

The Economic Divide: Hunger plagues region that helps grow food to feed the world

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The Inland Valley Food Bank rents space on a digital sign to raise financing for food distribution. / Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun

The Economic Divide

Sunday: The Great Recession ended in 2009, but its recovery forgot the Imperial Valley and parts of the Coachella Valley. Today: Poverty has made child hunger a huge challenge for struggling families in the Coachella and Imperial valleys. Tuesday: Stark contrasts between wealth and poverty can be found along Highway 111 from the border to the Coachella Valley.

Highest child food-insecurity rates by county:

1. Zavala County, Texas: 45.9 percent or 1,730 food-insecure children
 2. Imperial County, Calif.: 43.6 percent or 21,940 food-insecure children
 3. Luna County, N.M.: 43.2 percent or 2,950 food-insecure children
 4. Yuma County, Ariz.: 42.7 percent or 23,420 food-insecure children
 5. Starr County, Texas: 42.1 percent or 8,720 children
 6. Willacy County, Texas: 42 percent or 2,500 children
- Data from Feeding America Map the Meal Gap.

Fabian Mendez, 7, runs around his El Centro apartment, playing with toys, punctuating laughter with heavy coughs and rambunctious shrieks. He's not sure what he will eat for dinner, but he's happy because he had a hot dog at school lunch.

His mom Lizette, sitting on a couch nearby, says he will get Corn Flakes or a taco.

Tonight there is money for food.

Tonight she won't have to give up her dinner for her son's.

Tonight they all eat.

"He looks in the fridge and doesn't find anything there," Lizette says in Spanish.

"Mom, there's nothing to eat," he says.

"Let's see what we will do," she tells him.

The Mendezes, a family of three, rely on Fabian's dad's income after a back injury idled Lizette.

They are one family among tens of thousands struggling in El Centro and the rural communities that stretch from the border of Mexico in Imperial County to the border of comfort in Indio, La Quinta and the Coachella Valley.

Surrounded by vast, flat landscapes where farmers and field hands harvest corn, lettuce and food crops headed to tables across the country, many who live here pick vegetables by day but struggle to feed their children at night.

(RELATED: El Centro, east valley economic conditions struggle in recovery)

Plagued by nagging, debilitating unemployment, Imperial County has the second-highest child hunger rate in the country. More than 44 percent of El Centro's kids, nearly one in two, do not know where their next meal will come from.

"It's awful," said Sara Griffen, executive director of Imperial Valley Food Bank in El Centro. "It's really sad."

El Centro, southeast of Palm Springs and with strong ties to the eastern Coachella Valley, has for years recorded the highest or nearly the highest unemployment rate in the United States. Despite producing as much as two-thirds of the vegetables consumed nationally every winter, the region's unemployment rate is stuck between 20 and 25 percent.

A lack of jobs along with gaps in knowledge and education about money management and making healthy food choices contribute to the region's high rate of child hunger, Griffen said. Families run out of money by the second or third week and struggle to figure out how to make do for the rest of the month. Some children go home to a lack of social support. Many parents had their first child young without the skills to prepare healthy meals.

Children in these homes don't know anything different.

"(Child hunger) is invisible," Griffen said.

The problem stretches west along Highway 111 to the Coachella Valley, where one in six people is food-insecure, a U.S. Department of Agriculture measurement derived by conducting interviews that ask how often a population skips meals or worries about food or eating a balanced meal.

The Coachella Valley's rural community has much in common with El Centro: An agricultural base and low-wage jobs on the farm or in the service industry. Migrant farm workers in the east valley communities of Thermal and Mecca pick grapes, bell peppers and dates for a living.

Poverty rates range between 26 and 40 percent throughout the desert, said Lisa Houston, CEO of FIND Food Bank. Large segments of the valley struggle with basic necessities. About 17 percent of the Coachella Valley's population does not have access to a healthy food outlet, according to research highlighted by the Clinton Foundation, which targeted the region for its first national health initiative.

About 10 percent of families in the Coachella Valley, or about 7,893 people, admitted in a 2010

survey to cutting the size of or skipping meals for a child in the past 12 months because there was not enough money, according to the Health Assessment Resource Center, a Coachella Valley-based organization. About 21.2 percent of those families said they cut back on food almost every month.

Riverside County had child food-insecurity rates of 25.6 percent, or 157,800 children, and was one of 16 counties in the U.S. with more than 100,000 food-insecure children, according to Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap. All of the counties with the highest child food insecurity were in the Southwest, with rates at or above 42 percent in counties in Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas. Access to food was harder for kids in rural areas partly due to transportation barriers in getting to food-program sites, the report found. The problem was worse in summer months, when there were only 38 summer food sites for every 100 school-lunch programs.

Making ends meet

When Fabian Mendez gets hungry and there's no food at home, he goes to play or watch videos at a friend's house. Sometimes, they feed him.

"I ask, 'What can I eat?' " he said in Spanish. "Then I become happy playing with him."

Seven years ago, the Imperial Valley Food Bank initiated a backpack food program for hungry children, delivering 8 to 10 pounds of food for the weekend when kids wouldn't have access to school meals. The program began with eight kids.

Two years ago, El Centro residents noticed children sifting through trash bins after lunch to collect food. In schools, some girls passed out on Mondays.

"They just couldn't make it through the day," Griffen said.

Horrified, community leaders rallied to expand the program, which now serves 35 schools at a cost of \$180 per child, per year.

Still, hunger and food insecurity in the region is growing worse, Griffen said.

Billions of dollars in food-stamp benefits were cut in November in the middle of tense congressional budget negotiations. Roughly 47 million Americans who are enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program saw their benefits reduced. About 36,896 Imperial County residents participated in the food-stamp program in October 2013, according to the California Health and Human Services Agency.

In Riverside County, 279,868 residents received food stamps in October.

"They are willing to take food off their table... without providing them access to a job to support family," Griffen said. "As a nation I think we have a lot of soul-searching to do."

Many of her clients are "so desperate" that food stamps don't fill the gap, Griffen said.

The Imperial County food bank serves about 5,000 families each month, or about 11 percent of

the county's families, distributing soup cans, pasta, gallons of milk, cereal, canned fruits, rice and beans, and some chicken and ground beef. The organization delivers food through 50 agencies throughout the valley and tries to feed as many mouths as needed. The food bank also works in partnership with agencies throughout California, including FIND Food Bank of Indio.

FIND provides food to about 88,000 people each month at sites throughout the Coachella Valley including churches and shelters. FIND ramps up in the summer to feed children on break and without access to free and reduced school lunches.

Both FIND and Imperial Valley food banks serve the Southern California agricultural regions, offering nutrition education, and advocating for policies that would increase access to food for low-income families such as "modernizing and simplifying the CalFresh" food-stamp program and reinvesting in California's safety net. The groups belong to the California Association of Food Banks.

"We work together as a collaborative to work on policies on a state level in regards to what changes will make a difference to the population we're representing," said Houston.

Since 2008, most food banks have seen a 50 percent increase in the amount of people in need. And the numbers just keep growing "in a supposedly recovering economy," said Houston, pointing out that FIND serves nearly 10,000 more people today than it did in 2012.

But budget restraints put a serious burden on food banks in an economy still recovering from the worst meltdown in decades — one that is further complicated by the government shutdown, the sequester, extremely high unemployment rates in El Centro, cuts to unemployment benefits, cuts to the USDA emergency food assistance program and other financial concerns, Griffen said.

"With the stuff going on in government now I'm feeling a crunch," Griffen said. "How much more can they squeeze us?"

El Centro resident Cristina Valdez receives food stamps each month — but she says it's not enough to provide for her two children, ages 10 and 12. To try to stretch her money further she waits in line at emergency food deliveries at the Sister Evelyn Mourey Center.

"(Sometimes) it's been six days since we've been without food, and here I come and they help me a lot," Valdez, 37, said in Spanish.

She has been the sole breadwinner for her children since her husband died six years ago in an accident and she moved from Mexicali. She works as a caretaker for the disabled and tries to pick up odd jobs, such as babysitting, in exchange for money or groceries.

"As a mother we do the (most) possible to be able to get food to give them to eat," Valdez said.

After bills — gas, insurance, rent, cell phone, power, school costs — she is left with \$50 to \$80 each month for groceries for her family of three. She has not yet seen any cuts in her family's food stamps, but she is worried the amount will go down.

Health impacts of food insecurity

Dr. Nuri Afshan Baig, chief medical officer for Clinicas de Salud del Pueblo, a federally qualified health center with clinics in El Centro and the eastern Coachella Valley, said the region's medical community focuses primarily on healthy eating and obesity, and food insecurity is ignored.

"I think it's a problem," Baig said. "I don't think we're talking about it."

Food insecurity often shows up indirectly, Baig said. Children might have a hard time paying attention in school, learning well or might have behavioral problems. It could also manifest itself as anemia, a deficiency of red blood cells that leaves people extremely tired. Anemia shows up often among the 180 to 200 patients — between 40 and 60 kids — regularly seen at the El Centro Clinicas de Salud clinic, Baig said.

Food-insecure children were 90 percent more likely to rate their health as "fair/poor" instead of "excellent/good" than their counterparts in homes with consistent access to food, according to a report by the national advocacy group Children's HealthWatch and hunger-relief charity Feeding America. Child hunger leads to headaches and stomachaches and increases the incidence of cold viruses and hospitalizations, the report showed.

Over the long term, child malnutrition can negatively impact growth and development of the body and brain.

"We have so many people who don't have skills for work or don't work," Griffen said. "They're not being fed enough for proper brain function early on and that's having impacts down the road."

"If you really start talking to young, young kids, food has no nutritional value in their minds; it's all about what it represents," Houston added. "Food is one of the key sources of family, love, safety and caring. When you analyze having limited to no access to food on a regular basis you are breaking down one of the key building blocks to their mental well-being, and that's having the foundation of family."

Children who eat breakfast had lower obesity rates on average, Children's HealthWatch data showed. Obesity, often thought of as a problem of overindulgence, is also a sign of child hunger, manifesting in ways people don't expect.

"Everything is connected," Baig said.

Families trying to stretch their financial resources can wind up making bad food choices — buying cheaper, less-nutritious food like soda and cheap carbohydrates instead of lean protein, vegetables and fruits. They're feeding their families in whatever way they can.

"If you're eating rice and beans all the time, chances are you're not getting the full gamut of things that you need for proper development," Baig said.

A chronic condition

As the sun sets, Lizette watches her son run around the modest apartment, breathing heavily. She says Fabian is a "comelon" and has developed a penchant for unhealthy foods, which are

easier for her to come by.

This is where she struggles; there are never enough vegetables or fruit for Fabian, who struggles with chronic conditions like asthma. Food is too expensive even at Walmart, she said, so mostly she ends up cooking refried beans. She worries about the effect of his diet on his health, and she's sad when there isn't enough.

Tonight, she has just \$2 or \$3 to spare for some tortillas.

"Hago lo que puedo contar," she said.

She makes each dollar count.

"I want him to eat," she said in Spanish.

Families like the Mendezes suffer quietly, Baig said, so in many ways hunger is an unrecognized problem.

"You do know that during the holidays everybody becomes very sensitive to that issue, but the problem is year-round," Baig said. "It's not just something that surfaces and cannot be alleviated by us just giving turkeys or a Thanksgiving meal."

"It's not just one meal; it's chronic," she added.

There need to be more conversations about the issue, and different kinds of conversations surrounding the whole environment to which a child is exposed, Baig said.

"We as a community really need to embrace this and what we need to do is not just look at today's problem," Houston said. "We really need to pay attention on what this problem is going to look like in 10, 15, 20 years."

"It's one thing to acknowledge kids going hungry and having a hard time at school and things like that, but those kids are going to grow up," she said. "Are we all going to be looking at each other 15 years later going, 'Wish we had done something 15 years ago'?"

Griffen is not hopeless, even as children go to bed hungry and families ration money in El Centro.

"The pendulum can only be swung so far and then something happens," she said.

'I make myself tough'

Valdez walks a couple blocks from the complex where she picks up her food when she's struggling and heads home. As the afternoon wears on, her neighbors are getting ready to pick up their children from school. Hers will be out a couple hours later, following an after-school program.

Valdez's children have had a hard time concentrating at school. So do a lot of their friends.

Hunger makes it harder.

"I make myself tough," Valdez said. "The most tough that I can so they don't see me, so my children don't feel my pain, to not see them suffer."