



Food Insecurity Among Working-Age Veterans

Matthew P. Rabbitt and Michael D. Smith

What Is the Issue?

Many veterans face challenges with mental and physical health and finding and maintaining employment after completing their military service. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports that 1.5 million veterans live in poverty, and their poverty rates are rising. Increasing poverty among veterans has profound implications for their food security and health since access to enough food for an active, healthy life is essential to maintaining well-being.

In 2019, 17.4 million veterans lived in the United States, of whom three-fourths were of working age (i.e., between the ages of 18 and 64). Veterans face many challenges to maintaining their health and well-being due to circumstances related to their military service and unique demographic composition. One of the fastest growing and youngest groups of veterans—those who served after September 11, 2001—is more likely to have a service-connected disability than veterans from other service periods. These factors suggest working-age veterans are vulnerable to issues with food insecurity. Understanding food insecurity among working-age veterans compared with working-age nonveterans can provide useful information for maintaining a healthy veteran population well into the future.

This report considers the substantial observable differences among veterans regarding food insecurity, examining their socioeconomic, demographic, and military characteristics.

What Did the Study Find?

In 2015–19, 11.1 percent of working-age veterans lived in food-insecure households, and 5.3 percent lived in households with very low food security, meaning the food intake of some household members is reduced and normal eating patterns disrupted due to limited resources.



ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

Food insecurity among working-age veterans living in food-insecure households during 2015–19 differed by their most recent period and length of military service, educational attainment, metropolitan status, labor force participation status, disability status, and household composition.

- Food insecurity was more prevalent among working-age veterans who served between May 1975 and July 1990 (12.6 percent) than among those who served during the Pre-9/11 Gulf War (August 1990 to August 2001 [9.5 percent]) and Post-9/11 Gulf War (September 2001-present [10.7 percent]) eras. However, the rates were similar to working-age veterans of the Vietnam War era (12.5 percent). Food insecurity rates were similar for working-age veterans of the Pre- and Post-9/11 Gulf War eras, but rates were more prevalent among working-age Vietnam War era veterans compared with working-age veterans of the Pre-9/11 era.
- Food insecurity among working-age veterans declined with the number of periods of active duty military service.
- Food insecurity was higher among disabled (33.6 percent), unemployed (20.0 percent), and female (13.5 percent) working-age veterans.
- Food insecurity among working-age veterans declined with educational attainment.
- Food insecurity was higher among working-age veterans living in households in nonmetropolitan areas (13.9 percent) than metropolitan areas (10.6 percent) and in suburbs/exurbs and other metropolitan areas outside principal cities (8.7 percent).
- Before adjusting for observable differences in the characteristics of working-age veterans and nonveterans, we found that food insecurity was similar among working-age veterans (11.1 percent) and nonveterans (11.2 percent). The prevalence of very low food security was also similar between working-age veterans and nonveterans.
- After adjusting for observable differences in working-age veterans and nonveterans using regression analysis, we found that veterans have a 7.4-percent greater risk for food insecurity. The elevated risk is concentrated among veterans whose most recent period of military service was during the pre-9/11 Gulf War era (August 1990 to August 2001) and the interwar period between May 1975 and July 1990.

How Was the Study Conducted?

The report used data from the 2005–19 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS) to examine food insecurity among working-age veterans. We examined differences in food insecurity rates by several socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. For the first time, we included military characteristics from the most recent 5-year period (2015–19) to ensure adequate sample sizes for veteran subpopulations. Where possible, we compared veterans with nonveterans to provide additional context and to highlight the association between military service and food insecurity. Regression analysis was applied to data from 2005 to 2019 and adjusted for differences in veterans and nonveterans characteristics, which allowed a better understanding of the association between veteran status and food insecurity.