

# FOOD SECURITY

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**FOOD SECURITY** is a key goal of sustainable diets. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.”<sup>1</sup> The United Nations has an inclusive definition of food security that emphasizes food attributes and preferences: “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy lifestyle.”<sup>2</sup>

**FOOD INSECURITY** is the inverse of food security.

## KEY POINTS

- I. **FOOD SECURITY IS A KEY GOAL OF SUSTAINABLE DIETS** and contributes to nutrition and human wellbeing.
- II. **IN 2020**, 10.5% households in the United States<sup>1</sup> and 25% of the global population experienced some level of food insecurity.<sup>3</sup>
- III. **FOOD SECURITY IS A SOCIAL DETERMINANT OF HEALTH** that is impacted by the availability, accessibility, affordability, convenience, and desirability of food.



## IMPORTANCE OF ACHIEVING FOOD SECURITY

As a social value, food security is a basic human right.<sup>4</sup> Achieving food security is critical for supporting an active and healthy lifestyle as well as for sustainable diets.<sup>5</sup> Food insecurity is associated with detrimental physical and mental health issues. For example, food insecurity in children can cause micronutrient deficiencies, which are associated with undernutrition, stunting, or anxiety.<sup>4,7</sup> Adults experiencing prolonged food insecurity are at an increased risk of developing obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and asthma, or depression, anxiety, and stress.<sup>7</sup>

## FOOD INSECURITY TRENDS

In 2020, 10.5% of US households experienced food insecurity.<sup>3</sup> Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, about 9.7% of the population experienced severe levels (disruption and reduction of normal eating patterns) of food insecurity with the number decreasing to 3.9% in 2020.<sup>3</sup> Disparities exist among households experiencing food insecurity, with single-mother households and households with income below the poverty line having the highest rates of food insecurity.<sup>3</sup> Food insecurity is also higher among indigenous and rural populations. For example, compared to the US average, Native American and rural populations have higher food insecurity, with approximately 25% of Native American households<sup>8</sup> and 12.1% of rural households<sup>9</sup> being food insecure.

Disparities in food security by region, gender, age, or rurality also exist globally. For example, at a global scale, Africa currently is experiencing the highest levels of total food insecurity, while Latin America and the Caribbean are experiencing the fastest increase in food insecurity.<sup>7</sup>

## DRIVERS OF FOOD SECURITY

Multiple factors of an individual's food environment contribute to food security, including food availability, accessibility, convenience, desirability, affordability, and safety.<sup>5</sup> Recent drivers of increased food insecurity globally are climate, conflict, and economic shocks.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, drivers enhancing food security include education, increased income and purchasing power, and improvements in the food environment, such as access to food assistance through one of the 15 USDA nutrition assistance programs.<sup>5</sup>

## HOW IS FOOD SECURITY MEASURED?

Food security can be measured from the household to the community and national levels. The most direct way to measure food security is through individual or household surveys. For example, the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module is a questionnaire of 18 questions that evaluates household food access over a 12-month period. Similarly, the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) survey of the United Nations is a questionnaire of 8 questions regarding individual or household food access that has been validated in diverse contexts.<sup>10</sup> There are other variations of the U.S. Food Security Module that measure adult food security, a short-form household screen, a self-administered form for children 12 years and older, and Spanish and Chinese translations of the 18-item screen. Community food security can be measured by conducting the individual food security questionnaires across a community. Food security can also be indirectly measured by assessing various parts of the food system, including: (1) agricultural production data (i.e. yield, land use, farm income, and production costs); (2) food price data; and (3) food access data (i.e. diets and risk of hunger).<sup>5</sup>

### HOUSEHOLD PRACTICES TO ENHANCE FOOD SECURITY

1. Access food resources in your community including immediate options such as food banks or food pantries. Explore longer-term options by checking your eligibility for various food assistance programs offered in your community.
2. Enhance your diet with foraged and wild foods such as apples and plums, or wild game, berries, and mushrooms within or near your community. Learn about wild foods and traditional food practices from community elders.
3. Learn to grow your own food in your backyard, in food pots, or in a community garden.
4. Decrease food waste by incorporating left over foods or foods about to expire into recipes.
5. If you have room for food storage, help stretch your food budget by purchasing shelf-stable and nutritionally dense foods, such as lentils, chickpeas, buckwheat, and quinoa.
6. Seek out educational opportunities to learn about nutrition, food preparation and food safety, and stretching out food dollars through Supplemental Nutrition Education Program - Education (SNAP-Ed) and Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP).

### COMMUNITY PRACTICES TO ENHANCE FOOD SECURITY

1. Evaluate food security in your community or institution and provide food-insecure individuals with food access through government programs, grants, and partnerships with local nonprofits.
2. Implement interventions to make fresh produce and healthy foods more accessible.
3. As a business or organization, share food by donating to a food pantry or distributing it to your staff, patrons, and community.
4. If your household is food secure, share extra food by donating to a food bank or cooking a meal for others.

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