

Despite an Era of Abundance, Some Are Living With 'Food Insecurity'

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A volunteer at the First Lutheran food pantry in Fullerton on a recent weekday morning. (Photo by: Adam Elmehrik)

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By BIANCA BRUNO | 1 comment

Every Tuesday evening, 19-year-old Alex walks a few blocks from his home in central Santa Ana to La Semilla Calvary Chapel to pick up a box of produce for his family.

He picks from more than a hundred boxes overflowing with fruits and vegetables such as eggplant, squash and bananas assembled on banquet tables by church volunteers.

All of the produce is useable, but much of it is overripe and wouldn't pass muster at a supermarket. Yet in a given week it might be the only fresh food that Alex, whose father is unemployed, has access to.

"I love the fresh produce," said the Santa Ana College student who didn't want his full name used. "It gives me energy for school. I usually use it to make juice or smoothies."

Alex is not in a state of starvation. But like the more than 90 other Santa Ana families La Semilla serves every week, he is affected by "food insecurity," which is a lack of consistent access to nutritious food.

It is an issue that public health experts are increasingly putting front and center as low-income neighborhoods are besieged by an obesity epidemic that has led to spiraling rates of heart disease, diabetes and other nutrition-related ailments.

There are few places where the problem is more acute than in the urban centers of Southern California. A study released earlier this year showed that on a county-by-county basis, California has the fourth-highest rate of food insecurity among children nationwide.

Nearly a quarter of Santa Ana's residents are affected by food insecurity, and countywide more than 155,000 children are lacking regular access to nutritious food. Santa Ana's rates are similar to those in San Diego's City Heights neighborhood, which is also largely low-income and Latino.

The Problem is Access, Not Ignorance

As public health experts both locally and nationally work to improve these conditions, they have come to realize that personal choices about the nutritional quality of the food a family consumes has a lot more to do with access than it does with ignorance.

Jennifer Gilmore, executive director of Feeding America San Diego, said the realization forced her to change the internal culture of her organization, starting with herself.

"I went in with some assumptions," she said. "I thought families were choosing not to eat healthy food. I had to educate myself as families would come up to me requesting that we provide healthier options."

According to Gilmore, it goes without saying that making healthful food accessible increases consumption of healthful food. This is why Feeding America increasingly turns down donors who bring them processed food. Gilmore said Feeding America doesn't distribute any candy, soda or chips. Currently half of all their food is fruits and vegetables with 75 percent of the food they provide considered highly nutritious.

This change in approach comes as the Great Recession and its aftermath have caused a widening in the pool of families needing food pantries to include those who were formerly middle-class and many who are currently employed, said Janet Shellenberger, volunteer at the First Lutheran food pantry in Fullerton.

"They may be working, but they don't have 40-hour-a-week jobs," she said. "Most of our clients work in service industry jobs that can't afford to give them benefits. So they have to work two or three jobs just to get the 40 hours they need."

This past October, First Lutheran served more than 300 clients during food pantry hours on what should have been a routine Wednesday, Shellenberger said.

"We see more people at the end of the month," Shellenberger said. "There's just too much month for their money."

Finding Fresh Produce in a Food Desert

The lack of fresh food options in City Heights and many neighborhoods in Santa Ana lead public health experts to describe them as "food deserts."

Since 2008, Bridge of Hope has worked to change this reality in City Heights by hosting a weekly food pantry that serves between 250 and 280 community members.

Volunteer Alejandra Pena has been working at the food pantry for five years, and like the City Heights residents she serves, she and her family are food insecure. This summer the family's food budget was cut dramatically when the federal government determined that they earned too much money to be eligible for food assistance and took away their \$400-per-month food stamp allocation.

She said the food she received from Bridge of Hope was sometimes all her family of six would have for a week.

"The kids, they don't understand when you try to tell them there's nothing else to eat," she said. "We struggled a lot this year."

And whereas emergency food assistance used to help families get by for a day or a week, experts say it's now used as a long-term supplement to get by. Gilmore said that as food assistance programs become the primary source of food for some low-income families, they must take a look at the quality of food they're providing.

"To say we're emergency food is less and less true," she said. "They're isn't a neutral food; you're either helping or harming."

To prevent the fresh food from going, as Gilmore puts it, "from farm, to family, to trash," Feeding America provides cooking classes and recipe cards to clients. The organization also engages in "client choice," allowing families to pick the food they want rather than giving clients a bag of preselected items.

Such demands have put strain on small food pantries, where having enough to go around is always a concern. And with public health experts sounding the alarm about the quality of food being distributed, the need goes far beyond what a traditional canned food drive can provide.

This is where the Orange County Food Access Coalition comes in. The coalition has a program called the Harvest Club, where residential gardeners can donate excess produce from their backyards to emergency food providers.

Executive Director Gillian Poe said that 60 percent of Orange County residents have fruit trees, where a surplus can go a long way. They're even hosting a more healthful food drive with the Starbucks at Main Street and MacArthur Boulevard to educate donors on what to give.

"Rather than clear out their pantry of food they don't want, they should think about what they would want or need to eat if they were in a position requiring food assistance," Poe said. "It's not an acceptable response to people in need to think as long as we bring a bag of food we did our part."

Shellenberger said First Lutheran gets 41,000 pounds of fresh produce for \$250 a week as a part of the Second Harvest Farm to Family program. Albert Quintanilla, director of community outreach for La Semilla, said their monthly food bill shopping at Second Harvest is between \$400 and \$500.

Both pantries try to provide as much fresh fruits and vegetables to their clients as possible.

Yet despite all of these efforts, Poe said, there's a cultural disconnect about hunger in America.

"People don't understand how you can be overweight and hungry," she said. "Painting the public health picture for community is important, because when our neighbors aren't well, we're a much weaker community."

This article was produced in collaboration with Voice of San Diego. Bianca Bruno is a San Diego-based journalist. You can reach her directly at bbruno@kpbs.org

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