Breaking the Silence: Investigating Food Insecurity for Immigrant Communities

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Introduction
Nearly 11 million immigrants live in California, and approximately 22% are undocumented (Feldstein et al., 2022). The strong work ethic of this population is evident in their employment in jobs that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security identifies as essential and critical (Feldstein et al., 2022). However, many of these jobs pay low wages and undocumented workers do not have access to the same benefits or resources as US citizens (Feldstein et al., 2022).

As a consequence, immigrants and undocumented people experience high rates of food insecurity. According to the 2017-2020 California Health Interview Survey, approximately 500,000 undocumented adults lived in households that struggled with food insecurity (Food4All, 2022). Undocumented immigrants deserve to have their basic needs met and the lack of documentation should not be a barrier to accessing essential resources.

UCSC’s Blum Center and Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County partnered to conduct focus groups about experiences with food and housing insecurity.

Research Questions
- How do immigrant communities navigate food insecurity in Santa Cruz County?
- What resources are needed to assist immigrant communities in meeting their basic needs?

Methodology
In winter 2022, twelve 90-minute focus groups were conducted and audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated. Focus groups ranged in size from 6-14 participants. Community facilitators were trained by the Blum Center researchers to co-facilitate the focus groups alongside UCSC undergraduate students. Questions focused on experiences with food insecurity, awareness of and experiences with resources, and recommendations for non-profit and governmental resources.

Participants
This analysis focuses on a subsample of 9 focus groups in which the majority of participants were immigrants. Of these 71 participants, 64 participants were immigrants from Mexico, Belize, and El Salvador. Length of time living in the United States ranged from 6 and 63 years.

The majority of participants identified as women (n=45) and had children under the age of 18 living in their household (n=47). The majority of participants either experienced low food security (n=22) or very low food security (n=29).

Findings
Focus group transcripts were analyzed for core themes. We share three preliminary themes related to the experience of food insecurity within immigrant communities in Santa Cruz County.

1. “Feeling Trapped” in Financial and Food Insecurity
Many participants described “feeling trapped” by wages that were too low to meet their basic needs, but too high to qualify for resources.

“I feel like it’s the system, the system that has us like this, that doesn’t allow us to grow, because as my comrades here said, if we work two jobs to pay the rent, for one dollar they’ll deny us, and they want to have us here, pushed down, repressed, so that we can’t grow. And they simply maintain us at the same level of poverty.”
-Rosa, Immigrant, Mother

2. Legal Barriers Prevent Access to Resources
Whether due to lack of documentation or the fear of deportation, undocumented respondents described being excluded from essential financial and food resources.

“...There are a lot of people who don’t have knowledge, they don’t have documents. These people are afraid to go to the food banks because they think that this will reach immigration, and it will affect them. Or they think that if someday they want to get their documents, they’re going to have to pay for that...The other point is that if these undocumented individuals will go to the food banks all the time for breakfast, dinner, or so, they’re not going to have enough time to work, and they have families. I think that information is what is most needed here.”
-Jorge, Immigrant

3. Nature of Farmwork
Due to the inconsistency of field labor and low wages, affording food is difficult. The low wages coupled with lack of benefits deepens hardship, especially for people who are not U.S. citizens.

“Last year during this time, there was work at the fields, and currently, there isn’t any. If we go now, they’ll say, ‘Not yet... a month or a month and a half, even two months.’ Last year, there was work during this time, and everything we buy is more expensive...The prices for everything are going up, and you don’t see the salary of farmers going up much.”
-Martisol, Immigrant, Farmworker, Single mother

Discussion
These findings illustrate the hardships many immigrants must navigate without the support of government resources. Unfortunately, immigrants are frequently stereotyped as “job-stealers” who do not contribute to society. As our findings illustrate, this is not the case. Immigrants give much more to society than they take. Fear and oppression marginalize immigrants as they provide food to others’ tables but too often have empty tables themselves.

Recommendations
Based on these findings, we recommend:
(1) Providing undocumented immigrants eligibility for government food/financial resources, such as CalFresh;
(2) Adjusting the maximum income for eligibility to correspond with fluctuating wages and high living costs; and
(3) Reducing barriers to and requirements for accessing resources.

References

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