

Hunger: A Community Crisis



Lessons Learned from the Recipients of Emergency Food Assistance and the Agencies That Serve Them

Part of America's Second Harvest's
2006 National Hunger Study

A Report Prepared by By Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties



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Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties An Overview

Second Harvest Food Bank serves as the clearinghouse for donated food in Santa Cruz and San Benito counties. It plays a critical role in collecting, sorting, storing, and coordinating the distribution of food to local residents affected by hunger. In 2005, Second Harvest solicited and acquired more than 5.3 million pounds of food from local and regional agricultural growers and shippers, food industry manufacturers and retailers, federal food programs, and community food drive efforts.

Second Harvest distributed this food to those in need through its network of 150 agencies and programs, including food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, and social service organizations (ranging from senior and youth programs to residential care and recovery programs), in addition to its own three direct service programs. Second Harvest, a non-profit membership-based co-operative, serves over 44,000 low-income individuals per month through this network.

Food distribution is the most important aspect of Second Harvest's broader mission "to educate and involve individuals to end hunger and alleviate malnutrition in our communities." Second Harvest conducts nutrition education programs and food stamp outreach efforts in the community, while also staffing a Community Food Hotline (831-662-0991, M-F 9am-5pm) that provides referrals to local emergency food providers, monthly direct food distribution sites, federal nutrition programs, and health and social services providers.

Second Harvest also engages in advocacy and policy efforts to foster community food security and enhance the quality of life of low-income people through its membership and participation in the Central Coast Hunger Coalition, the California Hunger Action Coalition, the Nutrition and Fitness Collaborative of the Central Coast, and the Go for Health! Collaborative of Santa Cruz County. Second Harvest is a member of America's Second Harvest, the nation's food bank network.

Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties was the first food bank established in California and has been "helping neighbors feed neighbors" since 1972.

Summary of Findings

Introduction

Hunger is a community crisis on the Central Coast. The rise in the cost of housing and other expenses in this area is making it increasingly difficult for low-income residents to make ends meet. Faced with difficult choices between paying for either food, rent, utilities, or medicine, many limit their food purchases. Consequently they experience periods of hunger and food insecurity or purchase cheaper, lower quality foods that increase the risks of malnutrition and obesity. Each month, tens of thousands of Santa Cruz and San Benito County residents cannot afford well-balanced, nutritious meals for their families. Second Harvest, through our network of 150 agencies and programs, provides this increasing number of neighbors in need with emergency food assistance.

To better understand the challenges faced by our hungry neighbors and the agencies that serve them, Second Harvest participated in a national hunger study commissioned by America's Second Harvest, the nation's food bank network, and designed and planned by Mathematica Policy Research. In addition, Second Harvest planned, designed, and conducted a Community Nutrition Assessment under a grant from the California Nutrition Network to interview emergency food recipients about their current dietary and fitness habits, perceptions of barriers to access to healthy foods and physical activity, and recommendations on how to create a healthier community. Hunger: A Community Crisis presents the findings of the hunger study; some of the findings of the Community Nutrition Assessment are also included, to provide additional insights into the local hunger/obesity health care crisis.

Second Harvest hopes that this report will educate elected officials, policy makers, and community members about the significant challenges faced by our low-income neighbors who receive emergency food assistance; raise public awareness of the hunger crisis on the Central Coast; and serve as a call to action, which stimulates both governmental and community-based initiatives and efforts to end hunger in our community.

Summary of Findings

1. Despite growth in food bank services, hunger and food insecurity have increased since 2001.

- The number of people served by the Second Harvest suffering from food insecurity and hunger has increased since 2001 (66% face food insecurity, up 17%; 39% experience hunger, up 18%).
- 11,886 different people receive assistance from Second Harvest agencies weekly (about 44,000 a month, up from 32,000 in 2001).
- The number of adults who reported they went for an entire day without food for lack of money has tripled since 2001.

2. The costs of living, especially housing, medicine, utilities and fuel have gone up while wages have stagnated, and among those we serve, incomes have come down.

- 70% of those served are below the federal poverty level.
- The average household income has decreased (average income \$10,900).
- 1 in 3 households had a monthly income under \$500 last month.

3. Children are going hungry on the Central Coast! But that is not all – working poor families, seniors and the disabled remain the majority of those we serve.

- 39% of those served by the food bank are children.
- Since 2001, the number of households reporting that their children have skipped meals or experienced hunger in the past 12 months has more than tripled.
- 41% of the households served have at least one working adult.
- 11% of those served are elderly or disabled, most living on fixed incomes.



4. Hunger and obesity are health care issues for the poor.

- As low-income people struggle with diet-related diseases, 69% of those served by pantries, and 92% of those served by soup kitchens, say they can't afford to pay for balanced meals.
- 1 in 5 survey respondents noted that someone in their household has diabetes.
- Since 2001, 4 times as many food bank clients (24%) cite having to choose between paying for food and paying for medicine, almost twice as many report having no medical insurance (43.5%), and 1 in 5 has unpaid medical bills.

5. The gap between the need and current resources is growing.

- Between 70 and 80% of pantries, soup kitchens and shelters report an increase in the number of people they are serving since 2001.
- Though distributing more food bags and boxes, pantries have had to reduce the average weight from 24 to 19 pounds, and 25% of pantries report turning away clients for lack of food.
- 1 in 3 pantries estimates a need for nearly 500 more pounds of food a week to serve the current number of clients.

6. Despite extensive outreach efforts, the federal nutrition programs remain an under-utilized tool in the fight against hunger.

- Only 13% of those we serve receive food stamps, though 77% would qualify by income.
- Only 19.5% of children participate in the Summer Lunch program, though 85% would qualify.
- Positive trends are an increase in participation in school lunch and breakfast, and the WIC program, which serves pregnant women, infants, and children under 5 years old.

Analysis of Findings

The crisis of hunger is affecting an increasing number of households throughout the nation, state, and our local communities. Between 1999 and 2004, the number of U.S. households experiencing hunger increased 43%, with the prevalence of food insecurity and hunger among Californians exceeding the national average (Center on Hunger and Poverty, 2005).

Locally, despite growth in Second Harvest Food Bank services, the number of people suffering from food insecurity and hunger has increased since 2001. Currently, 66% of Second Harvest clients face food insecurity (an increase of 17%), while 39% of clients experience hunger (an increase of 18%).

Poverty and inadequate purchasing power, the root causes of this deprivation, are straining the food budgets of an increasing number of local people; compared to 2001, the number of adults going without food for an entire day for lack of money has tripled. Due to this increase in local hunger and food insecurity, thousands of local residents have turned to Second Harvest and its network agencies for emergency food assistance. Second Harvest now serves 12,000 more clients per month than in 2001 through our network of agencies and programs.

This increase in the size of our client population reflects how increasing costs of living, coupled with rising income inequality, have strained the household budgets of low-income residents. Low-income people nationwide are struggling to make ends meet as income inequality increases, and the gap between high- and low-income Americans widens.

In California, which ranks number six in terms of income inequality nationwide, residents face even greater pressures due to high housing and gasoline costs (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2006; Johnson, 2005). These household budget woes are especially widespread on the Central Coast, which has one of the highest costs of housing in the nation.

Moreover, as the costs of living have risen in recent years, wages and incomes of the poorest 20 percent of Americans have begun to decline (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2006; Westphal, 2006). The average income of Second Harvest clients has decreased to \$10,900, with one in three households struggling to survive on less than \$500 a month. Second Harvest clients, 70% of whom live below the federal poverty line, are forced to make difficult choices, as they struggle to pay for housing, medicine, utilities, and fuel. The household food budget is

often cut, resulting in reductions in the quantity of food purchased, the quality of food purchased, and the number of meals consumed. Additionally, one-third of Second Harvest clients have no telephone, and one-third lack a car. These difficult economic circumstances have also resulted in an increase in homelessness on the Central Coast.

Today, over twice as many homeless persons are being served by Second Harvest, compared to 2001, reflecting both the increase in the homeless population and increased efforts by Second Harvest to adequately serve them.

Aside from the increase in homeless persons served, the overall composition of the client population of the Second Harvest network remains similar to that of 2001. Hunger disproportionately affects the most vulnerable members of our society, including children, seniors, disabled people, and working poor families. These groups comprise the majority of our client population. 41% of the households served have at least one working adult; 11% of Second Harvest's clients are elderly or disabled people living on fixed incomes.

Nearly 40% of those served by Second Harvest are children under 18 years of age. Childhood hunger, which has serious consequences including health, psychological, behavioral, developmental, and academic risks, is becoming an increasingly acute problem on the Central Coast. Although most parents try to protect their children from hunger by reducing their own food intake, the number of households reporting that their children have skipped meals or experienced hunger in the past 12 months has more than tripled since 2001. Hunger on the Central Coast is truly a community crisis, with significant human and ethical costs, none more devastating than the diminished life chances of our children.



The number of households reporting that their children... have experienced hunger... has more than tripled since 2001.

The Resource Gap

Second Harvest Network Overview

Second Harvest is the hub of a network of 150 agencies and programs, including food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, and social service organizations (such as youth and senior programs, residential care and recovery programs, domestic violence shelters, women's centers, and AIDS support programs), in addition to its own three direct service programs. The direct service programs that Second Harvest operates are: 1. Monthly USDA commodity distributions at five locations throughout Santa Cruz County; 2. Monthly Food for Children distributions to qualifying families with children, currently in operation at 25 low-income housing complexes and schools; 3. The Partners in Need program, in which low-income individuals volunteer at the Second Harvest warehouse in Watsonville and receive boxes of food and produce. During the course of the hunger study, 92 agencies, representing 163 programs, responded to an agency survey to provide input on what improvements are needed to more adequately serve clients of the Second Harvest network.

Reports of Food Shortages

Their responses reveal a large gap between the need and the current resources for emergency food assistance. Between 70 and 80% of pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters report an increase in the number of clients served since 2001. These agencies are finding it increasingly challenging to accommodate all of the individuals seeking assistance with existing resources. While pantries are distributing more bags and boxes of food, the average weights have been reduced from 24 to 19 pounds, and one-quarter of Second Harvest network pantries report having turned away clients in the past year due to lack of food resources. Shortages of protein sources (including meat, poultry, and fish) and calcium-rich foods (such as dairy products) are particularly acute. Pantries reporting a shortage estimated an average need for nearly 500 more pounds of food per week to adequately serve their current client population. Filling this current "pantry gap" alone will require that many thousands more pounds of food per year be distributed through the Second Harvest network.

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Underutilization of Federal Food Resources

While food banks and agencies play an important role in alleviating hunger, they are designed to provide emergency food assistance. A comprehensive approach to ending hunger will require strengthening and investing in the national nutrition safety net. Client feedback reveals that local outreach efforts have raised awareness of the federal nutrition programs available and contributed to dramatic increases in the numbers of families and children participating in USDA commodity distributions (The Emergency Food Assistance Program – TEFAP), WIC (the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children), School Breakfast and Lunch Programs, the Summer Food Service Program (which serves children during the summer school break), and the Healthy Families and Healthy Kids Program.

Yet, these federal programs continue to be underutilized. Efforts to increase enrollment and participation among eligible individuals and to simplify application and enrollment procedures are needed. Specific recommendations by the National Anti-Hunger Organizations (NAHO) on how to improve the national nutrition safety net include improving the Food Stamp Program by simplifying application procedures, extending eligibility to more low-income people and increasing benefit levels, expanding access to child nutrition programs, and providing additional funding to the WIC program so that all eligible people may participate (NAHO, 2004). The prevention of hunger, food insecurity, and obesity among low-income people requires regular access to affordable, nutritious food. The national nutrition programs are an integral part of the long-term solution to these problems.

Obesity: The Other Community Health Care Crisis

Obesity is a public health crisis in the United States, detrimentally affecting the health of approximately one-third of our nation's children and more than 60% of our adult population. People who are overweight are at increased risk for heart disease, stroke, hypertension, diabetes, arthritis-related disabilities, some cancers, and other chronic health problems. Unhealthy eating and physical inactivity, the root causes of the obesity epidemic, are now the second leading cause of death in the U.S., second only to smoking. Locally, obesity negatively impacts the health of thousands of residents; some of California's highest childhood overweight figures have been recorded in Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties.

Poverty is one underlying cause of obesity in our communities. Low-income people often face barriers to accessing healthy food, such as inadequate purchasing power and government benefits; an absence of supermarkets and other healthy food outlets in their neighborhoods; and a lack of pedestrian, bicycle, and mass transit infrastructure in low-income neighborhoods. Inaccessibility to healthy food options fosters a reliance on neighborhood corner stores which typically feature higher prices, limited variety, few or low quality fruits and vegetables, and abundance of high-calorie, low-nutrient processed foods, all of which contribute to a poor diet that increases the risks of child and adult obesity and related health conditions. Thus, the obesity crisis disproportionately affects the low-income individuals and families that comprise Second Harvest's client population. One in five Second Harvest clients interviewed during the Community Nutrition Assessment report that they, or a member of their household, suffer from diabetes. As these low-income people struggle with diet-related diseases, the vast majority (92% of soup kitchen clients and 69% of pantry clients) report that they cannot afford balanced meals.

Second Harvest is actively working to alleviate the malnutrition in our communities that contributes to the prevalence of obesity and diet-related diseases among low-income residents. Thanks to an increase in produce donations, Second Harvest has distributed more fresh fruits and vegetables throughout the food bank network over the past four years. As a result, the number of agencies reporting a shortage of fruits and vegetables has decreased overall since 2001, although one-third of shelters still report a need for more fresh produce. In addition, courtesy of grant funding from the California Nutrition Network, over a third of the pantries and soup kitchens served by Second Harvest now offer nutrition counseling and food stamp information and application assistance. Second Harvest is also helping to devise comprehensive solutions to the local obesity crisis through its work with Go for Health! and the tri-county Nutrition and Fitness Collaborative of the Central Coast. Through these multi-faceted efforts, we hope to improve the health, nutrition, and living environments of our low-income clients.

Building Healthier Communities: A Community Nutrition Assessment

Under a California Nutrition Network grant, an additional 20-question Community Nutrition Assessment survey was conducted with all 295 clients of pantries, kitchens and shelters interviewed in the 2006 National Hunger Study. Questions addressed current dietary and shopping habits, perceived barriers to accessing healthy food and physical activity, and recommendations for creating healthier communities. Some of the findings were:

- 47% report that more fruits and vegetables, and more protein sources, would improve their diets.
- Over half report that produce is too expensive where they shop.
- 1/3 say that they walk to where they purchase food.
- More than half cite interest in classes on nutrition, healthy cooking, diabetic cooking, vegetarian cooking and other nutrition education and resources.
- 63% would grow produce in a community garden, if one was available.
- Good News! 43.8% of pantry clients state they eat five or more fruits and vegetables a day, versus 36.5% of the general population. This may partially reflect the impact of our nutrition education work for the past 3 years under a California Nutrition Network grant.

To receive a copy of the Community Nutrition Assessment brief *Building Healthier Communities*, contact Second Harvest Food Bank at (831) 722-7110 ext. 220 or e-mail lee@thefoodbank.org.



Hunger's Health Effects ...on Children

Children deprived of an adequate diet are at risk of not reaching their full potential. Hungry children may suffer from health problems, including unwanted weight loss, fatigue, headaches, irritability, inability to concentrate, and frequent colds. Children subject to an irregular food supply and to low-quality foods are also at increased risk of obesity, diabetes, and other complications. In addition, under-nourished children are more likely to be ill or absent from school. The effects of childhood hunger can last into adulthood, causing an increased likelihood for osteoporosis, Alzheimer's disease, and other adult diseases.

...on Adults and Seniors

Adults require adequate nutrition to reduce the occurrence of chronic health risks, including cancer, heart disease, and diabetes, all of which are more prevalent among poor people. For seniors, hunger intensifies the risk of stroke, limits the effectiveness of many medications, and may increase the occurrence of depression. Inaccessibility of supermarkets means higher prices, limited variety, and greater dependence on processed foods, all of which contribute to a poor diet and sometimes obesity.

Ending the Twin Community Crises of Hunger and Obesity

Recommendations

To confront the twin health crises of hunger and obesity, comprehensive strategies must be developed involving partners ranging from the local farmer to the federal government. A common definition of a food secure community is one in which “all persons have access to culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate food through local non-emergency sources at all times.” In a food-secure community, with sufficient food systems and economic resources (including full employment), most households could afford to buy healthy, locally produced foods. For those unable to buy food—the unemployed, the disabled, and the aged—emergency food resources, including federal nutrition programs, would be available.

To build a bridge to such a food-secure community, we must begin by strengthening the food and nutrition resources for many thousands of individuals currently unable to purchase sufficient nutritious food.

1. To Address The Increase in Hunger and Fill the Resource Gap:

Improve Food Bank Infrastructure and Donations

- Strengthen food bank infrastructure, facilities and resources.
- Increase volume and quality of food available.
- Create a geographic gap assessment of Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties to plan and implement new pantries, soup kitchens and distribution sites.
- Expand the Food For Children and Fresh Food For Families (produce distribution) programs.
- Expand food acquisition efforts by partnering with additional regional food producers and distributors and the statewide produce network.
- Expand the agency delivery program.
- Seek additional community food and resource donations.

2. To Confront the Obesity Health Care Crisis: *Expand Nutrition and Food Security Projects*

- Partner with Go For Health!, the Nutrition and Fitness Collaborative of the Central Coast and other groups to devise community-wide strategies to address the environmental causes of obesity.
- Continue and enhance nutrition education efforts through agencies and distribution sites.
- Partner with private, public and non-profit agencies on food security projects such as community gardens and food processing initiatives.

3. To Address the Long-term Causes of Hunger: *Advocate for Improved Public Policy and Economic Opportunity*

- Continue food stamp outreach efforts to increase participation by eligible households.
- Advocate for simplified and integrated application and eligibility processes improving access to federal food programs (food stamps, WIC, school meals, Summer Lunch Program).
- Develop comprehensive anti-poverty programs including local economic development, jobs, job training, childcare, improved minimum wage, and asset development.

Methodology

Hunger: A Community Crisis presents the findings of a survey of emergency food recipients and providers conducted by the Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties, as part of a national hunger study commissioned by America's Second Harvest and designed and planned by Mathematica Policy Research of Princeton, New Jersey. [For complete information on the methodology of this survey, or for a list of complete citations and participating agencies, call Second Harvest Food Bank, at \(831\) 722-7110 ext 220 or e-mail \[lee@thefoodbank.org\]\(mailto:lee@thefoodbank.org\).](#)

Help End the Crisis of Hunger in Our Community

Get involved!

As members of an affluent society, we have a shared responsibility to end hunger. It is morally unacceptable that a nation with the wealth of the U.S. tolerates widespread hunger within its borders. Federal, state, and local governments; schools; community and non-profit organizations; and labor and industry all have roles to play in addressing this fundamental social problem, but at the local level, hunger is a community crisis which requires a community response. Individuals and organizations must get involved to support and expand community-based efforts to serve our hungry neighbors and to build the political will to devise and implement a systematic, national response.

Donate

Help Second Harvest Food Bank feed our hungry neighbors by donating food or money. Sponsor, promote, or participate in a food drive; encourage employers in the agriculture and food industries to donate to Second Harvest; or plant a row for the hungry in your backyard garden and donate the produce. Donate funds to enable Second Harvest to acquire healthy foods that improve the nutrition of food donations; every \$10 donated creates \$90 worth of food.

Volunteer

Share your talents and skills by volunteering at Second Harvest, in our office, warehouse, or Community Food Hotline, or at the food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, and other social service agencies that comprise the Second Harvest network. It is our more than 3,000 volunteers, who donate over 36,000 hours of service each year, that enable Second Harvest to distribute more than 5.3 million pounds of food to our hungry neighbors.

Educate

Help raise public awareness by talking to your friends and neighbors about our community hunger crisis, Second Harvest Food Bank's efforts to educate and involve individuals to end hunger and alleviate malnutrition in our community, and the importance of community-level involvement "helping neighbors feed neighbors." Invite Second Harvest staff to give a presentation on hunger at your workplace, school, community organization, or place of worship.

Advocate

Get involved in anti-hunger advocacy efforts to improve federal nutrition programs and poverty relief policies. Urge public officials to enact public policies designed to address the root causes of, and end, hunger in America.

Do your part to end hunger on the Central Coast and be a part of the movement to end hunger in America. For more information on how to get involved, contact us.

New Voices to Advocate Against Hunger

The 2006 National Hunger Study included a new question, "Are you a registered voter?" 30% of Second Harvest pantry recipients, and 50% of soup kitchen clients, noted that they are registered voters. 15% of the agencies surveyed would like advocacy training to address local, state and national policy on hunger.

Survey responses indicate a strong interest among clients in advocating for public policy on hunger and nutrition. Under a grant from Mazon: A Jewish Response To Hunger, Second Harvest is organizing hunger advocacy trainings for agencies, clients of food bank services, and the general public.

To get involved in advocacy to end hunger, call Second Harvest Food Bank's Education and Outreach Department at (831) 722-7110 ext. 220 or e-mail lee@thefoodbank.org

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