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Commentary on "Individual, Family, and Neighborhood Characteristics and Children's Food Insecurity"

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Food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.¹ Food security is the access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. The measurement of these conditions and the range between them is reported in the Household Food Security report, published by the US Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS). ERS sponsors the annual food security survey performed by the US Census Bureau and analyzes the subsequent data on food security for use in USDA research.

Measuring food security was enacted after the passage of the National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act of 1990, which included a Ten-Year Comprehensive Plan to standardize the definition, methodology, and obtainment of food insecurity data. After the development of a national measurement of food insecurity, in 1995 the U.S. Census Bureau began including an annual food security questionnaire, the Food Security Supplement, in the administration of the Current Population Survey.

The food insecurity data reported since the development of the survey and its administration is the measurement of a household's access and lack of access to adequate food. Currently, more than 17.2 million households in the U.S. were food insecure some time during 2010, and 48.8 million people lived in food-insecure households. About 16.2 million children lived in food-insecure households in which both children and adults experienced food insecurity. Households with a single woman or single man with children, a low income-to-poverty ratio, and a head of household whose race/ethnicity is Black or Hispanic are more likely to be food insecure.²

In recent years, attention has been drawn to the need to better understand food insecurity as it relates to the household's surrounding community. While the term does not have a standardized definition, community food security has been used to describe a community's access and lack of access to adequate food. The findings in the article "Individual, Family, and Neighborhood Characteristics of Children's Food Insecurity," by Rachel Kimbro and colleagues, characterize the neighborhoods that are home to food insecure households. The results of the study, while based on data from 1998-1999, provide helpful context for understanding the characteristics of communities in which food insecure households live.

More importantly, the findings underscore the question of whether food insecurity is an attribute of communities and neighborhoods themselves, prompting a greater need for research in standardizing methodology to measure and obtain data on the characteristics of

communities and neighborhoods. Such statistics have long-term implications for policymaking as well as nutrition assistance program delivery, agricultural production, and food retail.

Community strategies and initiatives that assume the community-wide necessity of affordable, accessible produce are already underway to increase availability of food to a community. These initiatives target a wide variety of policies and programs to address many issues involved in community food security, including the availability of locally grown and fresh produce, the existence of grocery stores, agriculture practices and land use, access to and participation in nutrition assistance programs, consumer behavior, and the incidence of diet-related conditions and disease. Many strategies also seek to address the built environment's failure to provide safe walking routes, sidewalks, and outdoor recreational spaces.

With the passage of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, ERS published a report to Congress summarizing the existence and characteristics of areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, commonly known as food deserts. The study brought new information to the current discussion of food deserts. For example, the study measured the ability of a household to access a supermarket or large grocery store and found that of all US households, about 2.2% live more than a mile from a supermarket and do not have access to a vehicle. Overall, however, the study found that the "current state of research is insufficient to conclusively determine whether some areas with limited access have inadequate access."³

The understanding of a community's food security status is still needed and relevant for local, state, and federal policymaking decisions. The analysis provided by Kimbro and colleagues in this article emphasizes the need to prioritize research investments in community characteristics of food insecurity in order to effectively address food insecurity at the individual and household level.

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