FOOD INSECURITY IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Introduction
Most Americans are able to consistently access and purchase high quality, nutritious food to live a healthy life. Nonetheless, recent data from 2016 demonstrate that approximately 12.3% of U.S. households remain food insecure, which means that they face barriers at some time during the year to purchasing healthy foods like fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and foods high in fiber. Food insecurity is more likely to occur among racial and ethnic minorities and low-income communities. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) considers a household to be food insecure if it experiences either:

1. **Low food security** – reports a reduction in the quality, variety, or desirability of diet with little to no indication of reduced food intake, or
2. **Very low food security** – reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake

Families and individuals in food insecure households often have poor diets because they resort to buying less expensive foods that are high in calories but lacking in nutritional value. For instance, they are more likely to eat in fast food restaurants where foods are served in greater portions and are higher in salt, saturated fat, and added sugar. Thus, they are also at increased risk for poorer health in the long run, as excess intake of calories, salt, saturated fat, and added sugar increases the risks for many chronic health conditions, including high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and many types of cancer.

Food insecurity during childhood can lead to delayed development, diminished academic performance, impaired social skills, and early onset of obesity. It is especially important for children to not skip meals and to be supported in making healthy food choices early in their development. Doing so may help them sustain healthy eating habits and maintain optimal health and well-being throughout their lifetimes.

To assess trends in the status of food insecurity in households with incomes less than 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL) in Los Angeles County, four cycles of the Los Angeles County Health Survey, from 2002 to 2015, were analyzed.

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Household Food Insecurity Trends

- In households with incomes less than 300% FPL, food insecurity steadily increased from 21.8% in 2002 to 30.6% in 2011, and then leveled off from 2011 to 2015 (29.2%) (Figure 1).
- Very low food security paralleled the trend of overall food insecurity.
- Food insecurity among households with and without children steadily increased from 2002 to 2011. However, in 2015, households with children saw a decrease, while those without children continued to increase (Figure 2).
- In 2002 and 2005, households with children had higher rates of food insecurity than households without children; this gap between households with and without children narrowed in 2011 and reversed in 2015, although these differences were not statistically significant.

Household Food Insecurity in 2015

- In 2015, food insecurity affected 29.2% of Los Angeles County households with incomes less than 300% FPL, or 561,000 households†; very low food security impacted 11.3% of households, or 217,000 households (Table 1).

Adult Demographics by Household Food Security Status

When comparing demographic characteristics of adults with household incomes less than 300% FPL living in food insecure households to those living in food secure households, we found that:

- A higher proportion of adults ages 65 years

† With the average food insecure household composed of 3.0 individuals, this equates to approximately 1,683,000 people who could be suffering from food insecurity.

*The estimate is statistically unstable and therefore may not be appropriate to use for planning or policy purposes.
a lower level of education compared to those living in food secure households. The percentage of adults with less than a high school education living in food insecure households was 48.1% compared to 30.2% among those living in food secure households.

- A higher proportion of unemployed adults lived in food insecure households (17.7%) compared to food secure households (12.3%) while a lower proportion of employed adults lived in food insecure households (40.5%) compared to food secure households (50.0%).

or older were living in food secure households (14.8%) than living in food insecure households (11.0%), however the reverse was found for those ages 50-64 years; 25.3% were living in food insecure households compared to 19.4% in food secure households (Table 2).

- A higher proportion of Latinos and a lower proportion of Asians were found to live in food insecure households compared to food secure households. Latinos made up over two-thirds (67.4%) of food insecure households. (Figure 3)

- Adults living in food insecure households reported...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2: Demographic Characteristics of Los Angeles County Adults (ages 18+ years) with Household Incomes &lt;300% FPL(^1) by Food Security Status, LACHS 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living in Food Insecure Household</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>GENDER</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>AGE GROUP</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
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<td>30-49</td>
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<td>50-64</td>
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<tr>
<td>65 or over</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>RACE/ETHNICITY(^\circ)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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<td>Asian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan Native</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EDUCATION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some college or trade school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or post graduate degree</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EMPLOYMENT STATUS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in the labor force(^\ast)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{\ast\ast}\) The estimate is statistically unstable and therefore may not be appropriate to use for planning or policy purposes.

\(^{\ast\ast\ast}\) Based on U.S. Census 2013 Federal Poverty Level (FPL) thresholds which for a family of four (2 adults, 2 dependents) correspond to annual incomes of $23,624 (100% FPL), $47,248 (200% FPL), and $70,872 (300% FPL). [These thresholds were the values at the time of survey interviewing.]

\(^{\circ}\) Percentages do not sum to 100%. Data for Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Other are not presented due to unstable estimates (relative standard error > 30%) or suppressed due to confidentiality (cell size less than 5).

\(^{\ast}\) The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines “not in the labor force” as those who have no job and are not looking for one.
Health Care Access and Food Insecurity

- The proportion of adults (ages 18-64 years) with household incomes less than 300% FPL who were uninsured was similar for those who were food insecure (17.8%) and those who were food secure (16.5%) (Figure 3).

- Among adults 18 years and older, 25.5% who were food insecure reported not having a regular source of care compared to 22.6% who were food secure.

- A higher percentage of adults 18 years and older who lived in food insecure households reported difficulty obtaining medical care when needed (44.6%), compared to 28.2% of those living in food secure households.

Chronic Conditions, Housing Instability and Food Insecurity

- The proportion of adults with chronic conditions of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, and current depression was higher for each condition among those living in food insecure households compared to those living in food secure households (Figure 4).

- Housing instability, defined as a history of being homeless or not having one’s own place to live or sleep at some point in the past five years, was highest among households with very low food security and lowest among food secure households. This pattern was consistent from 2002 to 2015 (Figure 5).
Recommendations

A multi-sector approach that involves government agencies, health care providers, schools, faith-based institutions, and community-based organizations can assist individuals and families in accessing affordable, nutritious food. Strategies and recommendations to improve food security include the following:

Explore and launch new initiatives to increase participation in CalFresh
In May 2017, the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors issued a motion that instructed its Department of Public Social Services to reduce the prevalence of food insecurity and poverty by increasing CalFresh participation by 20% by 2019 from the current 66.3%. This motion provides the opportunity to explore new partnerships between the Department of Public Social Services and private organizations as well as public agencies to reach more seniors, families, single adults, homeless individuals, and other groups who experience food insecurity.

Enhance nutrition standards in food pantries and meal programs
Many food banks, including the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, have established nutrition policies that guide food solicitation efforts. Many food pantries and meal programs now offer balanced food packages, including fresh produce and other foods required to meet the nutritional requirements of clients. However, the large number of people seeking food assistance who have diabetes, hypertension, and high cholesterol reinforces the need for food pantries and meal programs to offer tailored food choices to clients who have these health conditions.

Screen for food insecurity and intervene at scheduled health visits
Exploring opportunities for increasing health care provider involvement in screening and intervening on food insecurity could lead to improved health outcomes for many Los Angeles County residents, especially given the intersection of food insecurity and diet-related chronic diseases. Physicians or other medical staff can play an important role in identifying food insecurity in a clinical setting by implementing a short screening tool called the Hunger Vital Sign™. Patients who identify as food insecure can be referred to appropriate resources such as CalFresh, Women Infants and Children (WIC), and other food assistance programs.

9. LA County Department of Public and Social Services Board Memo; Motion by Supervisors Sheila Kuehl and Janice Hahn to Reduce Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Poverty by Increase CalFresh Participation; July 25, 2017.
Healthcare organizations can collaborate with government agencies and community-based organizations to identify feasible referral processes that connect patients to these resources, such as on-site enrollment into food assistance programs and follow-up phone referrals from community-based organizations.

**Increase nutrition education resources**

Nutrition education (e.g., classes), learning tools, and other resources from food pantries, schools, faith-based organizations, retail settings, and health care organizations should be made more available to aid individuals with maximizing food dollars in their family budget and preparing healthy meals.\(^\text{13}\)

**Reduce food waste by feeding hungry people**

In 2014, over 38 million tons of wasted food were thrown away in the United States. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends donating extra food to feed hungry people as the second most effective action an organization can take to reduce food waste.\(^\text{14}\) Schools, grocery stores, hotels, hospitals, and restaurants can donate unspoiled, healthy food to food gleaning organizations, faith-based organizations, soup kitchens, and shelters. Donors are protected from liability under the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act and could potentially receive tax benefits.\(^\text{15}\)

**Support broad societal efforts to eliminate poverty and increase household incomes**

Food insecurity is strongly associated with other social determinants of health including income, education, employment, and housing stability. The most compelling association is that with household income. Efforts to eliminate food insecurity are unlikely to be successful without broad anti-poverty measures, including social, educational, and economic interventions that create living wages and expanded employment opportunities for those most at risk of poverty.


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For additional information about the LA County Health Survey, visit: www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/ha

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