

Report: 'Food insecurity' affects thousands in Kern

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Last Updated: Monday, Jun 11 2007 11:12 PM

Thousands of people living in the "breadbasket of California" rarely get enough to eat, according to a new report.

Kern County ranked No. 13 out of 41 counties and county groups for low-income individuals who have trouble getting quality food and who often can't afford meals, according to the study done by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

"We definitely have a food security problem here," said Angie Kurtz, a registered dietitian and assistant director of the the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, or WIC, at Clinica Sierra Vista. "Daily we're providing referrals to people to the food bank."

More than 43,000 people were queried over the phone for the UCLA's California Health Interview Survey.

The researchers then asked six additional questions concerning hunger and food obtainability to people who made less than 200 percent of the federal poverty limit. This threshold varies by household size. For example, this was \$19,140 for a single person, and for a family of four, it was \$38,700.

These questions included "Have you had to skip meals in the past 12 months for money?" and "Have you eaten less than you should because of money in the past 12 months?"

Statewide, about 2.5 million low-income Californians suffered "food insecurity," the report says.

About 73,000 Kern County adults had difficulty obtaining food in 2005, and of those, 29,000 reported "very low food security," which is commonly known as hunger.

Studies have shown that food insecurity contributes to anxiety and worry, and children from these homes often miss more school and do poorer in school.

These households also experience lower levels of health, said Kenneth Hecht, executive director of California Food Policy Advocates, a public policy organization that works to improve the health of low-income Californians. The group funded the study.

In 2005, 1.6 million adults in these households, or 64 percent, were overweight or obese, compared to 58 percent of people in households without hunger issues, the study says.

"The food that fills you up quickest at a very low cost are foods that have no nutrition," he said. "You overeat and get more calories, but you don't catch up on the calories you need."

Assuming healthy foods are expensive, some families will go for the bargain items at the convenience store or the dollar menu at the local fast-food restaurant, said Avtar Nijjer-Sidhu, community health capacity building specialist with the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Project.

"Instead of going for the whole wheat, you go for the white bread that's on sale," she said.

But families can eat healthier when the pennies are pinched, she said. Nijjer-Sidhu recommends mixing frozen vegetables with Ramen noodles or canned corn with Rice-A-Roni.

"The health care costs of people who don't have food on the table are really going to affect us all," Kurtz said. "A lot of times they are accessing health care at Kern Medical Center and places we are paying for."

Streamlining the federal Food Stamp Program enrollment process is one way of improving access, Hecht said. The study also recommends raising wages and guaranteeing affordable health care.

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