



September 11, 2026

# Measuring Food Security During a Time of Transition

Presentation for Nonprofit Federal Policy Response Network (NFPRN)

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# What is food security & how is it measured?

## USDA definition

- Access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life
- Conceptualized as a continuum:
  - High food security
  - Marginal food security
  - Low Food Security
  - Very Low Food Security

## USDA Food Security Scales (18-, 10-, and 6-item scales)

- Responses to series of questions that indicate increasing severity of hardship to determine food security status of households on this continuum
- 12-month reference period; last 30-day reference also collected
- Validated 6-item short form to reduce respondent burden and survey costs

## Questions Used to Assess the Food Security of Households in the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement



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 were only asked if the household included children ages 0–17)

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 there wasn't enough money for 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 because there wasn't enough money for 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)

# USDA Annual Collection & Reporting of Food Security Data

- Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS) used to collect 18-item module since 1995.
- [Economic Research Service of USDA](#) published data and summarized findings each year.
- Food security prevalence estimates overall & for demographic, socioeconomic status, program participation status subgroups & time trends.
- Included annual state level estimates based on 3-year moving averages.
- CPS-FSS also collected data on food spending and use of private and public food assistance programs.



Economic Research Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

## Household Food Security in the United States in 2024

Matthew P. Rabbitt  
Madeline Reed-Jones  
Laura J. Hales  
Shellye Suttles  
Michael P. Burke

Economic  
Research  
Service  
  
Economic  
Research  
Report  
Number 358  
  
December 2025

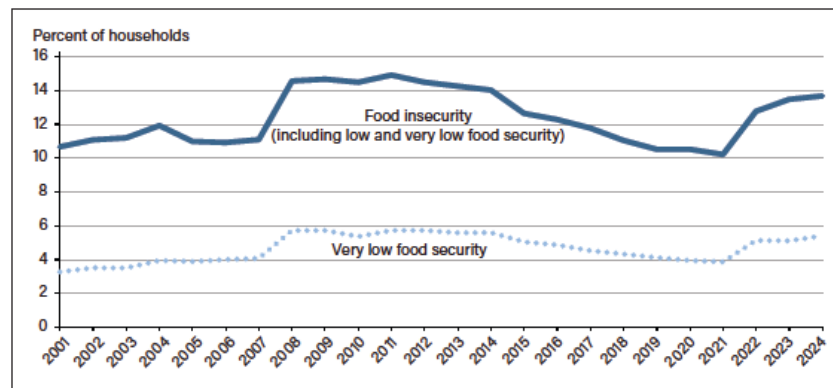
# How are food security estimates used?

- Federal policymakers use data to monitor performance of food assistance programs.
  - Estimates are also a key indicator for Healthy People 2030 goals.
- State and local policymakers and organizations use data to track well-being and to target resources and interventions.
- Researchers use data to understand causes and consequences of food insecurity, impact of food insecurity on well-being and to evaluate effectiveness of food assistance, nutrition and other programs.

# What was lost when USDA cancelled CPS- FSS?

- Long-running time trend of consistently measured food security estimates
- State-level estimates based on 3-year moving averages
- Data on food spending and food assistance use in CPS-FSS, for which the large sample size enabled research on food security.
- National level estimates used as base of model-based estimates of state and local food security prevalence (e.g. Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap).

Figure 3  
Trends in the prevalence of food insecurity and very low food security in U.S. households, 2001-24



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements.

# Importance of using USDA standardized measures of food security (18-, 10-, 6-item modules)

- USDA food security scale was developed, in part, to standardize the measurement of barriers to food access.
- Extensive validity and reliability testing of USDA scales before they were implemented in 1995 and further refinement since.
- Extensive research base on the causes and consequences of food insecurity using the USDA measure. Other measures do not have that research base.
- One goal of Food Security Data Collaborative is to promote validated and standardized measurement of food security & keep field focused on this important indicator.

# Food Security Data Collaborative

A researcher/practitioner  
initiative hosted by the  
Urban Institute

Goal is to bring voices  
across the field into the  
conversation and ensure  
continuity of guidance  
during federal pause in  
data collection

Guided by core steering  
committee made up of  
food security research  
experts

<https://www.urban.org/projects/food-security-data-collaborative#projecthome>

# Focus Areas of Data Collaborative

**Convene stakeholders** interested in food security measurement including researchers, states, service providers, and advocates

**Support rigorous data collection** through provision of expert-led technical guidance and best practices through topic-specific working groups

**Ensure access to high-quality information** on validated food security measurement tools and technical documentation

**Publish rapid-response briefs** and other short products on key methodological topics and best practices

# Food Security Data Collaborative Briefs



## Not All Measures Are the Same: How Food Access Indicators Differ and Why That Matters

Colleen M Heflin, Michele Ver Ploeg, and Elaine Waxman

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, NATIONAL CENTER FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL POLICY, URBAN INSTITUTE

February 2026



## Assessing National Survey Options for Food Security Measurement Following CPS-FSS Suspension

Michele Ver Ploeg, Colleen M Heflin, and Elaine Waxman

NATIONAL CENTER FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL POLICY, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, AND URBAN INSTITUTE

April 2026

<https://www.urban.org/projects/food-security-data-collaborative#publications>



## Why SNAP Participation Is Not a Substitute for Food Insecurity Data

Colleen M Heflin, Michele Ver Ploeg, and Elaine Waxman

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, NATIONAL CENTER FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL POLICY, URBAN INSTITUTE

July 2026

# Using the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) to Measure State-Level Food Security

- Annual state-representative telephone survey (cell & landline) sponsored by CDC.
  - All 50 states, D.C., and 3 territories
  - Over 400,000 adults surveyed each year.
- Collects data on health-related risk behaviors, chronic health conditions, and use of preventive services.
- States can add survey questions to CDC core questionnaire through State Added Questions (SAQs)
- Potential avenue to help understand food security during time of major changes to SNAP and other conditions.

Adding the 6-item food security module to state BRFSS surveys through SAQs.

- Data Collaborative & Feeding America are offering funding for 6-item food security module as SAQs.
  - FANO funding 9 questions (6-item scale + 3 questions on food assistance use).
  - Pennsylvania has applied for funding of 9 questions through FANO.
- We hope a sizable number of states will have food security data from 2027 BRFSS.

# Questions?

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To join Food Security Data Collaborative, send an email to: [FoodSecurityData@urban.org](mailto:FoodSecurityData@urban.org)

<https://www.urban.org/projects/food-security-data-collaborative#projecthome>