At-risk for food insecurity:
Developing a locally-relevant measure in Santa Clara County

Laura Vollmer, MPH, RD[1]; Lucy Diekmann, PhD[1]; Cassandra J. Nguyen, PhD[2]
[1]University of California Cooperative Extension; [2] University of California Davis, Nutrition Department

What is food insecurity?

Food insecurity can be defined as the lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life.[1]

Food insecurity is associated with a host of negative health outcomes in children, adults, and seniors, including poor diet quality, mental health issues, and chronic diseases like diabetes and cardiovascular disease.[2,3] It has profound impacts on the well-being of individuals, families, and communities.

How is food insecurity measured?

The USDA's 18-item Food Security Survey Module is the most common measurement approach used in the U.S.[4] Food insecurity is also estimated, using correlates like income, unemployment, race/ethnicity, etc.[5]

In California, the major sources of food insecurity data are state level estimates, issued by the USDA annually; data from the California Health Interview Survey, which asks low-income survey respondents about their food insecurity status.[6,7] Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap is also widely used, and provides county level estimates, but it lacks a robust cost of living variable.[8] Therefore, Feeding America's county level estimates do not provide a complete picture for places with a very high cost of living, such as Santa Clara County.

What is "at-risk for food insecurity"?

At-risk for food insecurity uses the Self-Sufficiency Standard. The Self-Sufficiency Standard estimates how much working families must earn to cover their basic needs, taking into account family composition, children's ages, and–particularly important for Silicon Valley–county-specific costs of living.[9] Measures that do not consider geographic differences in costs tend to substantially underestimate the portion of the population experiencing food insecurity in areas with a high cost of living, like Santa Clara County.

Residents living below the Self-Sufficiency Standard are considered to be "at-risk for food insecurity", as they do not earn enough to meet their basic needs and therefore are likely making tough choices about their household budget and are likely to be particularly vulnerable during an emergency. Reducing food budgets is one common coping strategy when household budgets are tight.[10]

At-risk for food insecurity provides a locally relevant measure that can be used by government agencies, non-profit organizations, and other stakeholders to understand the pressures on Santa Clara County residents, estimate the need for food assistance, plan and target programs, and prepare for societal disruptions, including natural disasters.

At-risk for food insecurity in Santa Clara County

Methods

The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Santa Clara County was applied to American Community Survey 5-year estimates (2015-2019), generating an estimate of the proportion of residents living above and below the self-sufficiency standard. Data were also analyzed by race/ethnicity, household composition, housing status, housing burden, and geography

Results

Almost one-third (n=153,189) of county residents are at-risk for food insecurity. There are significant racial and ethnic disparities, with Black and Latino households at much higher risk. Households with children, especially young children are at greater risk. Households with a high housing burden–those that spend >50% of their income on housing costs–are also at greater risk of food insecurity. There are also substantial disparities by geography. Roughly 60% of residents in east San Jose were at-risk for food insecurity as compared with 15% of residents in Cupertino, Saratoga, and Los Gatos.

Disparities Revealed

31%
of Santa Clara County residents are at-risk for food insecurity

59% of Latino residents

45% of Black residents

26% of Asian residents

21% of white residents

47% of households with children under 6 years old are at-risk for food insecurity → **83%** of Latino households with children under 6 years old are at-risk for food insecurity

Uses for place-based food insecurity estimates
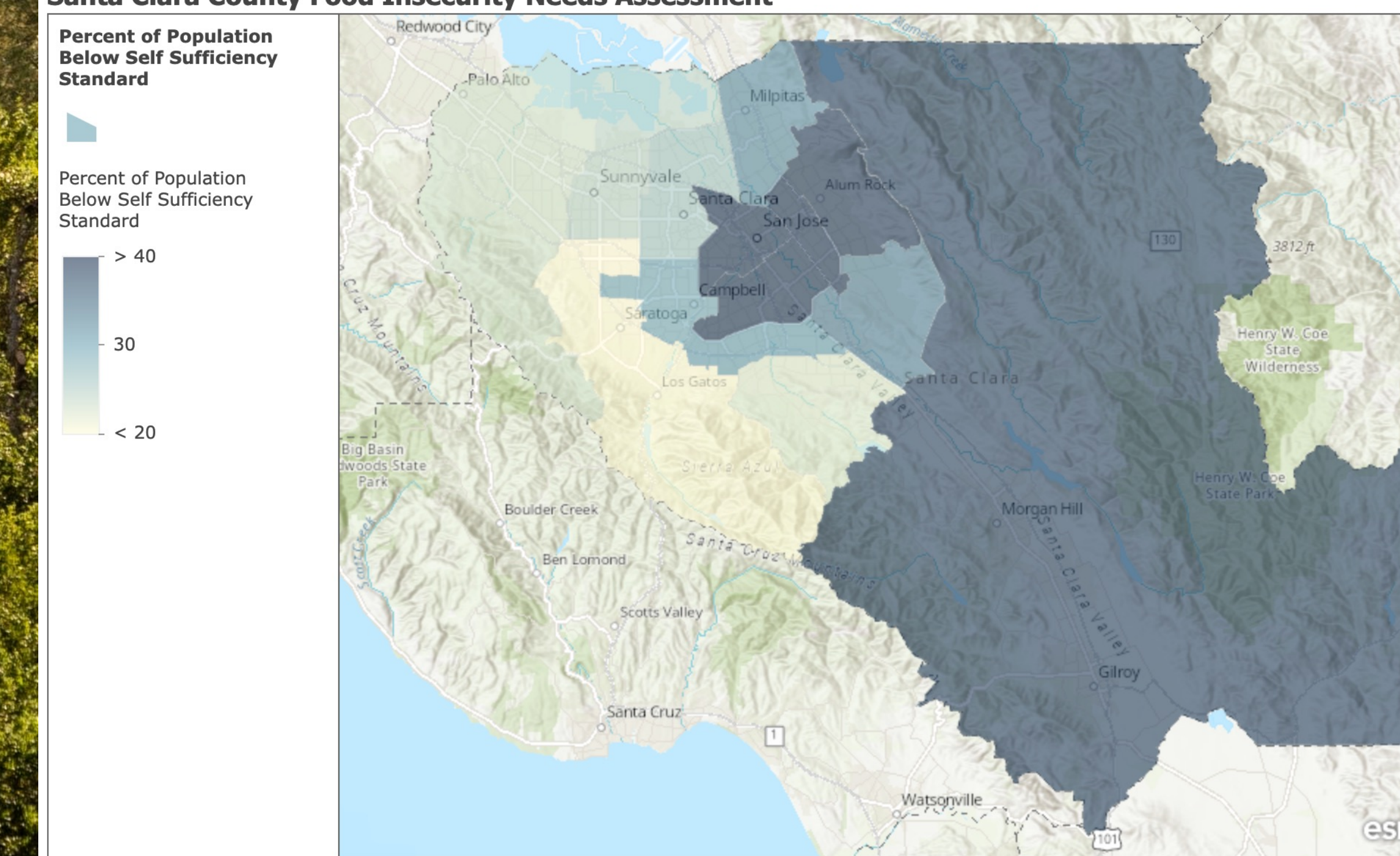
In Santa Clara County
County and non-profit partners find this measure to be more reflective of the lived experience of communities in Santa Clara County and valuable for program planning and resource allocation. The data has been used to:
- Form working groups around high-need populations, like families with young children and older adults;
- Better understand how many and what kind of residents need food assistance who are not eligible for federal nutrition programs;
- Improve training and promotional resources, to make it easier for residents to access information about food assistance; and
- Allocate American Rescue Plan Act funding.

Beyond
Estimating the proportion of residents at-risk for food insecurity based on the Self-Sufficiency Standard in other counties may be of interest for two reasons. First, this estimate relies on household characteristic data that is regularly assessed by various organizations, in contrast with the Food Security Survey Module which is only integrated into a handful of surveys. Secondly, given the accessibility of data to estimate at-risk for food insecurity, it can be monitored for more short-term differences in contrast to food security estimates from national surveys which are often conducted annually.

Santa Clara County Food Insecurity Needs Assessment
Percent of Population Below Self Sufficiency Standard
> 40
30
< 20

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