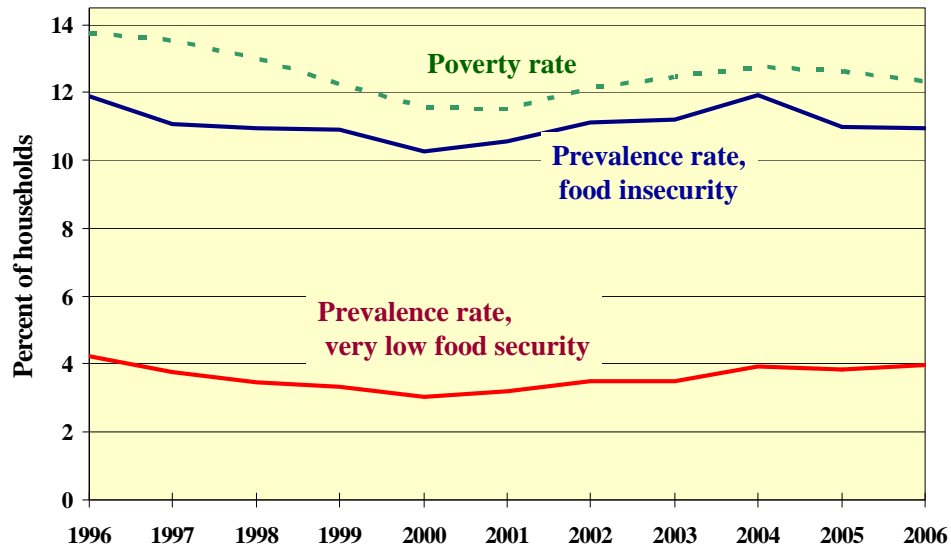


Source: Calculated by USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the December 2006 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

The prevalence of food insecurity varies considerably among different types of households. In 2006, rates of food insecurity were well below the national average for households with two or more adults and no children (6.5 percent) and for households with one or more members over the age of 65 (6.0 percent). Rates of food insecurity were substantially higher than the national average for households with incomes below the poverty line (36.3 percent), households with children headed by single women (30.4 percent) or single men (17.0 percent), and for Black and Hispanic households (21.8 percent and 19.5 percent, respectively).

Over the last decade, the prevalence of food insecurity has moved approximately in parallel with the national poverty rate, declining in the late 1990s, increasing following the recession of 2001, and declining after 2004 (figure 4). The prevalence of very low food security has remained essentially unchanged since 2004.

**Figure 4. Trends in food insecurity and poverty**



Note: Two-year rolling averages are presented for 1996-2001 to smooth seasonal fluctuations.

Source: Calculated by USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the December 2006 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I will be glad to answer questions the Committee may have.

## Appendix A

### Questions Used To Assess the Food Security of Households in National Surveys

1. “We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?
2. “The food that we bought just didn’t last and we didn’t have money to get more.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?
3. “We couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?
4. In the last 12 months, did you or other adults in the household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)
5. (If yes to Question 4) How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?
6. In the last 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)
7. In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry, but didn’t eat, because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)
8. In the last 12 months, did you lose weight because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)
9. In the last 12 months did you or other adults in your household ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)
10. (If yes to Question 9) How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?

#### *(Questions 11-18 are asked only if the household included children age 0-18)*

11. “We relied on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed our children because we were running out of money to buy food.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?
12. “We couldn’t feed our children a balanced meal, because we couldn’t afford that.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?
13. “The children were not eating enough because we just couldn’t afford enough food.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?
14. In the last 12 months, did you ever cut the size of any of the children’s meals because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)
15. In the last 12 months, were the children ever hungry but you just couldn’t afford more food? (Yes/No)
16. In the last 12 months, did any of the children ever skip a meal because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)
17. (If yes to Question 16) How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?
18. In the last 12 months did any of the children ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)

Household food security status is determined by the number of food-insecure conditions reported. (Food-insecure conditions are indicated by responses of “often” or “sometimes” to questions 1-3 and 11-13, “almost every month” or “some months but not every month” to questions 5, 10, and 17, and “yes” to the other questions.)

Households are classified as *food secure* if they report no food-insecure conditions or if they report only one or two food-insecure conditions. They are classified as *food insecure* if they report three or more food-insecure conditions.

Food insecure households are further classified as having low or very low food security by the following criteria:

- For households with no child present, 3-5 food-insecure conditions indicates low food security and 6-10 indicates very low food security.
- For households with one or more children, 3-7 food-insecure conditions indicates low food security and 8-18 indicates very low food security. Five or more food-insecure conditions *among the children* (that is, in response to questions 11-18) indicates very low food security among children.