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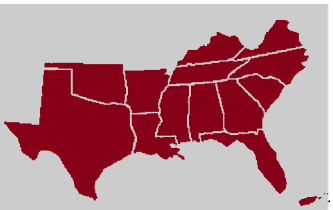

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Household food security in the rural South: Assuring access to enough food for healthy lives

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Food security, food insecurity and hunger

A healthy, well-nourished population is both an objective of, and an essential requirement for, a strong, vibrant economy and active, resilient communities. Food security — access by all people at all times to enough food for healthy, active lifestyles [1] — is one of several necessary conditions for a population to be healthy and well nourished. The economic and social challenges that the rural South has faced for decades are reflected in the fact that a sizable minority of its households do not always have access to enough food for healthy, active lives. In this report, data are used on household food insecurity and hunger, collected by the U.S. Census Bureau for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to assess the challenge that remains for achieving food security in all households in the rural South.

Economic measures of well-being, such as per-capita income and the poverty rate, provide rough proxies for the ability of households to meet their basic needs. But well-constructed direct measures of the extent to which basic needs are being met can provide more reliable information on these crucial aspects of well-being and give important additional insights into these issues. Beginning in the early 1990s, a national project under the leadership of USDA and the National Center of Health Statistics developed a survey module and a scale based on 18 questions to measure food security, food insecurity and hunger in U.S. households [3]. The food security survey has been conducted annually since 1995.

The household food security scale is based on respondents' answers to a series of 18 questions (10 for households without children) that ask about behaviors and experiences known to characterize households that are having difficulty meeting food needs. The questions ask about conditions across a wide range of severity from worrying whether food would run out to going a

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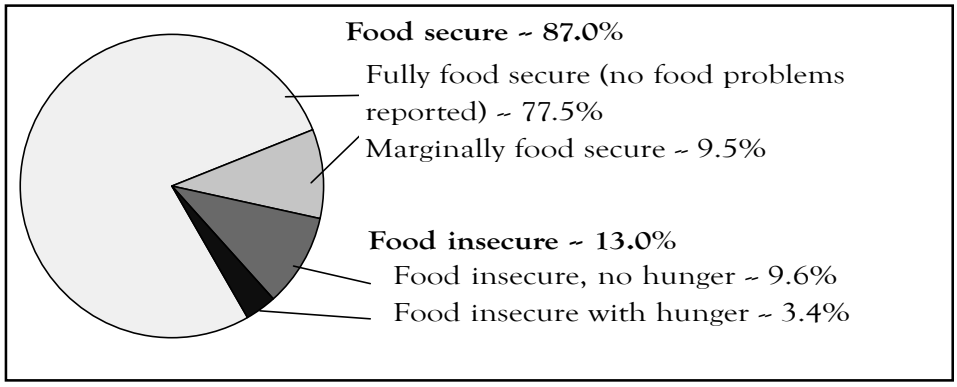
Figure 1. Prevalence of food security, food insecurity and hunger in the nonmetropolitan South, average 1998-99.



Source: Calculated by ERS based on Current Population Food Security Supplement data, August 1998 and April 1999.

> **"Most food-insecure households avoid hunger by reducing the quality, variety and desirability of meals to maintain an adequate amount of food intake."**

whole day without eating because there was not enough money for food (See Appendix A1). Based on the number of indicators of food stress or food deprivation reported, households are classified as food secure, food insecure without hunger, or food insecure with hunger. Each question specifies lack of resources as the reason for the behavior or experience (e.g., "...because we couldn't afford more food," or "... because there wasn't enough money for food.") to assure that the measure does not register behaviors associated with dieting to lose weight or fasting for religious reasons as food deprivation [a].

In the rural South, 87 percent of households were classified as food secure in 1998-99, the most recent years for which food security data are available (Figure 1) [b]. This included 77.5 percent that were fully food secure — households that reported no food-related problems at all — and 9.5 percent that were marginally food secure — reporting only one or two indicators of food insecurity [c]. Typically, these marginally food secure households reported one or both of the least severe items; that is, they worried that their food would run out before they got money to buy more, or the food they bought did not last, and they did not have money to get more.

The remaining 13 percent of households in the rural South were food insecure. At times during the year, they lacked access to enough food for healthy, active lives. These households affirmed at least three of the 18 questions in the food security scale, and many affirmed more than three. Households right at the threshold — just barely food insecure — typically reported the two least severe conditions described above and also that they could not afford to eat balanced meals or that they relied on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed the children because they were running out of money to buy food.

Most food-insecure households avoid hunger by reducing the quality, variety and desirability of meals to maintain an adequate amount of food intake. These households are classified as food insecure without hunger. In 1998-99, 9.6 percent of all households in the rural South were in this situation. However, in the remaining 3.4 percent of households, one or more people were hungry at times during the year because there was not enough money for food. These households reported multiple indicators of reduced food intake, such as cutting and

skipping meals and eating less than they felt they should. A small proportion (1.2 percent of all households) reported that adults in the household went a whole day without eating because there wasn't enough money for food.

How does food security in the rural South compare to that of other regions?

The prevalence of food insecurity is higher in the rural South than in metropolitan areas of the South and considerably higher than in rural areas outside of the South (Figure 2). However, this is not true for hunger. In 1998-99, the prevalence of hunger in the rural South was 3.4 percent — about the same as the 3.8 percent registered in metropolitan areas of the South and only marginally higher than the 2.9 percent registered in rural areas outside the South. The prevalence rate of hunger among children in the rural South was also similar to rates in other areas. In most U.S. households, children — especially young children — are protected from hunger, even at the cost of quite severe or frequent hunger among adults. Hunger among children was reported in 0.8 percent of households with children in the rural South, in the same proportion in the metropolitan South, and in 0.7 percent of households with children in both nonmetropolitan and metropolitan areas outside the South. Estimates of the prevalence of hunger among children are based on a subscale of eight items in the household food security scale that ask specifically about the experiences of children in the household.

At present, we cannot account for the disparity of comparatively low prevalence of hunger in the rural South in spite of a higher

The Issues

- A sizable minority of households in the South do not always have access to enough food to support healthy, active lifestyles.
- Direct measures of the extent to which basic needs are being met can provide more reliable information and valuable insights into food issues.

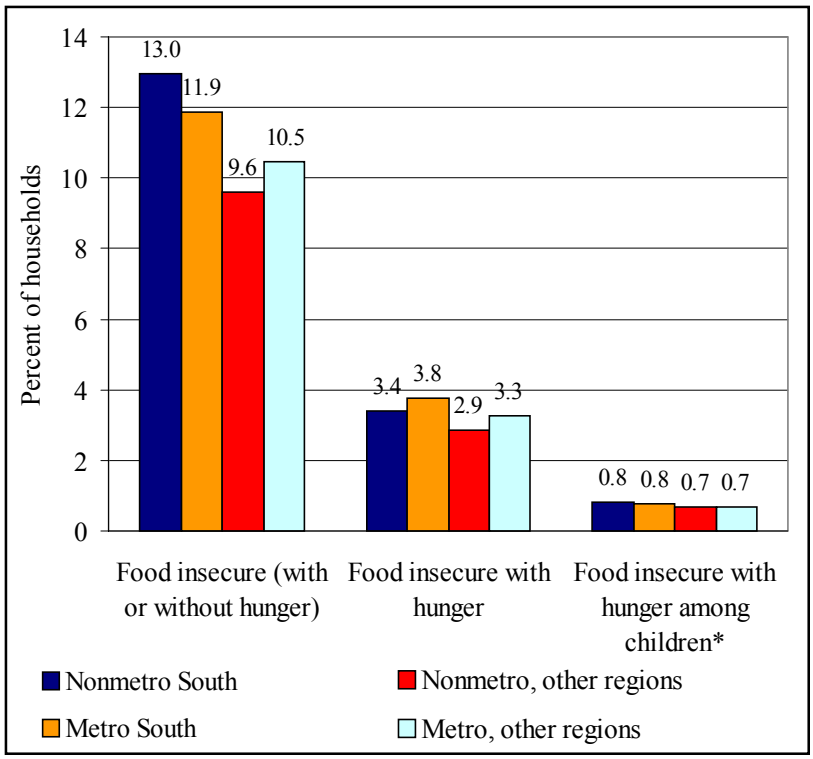
The Trends

- The prevalence of food insecurity is higher in the rural South than in metropolitan areas of the South and considerably higher than in rural areas outside of the South.
- The ability of households to consistently acquire an adequate food supply depends on many factors, including household structure and income.

Policy Recommendations

- Promote economic development and state and national policies to improve employment and earnings of less skilled workers, while also providing them opportunities to improve their skills.
- Address issues that affect single mothers, such as childcare, cash welfare and teenage pregnancy prevention.
- Assure that federal and state food and nutrition assistance programs are available to, and readily accessible by, all households who qualify for them.
- Develop strong community organizations to meet emergency needs, and coordinate among private assistance providers and public assistance agencies.

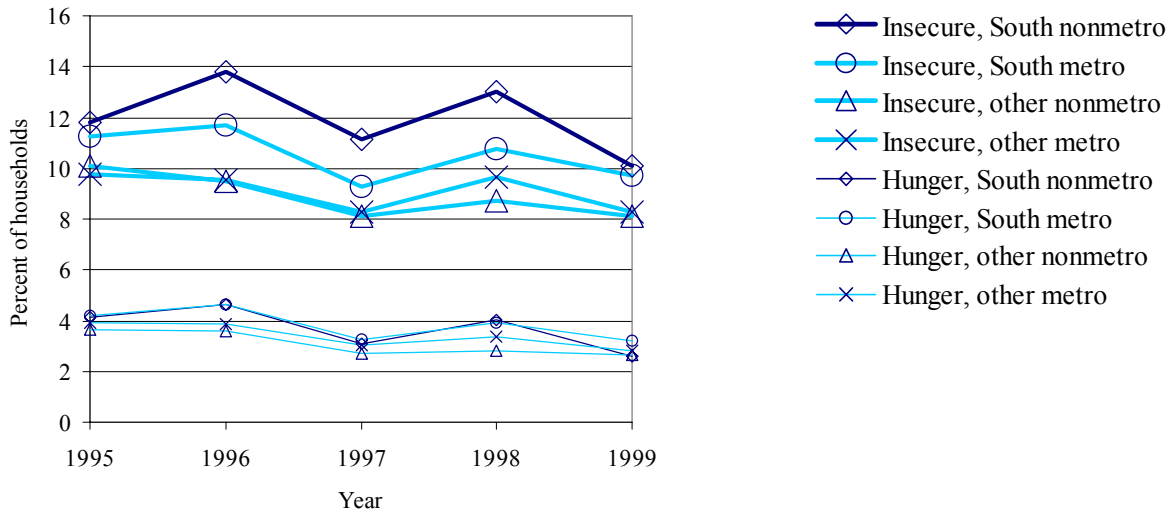
Figure 2. Food insecurity and hunger by region and metropolitan residence, average 1998-99.



*Households with no children are excluded from the denominator for calculating the prevalence rate of hunger among children.

Source: Calculated by ERS based on Current Populations Survey Food Security Supplement data, August 1998 and April 1999.

Figure 3. Food insecurity and hunger, by region and metropolitan residence, 1995-99.



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

level of food insecurity. In part, this pattern may reflect strong extended family and community relationships in the rural South. Such support networks are important buffers against the more severe aspects of food insecurity.

Trends in food security and hunger

Food insecurity and hunger have declined nationally since 1995, when food security was first measured at the national level [2]. As shown in Figure 3, this trend is also observed in the rural South [d]. The prevalence of food insecurity in the rural South declined from about 12 percent in 1995 to 10 percent in 1999, and the prevalence of hunger declined from 4.1 percent to 2.6 percent during the same period. In general, the relationship of food insecurity and hunger rates in the rural South to those in other regions has been fairly stable over time. An exception is that the prevalence of hunger in the rural South varied somewhat with respect to other regions in the last three years and especially in 1999. This may be partly due to sampling variability, and if so, the extent of the decline to 1999 may be somewhat overstated. When the data for 2000 are released later this year, they should clarify whether food security is improving as rapidly in the rural South as suggested by the 1999 statistics. It should be noted that the upward and downward alternations in successive years as food insecurity generally trended downward are believed to result in large part from a seasonal distortion in the measure. The food security survey was conducted in the spring and fall in alternate years (spring in 1995, 1997, and 1999, and fall in 1996 and 1998). Although the questions ask about experiences over the past 12 months, recent experience is often more salient in respondents' memories than experiences of 11 or 12 months earlier. Further research is needed to understand why food security varies in a seasonal pattern.

Food security depends on household structure and income

The ability of households to consistently acquire an adequate food supply depends on many factors. Two of the most important are household structure and income. Single mothers with children face the greatest obstacles in achieving food security. In the rural South in 1998-99, one-third of families headed by a single mother were food insecure. Also, in 8 percent of single-mother households, one or more persons (usually the mother) was hungry at times because there was not enough money for food (Figure 4). Prevalences of food insecurity were much lower for two-parent families with children and for single fathers with children, although these rates were higher than those for households without children. Prevalences of hunger were lowest for two-parent families with children and for households consisting of two or more adults without children, consistent with the greater flexibility of such households to keep at least one adult in the

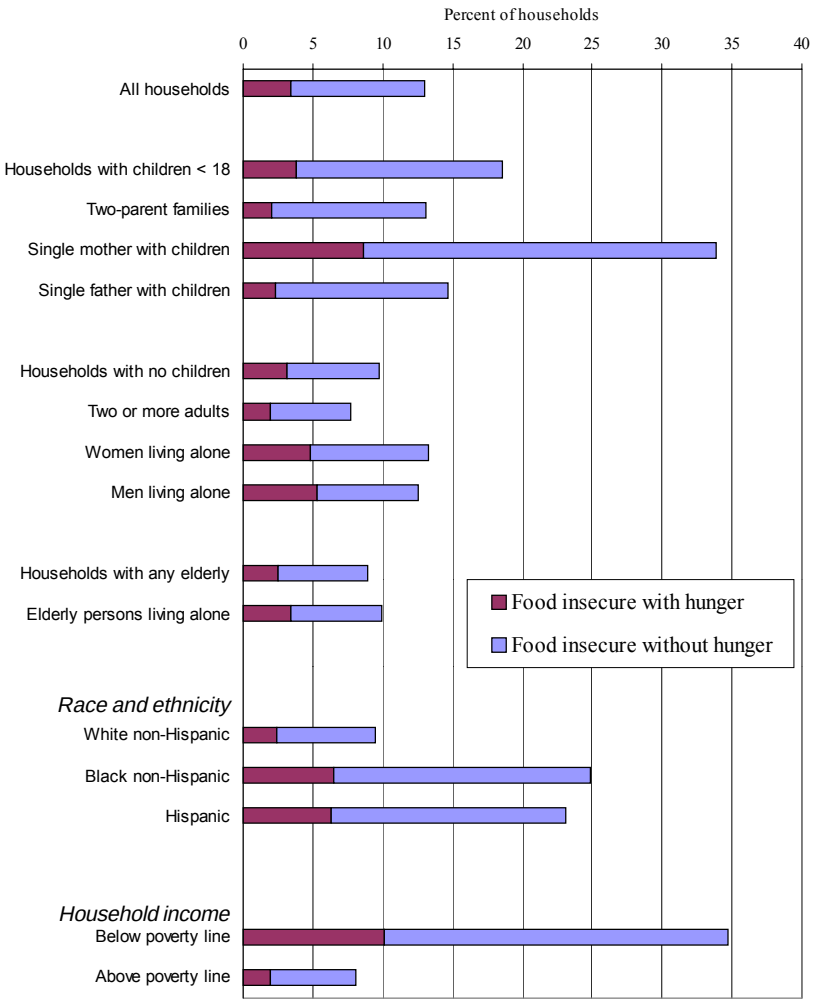
labor force.

Rates of food insecurity and hunger were relatively low for elderly persons (over age 65) in the rural South. Even though a substantial part of this population lives on fairly low incomes, those incomes tend to be quite stable.

Food insecurity and hunger were about twice as prevalent among rural Southern households headed by African Americans and Hispanic Americans as they were among those headed by white non-Hispanic Americans. This is almost a complete result of the higher poverty rates among these racial and ethnic minorities.

Food insecurity and hunger as measured in this project are specified to be conditions that result from insufficient household economic resources, so they are strongly related to income. Nearly 35 percent of households in the rural South with income below the federal poverty line were food insecure in 1998-99, and 10 percent were food insecure with hunger. However, income above the poverty line does not assure food security. About 8 percent of these households also experienced food insecurity, including 2 percent that were classified as food insecure with hunger. In some cases, these may have resulted from variability in income during the year. A household's annual average income may be above the poverty line, but may be much lower during some months. Also, family disruption or unexpected large expenses such as illness, accident or natural calamity can result in periods of food insecurity, even for households with quite high annual incomes.

Figure 4. Prevalence of food insecurity and hunger in the nonmetro South, by household characteristics, average 1998-99.



Source: Calculated by ERS based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data, August 1998 and April 1999.

Achieving food security for households and communities

To assure access by all people at all times to enough nutritious food for active, healthy lives requires at least three complementary conditions:

1. A ***strong economy*** that provides adequate earnings for less skilled and less educated workers.
2. A strong safety net of ***public food and nutrition assistance programs*** to meet transitional needs and certain chronic needs.
3. Strong ***community assistance infrastructure*** to meet emergency needs and to assure that people in need gain access to public programs.

A strong economy

We already have seen that food security is strongly linked to income. Food insecurity is rare for households with incomes above four times the federal poverty line [e]. As income falls below twice

Table 1. Participation in the Food Stamp Program and the National School Lunch Program (free or reduced-price meals), by region and metropolitan residence, average 1997-1998.

	Nonmetro South	Metro South	Nonmetro, other regions	Metro, other regions
Food Stamp Program				
Percent of all households that participate	9.7	6.3	6.2	6.0
Percent of poor households that participate	37.7	34.0	33.1	35.5
Average annual value to households that participate	$1,596	$1,638	$1,489	$1,729
School Lunch Program				
Percent of all households with children that participate	37.1	28.2	25.4	23.2
Percent of poor households with children that participate	77.4	71.5	63.8	72.3
Average annual value to households that participate	$624	$601	$618	$628

Notes: The CPS, on which these statistics are bases, is known to understate the participation in food assistance program at the national level by about 20 percent. This bias was not corrected or adjusted for in this table. Participation in programs is assessed on an annual basis. Some households did not participate in programs for the entire year, so average monthly benefits during enrollment were higher than 1/12 the annual averages shown in the table.

Source: Calculated by ERS based on data from the Current Populations Survey March Demographic Supplements, 1998 and 1999.

the poverty line, food insecurity increases rapidly, rising to about 20 percent at the poverty line, and to 35 percent at an income level half the poverty line. The Southern Rural Development Center and hundreds of state and local economic development agencies throughout the rural South have worked for many years to improve employment opportunities and earnings of workers in the rural South. These programs contribute to food security by improving income and income stability of economically vulnerable groups and regions. Several characteristics of the income-food security linkage merit special attention in planning economic policies and economic development programs.

First, employment and earnings opportunities for the least skilled and least educated workers are keys to reducing food insecurity and hunger because these factors raise incomes in the low-income range. Economic development strategies that attract employment across the spectrum of skills and education, not just at the high-skill end, contribute to lowering food insecurity and hunger. Policies and programs such as minimum wage and the earned income tax credit (EITC) are key components to making work pay for less skilled and less educated workers [4, 5, 6]. Vocational education programs and job training programs also are important in this regard. Residential development planning, to assure an adequate supply of low-cost housing in areas of economic growth, can make it possible for less skilled workers to move to areas of greater economic opportunity.

Second, policies and programs that improve the transition from high school or college to the workforce can be helpful. The high rates of food insecurity and hunger in families with children, in young families, and among men and women living alone, reflect in part the difficulties inherent in young adults moving into their first few jobs after leaving home. An economy that puts a premium on experience can be hard on young families and young singles. Internship programs, apprenticeship programs and programs that facilitate educational loans and scholarships for part-time continuing education are just a few of the approaches that can improve incomes and stabilize food security of young families and young singles.

Third, child care assistance and other supports for single mothers with children are crucial. Single mothers are more vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger than any other group. Changes in cash welfare programs in the late 1990s that impose time limits and work requirements on recipients make it even more important to assure that the special needs of these families are met. Economic development programs can help by creating incentives that encourage development of

businesses that provide quality child-care and encourage employers to provide on-site child care.

Public food and nutrition assistance programs

Even in a strong economy, personal economic reversals and family emergencies and disruptions can create needs for short-term food assistance. Food and nutrition assistance also can complement other longer-term programs that assist persons with chronic needs due to physical, mental or developmental disabilities. The federal government commits more than $36 billion each year to food and nutrition assistance programs intended to increase food security and to reduce the incidence of hunger by meeting such short-term and chronic needs. The three largest programs, the Food Stamp Program, the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, and the WIC program (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), account for 87 percent of these funds and are important parts of the safety net for thousands of low-income households in the rural South.

Even after the large declines in Food Stamp Program caseloads in the late 1990s [7], almost 10 percent of households in the rural South received food stamps in 1997-1998. About 38 percent of households with incomes below the federal poverty line received food stamps (see Table 1)[f]. The average annual value of food stamps for households that participated during this period was about $1,600. A higher proportion of households received food stamps in the rural South than in other regions. This, in part, is due to the higher incidence of poverty in the rural South. But even among poor households, food stamp use was higher in the rural South.

More than one-third of households with children in the rural South benefited from free or reduced-price school lunches in recent years. More than three out of four poor households with children did so. The average annual benefit to households that participated was $624.

These food and nutrition programs are funded almost completely by the federal government, but they are operated by state and county agencies. Those agencies' administrative policies and procedures have important effects on the extent to which the programs are available to, and used by, those who need them. State practices that can improve Food Stamp Program access are described in, "Improving Food Stamp Program Access: State Best Practices," available from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp).

"Food and nutrition assistance also can complement other longer-term programs that assist persons with chronic needs due to physical, mental or developmental disabilities."

Community food assistance

The federal food and nutrition assistance programs are not always adequate protection against hunger. In fact, in 1998-99, 15.8 percent of households that received food stamps in the rural South reported instances of hunger for some household members. Also, not all households that might benefit from food assistance programs apply for assistance. More than half (53.8 percent) of rural Southern households classified as food insecure and almost half (46.1 percent) of those classified as food insecure with hunger did not apply for food stamps or were not eligible to receive them.

Communities' emergency food assistance organizations and other

local government and civic efforts can play important roles both in increasing access by needy families to federal food programs and in meeting needs that are not met by those programs. Food banks, food pantries, community kitchens, and other community and faith-based programs have the flexibility, immediacy and local knowledge that are often keys to meeting unusual needs and hard-to-reach populations. Although most of the resources of these emergency food assistance organizations come from local private sources, USDA programs such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program provide additional resources to support their services. Federal and state policies that facilitate food donation and gleaning are important to expand the resources of these community organizations. USDA, which operates the federal food and nutrition assistance programs, has prepared information resources to help community organizations assess their communities' food security and food needs and to maximize the effective use of the federal food programs by eligible people and households. For information on these USDA resources, visit the Economic Research Service's Food Security Briefing Room: http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodsecurity/ and the Food and Nutrition Service website: http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsec/.

"Food banks, food pantries, community kitchens, and other community and faith-based programs have the flexibility, immediacy and local knowledge that are often keys to meeting unusual needs and hard-to-reach populations."

Summary and Conclusions

Food insecurity is more prevalent in the rural South than in metropolitan areas of the South and rural areas in other regions. This reflects the lower incomes and higher poverty rates in the rural South. On the other hand, the prevalence rate of poverty-linked hunger — the most severe range of food security — is about the same in the rural South as in the rest of the nation. Also, in the rural South, as in the rest of the nation, single mothers with children are especially vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger, as are African Americans and Hispanic Americans. On the positive side, rates of food insecurity and hunger in the rural South have declined substantially since they were first measured in 1995.

The national economy and federal programs play dominant roles in assuring that all people have enough food for active healthy lives, but states and local communities also can make important contributions by:

1. Making sure that work pays, especially for less skilled and less educated workers, by promoting economic development and state and national policies to improve employment and earnings of less skilled workers, while also providing them opportunities to enhance their skills.
2. Paying particular attention to issues that affect single mothers, such as child care for training programs and employment, cash welfare and teenage pregnancy prevention.
3. Assuring that federal and state food and nutrition assistance programs are available to, and readily accessible by, all households who qualify for them.
4. Developing strong community organizations to meet emergency needs, and coordinating among private assistance providers, and between those providers and public assistance agencies.

Appendix Table A1. Percentage of households in the rural South that affirmed each item in the food security scale, average 1998 and 1999.

Condition, experience, or behavior (in order of increasing severity)	Households reporting this condition: Percent of all households	Households reporting this condition: Percent of households with hunger
Worried whether their food would run out before they got money to buy more.	19.2	98.4
Food that they bought just didn't last, and they didn't have money to get more.	15.3	97.6
Relied on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed the children because they were running out of money to buy food.*	18.2	93.5
Couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.	12.8	94.6
Couldn't feed the children a balanced meal, because they couldn't afford that.*	9.8	86.6
Adults in the household cut the size of their meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food (ever in last 12 months).	5.9	95.4
Respondents ate less than they felt they should because there wasn't enough money to buy food.	5.8	87.5
Adults in the household cut the size of their meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food (in 3 or more of the last 12 months).	4.2	89.9
Children were not eating enough because they just couldn't afford enough food.*	4.8	59.7
Respondents were hungry but didn't eat because they couldn't afford enough food.	2.4	60.2
Respondents lost weight because they didn't have enough money for food.	1.4	34.7
Cut the size of any of the children's meals because there wasn't enough money for food.*	1.2	23.6
Adult in the household did not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food (ever in last 12 months).	1.2	33.0
Child was hungry but household just couldn't afford more food.*	1.0	25.1
Adult in the household did not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food (in 3 or more of the last 12 months).	0.9	26.8
Child skipped a meal because there wasn't enough money for food (ever in last 12 months).*	0.7	15.9
Child skipped a meal because there wasn't enough money for food (in 3 or more of the last 12 months).*	0.6	14.9
Child did not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food.*	0.3	6.3

* Households with no child were excluded from denominator in calculation of proportion of households affirming items about children.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, August 1998 and April 1999.

Endnotes

[a] Further information on how food security is measured, including a full listing of the questions in the scale, is available from the Economic Research Service, USDA at http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodsecurity/measurement.

[b] The South in these analyses consists of the states served by the Southern Rural Development Center. Nonmetropolitan (i.e., not within a metropolitan statistical area) is used as a proxy for rural.

[c] All food security statistics reported here, except annual trends, are based on averages of 1998 and 1999. This provides a sample of 5,620 households for the rural South and 77,485 households for the nation as a whole. Averaging across two years provides more stable, reliable estimates for subpopulations in the nonmetropolitan South, and avoids bias associated with a seasonality component that is believed to affect the food security survey (discussed further in the section on trends in food security from 1995-99).

[d] Note that the prevalence rates in Figure 3 are somewhat lower than those reported elsewhere in the article. Because of differences in survey administration, data from 1998 and 1999 must be adjusted to be comparable to those from earlier years.

[e] The poverty line depends on the number of adults and children in the household. For example, the poverty line for a family of two adults and two children was $16,895 annual income in 1999.
[f] These statistics are based on the CPS March Demographic Supplements for 1998 and 1999, which have more complete information on receipt of food stamps and use of the School Lunch Program than do the CPS Food Security Supplements. The receipt of food program benefits is known to be about 20 percent higher at the national level than reported by the CPS. Thus, the actual participation rates are higher than those shown here.

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