

Commentary: Addressing Food Insecurity in Los Angeles

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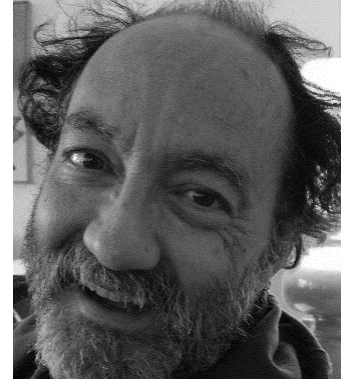


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Defining food security can be difficult, with no strictly agreed upon criteria. One of about 200 definitions used is: *the state of having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.* In today's food justice community, the food security issue can be broken down into two separate but usually overlapping problems:

1. Lack of adequate resources, whether it's money or benefits such as Cal Fresh, to afford sufficient food for themselves and their families
2. Inadequate access to healthy food, particularly fruits and vegetables, which is connected to income but also to other inequities including racial disparities

There are several “pickpockets” or economic factors that result in people having to prioritize spending money on something other than food. The major pickpockets in Los Angeles County are:

- Low wages and similar labor issues such as lack of paid sick days, less than full-time employment
- Cost of housing for low income families especially and in LA especially.
- Homelessness with accompanying inability to store or cook food
- Health insurance gap, also known as the “food vs medicine” choice: out of pocket payments or insufficient insurance cause many persons especially seniors to make dire choices
- Indebtedness to credit cards and payday lenders (itself necessitated by low wages or high rent),
- Costs of fuel, car repairs or other expenses necessary to get to work

In the following paragraphs we'll look at the state of hunger in the Los Angeles Area today, and the outstanding issues related to hunger including particularly vulnerable populations: what's being done and what more could be done.

State of Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County

Various methodologies and data are used to determine “food insecurity” in Los Angeles. *California Food Policy Advocates* state that for 2014, 40% of low income households in LA County, or 1.2 million, are listed as food insecure. 27% of low income children are classed as food insecure. 63% of adults are overweight or obese. *Social Determinants of Health Rising Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County* finds 30.6% of those in Los Angeles County with incomes under 300% of poverty were food insecure, with a 12.8% prevalence of low food security (221,000 households.) *Feeding America* in its 2015 survey states 12.2% food insecurity for Los Angeles County, or 1,224,940 people, with 95% of them below 200% of poverty.

The Major Issues, Vulnerable Populations, What’s Being Done, and What More Can Be Done

Insufficient enrollment in major food programs, and threats of cuts to federal programs: Only 53% of eligible CalFresh recipients in Los Angeles County are enrolled, and only 76% of children eligible for free school meals are enrolled. The County of Los Angeles (May 2017) set a goal for the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) to increase CalFresh enrollment by 20%, a lofty goal. DPSS has undertaken many measures recently to improve enrollment including instituting online application for CalFresh and greatly expanded presence at community events to enroll new participants.

To maximize CalFresh, advocates should support state legislation to improve CalFresh, including proposals to add flexibility to the state program in case federal cuts are made. We should defend SNAP against federal-level threats of cuts to immigrants, reduced access for single adults, time limiting or block granting, and the threat to charge retailers for participating in the program. The community should make sure LA City and County officials are aware of these issues and voice support for SNAP. Concerned people should have access to rules and regulations of all the various federal programs through vehicles such as “The Peoples Guide”.

Hunger among immigrant population: The “Social Determinants of Health” study showed higher rates of food insecurity among undocumented individuals-- none of whom can receive CalFresh. The anti-immigrant tenor prevalent in our current political climate might discourage eligible people from applying for benefits. To counteract this, advocates should support the efforts by legal services and immigrant coalitions in Los



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Angeles, together with the County of LA, to encourage qualified immigrants to apply for needed benefits; legalize street vending and other avenues for revenue among undocumented persons; and protect immigrant workers from exploitation and wage theft.

Seniors, people with disabilities, and SSI recipients: Seniors are under-enrolled in the variety of programs that serve them including Meals on Wheels, Congregate Meals and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (administered locally by LA Regional Food Bank).

Health conditions impacting food needs of seniors include hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and dental issues. Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients, all either seniors, blind or disabled, are under 90% of the poverty level and there are 400,000 of them in LA County. They are the only such group aside from undocumented people who can be so poor and not qualify for the CalFresh program. For those seniors who do qualify for CalFresh, advocates should promote the new CalFresh guidelines for seniors which increase their benefits if they have higher housing and medical costs. We should defend senior meal programs at the federal level. We should advocate to protect Social Security and Medicare, and support Rep. Raul Grijalva's recent proposal to boost SSI. We should encourage the state to either increase SSP (State Supplemental Payment) payments or find an equitable way to remove the state waiver prohibiting CalFresh for SSI recipients; and, advocate for revival of funding for state Renter and Homeowner Assistance.

Low income families: We should protect CalWORKs (the cash assistance for low income families) and WIC from cuts, as well as school meals. We should ensure that domestic violence victims are protected and meet all eligible exemptions from CalWORKs rules, and support all efforts to reduce domestic violence. For school meals, advocates should continue to work with the schools in LA Unified and other districts in the county to improve the quality of meals, use locally sourced ingredients, and provide nutrition education to children especially incorporating school gardens to increase enthusiasm for fruits and vegetables. Legislation to simplify school meal applications should be supported.

Employment issues: Support efforts to create jobs, find jobs, or train people in re-entry, people with low education, emancipated foster youth, LGBT persons and others who face discrimination; and homeless persons. Support increases in minimum wage, sick pay, and worker protections including legal assistance to get wages unfairly withheld by employers.

Housing and homelessness: Various city, county and state initiatives are in play for more affordable housing but need to be strengthened and supported. Enforce tenant law to end evictions, especially Ellis Act ("no fault" evictions.) While fighting homelessness, we should meanwhile encourage innovative use of the Restaurant Meal option in CalFresh to bring healthier, lower cost meals specifically aimed at the homeless.

College Students: A study by the Cal State University system estimated that 20% of the students had difficulty getting enough food. A flurry of legislation at the state level in recent years has clarified which programs qualify as work-study, necessary to enable full time students to be eligible for CalFresh, and has required campuses to have places where students can use CalFresh, as well as requiring the student aid office to help students get together documentation needed to qualify them for CalFresh. The anti-hunger community should be aware of, and publicize, these new regulations.



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Lack of access to healthy food: Solutions include a variety of private programs, some with a degree of public funding designed to bring more fruits and vegetables to low income people, including Farm to Family (statewide), Food Forward, L.A. Kitchen, Everytable, Market Match, and Corner Store Conversions. These programs should be supported, helped to be sustainable, or even eventually incorporated into existing safety net programs. In “food desert” areas, advocates should continue to address “redlining” keeping supermarkets out of geographic areas, most historically South LA and parts of East LA.

Gardens: Advocates should maximize the opportunities offered by the Urban Agriculture Incentive Zones, and fight to keep water rates affordable for low income gardeners. More education should be done showing how much money families can save by growing some of their own food.



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Food Waste: We should support efforts to end food waste for its own sake: it should be realized that recycling leftover food is not going to end hunger by itself, but it can still be substantial amounts of food, and for environmental reasons if nothing else, we should promote efforts to get food that would otherwise be wasted to charities that can distribute it.

Conclusion

Food insecurity connects to housing insecurity, job insecurity, land insecurity, healthcare security and a host of other issues impacting poor families. The solutions for addressing

food insecurity in Los Angeles must be comprehensive and multiscalar in scope to truly bring about the transformative impacts we hope to achieve. We must act together, in solidarity with other anti-poverty and social justice initiatives to make Good Food affordable and accessible for all.