

The residential Energy Consumption Survey, conducted periodically by the U.S. Department of Energy/Energy Information Administration,¹ includes variables related to “energy insecurity.” These variables include inquiry into frequency of forgoing necessities such as food or medicine to pay a home energy bill, maintaining unhealthy indoor temperatures to afford home energy service, receipt of disconnection notices, and loss of service due to home energy bills or equipment repair expenses. These measures are commonly viewed as key indicators home energy affordability challenges. Put another way, presence of energy insecurity provides strong evidence of lack of affordability of essential home energy service for households experiencing such insecurity.

Home energy insecurity is highly concentrated among households with very low incomes. In 2020, over 22% of Massachusetts households reported experiencing some form of home energy insecurity. However, for households living at or below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (“FPL”), nearly 52% -- well over twice the statewide average -- of households reported insecurity. In fact, while less than 11% of Massachusetts households had income below the poverty level in 2020, over 25% of all energy insecurity instances were concentrated among this group. In contrast, about 15% of households with income in excess of 200% FPL reported energy insecurity. The rate of energy insecurity among households living over 200% FPL was less than one third that of households living below the poverty level.

A key energy insecurity measure involves gauging the frequency with which a household is forced to forgo necessities such as food or medicine to pay for home energy service, sometimes referred to as the “heat or eat” tradeoff. In Massachusetts, 40% of households living below poverty reported forgoing necessities to pay for home energy. Among this group, 41% reported forgoing necessities while 35% reported “chronic” insecurity by indicating the need to forgo necessities “almost every month” or “some months.” Among households with income above 200% FPL, 9% reported foregoing necessities in 2020, with 7% reporting chronic insecurity in this area.

¹ The most recent RECS was conducted in 2020. National Consumer Law Center tabulated selected energy insecurity variables using RECS microdata available at <https://www.eia.gov/consumption/residential/data/2020/index.php?view=microdata>.