"It is Better to be Roughly Right, than Precisely Wrong:" The Case of the Household Food Security Survey

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BACKGROUND

- History
  - Genesis
  - Its evolution
  - CNStat review
  - Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS)
- USDA Decision (9/20/2025)
  - Releasing the 2025 report (based on 2024 data), terminating future data collection

"These redundant, costly, politicized, and extraneous studies do nothing more than fear monger."

CANCELLING DATA

- Data is everywhere
- Economic data are a strategic asset.
  - Pertinent, quality data is the foundation to good analysis, which supports sound policy.
  - Bad data misinforms analysis, which leads to misguided policy.
  - An absence of data, predicates no objective analysis, resulting in policy driven by self-serving anecdotes and narratives.

NUTS & BOLTS OF THE CPS-FSS

- Current Pop Survey Supplement Timing
- FSS Component
  - 10 questions baseline
  - 8 questions if household includes children ages 0-17

Definitions:

- Low food security: at least one or more household members reported reduced quality, variety, or desirability of their diet at some time during the year.
- Very low food security: is the more severe range of food insecurity where one or more household members experience reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns at times during the year because of limited money or other resources for food.

CORE QUESTIONS ASSESSING HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY

1. "We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the **last 12 months**?

2. "The food that we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the **last 12 months**?

3. "We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the **last 12 months**?

4. In the **last 12 months**, did you or other adults in the household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes/No)

5. (If yes to question 4) How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only **1 or 2 months**?

CORE QUESTIONS ASSESSING HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY

6. In the **last 12 months**, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes/No)

7. In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry, but didn't eat, because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes/No)

8. In the **last 12 months**, did you lose weight because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes/No)

9. In the **last 12 months**, did you or other adults in your household ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes/No)

10. (If yes to question 9) How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in **only 1 or 2 months**?

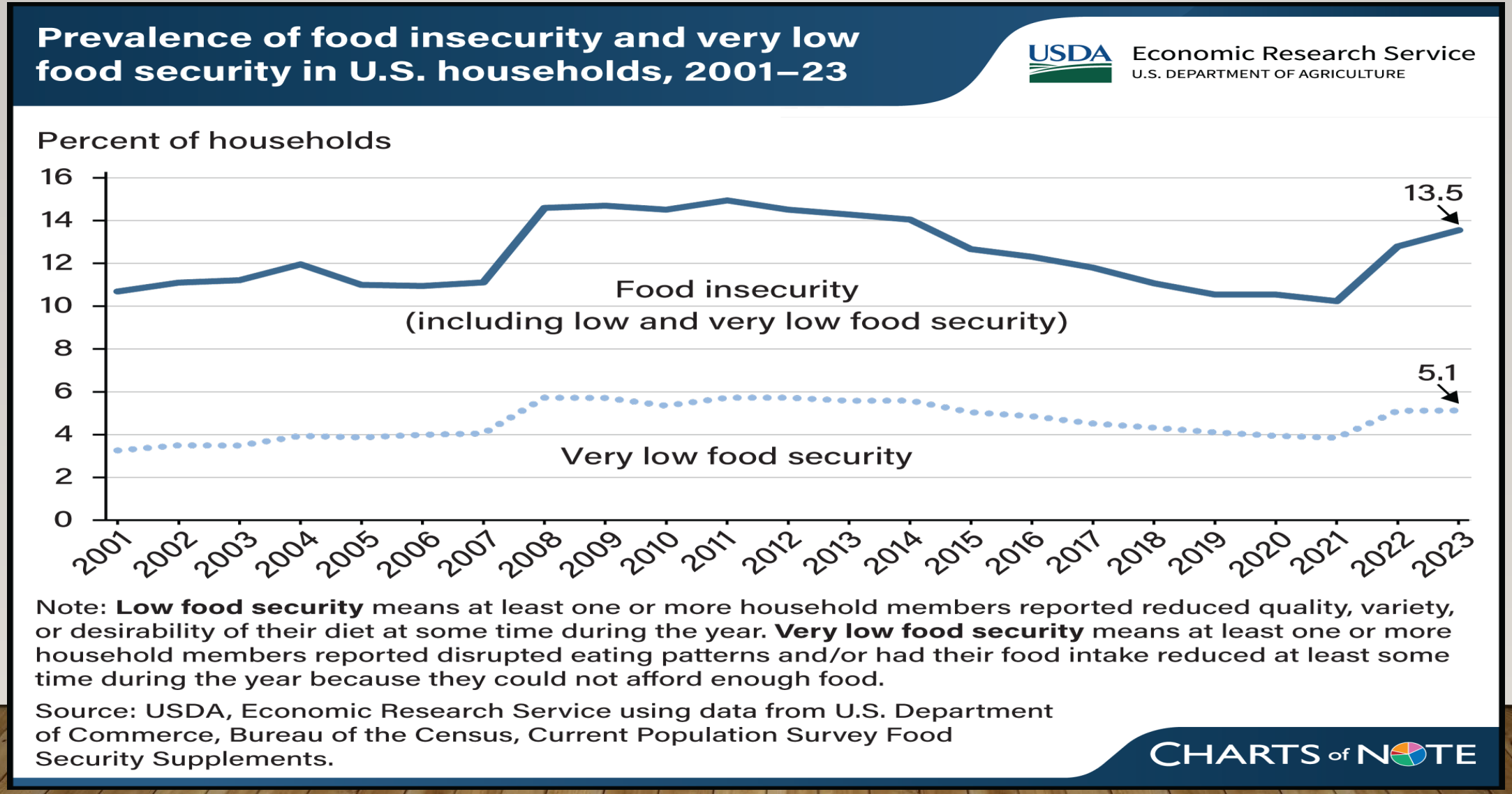
NUTS & BOLTS OF THE CPS-FSS

- Updated for the survey conducted in 2022 (for the 2021 food security report)
- Typical timeline
- Release
  - Sept/October annual release with Webinar
  - For the 2024 report, ????

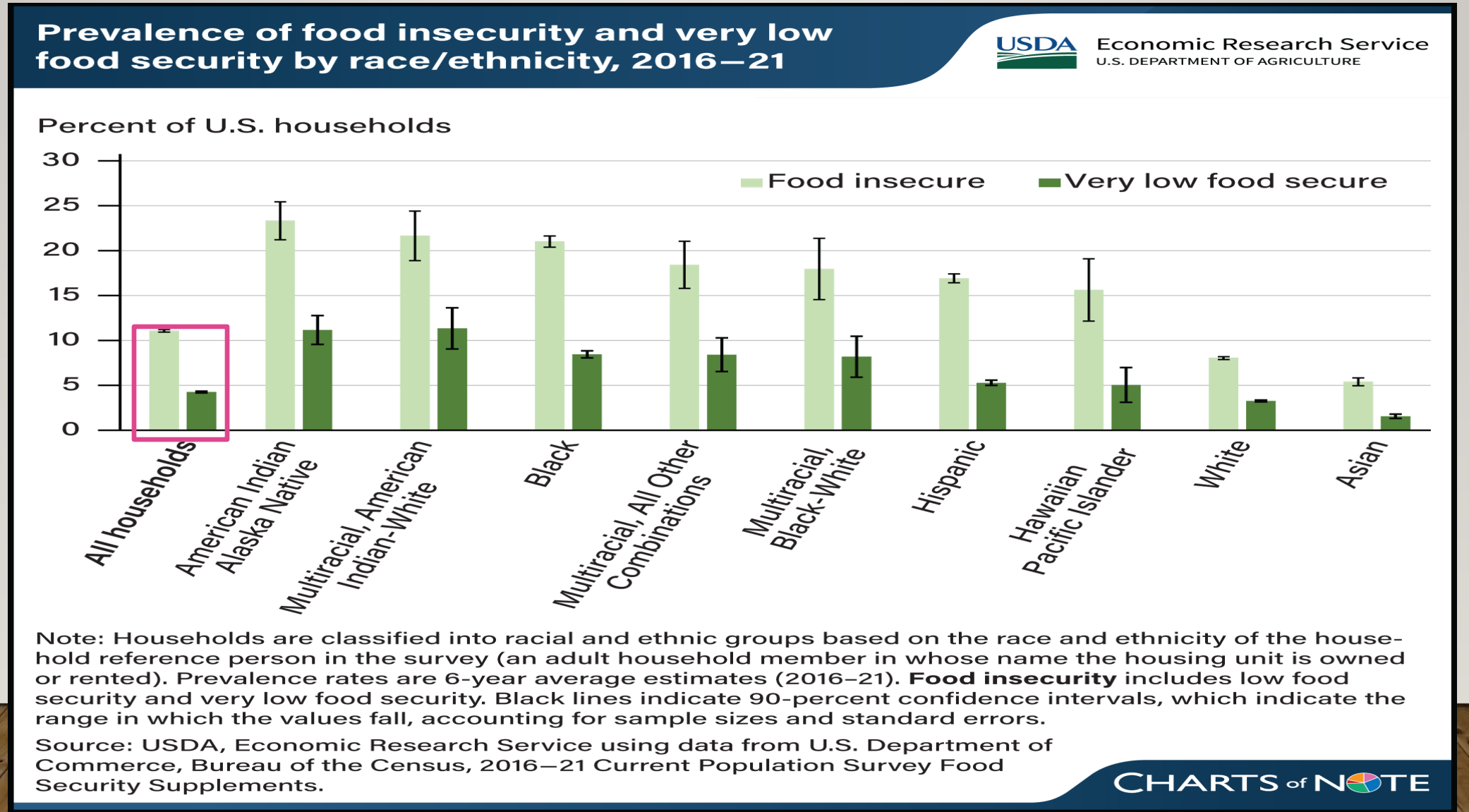
RECOGNIZED VALUE

- VA
  - Study food security among veterans
- DoD
  - Study food security among military families
- UN FAO
  - Serving as a model

SCOPE OF RESULTS: OVER TIME



SCOPE OF RESULTS: TARGETING VULNERABLE POPULATIONS



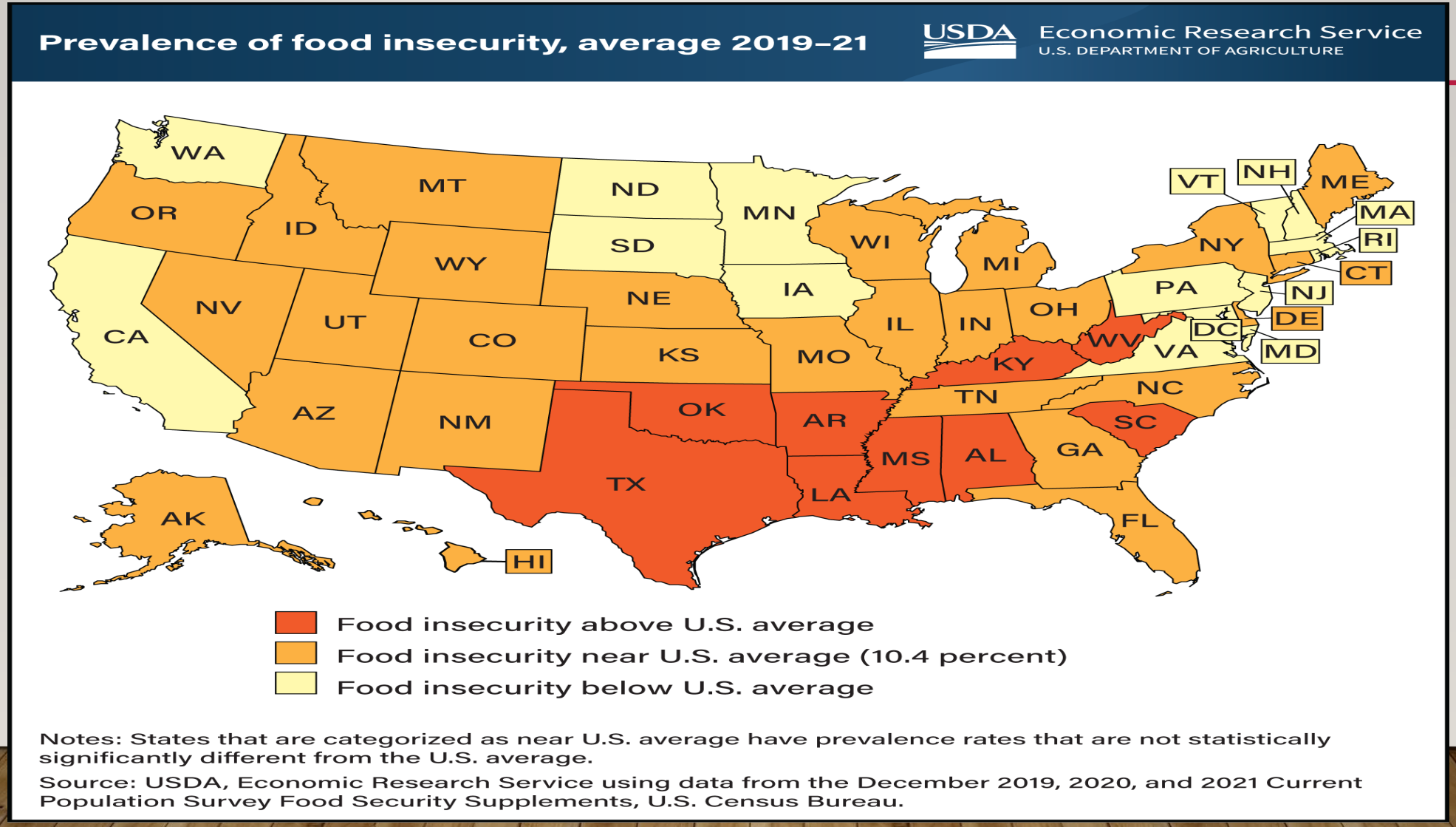
SCOPE OF RESULTS: IMPACT OF FOOD ASSISTANCE

- The median food-secure household spent 16 percent more for food than the median food-insecure household
- In 2023, the following were food insecure:

Food Insecure	Very Food Insecure
51.9% of SNAP households	22.4% of SNAP households
43.7% of households received free or reduced-price lunches	15.3% of households received free or reduced-price lunches
37% of households received WIC benefits	14% of households received WIC benefits

HTTPS://WWW.ERS.USDA.GOV/TOPICS/FOOD-NUTRITION-ASSISTANCE/FOOD-SECURITY-IN-THE-US/INTERACTIVE-CHARTS-AND-HIGHLIGHTS#CHILDTRENDS

SCOPE OF RESULTS: STATE SPECIFIC RESULTS



OTHER SURVEYS

HTTPS://BLOG.POPDATA.ORG/FOOD-SECURITY-DATA-CPS/

Data Source	First Year of Food Security Coverage	Sample Size (households)	Geographic Detail	USDA Food Security Modules	Supplemental Coverage Related to Food Security
National Health Interview Survey (NHIS)*	2011	30,000-60,000	Census region	Adult (30 day reference period)	SNAP, WIC, school meal subsidy
Medical Expenditure Panel Survey (MEPS)* †	2016	10,000-14,000	Census region	Adult (30 day reference period)	SNAP, grocery stores, hard to pay for basics like food
American Community Survey (ACS)*§	2000	1,300,000-1,500,000	State, sub-state §	None	SNAP, WIC‡, lunch subsidy‡
American Time Use Survey (ATUS)*	2014	8,000-12,000	All states, some counties, metro areas, and cities	None	SNAP, WIC, places to buy food, preferred foods, meal preparation

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National Survey of Children's Health (NCHS)	2016	20,000-55,000	State, CBSA	None	SNAP, WIC, expenditures, community assistance (e.g., food pantry)
Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID)	1997	20,000-26,000	State	Household	SNAP, WIC, expenditures, community assistance (e.g., food pantry)
Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP)	1998	14,000-52,000	State	Short-form	SNAP, WIC, school meal subsidy

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USDA DECISION (1)

- "If you are explaining, you are losing" – Ronald Reagan
  - Community response
- Redundant?
- Costly?
- Politicized?
- Food security trends unchanged?
- Not statutorily required?

USDA DECISION (2):
ERS REPORT ON FOOD AND NUTRITIONAL LANDSCAPE IN AMERICA, JULY 2025

- Created to support SNAP the increase in SNAP eligibility and benefits?

Table 1
USDA food and nutrition assistance at a glance, fiscal years (FY) 2023 and 2024

Program		FY 2023	FY 2024	Percent change
SNAP	Average monthly participation (millions)	42.2	41.7	-1.1
	Participation rate (percent)	12.5	12.3	-2.1
	Average benefit per person (dollars per month)	211.45	187.20	-11.5
	Total spending (billion dollars)	113.1	99.8	-11.7
WIC	Average monthly participation (millions)	6.58	6.70	1.9
	Women	1.49	1.51	1.7
	Infants	1.47	1.49	1.1
	Children	3.62	3.70	2.3
	Food cost per person (dollars per month)	56.06	60.88	8.6
	Total spending (billion dollars)	6.7	7.2	7.1
NSLP, SBP, CACFP, and SFSP	Total meals served (billions)	8.9	9.3	4.1
	Total spending (billion dollars)	27.0	28.2	4.3
P-EBT	Total spending (billion dollars)	13.8	0.4	-97.4
Other programs	Total spending (billion dollars)	7.8	6.7	-14.0
All programs	**Total spending (billion dollars)**	**168.3**	**142.2**	**-15.5**

SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. NSLP = National School Lunch Program. SBP = School Breakfast Program. CACFP = Child and Adult Care Food Program. SFSP = Summer Food Service Program. P-EBT = Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer.

CONSEQUENCES OF LOSING FSS

- "It is better to be roughly right, than precisely wrong" – John Maynard Keynes
  - Nature of social science research
- First Order effect
- Second Order Effect
- Can't afford to be precisely wrong!

GOING FORWARD

- The Gold Standard …. But can certainly do better
- Take on a trusted 3rd party
- Fraud, Waste & Abuse…
- Final Thoughts

SOME RESOURCES

- Smith, Travis A., and Christian A. Gregory. "Food insecurity in the United States: measurement, economic modeling, and food assistance effectiveness." *Annual Review of Resource Economics* 15.1 (2023): 279-303. (Open Access)

https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-resource-101422-090409

- The Household Food Security Report released last year:

https://ers.usda.gov/sites/default/files/_laserfiche/publications/109896/ERR-337.pdf?v=16849

- Some nice interactive charts and highlights:

https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/interactive-charts-and-highlights#childtrends

SOME RESOURCES

- PAA blog identifying the various surveys that have measured food security. Table 2 has the list. The first year of food security coverage is identified, but you need to check each survey to see the frequency of the food security component.

https://blog.popdata.org/food-security-data-cps/

- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2006. Food Insecurity and Hunger in the United States: An Assessment of the Measure. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/9502

https://www.nationalacademies.org/read/11578

- ERS Report on Food and Nutritional Landscape in America

https://ers.usda.gov/sites/default/files/_laserfiche/publications/112884/EIB-291.pdf?v=11471

THANK YOU

QUESTIONS WELCOMED!