

Report Summary: Addressing Food Insecurity & Housing Insecurity Together in California

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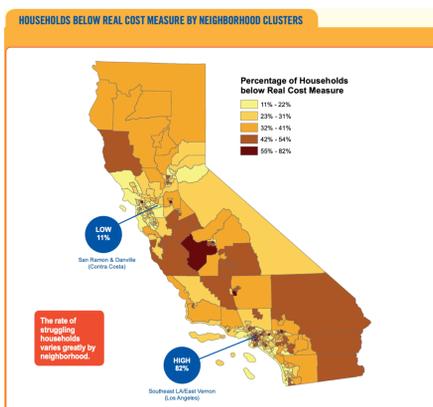
Introduction

Californians struggle to afford adequate housing and food.

The cost of living in California is high and continues to rise, leading many individuals and families to struggle to afford adequate housing and food. Food insecurity and housing insecurity have been linked to poor health outcomes^{1,2,3} and poor access to healthcare^{4,5} respectively, threatening the overall health of California's most vulnerable populations. Because food and housing are both basic needs, it is logical that assistance for these populations be provided in a coordinated way.

Who can play a role? Government and nonprofit programs and organizations that address food insecurity and housing insecurity are well positioned to address basic needs together, either through direct services, program referrals, or policy. Uniting efforts related both to housing and food insecurity could improve access to a host of services for individuals and families in California, potentially impacting their health and quality of life. Researchers and other professionals could assist existing government and nonprofit organizations with data collection and analyses, providing a sound evidence base to bring to policy makers who can influence policy and funding for services and programs designed to alleviate housing and food insecurity.

Purpose of this report. The intersection of housing insecurity and food insecurity among university and college students has gained interest among researchers and professionals within the University of California (UC) system.⁶ This report aims to provide insight into what other organizations in California are doing to deliver and improve access to basic needs services for other populations, such as nonstudent adults and families, who struggle to afford the high cost of living in California. Current methods among organizations interviewed include community partnerships and providing a variety of basic needs services at a single location.



Report Aims

With a focus on California families and individuals experiencing housing insecurity and food insecurity, this report aims to:

- 1) Describe assessment tools and definitions:** This report provides established definitions and methods for assessing food insecurity and housing insecurity while detailing gaps in definitions and assessments. A glossary of terms related to housing insecurity and food insecurity can be found in Appendices A and B.
- 2) Provide a brief literature review:** Existing literature and statistics related to the status of food and housing insecurity in California are provided.
- 3) Provide detailed case studies:** Eight case studies resulting from key informant interviews describe current services provided by California organizations to address both housing and food insecurity.
- 4) Suggest roles that researchers and educators can play:** This report will suggest ways in which the University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources (UC ANR) can engage to assist efforts aimed at expanding and improving access to basic needs services for low-income Californians.

Report Development

The development of this report began with an interest among researchers connected to the University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources (UC ANR) in public health issues related to the intersection of housing insecurity and food insecurity in California. This project was mentored by two researchers at the Nutrition Policy Institute in Berkeley, California. After a series of conference calls, it was eventually decided that the primary research would conduct key informant interviews to develop case studies. The interview questions and consent forms used for this project were approved by the IRB at the University of California at Davis. Potential key informant interviewees were selected through existing professional connections among the researchers, through use of online search engines, and through suggestions from interviewees.

Interview questions were designed to gather background information about the organization, what services are provided to clients, demographic and other information related to the clients, strengths and challenges related to service delivery, and what additional resources might be needed to reach program goals. Information from the interviews was then extracted and formatted into case studies with bullet points and headings. Information in the case studies include services provided, client characteristics, professional partnerships, and details of how the organization addresses both housing and food insecurity.

Summary of Case Studies

Strengths

- Organizations largely treat issues related to income holistically, understanding the importance of providing comprehensive services and tailoring their approach on a case-by-case basis. Clients will have the easiest time accessing and becoming aware of all services they might need if they are in one location.
- Following the "Housing First" model to get clients in doors provides the supportive services needed to maintain eligibility for housing received.
- Organizations that serve children understand the importance of providing services that support the entire family.
- Instilling a sense of dignity for program recipients at all points in their contact with services builds trust and comfort for clients.
- Some organizations are participating in pilot programs, which are opportunities for growing an evidence base to support the delivery of basic needs services.
- Building new housing developments with the physical capacity to handle the cooking, heating, and distribution of quantities of food large enough to feed all residents of that housing facility has the potential to improve food security.

Needs & Challenges

Research, assessments, and data analysis.

- Most organizations described data maintenance as a challenge or lacked knowledge of their organization's data maintenance methods.
- In some cases, data collected are generally not maintained in a way that prepares data for rigorous analysis. New programs and data collection may benefit from immediate orientation toward future evaluation. This suggestion should not dismiss the value of data currently maintained by these organizations.
- Many organizations did not formally assess food insecurity, despite having referral systems to enroll eligible individuals in government food programs.
- In-depth knowledge of assessment methods and tools for housing insecurity and food insecurity could improve.

More housing, funding and policy advocacy.

- There is a shortage of low-income and section 8 housing facilities.
- The availability of transportation could improve so that families and individuals can transport home food for which they are eligible.
- Preventing homelessness and crises in the first place would be ideal, as the longer one experiences homelessness, the more difficult it can be to reach eventual self-sufficiency.
- Having access to nonprofit-owned housing facilities would limit dependence on relationships with landlords, allowing ease of placing clients in need in housing.

Role of UC Div. of Agriculture & Natural Resources (UC ANR)

Cooperative Extension. UC ANR is part of the UC Cooperative Extension (CE), an entity bridging the work of researchers in the UC system to surrounding communities who can put knowledge into practice in agricultural settings. CE researchers and professionals have the opportunity to apply findings from this report to program implementation and further research that can build an evidence base in support of enhancing and improving the delivery of basic needs services through nonprofit and government organizations.

Policy Recommendations and Future Research. There are a number of policy advocates and analysts associated with UC ANR who are in positions to make policy suggestions aimed at improving basic needs issues in California. Some policy recommendations and suggestions for future research are briefly described below.



Food distribution at LA Family Housing

Future Research & Policy Recommendations

Future research. Improving data maintenance systems could improve evaluation and research efforts related to basic needs programs and policies. For example, to contribute to literature regarding housing insecurity and food insecurity, UC ANR could recommend that organizations providing services for these basic needs provide formal, standard assessments of food insecurity and housing insecurity. Current required government entry systems for housing assistance do not include standardized assessments. The development of standardized assessments are recently gaining interest among researchers and may result in a recommended assessment tool.

Policy recommendations. Government food and housing assistance programs could benefit from considering basic needs holistically for low-income individuals and families. For example, when enrolling a participant in CalFresh, the recipient could complete questionnaires assessing their housing security status. CalFresh, or SNAP, could additionally expand its list of eligible foods to include prepared foods for housing insecure individuals and families who do not have facilities to cook raw ingredients.

Literature Cited

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