

1. Introduction

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of food insecurity and hunger in the United States

Many U.S. families struggle to meet their basic food needs despite continued economic expansion and a strong national nutrition safety net. A recent U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) study estimated that 10.1 percent of U.S. households—about 9 million households during 1999—were food insecure; that is, they did not have access at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life, with no need for recourse to emergency food sources or other extraordinary coping behaviors to meet their basic food needs. Included among those were 2.8 percent of households in which food insecurity reached levels of severity great enough that one or more household members were hungry at least some time during the year due to inadequate resources for food.

Beyond obvious moral considerations, food insecurity and hunger of this magnitude imply public health and economic costs to both communities and individuals through reduced cognitive development and learning capacity in children, impaired work performance and earnings potential in adults, and lower intake of food energy and key nutrients leading to increased medical costs, disability, and premature death due to diet-related illnesses.

Socioeconomic and demographic factors, including household size, homeownership, educational attainment, savings rates, and access to credit and health insurance, have been shown to be other important determinants of food security, independent of

household income. For such households, food spending is often the most flexible item in the family budget and the first to get cut when unexpected changes in income occur, such as job loss or medical expenses.

In recent years, researchers, policymakers, and advocates for the poor have suggested that food insecurity and hunger are also factors of the broader social, economic, and institutional characteristics of the communities in which they occur. Of particular concern are those factors that affect the availability, accessibility, and affordability of food, such as the size and proximity of retail food stores, the variety, quality, and price of food available for purchase, the availability and adequacy of public transportation systems that support food access, and the viability and sustainability of local food production and marketing infrastructures.

Recent legislative changes associated with welfare reform and dramatic shifts in Federal farm supports have created a policy environment conducive to community-based initiatives that improve food access for low-income households and support rural communities by strengthening traditional ties between farmers and urban consumers. Funding for community food projects included in the 1996 Farm Bill and the launching of a nationwide Community Food Security Initiative by the Secretary of Agriculture in February 1999 have increased interest in developing tools that can be used to assess key components of a food secure community.

1.2 What is household food security?

The Ten-Year Comprehensive Plan for the National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Program, part of the National Nutrition and Related Research Act of 1990 (Public Law 101-445n 1990), directed the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services to define and measure food security and hunger as part of a comprehensive effort to monitor the dietary health and nutritional status of the U.S. population.

The food security measurement and instrument were developed over several years as part of the Federal Food Security Measurement Project, an ongoing collaboration among Federal agencies, academic researchers, and commercial and nonprofit private organizations. Key to the success of the new measurement effort was the adoption and standardization of a conceptual definition of the three terms that had been developed by the Life Sciences Research Office (LSRO) of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology. (See box 1.)

1.3 What is community food security?

Community food security is a relatively new concept with no universally accepted definition. For some purposes, community food security can be viewed as an expansion of the concept of household food security. Whereas household food security is concerned with the ability to acquire food at the household level, community food security concerns the underlying social, economic, and institutional factors within a community that affect the quantity and quality of available food and its affordability or price relative to the sufficiency of financial resources available to acquire it. For more information, see Linda S. Kantor. "Community Food

Box 1

What is Household Food Security? Definitions From the Life Sciences Research Office

Food security—Access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum

- ❖ The ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods.
- ❖ An assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

Food insecurity—Limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

Hunger—The uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food. The recurrent and involuntary lack of access to food.

Security Programs Improve Food Access," *Food Review*, 2001.

Communities may be considered to be food insecure if

- There are inadequate resources from which people can purchase foods.
- The available food purchasing resources are not accessible to all community members.
- The food available through the resources is not sufficient in quantity or variety.
- The food available is not competitively priced and thus is not affordable to all households.
- There are inadequate food assistance resources to help low-income people purchase foods at retail markets.
- There are no local food production resources.
- Locally produced food is not available to community members.

- There is no support for local food production resources.
- There is any significant household food insecurity within the community.

Policies and programs implemented to improve community food security address a diverse range of issues, including participation in and access to Federal food assistance programs, economic opportunity and job security, community development and social cohesion, ecologically sustainable agricultural production, farmland preservation, economic viability of rural communities, direct food marketing, diet-related health problems, and emergency food assistance access. Some examples include the following:

- **Food stamp outreach programs** that help increase the number of eligible households that participate in the Food Stamp Program.
- **Farmers' markets** that boost incomes of small, local farmers and increase consumers' access to fresh produce.
- **Community gardens** that help public housing residents and other low-income consumers supplement their diets with home-grown produce.
- **Asset development programs** that assist low-income families to accumulate funds for obtaining additional education, purchasing a home, or starting a business.
- **Food-buying cooperatives** that help families save money by pooling food purchases.
- **Community-supported agriculture programs** that can help provide small farmers with economic stability and consumers with high-quality produce, often at below retail prices.
- **Farm-to-school initiatives** that help local farmers sell fresh fruits and vegetables directly to school meals programs.
- **Community kitchens** that provide job training to the unemployed while

converting surplus food to meals for the needy.

When implemented together with a strong Federal nutrition safety net and emergency food assistance programs that alleviate food insecurity and hunger over the short-term, such community food security initiatives may, over the long term, increase the economic resources available to households to purchase food; strengthen local capacity for food production, processing, and marketing; and boost the effectiveness of Federal food assistance and education programs by increasing the availability of high-quality, affordable food within a community.

In this sense, community food security is most easily understood as a continuum. Communities are unlikely to be either entirely "food secure" or entirely "food insecure." Rather, they can be placed on a continuum where the goal is to move from less food secure to more food secure. Ultimately, the end goal is a "food secure" community in which "all people in a community have access to a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through non-emergency (or conventional) food sources at all times"(D. Biehler et al. *Getting Food on the Table: An Action Guide to Local Food Policy*, 1999).

1.4 Purpose and overview of the Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit

The purpose of the toolkit is to provide a standardized set of measurement tools for assessing various indicators of community food security. It was developed by the USDA as a resource for community-based nonprofit organizations and business groups, local government officials, private citizens, and community planners. It marks the latest phase of a new community-focused chapter in USDA's ongoing efforts to improve our knowledge about the nature and magnitude of

hunger and food insecurity in the United States.

As part of this effort USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS), in conjunction with the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, the Food and Nutrition Service, held a Community Food Security Assessment Conference in June 1999. The goal of the conference was to guide the development and implementation of community food security measurement tools.

The meeting was attended by an interdisciplinary group of academics and community practitioners from Government, universities, research institutes, and nonprofit organizations. Although their areas of expertise were diverse—including community gardening, urban transportation policy, farmland preservation, food marketing, hunger prevention, and nutrition assistance—the group worked to identify methods for measuring a community's ability to ensure that all of its members have access to enough food for an active, healthy life. The *Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit* was developed with the guidance of the meeting participants.

Subsequent development of the toolkit benefited from a collaboration with the Community Assessment Working Group of USDA's Lower Mississippi Delta Nutrition Intervention Research Initiative. Some of the tools and instruments were field-tested in Drew County, Arkansas, by the Center for Applied Research and Evaluation at the Arkansas Children's Hospital Research Institute. An orientation workshop sponsored by the University of Wisconsin-Extension office was held to orient potential toolkit users from several Wisconsin and Illinois communities and solicit their feedback on the toolkit's usefulness.

It is not our intention in the toolkit to reinvent the wheel. The toolkit is a product of the energy and enthusiasm of the conference

attendees, but it also reflects the dedicated work of assessment studies conducted in countless cities and counties across the Nation, as well as how-to manuals created by other researchers. (See chapter 12, *An Annotated Bibliography of Community Food Security Assessment Studies*.)

The goal is to help you plan and carry out a community food security assessment process that does not rely on professionals but allows you to include a wide variety of participants. You are guided to look at all resources to understand the community's potential not only for identifying an issue but also for addressing it successfully.

We have tried to do a great deal of the legwork for you by identifying sources of data that can be used in your assessment. The tools themselves are divided into separate units that can be used independently of one another. We recognize that food security issues differ by community and the combination of tools needed for an assessment in one community may be very different from that needed in another.

The toolkit provides tips, guidelines, and data collection tools for conducting a food security assessment of your community. To accomplish this task, we provide you with a general guide to community assessment—from planning to analysis stages. This guide can be used to familiarize all members of the community food security assessment team with the key components of the community assessment process. The next stage of the process focuses on community food security assessment. These chapters of the toolkit begin with an explanation of the elements of community food security and how they can be measured and analyzed. Then you are provided with a cross-reference between the indicators or data needed for the assessment and the corresponding assessment tools and guides. Appendices A and B include the necessary data collection tools (tables,

surveys, and focus group guides) and instructions on how to use each tool to collect data. These data collection instruments, including a food store survey in appendix C, can be customized to include any of the variables presented in the toolkit or any additional variables. There are six basic assessment components:

- Profile of community socioeconomic and demographic characteristics
- Profile of community food resources
- Assessment of household food security
- Assessment of food resource accessibility
- Assessment of food availability and affordability
- Assessment of community food production resources