

Preface

Since publication of the Guide to Implementing the Core Food Security Module in 1997 by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS, previously Food and Consumer Service) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the standard procedures for measuring food insecurity and hunger have undergone further refinement and development based on ongoing research within the federal interagency Food Security Measurement Project. This new edition of the Guide documents minor corrections and changes, bringing the procedures described in the original publication up to date. These include:

Small changes in the format of the core-module questionnaire for consistency with the form adopted in 1998 for standard use in the annual Food Security Supplement to the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS), and other applications;

- Significant simplification and streamlining of the recommended procedure for scoring households with partially missing data;
- Revised and corrected scale-score ranges, based on 1998 data, for classifying households by food security status categories;
- An alternative, simple method of assigning households with complete core-module data to the food security status-level classifications; and
- Brief information on adapting the measure for particular survey uses.

None of these changes alters the content of the food security core-module questionnaire, the scaling method underlying the food security scale, or the basic method of classifying households by food security status level.

Consequently, data collections and analyses based on the original Guide and on this Revised Edition can be fully consistent (although users of the original Guide should note the corrected and updated scale-score ranges presented here).

USDA actively encourages State- and local-area research and population monitoring applications of the standard national measure of household food security, as well as continued testing and validation research on the measure itself.

The ERS Food Security Briefing Room also provides additional technical information and references.

Introduction

The presence of hunger in American households due to insufficient resources to obtain food has been a long-standing challenge to U.S. health, nutrition, and social policy. The success of the nation's nutrition-assistance safety net, beginning with the National School Lunch Program in 1946 and later under-girded by the Food Stamp Program and special programs for unusually vulnerable groups, has meant that extreme forms of hunger, common in Third-World countries, have been virtually eliminated in the United States. However, less severe forms of food insecurity and hunger--deprivation in basic need for food--are still found within the U.S. and remain a cause for concern. The basic policy tenet was forcefully stated by the President's Task Force on Food Assistance in 1984:

It has long been an article of faith among the American people that no one in a land so blessed with plenty should go hungry. ...Hunger is simply not acceptable in our society.

The Task Force also noted that, up to the time of its Report:

There is no official "hunger count" to estimate the number of hungry people, and so there are no hard data available to estimate the extent of hunger directly. We regret our inability to document the degree of hunger caused by income limitations, for such lack of definitive, quantitative proof contributes to a climate in which policy discussions become unhelpfully heated and unsubstantiated assertions are then substituted for hard information.

Now the tools do exist to document directly the extent of food insecurity and hunger caused by income limitations, as these conditions are experienced and reported by American households. Following the 1984 Task Force Report--indeed, in part stimulated by the report--private-sector researchers redoubled efforts to develop the kind of direct survey measure that could reliably and consistently document the extent of U.S. hunger. By the early 1990s, an extensive body of field experience had been gained and substantial consensus had emerged among nutrition experts on the sound conceptual and practical bases for such a measure. Meanwhile, Congress enacted the National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act of 1990, asserting the need for better monitoring and assessment of the nutritional state of the American people. The long-range plan formulated under the Act by the U. S. Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and Health and Human Services (DHHS) clarified the government's responsibility to help create a sound national measure of food insecurity and hunger. A key requirement was that this measure should be appropriate for standard, consistent use "throughout the national nutrition monitoring system and at State and local levels."

A federal interagency working group--the Food Security Measurement Project--was formed in 1992 to develop the needed measure, building upon the earlier research and working in close collaboration with private-sector experts and the U.S. Census Bureau. Throughout this development process, one objective held firmly

in view was to make the final measure appropriate and feasible for use in locally designed and conducted food-security surveys.

We believe that this objective is achieved with the food-security core survey module, which currently is being used successfully in local applications throughout the U.S. and Canada. While the module may seem unduly long and repetitive at first sight, it generally requires less than four minutes of survey time to administer--under two minutes average in a full population sample with screening--while offering important strengths not available from single or small sets of indicators. The key strength of the measure, as explained below, is that its multiple indicator questions capture and distinguish the various levels of severity throughout the full range of severity with which the phenomenon of food insecurity/hunger is experienced in U.S. conditions. This feature is critical for accurately assessing the prevalence of food insecurity because the greater the severity, the less the prevalence and each separate indicator captures a different degree of severity. The frequency of the various indicators varies widely depending upon exactly which level of severity each one reflects.

Food insecurity is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon which varies through a continuum of successive stages as the condition becomes more severe. Each stage consists of characteristic conditions and experiences of food insufficiency to fully meet the basic needs of household members, and of the behavioral responses of household members to these conditions. A variety of indicators is needed to capture the various combinations of food conditions, experiences, and behaviors that, as a group, characterize each such stage. This is what the 18-item "core module" set of indicators provides. The chapters below describe some of the characteristic aspects of the continuum of food insecurity and hunger, and Exhibit 3-2 (p.32) illustrates graphically the relationship of the food security measure to this continuum. An even larger, more detailed indicator set than the 18-item standard U.S. food security scale might do an even better job of measuring the severity of food insecurity/hunger--e.g., it could

distinguish more fully among the various time paths of the experience (cyclical, episodic, prolonged, brief but intense, etc.) and among the alternative behavioral paths that reveal the various coping strategies that households employ in attempting to deal with food-resource inadequacy. However, for the main purpose of assessing the prevalence of food insecurity/hunger at each of its several measurable levels of severity among U.S. households, the 18-item core module has been shown to be a stable, robust, and reliable measurement tool.

In addition, for circumstances in which limitations on survey time are insurmountable, a standard 6-item subset of the core-module indicator questions also has been developed, designed to capture reliably the first two thresholds identified in the full continuum measured by the food-security/hunger scale--i.e., the threshold of identifiable household food insecurity and the threshold of identifiable hunger among household members. Testing has shown this standard subset (Appendix B) to be significantly more reliable in classifying households accurately to the appropriate food security status level than alternative small, idiosyncratic sets of food-security indicators selected on impressionistic or "face-validity" grounds alone.

Local surveys that employ the systematic, tested, and validated indicator set provided by the core module for food security measurement, or the reduced standard 6-item partial set, can obtain findings that are readily interpretable. Such local survey findings can be compared directly with national and state-level standard benchmark statistics published annually by USDA and with many national- or regional-level tabulations of population subgroups available in the USDA reports. This food security benchmark data series is available from the U.S. Census Bureau, by CD-ROM or at the Bureau's web-site www.census.gov.

As an additional strength for comparative research with local survey findings, data from the standard food security Core Module also will be available from several specialized national

surveys: the 5-year longitudinal Survey of Program Dynamics (SPD, conducted by the Census Bureau for DHHS, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation), the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS, conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics), the USDA Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals (CSFII), and the DHHS 4th National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES-4).

The Core Module has been designed, not only for use in national surveys, but also for local groups wanting to determine the extent and severity of food insecurity and hunger within their own communities, using a technically well grounded and tested method to produce local prevalence estimates comparable with national and state-level standard benchmark figures. Local studies using either the Core Module or the standard 6-item subset can play a key role in documenting the presence of hunger in the community as measured under standard national practice, in providing a sound base for broader community needs assessment, and in helping focus attention on unmet food-security needs within the community. When the Core Module is used to collect data on a periodic basis--as USDA is doing for national and state levels with the annual Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey--it also can provide systematic monitoring of the community's progress in addressing the hunger and other food-security needs within its midst.

The next section (Chapter 1) presents the background description of food security measurement, slightly edited, from the 1997 Guide to Implementing the Core Food Security Module. The second chapter describes the data collected with the core module survey instrument. Chapter 3 gives updated guidance on how to score data collected with the module to produce prevalence estimates for food insecurity and hunger within the sampled population. The final chapter offers brief preliminary guidance on procedures for sampling within local population groups to assure that findings obtained from food-security surveys can be accurately interpreted and to avoid making

unsupportable generalizations from the data collected.

In general, we recommend that any local group planning a food security survey seek to work cooperatively with university or other resource persons experienced in sample-survey work. Numerous sampling methods are available that are feasible and that can yield meaningful results, but expertise is needed to design these

methods into your planned survey. Some experienced guidance at the initial planning and design stage of the study will pay off handsomely in helping to assure that the survey findings you obtain serve the purposes you intend, and that you and others can make valid interpretations of the findings.

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