

**FOOD SECURITY UPDATE**  
**Older Adults:**  
**Food Security and Food Stamp Participation**

**From the desk of Kadi Row**  
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Of all US households, those that include elderly persons are generally more food secure than those households that don't. That's the point brought home in a recent issue of FoodReview: The Graying of America.<sup>1</sup> The report uses data from the USDA's Food Security Supplement to the US Census to document the differences: 94% of households with elderly are food secure, as compared to 88% of households without an elderly person. According to the report, this is due in part because elderly households generally have a lower poverty rate, tend to have more stable incomes provided by Social Security and pensions, and have more personal savings and assets. Some elderly also participate in national and community food assistance programs, such as food stamps and home delivered meal programs, which helps to keep elderly households more food secure.

What the authors point out, and what I think is important to note here is that despite being a relatively more food secure population, not all elderly persons are food secure. In fact, the almost 6% of U.S. households with elderly that are food insecure amounts to approximately 1,500,000 households. Plus, one in four of the food insecure households have at least one household member that experienced hunger. And the food insecurity rate for elderly living alone is over 7%. This population group (elderly living alone) was the *only* population group with increased prevalence of food insecurity or hunger between 1998 and 2000.

Is it possible that the lower food insecurity rate among elderly households is due to underreporting? Recall that the food security rates above are based on USDA Supplemental Survey. Research by Rose<sup>2</sup> suggests that the elderly may have different perceptions of food insecurity and do not report themselves to be food insecure. Many individuals who lived through the depression may be less likely to consider current food deprivation as worthy of being reported.

In a related article in the same issue of FoodReview, authors report that food stamp participation by eligible persons age 60 and older is low<sup>3</sup>. Data show that only about a third of eligible seniors receive food stamps, compared with approximately 60% participation among all eligible people. Why does the elderly population participate at a

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<sup>1</sup> Nord, Mark. *Food Security Rates Are High for Elderly Households*. FoodReview. 2002. Volume 25, Issue 2.

<sup>2</sup> Rose, Donald. *Economic Determinants and Dietary Consequences of Food Insecurity in the United States*. Journal of Nutrition. 1999. 129:517-520.

<sup>3</sup> Wilde, Parke and Elizabeth Dagata. *Food Stamp Participation by Eligible Older Americans Remains Low*. FoodReview. 2002. Volume 25, Issue 2.

lower rate than any other demographic group? According to USDA studies, “the most commonly mentioned barrier to participation was pride.” Other barriers included difficulty understanding eligibility rules, lack of transportation and low benefit levels. You can read more about this USDA report in my July 2002 update:  
<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/p3/pdfs/fsecupd2.pdf>

What are the implications for Extension educators? Obviously, a portion of our programming in Extension is focused on this audience, and this audience is growing. “In 2000, 35 million Americans were age 65 and older, representing 12.4 percent of the total population. The older population is expected to reach 54 million in 2020 and more than double by 2050, accounting for 20% of our population.”

Food insecurity contributes to other problems. Dietary consequences include a lower intake of nutrients and a lower variety of foods eaten. Health consequences include a higher risk of being underweight and/or reporting a fair or poor health status.

Fortunately, we are in a position to help improve the food security status of low income seniors. Our nutrition education programs at senior meal sites are places to teach about dietary quality and managing food dollars. In 2002, WNEP made over 45,600 education contacts with older adults, amounting to 15% of all educational contacts for that year. Also last year, 21 Wisconsin counties had the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program that provides vouchers to low income seniors for purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables and markets and farm stands in the summer months  
(<http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/SeniorFMNP/SeniorFMNPoverview.htm>).

We can certainly provide outreach to eligible seniors who may not currently be enrolled in the food stamp program. Outreach materials are available for free from USDA:  
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/info.htm>. As noted above, there is a perception that food stamp benefits for seniors are too low, often only \$10 per month. While this is true for some, the average benefit for seniors living alone is \$44 per month, and the average for seniors living with others is \$116 per month. A handout prepared by USDA can help overcome these and other common myths related to food stamps and senior households  
(<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/outreach/pdfs/10mythsp1.pdf>)

For further reading, I have compiled a bibliography related to Food Insecurity Among Older Adults <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/p3/pdfs/fdinsbib.pdf>