

# Food Security Rates Are High for Elderly Households

Mark Nord

**H**ouseholds that include elderly persons are generally more food secure than other U.S. households. However, not all elderly persons have achieved food security—access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. Analysis by USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) of data from a nationally representative food security survey conducted in September 2000 shows that 94 percent of households with an elderly person (age 65 or older) present were food secure throughout the year. The remaining 6 percent of households

with elderly were food insecure. At some time during the previous year, these households were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet basic needs of all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food (see box).

One in four of the food-insecure elderly households (1.5 percent of all elderly households) were food insecure to the extent that one or more household members were hungry, at least some time during the year, because they could not afford enough food. The other three-fourths of food-insecure elderly

households obtained enough food to avoid hunger by using a variety of coping strategies, such as eating less varied diets, participating in Federal food assistance programs, or getting emergency food from community food pantries. These rates of food insecurity and hunger among elderly households were

Mark Nord (202) 694-5433  
marknord@ers.usda.gov

The author is a sociologist with the Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, USDA.



The high proportion of elderly that own their own homes and have substantial financial assets is a likely factor in the higher rates of food security among this age group.

Credit: Ken Hammond, USDA.

about half those of households with no elderly members.

Elderly households registered nearly identical rates of food insecurity and hunger in 1999 and 2000. Two-year average rates for 1999-2000 are reported in the remainder of this article to increase the reliability of the statistics, especially as pertains to smaller sub-populations of the elderly.

### **Elderly Are More Food Secure Than Nonelderly**

The lower rate of food insecurity of elderly households compared with nonelderly households is, in part, a result of a lower poverty rate among the elderly. Food insecurity is, by definition, a condition that results from constrained resources, and the elderly have, for several decades, registered lower rates of poverty than the nonelder-

ly. In 2000, for example, the U.S. Census Bureau reported a poverty rate of 10.2 percent for people age 65 and older, compared with 11.4 percent for people under age 65. (Poverty and income statistics reported in this article take into account all cash income, including Social Security benefits.)

Lower poverty rates, however, account for only a small part of the low rate of food insecurity among the elderly. At all income levels, food insecurity was much less prevalent among households consisting entirely of elderly persons than among households with no elderly persons (fig. 1). Food insecurity rates for mixed-age households—those with both elderly and nonelderly present—fell between those of the other two groups. The prevalence of food insecurity with hunger—the more severe range of

food insecurity—followed a similar pattern except that rates for mixed-age households were nearer those of households consisting entirely of elderly persons (fig. 2).

More stable income probably contributes to the higher rates of food security among the elderly compared with other age groups. ERS research shows that irregular income, and especially sudden drops in income, contributes to food insecurity. Social Security and pensions provide relatively stable income for many elderly persons. Also, as reported by the Institute for Research on Poverty, a larger proportion of elderly than nonelderly own their own homes and have substantial financial assets. Thus, the elderly have more of their income available for food, and they are better able to smooth

### **How Does USDA Measure Food Security?**

USDA monitors the food security of the Nation's households through annual, nationally representative food security surveys. The surveys are conducted for USDA by the U.S. Census Bureau as an annual supplement to the Bureau's monthly Current Population Survey (CPS)—the same survey that provides data for the Nation's monthly unemployment statistics and annual poverty rates. A nationally representative sample of about 40,000 households responds to CPS questions about food expenditures, use of Federal and community food assistance programs, and whether they are able to consistently meet their food needs.

Each household's food security status is assessed by a series of 18 questions about behaviors and experiences known to characterize households that are having difficulty meeting their food needs. The questions cover a wide range of severity of food insecurity. For example, questions at the least-severe level of food insecurity ask whether respondents worried that their food

would run out before they got money to buy more and whether they were able to afford to eat balanced meals. Questions at the midrange ask about reductions in food intake, such as whether adults in the household cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food. Questions tapping the more severe levels of food insecurity ask whether children skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food, and whether adults did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food. Each question asks whether the condition or behavior occurred during the previous 12 months and specifies a lack of money or other resources to obtain food as the reason for the condition or behavior. Voluntary fasting or dieting to lose weight is thereby excluded from the measure.

Interviewed households are classified into one of three categories—food secure, food insecure without hunger, food insecure with

hunger—based on the households' responses to all items. Households that answer yes to 3 or more of the 18 food security questions are classified as food insecure. At a minimum, food-insecure households have affirmed all of the following three items or items indicating more severe conditions:

- They worried whether their food would run out before they got money to buy more.
- The food they bought didn't last, and they did not have money to get more.
- They could not afford to eat balanced meals.

Households classified as food insecure with hunger have affirmed, in addition to the three items above, both of the following items or items indicating more severe conditions:

- Adults ate less than they felt they should.
- Adults cut the size of meals or skipped meals in 3 or more months.

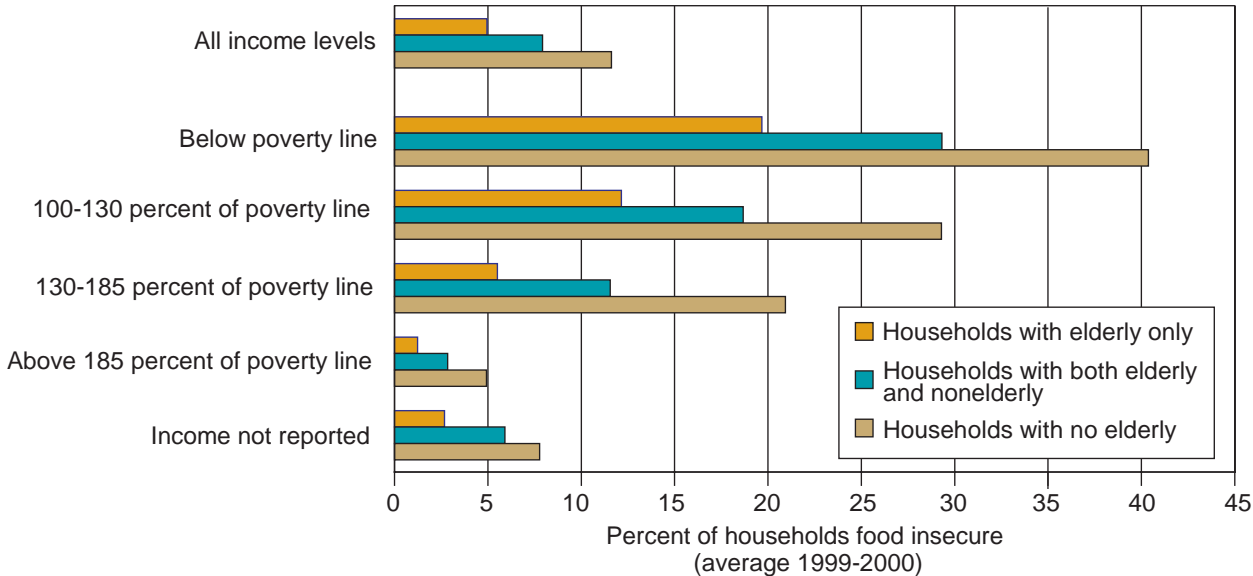
their consumption if income or other needs fluctuate.

Rates of food insecurity and hunger among households consisting entirely of elderly persons remained almost unchanged from 1995, when the first nationally rep-

resentative food security survey was conducted, through 2000 (fig. 3). Over the same period, the food security of nonelderly households improved steadily as incomes rose with economic growth. Elderly persons generally depend less on the

labor market for their income than nonelderly persons. As a result, the incomes of elderly persons, especially the lower income elderly, who are more vulnerable to food insecurity, are not affected much by changes in the economy.

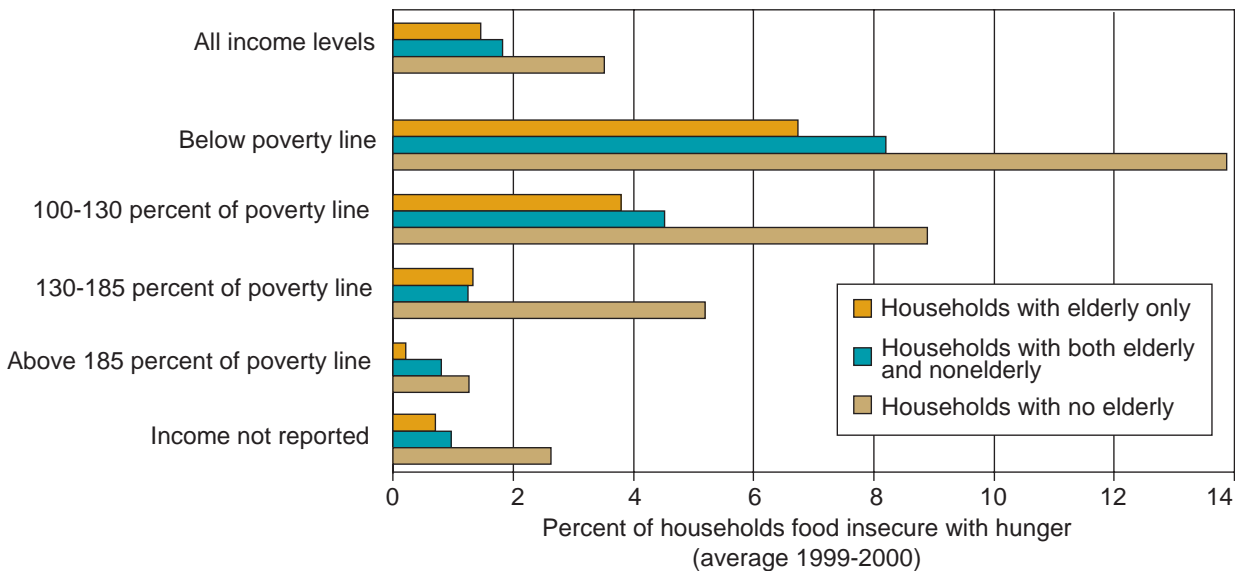
**Figure 1—Elderly Are More Food Secure at All Income Levels**



Note: Income categories are based on all cash income, including social security benefits.

Source: Prepared by USDA's Economic Research Service based on data from April 1999 and September 2000 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements.

**Figure 2—Prevalence of Hunger Is Lower Among Elderly at All Income Levels**



Note: Income categories are based on all cash income, including Social Security benefits.

Source: Prepared by USDA's Economic Research Service based on data from April 1999 and September 2000 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements.

## Elderly Couples Were Most Food Secure

Rates of food insecurity and hunger among elderly households depended to a considerable extent on household composition, household income, race and ethnicity, and area of residence. Households consisting of two or more elderly persons—almost all of them married couples—were by far the most food secure. Only 2.4 percent of such households were food insecure, and 0.6 percent were food in-

secure with hunger (table 1). Rates of food insecurity were higher among elderly men living alone (6.9 percent) and elderly women living alone (6.6 percent) and higher still for mixed-age households (7.9 percent). All of these rates, however, were well below those of households with no elderly members (11.6 percent).

Food security is strongly related to income. The rate of food insecurity among elderly households with incomes below the Federal poverty line was 22.6 percent—more than

12 times that of elderly households with incomes above 185 percent of the poverty line. Hunger resulting from food insecurity was even more strongly associated with income, measuring 7.2 percent for elderly households with incomes below the poverty line and 0.4 percent for elderly households with incomes above 185 percent of the poverty line.

Food insecurity and hunger were more common among Black and Hispanic elderly than among non-Hispanic White elderly. Rates

**Table 1—Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger Is Much Lower for Elderly Couples Than for Elderly Men or Women Living Alone**

Category	Total number of households <sup>1</sup>	Food secure	Food insecure		
			All	Without hunger	With hunger
	Thousands		Percent		
Households with no elderly person present <sup>2</sup>	80,548	88.4	11.6	8.1	3.5
Households with elderly person present <sup>2</sup>	24,815	94.1	5.9	4.4	1.5
Household composition (households with elderly):					
Elderly men living alone	2,324	93.1	6.9	4.6	2.3
Elderly women living alone	7,763	93.4	6.6	4.7	1.9
Two or more elderly living together	6,975	97.6	2.4	1.8	.6
Elderly living with nonelderly	7,754	92.1	7.9	6.1	1.8
Household income (households with elderly):					
Below poverty line	2,414	77.4	22.6	15.4	7.2
Between 100 and 130 percent of poverty line	1,821	86.1	13.9	9.9	4.0
Between 130 and 185 percent of poverty line	3,769	93.1	6.9	5.6	1.3
Above 185 percent of poverty line	11,498	98.2	1.8	1.4	.4
Income not reported	5,313	96.4	3.6	2.8	.8
Race/ethnicity (households with elderly):					
White non-Hispanic	20,530	96.3	3.7	2.8	.9
Black non-Hispanic	2,315	81.1	18.9	12.7	6.2
Hispanic <sup>3</sup>	1,324	84.6	15.4	12.0	3.4
Other non-Hispanic	646	91.8	8.2	6.5	1.7
Area of residence (households with elderly):					
Inside metropolitan area	19,151	94.1	5.9	4.4	1.5
In central city <sup>4</sup>	5,907	91.2	8.8	6.5	2.3
Not in central city <sup>4</sup>	9,707	96.0	4.0	3.0	1.0
Outside metropolitan area	5,664	94.2	5.8	4.2	1.6
Census geographic region (households with elderly):					
Northeast	5,303	94.3	5.7	4.1	1.6
Midwest	5,878	96.1	3.9	3.0	.9
South	8,883	92.2	7.8	5.6	2.2
West	4,751	95.1	4.9	3.7	1.2

<sup>1</sup>Totals exclude households for which food security status is unknown because they did not give a valid response to any of the questions in the food security scale. In 1999 and 2000, these represented 0.4 percent of households with elderly present.

<sup>2</sup>"Elderly" refers to persons age 65 and older.

<sup>3</sup>Hispanics may be of any race.

<sup>4</sup>Metropolitan area subtotals do not add to metropolitan area totals because central-city residence is not identified for about 17 percent of households in metropolitan statistical areas.

Source: Calculated by USDA's Economic Research Service using data from the April 1999 and September 2000 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements.





Meals on Wheels and other community food assistance programs that deliver prepared meals to homes help supplement the food resources of elderly households coping with food insecurity.

Credit: Ken Hammond, USDA.

of food insecurity were 18.9 percent for Black elderly households, 15.4 percent for Hispanic elderly households, and 3.7 percent for non-Hispanic White elderly households. About half of these differences can be accounted for by the lower incomes and higher poverty rates among the minority households and by the smaller proportion of minority elderly who live in mar-

ried-couple households and the larger proportion who live in mixed-age households.

Elderly living in the central cities of metropolitan areas were about twice as likely to be food insecure, and food insecure with hunger, as those living elsewhere within metropolitan areas, such as in suburban areas and other less densely populated urban areas. El-

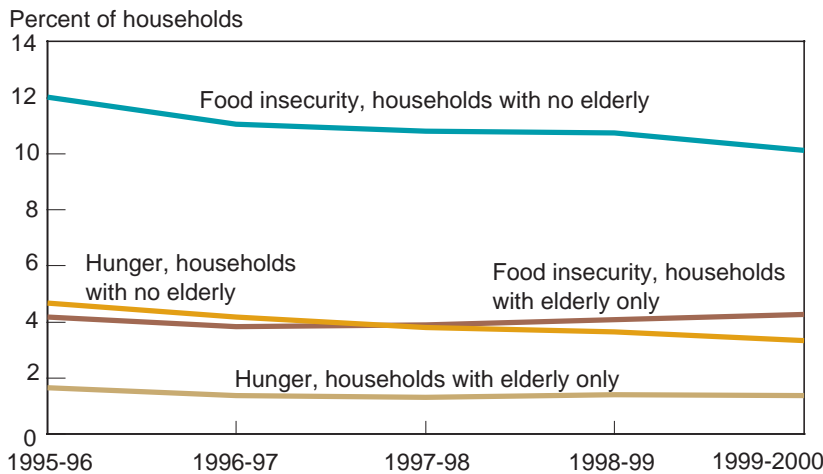
derly households located outside metropolitan areas registered rates of food insecurity and hunger between those of the two metropolitan categories. Food insecurity and hunger were more prevalent among elderly living in the South than among elderly living in other regions.

Most elderly survey respondents who reported food access problems said that these problems were due to lack of income and other resources for food. A small proportion reported other food access problems serious enough to disrupt normal eating patterns or reduce food intake. For example, 3 percent said they did not always have the kinds of food they wanted to eat or did not have enough to eat because it was too hard to get to the store (table 2).

### How the Elderly Cope With Food Insecurity

When faced with limited money or other resources, some elderly households supplement their food resources through Federal or community food assistance programs. Food programs used most frequently by the elderly are the Food Stamp Program, Meals on Wheels and similar services that deliver prepared meals to the home, senior

**Figure 3—Economic Growth Had Little Effect on Food Security of the Elderly, But Improved Food Security of Nonelderly**



Note: Two-year averages are presented to provide more reliable estimates and to smooth year-to-year fluctuations related to the season in which the survey was conducted. "Elderly" refers to persons age 65 and older. Data were adjusted for differences in screening procedures to be comparable in all years. This results in lower rates of food insecurity and hunger than those reported elsewhere in the article. Source: Prepared by USDA's Economic Research Service based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data.

**Table 2—A Small Proportion of Elderly Households Reported Other Food Access Problems Serious Enough To Affect Food Choice or Reduce Food Intake**

Condition <sup>1</sup>	Percentage of all elderly households reporting the condition (average 1999-2000)
Did not always have the kinds of food they wanted to eat or did not have enough to eat:	
Because they did not have time for shopping or cooking	1.7
Because it was too hard to get to the store	3.1
Did not have enough to eat:	
Because they had no working stove	.1
Because they were not able to cook or eat because of health problems	.3

Note: "Elderly households" refers to households with one or more members age 65 or older.  
<sup>1</sup>Survey respondents were first asked to describe the food situation in their household in one of four categories. If they indicated that they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat, or that they did not always have the kinds of food they wanted to eat, they were presented with a list of possible reasons from which they selected all that were applicable.  
 Source: Calculated by USDA's Economic Research Service using data from the April 1999 and September 2000 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements.

**Table 3—Forty Percent of Low-Income Food-Insecure Elderly Households Received Food Stamps, Senior Meals, or Food From a Food Pantry**

Food assistance program	Percentage of low-income food-insecure elderly households using the program (average 1999-2000)
Food Stamp Program (during previous 12 months)	26.2
Senior meals (either delivered to home or in a center, during previous month)	10.9
Food pantry (during previous 12 months)	15.0
One or more of the three programs	39.6
None of the three programs	60.4

Note: "Elderly households" refers to households with one or more members age 65 or older.  
 "Low-income" refers to households with annual incomes below 185 percent of the poverty line. Most households with incomes higher than that level were not asked about use of these food resources. Some households were not eligible for the Food Stamp Program, for which monthly income must be below 130 percent of the poverty line.  
 Source: Calculated by USDA's Economic Research Service using data from the April 1999 and September 2000 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements.

meals provided at a community center or senior center, and community food pantries.

Forty percent of food-insecure elderly households reported using one or more of these Federal or community food assistance resources (table 3). Twenty-six percent of food-insecure elderly households received food stamps; 11 percent received meals, either delivered to their homes or in community centers or senior centers; and 15 percent received emergency food from food pantries, food banks, or similar community food programs.

For the elderly who seek food assistance, community food programs largely substitute for, rather than supplement, the Food Stamp Program. Among elderly households that got food either from senior meals programs or from a food pantry, only 34 percent also received food stamps. Similarly, of those that got food stamps, only 28 percent also got food from community food programs.

Food security is one of several necessary conditions for a population to be healthy and well nourished. The prevalence of food secu-

rity among the elderly in the United States is high, thanks to stable incomes provided by Social Security, pensions, and personal savings, and to national and community food assistance programs. Nevertheless, some work remains to assure that all elderly have access at all times to enough food for active healthy lives. USDA's food security monitoring and research program provides information to guide this work.

## References

Dalaker, Joseph. *Poverty in the United States: 2000*, Current Population Reports, P60-214, U.S. Census Bureau, 2001.

Gundersen, Craig, and Joseph Gruber. "The Dynamic Determinants of Food Insecurity," in Andrews, Margaret, and Mark Prell (eds.), *Second Food Security Measurement and Research Conference, Volume II: Papers*, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report 11-2, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, August 2001.

Haveman, Robert, and Edward N. Wolff. *Who Are the Asset Poor?: Levels, Trends, and Composition, 1983-1998*, Discussion Paper No. 1227-01, Madison, Wisconsin: Institute for Research on Poverty.

Nord, Mark, Nader Kabbani, Laura Tiehen, Margaret Andrews, Gary Bickel, and Steven Carlson. *Household Food Security in the United States, 2000*, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 21, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, March 2002.

Nord, Mark, and Margaret Andrews. *Reducing Food Insecurity by Half in the United States: Assessing Progress Toward a National Objective*, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 26-2, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, May 2002. **FR**