

Food Security among WIC Participants in Los Angeles County

Our role at WIC: 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.

Across time: The proportion of families reporting low and very low food security rates has consistently decreased since 2011.

Implication: Food insecurity increases the risk of physical and cognitive developmental delays in children and is associated to chronic illnesses in adults such as obesity and diabetes.

Food insecurity is defined as the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food¹. Food security is measured at the household level, differentiated into 4 categories: High, marginal, low, and very low food security (see the textbox “Levels of Food Security”). 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. In 2017, approximately 15 Million (11.8%) of households in the United States were considered food insecure, decreasing from 12.3% 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. The aim of this brief is to illustrate food security trends among WIC participants in Los Angeles County in comparison to the nationwide trends. Data collected from three iterations of the Los Angeles County WIC Survey in 2011, 2014 and 2017 were analyzed. Over 5,000 WIC participants answered the food security 6 item tool developed by the USDA for determining a household’s food security level in the Los Angeles County WIC surveys each year³.



Levels of Food Security³

Very low food security: households are food insecure to the extent that normal eating patterns of some household members were disrupted in three or more months throughout the past year, with members reporting less than the adequate amount of food intake.

Low food security: households where 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 members express anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house but does not lead to a disruption in their eating patterns or food intake. **High Food Security:** food secure households have access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members.

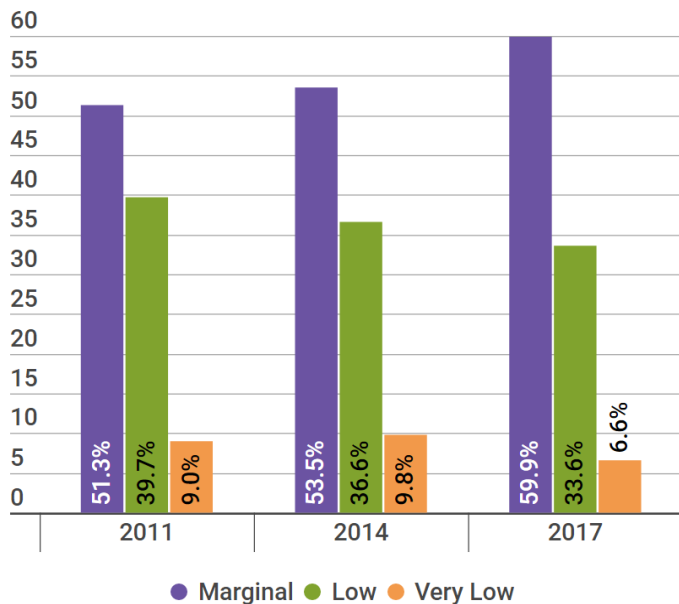
Comparing food security among WIC households in Los Angeles County

Food insecure households are those whose eating patterns and access to food are highly disrupted for some household members in 3 months or more during the past 12 months. In 2017, 40.0% of Los Angeles County WIC households were considered food insecure (low or very low food security). In comparison, only 15.7% of all households with children throughout the United States were food insecure in 2017. While the percent of food insecure households in Los Angeles County has fallen since 2011 the rates are over two and a half times higher among low income WIC participants in Los Angeles County. The USDA reports that households with an income below 185% FPL, Hispanic or Black households and households with children are at a higher risk of being food insecure. Being able to provide supplemental food for these communities is essential to provide equal opportunities for all families to have an adequate access to affordable and nutritious foods.

Trends in food security among WIC participants

Figure 2 illustrates the food security levels of households 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, nearly half of WIC households experienced some level of food insecurity. However, the situation has improved since then with low and very low food security rates consistently decreasing.

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



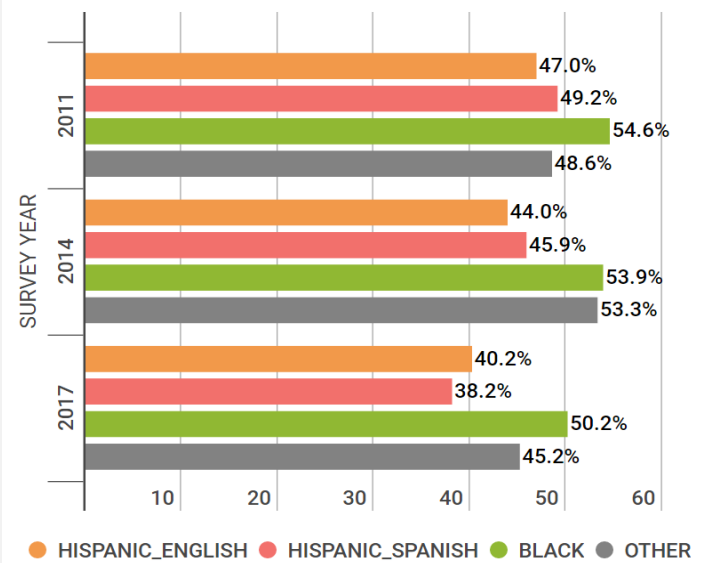
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Food insecure households by race and ethnicity

In the United States, the prevalence of food insecurity, including low and very low food security, tends to be higher in Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black households.¹ Los Angeles WIC participants are over 80% Hispanic and 8% Black.³ Figure 3 shows the percent of food insecure WIC households by race/ethnicity starting in 2011. In all of the survey years, non-

Hispanic Blacks have the highest prevalence of food insecurity, with rates above 50% in each year. Among non-Hispanic Black WIC respondents, the prevalence of food insecurity has remained relatively stable throughout the three survey years, although there was a promising drop during the 2017 survey year.

Figure 3: Distribution of race and ethnicity among WIC households with low or very low food security in Los Angeles County by survey year.



Due to the cultural differences that may exist among Hispanic English-speaking and Spanish-speaking households, food insecurity prevalence is shown separately by language. The prevalence of food insecurity among Hispanic Spanish and English-speaking participants has been decreasing since 2011. Because of small numbers of White and Asian respondents in each survey year, they were included in the 'Other' category. This category showed an increase in food insecurity prevalence in 2014 but re-stabilized in 2017.

References

- 1 "Food Security." https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/food_security. Oxford, 2018. Web. 27 September, 2018.
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- 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