Issue At A Glance:
Addressing Hunger in San Bernardino County

Food insecurity affects over 12 percent of families nationwide and about the same percentage of families across California. In San Bernardino County, 11 percent of families are estimated to be food insecure.

Although 11 percent of families are estimated to be food insecure in San Bernardino County, the actual extent of food insecurity is not known as San Bernardino County is a large and diverse region. Since food insecurity directly impacts health, making a concerted and targeted effort to decrease food insecurity across the County is important for a healthy community. To do this well, accurate and up-to-date information about food insecure households and the causes and consequences of food insecurity should be collected at the local community level.

Did You Know?

“Low Food Security” and “Very Low Food Security” are two terms that measure food insecurity.

In a low food-secure family, the quality, variety, or desirability of diet is reduced but food intake is not reduced.

In a very low food-secure family, the eating pattern is disrupted and food intake is reduced.

What is Food Insecurity?

Researchers use food security to measure whether people or households have access to enough healthy and safe foods without having to steal or scavenge for food. When people or households have food insecurity they might not know where their next meal is coming from or cannot get enough nutritious foods for their family to eat. In other words, people suffering from food insecurity often go hungry or must rely on cheaper, less healthy foods for their daily needs.
Food Insecurity in San Bernardino County

San Bernardino County suffers from high rates of poverty, under- and unemployment, disability, and other risk factors for food insecurity. One in five individuals—and one in four children—lives in poverty. In recent years, the County unemployment rate has been between four and seven percent. Additionally, 7.5 percent of adults report having only part-time employment, 16.5 percent of adults report being disabled, and almost half of County residents do not make enough money to be financially self-sufficient.

From 2014 to 2015, 70 percent of County children were eligible for school meal assistance based on income. And from 2011 to 2016, Countywide enrollment in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; CalFresh is California’s version) increased from 15 percent to nearly 20 percent.

According to estimates produced by Feeding America, 221,000 or 11 percent of County residents experience food insecurity, and nearly 120,000 or 20 percent of children experience food insecurity. Although County access to CalFresh is quite good, nearly 20 percent of income-eligible individuals were not participating in CalFresh in 2013, and about the same number of County adults may not be able to afford enough food at one point or another each year. Furthermore, an additional 26 percent of food-insecure children are likely not income-eligible for federal nutrition assistance. Finally, school-based meal programs reach three-fourths of eligible students when school is in session, yet only six percent of school lunch participants are reached during the summer months.

Why is Food Insecurity Important?

Besides hunger, food insecurity is also linked to many health problems, including obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, liver disease, stroke, cancer, asthma, arthritis, lung disease, kidney disease, and depression. People affected by food insecurity are more likely to:

- Eat fewer fruits and vegetables, drink more soda, or eat more fast foods
- Smoke
- Have more stress
- Not take their prescription medications
- Feel unable to take care of their diabetes

In 2007, healthcare costs attributed to hunger were about $98.5 billion nationwide—and by 2010 this figure had increased to $130.5 billion.
Identifying Local Data Gaps in San Bernardino County

Although these statistics paint a broad picture of the problem of food insecurity across the County, it tells an incomplete story of the problem. Dramatic differences between neighborhoods and communities exist but little is known about which communities are most affected by food insecurity.\textsuperscript{28} Furthermore, from the existing regional data and computer models, only guesses can be made about the causes of food insecurity in these communities. These gaps in our knowledge about our local communities limit the ability of stakeholders from all sectors to coordinate efforts in targeting food insecurity and its underlying causes.

Right now, hundreds of organizations in San Bernardino County distribute food to insecure communities and households. In some communities, local agencies are beginning to coordinate their efforts through written agreements and shared resources with the goal of best serving their local communities.\textsuperscript{29} Up to now, such activities have been guided by the demand alone, as routine and systematic data collection does not occur at the local community level.\textsuperscript{30} Consequently, little is known about which neighborhoods are most affected and why. If such an assessment were to be undertaken, the resulting information could guide a targeted and concerted effort to make impactful improvements in these measures. For example, one such needs assessment helped a California community identify targetable barriers to food insecurity, which allowed strategic interventions to be implemented.\textsuperscript{31}

Recommendations to Stakeholders

Accurate and up-to-date information about food insecure households, risk factors for food insecurity, and health issues resulting from food insecurity, should be collected at the community level. Specifically, stakeholders from different sectors—especially government, health care, academia, for-profit food retail and distribution, and community-based organizations—should come together to study the reach of food insecurity within their local communities. Ideally, this effort would be led by local Healthy Communities programs and would occur every one to two years. Such information should then be shared with and used by existing food distribution agencies in order to coordinate a targeted and concerted countywide effort to eliminate food insecurity. Such information should also be shared with regional and state government representatives in order to guide additional food policies.
References


17. Shepard DS, Setren E, Cooper D. Hunger in America: Suffering We All Pay For. Center for American Progress; 2011 Oct.


