

**Statement of Dr. Matthew P. Rabbitt, Economic Research Service
Before the House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Matthew Rabbitt, and I am a research economist in the Food Economics Division of the Economic Research Service (ERS) within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). I am pleased to appear before you today to testify about a critical issue facing the nation – the number of food insecure veterans who have limited or uncertain access to food. As the son of a veteran, I know the critical importance of keeping our commitment to the men and women who have served our nation after they return to civilian life.

In May 2021, my colleague, Dr. Michael D. Smith, and I authored a report titled “[Food Insecurity Among Working-Age Veterans](#),” which aims to identify the underlying demographic, socioeconomic, and military service factors associated with veteran food insecurity. The report used nationally representative data to examine the veteran population, aged eighteen to sixty-four, between the years 2005 and 2019. The findings in this report illustrate there is considerable heterogeneity in the risk for food insecurity among veteran subpopulations and provide new insights into how prior military service may influence food insecurity.

In my testimony before this Subcommittee, I will outline the main findings from this report and welcome questions related to the data and methodology behind our analysis.

Between 2005 and 2019, veterans were predicted to be 7.4 percent more likely to live in a food-insecure household than nonveterans. There are two plausible explanations for why veteran status is associated with an increased likelihood of exposure to food insecurity. First, veterans use food and nutrition assistance programs at lower rates than nonveterans. Despite higher predicted rates of food insecurity among veterans than nonveterans, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, only 7 percent of veterans are estimated to have participated in SNAP between 2016 and 2018, a much lower rate than the nonveteran population.

Second, younger veterans are at increased risk of having a work-limiting disability compared with nonveterans. Given that poor mental and physical health and work-limiting disabilities are associated with greater economic hardship and higher rates of food insecurity, this could explain the increased risk of food insecurity among veterans. While the poverty rate for veterans with a work-limiting disability is higher than the rate for nonveterans, veterans in receipt of benefits for a service-connected disability from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have significantly lower poverty rates compared to nonveterans.

In this ERS report, we used data from the most recent four-year period, spanning 2015-2019, to examine differences in the prevalence of food insecurity among veteran subpopulations defined by their demographic, socioeconomic, work-limiting disability, and military service characteristics. Our findings highlight the differences among veterans in food security risk which can be used to better inform USDA and VA's food and nutrition assistance programs in their aim to meet the needs of veterans.

Demographic Characteristics

Several demographic characteristics, known to be associated with food insecurity, are considered in this report. Between 2015 and 2019, race and ethnicity were associated with food insecurity among veterans. Non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic veterans were more likely to live in food-insecure households than non-Hispanic White veterans. However, when comparing veterans and nonveterans, non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic veterans were less likely than similar nonveterans to live in food-insecure households. This may suggest military service provides veterans from disadvantaged backgrounds with resources – such as increased social networks and occupational skills – necessary for preventing food insecurity.

Food insecurity among veterans differed by gender between 2015 and 2019. Overall, women veterans were more likely to live in food-insecure households than men, and the risk for exposure to food insecurity among women veterans increased when they had children or were living alone. Gender differences in the health effects of military service may be leading to higher rates of food insecurity among women veterans. A study by Wilmoth and colleagues found that

women veterans were at an increased risk of experiencing a work-limiting disability than comparable veterans who are men.

Veterans receive extensive training due to their military service. These investments in human capital – through military training and formal education – can affect their earnings, which in turn can affect their food insecurity. This is borne out in our report, which shows that veterans were less likely to live in food-insecure households as their educational attainment increased.

Work-Limiting Disability Status

Another factor impacting food insecurity among veterans is their general health and wellbeing. As field and military medicine improve, younger veterans are more likely to survive what may have been previously mortal wounds. This is a clear success of modern medicine but is also tied to higher rates of service-connected disabilities among younger veterans. While we cannot identify veterans with a service-connected disability in our report, we can identify those with a work-limiting disability. In 2015-2019, 33.6 percent of veterans with a work-limiting disability were living in food-insecure households, and this was statistically similar to the rate for nonveterans with a work-limiting disability, suggesting veterans with work-limiting disabilities are no more protected from food insecurity than nonveterans with disabilities.

Military Service Characteristics

Food insecurity among veterans is also related to the period and length of a veteran's military service. While the prevalence of veterans living in food-insecure households was generally similar across military service cohorts, a veteran's exposure to food insecurity declined with their number of periods of active service.

Geography

Finally, we considered how the prevalence of food insecurity among veterans varied by their geographic location in 2015-19. For the purposes of this report, we only compared U.S. Census Bureau Regions defined by those living in the Northeast, Midwest, South and West. The prevalence of veterans living in food-insecure households was statistically similar across regions. However, differences were detected when comparing food insecurity rates for veterans living in

nonmetropolitan (rural), suburban, and principal cities. Nonmetropolitan veterans were more likely to live in a food-insecure household than veterans in metropolitan areas, and those living in suburban areas were less likely to be in a food-insecure household than veteran living in principal cities.

The implications of food insecurity are well-documented – when an individual’s access to healthy and nutritious food is compromised, they are at greater risk for adverse mental and physical health outcomes and long-term financial instability. By identifying the root causes of food insecurity among veterans, we can collaborate with our Federal partners, like VA, to mitigate veterans’ food insecurity. The U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Economic Research Service are committed to providing clear, unbiased data on this important issue to inform policy discussions like the one considered here today.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, I look forward to working with you and the members of this Subcommittee as we continue to support VA, as well as the men and women who have served our nation. Thank you again for your time and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.