

One in Four California Families Can't Afford Food for Their Kids

By [Raul Rodriguez](#)

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One in four California households with children reported food hardship, according to a new analysis of Gallup data released last Thursday by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC).

"It's disturbing, but not surprising," said Kelly Hardy, director of health policy at Children Now.

The report analyzed data gathered as part of the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index project's responses to the question: "Have there been times in the past 12 months when you did not have enough money to buy food that you or your family needed?"

"It sends a clear signal of economic distress, particularly for families with children," noted James Weill, president of FRAC. "The answers to the question reveal there are times that these families are going without eating a meal, or the parents are skipping a meal for their children, or children are skipping meals."

California had the second highest number of metropolitan areas with rates of food hardship in households with children in 2009-2010, according to the report.

According to Kidsdata.org, a project of the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, which tracks the health and well being of children in communities across the nation, 68.6 percent of students in schools in Fresno County and 65.6 percent in Los Angeles County were eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals in 2010.

But sadly, "California has one of the worst records of enrolling those eligible in federal food programs," said Weill - an assertion borne out by a report by the California Food Policy Advocates, which talks about the dismal enrolment in CalFresh, the federal food program in the state. The finger-imaging requirement discourages many from participating in the program, the report says.

According to the FRAC's findings, California has four of the top 20 metropolitan areas in the nation facing food hardship. Fresno ranked fifth (32.6 percent) nationwide among large metropolitan cities in households with children facing food hardship. The Riverside-San Bernadino-Ontario area ranked eighth (30.4 percent), the Bakersfield area ranked 11th (29.5 percent), and the Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana area ranked 18th (28.3 percent).

And, according to Kidsdata.org, 59 percent and 62.3 percent of children living in the Fresno and Los Angeles County, respectively, are Latino.

Children’s healthcare advocates worry about the consequences of a lack of access to nutritious food.

“It will lead to development and health issues which affect performance in school,” Hardy said. “A lack of nutritious food can also lead to poor oral health, which has been shown to lead to heart disease.”

Kelly noted that there is a connection between food deserts — areas where there is a lack of easy access to affordable nutritious food - and obesity. These areas are often found in the inner-cities or rural areas such as Fresno and are often the cause for poor nutrition choices, she said.

California Association of Food Banks policy director Eric Manke worries that the newly setup federal Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, also known as the “Super Committee,” set up to further reduce federal spending by \$1.5 trillion, might target federal food programs.

The Super Committee is set to hold its first meeting when Congress returns to Washington after its August recess. The California Association of Food Banks, along with FRAC and other non-profit food organizations, is urging Congress and the Super Committee to protect food programs for the low-income population.

“Our goal is to make sure they don’t target the federal food programs,” said Manke, noting, “Folks in Congress must understand that there is a great deal of need for these type of programs, and this is the opposite time to think about cutting programs that serve those with the most need.”

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