

New FRAC Report on Food Hardship – Questions and Answers

What's so new and unique about this report?

No report before this has ever been based on a sample size adequate to analyze food hardship data at the MSA and congressional district level. And no report before this has been able to look at food hardship data so close in time to publication.

Where did the data come from?

These data were provided to and analyzed by the Food Research and Action Center. They come from Gallup's partnership with Healthways that is interviewing 1,000 households per day almost every day, year-round, and has done so since January 2, 2008. Through December 2009, more than 650,000 people have been asked a series of questions on a range of topics including emotional health, physical health, healthy behavior, work environment and access to basic services. Specific to this report, more than 530,000 people were asked: "Have there been times in the past twelve months when you did not have enough money to buy food that you or your family needed?"

What's that question?

Gallup has been asking: "Have there been times in the past twelve months when you did not have enough money to buy food that you or your family needed?" It's very similar to one of the questions asked by the federal government in its annual survey of food security, allowing us a closer and more localized look at people's ability to afford enough food.

How does this compare to USDA's food security study?

Gallup's question is very similar to one of the questions asked by the federal government in its annual survey of food security – this similarity provides a basis for concluding that the two questions are measuring food insecurity in quite similar ways. And while the Census Bureau/USDA's additional questions allow a more nuanced view of the depth of food insecurity, the very large Gallup sample allows a closer, more localized and more recent look at food hardship. USDA's data only go to 2008 (2009 data will come out until November 2010) and do not go beyond the state level; even at the state level, they use three-year averages. Gallup's data take us through 2009 and provide data from the national level to congressional districts.

What is food hardship?

FRAC is using the term "food hardship" to describe the experience of household answering "yes" to the Gallup question to avoid confusion with the Census Bureau/USDA study that produces "food insecurity" numbers. The concepts are comparable – in the end, both studies tell us that far too many Americans struggled to put food on the table.

Economically, 2009 was worse than 2008. Why didn't the national food hardship number keep climbing?

The dramatic rise in food hardship in 2008 tracked key developments in the economy, including increases in the unemployment rate and food prices. While the economic crisis continued in 2009 and in some ways accelerated, several factors likely were responsible for keeping the food hardship rate from continuing to climb, including increases in SNAP/Food Stamp benefits (an annual increase and the boost provided by the economic recovery act), rapid growth in SNAP/Food Stamp participation, and a drop in food prices.

Hunger's not a problem in my community. My MSA/Congressional District falls near the bottom.

Ranking at the bottom of this list shouldn't be a point of pride. What this list shows is that food hardship is a problem in every corner of America, and should be a concern for every member of Congress. No MSA and only a handful of Congressional Districts had fewer than 1 in 10 households experiencing food hardship. It's not a question of who's at the top and who's at the bottom. It boils down to the fact that in this extraordinarily wealthy nation, far too many people are not able to afford enough food for their families. This is a national problem demanding a solution.

Why are some data for 2009 only (e.g., national and state) and other data for 2008-2009 combined (e.g., children in the states, MSAs, Congressional Districts)? And, why are there fewer MSAs in the children's data than in the general data?

For each piece of analysis, FRAC used the time periods and number of jurisdictions that assured a significant sample size and statistical significance. For example, while our sample size was large enough to see the extent of food hardship in the 100 largest MSAs, only the 50 largest yielded a sample size adequate enough for FRAC to examine the differences between for households with children and without children.