

# STATE OF HUNGER



Hunger Study  
2018

# STATE OF HUNGER



There is a significant low-income population within the wealthy counties of Contra Costa and Solano. Despite an improving economy, 11.4% of the population in the two-county area – almost 180,000 people – live below the federal poverty line. After factoring in the high cost of living, especially housing, the poverty level may be as high as 17%. This translates to 275,000 people at risk of going hungry.

An astonishing 1 in 8 people in the two counties - about 180,000 individuals - turn to the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano each month. Of those surveyed, 64% of households have seniors, children or both. Even more staggering, 29% rely on us for at least half of their food.

The Food Bank collaborated with Saint Mary's College to develop the Hunger Study 2018. The goal of this project was to determine **who** our recipients are, **how** we are currently serving them, **why** people need the Food Bank's assistance and **what** we should focus on moving forward. Research results will influence our programs and services and will be shared with the Food Bank staff, partners, elected officials, funders and the public.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Larry Sly'.

Larry Sly  
Executive Director

29% of those surveyed rely on us  
for at least half of their food.

"It's been hard getting on my feet after tough times, especially with a little one. I'm trying to build my family a sustainable and healthy future by going to school full-time, and trying to stay afloat by working at the same time as well. It's a daily struggle to find a balance, and weekly trips to the food pantry are the only thing that give me security that I won't run out of food before my next paycheck comes."

-Mary, Vallejo





# WHY THE NEED IS HIGH

While the issues faced by the low-income households of this two-county region echo the problems faced nationwide, a few distinct trends emerged, specifically around housing. Housing costs are high in California, but are especially high for the San Francisco Bay Area.

## HIGH COST OF LIVING

The majority of respondents making \$25,000 or less spent more than 50% of their income on housing, classifying them as 'severely cost burdened'. This is higher than both state and national estimates of low-income households' housing burden. This could explain in part why 47% of households surveyed consisted of multigenerational family members, adult family members cohabiting, or non-related adults cohabiting.

## INCOME & EMPLOYMENT

The myth that most people receiving food assistance choose not to work is simply untrue:

- 78% of household members that are old enough to work are either working, actively looking for work, or would not be expected to work due to age, disability, or because they are taking care of another family member.
- 31% are under employed and working 20 hours or less (and often these part-time positions don't include benefits).
- 30% of those looking for work reported actively seeking employment for over a year.
- 24% of respondents have disabled or senior household member living on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits. In California, SSI recipients don't qualify for CalFresh nutrition assistance even though their incomes are below 90% of the Federal Poverty Line.

**92%** have a total household income of less than \$35,000 a year.

**It takes an annual income of \$76,500 for a family of four to make ends meet in California.**

# MAKING HARD CHOICES

In an ideal world, everyone's income would provide what they need to cover expenses. The reality is that people who turn to the Food Bank run out of money before they can pay all of their bills, leaving them to make no-win decisions.

The people we feed are either not able to buy enough food, or they purchase lower-quality food because it costs less—that is, if they can afford groceries at all.



**OR**

**62%**

chose to pay  
for utilities



**61%**

chose to pay for  
transportation



**33%**

chose to pay for  
medicine/medical care



**55%**

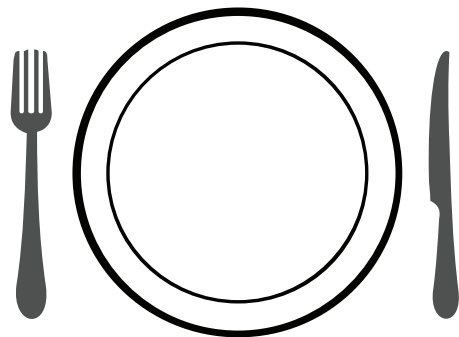
chose to pay for  
rent or mortgage

"With the high cost of living in this area, even though I'm working 40 hours a week with my husband, we have to make a decision to pay PG&E or feed our daughter."

-Theresa, Bay Point

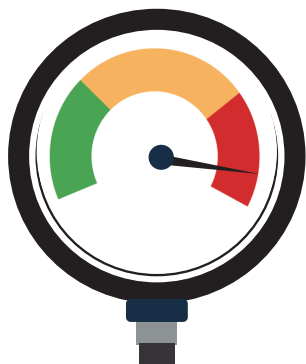
# HUNGER AND HEALTH

It has been repeatedly shown that health improves and healthcare costs decline when people receive the nourishment their bodies require.

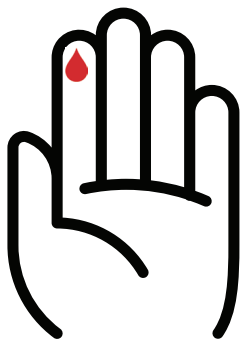


57% bought the cheapest food available every month because a healthier choice was more expensive.

23% ate less than they should, or skipped meals every month because they couldn't afford food.



**52%**  
had a household member with high blood pressure.



**37%**  
had a household member with diabetes.



**41%**  
had a household member with depression or anxiety.



"The price of produce is so expensive at the store, so the fruits and vegetables from the Food Bank are one of the best things that's ever happened to me. I'm diabetic, so it really helps."

- Jesse, disabled senior and veteran from Antioch

# NEXT STEPS

## TODAY

The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano is committed to providing food assistance that is **accessible, nutritious, and dignified**. While the state of hunger in our community is far too high, the Food Bank's services are making a real difference for families in need.

- The study reveals that the majority of participants eat healthier since receiving food assistance from the Food Bank and its partner agencies.
  - 71% of respondents said they eat more balanced meals.
  - 75% of respondents said they eat more fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Results indicate a high level of satisfaction among people who receive food from us and a strong intent to recommend the Food Bank and partners to someone needing food assistance.
  - The average service rating was 4.7 out of 5 (1 being poor and 5 being excellent).
  - The average likelihood to recommend Food Bank services was 4.9 out of 5 (1 being not likely and 5 being very likely).

## TOMORROW

Services provided by the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano are intended to be supplemental emergency assistance, but 76% of respondents reported relying on picking up free food every month. To address both the depth and persistence of this need, we will continue to improve the accessibility of our distributions and reduce the need for those services through partnerships, outreach, and advocacy.

- We will continue to provide exemplary customer service and work to improve the nutritional quality of the food we provide. Our goal is to increase distributions on college campuses and better integrate our services with health clinics and other community-based organizations.
- We will advocate to protect and strengthen CalFresh/SNAP and will increase access through outreach and application assistance.
- In coalition with our partners, we will support programs and policies that address the high cost of living by increasing income or reducing cost burdens.

For Mary, Theresa, Jesse and the thousands of others who depend on our services, the Food Bank will keep providing healthy food and advocating against food insecurity to reduce the state of hunger in our community.

# METHODOLOGY

This local hunger study involved administering 415 face-to-face client interviews (using iPads) in Contra Costa and Solano counties. It provided valuable insights about the people who receive food from the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano including information on demographics, housing, income and working status, health and use of Food Bank programs and services. Approximately 10% of eligible households were sampled from 47 sites (food pantries, soup kitchens and various Food Bank distribution sites). Data was collected between September 6 and November 17, 2017. The response rate was 71.9%.



Caitlin Powell, Ph.D. and John Gruenstein, Ph.D., faculty members of Saint Mary's College of California, brought decades of experience working on quantitative research studies to the Hunger Study.

Dr. Gruenstein is teaching a course he developed in *Wealth, Poverty, and Social Justice* at Saint Mary's College. The course focuses on some of the food insecurity issues that the Food Bank explored in the study.



Leading the fight to end hunger, in partnership with our community and in service of our neighbors in need.

The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano has been serving the community for over 40 years. We feed 1 in 8 people living in Contra Costa and Solano counties every month directly at community sites and through a network of 180 charitable agencies. Last year we distributed 22 million pounds of food – about 60% of which was fresh produce. The Food Bank works to reduce food waste, feed hungry people, and raise public awareness of issues related to food and hunger.

## SUPPORTERS

Funding was generously provided by the Dean and Margaret Lesher Foundation, the Y&H Soda Foundation and the John Muir/Mt. Diablo Community Health Fund. We are grateful for their leadership and support. We also thank the many volunteers who helped us conduct interviews for this study.





**[foodbankccs.org/hungerstudy](https://foodbankccs.org/hungerstudy)**

