

# Case Study: L.A. Kitchen- Dismantling Poverty through Fair Food System Jobs

L.A. Kitchen created the Empower L.A. program in 2014 with the goal of using food to empower communities and address the root causes of poverty by creating paths to employment and independence. Open to those who were formerly incarcerated or homeless, as well as youth who have



*Photo Source: LA Kitchen*

recently transitioned out of the foster care system, Empower L.A.'s 14-week program includes culinary classes, internship placement, and job search support. This structure helps students build personal and professional skills and secure employment in the foodservice industry. This brief case study explores how increasing employment opportunities to those most vulnerable to poverty and unemployment transforms individuals, communities and the food system.

## Poverty and Unemployment in Los Angeles

Los Angeles has one of the highest poverty rates of any metropolitan area in the United States<sup>i</sup>. Over 18% of adults in Los Angeles County live below the federal poverty level, a calculation that likely underestimates economic hardship as it does not take into account the incredibly high cost of living in the LA region<sup>ii</sup>. While unemployment rates are improving, unemployment in Los Angeles still hovers around 4-5%, and rates are much higher for low-income Angelenos<sup>iii</sup>.

Unemployment, slow wage growth, and high housing costs have made it extremely difficult for Angelenos to lift themselves out of poverty and have contributed to high rates of housing and food insecurity. Approximately 30% of all adults and 41% of adults living below the poverty level in LA County report being food insecure, which means they skip meals, eat less, or go hungry because they cannot afford adequate food<sup>iv</sup>. Beyond the immediate physical and emotional impacts, food insecurity often limits the healthy food choices an individual can make and increases the risk of long-term health impacts and chronic disease (e.g. diabetes, hypertension, obesity)<sup>v</sup>.

### Revealing the Power of Food

After 31 years in prison, former gang member Kevin Williams graduated in 2015 from Empower L.A., a culinary job training program run by the nonprofit L.A. Kitchen. Now an employee of the organization, Williams describes how the program helped him not only re-enter the workforce, but thrive after incarceration:

*75% of Empower L.A. graduates are employed in living wage jobs at the time of program completion*

*“In life, I didn't think I would have this kind of job ...Coming out of prison, I was wondering how I was going to make it out here. I didn't want to go back home to my family; I wanted to stay in re-entry and work on me. Now, my girlfriend and I just bought our first car. I rent my own apartment, and I'm happily paying bills. These are all things I've always wanted in life.”*

Since LA Kitchen’s launch, 107 students have graduated and 75% of graduates are employed in living wage jobs at the time of program completion. After hiring a Workforce Development Coordinator in 2016, Empower L.A. graduates have achieved even higher rates of employment and job retention - 85% of students were employed at graduation, and 80% have maintained employment beyond 3 months.

Like many low-income Angelenos, the populations eligible for Empower L.A. are extremely vulnerable to high rates of unemployment, food insecurity, homelessness, and incarceration. Research suggests, however, that well-designed job training programs may help break these cycles by resulting in higher wages, greater job retention, reduced recidivism and longer periods before re-incarceration<sup>vi</sup>. Empower L.A. further elevates these benefits by focusing specifically on foodservice training.



*LA Kitchen Graduate Kevin Williams; Source: LA Kitchen*

Food system jobs and wages in LA County are growing, but unskilled workers often struggle to find jobs in this industry that provide benefits and are well-paid. L.A. Kitchen fills this gap by helping trainees obtain the skills, social connections, and work experience necessary to take advantage of our expanding food system and rise out of poverty and food insecurity.

---

<sup>i</sup> Bishaw, A. & Glassman, B. (2016). Poverty: 2014 and 2015, American Community Survey Briefs. United States Census Bureau. Retrieved from:

<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/acsbr15-01.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> United States Census Bureau. (2015). 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Los Angeles County. Retrieved from:

<https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

<sup>iii</sup> United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2017). Economy at a glance: Los Angeles-Long Beach-Glendale, CA. Retrieved from: [https://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.ca\\_losangeles\\_md.htm](https://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.ca_losangeles_md.htm)

<sup>iv</sup> Los Angeles Food Policy Council. (2017). Dashboard.

<sup>v</sup> Seligman, H. K., Laraia, B. A., & Kushel, M. B. (2010). Food insecurity is associated with chronic disease among low-income NHANES participants. *The American Institute of Nutrition*, 140(2), 304-310. doi: 10.3945/jn.109.112573

<sup>vi</sup>