

PERSPECTIVES ON OPPORTUNITY

The End of the Food Security Supplement in the Current Population Survey: Next Steps

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Since 1996, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has published an annual report on household food insecurity in the United States, which policymakers, program administrators, the media, and researchers closely follow. This report is based on data collected through the Food Security Supplement, which the US Census Bureau had included every December in its Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly household survey. In 2025, the USDA stopped including the Food Security Supplement on the CPS, essentially ending a consistent source of nationally representative household food-insecurity data. In this report, we provide one perspective on the implications of losing this measure, concerns we have regarding some of the food-insecurity rhetoric in the US, and a call for more attention to very low food security rather than the broader measure of food insecurity.

According to the most recent *Household Food Security in the United States* annual report, 18.3 million households, or 13.7 percent of all US households, were food insecure in 2024. This is above the record low 10.2 percent in 2021 but below the high of 14.9 percent in 2011.¹ These statistics come from the Food Security Supplement, an annual household survey that the US Census Bureau has administered each December since 1997 as part of its monthly Current Population Survey (CPS). In 2025, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which oversees nutrition-assistance programs in the US, stopped including the Food Security Supplement on the CPS, essentially ending the production of a national statistic on household food insecurity.

We have extensively used the CPS Food Security Supplement in our research—independently and as coauthors. In this report, we discuss what the US loses by discontinuing the Food Security Supplement, the stated reasons for ending it, and some ways to address its shortcomings should the USDA decide to reinstate the survey so it can advance future research. In our concluding remarks, we build off this perspective and offer three recommendations: Restore the Food Security Supplement to the December CPS, reorient the annual USDA report to cover very low food security, and devote more attention toward understanding household responses to the more severe food-hardship questions.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all information about food-insecurity rates come from Rabbitt et al. (2025a) and Rabbitt et al. (2025b).

What Is Lost

Ending the Food Security Supplement in the CPS will disrupt a national data series on household food insecurity that dates to 1996. This will reduce our understanding of food insecurity and make it harder to assess policies' effectiveness in addressing it. We turn to three of the most important disruptions—the loss of longitudinal data from a consistent source, the inability to accurately measure changes to economic and other conditions, and the loss of a gold standard when measuring food insecurity.

Longitudinal Data

There is only one uninterrupted dataset that allows us to see what has happened to food insecurity since 1996—the Food Security Supplement in the CPS.² This measurement stability has helped establish food insecurity as one of the most closely followed measures of well-being for vulnerable Americans. In addition, its continuity places it alongside other long-standing metrics of well-being that also use data from the CPS, including median income, unemployment, and poverty.

There are other nationally representative datasets funded by the federal government with information about food insecurity that have been in place since the Food Security Supplement has been included in the December CPS. These include the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) and the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). These datasets have also substantially improved our understanding of food insecurity, but they are not as robust as the CPS Food Security Supplement. For example, the PSID does not have an uninterrupted time series,³ and, due to concerns about confidentiality, responses to individual questions and relationship status among household members are not available in the NHANES.⁴ Moreover,

the sample size in the CPS is large enough to provide food-insecurity rates at the state level, which neither the PSID nor the NHANES offers.

More recent nationally representative annual datasets have also emerged that are not funded by the federal government—for example, the Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey and the Consumer Food Insights survey from Purdue University's Center for Food Demand Analysis and Sustainability. While these survey results have and will continue to contribute important insights to our understanding of food insecurity, they differ markedly from the CPS in terms of, for example, how the sampling frame is constructed, the broader survey's structure, and the questions' time frame. In addition, due to their smaller sample sizes compared with the CPS, neither dataset can reflect household food insecurity at the state level or allow for robust subgroup analyses, such as by race and marital status.

Moving forward, these other surveys cannot replace what the CPS Food Security Supplement offers. This means that some of our understanding of household food insecurity will be lost and subject to continued private funding support. Consequently, even though we will have information from other nationally representative surveys, we will lose the ability to track household food insecurity in the US since 2000 in a relatively consistent manner.

How Food Insecurity Responds to Changing Conditions

Using CPS data from 2000 to 2024, Figure 1 displays the proportion and number of food-insecure households in the US. Food-insecurity rates range from 10.2 percent in 2021 to 14.9 percent in 2011. The number of food-insecure households ranges from 11.5 million in 2000 to 18.3 million in 2024.⁵

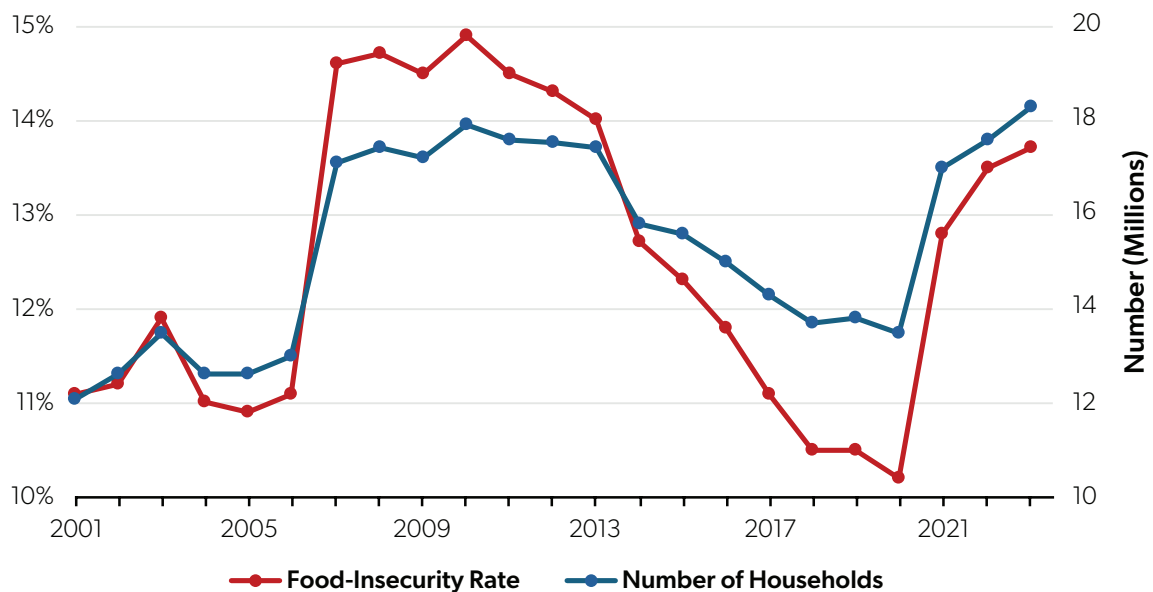
2 Due to changes in survey timing and the questionnaire's structure, the results are only directly comparable for 2000 and subsequent years. In addition, a shift in some aspects of the survey's construction in 2022 means comparisons with earlier years must be made with caution.

3 The PSID included food-insecurity questions from 1997 to 2003 and 2015 to 2025, but it did not include these questions between 2004 and 2014.

4 Multiple members of a household can be included in the NHANES, but they cannot be identified as being within the same household in the publicly available data.

5 The USDA's annual food-security report focuses on households, given the nature of the questions. As such, the USDA advises readers that "the food security survey is designed to measure food security status at the household level. Although it is informative to examine the number of persons living in food-insecure households, these statistics should be interpreted carefully. Within a food-insecure household, each household member may be affected differently by the household's food insecurity. Some members—particularly young children—may experience only mild or no effects, whereas adults are more severely affected (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013; Nord, 2009). It is more precise to describe these statistics as representing 'persons living in food-insecure households' rather than as representing 'food-insecure persons.' Similarly, 'persons living in households with very low food security' is a more precise description than 'persons with very low food security'" (Rabbitt et al. 2025a, 11).

Figure 1. Trends in Household Food Insecurity, 2001–24



Source: Authors' analysis of data from Rabbitt et al. (2025a).

Since the end of the Great Recession, researchers and policymakers have often focused on three broad patterns that would not have been visible without the CPS. First, from 2014 to pre-pandemic 2019, food-insecurity rates fell 25.0 percent, from 14.0 percent to 10.5 percent.⁶ This decline is often ascribed to factors such as low unemployment rates and low food prices. The US also experienced declining unemployment rates and low food prices from 2011 to 2014, but food-insecurity rates were relatively high and constant over this period. Without the Food Security Supplement, one may have expected declines over this earlier period as well.⁷

Second, many predicted that food insecurity would substantially increase due to COVID-19. In some cases, these predictions were based on the CPS's historical record (Gundersen et al. 2021), while others used the CPS combined with other datasets (Schanzenbach and Pitts 2020). Fortunately, these predictions

were incorrect, and household food-insecurity rates remained the same in 2019 and 2020, at 10.5 percent, and even fell to 10.2 percent in 2021.⁸ Without the CPS Food Security Supplement, we would have had no way to place these predictions in a broader context, nor could we have ascertained various predictions' accuracy. Our understanding of food insecurity during the pandemic would have remained flawed.

Third, due to inflation, the second-largest annual increase in food-insecurity rates on record, only after the increase during the Great Recession, was from 2021 to 2022. As inflation continued but was more moderate, a subsequent increase was seen in 2023.⁹ This was the first time since food-insecurity measurement began that such high inflation occurred—and only the Food Security Supplement in the CPS allowed us to see this impact on food insecurity and compare it to historical trends.

6 During this period, the food-insecurity rate among children in food-insecure households fell even more—a 44.8 percent decline, from 23.2 percent to 12.8 percent.

7 For more on food-insecurity patterns since 2010, see Gundersen (2024).

8 See Gundersen (2023) for more on why food-insecurity rates did not increase.

9 For an overview of inflation's role in these increases, see Rachidi and Gundersen (2024a) and Rachidi and Gundersen (2024b).

The Gold Standard

As food insecurity has become a leading measure of well-being in the United States, its inclusion on other surveys has become common. These surveys often include the full 18-item set of questions found in the CPS supplement (10 household- and adult-referenced items and eight child-referenced items). In other instances, a subset of these questions are used, including the 10 household- and adult-referenced questions (even in households with children) and the so-called six-item and two-item scales, which are based on questions taken from the 18 questions. In addition, these surveys include other questions, such as food insufficiency and demographic questions.¹⁰ Food-security and food-sufficiency data are therefore reported along with a variety of other data points when available on these surveys, such as demographics, income, expenditures, other hardships, food intakes, and health outcomes.

Each survey provides its own data points, along with differences in the populations surveyed. For example, some surveys might be directed toward recipients of charitable food assistance, healthcare patients, parents of schoolchildren, or unhoused persons. The sample construction and target population make each survey effort somewhat different.

The data collected through these other surveys and the resulting analyses have made vital contributions to our understanding of food insecurity. For example, including food-insecurity questions, along with other variables, in different surveys can offer new insights into the causes and consequences of food insecurity that the CPS Food Security Supplement cannot answer. These other surveys can also offer a better understanding of populations that are often under-sampled or not included in other surveys. For example, the CPS does not include unhoused persons in its sample. This is one reason we should consider the CPS Food Security Supplement not as redundant but rather as a gold standard of food-insecurity measurement by which other measures can be compared.

This multitude of surveys presents a challenge regarding the plausibility of food-insecurity rates. Fortunately, most surveys report food-insecurity rates that are reasonable and consistent with other sources of data on similar populations. If a study were to report a food-insecurity rate for one population that differed vastly from the CPS average for that population, the study's accuracy and conclusions should be questioned. In this way, the CPS Food Security Supplement provides a robustness check on other survey data.

One research area that has many studies with implausible results is "college hunger," and the availability of the CPS Food Security Supplement data allow us to assess these studies' results. On average, college students are from families with substantially higher incomes than the overall population (Cahalan et al. 2022). Consequently, we would expect food-insecurity rates among college students to be lower than national averages or, at the very least, no higher than the national average.

A series of studies, though, found that college students had food-insecurity rates that far exceeded the national average, including several studies with rates over 50 percent.¹¹ These high rates were due to, among other problems, nonrepresentative sampling frames and low response rates.

Despite these non-credible findings, "college hunger" received a great deal of attention from the media, which generated calls to concentrate efforts to alleviate food insecurity specifically among college students. These calls resulted in, for example, the Hunger-Free College Campuses initiative in California¹² and the Hunger-Free Campus Act in New Jersey.¹³

These high rates were debunked using CPS data. From 2014 to 2018, food-insecurity rates among full-time college students age 18 to 25 (about 85 percent of all college students) were between 9.1 and 9.9 percent (Gundersen 2021). In contrast, non-college students in this age range had rates between 16.8 and 18.4 percent. These wide relative gaps held irrespective of race or ethnicity.

¹⁰ See Heflin et al. (2026) for in-depth coverage of these different measures of food insecurity and insufficiency.

¹¹ A list of studies is found in Gundersen (2021, Table 1). Not all studies have implausibly high rates. For examples, see Chaparro et al. (2009), Hanna (2014), and Gaines et al. (2014).

¹² Cal. Educ. Code § 66027.8. (b) (West 2017).

¹³ S.B. 3239, 218th Leg., Reg. Sess. (N.J. 2019).

Without the CPS Food Security Supplement, debunking the high rates of food insecurity among college students would not have been possible. The CPS had all the necessary information to do this analysis—a large sample size, a sampling frame that reflected the US population (and not just a subset), and questions on relevant demographic characteristics. More broadly, data from different populations and sampling frames can be tested against the CPS data to determine the credibility of food-insecurity research.

The USDA’s Stated Rationale for Ending the Food Security Supplement

In the previous section, we highlighted several advantages to continuing the CPS Food Security Supplement. Despite these advantages, survey results have been used problematically, with the USDA arguing that the survey had become “redundant, costly, politicized, and extraneous” (USDA 2025). One of the main critiques of the Food Security Supplement is that advocates and the media often misinterpret the results and confound food insecurity with hunger. This can skew the public’s understanding of hunger in the US.

Before turning to these misinterpretations, we emphasize that the USDA’s annual report is accurate and careful with its language around food security. “Food insecurity” and “very low food security” are well-defined in the report, and the authors issue several cautionary statements about interpreting the measures.

However, the language others use about food insecurity is often misleading and directly contradicts guidance offered by the USDA and the report itself. Here, we consider two ways in which the results from the USDA household food-security report are commonly misused.

The Extent of Child Hunger

Since 2000, the proportion of children living in food-insecure households has ranged from 12.8 percent in 2021 to 23.2 percent in 2009. These figures have led some to make inaccurate claims about children’s

experiences in the US. For instance, former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said in a press conference that “1 in 5 children in America lives in poverty and goes to sleep hungry at night” (Kiely 2018). Advocacy groups will also sometimes misuse these results. Feed the Children—a major charitable food network—wrote on its website that “1 in 5 American kids doesn’t have enough food and doesn’t know where their next meal will come from” (Feed the Children 2024). Similarly, in a request for donations, the Food Research & Action Committee—a national anti-hunger advocacy organization—began with the following statement: “One in five children in America face hunger” (FRAC n.d.).

This perspective is mistaken for two primary reasons. First, it falsely assumes that all children in food-insecure households are also going without food. It is important to understand the difference between low food security and very low food security.¹⁴ For example, authors of the USDA’s food-security report specifically challenge any interpretation that low food security reflects reduced food intake:

Low and very low food security differ in the extent and character of the adjustments the household makes to its eating patterns and food intake. Households classified as having low food security reported multiple indications of food acquisition problems and reduced diet quality but typically reported fewer, if any, indications of reduced food intake. Those classified as having very low food security reported multiple indications of reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns because of inadequate resources for food. (Rabbitt et al. 2025a, 6–7)

In 2024, 19.5 percent of children were in food-insecure households, but this is not the same as children going without sufficient quantities of food. Because the entire household is classified as food insecure, we need to explore the data further to understand whether all or only some of the household members fall into that situation.

¹⁴ Households with children responding affirmatively to between three and seven questions and households without children responding affirmatively to between three and five questions are defined as having low food security. A household is defined as having very low food security if eight or more affirmative responses are given for households with children and six or more affirmative responses for households without children.

In 2024, just over half (51.8 percent) of children in food-insecure households were themselves food insecure, meaning their parents responded affirmatively to three or more child-specific questions on the Food Security Supplement. This represents 10.1 percent of all children who had a parent report them as being food insecure, which contrasts with the broader group of children in a food-insecure household (19.5 percent). Further, 41.2 percent of the affirmative responses (namely, those who responded “sometimes” or “often”) were to the first two questions, which do not include reduced food intake: “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 [in the past 12 months]” and “We couldn’t feed our children a balanced meal, because we couldn’t afford that [in the past 12 months].”¹⁵ The remaining six questions included some notion of reduced food intake by children.

In sum, 5.9 percent of children in the US had parents who responded to at least one question indicating a reduction in food intake during 2024. Of these, less than 20 percent had reductions severe enough to be defined as children experiencing very low food security. In other words, 0.9 percent of children in the US in 2024 were in households defined as experiencing very low food security among children.

Second, even among the 0.9 percent of children who were reported to have very low food security, the rhetoric about food insecurity among children assumes that these children experience this condition every day. For reasons discussed in the next section, this is false as well.

The Duration of Food Insecurity Experienced over a Year

A household is classified as food insecure if, at any point during the previous 12 months, at least one person experienced food insecurity based on responses to the food-security scale. Thus, a statement such as

“In the past year, X percent of Americans lived in a household in which at least one member experienced food insecurity at some point” accurately reflects the underlying measure.

In contrast, public discourse often frames food insecurity as a contemporaneous or continuous condition—for example, implying that “every day, X percent of Americans experience food insecurity.” Such formulations convert a 12-month incidence measure into a point-in-time or daily condition. This type of language appears in a variety of settings, including statements in the *Congressional Record*,¹⁶ testimony before state legislatures,¹⁷ policy discussions (Cooper 2022), and national media coverage (CBS News 2026).

Indeed, how many months households experience food insecurity during a year isn’t directly derivable from the Food Security Supplement. This also holds for the number of days in a month a household is food insecure. However, one can look at the responses to individual questions to get some context about the frequency of food insecurity.

As seen in Table 1, the Food Security Supplement has six questions that are used to establish food insecurity, which ask whether something occurs “never,” “sometimes,” or “often.” The share of the population that responds “sometimes” (rather than “often”) to these questions ranges from 74 to 83 percent for food-insecure households.¹⁸ There are seven yes-or-no questions that have follow-up inquiries for those responding affirmatively about whether something occurs in “1 or 2 months,” “some months but not every month,” and “almost every month.” For all but one, the most common response (ranging from 37 to 44 percent) is “some months but not every month.”¹⁹

The CPS Food Security Supplement also includes a 30-day follow-up set of questions for those who reported experiencing food insecurity during the previous month. Those who responded affirmatively to some of these questions are asked seven follow-up

15 See Table 1 for the full set of food-hardship questions.

16 117 Cong. Rec. S5042–S5043 (2021).

17 *Joint Legislative Hearing in the Matter of the 2021–2022 Executive Budget on Local Government Officials/General Government*, 2021 Leg., 2021 Reg. Session (NY 2021) (statement of Helene Weinstein, Chair, H. Comm. on Ways & Means).

18 This discussion about the length of food-insecurity spells is based on information from Tables S-7 and S-9 in Rabbitt et al. (2025b).

19 The one exception is for “children skipping meals,” with 39 percent reporting “almost every month” and 37 percent reporting “some months but not every month.” Only 0.3 percent of households with children responded affirmatively to this question.

Table 1. Questions Used to Establish Food-Insecurity Status in the United States

Item	Question	Response Options
All Households		
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?	Often true Sometimes true Never true
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?	Often true Sometimes true Never true
3	"We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?	Often true Sometimes true Never true
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?	Almost every month Some months but not every month 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?	Almost every month Some months but not every month 1 or 2 months
Households with Children		
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?	Often true Sometimes true Never true
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?	Often true Sometimes true Never true
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?	Often true Sometimes true Never true
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?	Almost every month Some months but not every month 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

Source: Rabbitt et al. (2025b).

Note: Affirmative responses are in bold.

questions about how often in the previous month they occurred: one to seven days, eight to 14 days, or 15 to 30 days. The majority for each of the seven questions was one to seven days, with the shares ranging from 57 percent for “Respondent ate less than felt he/she should” to 76 percent for “Child(ren) skipped meals” (Rabbitt et al. 2025b). Examining the data at this level suggests that experiences of food insecurity within households and by children are notable but, in general, not a frequent occurrence.

Emphasize Very Low Food Security

The overwhelming majority of research on food insecurity in the United States has concentrated on whether households are food insecure or food secure.²⁰ This emphasis is especially reflected in the USDA’s annual report on food insecurity, in which the primary figure it highlights is the proportion of households that are food secure versus food insecure.²¹ And when the media reports on food insecurity, it is almost always the food-insecurity rate that is published rather than the rate of very low food security.

Food-insecurity rates are important measures of well-being when properly understood and described. In fact, we have often used the food-insecurity measure in our joint work (Rachidi and Gundersen 2024a; Rachidi and Gundersen 2024b). Undeniably, however, “household food insecurity” as used in public and political discourse is frequently misunderstood and misrepresented. Here, we examine the advantages of changing the emphasis from food insecurity instead to very low food security.

Distribution of Responses to Food-Hardship Questions

The number of affirmative responses to the questions in Table 1 reflects the degree of a household’s food insecurity. For food-insecure households, Figure 2 displays the distribution of affirmative responses for households

with children in the first panel and households without children in the second. In both panels, we show the “number of questions” cutoff for a household to be considered to have very low food security—eight in the first panel and six in the second. This allows us to divide food-insecure households into two mutually exclusive categories—low food security (less severe) and very low food security (more severe).

As seen in Figure 2, Panel A, there is a sharp drop-off in the proportion of affirmative responses—from three responses (19.3 percent) to seven (10.5 percent)—for households with children. This reflects the concentration of food-insecure households at the lower end of the affirmative response range; recall that the higher the number of affirmative responses, the more severe a household’s food-insecurity conditions are. Another way to look at this is to compare the average number of affirmative responses for those who have low food security (4.8) with those who experience very low food security (10.3).

Using the information in Table S-5 in Rabbitt et al. (2025b), we can establish the questions that commonly received the most affirmative responses among respondents with low food security: “Worried food would run out before (I/we) got money to buy more” (17.2 percent); “Food bought didn’t last, and (I/we) didn’t have money to get more” (14.7 percent); “Couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals” (15.5 percent); “Relied on few kinds of low-cost food to feed child(ren)” (14.5 percent); and “Couldn’t feed child(ren) balanced meals” (9.6 percent).²² None of these responses for low food security include cutbacks in food consumption.

In contrast, the most common affirmative responses among respondents with very low food security were for those five questions plus “Adult(s) cut size of meals or skipped meals” (8.4 percent), “Respondent ate less than felt he/she should” (8.5 percent), “Adult(s) cut size or skipped meals in 3 or more months” (6.5 percent), “Respondent hungry but didn’t eat because couldn’t afford food” (4.7 percent), and “Child(ren) were not eating enough” (4.3 percent). Here, we see respondents

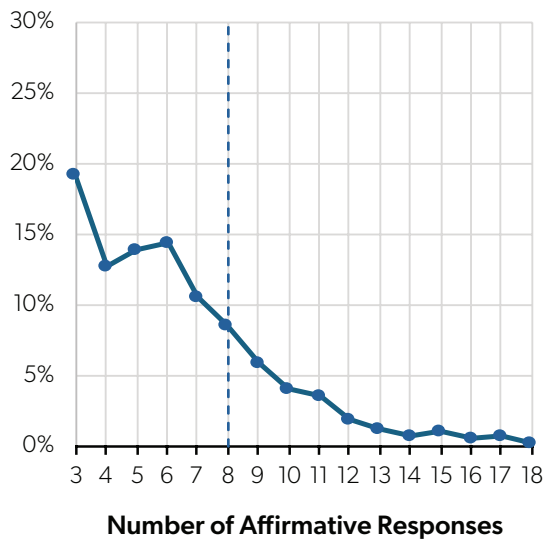
20 Two papers summarizing this literature are Gundersen and Ziliak (2015) and Gundersen and Ziliak (2018).

21 The report is comprehensive and provides information about very low food security across several dimensions.

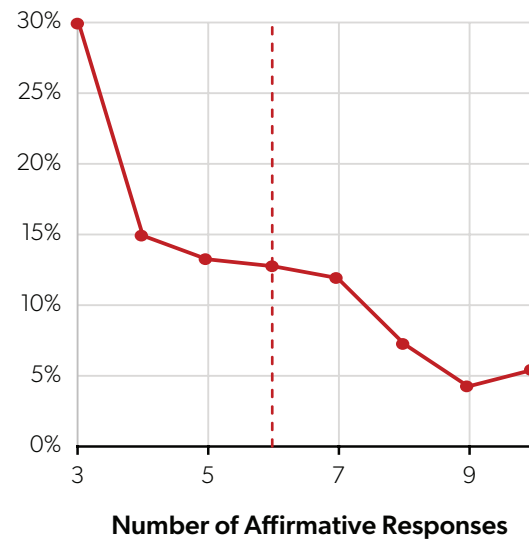
22 This does not imply that all households will follow the most common response pattern. For example, a household responding affirmatively (“often true” or “sometimes true”) to two questions could do so for, say, questions 2 and 4. However, the most common response pattern is to respond affirmatively to questions 1 and 2, which have the first- and second-highest number of affirmative responses.

Figure 2. Number of Affirmative Responses on the Household Food-Security Module for Food-Insecure Households

Panel A. Households with Children



Panel B. Households Without Children



Source: Authors' calculations using data from the 2024 Current Population Survey.

Note: Vertical lines denote thresholds for very low food security.

reporting cutbacks in consumption among adults and children. By combining “low food security” and “very low food security” into the concept of “food insecurity,” the much worse but far less frequently occurring category of very low food security is not fully articulated.

A similar story holds in Figure 2, Panel B for households without children. The share of respondents falls for every additional affirmative response, from 30.0 percent for three affirmative responses to 13.3 percent for five. The average number of affirmative responses for those who have low food security is 3.7; for those with very low food security, it's 7.5.

Households with low food security and no children were most likely to respond affirmatively to “Worried food would run out before (I/we) got money to buy more” (17.2 percent); “Food bought didn’t last, and (I/we) didn’t have money to get more” (14.7 percent); “Couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals” (15.5 percent); and “Respondent ate less than felt he/she should” (8.5 percent). The most common responses for those with very low food security and no children are responding affirmatively to those four questions plus “Adult(s) cut size of meals or skipped meals” (8.4 percent),

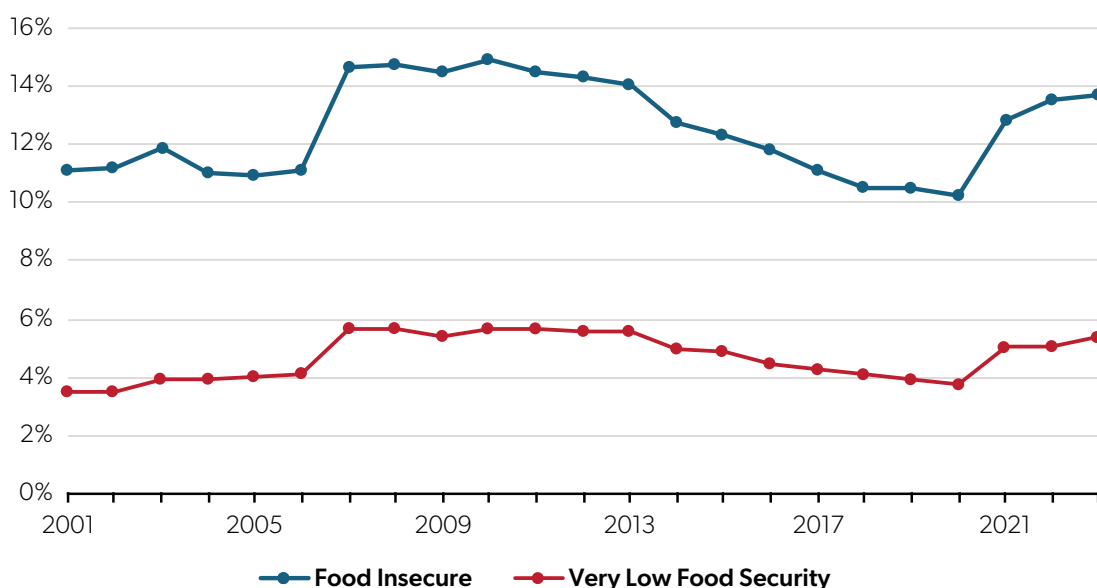
“Adult(s) cut size or skipped meals in 3 or more months” (6.5 percent), “Respondent hungry but didn’t eat because couldn’t afford food” (4.7 percent), and “Respondent lost weight” (3.1 percent). Like households with children, households without children lose important context about the much worse experiences of very low food security when they are lumped in with households with low food security.

The Persistence and Severity of Very Low Food Security

The previous section demonstrated the advantages to concentrating on the substantially worse situation of very low food security by not lumping these households together with other food-insecure households. Additionally, households with very low food security are less likely to escape this condition compared with the broader food-insecure population.

Figure 3 repeats information from Figure 1 regarding food-insecurity rates and adds rates for very low food security. From a peak food-insecurity rate of 14.9 percent in 2011 (17.8 million households), rates fell to 10.5 percent by 2019 (13.7 million). In other words,

Figure 3. Trends in Households with Low and Very Low Food Security, 2001–24



Source: Rabbitt et al. (2025a).

4.1 million fewer households were food insecure by 2019. Over this same period, rates for very low food security fell from 5.7 percent to 4.1 percent, a much smaller decline of 1.6 million fewer households with very low food security. At least at the aggregate level, this points to the persistence of very low food security compared with low food insecurity, and it confirms that these are different concepts.

Another way to view this persistence is at the individual household level. With the CPS, one can observe households at two points in time, which allows for the comparison of individual households' trajectories. As seen in Ziliak and Gundersen (2016) with data from 2001 to 2010, 40 percent of households with very low food security were still in the same condition a year later, while 24 percent had transitioned to low food security and 36 percent to food security. Compare this with households with low food security. Here, 61 percent had transitioned to food security one year later.

Reflection of Vulnerability

One advantage of the Food Security Supplement is it portrays vulnerability in ways that might not be captured

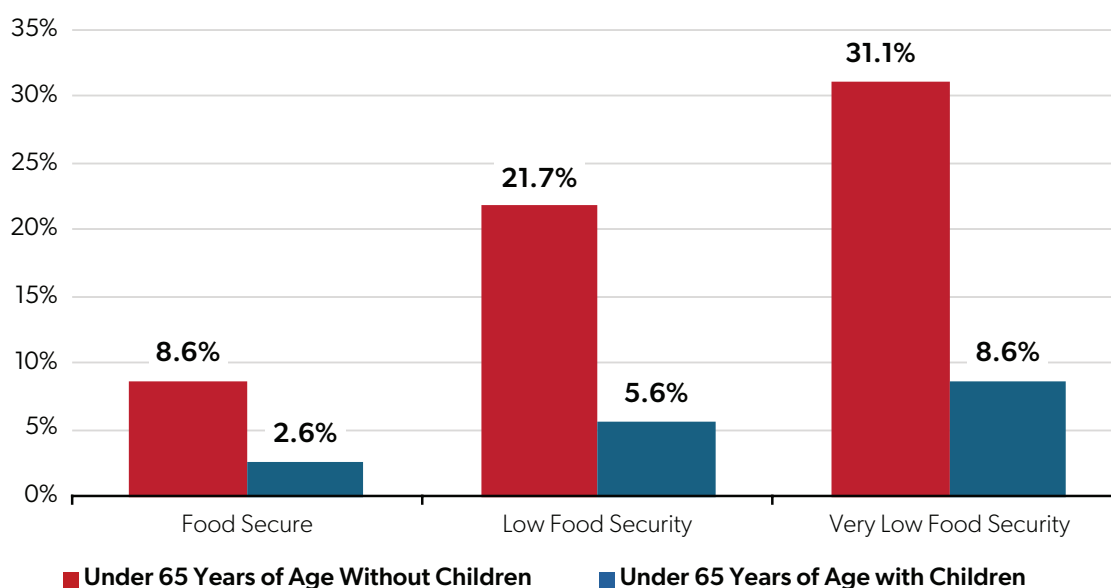
by other economic and well-being measures, such as the poverty rate. This portrayal is particularly acute when using data for households with very low food security rather than the broader measure of food insecurity.

In Figure 4, we consider what is arguably the most important determinant of food insecurity in the United States—disability status—and its proportions at various levels of food security.²³ As expected, households with at least one disabled person are disproportionately categorized as having very low food security. For example, while disabled households with children make up only less than 3 percent of all food-secure households, these households constitute nearly 9 percent of households with very low food security (Figure 4).

Among disabled households without children, this discrepancy is even larger. Such households constitute 8.6 percent of food-secure households but 31.1 percent of households with very low food security. In other words, by looking at very low food security, we can assess the prevalence of this more dire condition for a group of households at an especially high risk of food insecurity.

23 For work on the connections between food insecurity and disability status, see Henly et al. (2023), Charnes (2022), Karpur et al. (2021), Jensen et al. (2023), Meshkat et al. (2024), Brown et al. (2022), and Burke et al. (2016).

Figure 4. Proportion of Households with a Disability Among Food-Security Categories



Source: Authors' calculations using data from US Census Bureau (2024).

Conclusion

Since 1996, the federal government (through the USDA) has produced an annual household food-security report using data collected through the Food Security Supplement, which was included in each December's CPS. Since 2001, the survey has had a consistent framework, which enabled researchers to create a picture of households with low and very low food security in the US.²⁴ The USDA ended this data collection effort in 2025 based on concerns over the misuse of food-insecurity data in research and public discourse.

We identified several advantages to continuing the Food Security Supplement and the associated disadvantages if it remains discontinued. These disadvantages include a break in a reliable and longitudinal data source on food insecurity, which can lead to less understanding of this condition among US households, and a limited ability to reliably validate other data sources on food insecurity. However, we also acknowledge that

the use of the food-insecurity measure in recent years has been misleading and distracted from understanding the more severe condition of very low food security and the policy implications associated with this condition among vulnerable populations.

A federal measure of food insecurity serves several important objectives. At the same time, some policymakers and advocates have misrepresented the food-insecurity measure in ways that make it less useful.

We recommend reinstating the Food Security Supplement in future CPS surveys, but the annual food-security report and related USDA materials should focus on very low food security. The survey would still have the full set of 18 questions used to define food insecurity so researchers could continue to consider food insecurity, but the report should shift its focus. In doing so, the report would emphasize the most severe and persistent level of food insecurity and highlight some of the most vulnerable groups in the United States.

²⁴ The survey methodology changed slightly in 2022, which affects our ability to compare trends across time. However, Kephart et al. (2021) concluded that the changes in wording and ordering of questions did not affect the Food Security Supplement's reliability.

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