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## How the Feds Distort Their 'Food Insecurity' Numbers

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On Wednesday the Agriculture Department released the results of its annual Household Food Security in the United States survey for 2013. According to the [USDA](#) survey, 14.3% of U.S. households -- some 49 million Americans -- were "food insecure at least some time during the year in 2013." The decrease from 14.5% of households in 2012 was "not statistically significant." Yet if the past is any guide, the survey will be wrongfully invoked by politicians and pundits as proof of a national hunger crisis.

Is being "food insecure" the same as going hungry? Not necessarily. The [USDA](#) defines a "food insecure" household in the U.S. as one that is "uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet the needs of all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food" at times during the year. The [USDA](#) notes: "For most food-insecure households, the inadequacies were in the form of reduced quality and variety rather than insufficient quantity."

The [National Academy of Sciences](#) urged the [USDA](#) in 2006 to explicitly state that its food-security survey results are not an estimate of nationwide hunger. The [USDA](#) responded by dropping any mention of "hunger" in the survey's response categories. Nevertheless, the survey's results continue to be pervasively misrepresented as an accurate measure of hunger in America.

Democrats have a long history of demagoguing the survey's findings. In 2009, after a spike in the number of "food insecure" households, President Obama announced that "hunger rose significantly last year" and promised to reverse "the trend of rising hunger." Mr. Obama's comment spurred a [Washington Post](#) headline, "Hunger a growing problem in America, [USDA](#) reports," while the [New York Times](#) chimed in with, "Hunger in U.S. at a 14-Year High."

In 2013 the [USDA](#) reported that federal food programs -- most notably food stamps provided by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) -- "increase food security by providing low-income households access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education." But food insecurity was more widespread in 2013 (14.3%) than in 2007 (11.1%), while food-stamp recipients rose to 47 million from 26 million.

Paradoxically, rising government dependency may in part explain rising food insecurity. A 2007 [Journal of Nutrition](#) study concluded that families receiving food stamps are over 50% more likely to be "food insecure" than similar households not on food stamps. In 2010, the [Government Accountability Office](#) reported that food-stamp participants "tend to be more food insecure" compared with eligible nonparticipants. A 2013 [Harvard School of Public Health](#) study also found that enrolling in the food-stamp program failed to significantly boost participants' food security or dietary quality.

Though the food-security survey results are often touted as evidence of widespread hunger, another [USDA](#) survey debunked that conclusion. The agency's [Agricultural Research Service](#) conducts periodic surveys of "What We Eat in America." The most recent survey (2009-10) revealed that children ages 2 to 11 in households with less than \$25,000 in annual income consume significantly more calories than children in households with incomes above \$75,000.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration is resisting disclosures that could explain the paradoxical relationship

between food stamps and food insecurity. Seeking some clarity, Rep. Tom Marino (R., Pa.) introduced the SNAP Transparency Act last year to compel the [USDA](#) to disclose more information about what food stamps are used to buy. Mr. Marino said that "Congress has virtually no information to ensure that the program is operating effectively." The [Association of Health Care Journalists](#), the National Association of Science Writers and other organizations have endorsed Mr. Marino's legislation, but Democratic lawmakers made sure it went nowhere.

Some Americans do indeed suffer from hunger, but the federal government has shed little light on the challenges they face. The [National Academy of Sciences](#) urged the [USDA](#) in 2006 to develop measurements of individual hunger instead of household "food security," but the [USDA](#) hasn't done so. More than 40 years after President Nixon declared war on hunger, the federal government still doesn't care to accurately measure the problem.

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Mr. Bovard, the author of "Attention Deficit Democracy" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), testified before President Reagan's Food Assistance Task Force in 1983.

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