

Food Security among WIC Participants in Los Angeles County

Food insecurity is defined as the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food¹. A household is classified as food insecure if members are uncertain of having, or unable to achieve, the adequate food intake needs at some time in a given year. Food security is differentiated into 4 categories described more fully below: High, marginal, low, and very low. Households in the low and very low categories are considered food insecure. In 2017, approximately 15.7% (5.9 million) of households with children in the United States were considered food insecure, decreasing from 16.5% in 2016². The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) is a resource for low-income families to access nutritious food and reduce the burden of food insecurity among women and children under the age of five. In Los Angeles County (LAC), WIC serves about half of all children under 5. The aim of this brief is to examine food security trends among WIC participants in LAC in comparison to nationwide trends. Data from three iterations of the LAC WIC Survey in 2011, 2014 and 2017 were analyzed. Over 4,500 WIC participants answered the USDA 6-item food security questionnaire each year³.

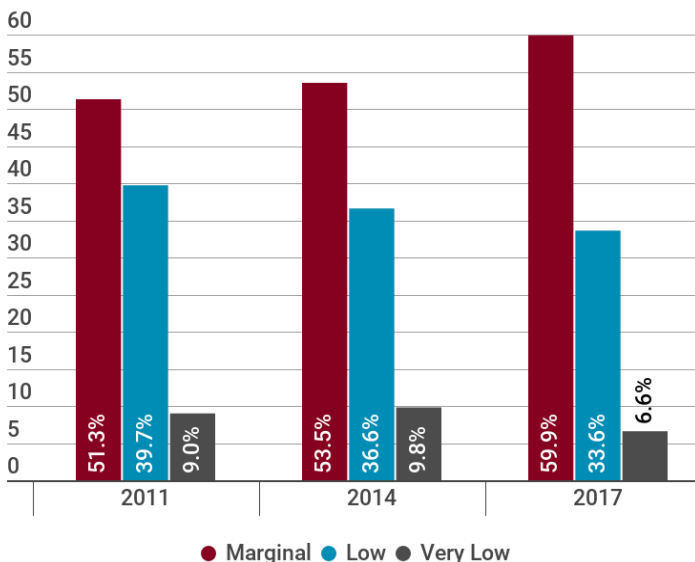
Figure 1: Comparing very low food security in US households to WIC households in Los Angeles County



Food security among WIC participants

Figure 2 illustrates the food security levels of households in Los Angeles County, determined from responses to the 6-item food security questionnaire.

Figure 2: Percent of households by food security levels in Los Angeles County by survey year.**



- There were no WIC households in Los Angeles County that were determined to have high food security in any of the survey years.
- In 2011, 49% of the WIC households were considered food insecure. Of these, 9% were determined to have very low food security.
- In comparison, 2017 saw a decrease with the overall number of food insecure households at 40%. The percent of households with very low food security fell to 6.6%.

Levels of Food Security³

Very low food security: households in which normal eating patterns of at least some household members were disrupted in three or more months during the past year, with members reporting less than the adequate amount of food intake.

Low food security: households in which eating patterns or reduction in food intake is not substantial but still disrupted in two months or less within the past year.

Marginal Food Security: household in which a member expresses anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house, but there is not a disruption in eating patterns or food intake.

High Food Security: households in which all members have access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life.



2 in 5 WIC households in LAC reported food insecurity in 2017

Food insecure households by Race and Ethnicity

Across the U.S., the prevalence of food insecurity tends to vary by racial-ethnic group¹. Los Angeles WIC participants are over 80% Hispanic and 8% Black.³ *Figure 3* shows the percent of food insecure WIC households by racial-ethnic group, starting in 2011. Due to the cultural differences that may exist among Hispanic English-speaking and Spanish-speaking households, prevalence of food insecurity is shown separately by language. While the prevalence of food insecurity among Hispanic Spanish-speaking households has been decreasing since 2011, the prevalence of food insecurity in Hispanic English-speaking households has been increasing. Among black WIC respondents, the prevalence of food insecurity has remained relatively stable throughout the three survey years. Because of the comparatively small number of White and Asian participants in WIC in LAC, these groups are included in the 'Other' category. This category showed an increase in food insecurity prevalence in 2014 but re-stabilized in 2017.

Summary and Implications

Consistent with trends seen across the country, 2017 saw some improvements in food security for low-income households. That said, there are clear disparities, and English-speaking Hispanic families exhibited a recent uptick in food insecurity. The reality in LAC that over 40% of families with young children experience food insecurity, despite having access to the WIC program, highlights not only the very real need for strong food assistance programs for children, but the significant financial challenges faced by low-income families. Although food insecurity rates are on a decline in LAC, they are still almost three times higher than the national average. Food insecurity rates among racial-ethnic minorities could be an indicator of a lack in knowledge and outreach in these communities as well as the scarce resources that may be available to low-income families. Efforts can be made to ensure these communities are aware of the resources available and that program like WIC can reach the majority of the eligible population to continue to improve food security among these vulnerable populations.

References

- 1 "Food Security." https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/food_security. Oxford, 2018. Web. 27 September, 2018.
- 2 Rabbitt, M. P., Coleman-Jensen, A., & Gregory, C. A. (2017). Understanding the Prevalence, Severity, and Distribution of Food Insecurity in the United States. Amber Waves.
- 3 Coleman-Jenson A, Gregory CA, Rabbitt M. Definition of Food Security. 2018. Available from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security/>.
- 4 Demographics. Los Angeles County WIC data. 2018. Available from <http://lawicdata.org/topics/demographics/>
- 5 Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology, Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County, September 2017. Available from www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/ha

Figure 3: Distribution of food insecurity by racial-ethnic group among WIC households in Los Angeles County by survey year.

