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## FOOD INSECURITIES

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# Food Insecurities



## What is this indicator?

Five terms are frequently used in the expression of hunger and relevant status of food insecurity by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) food security survey. This survey is part of the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and has been conducted annually since 1995 (Nord, et. al., 2006).

**Food security:** having consistent access to enough food for active healthy lives for all household members at all times during the year (without recourse to emergency food sources such as food pantries and soup kitchens).

**Food insecurity:** limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods.

**Hunger:** the uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food; the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to food.

**Low food security:** households which have multiple indications of food access problems, but typically have reported few, if any, indications of reduced food intake.

**Very low food security:** households in which food intake of one or more members was reduced and eating patterns disrupted because of insufficient money or other resources for food.

## What are key findings?

Many Americans think of malnutrition and hunger as a problem in the poor and developing nations. It is estimated (2001) worldwide 815 million households have food insecurities; 777 million in developing nations, 27 million in transition countries, and 11 million in industrialized countries<sup>2</sup>. In the U.S., there are 35.5 million people living in households considered to be food insecure and of these, 12.6 million are children (Nord, 2006).

In 2006, 89.1% of U.S. households were considered food secure. Of those that are not food secure, 6.9% are low food secure and 4.0% are very low food secure. Many of the food insecure households avoid substantial reductions in food intake by reducing the variety in their diets.

Of the 4.6 million households that are classified as very low food security households (Nord, 2006):

- 98% reported a fear that their food would run out before they had enough money to buy more
- 96% reported that the food they could afford to purchase did not last them until they had enough money to get more
- 94% reported they could not afford to eat a balanced meal

- 95% reported that an adult had to cut the size of meals or skip meals because there was not enough money for food
- 85% reported that the above situation occurred for three or more months out of the year

In a second group of questions (Nord, 2006):

- 95% reported having to eat less than they felt they should
- 69% had been hungry, but did not eat because they could not afford enough food
- 46% had unintentionally lost weight because they did not have enough money for food
- 33% reported that an adult did not eat for a whole day because of not having enough money for food
- 24% had the above conditions occur for three or more months out of the year

The ten states with the highest prevalence of food insecurity in 2004-2006 were: Mississippi (18.1%), New Mexico (16.1%), Texas (15.9%), South Carolina (14.7%), Oklahoma (14.6%), Utah (14.5%), Louisiana (14.4%), Arkansas (14.3%), Kentucky (13.6%), and Arizona (13.1%) (Nord, 2006).

Households with children are twice as likely to suffer from food insecurities as those without children. Households headed by Hispanics, Blacks, a single woman, and those with incomes below poverty level are also at a significantly increased risk (Nord, 2006; Blatt, 2008). The average number of children under the age of 18 in the U.S. from 2003-2005 that lived in households which experienced food insecurities was 13,178,507 (18.0% of children). In Oklahoma, the average is 190,272 children (22.2%), considerably higher than the national average (Blatt, 2008).

One out of every seven Oklahomans (14.6%) is considered food insecure. The average Oklahoma household spends 12.6% of its budget on food. As food prices increase, so too does the percentage of a family's budget that must be set aside to accommodate this rise. In 2007, food prices rose an average of 4.5%; dairy and related products led the way, with an 11.0% increase from 2006. This in conjunction with the sharp increase in the cost of gasoline (26.4%) and household energy (6.8%) and a lack of increase in annual incomes has put a significant strain on the average family's budget. The poverty rate in Oklahoma increased from 11.8% in 2003-04 to 13.2% in 2004-05 up to 15.4% in 2005-06 (Feeling Hungry, 2008).

One out of every ten Oklahomans depends on food stamps to pay for some or all of their food. There has been a 59% increase in the number of participants in the Food Stamp Program from fiscal year 2001 to fiscal year 2007 (Feeling Hungry, 2008). Even with this substantial increase in participants, the number of food insecure households in the state has increased.

## What are the implications?

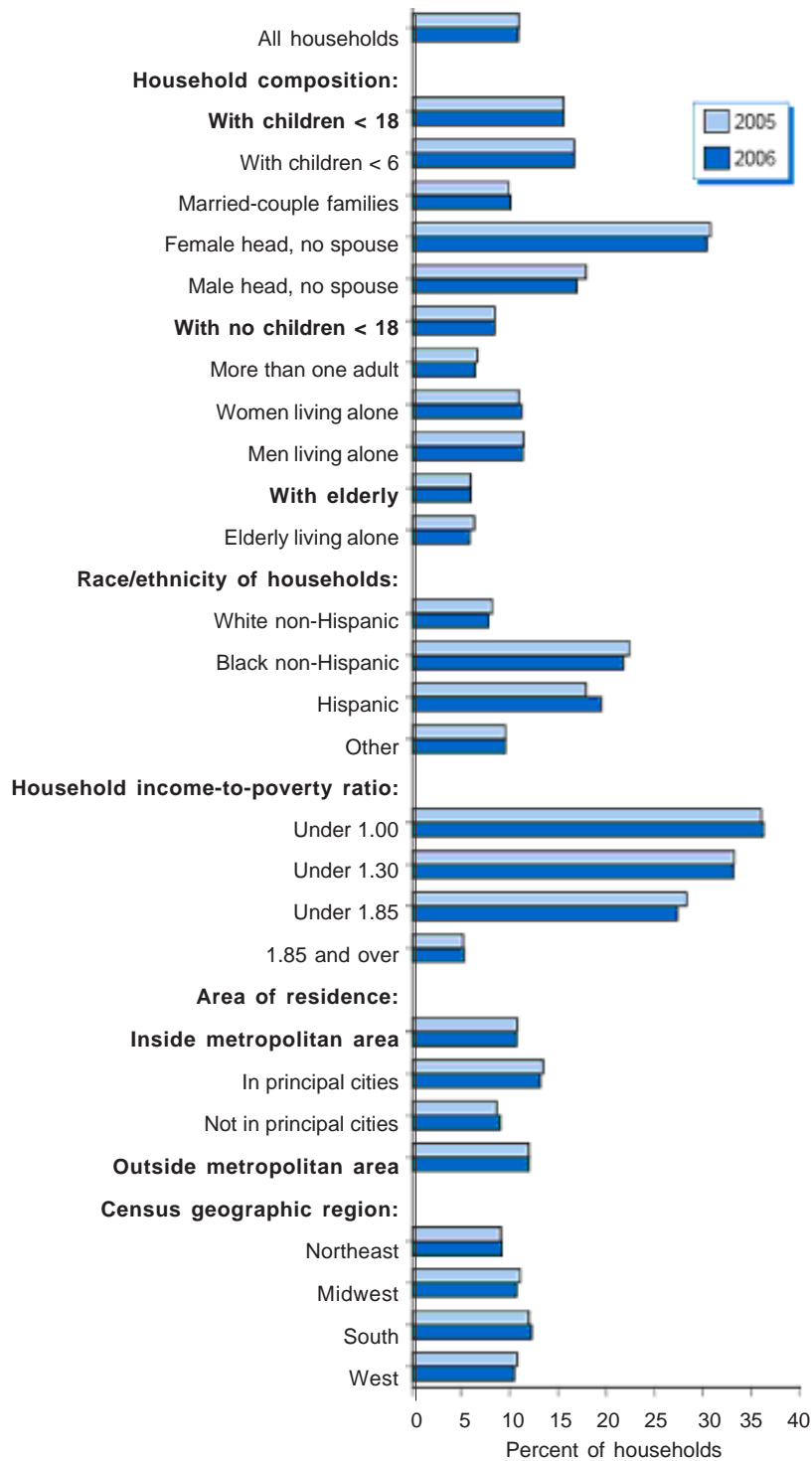
One of the most basic of all human needs is the ability to obtain enough food for an active and healthy life. Most Americans take for granted their basic levels of well-being and as such have never heard of nor experienced food insecurities. There are many obvious factors that contribute to food insecurities: low income, lack of transportation resources (cannot get to the grocery store), and illness, which causes people to miss work (lowering incomes) and/or to choose between medical necessities and food.

Some causes are surprising. For example, more farmers are moving toward producing higher value agricultural products such as milk, meats, fruits and vegetables, in order to increase their household income and perhaps decrease their own food insecurities. This causes the price of basic cereal crops (corn, wheat, soy, etc.) to increase significantly due to a lower supply in conjunction with maintained or higher demand. This process is good for those households that are net sellers in the food market; however, it leads households which are net buyers (the majority of households in the U.S.) closer to or deeper into poverty, becoming more food insecure (von Braun, 2007).

Surprisingly, food insecurity can also lead to obesity. Some households are forced to trade food quality for food quantity in order to alleviate hunger. Cheaper foods and those that are more likely to decrease hunger for a longer period of time include processed foods and foods with excess calories. This trading allows for more calories to be purchased for the dollar but can lead to obesity. The body also changes its utilization of calories based on the frequency and types of meals it receives. It can quickly become more efficient at storing calories as fat in order to compensate for when food is not available. This in conjunction with significant overeating when food is available (thus storing significantly more calories and putting on extra pounds) can also lead to obesity (Food Research, 2007).

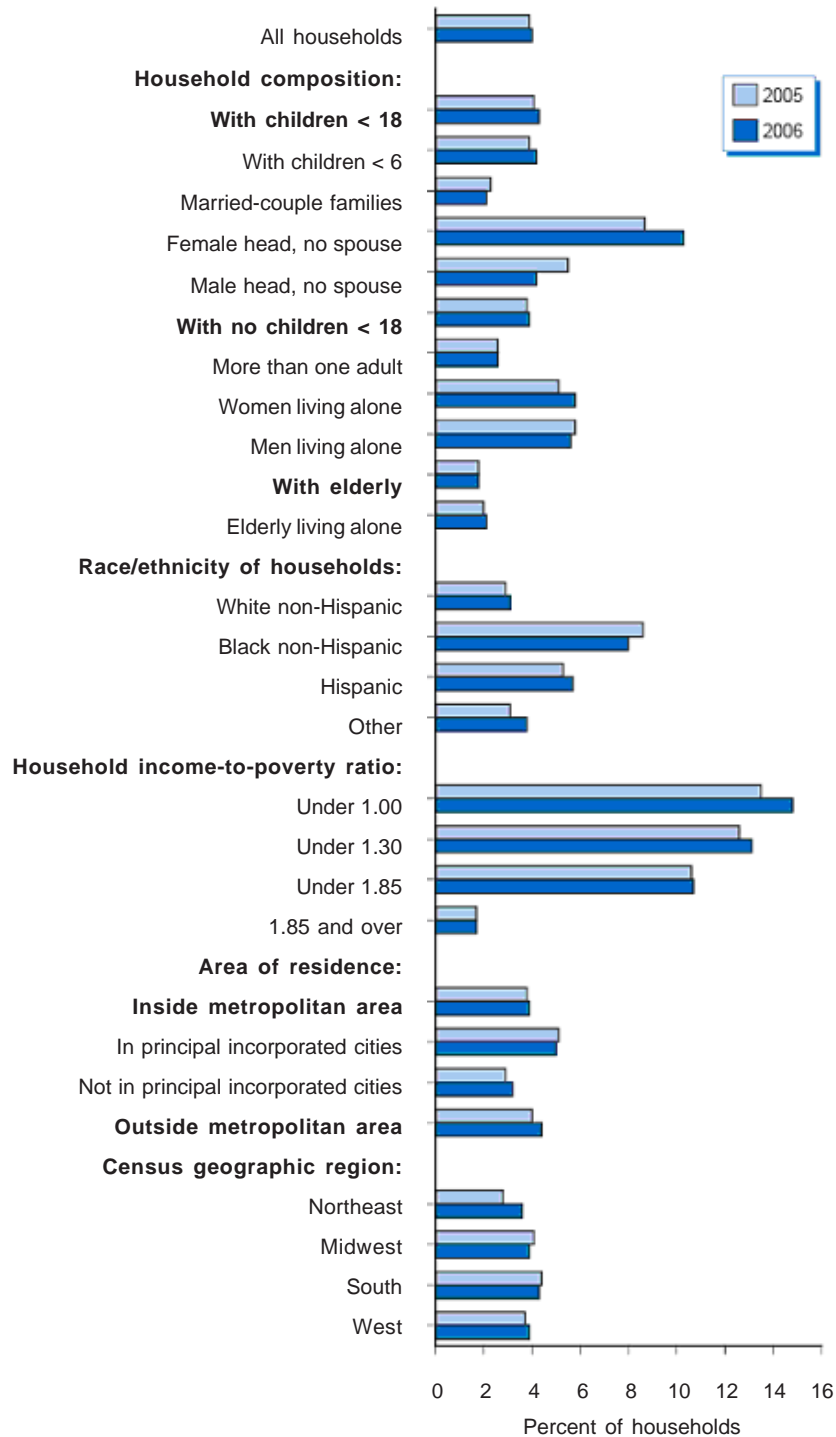
Skipping meals, decreasing portion size, and reducing variety (i.e. being classified as food insecure) can lead to a host of problems. In its most severe form, food insecurity can lead to malnutrition, starvation and death. In the U.S., being food insecure rarely goes to that extreme; instead, people suffer in hiding. Under nutrition generally does not lead to the same extremes in physical appearance as malnutrition and starvation. Food insecurities in the U.S. more often lead to more frequent and/or severe illnesses, stunting in physical development, learning disabilities, and decreased psychological development (Food Research, 2007).

Figure 1. Prevalence of Food Insecurities for the U.S., 2005 and 2006



Source: Calculated by ERS based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data, December 2005 and December 2006.

Figure 2. Prevalence of Very Low Food Insecurities in the U.S., 2005-2006



Source: Calculated by ERS based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data, December 2005 and December 2006.

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## ***Census questions?***

**1-866-758-1060**

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