

Department of
Public Social Services
Philip L. Browning, Director



“To enrich lives through effective and caring service”

In 2005, DPSS completed its first report on homeless families in the CalWORKs program. It provided DPSS with unique information, ranging from frequency and duration of homelessness to reasons that lead to a housing crisis. The motivation for this report was to capture similar data not available from administrative records on participants in the County of Los Angeles General Relief (GR) Program for adults with little or no income and who are not eligible for federal and state cash aid.

GR Program participation requirements for each person are, in part, determined by their employability status. As a condition of cash aid, men and women deemed employable are obliged to engage in employment development activities through the GR Opportunities for Work (GROW). Those judged unemployable, either temporarily or permanently because of conditions such as physical health or mental health, are not required to participate in job development activities. In accordance with GR Program policies, describing people in terms of employability status is an effective indicator of the presence or absence of a host of barriers to the development of self-sufficiency. For the sake of brevity, reference is made to ‘employables’ and ‘unemployables’ throughout the report.

FOOD INSECURITY AND HUNGER

GR participants are at risk for food insecurity because of their severely limited financial resources. Most receive \$221 in cash and \$152 in food stamps per month from DPSS. Food insecurity, as defined by the Life Sciences Research Office, “exists whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the

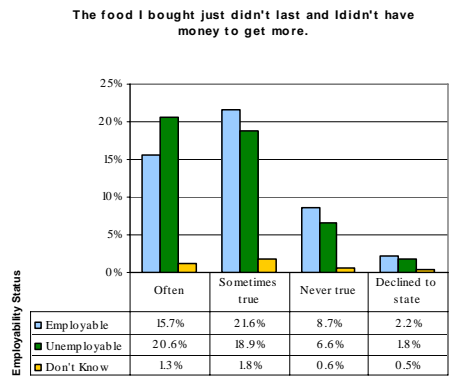
ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain.”¹ Conversely, food secure individuals do not resort to stealing, scavenging, emergency food supplies to have enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs. Food insecurity can lead to hunger and malnutrition. The extent of food insecurity and hunger among GR participants is unknown. To address this issue, the General Relief Survey included questions from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Community Population Survey (CPS). The CPS includes 18 questions to measure food insecurity. Researchers from the National Center for Health Statistics found that six of the 18 items could reliably classify the food security of households without children in the general population.² The six include the following: *I bought food that didn’t last and didn’t have money for more; I couldn’t afford to eat balanced meal; Did you or other adults in the household ever cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there wasn’t enough money for food?; How often did you or other adults in the household ever cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there wasn’t enough money for food?; Did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn’t enough money to buy food? Were you ever hungry but didn’t eat because you couldn’t afford enough food?* These six questions were retained in the General Relief Survey to assure a high level of consistency with Census Bureau’s standard of measurement, and are the focus of this report.

¹ Life Sciences Research Office, Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology. Core indicators of nutritional state for difficult-to-sample populations. *Journal of Nutrition*, 1990; 120: 1559-1600.

² Blumberg, S. J., Bialostosky, K., Hamilton, W. L., & Briefel, R. R. (1999). The effectiveness of a short form of the household food security scale. *American Journal of Public Health*, 89, 1231-1234.

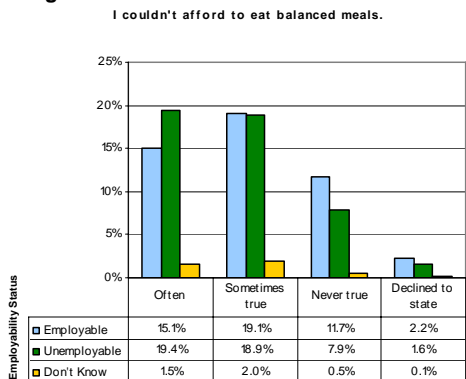
Respondents were asked about their access to food in the last 12 months. Figures 1 - 6 display the responses by employability status of the 854 GR participants who answered all six questions. Employables and unemployables reported significant difficulty in obtaining and maintaining enough food. There is similarity in proportion of positive responses across the six questions; unemployables, as might be expected, reported more difficulty accessing enough food than employables. Unemployables more often bought food that didn't last and couldn't afford to eat balanced meals. Moreover, larger percentages of them cut the size of or skipped meals almost every month, and were more likely to report eating less and being hungry.

Figure 1



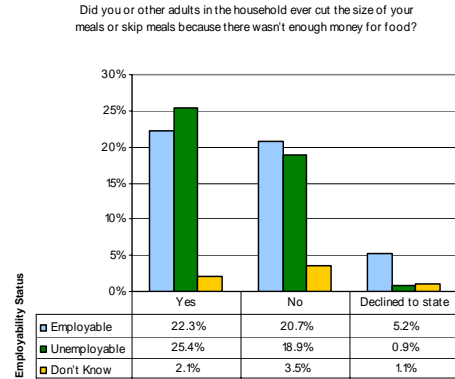
In the last 12 months, nearly 80% bought food that didn't last and didn't have money for more.

Figure 2



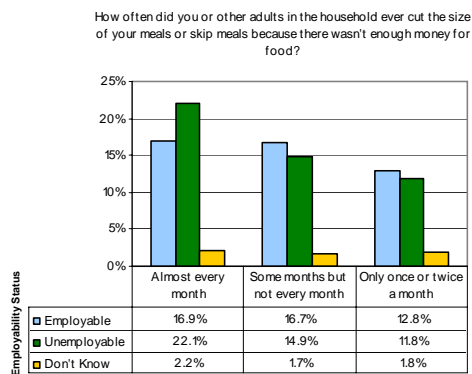
In the last 12 months, 76% couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.

Figure 3a



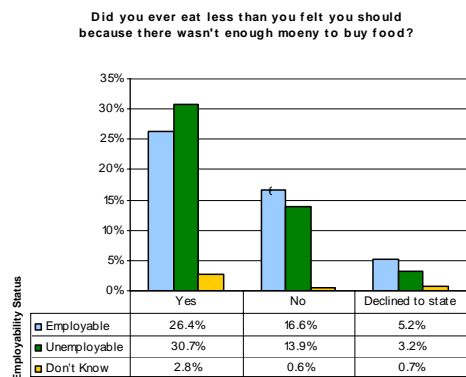
In the last 12 months, close to 50% cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food.

Figure 3b



In the last 12 months, about 41% cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food almost every month.

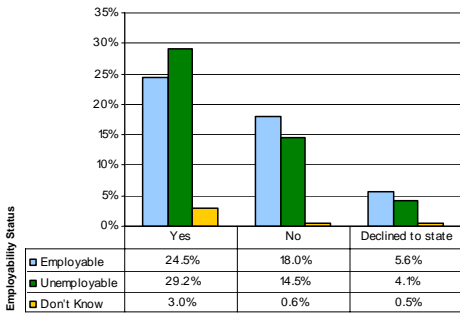
Figure 4



In the last 12 months, 60% ate less than they felt they should because there wasn't enough money to buy food.

Figure 5

Were you ever hungry but didn't eat because you couldn't afford enough food?



In the last 12 months, 57% were hungry but didn't eat because they couldn't afford enough food.

Food insecurity was calculated by summing the number of affirmative response for each individual. (*Often* and *sometimes* were considered affirmative responses for questions 1 and 2; *almost every* and *some months* were considered affirmative responses for question 3b.) Two or more affirmatives indicated food insecurity and 5 or more affirmatives indicated hunger. In previous research, this scoring method correctly identified the level of food insecurity for 99% of all households without children.³ Table 1 displays the results of these calculations. Employable and unemployable GR participants reported similarly high levels of food insecurity and hunger.

TABLE 1 Food Security and Hunger

	Employable	Unemployable	All in sample
Food insecurity	81.3%	85.8%	84%
Food insecurity with hunger	46.5%	57.8%	52.5%

DATA COLLECTION

Inclusion criteria: Participants receiving General Relief cash assistance were asked to complete a survey while visiting a DPSS office between October 1, 2005 and January 31, 2006.

Exclusion criteria: Men and women submitting applications were not included in the survey for two reasons: First, not all of them were eligible for assistance

³ Blumberg, S. J., Bialostosky, K., Hamilton, W. L., & Briefel, R. R. (1999). The effectiveness of a short form of the household food security scale. *American Journal of Public Health*, 89, 1231-1234.

and second, the department did not want to burden individuals with paperwork over and above what was required on the day of application.

Administration: One-thousand and five-hundred surveys were distributed and data was collected on 1123 participants across 13 office locations. DPSS workers completed the survey with the participant to overcome either a language or literacy barrier. Two-hundred and ninety four participants refused to complete the survey and 83 surveys were never administered.

LIMITATIONS

Caution is urged in interpreting the results of this report. Although the demographic characteristics of respondents were representative of the GR caseload, the results should be interpreted as suggestive of trends within the greater GR population rather than precise estimates of occurrence for the population. Moreover, respondents may have been hesitant to disclose certain information.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Numerous people at DPSS and the Chief Administrative Office assisted in gathering data for this report. The author extends thanks to all involved. Photograph courtesy of © Arturo Delfin 2005.

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