



CENTER FOR HUNGER-FREE COMMUNITIES

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USDA Releases Household Food Security Data

**A major public health concern:
An increase in very low food security, and hunger rates still high.**

Philadelphia – September 5, 2012 - Today the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service released the [annual report on food security in the United States](#). In the U.S. 14.9% of households were food insecure, meaning 1 out of every 6 households did not have access to enough food for an active and healthy life. Though this marks no real change from the previous year, very low food security (the more severe form of food insecurity) *increased* to reach 5.7% or 6.8 million households, levels seen at the height of the recession in 2008 and 2009. Across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, food insecurity increased 4.1% from 1999; where now, 1.6 million, or an average of 12.5% of Pennsylvania residents struggled to pay for food between 2009-2011.

A closer look at the national data reveals almost a quarter (24.5%) of all children under age 6 lived in food insecure households in 2011. This figure has particularly significant public health implications: these early years lay the foundation for children's health, cognitive, social and emotional development and future potential.

"Being food insecure means far more than not having enough to eat; there are lifelong implications," said Dr. Mariana Chilton, an associate professor and director of the Center for Hunger Free Communities at Drexel University's School of Public Health. "Children in food insecure households have more health problems, are more likely to be hospitalized, and to have developmental delays. Young kids who are food insecure may arrive at kindergarten unprepared, and may never catch up to their peers."

The new USDA data reflect food insecurity issues affecting children right here in Philadelphia. At the height of the recession between 30-50% of the families with children said they did not have enough money for food. Over 60% of families with children under age 4 interviewed by the [Children's HealthWatch study in Philadelphia](#) had some form of hardship with housing, utilities and food. Since the beginning of the recession through the end of 2011, Children's HealthWatch-Philadelphia saw an upward spike in food insecurity among families with young children, increasing from 16.8% in

2008 to 22% in 2011. The USDA data also shows that across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, food insecurity increased 4.1% from 1999; where now, 1.6 million, or an average of 12.5% of Pennsylvania residents struggled to pay for food between 2009-2011.

The staff of the Center for Hunger Free Communities of Drexel University School of Public Health witness many families struggling to put food on the table. Many of the members of the Center's [Witnesses to Hunger](#) program face difficult sacrifices when they confront the gap between their income and essential needs – such as making rent by forgoing purchasing food for the week.

Tianna Gaines-Turner, of Witnesses to Hunger, was not surprised by the numbers as she sees many struggling to put food on the table. “I see more and more people in need of assistance with purchasing food. Many come with their children who wake up in the morning hungry and go to bed with their stomachs growling.”

Chilton explained, “What these numbers show is that we have malnutrition right here in America. The people suffering from hunger are our neighbors, they are all around us—in the suburbs, cities and rural areas. We can do better as a nation.”

Chilton predicted that, unless our leaders act, the situation will only deteriorate further. Currently, there is no national plan to end hunger.

“What we do know is that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, the nation’s first strongest defense against hunger, has prevented food insecurity from rising nationally,” Chilton said. “However, its funding and structure are under threat in Congress, as deliberations on the renewal of the program continue. Additionally, this past summer’s drought has affected corn and soy crops, key ingredients in animal feed and many common foods, which is expected to drive food prices higher in the coming months. If we value our children and want them to be ready to learn, then we must ensure that they receive the nutrition they need through all stages of their lives, especially when they are just starting to develop and grow.”