

Food Hardship: A Closer Look at Hunger

Data for the Nation through September 2010

Food Research and Action Center | November 2010

About This Report

This report contains the Food Research and Action Center's (FRAC) analysis of very recent survey data collected by Gallup as part of the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index and provided to FRAC. The report provides a unique up-to-date examination of the struggle that very large numbers of American households are having with affording enough food. This new analysis builds on national data concerning 2009 released in January 2010 by FRAC, and updates that report on national food hardship data and trends through September 2010.

The ability to provide such up-to-date data comes from Gallup's partnership with Healthways that is interviewing 1,000 households per day almost every day, year-round, and that has done so since January 2, 2008. As part of this partnership, 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 analysis, through September 2010 more than 800,000 people had been 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?" In this report, FRAC refers to a "yes" answer as "food hardship."

Food Hardship in the Nation

In 2010, the nation's unemployment rate has stayed very high (with the monthly rate ranging from 9.5 to 9.9 percent), and SNAP/Food Stamp participation reached record levels. Yet, the number of people reporting food hardship as surveyed by Gallup slightly declined in 2010, compared to 2009.

Our previous analysis of the 2009 data showed that food hardship numbers were rising rapidly in late 2008 and early 2009 until an increase in monthly SNAP benefits, passed as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, took effect in April 2009. Then food hardship leveled off and even declined a bit, even while unemployment rose from 8.6 percent in March 2009 to 10 percent in the last quarter of 2009.

Month	Food Hardship Rate
January 2010	18.1
February 2010	17.9
March 2010	18
April 2010	17.1
May 2010	17.9
June 2010	17.5
July 2010	17.6
August 2010	18.2
September 2010	18

In particular, food hardship in 2008-2009 rose dramatically from 16.3 percent of respondents in the first quarter of 2008 to 19.5 percent in the average month the last quarter of 2008 and then, in 2009, dropped somewhat, especially after the economic recovery act took effect. The rate was 18.5 percent in the fourth calendar quarter of 2009.

Now FRAC's analysis of data from the Gallup-Healthways' survey shows that food hardship (the household reporting inability to afford enough food at times over the 12 month period) averaged 17.8 percent from January through September 2010, down from an average of 18.5 percent for the last quarter of 2009.

Some key factors likely were responsible for keeping the food hardship rate from continuing to climb in 2009 and then for the modest decline in the food hardship rate, even while unemployment rose and hours of work and wages stayed low:

- Beginning in April 2009, SNAP/Food Stamp beneficiaries received an increase in monthly benefits of at least 13.6 percent as part of the economic recovery legislation—the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Whereas in March 2009 the average SNAP benefit per recipient was \$114.67, it has been \$133-134 in every month since.
- The number of people receiving SNAP assistance to purchase food kept growing rapidly, as it had earlier in the recession. Today, the program reaches one in eight Americans, an all-time high for participation.

Anecdotal evidence has supported the data on the effect of increased SNAP benefits on food hardship. Food retailers, food banks and anti-hunger advocates report that the new benefit level helps families purchase groceries considerably deeper into the month than the prior level did, when many families typically ran out of food in the third week of the month.

While it is an encouraging sign that the food hardship rate dipped in 2010, the bottom line should not be comforting to anyone. The most recent food hardship numbers mean that nearly one in five U.S. households is reporting each month that it has been struggling with hunger and inability to purchase needed food at times over the prior year. This should be of tremendous concern to the nation, and one that demands a robust policy response.

Impact of the SNAP ARRA Boost

SNAP benefit levels have long been inadequate to provide the typical family a minimum healthy diet throughout the month, but ARRA boosted benefit levels for these vulnerable people. Seen as a way to stimulate the economy, support those struggling in the recession, and move the nation towards the President's goal of eliminating childhood hunger by 2015, the SNAP boost was described as the best economic stimulus, dollar for dollar, by both conservative and progressive economists.

The ARRA boost is not only helping struggling households avert food hardship, but positively affecting poverty rates as well. The recently released Census Bureau report on poverty included the information that 3.6 million people were lifted above the poverty line by SNAP (under the alternative Census Bureau computation that counts certain in-kind benefits), a number 1.4 million higher than in 2008, almost certainly due to the SNAP benefit increases in 2009.

Proposals in Congress, however, would cut short the benefit boost and return benefits to lower, inadequate levels. A bill passed over the summer took nearly \$12 billion from future SNAP benefits, and a second proposal would cut further. The child nutrition bill passed by the Senate and being considered by the House would cut an additional \$2.2 billion from future SNAP benefits by ending the ARRA boost in 2013. If it is passed, SNAP recipients would see their benefits fall by about \$59 a month starting in November 2013.

Recommendations

Food hardship remains far too common and far too high. It is crucial that the nation restore a job market and develop public supports that will dramatically decrease hunger and do so quickly. Essential steps include: a growing economy that provides jobs at decent wages, shares prosperity and pulls households out of hunger and poverty; improved income supports (e.g., unemployment insurance, refundable tax credits) that help struggling workers and families; and strengthened federal nutrition programs (SNAP/Food Stamps; school meals; WIC; summer, afterschool and child care food) that reach more people.

The first step is for Congress to stop the damaging raid on SNAP benefits and move a child nutrition bill that is not financed by cuts in monthly SNAP allotments. The data in this report show that the increased benefits are helping families put food on the table, and mitigating some of the most damaging effects of the recession.

For earlier data and a discussion of the methodology, go to <http://frac.org/reports-and-resources/food-hardship-data/>.

National Food Hardship – 2008 and 2009	
Month	Food Hardship Rate
January 2008	16.5
February 2008	16.2
March 2008	16.1
April 2008	16.7
May 2008	17.4
June 2008	17.4
July 2008	17.0
August 2008	19.1
September 2008	18.5
October 2008	18.8
November 2008	20.3
December 2008	19.4
January 2009	18.8
February 2009	19.0
March 2009	18.6
April 2009	18.2
May 2009	18.4
June 2009	17.3
July 2009	17.7
August 2009	17.9
September 2009	18.1
October 2009	18.9
November 2009	18.3
December 2009	18.2