

Hunger in California's Central Valley: rising poverty in leading food-producing region

By Kevin Kearney
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According to a report released by the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Center for Health Policy Research in June, the pains of poverty are sharpening in California with hunger and food insecurity on the rise in the state. In the cruelest of ironies, the study found that some of the worst conditions in the state prevail among the poor and working poor in the Central Valley region of San Joaquin County—one of the nation's centers of agricultural production.

Based on data from the 2003 California Health Interview Survey, the UCLA researchers determined that more than 2.9 million adults in low-income California households feared not being able to feed themselves or their families in the past year. The report notes that if each of the adults suffering from food insecurity had just one child—a modest guess—the total number of people affected by this condition in California would be approximately 6 million. Of those deemed food insecure, almost 900,000 have experienced periods of hunger and the remaining 2 million are at continual risk of being hungry.

In San Joaquin County the study reported that the percentage of adults living below the federal poverty line and in a state of food insecurity, which is defined as not having enough money to not worry about whether one can secure adequate food, grew to 41 percent from 34 percent during the past two years. In this region, 17.7 percent of the population lives below the federally determined poverty level, significantly higher than both the national rate of 12.4 percent and the California rate of 14.2 percent.

Researchers also discovered that more than one in 10 poor adults in San Joaquin County, or about 17,000 people, could not afford to feed themselves regularly. This figure has remained unchanged from 2001. Only

three other regions in California—Kern, Sutter/Yuba and Napa counties—reported higher percentages of people suffering from food insecurity.

Gross agricultural production in San Joaquin County in 2003 was just under \$1.5 billion, making the region the sixth largest producer of foodstuffs in the state. It is the state's largest producer of cherries, selling almost \$98 million worth in 2003. It is also first in the nation in production of walnuts and asparagus, selling a total of \$143 million of these goods in 2003. The region also produces a significant amount of milk, beef, hay, corn and grain. California as a whole is one of the world's largest agricultural producers and the nation's leader in agricultural exports, shipping more than \$7.2 billion in both food and agricultural commodities to locations around the world in 2003.

According to experts on the question of food insecurity, the growth of the phenomenon is bound up with sharp increases in the cost of living in California.

“Most Americans equate hunger to famine-stricken Third-World nations in Africa,” said Paul Rengh, CEO of Second Harvest Food Bank of San Joaquin and Stanislaus counties. “With the cost of living skyrocketing in California, even working families are finding it more difficult to pay the bills and put food on the table,” he said. “When a person wakes up in the morning they may know what they'll have for breakfast, but they don't know if they'll have dinner.”

In Stockton, the city center of San Joaquin County, poverty rates are even higher than in the region as a whole, standing at 25 percent. Food bank workers here affirm that the extremely poor aren't the only people having trouble finding something to eat. Julie Ellis, operations manager at the Greater Stockton Emergency Food Bank (GSEFB), recently told the press that more working families are collecting donated food. “If

you've got to pay \$800 a month for rent, plus your PG&E (electrical utility) and other bills, you're already done," Ellis said. "Something's going to fail. It always happens in the food area."

The GSEFB, which uses food donated by supermarkets and private contributors, feeds up to 1,000 people per day.

In February of this year, researchers from California State University, Fresno (CSU-Fresno) released a study on hunger in the region entitled, "Hunger and Food Insecurity among San Joaquin Valley Children in Immigrant Families." Researchers examined the prevalence of food insecurity among 457,000 San Joaquin Valley children living in low-income immigrant households. (San Joaquin County is in San Joaquin Valley, which is part of the low-lying region in California known as the Central Valley. The Central Valley is a 400-mile stretch of fertile land bordered by the state's coastal range in the west and the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the east.)

The CSU-Fresno study demonstrates that in the San Joaquin Valley almost half of low-income immigrant households with children were food insecure in 2001, with a significant negative impact on childhood health.

"The extent to which hunger is estimated among these families is startling and has severe implications for the health and development of children in our Valley," explained Dr. Virginia Rondero Hernandez, lead author of the "Hunger and Food Insecurity" study. She pointed out that hunger and food insecurity ultimately lead to adverse effects on children's health, development, psychosocial functioning and learning. Hungry and food insecure children have a hard time performing well in school, their work productivity decreases and their health-care expenses increase.

Almost four in five children of immigrant parents in the San Joaquin Valley lived in households with incomes under 200 percent of the federal poverty level, compared with two in five children of US-born parents. The percentage of low-income food-insecure households ranged from 32.6 percent in San Joaquin County to 41.4 percent in Tulare County, another large agricultural area in the San Joaquin Valley.

In the San Joaquin Valley, 166,844 or 47.3 percent of low-income immigrant households were food insecure in 2001. Over one tenth (45,004) of low-income immigrant households experienced hunger and the

remaining 121,840 were at risk for hunger. The data from the CSU-Fresno study reveal that immigrant households—which make up nearly the entire agricultural workforce of California—suffer the worst hunger and food insecurity of all! Only recently have immigrant adults and all legal immigrant children under the age of 18 become eligible for food stamp benefits in California.

Laura Tatum, congressional fellow of the Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow program, insists that one of the major reasons for these inflated hunger levels is that "immigrant persons" are not applying for food stamps due to lack of trust toward the government. This observation, while in part true, ignores the fact that immigrant farm laborers make up a super-exploited workforce, whose wages, often below the state-mandated minimum level, are not adequate to provide basic sustenance, much less a decent standard of living.

The San Joaquin Valley has been compared to the nation's Appalachian region for its levels of poverty, unemployment and lack of public funding for roads, schools and health care. In fact, according to preliminary data from a congressional report released early in the year, the valley suffered from a higher poverty rate in 2000 than the Appalachian region—20.5 percent compared to 13.6 percent.

In addition to hunger, San Joaquin County workers also suffer from a lack of health care, a rotting infrastructure with inadequate roads, a lack of clean water and terrible air pollution, largely as a result of the fact that the agricultural industry is not subject to strict air quality regulations. Per capita federal expenditures for San Joaquin Valley in 2002—including loans, retirement, disability, grants and wages—were \$4,736, more than \$2,000 less than the per capita expenditures for the nation, the congressional report stated.

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