



The Daily Dish

Metrics of Food Adequacy

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Eakinomics: Metrics of Food Adequacy

One of the enduring images of the pandemics is long lines of cars at food banks. That seemed real enough, but often the accompanying news story contained some seemingly outlandish figure on the fraction of Americans who did not have enough food. I did not know what to believe.

Enter the [latest](#) from AAF's Tara O'Neill Hayes. I was not aware that "the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] has conducted an annual survey since 1995 in partnership with the Census Bureau (the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, CPS-FSS) of 40,000 nationally representative households. This survey assesses households' abilities to meet their food needs, including how often they may not have had enough food or any food for some period of time in the prior year." This is a systematic assessment of specific metrics of food shortfalls.

According to the USDA food insecurity is defined as "the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways." It may include "reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet," but does not necessarily include reduced food intake. A more severe condition is very low food security when there are "multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced intake." At the other end of the spectrum, food secure households have "consistent access to enough food for active, healthy lives for all household members at all times during the year."

Finally, [food insufficiency](#) is a simpler measure of whether or not there was enough to eat. Because the measures overlap, those who are classified as food insufficient are likely to have very low food security.

What does this statistical machinery tell us? "Official metrics estimate 10.5 percent of Americans (35.2 million) were food insecure in 2019, including 4.1 percent (9 million) who were considered to have very low food security and 3.7 percent were estimated be food insufficient." Not surprisingly, challenges with food vary greatly across different households and have fluctuated over time. Hayes provides a valuable analysis, but summarizes the bottom lines: "Food insecurity is highly correlated with financial challenges but may also be caused by physical or logistical challenges in accessing or cooking nutritious food. Over the past 25 years, food insecurity was highest in the years immediately following the 2008 financial crisis but had been steadily declining since 2014—at least until the COVID-19 pandemic."

Of course, the arrival of the pandemic spawned much additional interest in food insecurity and insufficiency. The next step is to examine the past year more closely. Stay tuned.