FOOD SAFETY NETS IN THE UNITED STATES

Kimberly Chung    April 14, 2010

What is “food security”? 

USDA definition:

“Access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life”

How do you measure food insecurity?

Series of 18 survey questions about household eating patterns
Questions designed to….  

... identify the **extent of disruption** to normally-accepted eating behaviors that occur because of inadequate resources

Disruption happens in stages…

![Diagram showing stages of disruption]

- **Stage 1:** Anxiety that food budget/supply is inadequate
- **Stage 2:** Begin to skip meals, ↓ size of meals
- **Stage 3:** Multiple strategies to ↓ food intake. Hunger

Examples of food security series

- “We were worried our food would run out before we got money to buy more.”
- “The food we bought just didn’t last and we didn’t have money to get more.”

Examples from the food security series

- Did adults in the household ever cut the size of meals or skip meals because there wasn’t enough money for food?
- Did any of the children ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn’t enough money…”

Categories of Food Security

- **Food secure**
- **Food Insecure**
  - Low Food Security
  - Very Low Food Security

The vast majority of Americans are food secure

- Total Food Insecurity 15%
- Very Low Food Security 6%
- Low Food Security 9%
- Food Secure 85%

Food insecurity is on the rise

Who is food insecure?

Food insecurity disproportionately **HIGH** among households with these characteristics:

- Below 130% poverty: 42%
- With children, single mother: 37%
- Black: 26%
- Hispanic: 27%

vs. 14.6% among general population

[USDA 2009]
Children are food insecure

- 37% of all children living in single, female-headed households
- 26% of all children in largest cities
- 32% of all black, non-Hispanic children
- 32% of all Hispanic children

[USDA 2009]

Where do the food insecure turn?

The US Food Safety Net

A Hybrid Food Safety Net

1. Privately-funded, organized network
   - Charitable donations
   - “Food Banks”
   - Emergency Food Assistance Providers

A Hybrid Food Safety Network

2. Publicly-funded government programs
   - SNAP
   - School lunch & school breakfast
   - Women, infants, and children (WIC)
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

- "Food Stamps"
- “First line of defense against hunger”
  - Permanent since 1964
  - Paper coupons -> retail markets
  - Electronic benefits (EBT)

Challenges: coverage low with SNAP...

Only 34% of the food insecure receive food stamps
Why Low SNAP Participation?

- Application process
  - Complex
  - Documentation
  - Transport
  - Case workers overburdened
- Stigma

Addressing Low SNAP Participation

- Enroll more eligible people
- Outreach
  - Most through private-public partnerships

Innovations to enroll SNAP eligibles

...thru greater outreach

- Toll-free number
- Off-site enrollment: go to where clients are
  - Case workers
- Off-site application assistance
  - Community volunteers

Innovation to reduce stigma: EBT
Innovation:
EBT extended to farmers markets

- Public–private projects
- Tie food security to agric sector development

Farmers Markets Accepting EBT in Michigan

EBT sales at farmers markets in Michigan

Farmers' Markets Accepting EBT
January 2010
Innovations: Double Incentive Programs

- Double SNAP benefits at farmers markets
- Privately-funded pilot project

Critique: SNAP Targeting

- Many eligibility criteria
- Income eligibility
  - < 130% of the poverty line

Setting the poverty line

- Method: 1960s
- Assumption: 1/3 income spent on food
- Poverty line = food costs x 3
- “Thrifty Food Plan”

The Thrifty Food Plan

- National standard for a nutritious diet at a minimal cost
- Varies with household composition
- Assumes all food is consumed at home
- Sets poverty line → eligibility for SNAP
Critiques of Thrifty Food Budget

- 1/3 is arbitrary
- So, what is the Poverty Line measuring?
- Households spend less than 1/3 on food
- Poverty line too low

Summary on SNAP

- Primary tool against food insecurity
- Targeting far from perfect
- Many eligibles do not apply
  - Process
  - Stigma
- Efforts to address challenges
  - Private-public partnerships

School Meals Program

- Free and reduced lunch & breakfast for low-income children
- Lunch: 1946
  - National School Lunch Act
- Breakfast: 1966
  - Child Nutrition Act

Growth in school lunch participation

Graph showing the growth in individuals in the National School Lunch Program from 2011 to 2019.
Coverage low with school meals program

- 33% of food insecure households with children receive free/reduced lunch

[ USDA 2010 ]

Challenges with school meals

- Nutritional quality of meals ...in era of obesity

Changes to School Meals Program

- Political Champion Childhood Obesity
- Child Nutrition Act
  - First real increase over inflation in 40 yrs
  - $4.5 billion over 10 yrs

Changes to School Meals Program

- ↑ reimbursement per meal
- Fruit & vegetables
- Limit calories per meal. First time in history
- Limits on nutrients in food sold at school (fat, sodium)
Changes to School Meals Program

- Programs to ↑ awareness fruits & vegetables
  - Farm-to-school programs
  - School gardens
  - Add organic foods
  - Train cafeteria workers

Summary: Changes to School Meals

- Diet quality matters
- Not just calories
- Tie-in to ag sector
- Private-public partnerships

WIC Healthy Food Package Changes

- fruits
- vegetables
- whole grains
- low-fat milk
- yogurt
- soy milk

The Private Side of the Food Safety Network
The Emergency Food Assistance Network

- "Food Banks" supply:
  - Food pantries
  - Soup kitchens

- Network:
  - Locally-based
  - Volunteers
  - Faith-based organizations (~67%)

How many people use emergency food assistance in the US?

1 in 8 persons
- 1 million more per week than in 2006
- 37 million people
- 14 million children

[Hunger in America 2010]

Food pantries and soup kitchens serve the food insecure

- Pantries: food insecure household 13xs more likely than food secure

- Soup kitchens: 14x's

Emergency food assistance clients struggle to meet basic needs ....

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food versus utilities</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food vs. housing</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food vs. medicine</td>
<td>22%</td>
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</tbody>
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[Hunger in America 2010 & 2001]
Health…

- 30% of households using emergency food assistance have at least 1 person in poor health
- 47% of clients have unpaid medical bills
- 24% have no medical insurance

Hunger in America 2010

Challenges: Coverage is low.

- Only 20% of the food insecure report going to a food pantry; 2.6% go to a soup kitchen
- Of those who don’t go to a pantry:
  - 30% say there’s no such resource in their community
  - 18% say they don’t know if one exists

[USDA 2009]

Challenges: Stigma?

- 68% of the food insecure who knew of a food pantry in their community did not use it

[USDA 2009]
Challenges: system is taxed

- Volunteers
- 75% pantries report ↑ demand since 2005
- 25% ↓ food packet portions
- 45% say lack of resources → unable to serve clients
  [Feeding America 2010]

Summary

- Food Security in the US
  - Safety net system
    - A hybrid
    - Established
  - Reform at margins
    - Private & public partnerships
    - Coverage
    - Diet Quality

Questions?

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Most recent national studies...

- **USDA**
  Household Food Security in the United States, 2008 (November 2009)

- **Feeding America**
  Hunger in America 2010