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On the Brink: New study reveals 1 in 5 Alameda County Residents Experiences or is at Risk of Hunger

Most in-depth study ever of local hunger underscores the growing effects of skyrocketing cost of living

OAKLAND, Calif.—November 4, 2019—One in five Alameda County residents is experiencing or at risk of hunger, according to new data released today by Alameda County Community Food Bank and Urban Institute.

This finding, from one of the most in-depth assessments ever done on food insecurity and unmet need for hunger-relief services at the local level, deepens the understanding of the complex needs of a diverse and rapidly evolving community – and further underscores the role high cost of living plays in local food insecurity.

According to Map the Meal Gap—the most recent national study on hunger released by Feeding America in May 2019—nearly 199,000 Alameda County residents are considered “food insecure” as measured by the United States Department of Agriculture¹. However, a deeper dive into local data found that an **additional 130,000 residents were considered “marginally food secure”** – indicating that they, at times, had problems with or anxiety about accessing adequate nutrition.

Given the struggles faced by Bay Area residents due to cost of living, examining the Marginal Food Secure subset in the USDA’s measurement has far-reaching implications for the future of hunger-relief efforts.

“Historically, we’ve talked about food insecurity as an ‘either/or’ status – you are food insecure or you’re not,” says Elaine Waxman, senior fellow at The Urban Institute Income and Benefits Policy Center. “Increasingly we understand that it is important to look at those who indicate some level of vulnerability in the survey. Those households may be at risk of being unable to meet their food needs, or may be emerging from more significant food insecurity. In a rapidly changing environment like in Alameda County, it’s important to anticipate where need may be present or burgeoning.”

In examining all levels of food insecurity, the findings also underscore unique demographic dynamics faced by Bay Area residents – often substantially different from the general U.S. population:

- **Married with Children:** 50 percent of Marginally Food Secure people in Alameda County are married, significantly higher than 35 percent nationwide. Thirty-five percent of Food Insecure in Alameda County are married, compared to 29 percent reported nationwide.

Having children in the home is a strong indicator of a household experiencing or being at risk of hunger. In Alameda County, 54 percent of the FI population have a child present in their home, compared to 40 percent nationwide; additionally, 42 percent of MFS have a child – slightly higher than the national average (40 percent).

¹ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2017/overall/california/county/alameda>

- **Education doesn't protect from hunger:** 89 percent of Marginally Food Secure and 91 percent of Food Insecure residents in Alameda County are high school graduates. These rates are significantly higher than the California (76 percent MFS; 71 percent FI) and U.S. (82 percent MFS; 81 percent FI) averages.
- **Younger and on the brink:** Both Food Insecure and Marginal Food Secure households skew younger in Alameda County. Just 17 percent of FI and 13 percent of MFS in Alameda County have heads of household age 60 or older. Statewide, 24 percent of both FI and MFS have heads of household age 60 or over; nationwide those rates jump to 25 percent and 28 percent respectively.

Too poor to afford food ... too rich to get help

One of the report's most telling indicators about the effects of local cost of living is the relationship between food insecurity and access to government nutrition benefits.

This study found that nearly half (48 percent) of MFS and 42 percent of FI have incomes greater than 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Line – the threshold to qualify for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits in California – also known as “CalFresh.” This rate is significantly higher than the U.S. (39 percent MFS; 32 percent FI) and California (40 percent MFS and 42 percent FI) averages.

Notably, MFS and FI in Alameda County are enrolled in SNAP at half—or less—the rate of those nationwide (13 percent vs. 26 percent MFS; 18 percent vs 39 percent FI).

“SNAP is our nation's first line of defense against hunger, and yet nearly half the people struggling with hunger in our community aren't allowed to access it,” says Allison Pratt, Alameda County Community Food Bank's chief of partnerships and strategy. “This puts added pressure on us to fill that gap. And as we work to reach more people it underscores the need to develop programs that can disrupt food insecurity before families slip even further.”

Under Pressure: Local housing burden leads to hunger

Overall, the report shows that some level of food insecurity exists in *every* city in Alameda County – ranging from 11.5 percent (Piedmont) to 29.2 percent (Oakland). And reflective of extreme housing burdens, it reveals drastic differences in homeownership status among those experiencing hunger locally relative to nationwide.

In Alameda County, 75 percent of Marginally Food Secure are renters with only 25 percent owning their home. Nationwide, the difference between renters (55 percent) and homeowners (45 percent) is more even. For those who are Food Insecure, just 10 percent are homeowners locally, compared to 37 percent nationwide.

High rental costs are a key challenge facing low-income households in Alameda County and the research shows a distinct correlation between households paying more than 30 percent of their income on rent and Marginal Food Security. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that even a family of four living at 300 percent of the FPL (\$74,574/year)² would pay nearly 50 percent of their net income on rent for a two-bedroom apartment – a level considered “extreme housing burden.”

² U.S. Census Bureau. Poverty thresholds for 2017 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years. For size of family unit (4), with two related children, 100FPL is \$24,858.

“We’ve seen an increase in demand for services supporting the growing homeless population – but that’s just the tip of the iceberg,” says Pratt. “This research further confirms something many of us experience: Bay Area families are stretched, and don’t feel as though their financial security has improved, even as the economy has recovered. More and more households are only one emergency away from making decisions about whether to pay for rent, food, medicine or childcare. That’s unacceptable.”

But wait, there’s (a lot) more!

This research, which was funded by a grant from the Stupski Foundation, was informed in part by the puzzle of relatively low food insecurity rates in Alameda County compared to other major urban areas. Over the coming months, Alameda County Community Food Bank will be releasing more detailed data, including groundbreaking findings on the correlation between food insecurity and financial health, as well as insights into food insecurity at zip code and census tract levels.

More immediately the report illuminates a number of areas of opportunity for the Food Bank to explore as it develops new solutions to meet growing and unmet need. These recommendations include:

- Examining risk in areas with emerging need, including Hayward, South County, and Tri-Valley.
- Understanding how MFS households differ from FI, and supporting households with incomes that are still low but above the SNAP eligibility threshold.
- Prioritizing new partnerships in areas such as health, affordable housing, transportation, workforce development and financial security.
- And importantly, building awareness of our work among new populations while exploring ways to destigmatize food insecurity and receiving food assistance.

“Households that report marginal food security look more like food insecure households than households that don’t report any challenges with affording an adequate diet,” notes Waxman. “Yet these households might be less likely to think of their situation as one that could benefit from assistance, and they may not be likely to seek charitable feeding in traditional formats.”

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About The Study

The goal of this collaboration was to examine the characteristics and neighborhoods with high rates of food insecurity and marginal food security to determine where these individuals live and what demographic characteristics they report; use other data to understand new trends and provide information about heretofore overlooked determinants of food insecurity for Alameda County; evaluate how well ACCFB is positioned, given its current distribution footprint; through discussions with focus groups, understand the potential barriers individuals may face in accessing services of ACCFB and provide recommendations that ACCFB may adopt to widen its reach. This brief was funded by the Alameda County Community Food Bank through the generous support of the Stupski Foundation.

About Alameda County Community Food Bank

Alameda County Community Food Bank—Feeding America’s 2016-2017 Food Bank of the Year—has been at the forefront of hunger relief efforts in the Bay Area since 1985. This year, the Food Bank will distribute the equivalent of 29 million meals. More than half of the food distributed is farm-fresh produce. The Food Bank serves 1 in 5 Alameda County residents by distributing food through a network of 267 food pantries, soup kitchens, and other community organizations, as well as direct-distribution programs including Children’s Backpack and Mobile Pantry. For 13 consecutive years, Alameda County Community Food Bank has received Charity Navigator’s top rating —

Four Stars — ranking the organization among the top 1 percent of charities nationwide. Learn more at www.accfb.org.

About The Urban Institute

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places. Copyright © August 2019. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.