USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service

# FOOD STAMP PARTICIPANTS FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRIENT AVAILABILITY

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## Summary

A major objective of the Food Stamp Program (FSP) is to ensure the availability of adequate nutritious food to low-income households. The National Food Stamp Program Survey conducted in 1996 collected information on customer service, access to authorized food retailers, and food security and nutrient availability from the first nationally representative sample of Food Stamp Program participants and potential participants. A primary objective of the survey was to examine the adequacy of the foods available to FSP participants and their risk of hunger. The study also examined the amount of nutrients FSP households used from home food supplies, their dietary knowledge, the determinants of food security, households' perceived reasons for food insecurity, coping strategies used to deal with food security problems, and the degree to which food security and food availability are correlated.

### Nutrient Availability

Nutrient availability for the household is calculated from a seven-day record of food used from the home food supply. This includes food used within the home, as well as foods prepared in the home but then taken elsewhere for consumption. Both purchased food and food obtained at no cost, such as home-grown produce, are included. Food use does not include foods bought and eaten outside the home but does include foods that were in the home food supplies but were then wasted or spoiled and not eaten.

The average levels of nutrients available to respondents, based on a seven-day food use survey, exceed Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) for all of the key nutrients examined. Nutrient availability as a percent of RDA ranged from 114 for calcium to 262 for Vitamin C.

However, behind the averages, substantial percentages of respondents fail to meet their RDAs. For instance, only 69 percent of food stamp households met the RDA for iron and only 79 percent met the RDA for folate.

### Food Security

Food security is assured access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum: (1) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and (2) the assured ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways (e.g., without resorting to emergency food sources, scavenging, stealing, or other severe coping strategies). These manifestations of poverty-related food insecurity are believed to have deleterious health and behavioral impacts.
Nationally, fifty percent of FSP participants experience some level of food insecurity. Twenty-eight percent were classified as food insecure without hunger, 17% as food insecure with moderate hunger and 5 percent as food insecure with severe hunger. Virtually all respondents experiencing food insecurity indicated that the main reason for their food insecurity was lack of financial resources. FSP participants are more likely to experience food insecurity than eligible nonparticipants.

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