

# Hunger in Butte County

## Social Services in Action to Prevent Food Insecurity

“The day hunger disappears, the world will see the greatest spiritual explosion  
humanity has ever seen.” – Federico Garcia Lorca.

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## **ABSTRACT:**

The objective of this study was to research the different social services available to those experiencing food insecurity in Butte County. Three different subjects were chosen for interviews from varying social services provided in Butte County. The goal was to find out qualifying criteria for these various social services, the overall mood of those seeking aid, services provided by them, and involvement of social service staff in eliminating food insecurity. It was found that a vast array of options exist for those experiencing food insecurity; ranging from providing meals to providing government aid to purchase food.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

It is no secret that the country is becoming more hunger stricken every year. As a result of the on-going financial crisis that is gripping the country more and more families are meeting the poverty line; which in turn has produced striking numbers of food insecure families. Food insecurity is defined as limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (1). According to the *Hunger in America 2006* report, 70% of surveyed clients were food insecure. Currently, 1 out of 6 people in this country are experiencing food insecurity.

Food insecurity also spans a great range of affected individuals. Hunger and food insecurity can range from your typical homeless man to a working class family who cannot seem to make ends meet. Fifty percent of households affected by hunger have incomes above the federal poverty line (2). The largest number of food insecure individuals were found to be using government food assistance programs.

However it is also a recurrent case that those eligible for government food assistance programs believe they are not eligible when in fact they are, and that they are ashamed to ask for the help because of the negative stigma attached.

Food insecurity has its greatest effect on children, the elderly, and those living with chronic diseases. These populations suffer the greatest nutrient deficiencies. It has been reported that children from food insecure households were significantly more likely to have poorer health status and to experience more frequent stomachaches and headaches (2). It has also been reported that children and teens suffering from hunger had a more difficult time getting along with other children and teens and have also reported seeing a psychologist.

It's no surprise then that this national crisis is happening in our own backyard. According to the data collected from the 2001 - R and 2003 California Health Interview Surveys, out of a total of 2.9 million low - income California adults reporting food insecurity, approximately 15,000 adults resided in Butte County in 2003. Currently the North State Food Bank, which serves Butte, Glenn, Colusa, Plumas, Sierra, and Tehama counties, is distributing an average of 150,000 pounds of food per month (3).

### **LITERATURE REVIEW:**

According to the *Journal of Nutrition's* article "Experiences of Latino Immigrant Families in North Carolina Help Explain Elevated Levels of Food Insecurity and Hunger," poverty amongst immigrants seems to be one of the biggest contributors to food insecurity. Certain areas in the U.S. have higher populations of

Latino immigrants, which have much higher rates of food insecure populations than the overall U.S. population (8).

Participants in the study were selected and a 4-cross sectional survey was used to assess food insecurity. This report included four different studies that were all face-to-face interviews conducted in Spanish. Responses were coded and put into a summary to illustrate findings. The majority of respondents were females from Mexico. Results indicated that the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the school lunch program were the most commonly used government food programs. Participation in these programs varied among the four study groups.

Immigrants encounter many barriers to food security such as poverty, low-wage employment, job insecurity, language, education, and the lack of valid immigration documents. Immigrants also face an overwhelming obligation to send money back to their homeland, something that Latino's have found very challenging during times of poverty and extreme food insecurity. However, to not send money would indicate to the relatives back home that they were not doing well, which is highly shameful for the Latino culture. Most Latino employment in North Carolina is seasonal which makes the income unpredictable. These participants also noted psychological complaints such as shame, anxiety, and embarrassment.

According to the *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition's* article "The Relationship Between Food Security and Poor Health Among Female WIC Participants," it is suggested that those suffering from very low food security and low food security experience decreased mental and physical health alongside a

decreased healthful diet. The study results were classified into four main groups: high food security, marginal food security, low food security, and very low food security.

It has been founded that in California alone, nearly 2.5 million adults live in food insecure households. In Butte County in 2005, it is reported that 31% of the population was food insecure and of that population 15% live in households experiencing very low food security (9). Correspondingly in 2004, 15.2% of Butte County residents lived in poverty, which is higher than the national and state average for poverty; 12.7% and 13.2% respectively (9). Research indicates the one of the greatest populations experiencing food insecurity are among the women and single mothers participating in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

This study was a cross-sectional study of 155 mothers participating in the WIC program. Participants were recruited from Chico, Oroville, Paradise, and Gridley clinics. Requirements for participating women were that they had to be between 18 and 65 years old, postpartum and not lactating. Various surveys were used to assess participants on questions ranging from food insecurity to self-reported physical and mental health along with questions regarding fruit and vegetable consumption.

Of the participants, 42% claimed to be food insecure while 58% were found to be food secure. Ethnic demographics for study participants were 73% white and 27% were either Hispanic, Asian, African American, or Native American. 40% of study participants participated in the Food Stamp Program, while 60% did not.

Study results found that those experiencing very low food insecurity also reported having poorer health than their high/marginal food secure counterparts (9). Mean mental health score, general health score, dietary quality, and self-reported healthful diets all scored higher among the food secure participants than the food insecure participants. “As participants become more food secure, their mental and general health increases” (9). Low fruit and vegetable consumption was found to be an indicator of fair/poor health. Again, depression and anxiety were noted as a psychological disorder among the food insecure population.

**METHODS:**

The study population included three representatives from different social services in Butte County; an Education Coordinator from the Boys and Girls Club, CalFresh Outreach Director from CalFresh formerly known as Food Stamps, and the Food Bank Supervisor from the North State Food Bank. Participants 1 and 2 were met at their office on site and the interviews were conducted there. Participant 3’s interview took place over the phone. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to one hour. An interview sheet was prepared previously with general questions concerning food insecurity followed by probing questions to get a better understanding of the participant’s responses (see table 1).

Table 1:

<b>Qualitative Interview Guide Questions</b>
1) Tell me about your experience working with food insecure populations. Probe: When did you start working with this population? What drew you there?
2) What kinds of services does your organization provide to peoples and families experiencing food insecurity?
3) What are the qualifications to participate in your program? Probe: Is there a certain level of income participants need to or need not to meet? What cultural/economic/familial demographics do you look at?
4) What can you tell me about the overall emotions you feel when meeting with these qualified individuals? Probe: Is the ambiance melancholy? Do participants seem ashamed/upset/hopeful?
5) What have your efforts been, if any, to stop hunger and food insecurity in your own personal community? Are you passionate about the issue? Probe: Do you volunteer at a soup kitchen? Jesus center? Food bank?

Participants were allowed to provide as much detail as they deemed necessary for answering each question. At the end of the interview participants were asked if there was anything they would like to add which was appropriately documented on the field notes. Some participants even offered pamphlets and/or other resources to help aid in the study. Participant's responses were then analyzed and coded into a code matrix to better view differences in study results (see table 2). The code matrix is compiled of themes and subthemes gathered from the responses of these three in-depth interviews.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:**

Participant 1 was an Education Coordinator from the Boys and Girls Club. He is a former member of a sister organization from Los Angeles Harbor Boys and Girls Club and has worked for the organization since 2008 and currently works specifically with the 12-18 year old population. From an in-depth interview with

this subject, data was collected on specific programs the Boys and Girls Club provides to food insecure families.

The organization serves any child or adolescent ages 6-18y/o and children from all income levels are accepted, but the average participant is way below poverty level; 85% of members are on free or reduced lunch. Snack is provided five days a week and supper is provided 4 days a week. During the summertime all meals are provided. During Thanksgiving and Christmas meals baskets are sent home with the kids.

The feeding experience is overall positive. It is very high energy and the set up in family style. All kids are forced to participate in supper and by now all staff members are aware of which kids will ask for leftovers to take home to their families.

Once a month the Boys and Girls Club leadership group, which consists of teens, will go to the Jesus Center to prepare and serve meals. The Boys and Girls Club also donates any leftover food to the Jesus Center and the Salvation Army. The interviewed staff member said he was very passionate about the issue of hunger among his kids.

Participant 2 is the CalFresh Outreach Director who is employed through the Chico State Research Foundation. She oversees outreach activities spanning 11 subcontractors in 12 counties throughout the north state. Her involvement in working with food insecure populations started when she began her career as a childcare director in Richmond where her awareness of food insecurity was first observed. She noticed children stealing and hiding food as well as rushing to food

lines. These children came from low-income families where there was competition for food. Due to a limited budget food was usually cheap, and processed. Family members would only buy food that they knew would be consumed, in order to prevent waste.

Participant 2 also worked for a YMCA day camp in San Francisco where poverty and food insecurity were also experienced. Children coming to this camp would bring what participant 2 referred to as “corner store lunches”. A typical corner store lunch would usually be bought from a liquor store or some other form of corner store and would contain processed food with very little nutritional value. In the neighborhood, where these children lived, there were fast food restaurants and convenience stores but lacked a proper grocery store. These neighborhoods contained no kitchen in the apartment unit; therefore providing families with utensils and healthy cookbooks was virtually pointless. It was common for children to experience times of ravenous hunger during meal times. Participant 2 expressed that she tried to teach the children about listening to your stomach but in general the children lacked a food effects behavior balance.

As stated above, CalFresh provides administration and support to 11 subcontracts in 12 counties. CalFresh employees assist populations typically eligible for CalFresh dollars (nationally known as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP). The CalFresh Outreach program helps assist this population through barriers, the prescreen process, and the application process. CalFresh dollars are distributed through the county through the Department of Social Services. CalFresh Outreach allows for more personal conversation amongst

qualifying populations. They provide general assistance to navigate the public benefits system and in addition promote healthy eating.

Participants in the CalFresh program must have a gross monthly income of  $\leq 130\%$  federal poverty level. CalFresh dollar distribution is determined by household size (see table 2). A “household” is a person living alone or a group of people living together (they do not have to be related) who buy food and make meals together (7). Any child born in the U.S. can qualify for CalFresh no matter the origin of the parent.

Table 2: **CalFresh eligibility requirements and dollar distribution**

People in household	Gross monthly income	Maximum CalFresh allotment
1	\$1,180	\$200
2	\$1,594	\$367
3	\$2,008	\$526
4	\$2,422	\$668
5	\$2,836	\$793
6	\$3,249	\$952

Participant 2 revealed that often the eligible populations feel too proud to ask for food assistance and sometimes feel ashamed. They feel that food assistance is for the poor, which is unfortunately the stigma associated with the formerly known food stamps. Conversely, single mothers are more accepting of seeking aid and are typically hopeful. Single mothers know they must provide for their family, therefore they are hungry for resources.

Participant 2 noted that she is somewhat passionate about the issue of food insecurity. She stated food insecurity is tied to so many other social issues so it becomes overwhelming. During the holidays she and her family deliver Thanksgiving food baskets to families in need. Daily she tries to promote acceptance of all peoples and tries to relay these values to her sons.

Participant 3 is the Food Bank Supervisor at the North State Food Bank. He began working for the Community Action Agency of Butte County in 2010 where he worked for the senior nutrition programs. In December 2010, participant 3 stated he “fell into” the position of Food Bank Supervisor. He admitted to growing up in poverty himself, which made him view this specific job as a “calling”.

The North State Food Bank operates under the Community Action Agency of Butte County. The North State Food Bank is a regional affiliate of the Feed America agency and advocates on behalf of food insecurity nationwide. They are a warehouse for donated food from major corporations, which becomes government surplus food. Food surplus donations are determined by size and demographic of food insecure population.

The North State Food Bank oversees four major food assistance programs: the Senior Nutrition Program, Food Distribution, Emergency Food Assistance Program, and CalFresh Outreach, which is a subcontract of the CalFresh Outreach Program. The Senior Nutrition Program covers a three county region, which includes nine dining sites that serve seniors. At these sites seniors are served lunch which is designed to cover one third of seniors nutrition for one day. This meal provides seniors with a social setting, which they otherwise may not have. A small

donation of \$2.50 is asked for lunch, but no senior is turned away if they cannot afford the donation. The North State Food Bank also provides a meals on wheels type service for seniors. One weeks worth of frozen meals are delivered to seniors once a week.

Food distribution takes place through the food bank warehouse. Organizations or charities such as the Jesus Center place orders through the warehouse to help expedite the distribution of food to the participating recipients. This is an indirect service that the food bank provides.

The Emergency Food Assistance Programs provides on a monthly basis to food insecure families. Participants of this program must meet  $\leq 150\%$  of the federal poverty level. The Emergency Food Assistance Programs has 53 distribution sites covering five counties serving 9,000 people or 3,800-4,500 households a month. The food is supplied by the USDA and is distributed by 200 volunteers throughout the five counties.

The North State Food Bank does not require individuals or families to meet a certain level of income to seek aid from their program, unless using the Emergency Food Assistance Program. Participant 3 affirmed that food insecure individuals and those in need will be serviced.

When participant 3 was asked about the overall emotions of participants he stated that people who have used the program before feel expectful and very hopeful. New people who have never used the services before are not sure what to do and may take up a lot of staff time and may feel apprehensive at first. He stated that the senior population still subscribes to the stigma that food stamps are for the

poor. Overall the emotions amongst those seeking food assistance are melancholy but upon leaving they feel gratified. Participant 3 referred to his organization as a community “hero”.

Participant 3 disclosed that even when he is “off the clock”, he still feels like he is working. He is extremely passionate about the issue as he has experienced poverty firsthand. Similar to participant 2, he makes sure his daughter understands the importance of not passing judgment on people.

Table 3:

**CODE MATRIX**

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C
<b>Qualifying participants</b>			
Any financial status	X		X
At or below poverty line	X	X	X
Below poverty line	X	X	X
<b>Meals provided</b>			
Breakfast			X
Lunch			X
Dinner	X		X
Snacks	X		
Other			Government surplus
<b>Populations Served</b>			
Toddlers and Infants		X	X
School aged children	X	X	X
Adults		X	X
Elderly		X	X
Disabled	X	X	X

## **CONCLUSION:**

It is clear that many resources are available for individuals and families experiencing food insecurity in Butte County. Programs serve many different populations, including children, adolescents, adults, seniors, and the disabled. There are monetary resources available to families depending on income and household size. Government surplus food is also available for distribution through a variety of programs. Children suffer consequences of food insecurity the most and luckily there are programs to aid children and their families. Butte County statistics show some of the highest percentages of poverty which are directly tied to food insecurity.

If there is to be further research, it would be a good idea to survey populations actually experiencing hunger and food insecurity. Qualitative information from participants of WIC, CalFresh, Boys and Girls Club, or any other social service would be beneficial to better understand the experiences and emotions of participants. It would also be a good idea to interview local government to see what advocates are doing to rally against food insecurity in our community.

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