

U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module: Six-Item Short Form
Economic Research Service, USDA
May 2024

Revision Notes: The food security questions in the 6-item module are essentially unchanged from those in the original module first implemented in 1995 and described previously in this document.

May 2024:

- Revised to correct a typo in AD3.

September 2012:

- Added coding specification for “How many days” for 30-day version of AD1a.

July 2008:

- Wording of resource constraint in AD2 was corrected to, “...because there wasn’t enough money for food” to be consistent with the intention of the September 2006 revision.

January 2008:

- Corrected user notes for coding AD1a.

September 2006:

- Minor changes were introduced to standardize wording of the resource constraint in most questions to read, “...because there wasn’t enough money for food.”
- Question numbers were changed to be consistent with those in the revised Household Food Security Survey Module.
- User notes following the questionnaire were revised to be consistent with current practice and with new labels for ranges of food security and food insecurity introduced by USDA in 2006.

Overview: The six-item short form of the survey module and the associated Six-Item Food Security Scale were developed by researchers at the National Center for Health Statistics.

Background: The six-item short form of the survey module and the associated Six-Item Food Security Scale were developed by researchers at the National Center for Health Statistics in collaboration with Abt Associates Inc. and documented in “The effectiveness of a short form of the household food security scale,” by S.J. Blumberg, K. Bialostosky, W.L. Hamilton, and R.R. Briefel (published by the *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 89, pp. 1231-34, 1999). ERS conducted additional assessment of classification sensitivity, specificity, and bias relative to the 18-item scale.

If respondent burden permits, use of the 18-item U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module or the 10-item U.S. Adult Food Security Survey Module is recommended. However, in surveys that cannot implement one of those measures, the six-item module may provide an acceptable substitute. It has been shown to identify food-insecure households and households with very low food security with reasonably high specificity and sensitivity and minimal bias compared with the 18-item measure. It does not, however, directly ask about children’s food security, and does not measure the most severe range of adult food insecurity, in which children’s food intake is likely to be reduced.

[Begin Six-Item Food Security Module]

Transition into Module :

These next questions are about the food eaten in your household in the last 12 months, since (current month) of last year and whether you were able to afford the food you need.

NOTE: If the placement of these items in the survey makes the transition/introductory sentence unnecessary, add the word “Now” to the beginning of question HH3: “Now I’m going to read you....”

FILL INSTRUCTIONS: Select the appropriate fill from parenthetical choices depending on the number of persons and number of adults in the household.

HH3. I’m going to read you several statements that people have made about their food situation. For these statements, please tell me whether the statement was often true, sometimes true, or never true for (you/your household) in the last 12 months—that is, since last (name of current month).

The first statement is, “The food that (I/we) bought just didn’t last, and (I/we) didn’t have money to get more.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for (you/your household) in the last 12 months?

- ☐ Often true
- ☐ Sometimes true
- ☐ Never true
- ☐ DK or Refused

HH4. “(I/we) couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for (you/your household) in the last 12 months?

- ☐ Often true
- ☐ Sometimes true
- ☐ Never true
- ☐ DK or Refused

AD1. In the last 12 months, since last (name of current month), did (you/you or other adults in your household) ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No (Skip AD1a)
- ☐ DK (Skip AD1a)

AD1a. [IF YES ABOVE, ASK] How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?

- ☐ Almost every month
- ☐ Some months but not every month
- ☐ Only 1 or 2 months
- ☐ DK

AD2. 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
- ☐ DK

AD3. In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ DK

[End of Six-Item Food Security Module]

User Notes

(1) Coding Responses and Assessing Households' Food Security Status:

Responses of “often” or “sometimes” on questions HH3 and HH4, and “yes” on AD1, AD2, and AD3 are coded as affirmative (yes). Responses of “almost every month” and “some months but not every month” on AD1a are coded as affirmative (yes). The sum of affirmative responses to the six questions in the module is the household’s raw score on the scale.

Food security status is assigned as follows:

- Raw score 0-1—High or marginal food security (raw score 1 may be considered marginal food security, but a large proportion of households that would be measured as having marginal food security using the household or adult scale will have raw score zero on the six-item scale)
- Raw score 2-4—Low food security
- Raw score 5-6—Very low food security

For some reporting purposes, the food security status of households with raw score 0-1 is described as food secure and the two categories “low food security” and “very low food security” in combination are referred to as food insecure.

For statistical procedures that require an interval-level measure, the following scale scores, based on the Rasch measurement model may be used:

Number of affirmatives	Scale score
0	NA
1	2.86
2	4.19
3	5.27
4	6.30
5	7.54
6 (evaluated at 5.5)	8.48

However, no interval-level score is defined for households that affirm no items. (They are food secure, but the extent to which their food security differs from households that affirm one item is not known.)

(2) Response Options: For interviewer-administered surveys, DK (“don’t know”) and “Refused” are blind responses—that is, they are not presented as response options but marked if volunteered. For self-administered surveys, “don’t know” is presented as a response option.

(3) Screening: If it is important to minimize respondent burden, respondents may be screened after question AD1. Households that have responded “never” to HH3 and HH4 and “no” to AD1 may skip over the remaining questions and be assigned raw score zero. In pilot surveys intended to validate the module in a new cultural, linguistic, or survey context, however, screening should be avoided if possible and all questions should be administered to all respondents.

(4) 30-Day Reference Period: The questionnaire items may be modified to a 30-day reference period by changing the “last 12-month” references to “last 30 days.” In this case, item AD1a must be changed to read as follows:

AD1a. [IF YES ABOVE, ASK] In the last 30 days, how many days did this happen?

_____ days

[] DK

Responses of 3 days or more are coded as “affirmative” responses.

(5) Self Administration: The six-item module has been used successfully in mail-out, take-home, and on-site self-administered surveys. For self-administration, question AD1a may be presented in one of two ways:

- Indent AD1a below AD1 and direct the respondent to AD1a with an arrow from the “Yes” response box of AD1. In a parenthetical following the “No” response box of AD1, instruct the respondent to skip question AD1 and go to question AD2.
- Present the following response options to question AD1 and omit question AD1a:
 - Yes, almost every month
 - Yes, some months but not every month
 - Yes, only 1 or 2 months
 - No

In this case, either of the first two responses is scored as two affirmative responses, while “Yes, only 1 or 2 months” is scored as a single affirmative response.

The two approaches have been found to yield nearly equal results. The latter may be preferred because it usually reduces the proportion of respondents with missing information on how often this behavior occurred.