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L.A. HEALTH Trends

County of Los Angeles Public Health

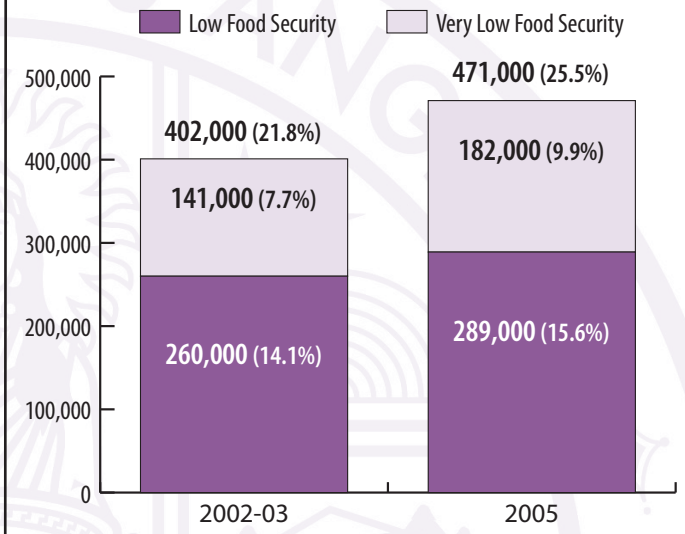
FOOD INSECURITY INCREASING IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Introduction

Despite an abundant food supply in the United States, many households experience food insecurity, an economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to nutritionally adequate and safe foods. Food insecurity is an important public health issue with wide-ranging adverse effects on health and well-being across the life span. Those who live in food insecure households are more likely to have poor diets that can lead to nutrient deficiencies and acute and chronic illness, and often report poor health status.[1,2,3] Among children, food insecurity can impair growth and development and has been associated with poor school performance.[4] In adolescents, food insecurity is associated with chronic stress and increases risk for depression and other mental health conditions.[5] Food insecurity is frequently associated with obesity in adults, in part because less expensive foods tend to be more calorie-dense, and access to healthy food is limited in many low income communities.[6,7] In the elderly, food insecurity contributes to malnutrition, which exacerbates disease, increases disability, decreases resistance to infection, and extends hospital stays.[8]

This report describes results from the 2002-03 and 2005 Los Angeles County Health Surveys (LACHS), which indicate that food insecurity is increasing in the county's lower income population. In 2005, an estimated 471,000 households living below 300% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) experienced low or very low food security, comprising one-quarter of all lower income households and representing a significant 17% increase over the number reported in 2002-03 (Figure 1). An estimated 10% of lower

FIGURE 1 Number (and %) of Households <300% FPL$ That are Food Insecure, 2002-03 & 2005



$ Based on U.S. Census 2003 Federal Poverty Level (FPL) thresholds which for a family of four (2 adults, 2 dependents) correspond to annual incomes of $18,700 (100% FPL), $37,300 (200% FPL) and $56,500 (300% FPL).

Food Insecurity Terminology

In 2005, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which monitors food insecurity nationally, introduced new language to describe levels of food insecurity. Even though new terms have been introduced, the methods to assess households' food security remain unchanged, so data from before and after the terminology change are comparable. The terms **low food security** and **very low food security** have replaced **food insecurity without hunger** and **food insecurity with hunger**, respectively. Because they lack resources to buy food, households with low food security experience a food shortage that reduces the quality of their diet, while households with very low food security additionally report reduced food intake.

Household Food Security in the United States, 2005/ERR-29; Economic Research Service/USDA

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TABLE 1 **Trends in Food Insecurity Among Households <300% FPL[$]**

	2002-03			2005		
	Percent Food Insecure	95% CI	Estimated # of Food Insecure Households	Percent Food Insecure	95% CI	Estimated # of Food Insecure Households
LA County	21.8%	20.5 - 23.0	402,000	25.5%	24.0 - 27.0	471,000
Federal Poverty Level[$]						
0-99% FPL	36.9%	34.3 - 39.5	212,000	41.5%	38.6 - 44.5	258,000
100%-199% FPL	19.2%	17.2 - 21.2	128,000	23.0%	20.6 - 25.4	158,000
200%-299% FPL	10.2%	8.5 - 11.9	62,000	10.2%	8.0 - 12.3	55,000
Race/Ethnicity						
Latino	25.9%	24.0 - 27.7	236,000	31.5%	29.3 - 33.6	320,000
White	15.6%	13.4 - 17.8	79,000	16.9%	14.2 - 19.7	80,000
African American	24.5%	20.4 - 28.6	50,000	23.8%	18.8 - 28.7	44,000
Asian/Pacific Islander	13.4%	10.1 - 16.7	24,000	12.8%	7.6 - 17.9	16,000
Household Type						
With Children	24.7%	23.0 - 26.5	229,000	30.1%	27.9 - 32.3	282,000
Without Children	18.9%	17.1 - 20.7	172,000	20.8%	18.6 - 22.9	188,000
Service Planning Area						
Antelope Valley	22.4%	17.2 - 27.6	13,000	25.7%	21.6 - 29.7	16,000
San Fernando	20.5%	17.7 - 23.4	72,000	24.4%	20.8 - 28.0	82,000
San Gabriel	18.3%	15.5 - 21.0	56,000	19.2%	15.7 - 22.6	54,000
Metro	27.4%	23.7 - 31.1	76,000	28.8%	24.7 - 33.0	81,000
West	17.3%	12.2 - 22.6	18,000	18.2%	11.1 - 25.2	19,000
South	24.1%	20.4 - 27.8	51,000	33.1%	28.8 - 37.4	75,000
East	20.1%	16.9 - 23.3	49,000	26.1%	22.2 - 30.0	67,000
South Bay	22.6%	19.3 - 26.0	66,000	25.9%	21.6 - 30.2	77,000

$ Based on U.S. Census 2003 Federal Poverty Level (FPL) thresholds which for a family of four (2 adults, 2 dependents) correspond to annual incomes of $18,700 (100% FPL), $37,300 (200% FPL) and $56,500 (300% FPL).

income households, or 182,000 homes, experienced very low food security in 2005—a significant 29% increase from 2002-03.

Rise in Food Insecurity Found in Poorest Households

• The increase in food insecurity was greatest among households living below 100% FPL. Food insecurity also increased among those living between 100%-199% FPL, but not among those with incomes between 200-299% FPL (Table 1).

• From 2002-03 to 2005, a statistically significant increase in food insecurity was observed in the households of Latino respondents, but not in households of African American or Asian/Pacific Islander respondents. Food insecurity also increased in the households of white respondents, but this increase was not statistically significant.

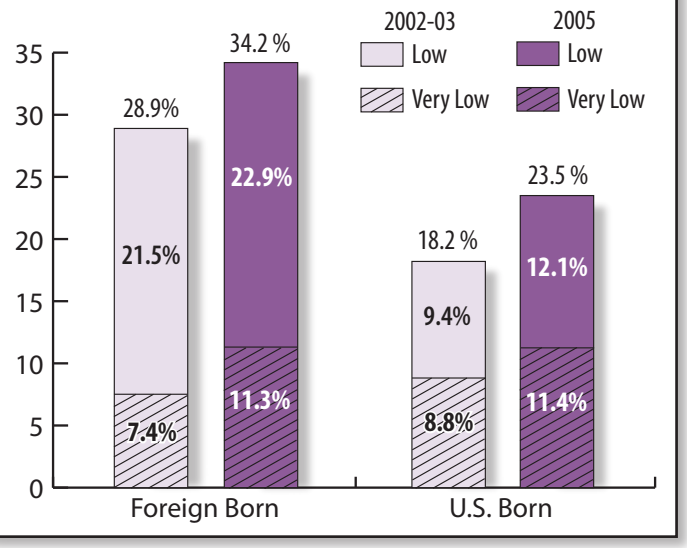
• The increase in food insecurity among Latinos occurred in the households of both U.S.-born and foreign-born respondents (Figure 2). Among foreign-born Latinos, very low food insecurity increased significantly from 2002-03 to 2005, from 7% to 11%.

• The increase in food insecurity also varied geographically and was most pronounced among households in the South and East Service Planning Areas (SPAs).

Current Food Insecurity Disparities

• In 2005, the percent of food insecure households was significantly higher in the poorest households; the percent food insecure was four times higher among those living in poverty (42%) than among those with incomes between 200-299% FPL (10%).

FIGURE 2 Food Security Trends Among Households of Foreign-Born and U.S.-Born Latinos



• In 2005, the percent of food insecure was significantly higher in households of Latino respondents (32%), and significantly lower in households of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents (13%), than in households of African American or white respondents (24% and 17%, respectively).

• Among Latinos, a significantly higher level of food insecurity was observed in the households of foreign-born respondents (34%) compared to the households of U.S.-born respondents (24%).

• Similarly, more Latino respondents who completed the interview in Spanish experienced food insecurity in their households (37%) than did those who completed the survey in English (21%).

• The percent of food insecure was higher among households in the South SPA (33% in 2005) than in other SPAs.

Households With Children Are Most Severely Impacted

• The increase in food insecurity from 2002-03 to 2005 was greater for households with children than those without children (Table 1).

• In 2005, the percentage of food insecure was significantly higher among households with children (30%) than those without children (21%).

• Households with children and with incomes below 100% FPL had the highest percentage of food insecurity of any group (44%) (Figure 3).

Employment Status Impacts Food Insecurity of the Household

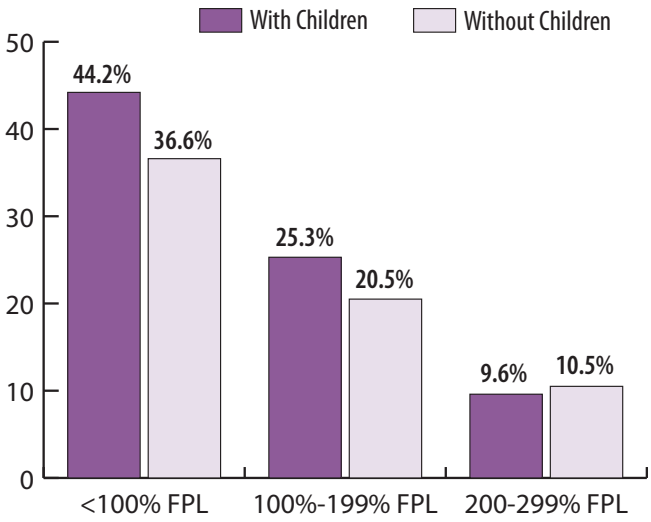
• In 2005, food insecurity was related to employment status. Households with the highest prevalence of food insecurity were those in which respondents reported being unemployed and looking for work (38% food insecure) or who reported not working because of a disability (44% food insecure).

• Among households whose respondents reported being employed, 24% were food insecure.

Food Insecurity is Associated with Obesity

• The rate of obesity was higher among food insecure adults (31%) than among adults who were food secure (23%); rates of overweight were similar (34% among food insecure and 36% among food secure).

FIGURE 3 Food Insecurity Among Households <300% FPL[$] With and Without Children by FPL, 2005



$ Based on U.S. Census 2003 Federal Poverty Level (FPL) thresholds which for a family of four (2 adults, 2 dependents) correspond to annual incomes of $18,700 (100% FPL), $37,300 (200% FPL) and $56,500 (300% FPL).

Discussion

Food security is one of the necessary conditions for a population to be healthy and well-nourished, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.[9] These data from the LACHS suggest that food insecurity remains a major public health concern in LA County, with over 25% of households earning less than 300% FPL categorized as having low or very low food security. Among vulnerable groups—

9. *Household Food Security in the United States, 2002. M Nord, M Andrews, S Carlson. Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Assistance and Nutrition Report No. 35.*

including households living below the poverty level, those with children in the home, and those who are unemployed and looking for work or disabled and unable to work— food insecurity prevalence is alarmingly higher.

Other recent studies on food insecurity in California and in the U.S. overall have not reported an increase between 2002 and 2005.[10,11,12] Why is food insecurity increasing in LA County? Local economic pressures experienced by county residents likely play an important role. According to the United Way, LA County has the most undereducated workforce in the nation, with the majority of workers employed in low-wage jobs that do not provide for basic living costs. While incomes for the vast majority of workers remain stagnant, the cost of living continues to rise. LA County is one of the most expensive housing markets in the nation, with home ownership rates among the lowest in U.S. metropolitan areas and rent burdens exceeding those in the state and the U.S. overall. Also, in LA County, 17% of the average income is spent on transportation, compared to 14% nationally.[13] As gas prices and public transportation fares rise, transportation costs consume an increasing proportion of household budgets. For households experiencing low food security, any increase in basic expenses (such as rent, public transportation or utilities) puts additional pressure on the household budget, increasing the likelihood of household members declining into very low food security.

The increase in food insecurity observed by the LACHS was limited to those living in or near poverty (below 200% FPL), and was most pronounced among those living below 100% FPL, especially in households with children. These findings highlight the increased vulnerability of low income populations to current economic pressures. It is also notable that foreign-born Latinos, and respondents who answered the survey in Spanish, demonstrated a particularly high prevalence of low and very low food security. In addition, these Latino subgroups experienced the greatest increase in low and very low food security between 2002-03 and 2005. One explanation for this finding is that the economic pressures faced by LA County residents may be particularly burdensome to the families of immigrants from Mexico and Central America, who comprise most of the foreign-born and Spanish-speaking LACHS respondents.

The observed increase in food insecurity in the county is consistent with the experience of charities that distribute food assistance to needy families and individuals. Local charities have observed that demand for help has increased while food supplies have decreased. The Los Angeles Regional Foodbank reports that shelf-stable commodities received from the USDA Emergency Food Assistance Program have decreased from 24 million pounds in 2002 to 12 million pounds in 2006. The Foodbank has attempted to fill part of this shortfall by accessing more donated fresh fruits and vegetables, which is helpful in providing clients with access to fresh produce that they may not be able to afford to purchase. However, food pantries and soup kitchens report that they require an additional 10.8 million pounds of food in order to meet the current demand for food assistance.[14]

One of the paradoxical and most concerning consequences of food insecurity is obesity. The higher rate of obesity observed among low and very low food secure adults in the LACHS is consistent with most previous studies, and underscores the importance of improving access to affordable, healthy foods in low income communities.[2,3] Many of these communities have been described as "food deserts" because of the paucity of venues available to purchase fresh produce and other healthy food products. These local environments are generally characterized by dense concentrations of fast food restaurants and small market chains that primarily sell packaged processed foods with high sugar and fat contents.

10. United States Department of Agriculture. Economic Research Service. Food Security & Hunger. Washington DC, United States Department of Agriculture, 2006; www.ers.usda.gov/Browse/FoodNutritionAssistance/FoodSecurityHunger.htm

11. Harrison GG, Sharp M, Manalo-LeClair G, Ramirez A, McGarvey N. Food Security Among California's Low Income Adults Improves, But Most Severely Affected Do Not Share in Improvement. Los Angeles: UCLA CHPR, 2007.

12. The increase in food insecurity observed by the LACHS from 2002-03 to 2005 differs from data reported by the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), which found a decrease in food insecurity in LA County and in California overall during the same time period.[11] This discrepancy may reflect differences in the populations sampled, and the weights used, for the two surveys. For example, while CHIS 2005 estimated that 16% of LA County residents live below the federal poverty level, the 2005 LACHS calculated that 21% of residents fall into this lowest income category. Given that food insecurity is most prevalent among the poorest households, the difference in estimating how many people live below FPL could contribute to the surveys' different findings.

13. Quality of Life in Los Angeles County: 2007 State of the County Report. United Way of Greater Los Angeles, March 2007.

14. Hunger in Los Angeles County 2006, Los Angeles Regional Foodbank.

The increase in the rate of obesity and related health problems across the general population is an alarming trend, and the fact that these problems disproportionately impact the food insecure highlights the need for action by communities and policymakers. Access to quality, affordable fresh foods at local markets, coupled with nutrition education, are critical first steps to combat obesity and its consequences.

What is Being Done?

Federal food assistance programs constitute the most important safety net to protect American households against food insecurity. These programs include the School Breakfast Program, the supplemental program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and Food Stamps. The Food Stamp Program is the largest program designed to mitigate food insecurity among low income households. Because approximately half of eligible families do not use food stamp benefits, increasing food stamp participation among eligible households continues to be a priority for LA County and its community partners.

To achieve greater participation in the Food Stamp Program, LA County has dramatically expanded its outreach efforts. In the Antelope Valley, a successful food stamp outreach program led to the implementation of the Countywide Food Stamp Outreach Campaign in July 2005. This plan provides outreach efforts at each of 23 Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) food stamp district offices. DPSS accepts and assists with food stamp applications at nontraditional sites, such as health clinics, food pantries, soup kitchens, farmer's markets, churches, and schools. Community based and faith based organizations offer excellent opportunities to reach eligible people currently not receiving food stamps.

DPSS also continues to conduct outreach with families and individuals enrolled in Medi-Cal who do not receive food stamp benefits, and maintains the Restaurant Meals Program to assist homeless, elderly, and disabled food stamp participants in purchasing prepared meals at restaurants authorized by the USDA.

In January 2007, the county implemented a 60-day food stamp advertising campaign to maximize the effectiveness of the Outreach Campaign, and dispel myths and misconceptions by clarifying food stamp eligibility rules. Advertisements in English and Spanish were printed in newspapers, posted on MTA bus placards, and aired over the radio.

Numerous other efforts are underway to provide families with nutrition assistance to bridge the gap between low wage work and food security. School districts, including Los Angeles Unified, are focused on providing more low income students with free breakfast and lunch. Research has demonstrated that participation in breakfast and lunch programs at school directly improves student health and provides a buffer against household hunger.

What More Can Be Done?

Reducing the rate of food insecurity over the long term requires programs and policies that increase employment opportunities, wages, and access to healthy and affordable foods. Reducing competing costs through the expansion of health insurance coverage and affordable housing will also help to improve food security in the county.

Annual federal and state legislative and budget decisions directly affect participation in the nutrition safety net programs. Policymakers must make reducing hunger a priority. Congress is in the process of debating the Farm Bill, which includes a "Nutrition Title" that authorizes funding for many federal nutrition programs. This bill provides the best short-term opportunity to increase funding and improve access to these programs.

Currently, the Food Stamp Program provides only about $1/person/meal, so even families and individuals receiving food stamps may still experience food insecurity. To address this problem, funding for food stamps, and the amount of food stamps per household, should be increased.

Local school districts administer student nutrition programs, and therefore play an important role in reducing food insecurity. School districts can take a range of actions to increase consumption of nourishing foods at school, such as serving breakfast in the classroom, or adjusting schedules to ensure all children have sufficient time for lunch.

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Food Insecurity Increasing in Los Angeles County

The Los Angeles County Health Survey is a periodic, population-based telephone survey that collects information on sociodemographic characteristics, health status, health behaviors, and access to health services among adults and children in the county. The 2005 survey collected information on a random sample of 8,648 adults and 6,032 children. The survey was conducted for the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health by Field Research Corporation and was supported by grants from First 5 LA, Tobacco Control and Prevention Program, the Emergency Response and Bioterrorism Preparedness Program and various Department of Public Health programs.

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For additional information about the L.A. County Health Survey, visit: www.lapublichealth.org/ha

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