

News

67,000 IN S.J. OFTEN GO HUNGRY

AROUND STATE, 40% OF LOW-INCOME POPULATION STRUGGLES TO EAT WELL

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STOCKTON - An estimated 67,000 low-income adults in San Joaquin County struggle to put food on the table, joining a surge in food insecurity throughout California.

The recession has taken its toll on family food budgets, according to a recent statewide study.

In 2009, the latest year reviewed, about 40 percent of California's low-income population - or nearly 3.8 million people - could not always afford adequate food, according to a survey released Monday by the University of California, Los Angeles, Center for Health Policy Research. It showed a sharp increase from better economic times in 2007, when 2.9 million Californians - or about 35 percent of low-income earners - were food insecure, according to the UCLA findings.

"What we found is that food insecurity was on the rise during the recession," said Kerry Birnbach, nutrition policy advocate with California Food Policy Advocates, which funded the policy brief.

San Joaquin County's rate grew from 30 to 39 percent, placing it better than the state average in 2009.

It also was an improvement of a few percentage points from 2003.

Economic times were better, but the county was among the worst in the state. It spurred some action, including collaboration between local charities and government to enroll more eligible residents in food-assistance programs and other steps to reduce hunger.

"Without that, it would have been a lot worse," Birnbach said. "Although it's bad, it's not as bad as it otherwise might be."

Food insecurity is defined as not having enough food or enough income to ensure a balanced diet, and the study only focused on adults earning less than twice the Federal Poverty Level. For a family of three, that would be an income of about \$34,200. From 2001 to 2009, the rates of low-income individuals who became food insecure rose. The study found foreclosures, decreased income and unemployment all contributed to the increase.

The survey was conducted in 2009, before San Joaquin County's unemployment hit its peak. It was not until 2010 that the local unemployment rate pushed higher than 18 percent. In May of this year, the unemployment rate was an estimated 14.5 percent, according to state labor statistics.

The study recommends policies that make it easier for people to participate in federal nutrition programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Formerly known as food stamps, this program is called CalFresh. It is funded through the federal Farm Bill and has been targeted for funding reduction. On average, it provides about \$150 a month per person.

In recent years, there have been state and local efforts to make it easier for eligible families to receive CalFresh benefits.

"There's a lot that has happened since 2009 to make access easier," said Brian Taing, a deputy director of the San Joaquin County Human Services Agency, which runs the local CalFresh program. But it will take more than just increased participation to tackle food insecurity, he said. It will take a community-wide effort, he said. Taing joined local nonprofit leaders in saying the collaboration to tackle hunger has strengthened in recent years.

"We all know the problem is beyond any one agency being able to handle it all," said Elvira Ramirez, executive director of Catholic Charities.

Tim Viall, executive director of the Emergency Food Bank & Family Services of Stockton/San Joaquin, agrees. "I take heart in that there is a lot of creative work being done," he said. In the past four years, the Food Bank's clientele has doubled, he said, but at the same time, the organization is collecting about twice the amount of donated food.

According to the UCLA study, 51 percent of Spanish-speaking, low-income adults were food insecure. And 48 percent of households with children could not afford sufficient food at least once during a yearlong period.

Food insecurity is a health issue and more, said Gail Harrison, professor of public health at UCLA and paper co-author. "There is a lot of evidence that children in food-insecure households have poor school attendance and poor school achievement," she said. "California is the largest agriculture producer in the country. There is no reason that people should be going hungry here."

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Food shortfall

The recession contributed to a skyrocketing rate of food insecurity among low-income adults in California. Defined as not having enough food or not having enough income to afford a balanced diet, food insecurity hit 40.4 percent of low-income adults in 2009, the latest year surveyed in a UCLA health survey. Percentages for various parts of the state:

- San Joaquin County: 38.7 percent
- San Joaquin Valley: 38.5 percent
- Northern and Sierra counties, including Calaveras: 34.4 percent
- Bay Area: 43.5 percent
- Sacramento area: 38.8 percent
- Los Angeles County: 38.2 percent

Source: California Health interview surveys