

Report: Health challenges for unemployed valley adults

Victoria Pelham, The Desert Sun

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(Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

Unemployed adults in the Coachella Valley face a wide range of health disparities, according to a [new report](http://www.harcdata.org/UserFiles/File/HARC_DataBriefUnemployed.pdf?utm_source=Special+Report+on+Unemployment+2013data&utm_campaign=Unemployed+Data+Brief&utm_medium=email) (http://www.harcdata.org/UserFiles/File/HARC_DataBriefUnemployed.pdf?utm_source=Special+Report+on+Unemployment+2013data&utm_campaign=Unemployed+Data+Brief&utm_medium=email) from the Health Assessment Resource Center, including being more likely to have diabetes and face food insecurity and have challenges accessing health care and insurance.

Drawing on 2013 HARC data, the report also showed that the level of unemployed adults rose drastically between 2007 and 2010 but has not improved much since then, affecting thousands with barriers to health. It estimates there are more than 34,000 unemployed adults in the valley, 9.6 percent.

"The fact is this problem is not over, we've not solved it and we need to continue our efforts to get these people employed and in better health," said Jenna LeComte-Hinely, director of research and evaluation for the Palm Desert-based HARC.

Roughly 12.9 percent of unemployed valley adults, or 4,402 people, have been diagnosed with diabetes, a chronic disease marked by exceedingly high blood sugar levels, compared with only 4.8 percent of their employed counterparts.

Unemployed diabetics are significantly less likely to have taken the hemoglobin A1C test, a key measuring tool of red blood cells for diabetes diagnosis and management. About 63.2 percent have never taken the exam, roughly six times more than the 10.1 percent of local employed adults who had skipped it.

Those without jobs relied much more on food assistance and emergency food supplies from food pantries, food banks and food kitchens, a "logical" conclusion based on their often low-income status, according to the report.

Going hungry can have health consequences from behavioral and psychological problems to anemia, potentially stunting growth, brain and physical development and has been linked in studies to chronic disease.

About 39 percent of local unemployed adults needed food assistance in the past year versus 8.2 percent of those with jobs, and 23.5 percent used emergency food sources (much higher than the 6.3 percent of employed valley adults).

"Those things kind of go hand-in-hand," LeComte-Hinely said. "It's not surprising, but it certainly is disturbing."

"It is clear that unemployment is negatively affecting these Coachella Valley adults' ability to get adequate nutrition, and that emergency food services are a much-needed service for this population," the report said.

The HARC figures also showed health care access barriers for residents without work.

About 56.8 percent of the unemployed – or about 19,089 people – have no health insurance, compared with 28.1 percent of the valley's residents with jobs.

Those with insurance lacked dental, vision and mental health coverage at high rates (more than 20,000 people for each) – 84.2 percent for dental, 82.5 percent for vision and 84 percent for mental health coverage. That's compared with 50, 48.9 and 48.3 percent for the employed.

That's problematic for people with generally poorer health, the report notes, because they often receive less therapeutic care than insured people and tend to be diagnosed at more advanced disease stages. They are "more likely to need care and less likely to receive care."

The valley's unemployed adults also skew younger (roughly half are between 18 and 34 years old) and tend to have less education – with over a quarter having less than a high school degree and just 8.9 percent having a college degree.

"Diabetes specifically is such an ongoing disease that really needs constant management or you have these awful outcomes like amputation and blindness," LeComte-Hinely said. "As we're looking at this these people who are unemployed and have high rates of diabetes also have low rates of education and may not know the importance of constant maintenance. It's not something you can take a pill and get managed."

The report said the data painted "a disturbing picture" of the health of the valley's unemployed.

"Since the crash was in 2008, it's not the hot topic of the moment anymore, but it's still something that needs programs," LeComte-Hinely said. "It needs people's attention."

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