

Improving Communication of Food Security Statistics: Common Misinterpretations and USDA Attempts to Prevent Them

March 1, 2010

Background

OMB requested the following information in connection with authorizing continued collection of the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement:

Within three months ERS will provide OMB with a summary of the most common misinterpretations of their food security data, their efforts to date in framing the communication of the study results to head off such misinterpretations, and how they will build on their recent experience to prepare for communicating the results of the 2009 survey. ERS will consult with colleagues in other agencies regarding such agencies' experiences with the release of other socioeconomic indicators in order to identify approaches to minimize mischaracterization of results. (Letter from Kevin F. Neyland, Deputy Administrator, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs December 6, 2009.)

This document constitutes ERS' response to OMB' query and is organized as follows:

Section 1—Highlights/Overview

Section 2—Challenges in Communicating Food Security Statistics

Section 3—Common Misinterpretations of Food Security Statistics

Section 4—Steps Taken to Date by USDA to Head Off these Misinterpretations

Section 5—Assessment of Media Coverage Following the 2009 Release of Household Food Security in the United States, 2008

Section 6—Release Plan for the Annual Food Security Report in 2010

Section 1. Highlights/Overview

Four common misinterpretations of food security data have been:

- overstating the severity of the condition represented by a statistic;
- overstating the number of persons suffering from food insecurity or very low food security by attributing household conditions to every individual in the household;
- overstating the frequency of occurrence of food-insecure conditions;
- understating the severity of food insecurity by misrepresenting the measurement method.

While misinterpretations continue, it seems to researchers and communications specialists at ERS that the frequency and pervasiveness of misinterpretations have diminished in recent years, possibly due to the steps ERS has taken to portray the statistics and their meaning more clearly. ERS also expects that some amount of misinterpretation is virtually unavoidable despite conscientious and professional efforts by ERS to communicate well; the subject of food security statistics is complex, not everyone is motivated to listen carefully, and some parties distort the meaning of the statistics to suit their own agendas.

It is incumbent on ERS as a federal statistical agency to explain the data it collects and the statistics it provides as accurately and carefully as possible. Improving communication of food security statistics is a long-term process for ERS, FNS, and USDA. Past steps include:

- reviewing and revising text and graphs of USDA's annual report *Household Food Security in the United States* to address communication challenges when they were detected;
- adding content to the food security section of the ERS website on food security measurement, the meaning of the various categories of food security, and the frequency and duration of food insecurity;
- conducting an in-depth usability study of the household food security section of the ERS website and revising content and format accordingly;
- distinguishing more carefully between the *operational* definition of food security (USDA/DHHS) and the *conceptual* definition (FAO, American Institute of Nutrition);
- explaining statistics and answering questions of journalists and other members of the media, through one-on-one communication with the authors of the food security report, and, in some years, providing a USDA press release, press conference, or call-in briefing.

ERS has drafted a communication plan for the release in November 2010 of the 2009 food security report. The draft is provided below as section 6. Actions in the plan include a press event, an electronic briefing kit, a media advisory, a call-in briefing for the media, briefing the Office of Communications in USDA, and a statement by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The plan reflects the cumulative experience of ERS in communicating clearly and addressing misinterpretations.

In early 2010 ERS staff met with counterparts at Census, BLS, and FNS to discuss the communications challenges those agencies face for statistical series that they produce or disseminate. Discussions covered the poverty rate, the percentage of individuals with health insurance coverage, the unemployment rate, and the participation rate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program). The experiences of these agencies are informative for ERS because these statistical series, like food security, pose communication challenges due to the complexity and political sensitivity of the statistics. For example, the experience of the Census Bureau with use of a webinar in connection with release of the annual poverty report last year informed the ERS consideration of this technology in the next release of the household food security report.

Section 2. Challenges in Communicating Food Security Statistics

Communicating results of the household food security survey is complicated by the lack of commonly understood terminology in the United States for describing food hardship. Descriptives of severe ranges and consequences of food insecurity such as “famine” and “malnutrition” are used and understood with reasonable consistency, but these severe and persistent manifestations of food insecurity are rare in the United States. The most commonly used language in the United States to describe food hardship is “hunger” or “hungry,” but these terms are not very consistently understood. A nationally representative survey of likely voters that examined perceptions of what conditions the government should describe as “hunger” in official reports revealed that:

There is a wide dispersion in perceptions of the meaning of “hunger.” On the one hand, nearly half (45.8%) of respondents think that inability to afford nutritious meals, even absent any more severe indications, is, or might be, hunger. This is approximately the condition USDA describes as low food security (formerly as “food insecurity without hunger”). At the other extreme, 16.7% are not sure that the most severe conditions described (“Could not afford to eat enough on several days, felt weak and dizzy and got sick and lost weight as a result”) should be called “hunger.” (Nord et al., 2009)¹

USDA uses descriptives based on the concept of “food security” in its official reports. This language has a solid base among researchers in the field, but is not common “on the street.” Not surprisingly, then, advocacy organizations and media often use other language to attempt to interpret the food security statistics to the general population. Both tend to use “hunger” language, but given the lack of precision of that language, it does not always improve the accuracy with which results are understood.

USDA sponsors the food security surveys, analyzes food security data, and publishes results in order to support evidence-based policy and program development. For that purpose to be achieved, policy officials at least, must have an accurate perception of what the food security statistics mean. Accurate perception by a sizeable proportion of the general public is also vital.

To that end, USDA has given attention to the most common misinterpretations of the food security statistics and has taken steps in its publications and web site to prevent them. These efforts have yielded results. Major print media coverage of the most recent report (Nord et al., 2009) was generally quite accurate, although there were certainly exceptions.

Section 3. Common Misinterpretations of Food Security Statistics

¹ The study by Nord et al. (2009) found that the median perception by the voting public of the condition the Government should describe as “hunger” is consistent with the usage by USDA prior to 2006, and slightly less severe than that suggested by the Committee on National Statistics (National Research Council, 2006). However, the lack of consensus and the wide range of perceptions on the appropriate meaning make use of “hunger” to describe either condition questionable if the objective is to accurately communicate the extent and severity of food insecurity in the population.

The most common misinterpretations fall into four categories, three of which overstate the seriousness of the problem and one of which understates it.

Overstating the severity of the condition represented by a statistic

This is, perhaps, the most common misinterpretation of food security statistics. Most commonly, the statistic for food insecurity is described in terms more appropriately descriptive of very low food security or an even more severe condition. For example, CNN's on-line publication, CNNMoney.com (11/16/2009) reported, "The Department of Agriculture report, which has been released annually since 1995, said the number of Americans that were hungry rose to 14.6%." The statistic (14.6%) is the percentage of households that were food insecure. USDA has never used the term "were hungry" to describe this broad category of food insecurity, and most Americans would not consider conditions in most of these households to be appropriately described as such.

The advocacy community commonly describes the condition of food insecurity as "hungry or at risk of hunger" or "struggling against hunger" (Food Research and Action Center, *FRAC News Digest*, 11/24/2009). Whether or not this overstates the severity of the condition may be debatable, but to most people it probably implies a more severe condition than is typical of households in this category.

Overstating the number of persons suffering from food insecurity or very low food security by attributing household conditions to every individual in the household

USDA measures food security at the household level, and the measure typically reflects the food insecurity of the most food insecure person or persons in the household. It is not necessarily the case that all persons living in a household with very low food security experience the conditions associated with that condition. This is not a mere quibble. Children, in particular, are usually protected from the more severe results of food insecurity.

For example, the *Washington Post* reported this year, "... the number of youngsters who sometimes were outright hungry rose from nearly 700,000 to almost 1.1 million" (11/17/2009). These statistics represent the numbers of children living in households with very low food

security among children. Referring to children with very low food security as being “outright hungry” is defensible (although not USDA standard reporting language). But describing all the children in those households in these terms overstates the prevalence of the condition, because in some households with very low food security among children, only older children experienced very low food security, while younger children did not.

The CNNMoney.com article discussed above also attributes household conditions to all individuals in the household. The article states, “the number of Americans that were hungry rose to 14.6%...” This is actually the percentage of households that were food insecure, so confuses households and persons living in households (a very rare occurrence in media and advocacy communications) in addition to the more common misinterpretation.

Overstating the frequency of occurrence of food-insecure conditions

When food insecurity occurs in U.S. households, it is usually periodic or occasional rather than persistent or chronic. The food security scale is designed to register even a single episode of food insecurity during the year. Most questions in the survey begin, “In the last 12 months, did you ever...?” Sometimes media and advocacy communications cite a statistic and describe those conditions as occurring every day.

Apparently, USDA efforts to head off this particular misinterpretation have yielded results. I did not find any occurrence of it in major media coverage of the 2009 release. A few years ago, an advocacy organization in a widely publicized statement described a USDA statistic as representing children “going to bed hungry every night.” In that case, “being hungry at some time during the year” would have been more accurate.

Understating the severity of food insecurity by misrepresenting the measurement method

The most common occurrence of this misinterpretation is to state that a USDA statistic for food insecurity represents many households that were just worried or “felt insecure” about their food situation. An example was an op-ed column in the *Washington Post* (11/20/2007), which stated, “The first question [in the food security survey] was whether the respondent had ever ‘worried’

about running out of food in the previous 12 months—not actually run out of food, just worried about it. A ‘yes’ answer counts as ‘food insecurity.’”

Similar misinterpretations have been published occasionally in past years. In some cases, those were probably honest mistakes (although careless journalism, considering how prominently the methodology is described in USDA reports.) However, the 2009 op-ed piece appears not to have been an honest mistake, but a deliberate misrepresentation. The journalist called an author of the USDA report the day before his article ran and asked specifically whether he understood correctly that households had to say “yes” to at least three questions to be classified as food insecure, which the USDA author confirmed.

Section 4. Steps taken by USDA to head off these misinterpretations

As USDA has become aware of the various types of misinterpretations, descriptions have been improved and material developed for published reports and articles as well as for the ERS web site to promote accurate description and use of the statistics and avoid misinterpretations. These are summarized in table 1 and described in detail below:

To prevent overstating the severity of the condition represented by a statistic

Throughout the annual food security report (e.g., Nord et al., 2009, to which page numbers in the following discussion refer) descriptions are provided of food-insecure households, households with low food security, households with very low food security, and households with very low food security among children. This begins with the abstract (p. i), is elaborated in the report summary (pp. iii and iv), and is further expanded in the initial presentation of national conditions and trends (p. 4). The classification methods are described in detail on p. 2, with a list of the questions on p. 3. Additionally, a box describing each category in terms of the specific conditions reported by households in that category is provided on p. 5.

The descriptions of the food security categories are provided prominently along with the statistics on the ERS web site’s *Food Security in the United States Briefing Room’s* “Key Statistics and Graphics” page—the most frequently visited page in the briefing room.. In addition, a page in the briefing room titled “Definitions of Hunger and Food Security” describes

conditions in households in each category of food security and insecurity and also describes how food insecurity is related to hunger.

To prevent overstating the number of persons suffering from food insecurity or very low food security by attributing household conditions to every individual in the household

USDA’s annual food security report gives prominence to statistics for households rather than individuals, since food security is measured at the household level. Statistics are also provided, although less prominently, for individuals, and for adults and children separately, by the food security status of their households. These are provided because many users want to be able to write, talk, and think in terms of people rather than households.

Readers are cautioned against attributing household conditions to all individuals in the household in table footnotes (footnote 2 in table 1A, footnote 2 in table 1B) and in the text describing individual-level statistics (p. 15). Here is an excerpt from p. 15:

The food security survey is designed to measure food security status at the household level. While it is informative to examine the number of persons residing in food-insecure households, these statistics should be interpreted carefully. In a single food-insecure household, different household members may have been affected differently by the households’ food insecurity. Some members—particularly young children—may have experienced only mild effects or none at all, while adults were more severely affected. It is more precise, therefore, to describe these statistics as representing “persons living in food-insecure households” rather than as representing “food-insecure persons.” Similarly, “persons living in households with very low food security” is a more precise description than “persons with very low food security.”

In the *Household Food Security in the United States Briefing Room* on the ERS web site, almost all statistics presented are for households. Statistics for individuals are presented only in one brief section on the “Key Statistics and Graphics” page, and the descriptives of the statistics are, “...people lived in food-insecure households” and similar phrases.

To prevent overstating the frequency of occurrence of food-insecure conditions

In USDA's annual food security reports, overviews of food security statistics begin by describing food-secure households as being food secure "throughout the entire year" (p. i, p. 4), or "at all times during the year" (p. iii). Food-insecure households and households with very low food security are described consistently as experiencing these conditions "at least some time during the year" (p. i), "at times during the year" (p. i), or "at some time during the year" (p. iii, p. 4, p. 5).

To further highlight the temporal characteristics of food insecurity, the following paragraph is included in the opening overview of national statistics (p. 7), and included almost in its entirety in the report summary (p. iv):

When interpreting food security statistics in this report (except for appendix D), it is important to keep in mind that households were classified as having low or very low food security if they experienced the condition at any time during the previous 12 months. The prevalence of these conditions on any given day is far below the corresponding annual prevalence. For example, the prevalence of very low food security on an average day during the 30-day period prior to the December 2008 survey is estimated to have been between 0.9 and 1.2 percent of households (1.1 to 1.4 million households)... Children, as well as adults, experienced very low food security in an estimated 86,000 to 111,000 households (0.22 to 0.28 percent of all U.S. households with children) during the same period.

To further emphasize these relationships, a full-page box is included, titled, "When Food Insecurity Occurs in U.S. Households, It Is Usually Recurrent But Not Chronic." The box describes typical temporal patterns and includes a graph of annual, monthly, and approximate daily prevalence rates.

On the ERS web site, as in the report, phrases such as "throughout the entire year" are used consistently to describe food-secure households and phrases such as "at least some time during the year" are used consistently to describe food-insecure households and households with very

low food security. An entire page in the briefing room, titled “Frequency of Food Insecurity” presents essentially the same material as that in the full-page box in the annual report.

To prevent understating the severity of food insecurity by misrepresenting the measurement method

The classification method is described in the opening section of the annual report, including this sentence: “Households are classified as food secure if they report no food-insecure conditions or if they report only one or two food-insecure conditions. They are classified as food insecure if they report three or more food-insecure conditions.” This is further emphasized in summary at the end of that section, “Households classified as having low food security have reported multiple indications of food access problems...”

The *Household Food Security in the United States Briefing Room* on the ERS web site includes a page titled, “Measuring Household Food Security,” which provides details of the classification methodology.

USDA may have inadvertently contributed to this misinterpretation by basing some descriptions of food insecurity on a conceptual definition of the condition rather than the operational definition. The conceptual definition includes the condition of anxiety about food adequacy. For example, the standard definition (from FAO and the American Institute of Nutrition), describes food insecurity as “...limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.” [emphasis added] Consistent with this conceptual definition, USDA has sometimes described food insecure households as, “...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.” (currently on the ERS website).

However, food insecurity as reported by USDA represents *experienced inadequacy* of food access. Households that only had anxiety or uncertainty about having enough food are not counted as food insecure.

Having become aware of this issue, ERS has introduced the phrase, "...unable to provide adequate food for all household members" or "...unable to obtain adequate food," as descriptors of food insecurity, omitting reference to anxiety or uncertainty. USDA publications are becoming more consistent in this usage, which may help head off some misinterpretations of this kind.

Section 5. Assessment of media coverage following the 2009 release of Household Food Security in the United States, 2008

Descriptions of food security statistics in some major print media in 2009 were quite accurate. USDA efforts to improve communication of these statistics over the past several years appear to have been successful to some extent. Journalists who really want to get it right appear to be able to do so. Here are excerpts from several with comments on avoidance of the various types of misinterpretation

New York Times (on-line 11/17/2009)

Headline: "Hunger in the U.S. at a 14-year high." This goes beyond USDA reporting language, but is a reasonable inference from the high prevalence of very low food security.

Lead paragraph: "The number of Americans who lived in households that lacked consistent access to adequate food soared last year, to 49 million, the highest since the government began tracking what it calls "food insecurity" 14 years ago...." The statistic is described correctly in terms of the level of severity (USDA's exact language). The statistic is correctly described as people who lived in such households not as people who, themselves, lacked consistent access. The temporal aspect is correctly conveyed by the word "consistent."

Paragraph 2: "About a third of these struggling households had what the researchers called 'very low food security,' meaning lack of money forced members to skip meals, cut portions or otherwise forgo food at some point in the year." This is a very accurate and appropriate description of conditions in households with very low food security, and includes the phrase "at some point in the year," to convey correctly the fact that, for many households, these were not chronic conditions.

Wall Street Journal (11/17/2009)

Headline: “More Households Request Food Aid.” This is based on material in the story that came from sources other than USDA but is consistent with statistics in the USDA report.

Lead and second paragraph:

The U.S. Agriculture Department said Monday the number of households that reported struggling to buy enough food in 2008 jumped 31% over the previous year.

According to the USDA’s annual poll, 17 million U.S. households reported some degree of food insecurity in 2008, up from 13 million households in 2006.

The statistics are for food insecurity, and the statement “some degree of food insecurity” in the second paragraph emphasizes this. “Struggling to buy enough food” is not USDA reporting language, but is a fair representation of the food-insecure condition. USDA has used similar language in *Amber Waves* articles. The report is in terms of households, not persons, which avoids the second type of misinterpretation described at the beginning of this paper.

Fifth paragraph: “The 2008 survey results suggest that almost 15% of U.S. households had trouble putting enough food on their tables, up from 11% in 2006.... Put another way, about 49 million people, including about 17 million children, worried last year about getting enough to eat.”

The first sentence is quite accurate. The statistic is, again, the percentage of households with food insecurity, and the descriptive “had trouble putting enough food on their tables” is not too bad. The final sentence, however, exemplifies two opposing errors. It overstates the number of persons affected by attributing conditions at the household level to all members. (Some of those 17 million children were less than a year old, and it is doubtful they worried about getting enough to eat.) On the other hand, the condition is more severe than just worrying about getting enough to eat.

McClatchy Newspapers (One of the largest newspaper companies in the U.S. The exemplar is from the Centre Daily Times of State College, PA, 11/17/2009)

Headline: “Recession causes more families to go hungry.” This is not USDA reporting language, but is a reasonable inference from USDA statistics.

Lead paragraph: “The number of U.S. households that are struggling to feed their members jumped by 4 million to 17 million last year....”

These are statistics for food insecurity, appropriately described as households, and appropriately characterized as “struggling to feed their members.”

Paragraph 3: “Additionally, more than one-third of these struggling families—some 6.7 million households, or 17.2 million people last year—had “very low food security,” in which food intake was reduced and eating patterns were disrupted for some family members because of a lack of food.”

These are statistics for very low food security, are described as such, and are appropriately characterized using USDA reporting language. The statement “17.2 million people had ‘very low food security’” incorrectly attributes the household condition to all household members, but this is corrected to some extent by including the phrase “for some family members” in the descriptive.

This article included graphics generated by the newspaper and they were carefully done, were all in percentages of households, used the correct USDA reporting language, and included a highlighted explanation, “Food Insecurity: Access to adequate food limited by lack of money.”

Washington Post (11/17/2009)

Unfortunately, not all print media were so consistently accurate. Although some of the Washington Post front page article was accurate, it misrepresented severity in at least one case and attributed household characteristics to all members at several points.

Headline: “America’s economic pain brings hunger pangs.” This goes beyond USDA reporting language, but may be considered to be within journalistic license.

Lead paragraph: “The nation’s economic crisis has catapulted the number of Americans who lack enough food to the highest level since the government has been keeping track, according to a new federal report, which shows that nearly 50 million people—including almost one child in four—struggled last year to get enough to eat.”

This incorrectly attributes food insecurity to all individuals living in food-insecure households.

Paragraph 4: “In 2008, nearly 17 million children, or 22.5 percent, lived in households in which food at times was scarce.... And the number of youngsters who sometimes were outright hungry rose from nearly 700,000 to almost 1.1 million.”

The first sentence correctly describes these children as living in [food-insecure] households rather than being food insecure. However, the descriptive “...in which food at times was scarce” might more correctly characterize a more severe range of food insecurity. Children with very low food security are described as “outright hungry.” This is not USDA standard reporting language, but is a fair descriptive. However, the statistics should have been described as “children living in households in which they or a sibling was outright hungry.”

Section 6. Release and Communications Plan for the Annual Food Security Report in November 2010

For the 2008 report (November 2009), USDA conducted a call-in press briefing as well as a call-in briefing for food advocacy organizations, with presentations by the lead author of the report and by key USDA officials. The audio podcast of the press conference was made available on the ERS website. ERS also initiated an electronic briefing kit (with a link from the agency’s

home page) which was promoted to media and advocacy organizations. For the 2010 report ERS plans to repeat these activities, and to add several new links in the briefing kit that will include a fact sheet as well as a document listing the most common misinterpretations of food security statistics. ERS is also considering a webinar in which the author would present a more in-depth explanation of the food security data.

The goal in all these activities is to generate a precise understanding and interpretation of the data among the stakeholders who will be communicating the report's findings. Media activities, which will involve USDA officials, will begin at least 1 hour after release of the report, to follow guidelines in OMB Statistical Policy Directive #4 which advises that any policy statements be kept separate from the statistical release.

2010 Activities Following Release of Report

1. **Household Food Security Press Event:** Press Briefing in Whitten Building with in-house reporters and call-in reporters on morning of release.
 - Welcome by USDA Press Secretary
 - Remarks by USDA officials, (e.g., Secretary of Agriculture, Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services)
 - ERS author provides highlights of report.
 - ERS author takes questions concerning the report from the media.
 - Speakers take questions from the media.

2. **Household Food Security Briefing for Advocacy Organizations:** Call-in briefing with same format as press briefing.

3. **Electronic Briefing Kit:** ERS will build an electronic briefing kit which will include links to:
 - ERS-authored press release
 - The report summary
 - The full report
 - Fact sheet ... clearly laying out the report's most important findings

- An audio slide show presenting highlights of the report
- A document listing the most common misinterpretations of food security statistics
- List of questions asked in the household food security survey
- List of tables (with links) containing data most requested
- Audio podcast of the call-in media briefing (added after the briefing)

Timeline for Preparation and Release Activities

3 days before release:

1. Send out advisories re: Release Day call-in briefing and Q&A

Time: Early afternoon

ERS will draft: one to media and one to advocacy organizations

USDA Office of Communications (OC) will distribute

2. Brief Office of Communication staff about the report

Time: Early afternoon

Primaryes:

USDA Press Secretary

USDA Speechwriters

Lead author of food security report

ERS public affairs officer

Detail: At this meeting ERS will brief OC on the report's most often misused numbers to ensure OC staff use the numbers accurately in any product beyond the initial press release.

ERS will stress the importance of having ERS staff review ANY product that uses the numbers from this report.

Day of Release:

8:00 am: Resend media advisories re briefing and Q&A

9:00 am: Report and electronic media kit released on ERS web site with links from USDA and FNS sites

10:00 am:

1. Media briefing in USDA radio studio, including call-in participation. Briefing and questions will be recorded so that links can be placed on each website.
2. Secretary's statement released on USDA site

11:00 am: Media call-in briefing with advocacy groups with audiobridge

References

National Research Council. 2006. *Food Insecurity and Hunger in the United States: An Assessment of the Measure*. Committee on National Statistics, Panel to Review the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Measurement of Food Insecurity and Hunger, Gooloo S. Wunderlich and Janet L. Norwood (eds.). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

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Nord, Mark, Max Finberg, and James McLaughlin. 2009. "What Should the Government Mean by *Hunger*?" *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition* 4(1):20-47.

Table 1. Steps taken by USDA to prevent misinterpretations of annual Food Security estimates

Common Misinterpretations	Improvements made to annual report	Improvements made to web site
Overstating the severity of the condition represented by a statistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The abstract, summary and body of the annual report provide descriptions of food-security conditions. • The classification methods and list of food security questions are highlighted early in the report. • In 2006, the labeling for food insecurity with hunger was changed to very low food security and a box was added to the annual report titled “What is ‘Very Low Food Security?’” which describes the conditions reported by households in each food security status. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Key Statistics and Graphics Page” highlights descriptions of food security categories. • A page titled “Definitions of Hunger and Food Security” was added in 2006 and provides detail on the food security categories and the conditions households report along with describing how food insecurity relates to hunger.
Overstating the number of persons suffering from food insecurity or very low food security by attributing household conditions to every individual in the household	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Throughout the report, statistics for numbers of households are more prominent than statistics for numbers of persons. • In several places in the text and tables readers are cautioned against attributing household conditions to all individuals in the household. • It is explicitly stated in the summary that children are often protected from food insecurity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All statistics are clearly labeled as referring to the household or people living in food-insecure households. • On the “Key Statistics and Graphics” page, numbers of people in food insecure households are presented while stating that children are often protected.

(Continued)

(Table 1 continued)

Common Misinterpretations	Improvements made to annual report	Improvements made to web site
Overstating the frequency of occurrence of food-insecure conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Language referencing the time period of food security measures is used throughout the annual report (i.e. food insecure at some time during the year).• A caveat that food security statistics refer to annual estimates and that daily prevalence estimates are much lower than annual prevalence is included in the report summary and main text. The Summary states: “On a given day, the number of households with very low food security was a small fraction of the number that experienced this condition ‘at some time during the year.’”• A box is included in the report titled “When Food Insecurity Occurs in U.S. Households, It Is Usually Recurrent But Not Chronic.” In the report released in 2006, the current title was introduced to provide further clarification from the previous title which was in question form (“How often were people hungry in households that were food insecure with hunger?”).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A page in the food security briefing room, titled “Frequency of Food Insecurity” describes the temporal patterns of food insecurity.
Understating the severity of food insecurity by misrepresenting the measurement method	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A description of the classification of households based on their responses to survey questions is provided in the opening section of the report along with the number of food-insecure conditions reported by each food security category and the full set of questions used to assess food insecurity.• USDA is becoming more consistent using the language – “unable to provide adequate food for all household members” or “unable to obtain adequate food,” omitting reference to anxiety or uncertainty. This language is more closely aligned to the way food insecurity is operationalized.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A page titled “Measuring Household Food Security” provides details of the classification methodology and the reported conditions associated with each food security status.