

**America's Second Harvest**  
**Ending Hunger**

**The UPS Foundation and the Congressional Hunger Center  
2004 Hunger Forum Discussion Paper**

**HUNGER IN AMERICA**  
**The Definitions, Scope, Causes, History and Status of the Problem of  
Hunger in the United States**

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This discussion paper addresses the following topics:

- *How many people are hungry in America and who are they?*
- *What are the root causes of hunger?*
- *What is the history of hunger in the United States and its impact on people--especially children?*
- *How does the government define and measure hunger?*

### **In Summary**

- **34.9 million people in 12.1 million U.S. households (11.1% of all U.S. households) were estimated to be food insecure in 2002. This is an increase of 600,000 households from 2001. (USDA)**
- **9.38 million people in 3.8 million households (3.5 % of all households) were estimated to be food insecure with hunger in 2002. (USDA)**
- **34.6 million people in the U.S. lived at or below poverty level (\$18,556 for a family of four) in 2002. (Census Bureau)**
- **23 million unduplicated people sought emergency food assistance in 2001 through local charities in the America's Second Harvest network. (America's Second Harvest)**
- **4 million non-elderly, low-income families accessed food pantries in 2002. (Urban Institute).**

**hun·ger**: a craving or urgent need for food or a specific nutrient **b** : an uneasy sensation occasioned by the lack of food **c** : a weakened condition brought about by prolonged lack of food (from Merriam-Webster)

## Background

The United States is the world's largest and most efficient producer of food. American agriculture generates the highest per capita food production in the world and the nation enjoys highly evolved markets and distribution systems to get food to consumers. With these obvious advantages in food production, distribution, and stability of governments and markets, the existence of hunger in the United States is perplexing, if not unbelievable. There is, perhaps, no nation on earth better equipped to eliminate the problem of hunger among its populace, yet the United States has failed to do so.

Understanding and addressing hunger in the United States is complicated by the "hidden" nature of the problem and, until recently, the absence of a way to quantify the problem. "Hunger" is a term that Americans easily understand in an everyday context, but what it means in a social policy or public health context has gained general acceptance only in recent years. The experience of hunger in the United States is an individual or household condition and may not necessarily be directly linked to larger societal conditions. Famine, starvation, or even widespread malnutrition – like the powerful and painful images observed in the developing world – are largely absent from the American experience.

Despite the difficulties in defining hunger and the hidden nature of the problem, the American people recognize that the condition exists and have typically viewed the problem through a sort of national moral prism and believe that we have a duty to share our abundance.<sup>1</sup> For example, a national public opinion poll of likely voters conducted in May 2003 found that 43% agreed that people in their own communities do not have enough to eat, 59% said that people were generally hungry due to circumstances beyond their control and 72% said families really need anti-hunger programs and could not get along without them.<sup>2</sup> Public agreement that hunger in America exists is established, but public disagreement on the extent of the problem has remained a substantial hurdle in addressing the problem.

An important obstacle in defining and quantifying the problem of hunger was overcome with the introduction of the concept of "food security," defined as "all people in a society obtaining a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet, through non-emergency food sources at all times."<sup>3</sup> Hunger in America can be measured quantifiably and reliably when defined within the parameters of a food security concept, and most importantly, policies can be identified for its prevention. The concept of food security, however, encompasses a broader vision that takes into account both individual and community resources along with the public policies that may be adopted for its prevention.<sup>4</sup>

*“Men who can graft the trees and make the seed fertile and big can find no way to let the hungry people eat their produce. Men who have created new fruits in the world cannot create a system whereby their fruits may be eaten...The works of the roots of the vines, of the trees must be destroyed to keep up the price, and this is the saddest, bitterest thing of all...A million people go hungry, needing the fruit – and kerosene sprayed over the golden mountains.*

*There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all of our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificate – died of malnutrition – because the food must rot, must be forced to rot.”*

John Steinbeck  
The Grapes of Wrath

### **A Brief History of Hunger in America**

Hunger has probably always existed in America, but has emerged as a major social and public health problem only in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The notions of America’s abundance, the land’s natural fertility, and the American people’s egalitarian thriftiness, ingenuity and work ethic all helped create a popular and enduring image of America as a nation largely free from the want and curses of Europe. That the land and the people were more than sufficient to provide all that the nation or any individual American could need is a “basic condition of American life,” as noted by University of Chicago historian David Potter.<sup>5</sup> And the people who couldn’t work – the very aged, the ill and the disabled – were generally cared for by extended family, public charities or houses of faith. Only as the nation transitioned from an agrarian society to an industrial one in the 1920s did widespread problems of hunger, malnutrition, and even starvation come to be witnessed on a scale that prompted public action and to be sufficiently understood as emblematic of modern American woes.

The Great Depression, 1929–1935, marked the beginning of widespread hunger in America and the first efforts by communities, charities, and the federal government to do something about it. In 1932-1933, huge agricultural surpluses in America’s farm belt were destroyed or plowed under due to low prices and a lack of markets. At the same time, the business crash in manufacturing and other industrial sectors drove unemployment rates to 24.86% and tens of thousands of men lined up for food handouts. A U.S. Senate Committee investigating relief activities for the unemployed heard testimony from the American Association of Social Workers that “Deaths due to insufficient food have been reported in several cities” and that charitable relief agencies were losing the battle to prevent starvation. As dairy farmers in Wisconsin and Vermont dumped their milk in ditches, “unemployed parents longed to provide even a pint for their children.”<sup>6</sup> The American paradox of want amidst plenty was born. The situation in 1932 is very similar to the current one; America was, and is, a nation with “breadlines knee-deep in wheat.”<sup>7</sup>

The Depression, the banking crisis of 1933, the increasing need to aid the growing ranks of the urban poor and bankrupted farmers in the countryside along with the seeming inadequacy of the solutions proposed by the Hoover Administration contributed to the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the creation of the “New Deal.” Among the reforms and progressive programs to address the problem of hunger were the creation of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and Federal Surplus Relief Corporation (FSRC). These initiatives began the process of purchasing surplus agricultural commodities and allocating them to states and municipalities for distribution to the needy; this process that would be repeated in future years in the form of the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (1973) and the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (1981). Clear inadequacies with the commodity distribution programs of the Depression era led to the creation of the Food Stamp Program in 1939. In this first attempt at food stamps, recipients purchased food stamps at face value and then received additional stamps that could be used to purchase agriculture commodities (such as oranges or milk) the government deemed as surplus. This early version of the Food Stamp Program reached its peak in 1942 when half of the counties in the United States and 88 cities participated in the program.<sup>8</sup> Another important first in the effort against hunger that arose from this period is the notion of tying agriculture and agriculture policy to food assistance and hunger relief—a fixture that remains today. In 1935, the Roosevelt Administration transferred the FSRC and its functions for commodity distribution and food stamps to the Department of Agriculture (USDA).<sup>9</sup> Today, the USDA administers 15 domestic food assistance programs – including food stamps and commodity distribution programs -- with budget authority of more than \$40 billion in federal fiscal year 2004.

America’s entry into World War II effectively eliminated agricultural surpluses, overabundant food, mass unemployment, and the need for continuation of the food assistance programs. By 1943, the early Food Stamp Program had ended, as had government commodity distributions. Although programs created to address large scale hunger in America mostly ceased with America’s entry into the war, policy makers remained aware of the lingering effects of under-nutrition and malnutrition experienced during the previous decade. During the draft for the war, 40% of draftees were rejected from duty due to poor health.<sup>10</sup> Hunger was no longer seen through just the national moral prism of concern for the poor as in the nineteenth century or as a way to avoid social strife and revolution as in the 1930s; now hunger was a national security problem. The federal government, with broad bi-partisan support and the support of agricultural interests, now targeted food assistance to poor children through the passage of the National School Lunch Act in 1946. The effect of the Act was the establishment of school lunch programs – which included commodities – in most public schools in the United States. This program remains today, like food stamps, one of the largest and most effective of the public food assistance programs.

The strong economy of the postwar period, coupled with flagging political and public awareness of the problem of hunger, led to the government largely abandoning food assistance, except in the case of the National School Lunch Program. USDA, under the Eisenhower Administration, again focused interest on support of farm policy and

agricultural trade. In fact, USDA became so inattentive to the problem of hunger (and the problem became increasingly invisible to the majority of Americans) that when a bill re-establishing the Food Stamp Program was enacted in 1959, USDA was not required to implement it and chose not to do so.<sup>11</sup>

The nation's federal food assistance programs began with the Roosevelt Administration and the New Deal; the food assistance entitlement programs that operate today received their form and substance from the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations.

During his campaign for the Presidency in 1960, then Senator John F. Kennedy witnessed the "hidden hunger" in the upper Midwest and in Appalachia, especially West Virginia, a state crucial to his election. In the first televised Presidential debate in U.S. history, before 65 million Americans, John Kennedy cited the problem of hunger in America in his opening statement. He spoke of poor children in West Virginia and how they took part of their school lunches home with them to share with their families. Kennedy "forcefully declared that government wasn't doing enough to feed the poor."<sup>12</sup> In the Kennedy Administration, food assistance fit into a larger context of farm policy. Food aid to the needy would lead to greater consumption and increased farm incomes.

President Kennedy's first executive order was for expanded food assistance, doubling the amount of commodities distributed for food assistance and establishing a pilot food stamp program that, unlike the original New Deal program, allowed recipients to purchase a wide variety of foods no longer tied to surplus commodities.<sup>13</sup>

Under the Johnson Administration, the Food Stamp Program became permanent through the Food Stamp Act of 1964 and was a key part of the larger "Great Society" programs that sought to eradicate hunger and poverty from the American landscape. Johnson's War on Poverty declared "We want no American in this country to go hungry. We believe we have the knowledge, the compassion, and the resources to banish hunger and to do away with malnutrition if we only apply those resources and those energies."<sup>14</sup> In addition to the establishment of food stamps, food assistance policy and agriculture policy became even more closely linked as the Food Stamp Act of 1964 was incorporated into a larger wheat and cotton support bill. The idea of passing food assistance policy as part of larger farm program reauthorization bills continues through to the present with policies such as the 2002 Farm Bill, which expanded food stamps by more than \$8 billion in the reauthorization.

In 1966, the School Breakfast Program was created to further the benefits of the popular National School Lunch Program. School breakfast, like school lunch, became permanently authorized in 1975. Also like school lunch, school breakfast benefits were targeted toward low-income children, a trend in federal food assistance policy that would continue largely without exception until 1981.

The next major boost for the eradication of hunger in America came in late 1967 when Senator Robert Kennedy and other members of the Senate Subcommittee on Poverty

visited the Mississippi Delta region, the Indian reservations of the upper Midwest, and rural Appalachia. The efforts of Senator Robert Kennedy helped focus the nation's spotlight on the hidden problem of hunger in America and helped show the problem at its most severe in rural parts of the nation, thus highlighting the paradox of hunger amid agricultural plenty.

In 1968, the "Citizens' Board of Inquiry" identified 280 "hunger counties" throughout the nation. Most of these counties were in rural areas of the nation where Third World conditions of starvation and malnutrition were present.<sup>15</sup> The Field Foundation released the report of a team of physicians it commissioned to survey the nutritional status of poor children in the rural south the year prior. The Field team found "severe malnutrition and nutrition related disease" not ordinarily present in the developed world.<sup>16</sup> In this same year, the television network CBS broadcast a documentary entitled "Hunger in America" that exposed widespread poverty and malnutrition in the south and southwest United States. These compelling visual images, like the compelling visual images of the civil rights movement, built public support for eradicating hunger. Congress responded with the establishment of the Summer Food Service Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program, both largely targeted at low-income children and designed to provide school meal-like assistance outside of school.<sup>17</sup>

In 1968, Congress established the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs. Writing for the committee in 1969, Senator George McGovern captured the spirit of the revelations of the hunger problem on the public: "Hunger is a unique issue in contemporary American politics...hunger is unique as a public issue not only because it is newly recognized, but because it exerts a special claim on the conscience of the American people. It is the cutting edge of the problem of poverty."<sup>18</sup>

In 1969, President Richard Nixon convened the first-ever White House Conference on Food and Hunger. In opening the conference, President Nixon declared: "So accustomed are most of us to a full and balanced diet that, until recently, we have thought of hunger and malnutrition as problems only in far less fortunate countries. [But now] there can be no doubt that hunger and malnutrition exists in America ...a situation embarrassing and intolerable, and [where] the honor of American democracy is at issue."<sup>19</sup>

Two major policy occurrences emanated from the White House conference. The first, the enactment of the Food Stamp Reform Act of 1970, would help establish much of the "national entitlement" structure of the current Food Stamp Program. These changes would be further expanded in 1977, leading to our current Food Stamp Program.<sup>20</sup> Another aspect of the growing importance of food stamps came in the area of advocacy with the establishment of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), which, in 1975, successfully sued USDA over inadequate food stamp benefit levels. The other major food assistance policy to arise from the White House conference would be the establishment of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). WIC provides food and nutritional supplements, health screening and counseling and similar assistance to low-income (up to 185% of poverty) pregnant and

postpartum women, their infants and children up to age 5. Reducing low-birth weight, reducing infant mortality, and generally increasing the health and well being of mothers and their infants has helped the WIC program become one of the most popular food assistance programs. Government studies of the program's efficacy have shown that for every federal \$1 spent on the program, the federal government saves between \$1.77 and \$3.13 in Medicaid costs for newborns and their mothers.<sup>21</sup>

In 1977, the Food Stamp Act completed the work begun seven years earlier by ending the purchase requirement for food stamps, a feature of the program that had, until 1977, remained constant even to the program's earliest New Deal origins. The modern Food Stamp Program – a federal program, administered by the states, with a uniform federal entitlement and benefit structure, accessible in all 50 states, and without the purchase requirement -- has become the largest federal food assistance program and the cornerstone of the federal government's effort against hunger. Today, more than \$24 billion in benefits are provided to an estimated 22 million low-income people through the program.

Also notably, the Field Foundation team of physicians re-visited the rural southern communities that they surveyed in 1967 and where they had found severe malnutrition and hunger. The Field researchers reported that, although many of the communities they visited had become even more impoverished in the past decade, the incidence of hunger and malnutrition had largely disappeared. The researchers credited food stamps, school lunches and WIC as the main reasons for the dramatic improvement in the public health and nutritional status of these communities.<sup>22</sup>

In 1979, with funding support from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, Second Harvest was incorporated as the national organization of "food banks." Over the next 25 years, Second Harvest became "America's Second Harvest" and the nation's largest hunger relief charity.

In 1981, severe economic declines – and the worst recession since the Great Depression – President Reagan issued an executive order that allowed USDA to begin distributing stocks of farm-support commodities that had been held in storage for market removal purposes. In 1983, the President's executive order was made into legislation with the Emergency Food Assistance Act and the establishment of the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). The establishment of TEFAP was a return to the Great Depression's commodity assistance distributions under the FERA.

Also important in the history of the hunger problem in the United States was the establishment of benchmark research into the problem of childhood hunger by the FRAC. The Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP) fundamentally changed the way policy makers addressed the issue of hunger. The CCHIP study estimated that four million children under the age of 12 went hungry, and nearly 10 million more were at risk of hunger. The CCHIP results would – a decade later – be uncannily similar to the number of children deemed food insecure by the Census Bureau.

By 1983, the federal food assistance safety net had largely been established. Fifteen federal programs – accounting for more than half of the USDA annual budget – comprised the public effort to end hunger. In 1984, President Reagan’s “Task Force on Food Assistance” stated that “it was an article of faith among the American people that no one in a land so blessed with plenty should go hungry...Hunger is simply not acceptable in our society.”<sup>23</sup> Despite these pronouncements, however, the economic recovery of the mid-1980s, burgeoning federal deficits, and lagging political attention to the problem—with the exception of some members of Congress—hindered progress on further expansions in the safety net, and most food assistance programs saw their eligibility restricted or program funding stagnated. With the exception of program reauthorizations in the 1980s and the Hunger Relief Act of 1988, little further expansion in food assistance programs occurred in the 1980s. As government’s efforts in fighting hunger waned, private charitable efforts grew and emergency food assistance programs proliferated throughout the nation.<sup>24</sup> During the 1980s, more than 48%<sup>25</sup> of the nation’s private food pantries in the America’s Second Harvest network were established as were more than 52% of the A2H soup kitchens.

The early 1990s saw a re-emergence of expanded food assistance policy and interest in the hunger problem in America. First, with the 1990 Farm Bill reauthorization and expansions to commodity assistance programs and food stamps, and later with the Childhood Hunger Relief Act in 1993, the Congress began a process of expansion that would lead to liberalizing food stamp eligibility, increasing food stamp benefit levels, fully funding the WIC program, and expanding summer food and school breakfast programs.<sup>26</sup> Also notable in 1993, Second Harvest released the first in a series of national studies on the emergency food assistance system. These studies were the first attempts to measure the scope and reach of the private food assistance system that emerged in the 1980s. The Second Harvest research includes interviews with more than 8,500 emergency food recipients at private charitable feeding sites around the country. A changing national economy and the recession of 1992 drove increasing numbers of Americans to seek food assistance. According to the same Second Harvest study, an estimated 19 million Americans received emergency food aid in 1993, and by 1995, more than 10% of the U.S. population (27 million) were enrolled in the Food Stamp Program.

After a campaign pledge to “end welfare as we know it,” President Bill Clinton signed legislation that brought the largest decrease in the federal food assistance safety net since the New Deal. In 1996, the Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), or welfare reform. The Act eliminated the entitlement status of welfare – Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) – and replaced it with a block grant to the states, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Welfare benefits were restricted to 5 years, legal immigrants were denied eligibility to nearly all means-tested programs, and the Food Stamp Program was reduced by more than \$23 billion through a series of repeals of food stamp expansions made in 1993. Summer food, school breakfast and the Child and Adult Care Food Program were also reduced in the legislation.<sup>27</sup>

In 1998, the strongest economy in U.S. history and the lowest rates of unemployment measured since World War II helped to reduce poverty and TANF and food stamp participation. The declines in food stamp rolls however – 33% since the enactment of welfare reform – vastly outpaced the reduction in the number of people living in poverty. While the number of Americans living in poverty declined by 3 million persons between 1997 and 2001, the number of people on food stamp rolls declined by more than 8 million. During this period, emergency food providers reported a surge in requests for food assistance. A review of national, state, and local studies of emergency food usage by the Tufts University Center on Hunger and Poverty showed dramatic increases in requests for emergency food as the economy improved and food stamp usage declined.<sup>28</sup> A 1999 U.S. General Accounting Office report on the decline in food stamp caseloads concluded that the need for food assistance had not dramatically declined; rather, needy people were seeking alternative forms of food assistance, mostly from private charities.<sup>29</sup> Most notably, emergency food providers reported an important demographic shift in emergency food recipients.

*Never before in the history of the hunger problem in the United States had employed persons and children sought assistance from pantries, soup kitchens and shelters in such significant numbers – by 2001 one-in-four people in a soup kitchen was now a child.* According to Second Harvest's 1997 report of emergency food providers, more than 20% of recipients came from a working household a number that grew to better than 38% by 2001, and 37.8% of emergency food recipients were children in 1997 a number that grew to 39% four years later.<sup>30</sup>

In 2002, the Congress reauthorized the Food Stamp Program as part of the larger Farm Bill reauthorization. A broad coalition of faith-based organizations, emergency food providers, food policy advocates and state program administrators helped craft food stamp reforms that restored food stamp eligibility to most legal immigrants, generally eased eligibility and access to the program for working poor families, and increased commodity distributions through TEFAP.

Currently, more than 22 million Americans are enrolled in food stamps. More than 14 million low-income children participate in school meal programs and more than 8 million women, infants and children receive WIC benefits. The most recent research indicates that 23 million unduplicated Americans received emergency food assistance from private charities in 2001. The federal fiscal year 2005 budget recently released by the Bush Administration provides no new funding for child nutrition program reauthorization scheduled for 2005. The only increases in food assistance spending are to provide for anticipated increased need.

Throughout the nation's 50 year struggle with the problem of hunger, the unique issue of childhood hunger – its impact on national security, its moral dimensions, and its special tug on the emotions of parents across the nation – has proven to be one of the most important catalysts for policy changes related to food assistance.

## **Childhood Hunger and Its Long-Term Impact**

As noted earlier, the evidence of childhood hunger in America and its long reaching negative health effects observed during the draft in World War II led to the creation of the National School Lunch Program in 1946. Policy makers sixty years ago – with much less scientific evidence to support their policies – recognized the profound and long lasting impact that childhood hunger can have on the future of the United States.

According to the most recent estimates, 13 million children in 2002 lived in food insecure households. The scientific evidence authoritatively shows that childhood hunger and food insecurity are linked to poorer overall health, a compromised ability to resist illness in children, and greater incidences of hospitalization and need for medical care.<sup>31</sup>

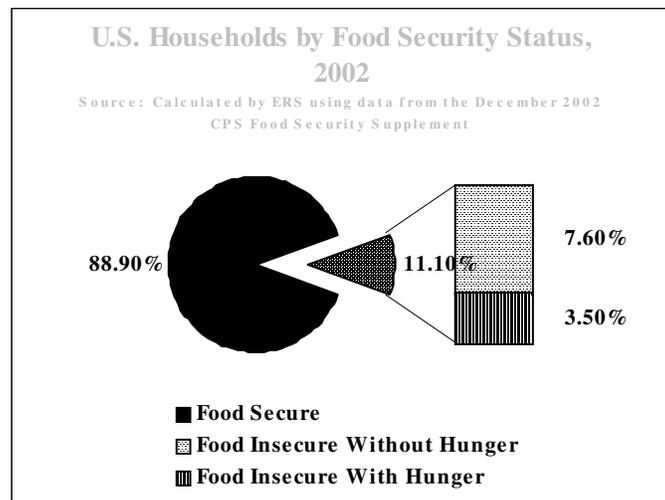
More than three decades of research shows conclusively that hunger and food insecurity among children are important risk factors for poor health, reduced social and psychological well-being, increased incidences of behavioral problems, and lower academic achievement. The scientific evidence suggests that poverty doesn't cause hunger, but rather that hunger – even moderate to mild under-nutrition at critical stages of child development – may be a leading contributing factor to developmental and academic problems and ultimately, lead to poverty later in life.<sup>32</sup> Today, a half century after the establishment of the National School Lunch Program for national security reasons, a broad array of federal nutrition and food assistance programs have been created and targeted to reduce the incidence of childhood hunger. These child nutrition programs, WIC, and food stamps, have quantifiably reduced infant mortality, averted malnutrition and hunger and improved the overall health of America's children, but they have not been successful in eliminating childhood hunger or food insecurity from the United States.

Through the work of academics, like Dr. J. Larry Brown at Tufts University and later Brandies University, and FRAC's CCHIP studies between 1983 and 1995, and Second Harvest's first hunger study in 1993, the problem of hunger, especially childhood hunger was less "invisible" to the public and policy makers. Nonetheless, the extent of the problem and commonly accepted definitions were elusive until 1995. Today, using the federal government's food security measurement project the scope of the problem of hunger and food insecurity is quantifiable and the effectiveness of public policies aimed at addressing the problem can also be measured.

## **The Definitions and Scope of the Hunger Problem in the United States**

In 2002, nearly nine out of ten American households (89%) were considered "food secure;" that is, all of the people residing in those households had "access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life," according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).<sup>33</sup> Also in 2002, one in ten American households (11.1%) – with 34.9 million people – were determined to be food insecure, including 9.38 million whose food insecurity was severe enough that they were hungry or "food insecure with hunger"

at some time during the previous 12 months, according to the most recent, published federal government estimates.<sup>34</sup>



Every year since 1995, the Economic Research Service of the USDA has collected and analyzed household data compiled from the special “food security supplement” to the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS).<sup>35</sup> Since the publication of the first report in 1997, the USDA estimates have largely been considered an authoritative source on the prevalence of hunger or the risk of hunger in the general U.S. population.<sup>36</sup>

A household’s food security status or condition is determined from the respondent answers to a battery of 18 questions that make up the “food security module supplement.” Households are classified into one of three categories: 1) food secure, 2) food insecure, and 3) food insecure with hunger. The supplemental questions measure and scale the conditions, experiences, and behaviors that characterize a range of severity of food insecurity and hunger. Individuals that affirmatively answer questions (answering yes to 3 or more of 18) that put their household in the food insecure with hunger category are then scaled to measure the severity of hunger in the household. For example, the module scales households with children in which the children have involuntarily missed meals or otherwise have gone without food for economic reasons food insecure with severe hunger.

### **Defining “Food Security”**

Food security for a household means access by all members 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) an assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways; that is, without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies.

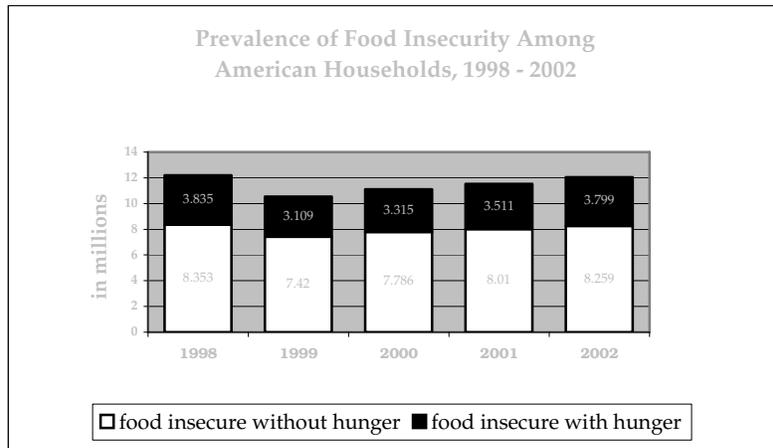
### **“Food Insecurity” and “Food Insecurity with Hunger”**

Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in “socially acceptable

ways.” Simply stated, individuals in households that receive otherwise adequate and safe food through food banks or other emergency food providers are deemed “food insecure, without hunger.” The most severe condition of food insecurity is the physiological phenomenon of “hunger” and is defined as an uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food. As measured and described in the U.S. food security measurement project, "hunger" is involuntary hunger that results from not being able to afford enough food. People are not counted as "hungry" in the food security project if they went without food because of voluntary dieting, fasting for religious reasons, or other reasons not related to income or income related access to food.<sup>37</sup>

### The Food Insecurity Trends

The findings of the food security measurement project suggest that the prevalence of hunger and food insecurity generally declined from 1995 through 1999 and rose over the period 2000 through 2002.<sup>38</sup> Eleven percent of households (12.1 million) were food insecure in 2002, up from 10.7% of households in 2001. The food insecurity rates seem to follow economic cycles in a manner consistent with average monthly food stamp caseloads, which have similarly followed U.S. economic trends and business cycles.<sup>39</sup> Even when factoring the well documented economic growth of the late 1990s and the economic downturn of 2000–2002, the U.S. rate of food insecurity and hunger stayed fairly consistent, with approximately 10% to 11% of U.S. households considered food insecure and approximately 3% to 4% of U.S. households food insecure with hunger.



The 2002 food security report finds that one-third of food insecure households were food insecure to the degree that at least one person in the household was hungry or went without food because they could not afford to purchase food, nor did they access food from another source such as family, friends, or through charity.<sup>40</sup> The most recent report shows that just over half of all food insecure households participated in one or more of the federal food assistance programs, such as school meals, food stamps, and the WIC program.<sup>41</sup> The USDA food security reports have shown consistently since 1995 that poverty-linked hunger occurs only episodically in most instances and is not typically a condition that lasts several days, but may occur with some frequency on a monthly basis.<sup>42</sup> This means that the overwhelming majority of people residing in food insecure households typically find some way to prevent food shortages that would cause someone

in the household to go hungry for an extended period of time. For one-fifth of households that are food insecure and one-fourth of households categorized as food insecure with hunger, the occurrence of the condition was “frequent or chronic.”<sup>43</sup>

Approximately one-third of households experiencing hunger report that that the incidence is “rare or occasional,” taking place only one or two months in a 12-month period. For the remaining two-thirds of households identified as food insecure with hunger, the condition is “recurring” and occurs in three or more months of the year. On average, according to the USDA, households that were food insecure with hunger experienced food insecurity in 8–9 months, but experienced hunger for only a few days in each month, during which time an individual or others in the household went without food. The USDA estimates that on the average day in 2002, food insecurity with hunger in the U.S. was experienced in 517,000 to 775,000 households, a rate substantially lower than the annual rate of 3,799,000 million households that were categorized as food insecure with hunger.<sup>44</sup>

### **Key Demographic Profiles**

In 2002, the national average of food insecurity with hunger among all American households was 3.5%, or 3.799 million, compared to the national average of 11.1% of households, or 12 million, considered food insecure.

#### **Marital Status, Household Composition and Age**

Households of married couples with children typically experience the lowest hunger rates (1.9%), as do multiple adult households with no children (2.3%) and households with elderly persons (1.9%). In addition, only 1.5% of households with incomes of at least 185% of poverty were classified as hungry in 2002.<sup>45</sup> Household rates of food insecurity were substantially below the national average (11.1%) for households with more than one adult and no children (6.3%) and for households with elderly persons (6.3%).<sup>46</sup>

Although married couple families are reported to have the lowest prevalence of hunger, 3.8% of households with children under age 18 were food insecure with hunger in 2002, representing 1.48 million households. Single-parent, female-headed households have the highest prevalence rate of hunger at 8.7% (828,000 households), followed by single-parent, male-headed households at 5.9% (139,000 households). Single men living alone also have high hunger prevalence rates of 5.3% (643,000 households). Households with children headed by single-parent females have the highest rates of food insecurity at 32%. The prevalence of food insecurity for households with children was 60% more likely than the rate for households without children and 45.5% of households with children living at or below the poverty line were food insecure in 2002.

An estimated 265,000 households with children experienced food insecurity with hunger so severe that one or more children went without food because the household lacked the financial resources to purchase food and did not or could not access emergency food assistance through charities or other sources. In 2002, the number of children in food

insecure households rose from 12.7 million children (17.6%) to 13.1 million (18.1%) in 2002.

### **Ethnicity**

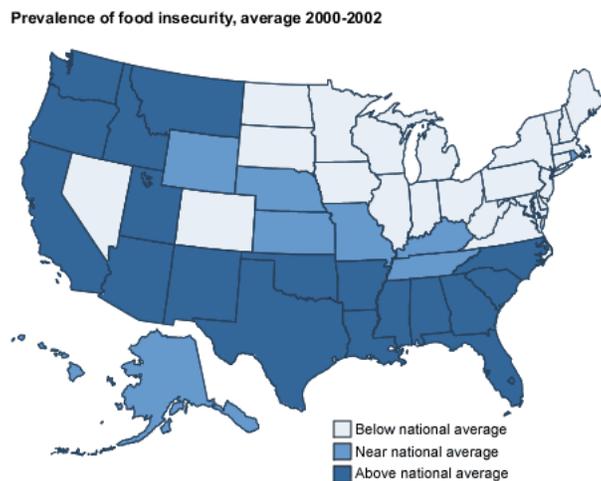
Among ethnic groups, households of Black non-Hispanics were reported to have the highest prevalence of hunger at 7.2% (970,000 households), followed by Hispanic households at 5.7% (591,000). Black non-Hispanic households (22%) and Hispanic households (21.7%) also had higher than average rates of food insecurity.

### **Income**

Not surprisingly, income is an important factor in determining a household's food security status, but income alone is not the only factor related to the prevalence of the condition. Two-thirds of households with incomes below the poverty line were food insecure and some households with income greater than 185% of poverty experienced food insecurity and, in some cases, hunger. Households with incomes below 100% of poverty (\$18,244 for a family of four in 2002) experience the highest rate of hunger at 14.3% (1.651 million households) and food insecurity (38.1%). Households with incomes below 130% of poverty experience hunger at 12.1% (2.057 million households). Of the income levels of food insecure households, more than half (56%) had incomes above the federal poverty level, and 29% had incomes above 185 percent of poverty.<sup>47</sup> These findings support the experience of emergency food providers that report that 38% or more of emergency food recipients have earned incomes from employment.

### **Geography and Region**

The food security measurement also tracks the prevalence of hunger by geography and region. The prevalence of hunger in metropolitan areas (central cities of 50,000 or more population), at 3.5% of households, and non-metropolitan (rural areas and towns less than 2,500 in population), at 3.4% of households, was more common than in suburban areas. Hunger was also more prevalent in the South and West than other regions of the nation; although the West had higher prevalence rates of hunger (3.9% and 944,000 households), the South had more actual households that experienced hunger (3.6% and 1.428 million households).<sup>48</sup>



Source: Calculated by ERS based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements.

Households with limited resources that restrict their access to food utilize a variety of methods to meet their basic food needs. The relationship between food assistance—private and public supports—and household food security is complex.

While the prevalence and patterns of food insecure households and households characterized as food insecure with hunger are generally similar, there are distinctions. Access to stable employment, federal food assistance programs, income supports, quality child-care and access to emergency food all contribute to the community supports that help food insecure households avoid the experience of hunger and rise above food insecure status to food secure.

### **Food Security and Emergency Food Assistance**

To better understand the scope and demographics of the problem of hunger, another source of information is the emergency food assistance system. Every four years, beginning in 1993, America's Second Harvest (A2H), the largest charitable emergency food provider, conducts research into the scope and demographic profiles of emergency food recipients.<sup>49</sup> By accessing food through private charities in their communities, emergency food recipients are by definition food insecure.

In 2001, 23.3 million unduplicated people accessed emergency food assistance through food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens and emergency shelters, representing a 9% increase over the 1997 estimate of emergency food usage. On any given week in 2001, an estimated 7 million different people were assisted through the emergency food assistance system.

As in the food security measurement project, the majority of recipients are single-female headed households with children. Sixty-two percent of all adult emergency food recipients in 2001 were female, and of emergency food recipient households with children, 50% are single parent households.

Children represented 39% (9 million) of emergency food recipients in 2001. The A2H study found that one-in-ten American children received emergency food aid in 2001 and nearly 20% of child recipients received food assistance through meals served at soup kitchens.

A substantial percentage of emergency food recipient households include at least one employed adult (38.9%) and 6.7% have two adults employed in the household. Despite employment, these households must rely on emergency food assistance to meet their basic needs. Less than two-thirds (63%) of adult emergency food recipients have a high school diploma or equivalent, substantially below the national average of 84% of all U.S. adults. Another 37% of adult emergency food recipients have not completed high school level education.

The monthly income of emergency food recipients averages 80 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines. Nearly two-thirds (63.7%) of emergency food recipients had monthly incomes at or below the poverty line, and 75.4% had incomes at or below 130% of poverty. The average monthly income for emergency food recipient households was \$833 in 2001.

As identified in the USDA food security measurement project in 2002, just over half of food insecure households reported that household members participated in one or more of the three major federal food assistance programs—school meal programs, food stamps and the WIC program. Although eligible emergency food recipients do participate in school meal programs and WIC at rates consistent with overall low-income participation rates for those programs, a very low percentage (30%) of emergency food recipient households participate in the Food Stamp Program, substantially below the national average participation rate of 59%.

Although we can now quantify the problem of hunger and food insecurity, the root causes of those conditions are complex, involving both individual and societal factors that lead to food shortages so severe that someone goes hungry.

### **The Root Causes of the Problem of Hunger**

The root causes of hunger and food insecurity are complex and incorporate both individual behaviors or household experiences and larger societal conditions. As the trends in food insecurity and hunger rates suggest, a strong economy, low unemployment, and rising incomes during the period 1995 through 1999 brought about a slight decrease in the prevalence of hunger. During the same period, however, *requests for emergency food assistance, especially among families with children, rose.*<sup>50</sup> Hunger and food insecurity are by definition the result of insufficient household resources, but the research indicates that it would be inaccurate to say that income alone is the cause of hunger. The research shows a high association between income and household food security status as food insecurity was approximately 45% for households with the lowest incomes, approximately 23% for households with incomes around the poverty level, and less than 10% for households with incomes up to 200% of poverty.<sup>51</sup> Despite the positive correlation between income and the prevalence of food insecurity, many low-income households – including nearly two-thirds with incomes below the poverty line – were nonetheless food secure in 2002.<sup>52</sup>

Income levels and other factors seem to play an important role in the likelihood that a low-income household may become food insecure or hungry. Low-income households with children and single-female parent households have the highest food insecurity and hunger rates.<sup>53</sup> But marital status and the presence of children in low-income households cannot alone account for the high rates of food insecurity or hunger. The research findings of emergency food recipients show that low-income households that access emergency food assistance, ostensibly to stave off hunger, experience more severe hardships in comparison with the general low-income population – they report higher

rates of illness, disability, material hardship and experience higher rates of homelessness than other low-income households.<sup>54</sup> Finally, access to food assistance programs or public sponsored income supports that allow for increased food purchases have an important function in addressing hunger's root causes. As noted earlier, the inattention to and eventual reductions in the food assistance safety net over the period of the 1980s to 2002, has had some responsibility for the rise of hunger and food insecurity. Major economic shifts and changes in the industrial sector alone cannot account for the high rates of hunger and food insecurity among working poor families. Limiting access to federal food assistance programs for the working poor, maintaining meager benefit levels, and penalizing families that work and accumulate assets in order to prevent emergencies in the household all contribute to the cause of hunger in America.

The root causes of hunger, the broad range of evidence suggests, arise from a complex interaction of employment status, educational level, inadequate income from employment, marital status, the presence of children, and especially access to food assistance either from the private or public sectors. As noted earlier, the prevalence of hunger versus food insecurity without hunger is dependent on household access to food in order to prevent deprivation. This access to food from either private or public sources hinges upon certain individual or household characteristics. In order to prevent a household's food insecurity from shifting downward into hunger, broader societal and public sector supports – stable employment and policies that allow for the accumulation of household assets, increased income to lift a working family above the poverty threshold, easier access to long-term food assistance in the form of the Food Stamp Program, and adequate housing supports, child-care, health care, and education – form a broader array of societal supports necessary to lift a food insecure family to food security status.<sup>55</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Among major industrialized democracies, the United States is nearly alone with a hunger problem in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The paradox of hunger amidst unprecedented national wealth, food availability and abundance makes the problem of hunger in the U.S. improbable, yet more than 34 million Americans, including 13 million children, are food insecure, meaning they are hungry or at risk of hunger.

From the 1930s to the present, the federal government has established a series of food assistance programs and income supports to help alleviate the problem of hunger in America. Currently, USDA administers 15 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs. The three largest federal food assistance programs are the Food Stamp Program (22 million participants in 2002), the school meal programs (14 million low-income students in 2002) and WIC (8 million participants in 2002). Despite the quantifiable efficacy of these programs, with few exceptions, none has been adequately funded or is easily accessible to many low-income people. Complicating the problem of program access in the last decade has been a growing number of working families, families with children and single parent headed households that now make up the vast majority of America's hungry and food insecure population. Government sponsored food

assistance programs and a dramatic proliferation in private sector emergency food programs have restricted the growth of the hunger problem, but have not been able to solve the problem. The tools to end hunger are already in place, what is lacking is the political will to end hunger in America once and for all.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Eisinger, *Toward an End to Hunger in America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> “Hunger: An Emerging Issue – Results and Analysis of Recent Public Opinion Polling” Prepared by Tom Freedman, Bill Knapp, and Jim McLaughlin for the Alliance to End Hunger, June 2003.

<sup>3</sup> United States House of Representatives, Select Committee on Hunger, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Curtis and Brian Green, “The ‘Persistent Emergency’ of Hunger: Food Pantry Usage in Delaware,” University of Delaware, College of Urban Affairs & Public Policy Public Affairs Reports, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Eisinger.

<sup>6</sup> Janet Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986). Dr. Poppendieck’s work on this subject is definitive and highly recommended to better understand the origins of modern American farm policy and the beginnings of the hunger problem.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Beth O. Daponte and Shannon L. Bade, *The Evolution, Cost and Operation of the Private Emergency Food Assistance Network* (Madison, WI: Institute for Research on Poverty, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Regina A. Galer-Unti, *Hunger and Food Assistance Policy in the United States* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Daponte and Bade 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ardith L. Maney, *Still Hungry After All These Years: Food Assistance Policy from Kennedy to Reagan* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989) and Jeffrey M. Berry, *Feeding Hungry People: Rulemaking in the Food Stamp Program* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Daponte and Bade.

<sup>14</sup> Eisinger.

<sup>15</sup> Kathy Koch, “Hunger in America,” *Congressional Quarterly Researcher*, Vol 10, No. 44, pp. 1033-1056, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Eisinger.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York: Viking, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Eisinger.

<sup>20</sup> Daponte and Eisinger.

<sup>21</sup> Koch.

<sup>22</sup> Eisinger.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity*.

<sup>25</sup> America’s Second Harvest, *Hunger in America 2001*.

<sup>26</sup> Koch.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> J. Larry Brown, *Hunger in the United States: A Summary of Recent Studies on Hunger and Emergency Food Demand*, Center on Hunger and Poverty, 2000.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *The Food Stamp Program: Various Factors Have Led to Declining Participation*, (Washington, DC: GAO, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Second Harvest, *1997 National Research Study*

<sup>31</sup> J. Larry Brown, *Congressional Hunger Briefing 2002*, Brandeis University, Center on Hunger and Poverty.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, *Household Food Security in the United States, 2002*, United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, October 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> The Current Population Survey (CPS) is a highly accurate, representative national sample of approximately 60,000 U.S. households. The surveyed households are representative of the entire non-institutionalized population of the United States, except homeless people. The lack of accounting for homeless persons may cause an undercount in the estimation of food insecurity and hunger. The Census Bureau conducts the CPS monthly for the Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. The primary objective of the CPS is to determine employment rates in the United States; it serves to gather additional information for other federal agencies.

<sup>36</sup> The first food security report, *Household Food Security in the United States in 1995*, was made public in 1997. That report established a baseline of 12% of U.S. households estimated to be food insecure, including 4% of households estimated to be food insecure with hunger.

<sup>37</sup> Definitions are from the American Institute of Nutrition, Life Sciences Research Office. Sue Ann Andersen, ed., "Core Indicators of Nutritional State for Difficult to Sample Populations," *The Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 120, 1990, 1557S-1600S.

<sup>38</sup> Nord and Andrews, *Issues in Food Assistance--Reducing Food Insecurity in the United States: Assessing Progress Toward a National Objective*, United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, May 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Average monthly food stamp caseloads have generally risen during periods of high unemployment or economic recession and fallen during periods of economic growth and lower unemployment. The 1995-2002 household food security rates seem to also track economic cycles. For additional information on these trends, please see: U.S. General Accounting Office, *The Food Stamp Program: Various Factors Have Led to Declining Participation*, (Washington, DC: GAO, 1999) and Nord and Andrews, *Issues in Food Assistance--Reducing Food Insecurity in the United States: Assessing Progress Toward a National Objective*, United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, May 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Nord, Andrews, and Carlson.

<sup>41</sup> The programs most likely to be accessed by food insecure households according to the *Household Food Security Report, 2002* report are the National School Lunch Program, the Food Stamp Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). pp. 26-28.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Nord and Andrews.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> The America's Second Harvest report *Hunger in America 2001* is independent research conducted for America's Second Harvest by Mathematica Policy Research Incorporated. The information contained in the report is comprised of data from 104 food banks surveying 24,000 local emergency food agencies (pantries, kitchens and shelters) and face-to-face interviews with 32,000 recipients, randomly selected at emergency feeding sites. The data collection was conducted January 2001 through April 2001 at sites throughout the country. The *Hunger in America 2001* report, as well as 101 local studies and 19 state studies are available through America's Second Harvest at [www.secondharvest.org](http://www.secondharvest.org).

<sup>50</sup> Laura Tiehen, "Use of Food Pantries by Households with Children Rose During the Late 1990s," *FoodReview*, Vol. 25, Issue 3, United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2002.

<sup>51</sup> Nord and Andrews.

<sup>52</sup> Nord, Andrews, and Carlson.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ronette Briefel et al, *The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings From the Client Survey: Executive Summary*, United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2003.

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<sup>55</sup> Sandra Venner, Ashley Sullivan and Dorie Seavey, *Paradox of Our Times: Hunger in A Strong Economy*, Tufts University, Center on Hunger and Poverty, 2000. An excellent report on the key elements of lasting public policy recommendations to prevent hunger.