

Nearly 4 Million Californians Cannot Afford Enough Food

Growing number of low-income people experiencing 'food insecurity,' study finds

By [Joanna Lin](#) on July 12, 2012 - 12:01 a.m. PDT

For Larry Sly, executive director of the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, the good news is that the number of people the Food Bank serves has leveled off over the past couple years. The bad news: The Food Bank still feeds 132,000 people every month.

The Food Bank today serves 46 percent more people in Contra Costa and Solano counties than it did in 2006, before the recession began. Those in need include people with financial emergencies, others who need sporadic help and still more who come in month after month; many never imagined they'd someday stand in line at a food pantry, Sly said.

"The recession I know is technically over ... but we're not seeing it here at all," he said. "We see nothing to indicate that things are getting better for the people we serve."

Nearly 58 percent of low-income residents in Contra Costa County could not afford enough to eat in 2009, according to a recent report by California Food Policy Advocates and the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. The county's rate of "food insecurity," as it's called, was higher than anywhere else in the state and jumped from 16 percent two years earlier.

The [analysis \[PDF\]](#), based on data from the California Health Interview Survey, found that more than 40 percent of low-income California adults in 2009 – 3.8 million in all – could not afford enough food at least once in the previous year.

About half of low-income households with children, low-income Spanish-speaking adults and those with less than a high school education struggled to put enough food on the table in 2009. The problem worsened among married couples, the employed, and nearly all racial and ethnic groups as well, the analysis found.

The growing number of Californians who cannot afford enough to eat is a direct result of the economic downturn, researchers said. Although more recent data is not yet available, other economic indicators show many Californians are still struggling.

The state's unemployment rate remained higher than the national rate at 10.8 percent in May. As of this week, more than 796,600 out-of-work Californians have run out of jobless benefits, up to the 99 weeks available, according to the state Employment Development Department.

Sly said more Contra Costa County residents are going hungry because the housing construction that fueled growth in the eastern part of the county, in cities like Antioch and Brentwood, has vanished.

"We're seeing a lot of people who had good incomes, very stable jobs and never thought they'd go ask for food help from a nonprofit like ours," he said. "They're seeing they've got to do it."

The Food Bank provides people about a couple bags of groceries each, Sly said. Many people coming to the Food Bank also receive benefits through CalFresh, the federal food stamp program in California. Neither resource is enough to keep stomachs full an entire month, he said.

Still, people who received CalFresh benefits during the recession were "somewhat shielded" from the growing inability to afford enough food, said Kerry Birnbach, a nutrition policy advocate at California Food Policy Advocates. That stability underscores the importance of the nutrition assistance program, she said.

Birnbach and Sly said California should do more to streamline CalFresh with other state programs to increase participation. One opportunity, Birnbach said, would be to allow low-income people enrolling in health coverage through the state's health benefit exchange, which must be up and running by 2014 as part of federal health care reform, to simultaneously enroll in CalFresh.

In the meantime, however, Birnbach and Sly are concerned about a House proposal that [cuts more than \\$16 billion from the food stamp program](#) and makes fewer Californians eligible for CalFresh. Nearly 4 million Californians receive an average of about \$150 in CalFresh benefits per month, according to the state Department of Social Services.

"These are people who are our neighbors, trying to get by," Sly said. "We can't penalize them because they happen to fall into a situation where they need the assistance of the CalFresh program."