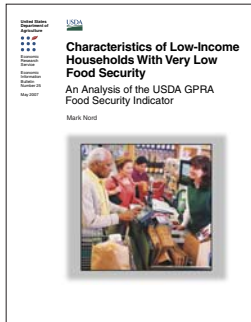


# ERS *Report Summary*

Economic Research Service

May 2007

U.S. Department of Agriculture



*This is a summary  
of an ERS report.*

Find the full report at  
[www.ers.usda.gov/  
publications/eib25](http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib25)

*ERS is the main source  
of economic research and  
analysis from the U.S.  
Department of  
Agriculture, providing  
timely information on  
economic and policy issues  
related to agriculture,  
food, the environment,  
and rural America.*

## Characteristics of Low-Income Households With Very Low Food Security

### An Analysis of the USDA GPRA Food Security Indicator

Mark Nord

The U.S. Department of Agriculture monitors the prevalence of “very low food security” among low-income households as a measure of how well the Government’s domestic nutrition assistance programs are meeting the needs of their target populations. Very low food security in a household means that at times during the year, food intake of one or more household members is reduced and normal eating patterns disrupted because the household lacks sufficient money and other resources for food.

#### **What Is the Issue?**

USDA set a goal of reducing the prevalence of very low food security among low-income households to 7.4 percent or below by 2007 as part of its 2002-07 strategic plan, developed in connection with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). In 2005, the prevalence of very low food security among low-income households stood at 12.6 percent, up from 10.9 percent in 2000. Reversing this trend may require changes in nutrition assistance policies and programs. Information about the composition, location, employment, education, and other characteristics of households with very low food security may provide important insights to guide these policy and program changes and improve the food security of economically vulnerable households.

#### **What Did the Study Find?**

To achieve the USDA food security target, the food security of households with incomes that are less than 130 percent of the poverty line will need to surpass the current level of food security of households with incomes in the range of 130 to 150 percent of the poverty line. In 2005, when the data used in this study were collected, the poverty line for a household of four made up of two adults and two children was \$19,806.

Nearly half of low-income households with very low food security had one or more members employed. Just over half received assistance from one or more of the three largest Federal nutrition assistance programs—the Food Stamp Program, the National School Lunch Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women,

[www.ers.usda.gov](http://www.ers.usda.gov)

Infants, and Children (WIC). The prevalence of very low food security among households receiving food stamps during the study period was more than double the USDA target, and for households that had recently left the Food Stamp Program, the prevalence rate of very low food security was nearly three times the target.

Low-income households with very low food security included disproportionately large shares of men ages 19-64 living alone, households headed by non-Hispanic Blacks, and households with adult members who were unemployed or disabled.

These profiles of low-income households with very low food security suggest that households' food security depends on a number of demographic, economic, geographic, and household structural factors. Achieving the GPRA food security objective may depend not only on improving the effectiveness and accessibility of nutrition assistance programs, but also on improving other key household circumstances.

### ***How Was the Study Conducted?***

Data on households' food security as well as their economic and demographic characteristics were provided by the nationally representative Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement for 2005. The prevalence of very low food security was calculated for low-income households (annual income less than 130 percent of the poverty line) in selected demographic and economic groups.