

CHAPTER 4

Findings and Interpretations

Several key findings from this research project began to answer the three questions posed by emergency food providers in Calaveras:

1. What are the relationships between the degree of food insecurity and specific sociodemographic characteristics of these food insecure households?
2. What are the primary reasons Calaveras County residents are forced to seek emergency food assistance?
3. What are the barriers, obstacles, and needs of Calaveras County residents that seek emergency food assistance?

These three questions are restated as headings in this chapter followed by a detailed discussion of relevant survey findings. Selected findings are then reported with more detail in Appendix A, “Calaveras County Hunger Report 2000: Voices of the People”.

The research findings below are based on the analysis of 159 self-administered, correctly completed surveys. The demographic breakdown of these 159 surveys indicated the majority of survey respondents were white (95%), female (93%), and an average age of 33 years old. Survey respondents lived in all five geographic areas of Calaveras County: the Angels Camp/Copperopolis Area (36%), the San Andreas/Mokelumne Hill Area (27%), the Valley Springs Area (20%), the Arnold Area (6%), and the West Point Area (11%). Survey respondents were from households with an average of 3.75 people per household. Children 0-17 years of age lived in 81% of the

159 households. The average cash income based on responses from 134 of these households was \$1354 per month.

Food Insecurity and Specific Sociodemographic Characteristics

Of the 159 survey households, 95 (60%) were food insecure. Twenty-eight percent were food insecure without hunger and 32% food insecure with hunger. Food insecure households were found in all five geographic areas of Calaveras County including the more remote mountain areas. The percentage of food insecure households by geographic area were: Angels Camp/Copperopolis Area (22%), the San Andreas/Mokelumne Hill Area (19%), the Valley Springs Area (10%), the Arnold Area (4%), and the West Point Area (5%). These findings indicate that food insecurity is a problem in Calaveras County.

Of the 159 survey households, 128 had children 0-17 years of age. Seventy-two (56%) of these 128 families were food insecure. These food insecure households with children represent 76% of the 95 food insecure households. The high percentage of food insecure households with children in this survey sample was partly due to the large number of surveys administered to families with children (81%). The majority of the surveys were administered at Motherlode WIC (77 surveys) and Calaveras Head Start State Preschool (26 surveys). This finding is especially troublesome to researchers because it indicates a high percentage of low-income children may be at risk of nutritional deficiencies that affect many facets of their development. A brief summary of current scientific research linking nutrition and cognitive development can be found page 72 of Appendix A.

Seventy-nine food insecure households reported cash income from the following sources: “salary from employment” (48); “social security disability insurance” (11); “unemployment insurance” (2); “pension” (1); “child support” (10); “general assistance” (6); and “social security” (14)⁶. From these 79 households, researchers estimated that the average food insecure household was a family of four with a monthly cash income of \$1209, which is \$182 below the poverty level in 1999 (see Appendix A, p. 54, for 1999 Poverty Guidelines). Researchers found that in this sample poverty level income was not necessarily a direct determinant of food insecurity. Some families living well below 100% of the poverty level were found to be food secure while other families at the same income level were food insecure. Researchers did determine that as income dropped below 130% of the poverty level, the number of food insecure households began to increase drastically. Of the 79 families reporting cash income, 64 food insecure families lived at or below 130% of the poverty level while only 35 food secure families lived at or below 130% of the poverty level. All but six of the 79 food insecure households reporting cash income lived at or below 185% of the poverty level.

Researchers analyzed several specific factors related to the cash income of all 95 food insecure households. Findings of interest were:

1. Sixty-two (65%) of the food insecure households rented their homes. The average rent cost in Calaveras County in 1999 was \$792 for a three-bedroom

6. The number reported in parenthesis does not total 79 because many of the food insecure households reported more than one source of cash income.

home or 66% of the average food insecure survey household's cash income of \$1209. The average two-bedroom home rented for \$569 in 1999 or 47% of the average food insecure survey household's cash income. (State of California, 1999, p. 2)

2. Fifty (52%) of the food insecure survey households included family members who were putting off medical or dental care due to a lack of money.
3. Fifty-eight (61%) of the food insecure survey households did not receive food stamps. Thirty-seven (39%) of the food insecure survey households received food stamps.

These three findings indicate that income and benefits levels for these resource-constrained families in Calaveras County, whether in the form of salaries from employment, work-related benefits, or government aid programs, do not reflect the self-sufficiency income needed to prevent food insecurity and hunger. (See Appendix A, p. 60, for 1999 Self-Sufficiency Wage by family size.)

As stated above, fifty-eight (61%) of the food insecure households did not receive food stamps. Only thirty-seven (39%) of the food insecure households received food stamps. The majority of these households reported their food stamps lasted only 2-3 weeks. Survey respondents who did not receive food stamps cited four main factors as reasons: "don't think I am qualified" (31%); "applied/turned down" (22%); "embarrassment/pride" (14%); and "do not want to apply" (10%). The low rate of food stamp utilization compared with the high rate of food insecurity in this survey sample is troublesome to researchers. These findings may be the result of one or more factors such

as a lack of client knowledge as to the resources available, the length and complexity of the food stamp application process, and/or the ineligibility of the household to receive food stamps.

Reasons for Seeking Emergency Food

The three most frequently cited reasons for seeking emergency food now or in the past were: “unusual expenses this month” (27%); “ran out of food stamps” (19%); and “recent job loss” (15%). These responses could be interpreted as indicators of a lack of sufficient money, resources, and/or skills. Or they could be interpreted as a lack of money and/or resource “management” skills. Survey respondents cited several types of education or information they would find useful: “tips on getting the most for your money at the grocery store” (20%); “healthy eating information/food safety information” (16%); “information about government programs and services for which you may be eligible” (15%); and “information on money-saving recipes and cooking techniques” (15%). Appendix A, p. 69, includes a complete list of responses. Researchers suspect that accurate interpretation of the reasons households are forced to seek emergency food needs to be made on an individual basis.

Needs, Obstacles, and Barriers

Survey respondents cited several barriers to accessing emergency food: no gas money (19%); “no transportation” (16%); “embarrassment/pride” (14%); and “distance I had to travel” (11%). Both insufficient gas money and a lack of a reliable vehicle are difficult barriers to overcome when a family lives in a more remote area of Calaveras County. If a household is not making self-sufficiency wages, chances are the household car is less

than reliable. If a household does not have enough money for food, it more than likely does not have any gas money either.

Survey respondents who had needed emergency food but had not received it indicated the two main reasons were: “didn’t feel qualified” (32%) and “didn’t know where to go” (25%). These responses indicate clients had a lack of knowledge as to both the resources available and the qualifications needed to access these resources. This finding is of interest to the researchers since information on resources is widely available through pamphlets, flyers, media coverage, and social service outreach workers (such as Head Start Family Advocates) in Calaveras County. Yet the finding indicates there is a missing link between the plethora of social marketing materials, outreach workers, and the populations targeted.

Recommendations for a Community Action Plan

The above findings and interpretations were an integral part of the recommendations for a community action plan that researchers and community stakeholders developed to address hunger in Calaveras County. As stated in the last chapters, these recommendations are presented in “Calaveras County Hunger Report 2000: Voices of the People” in Appendix A (pages 73 to 75).