



UCLA CENTER FOR HEALTH POLICY RESEARCH

Valerie Steiner, vsteiner@ucla.edu
(310) 794-0930

For Immediate Use
June 7, 2005

2.9 Million Low-income Adults in California Food Insecure; Prevalence Rises Since 2001

More than 2.9 million low-income adults in California live with hunger or make daily decisions about whether to eat or pay for other essential needs—such as shelter or medical care—according to a new UCLA Center for Health Policy Research report. Of that total, some 900,000 go hungry some of the time.

Compiled with data from the 2003 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS 2003), the report estimates that the percentage of low-income adults who suffer from food insecurity—either hunger or risk of hunger—rose to 33.9 percent in 2003 from 29.1 percent in 2001, while the percentage who experience hunger rose to 10.3 percent from 8.3 percent. National figures were almost stable during the same timeframe. The new study is available at www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu under What's New.

For the purposes of this report, low-income adults are defined as living below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL). A family of four with income below 200 percent FPL earns less than \$37,320 per year. Lack of assured access to enough food through socially acceptable means is termed “food insecurity”. Food insecurity may result in episodes of involuntary hunger—going without food—or risk of hunger.

The report also estimates food insecurity among low-income adults within each California county. The highest rates are found in Kern, Tulare, Sutter/Yuba, Napa, Shasta, San Mateo and San Joaquin counties, where more than 40 percent of low-income adults reported food insecurity. The report pinpoints the highest rates of hunger among low-income adults in Kern and Mendocino/Lake counties, with 21.1 percent.

Among the state's ethnic populations, the study finds food insecurity among low-income adults is most common among Latinos (38.2 percent), followed by African Americans (37.3 percent), whites (28.1 percent) and Asians (23.8 percent). Low-income African-American adults have the highest rate of hunger, with 13.8 percent, compared with 12.1 percent of whites, 9.7 percent of Latinos, and 3.9 percent of Asians.

“Too many households in California lack the means to put sufficient food on the table every day, and the consequences affect all Californians” said lead investigator Gail Harrison, professor of community health sciences at the UCLA School of Public Health and senior research scientist at the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. “Consequences of food

2-2-2 Prevalence of Food Insecure Adults Rises

insecurity include not only risk of poor nutrition, but also physical and emotional illness requiring greater use of medical care, increased complications from chronic diseases such as diabetes, and poor school performance among children and adolescents in these households.”

The report lists low-household income, a shortage of affordable housing and low rates of participation in federally-funded nutrition assistance programs (such as food stamps) as key factors resulting in food insecurity. Increases from 2001 may be related to increases in the unemployment rate and rapid increases in the cost of housing in California.

“Policymakers must take steps to assure that wages keep pace with the rising cost of housing, provide creative incentives for development of affordable housing and assist low-income residents with drawing their full share of federal food assistance—California’s strongest defense against hunger during a time of tight state budgets,” Harrison said.

Among other findings related to food insecurity drawn from the CHIS 2003 data:

- Among low-income adults age 65 and older, 20 percent are food insecure, up from 15.9 percent in 2001, and 4.3 percent report experiencing episodes of hunger, up from 3.8 percent.
- Among low-income pregnant women ages 18 to 44, 40.7 percent are food insecure in 2003, up from 29.2 percent in 2001, and 16.1 percent report episodes of hunger, up from 6.2 percent.
- Among low-income adults in households with children, 38.3 percent are food insecure and hunger affects 10.9 percent. Rates are higher in single-parent households with children.
- Among low-income unemployed adults, 40.4 percent are food insecure, up from 39.3 percent in 2001, and 14.4 percent reported hunger, up from 13 percent.
- Among low-income noncitizen adult residents without a green card, 44.6 percent are food insecure, up from 36.5 percent in 2001, and 10.2 percent experience episodes of hunger, up from 7.4 percent.

Other UCLA Center for Health Policy Research investigators involved in the report on hunger in California were Anthony Ramirez, a research associate and technical assistance coordinator for CHIS; Y. Jenny Chia, a senior statistician and research scientist; John Kurata, senior research scientist and director of CHIS; and November McGarvey, a graduate student researcher in the Department of Community Health Sciences in the School of Public Health. George Manalo-LeClair and Matt Sharp of California Food Policy Advocates also co-authored the report.

Funding and support for the policy brief were provided by the United States Department of Agriculture’s Food Stamp Program through the California Nutrition Network for Healthy, Active Families, and the Public Health Institute.

The California Health Interview Survey is a collaboration of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, the California Department of Health Services and the Public Health Institute.

3-3-3 Prevalence of Food Insecure Adults Rises

The California Department of Health Services, The California Endowment, the National Cancer Institute, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation provided major funding for CHIS 2003.

The UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, established in 1994, is one of the nation's leading health policy research centers and the premier source of key health policy information for California. Directed by E. Richard Brown, the Center is based in the UCLA School of Public Health and is also affiliated with the UCLA School of Public Affairs.

The UCLA School of Public Health is dedicated to enhancing the public's health by conducting innovative research, training future leaders and health professionals, translating research into policy and practice, and serving local, national and international communities.

Online resources:

- California Health Interview Survey: www.chis.ucla.edu/
- UCLA Center for Health Policy Research: www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu/
- UCLA School of Public Health: www.ph.ucla.edu/