

HUNGER & THE SAFETY NET IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY:

A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

CONDUCTED BY

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS INFORMATION NETWORK

SPIN

**IN ALLIANCE WITH THE
CARING COUNCIL OF SAN DIEGO**

AND THE SUPPORT OF

**THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT
PRICE CHARITIES**

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Copies of the full report are available at:

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Anecdotes

The anecdotes provided in this appendix present a much fuller picture of the struggle faced by the respondents in this study than can be portrayed in any statistical analysis. It is strongly recommended that these anecdotes be read as they will give much meaning to the rest of this report.

ABSTRACT

The Supportive Parents Information Network (SPIN) is a nonprofit, all volunteer organization providing information, advocacy, and peer support to families living near or below the federal poverty line. The purpose of the SPIN study described below was threefold: 1) To look more deeply into the experience of hunger through the eyes of those challenged by hunger; 2) To document peoples' experience with the San Diego County Safety Net from the perspective of the applicant/potential applicant for public assistance; and 3) To use the insights gained from this study to develop recommendations for improving access to healthy food for people living near or below the federal poverty line.

In September of 2009, San Diego County's participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program¹ (SNAP/FSP, also known as "Food Stamps") was declared the worst in the nation for the fifth straight year by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). These rankings confirmed what low-income families have been reporting to SPIN about their experiences attempting to access or maintain SNAP/FSP through San Diego County's Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA), the local agency charged with administering the program.

As economic conditions have deteriorated, SPIN found that more people were struggling with hunger, yet those who sought SNAP/FSP benefits had great difficulty obtaining them. In an attempt to address the problems of hunger and SNAP/FSP access, SPIN, in conjunction with the Caring Council of San Diego², launched a campaign to study the problems, educate the public, and identify areas of possible solutions and alternatives that could improve SNAP/FSP participation in San Diego County. SPIN began this campaign with preparation followed by detailed interviews related to hunger and SNAP/FSP access. The interviews were conducted in early 2009 with 187 respondents mostly from parents living in deep poverty.³

Preliminary findings were presented to public officials beginning in March 2009. Publicly confronted with low SNAP/FSP participation rates, HHSA responded by unveiling a new Nutrition Safety Plan. Two essential elements of the plan—a software system that bypasses human oversight and a business process model that removes cases from an assigned caseworker—have already been identified as obstacles to SNAP/FSP participation. Further, HHSA's plan calls for increased outreach, requires nutrition classes for anyone attempting to obtain SNAP/FSP and mandates agency lobbying to restrict access to "non-nutritious" foods for persons on SNAP/FSP. These elements directly conflict with findings from the SPIN study which shows that SNAP/FSP is widely known among low-income families, but the problems of access lie within HHSA. The study also indicates that low-income parents are aware of the basic elements of good nutrition, but that despite their best efforts at budgeting, they simply cannot afford to buy enough food to provide adequate quality and quantity during the last two weeks of each month. Finally, the study indicates that starting in the third week of each month, the least nutritious and cheapest foods are consumed as a last resort. If they were barred from purchase, low-income families would go hungry.

¹ The food stamp program was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/FSP) in 2008 by the federal government; California still uses the term "Food Stamps".

² The Caring Council, formed in 1998, is an informal association of about 130 persons who have met monthly to obtain and share information about poverty in San Diego County and to join with SPIN and other organizations in promoting ways to address barriers to self-sufficiency.

³ "Deep poverty" is defined as persons living below 50% of the federal poverty threshold.

As SPIN worked with people to gain access to SNAP/FSP, it found the application process to be daunting. People talked about how long the process took, how they were treated, and the conditions in the welfare offices. Many people reported being denied applications because they were told they weren't eligible so they need not apply. Based on these experiences, SPIN concludes that HHSA's consistently poor performance in enrolling eligible persons in the SNAP/FSP program is caused by the ways in which HHSA conducts its business. The low participation rate is not likely to be improved through more outreach or nutrition education.

FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY:

1. Respondents came to HHSA for help already filled with shame, embarrassment and fear.
2. Respondents experienced HHSA Family Resource Centers as enveloped in a Culture of Fear and Degradation.
3. HHSA is highly inefficient in processing SNAP/FSP applications.
4. Hunger may be deeper and more widespread than is generally known.
5. Respondents struggle to maintain an adequate healthy diet.
6. The quality of life deteriorates as food resources decline.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Two sets of recommendations have emerged from this study. One set addresses County policies and steps to be taken to increase the SNAP/FSP participation. The second set of recommendations addresses the issue of hunger.

For The County:

1. Reinstate the client-caseworker relationship, decrease caseloads, and require all negative County actions generated by CalWIN⁴ to be reviewed by a caseworker.
2. End Project 100% (home inspections of applicants not suspected of fraud).
3. Reduce wait times in Family Resource Centers to one hour or less.
4. Lobby to end all fingerprinting.
5. Upgrade the facilities.
6. Meet with SPIN/Caring Council to discuss the study.

To Address Hunger:

1. Expand eligibility and increase the benefit levels in SNAP/FSP.
2. Eliminate the asset test for SNAP/FSP eligibility for all recipients.
3. Join FRAC's call to end childhood hunger by 2015.
4. Develop alternative ways to access healthy foods.

The full report can be found at: www.caringcouncilsd.org, and www.spinsandiego.org

⁴ CalWIN is a software system used in public benefits systems in several California counties. It responds to the presence or absence of information by adjusting, reducing or terminating benefits without worker oversight.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Supportive Parents Information Network (SPIN) is a nonprofit, all volunteer organization providing information, advocacy and peer support to families living near or below the federal poverty line. The purpose of the SPIN study described below was threefold: 1) To look more deeply into the experience of hunger through the eyes of those challenged by hunger; 2) To document peoples' experience with the San Diego County Safety Net from the perspective of the applicant/potential applicant for public assistance; and 3) To use the insights gained from this study to develop recommendations for improving access to healthy food for people living near or below the federal poverty line.

In September of 2009, San Diego County's participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program⁵ (SNAP/FSP, also known as "Food Stamps") was declared the worst in the nation for the fifth straight year by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). FRAC reported the past year participation rate of 35%. These rankings confirmed what low-income families have been reporting to SPIN about their experiences attempting to access or maintain SNAP/FSP through San Diego County's Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA), the local agency charged with administering the program.

As economic conditions have deteriorated, SPIN found that more people were struggling with hunger, yet those who sought SNAP/FSP benefits had great difficulty obtaining them. In an attempt to address the problems of hunger and SNAP/FSP access, SPIN, in conjunction with the Caring Council of San Diego⁶, launched a campaign to study the problems, educate the public, and identify areas of possible solutions and alternatives that could improve SNAP/FSP participation in San Diego County. SPIN began this campaign with preparation followed by detailed interviews related to hunger and SNAP/FSP access. The interviews were conducted in early 2009 with 187 respondents mostly from parents living in deep poverty.⁷

Preliminary findings were presented to public officials beginning in March 2009. Publicly confronted with low SNAP/FSP participation rates, HHSA responded by unveiling a new Nutrition Safety Plan. Two essential elements of the plan—a software system that bypasses human oversight and a business process model that removes cases from an assigned caseworker—have already been identified as obstacles to SNAP/FSP participation. Further, HHSA's plan calls for increased outreach, requires nutrition classes for anyone attempting to obtain SNAP/FSP and mandates agency lobbying to restrict access to "non-nutritious" foods for persons on SNAP/FSP. These elements directly conflict with findings from the SPIN study which shows that SNAP/FSP is widely known among low-income families, but the problems of access lie within HHSA. The study also indicates that low-income parents are aware of the basic elements of good nutrition, but that despite their best efforts at budgeting, they simply cannot afford to buy enough food to provide adequate quality and quantity during the last two weeks of each month. Finally, the study indicates that starting in the third week of each month, the least nutritious and cheapest foods are consumed as a last resort. If they were barred from purchase, low-income families would go hungry.

⁵ The food stamp program was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/FSP) in 2008 by the federal government; California still uses the term "Food Stamps".

⁶ The Caring Council, formed in 1998, is an informal association of about 130 persons who have met monthly to obtain and share information about poverty in San Diego County and to join with SPIN and other organizations in promoting ways to address barriers to self-sufficiency.

⁷ "Deep poverty" is defined as persons living below 50% of the federal poverty threshold.

As SPIN worked with people to gain access to SNAP/FSP, it found the application process to be daunting. People talked about how long the process took, how they were treated, and the conditions in the welfare offices. Many people reported being denied applications because they were told they weren't eligible so they need not apply. Based on these experiences, SPIN concludes that HHSA's consistently poor performance in enrolling eligible persons in the SNAP/FSP program is caused by the ways in which HHSA conducts its business. The low participation rate is not likely to be improved through more outreach or nutrition education.

FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY:

1. Respondents came to the County for help already filled with shame, embarrassment and fear.

Feelings of shame and fear permeated individual responses to questions about needing and getting help. These feelings of shame and fear were so strong that 58% of the respondents reported that they had denied needing food even though they were hungry when asked by teachers, case workers, etc., whether they had enough. Of those respondents, almost half (48.6%) reported shame as the reason for denying their need for food. *"I feel like a failure going in there. Because you already know you can't do it by yourself."* Thirty-nine percent of the respondents reported fear as the reason for not reporting their hunger. Nearly two-thirds (65.5%) of those who gave fear as a reason were afraid they would have their children taken away. *"I'm scared to tell them, because I'm afraid they're going call CPS, because we don't have hardly anything to eat."*

Responses indicated that many people had internalized the general population's derogatory image of those living in poverty. *". . . I felt I should know better, I was educated and should have known how not to be in that situation, so I was embarrassed. To find myself in that situation in spite of everything that I had tried to do."* The decision to seek help from the County was not an easy one for the respondents of this study.

2. Respondents experienced the County Family Resource Centers as enveloped in a Culture of Fear and Degradation.

Experiences with the County HHSA exacerbated peoples' sense of shame. *"I have always felt that I am worth nothing, but with them I felt even worse, very ugly."* These feelings arose from the conditions of the facilities, how applicants were treated by staff, and the application procedures. People are searched and/or scanned as they enter the Family Resource Centers (FRCs). They face long lines and are not given clear directions about the process. The first person they speak to is behind a bulletproof glass. When there is a face-to-face interaction with a staff person, the experience is characterized along a continuum from indifferent to slightly hostile. Completing the application requires up to five visits (the average number of visits was 4.35), with each visit taking several hours (the average wait time was 3.9 hours, with 36% waiting four or more hours). The FRCs prohibit food or drink, are not children-friendly, and are often crowded and unsanitary.

Almost half of the respondents (48.1%) reported that their first experience at a Family Resource Center was a negative one. While 24% did say the experience was positive, only 1.9% of the respondents reported positive emotions as a result of the experience. Twenty-nine percent reported being saddened by the experience and 18.3% felt angry. Many people reported feeling ignored and neglected. *"[I felt] completely demoralized. You know every single person I encountered there had not one ounce of care, [not] one ounce of*

compassion, not one ounce of anything” “You could see the stress on their faces. It was, and you know, it was like in their eyes it was just next, next, next.” Others felt they were treated with mild hostility. “It wasn’t a very welcoming environment. It was more of a, I don’t want to say hostile, although it did become hostile at times.”

Many respondents found the process of applying offensive and insulting, even when the staff treated them respectfully. Almost a third (32.6%) reported that being fingerprinted made them feel like a criminal. Similarly, the home searches imposed upon applicants who requested both cash aid and food stamps were also experienced as offensive and degrading. *“I guess their thing is to try and catch us in the act. So my thing is you’re automatically thinking that we’re bad, automatically you’re just assuming we’re bad.”* Interestingly, many respondents (42%) reported feeling criminalized by the process even when they were treated respectfully by staff, reinforcing the finding that the County’s procedures are degrading by their very nature.

3. The County is highly inefficient in processing SNAP/FSP applications.

The federal regulations require counties to process all SNAP/FSP applications within thirty days. San Diego County has failed to meet that deadline in an average of more than 30% of SNAP/FSP applications during the first ten months of 2009 (latest data available), ranking among the worst Counties in the State. (Its ranking has ranged from last place to 50th out of 58 Counties).⁸

4. Hunger may be deeper and more widespread than is generally known.

The USDA study on hunger found that 42% of people living below the federal poverty line were food insecure. However, despite the SPIN study’s inclusion of families at 200% of the federal poverty level and below, all of the respondents reported some level of food insecurity: 6% marginal food security; 9% low food security and 85% very low food security. Food insecurity was higher among respondents receiving SNAP/FSP (89%) than those not receiving SNAP/FSP (77%)⁹ and was generally higher among households with children (97% low to very low food security) than those without children (85% low to very low food security). Two factors explain the difference in level of reported food security between the USDA and SPIN studies. First, the SPIN study reveals that many people (58% of respondents) deny or underreport their hunger. Second, the respondents in this study were drawn primarily from people living in deep or extreme poverty. More than half of the respondents (55.1%) reported incomes that place them below 75% of the federal poverty level, and only 6.8% of the respondents have incomes above 125% of the federal poverty level.

The USDA study also indicated that children and adults categorized as having low food security had difficulty accessing food but did not experience disruptions in eating patterns or reductions in food intake. The SPIN study found these claims to be only partially true. The data show that people struggle to maintain an adequate diet for as long as they can. This diet, however, begins to collapse in the third week of the month. The pattern of eating identified in the data show that both adults and children see a reduction in both the quantity

⁸ See <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/PG353.htm> for county reports to the state.

⁹ Non-SNAP/FSP recipients report slightly higher incomes than those on SNAP/FSP. SNAP/FSP recipients reported an average income below 75% of the federal poverty line while non-SNAP/FSP recipients reported an average income closer to 100% of the federal poverty line.

and quality of food as the month progresses. While adults regularly sacrifice their own eating for the children in the household, they are unable to fully shield their children from hunger. Almost three-quarters of respondents (71.9%) reported that food was their greatest worry and that the concern for feeding children rises steadily as the month progresses. While less than 30% of the respondents worried about feeding their children in the first two weeks of the month (22.6% and 28.5% for Weeks 1 and 2 respectively), this number jumps to over half the respondents (57.7%) by the fourth week of the month. People worry most when rent is due and/or at the end of the month. A detailed examination of the respondents' diets shows that rationing of food and reduction in food for both children and adults are the dominant strategies for stretching food resources.

5. Respondents struggle to maintain an adequate healthy diet.

This study asked respondents to give detailed descriptions of the menus in their households for children and adults for each week of the month. The findings in the SPIN study are consistent with the USDA study on food choices of people in poverty. Both studies show that the eating habits of people living in poverty are no different from those of others when both groups have the same resources and that an increase in food money results in an increase in purchases of fruits and vegetables.¹⁰ While all food groups decline in consumption over the month, the decline is faster for adults than children. Also, the decline is faster for some foods more than others. Using the food pyramid as a way of assessing household diets, the SPIN study shows that adults sacrifice their consumption of fruits and vegetables in order to give them to their children. It also shows that while households buy fruits for the children in the beginning of the month, fruits almost disappear from menus after the first week. It is also evident in the data that households experience a dramatic change in their menus after Week 2. Sharp declines in "Meats & Beans," "Grains," and "Milk" between Weeks 2 and 3 show how the menu begins to deteriorate by Week 3. By Week 4 the diet is made up of anything available to the household. By then, a food item's ability to satisfy hunger is more important than healthiness. *"And since we're Latinos I make them eat more tortillas in order to satisfy them because with only the stew, they'd be hungry again later."*

Households struggle to maintain an adequate and healthy diet for as long as they can during each month. For the first week of the month when food is most abundant, rationing is the most common strategy. This strategy remains important throughout the month, but reduction in food intake becomes the most common strategy used from Week 2 through the remainder of the month.

6. The quality of life deteriorates as food resources decline.

Respondents were asked to describe two weeks in their household, one when food was adequate and one when it was not. Behavior changes during weeks of inadequate food included more fighting and arguing (39.8%), loss of concentration (27.1%) and deterioration in school performance (25.3%). Additionally, households reported the following changes in emotions: increased depression (47.6%); increased feelings of anger (36.7%); feeling more stressed (31.3%); increased fatigue (28.3%), and an increase in worrying (17.5%)

¹⁰ See: Stewart, H. & Blisard, N. (2008). Are lower income households willing and able to budget for fruits and vegetables? Economic Research Report Number 54, USDA.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Two sets of recommendations have emerged from this study. One set addresses County policies and steps to be taken to increase the SNAP/FSP participation. The second set of recommendations addresses the issue of hunger.

For The County:

1. Reinstate the client-caseworker relationship, decrease caseloads, and require all negative County actions generated by CalWIN to be reviewed by a caseworker.

Public benefits have been hampered greatly in San Diego County by two systems—CalWIN¹¹ and ACCESS¹²—which HHSA identifies as remedies to low SNAP/FSP participation rates. However, CalWIN sends clients countless contradictory and confusing notices, warnings and requests without ever passing these actions in front of a caseworker for review or approval. The ACCESS business process model transforms the caseworker staff into a kind of assembly line with no particular person responsible for any individual caseload. In practical reality, no staff person is responsible for anything when something goes wrong with a client's case. It has been reported that the ACCESS telephone line, where clients call for assistance with their case, is typically busy for 20-30 minutes, whereupon clients hear a recorded message to call back when the line is not so busy, or they are referred to a voicemail that is full or the call is never returned. While the interviews in the SPIN study were conducted before HHSA fully implemented these changes, SPIN's experience with people attempting to obtain SNAP/FSP is that these changes have made the application processes for any kind of public benefits, including SNAP/FSP, harder to complete successfully. The study does show, however, that people who need help so desperately that they will bear the humiliation and shame of entering a welfare office need to see a real person with whom they can establish a respectful relationship. The removal of the client-caseworker relationship is detrimental to the program goal of fostering economic self-sufficiency. A supportive relationship between the client and caseworker strengthens the client, gets her through hard times and facilitates her re-entry into the competitive mainstream.

2. End Project 100%.

There are ample and detailed requirements for documentation, verification, computerized matches and other data that are much more effective in ensuring compliance with eligibility standards than Project 100%. Without losing any vigilance against suspected fraud or factual inconsistencies, San Diego County could redirect the money it spends needlessly treating innocent applicants as criminals to improve staffing and facilities at Family Resource Centers.

¹¹ CalWIN is a software system used in public benefits systems in several California counties. It responds to the presence or absence of information by adjusting, reducing or terminating benefits without worker oversight.

¹² ACCESS is the central phone line assistance for all persons applying for or receiving CalWORKs, food stamps, and other public benefits. Instead, people call the ACCESS line to find out why something has happened or not in their case. ACCESS is one element of business process re-engineering, a business model that has removed oversight of individual cases from an assigned caseworker.

3. Lobby to end all fingerprinting.

The County's Nutrition Safety Plan calls for lobbying to end fingerprinting for foster youth. Given the significant negative effect fingerprinting has on the applicant and its duplicative nature in protecting against fraud, the County should direct its lobbyists to work toward ending fingerprinting for all SNAP/FSP applicants.

4. Reduce wait times in Family Resource Centers to one hour or less.

For participants in the SPIN study, the average wait for assistance at a County FRC was 3.9 hours. This time was spent in an area where no food and drink are allowed and, with little exception, no space for children to play, to be fed, or be cared for.

5. Upgrade the facilities.

An evaluation of thirteen of the fifteen FRCs in San Diego County yielded grades of F/D- in Customer Service, F in Condition of Facilities, and F in Family Friendliness. There are several ways the County FRCS could be upgraded to reduce their contribution to client experiences of indifference, hostility and neglect. These are: remove bulletproof glass, create a space for eating and drinking, create a children's space, provide stimulating reading material or play activities, and decorate the facility with positive images.

6. Meet with SPIN/Caring Council to discuss the study.

The data collected for the SPIN study and the information obtained by the Caring Council in this joint project provides enormous insight into the perspective of the "SNAP/FSP customers" and could be of great assistance in guiding the County in their attempt to improve its participation rate.

To Address Hunger:

1. Expand eligibility and increase the benefit levels in SNAP/FSP:

Relatively small increases in household income increase the quantity and quality of food purchases. Raising the cut-off for SNAP/FSP eligibility from 130% to 185% of the federal poverty line and increasing benefit levels by 100% would significantly increase a household's purchase healthy foods in adequate amounts.¹³ This requires action at the federal level, but the influence of counties can be exerted through lobbyists.

2. Eliminate the asset test for SNAP/FSP eligibility for all recipients:

California law allows for the elimination of the asset test for everyone. Requiring a household to spend down all its assets before it can become eligible for SNAP/FSP is a counter-productive policy that forces people more deeply into poverty, making it harder for them to recover. The California Department of Social Services has applied this policy to families with children only.¹⁴ This policy should be applied to all eligible recipients regardless of household makeup.

¹³ See: Steward, H., Blisard, N. (January 2008). Are Lower Income Households Willing and Able to Budget for Fruits and Vegetables? Economic Research Report Number 54, USDA.

¹⁴ California AB 433 allows the State Department of Social Services (DSS) to use categorical eligibility to remove the asset test for Californians. CDSS has instructed counties to apply this change to families with children by January 2010.

3. Join the Food Research and Action Center call to end childhood hunger by 2015:

Presidential hopeful Barack Obama took a stand on hunger, claiming, “My top priority is making sure that people are able to get enough to eat.”¹⁵ He also called for the end to childhood hunger by 2015. FRAC has offered seven strategies to achieve this goal, including strengthening the SNAP/FSP and child nutrition programs.

4. Develop alternative ways to access healthy foods:

The recommendations thus far require action on a national level. This recommendation, however, calls for local action, i.e., the creation of community gardens, farmers markets that take SNAP/FSP and WIC, food cooperatives, buying clubs, etc.

The full report can be found at: www.caringcouncilsd.org and www.spinsandiego.org

¹⁵ Meet the Press, 5/4/08.

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The end of 2008 saw the collapse of the global economy, and a recession was officially declared in December of that year. The U.S. was losing hundreds of thousands of jobs per month, gas prices were soaring to almost \$5.00 a gallon, the housing market was crashing, California was slashing benefits to those in poverty, and access to credit had disappeared. As economic conditions worsened, SPIN (Supportive Parents Information Network)¹⁶ saw a sharp increase in the number of people struggling with hunger. Additionally, SPIN saw that the demand for food was overwhelming local food pantries, many of which were reduced to providing expired food or nothing at all. In the midst of this, Food Research Action Center (FRAC)¹⁷ reported that San Diego County had the worst SNAP/FSP participation rate in the nation for the fifth straight year.

Concerned with this rising level of hunger and alarmed by the fact that San Diego County's SNAP/FSP program once again was reported as having the lowest participation rate in the nation, SPIN in alliance with the Caring Council¹⁸ decided to launch a campaign to improve people's access to food assistance. Support for this effort came from the California Endowment and Price Charities. This campaign began by asking people experiencing hunger to share their experiences. In February and March of 2009, after three months of extensive training, a team of eleven women, ten of whom live or have lived in the past at or below the federal poverty line¹⁹, interviewed more than 180 individuals, parents and couples living in San Diego. These interviews asked people to share:

- Their experiences with hunger
- How hunger is affecting their family
- How they are dealing with the hunger
- If they went to San Diego County Health & Human Service Agency for help, what happened?
- If they did not go to San Diego County Health & Human Service Agency for help, why not?

The purpose of this study was threefold: 1) To look more deeply into the experience of hunger through the eyes of those challenged by hunger; 2) To document peoples' experience with the San Diego County Safety Net from the perspective of the applicant/potential applicant for public assistance; and 3) To use the insights gained from this study to develop recommendations for improving access to healthy food for people living near or below the federal poverty line.

¹⁶ SPIN is a constituent organization made up of over 5,000 families living near or below the federal poverty line. It is an all-volunteer organization that is constituent run. For more info see: www.spinsandiego.org

¹⁷ See: SNAP ACCESS In Urban America: A City-by-City Snapshot, September 2009 at <http://www.frac.org/html/publications/pubs.htm>. This site provides ranking of metropolitan areas from 2003 to 2007. San Diego's ratings ranged from 26% in 2003 to 35% in 2007. The County ranked last in nation in each of these years.

¹⁸ The Caring Council is a network of over 150 individuals who are concerned with poverty. It addresses poverty from the policy level with the mission of "telling the truth about poverty." For more information see: www.caringcouncilsd.org

¹⁹ One of the interviewees was a volunteer in her mid-twenties who has never been on public assistance. She worked with the organization and its membership for three years. She conducted ten interviews, one of which was dropped from the study because the respondent's income was over 200% of the federal poverty line.

BACKGROUND

Hunger, Health & SNAP/FSP: It is well documented that significant health disparities exist based on ethnicity and socioeconomic status.²⁰ These disparities arise from three sources: 1) limited access to health care, 2) poor quality care when received, and 3) environmental conditions that increase health challenges. Limited access to healthy food and hunger are perhaps the most widespread of environmental conditions negatively impacting health. We know that hunger/food insecurity contribute to a number of health problems, ranging from low birth weight and increased childhood hospitalizations to obesity and poor school performance.²¹ SNAP/FSP is the largest and most successful program for addressing the issue of hunger/food insecurity, providing food support to more than twenty-five million people daily.²² Along with unemployment insurance, SNAP/FSP is the federal program that is most responsive to changes in the economy. When the economy slows and people lose their jobs, SNAP/FSP is one of the first places people turn for help.²³ However, the success of this program in alleviating or reducing the consequences of hunger/food insecurity is limited by the rate at which eligible people participate in the program.

Problems with Program Participation and Compliance Rates: On a national level, the SNAP/FSP has been somewhat successful, reaching 66% of those eligible.²⁴ However, the picture is very different at the local level. Only 50% of Californians eligible for SNAP/FSP receive them. San Diego County's performance is even more disturbing, as only 35% of those eligible receive SNAP/FSP.²⁵ As stated above, this is the worst participation rate in the nation. Additionally, those with the greatest need, i.e., people reported as having "very low food security," have an even lower participation rate in California (22.8%).

A second measure of program success is how efficiently the program delivers these benefits. Federal regulations require all SNAP/FSP applicants to receive a determination of eligibility within thirty days of applying. San Diego County is among the worst counties in the State in violating this requirement. In 2009 it averaged a noncompliance rate²⁶ of 29.8% for the first ten months as compared to 8% for the State. Table 1 presents the average unadjusted noncompliance rate for San Diego County for each of the first three quarters of 2009 (4th quarter

Quarter	County	State	County to State Ratio	County Rank ²⁷
1 st : Jan-March 2009	48.2%	8.7%	5.6	58 each month
2 nd : April-June 2009	25.7%	8.33%	3.0	High: 53 Low: 56
3 rd : July-September 2009	20.47%	7.7%	2.7	High: 50 Low: 51

²⁰ See PolicyLink at www.policylink.org

²¹ Journal of Nutrition Symposium: Food Assistance and the Well-Being of Low-Income Families. Volume 136, No.4, 2006

²² See the USDA, Food & Nutrition Services at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/faqs.htm#1>

²³ See: Rosenbaum, Dorothy (2006). The Food Stamp Program Is Growing to Meet the Need. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Washington, D.C. www.cbpp.org

²⁴ See: Household Food Security in the United States, 2008 USDA Economic Research Report Number 83 November 2009

²⁵ See: SNAP Access in Urban America: A City-by-City Snapshot. Food Research Action Center (FRAC) www.frac.org

²⁶ Noncompliance rate is the percent of applications each month that have taken more than 30 days to process based on County data submitted to the state. Reports can be found at: <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/PG353.htm>

²⁷ Rank of 1 = lowest noncompliance rate while a rank of 58 = highest noncompliance rate

data not available). Noteworthy in Table 1 are the following facts: First, the County's noncompliance rate is consistently and significantly higher than the state average in each quarter, ranging from 2.7 times higher to 5.6 times the state average. Second, there is a precipitous drop in the noncompliance rate for the County from the first to the second quarter, i.e., from 48.2% to 25.7%. Third, the County is consistently ranked among the worst counties in the state for compliance.

A closer examination of the numbers reported by the County suggests that the drop in the noncompliance rate that occurred in the second quarter is due to a change in accounting practices and not in the way in which SNAP/FSP operates within the County. In the reports that counties submit to the State there is a place for "adjusted" and "pending" cases. Cases are categorized as "adjusted" if there is some change in how they were previously reported. The "pending" category is for cases that have been carried from one month to another. Table 2 shows how changes in the noncompliance rate for the County parallel changes in both the

Quarter	Noncompliance Rate	Number of cases "Adjusted"	Number of cases "Pending"	Pending as % of Total Cases
1 st : Jan-March 2009	48.2%	0	242	3.4%
2 nd : April-June 2009	25.7%	3,145	7,390	66.1%
3 rd : July-September 2009	20.47%	-205	7,841	46.4%

number of cases San Diego County reported as "adjusted" and "pending." Additionally, it can be seen that, while the number of "adjusted" cases dropped again in the third quarter, the number of "pending" cases has remained high. San Diego County HHS has been unresponsive in specifying definitions of "pending" and "adjusted" insofar as food stamps applications and cases are concerned. Without knowing why 8,133 cases were categorized as "adjusted" in the month of April, it is impossible to state with absolute certainty that the change in rate of noncompliance is simply an accounting change. However, the simultaneous and dramatic changes in each of these categories at the same point in time present a compelling argument for the accounting explanation. In other words, the access to food stamps has not been materially improved; only the accounting strategy has changed the compliance outcome. This data shows that not only is San Diego County unable to deliver SNAP/FSP benefits to nearly two-thirds of those who are eligible, but it also is unable to deliver the benefits in a timely manner to those who apply.

The SPIN study has identified three primary reasons why people eligible for SNAP/FSP do not participate: (1) the application process, which is often complex, intrusive, humiliating and confusing; (2) lack of awareness of eligibility; and (3) fear. The study pointed to the application process as the primary contributor to San Diego's low participation rate. San Diego puts applicants through an extremely complicated, lengthy, intrusive, and humiliating process. Additionally, it has been widely reported that the County frequently denies people access to the application, issuing verbal denials that prevent some eligible people from even submitting an application. The entire application process in San Diego County takes an average of up to five visits²⁸ and requires the fingerprinting of every adult member of the household. In addition, many applicants must submit to a home search by a fraud investigator from the District

²⁸ The Union Tribune Reported an average of five visits (McDonald, J. (11/20/06). As Frustrations Mount Fewer People Enroll in County's Food Stamp Program. (The SPIN study presented here found an average of 4.35 visits.)

Attorney's office (Project 100%) if their application for food stamps is combined with an application for cash aid, or welfare.²⁹

San Diego County's Approach: Local agency efforts to address the low participation rate are best captured in the Nutrition Safety Plan submitted to the County Board of Supervisors on April 21, 2009 by the County's Health and Human Service Agency (HHS). The Nutritional Safety Plan³⁰ guides HHS's food and nutrition programs toward three goals:

1. Promote Nutrition And Health Improvement
2. Strengthen Outreach, In-Reach & Education
3. Continue to Enhance Eligibility & Enrollment by Offering Superior Services while Assuring Program Integrity

These goals are to be achieved through advocacy, outreach and education. Changing access to food, streamlining the application process, and increasing incentives for SNAP/FSP outreach and nutrition education are the plan's specific objectives. The data presented in the SPIN study will show that, while the County's plan for outreach would be commendable if applications were handled efficiently, it is likely to add to the logjam in the present application process. Furthermore, the plan's advocacy and education strategies as a means of relieving hunger and increasing the participation rate are misguided. Taken together, the County's proposals imply that the problem of nutrition among people in poverty lies in their ignorance about healthy eating habits and lack of awareness of the SNAP/FSP. The findings from the SPIN study, however, are consistent with national studies on food choices by people in low-income households that show that eating habits of people in poverty are no different from other families when they have the same resources.³¹ The data from the SPIN study provide additional evidence that it is lack of access to healthy food that is the root of nutritional problems for people in poverty, not a lack of awareness of good nutritional content. This study strongly suggests instead that the low participation rate for the SNAP/FSP in San Diego County is a natural consequence of how San Diego County HHS conducts its business within its own FRCs.

The Cost of the County's Failure: The 35% participation rate has a clear and obvious cost to the more than 287,000 individuals in San Diego who are eligible for SNAP/FSP but do not receive them. What is less obvious is the cost of giving up this \$342,373,404 in lost SNAP/FSP benefits to the rest of the County.³² It is estimated that each dollar of SNAP/FSP generates \$1.84 of economic activity within a community. Using this conversion, San Diego County is losing \$629,967,063 in economic activity annually. In addition, the California Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) points out that the State and the County are losing an enormous amount of tax dollars.

Research done at the University of California and elsewhere indicates that individuals with income low enough to be eligible for SNAP/FSP would, on average, spend about 45 percent of their income on goods for which they would pay sales tax. The state General

²⁹ Project 100% is a program run by the San Diego District Attorney's Welfare Fraud Investigations Division and involves fraud investigators searching the homes of every individual who applies for cash assistance in San Diego County. Almost all of these cash aid applicants are also food stamps applicants.

³⁰ See the County's Nutritional Safety Plan as presented to the County Board of Supervisors on April 21, 2009.

³¹ See: Stewart, H. & Blisard, N. (2008). Are Lower Income Households Willing and Able to Budget for Fruits and Vegetables? Economic Research Report Number 54, USDA. This study shows that increasing people's food resources by as little as 10% leads to a significant increase in the amount of fruits and vegetables in their diets.

³² See: Lost Dollars, Empty Plates: The Impact of Food Stamp Participation on State and Local Economies. A publication of the California Food Policy Advocates (www.cfpa.org) - November 2009

Fund receives about 5 cents for every dollar that is spent on taxable goods. Local governments and special funds receive the remainder of the sales tax revenue (generally about 2.25 percent). Because additional food coupons would result in low-income families spending more of their other resources on taxable goods, the receipt of federal food coupons helps to generate revenue for the state and for local governments.³³

In practical terms, this assessment points to a loss of \$2,311,020 in additional annual tax revenue to San Diego County above and beyond the loss in SNAP/FSP dollars and economic activity. While this sizeable loss in both economic activity and tax revenue is problematic in good economic times, it has a much more significant impact during the current recession.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

The data presented here is the result of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study. PAR is different from academic research in that it is led and conducted by the people affected by the issue being researched. It is designed specifically for the purpose of informing the type of action needed to change the policies being studied. PAR provides data that typically does not exist, i.e., an assessment of the policy as experienced by those targeted by the policy. The uniqueness and necessity of PAR in evaluating hunger and access to SNAP/FSP in San Diego County lie in the ability of this methodology to elicit information that otherwise remains hidden. Hunger is a very sensitive subject, and 58% of respondents in the SPIN study admitted to denying the need when asked about having enough food, often out of fear that their children would be taken away. It was imperative that the study be developed and implemented by people who have experienced hunger and the safety net. The insights gained through their experience are invaluable in deciding what kinds of questions to ask and how to ask them. As pointed out below, different kinds of questions elicit different kinds of responses. Based on their experience, the design team was able to phrase questions in ways that reduced the discomfort that comes with discussing sensitive issues. Additionally, because those doing the interviews were/are facing the same challenges, it was much easier to develop a rapport between the interviewer and the person being interviewed. It is well known that the quality of the interview is determined by the quality of this rapport, especially when discussing sensitive issues.

OVERVIEW OF STUDY

While it is generally accepted that the SNAP/FSP application process is a barrier, it is not known what specifically about the process creates the barrier, why the barrier is significant, or what kind of policy changes would reduce these barriers. This information can only come from people eligible for SNAP/FSP. There have been several “top-down” studies related to participation, but no “bottom-up” studies have been conducted. The former studies begin with the questions and concerns of those implementing the policy while the latter are focused on how those targeted by the policy understand and interact with it. Outreach efforts can only succeed if they speak to the issues that prevent people from using the SNAP/FSP, and we can only know this by talking with clients/potential clients of the SNAP/FSP directly.

Survey Development: The study was conducted by Parent Leaders of SPIN, all of whom presently live or have lived in the past at or below the federal poverty line, and all of whom have experienced the SNAP/FSP application process. For twelve weeks, these Parent Leaders

³³ See: Legislative Analyst's Office, *Analysis of the 2004-05 Budget Bill- SNAP/FSP Program*, February 2004. Available at: http://www.lao.ca.gov/analysis_2004/health_ss/hss_20_foodstamps_anl04.htm

received extensive training and learned the history of social safety net programs, the structure of participation in our government decision-making, and interviewing skills so that they could produce reliable data. During these weeks, Parent Leaders created the interview instrument. Starting from their experiences, they critiqued existing hunger surveys and created new questions. Questions were vetted based on what information they would provide and how they would be received by the person being interviewed. Recognizing that people living in poverty, especially those on public assistance, are frequently barraged with intrusive questions, the design team was very sensitive as to how the questions would make interviewees feel.

Once the initial interview was created, the design team conducted a pilot test with each member conducting at least two interviews. All interviews were digitally recorded. The recordings from the pilot interviews were used to improve the interview questions and as a training tool to strengthen interviewing skills. Upon completion of the final interview questions, the team began to conduct interviews. All interviews were digitally recorded, conducted by two-person teams, and took place during the months of February and March of 2009. Throughout that time the team also met weekly to review progress on the study and to discuss and resolve issues that arose from the interviews. During that time, the team conducted 187 interviews, 172 of which were usable in the study.³⁴

Once the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service. Interviews that were conducted in Spanish were first transcribed in Spanish and then translated into English. A spot check of these translations was made to ensure they accurately reflected the content of the interview.

Respondents: As stated above, there were 187 interviews conducted, 172 of which were able to be used in the study. Table 3 presents a demographic analysis of the participants. As can be seen, 89% were women, 8% were men, and the remaining 3% were couples. Just over two-thirds (69%) of the participants identified as Latino, 15% were European-American and 11% African-American. Three-quarters (76%) of the respondents were responsible for children. Over half of the respondents (59%) were receiving SNAP/FSP. Eighty-six percent of the households receiving SNAP/FSP included children, while only 68% of the non-SNAP/FSP

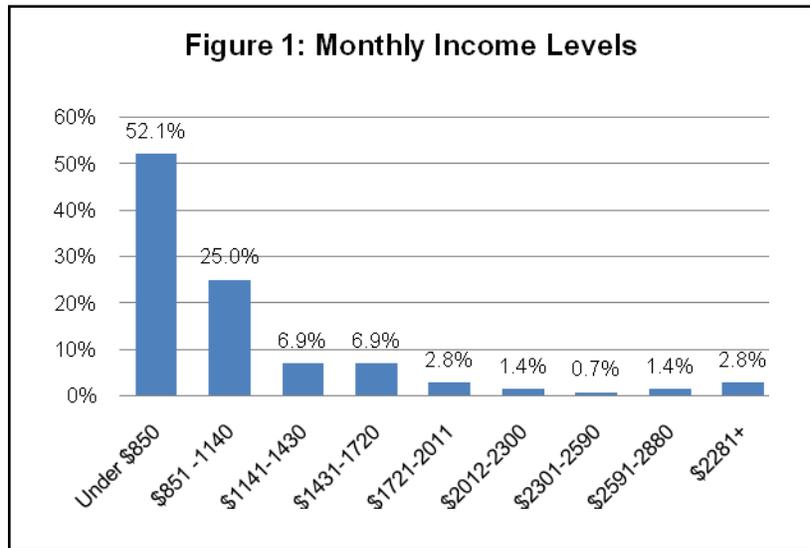
Gender	Female: 89%		Male: 8%		Couples: 3%
Ethnicity	African-American: 11%	Euro-American: 15%	Latino: 69%		Other: 5%
Family Make-Up	Children: 76%		Adults Only: 24%		
SNAP/FSP	SNAP/FSP: 59%		No SNAP/FSP: 41%		
	Children: 86%	Adults Only: 14%	Children: 68%	Adults Only: 32%	
	TANF & SNAP/FSP: 69%		SNAP/FSP Only: 31%		

households included children. Finally, 69% of the respondents who were receiving SNAP/FSP were also receiving TANF (CalWORKs), while 31% were receiving SNAP/FSP only.

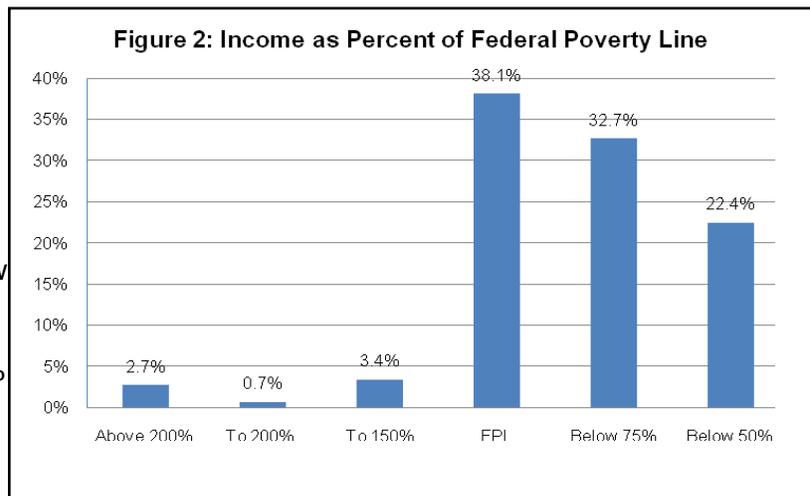
Figures 1 and 2 show the income distribution of respondents. As can be seen in Figure 1, more than half (52.1%) of the respondents had incomes of less than \$850 per month or \$10,200 per year. In fact, over 90% (90.9%) earned less than \$1,720 per month or \$20,640 per year. Figure 2, taking respondents' household size into account, presents the respondents' income as a

³⁴ 11 interviews were lost due to technical problems with the digital recorders and four respondents had incomes greater than 200% of the poverty level.

percentage of the federal poverty line. Just over one-third (38.1%) of the respondents reported incomes between 76% and 125% of the federal poverty line (labeled “FLP” in Figure 2). More than half (55.1%) of respondents reported incomes less than 75% of the federal poverty line, and more than a fifth (22.4%) reported incomes below 50% of the poverty level. Only a small percentage (2.7%) reported incomes of more than 200% of the federal poverty line. As previously stated, these participants were eliminated from the analysis, as the criteria for inclusion was an income below 200% of the federal poverty line.



The income data presented here indicate that the respondents in this study were drawn predominantly from among people living in extreme poverty. More than half (55.1%) of the respondents have incomes below 75% of the federal poverty line. This extreme level of poverty is also reflected in the fact that 69% of the respondents who receive SNAP/FSP also receive TANF, while this is true for only 25% of SNAP/FSP recipients within the



County at large. This level of poverty could contribute to what may appear to be an over representation of women and Latinas in the sample. However, census data show that the percentage of women in poverty increases as the poverty deepens. This relationship is also true for Latinos and African-Americans. Given San Diego’s proximity to the Mexican border, a high percentage of Latinos in any sample is to be expected. It is also to be expected that this percentage would rise as poverty deepens.³⁵

It is important to note here that this sample is unique in that it gives voice to a segment of the population that is rarely heard. It is known that using even the most comprehensive sampling procedures results in the underrepresentation of African-Americans and Latinos in general as well as people living in poverty.³⁶ This study breaks that barrier and provides insight into how

³⁵ See: US Census Bureau (September 2009). Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2008 at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2009pubs/p60-236.pdf>

³⁶ See: US Census Bureau (2009). Source and Accuracy of Estimates for *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2008* at http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/p60_236sa.pdf

this nearly invisible segment of our society deals with the issue of hunger and how they experience the safety net in San Diego County.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

As stated above, this study was designed to achieve three purposes, i.e., 1) To look more deeply into the experience of hunger from the eyes of those challenged by hunger; 2) To document the experience of the San Diego County Safety Net from the perspective of the applicant/potential applicant for public assistance; and 3) To use the insights gained from this study to develop recommendations for improving access to healthy food for people living near or below the federal poverty line. This report is organized around those purposes.

Part A: Hunger in San Diego County. This section examines hunger from the standpoint of those who experience it. Respondents were asked several questions relating to the impact of hunger on their lives. Questions explored issues such as changes in environments within households when food was adequate and when it was not. Respondents were asked detailed questions about their weekly menus for both children and adults. In particular, they were asked to name the foods they fed their children for breakfast, lunch, supper and snacks for each week of the month. The same questions were asked regarding the adult menu for the month. Those interviewed gave detailed descriptions of how they shopped and what strategies they used to make their food stretch from one week to the next. All those interviewed also responded to structured questions drawn from the Current Population Survey's Household Food Security Survey to assess the level of food security among respondents in a form that could be compared to national statistics.³⁷

Part B: The Culture of Fear and Degradation: This section documents the experience of the San Diego County Safety Net from the perspective of the applicant/potential applicant for public assistance. In the interviews, respondents who applied for public benefits were asked to describe their first experience at the Family Resource Centers (FRC), how long they had to wait for assistance, how many trips they needed to make before completing the application process, how long it took to receive their benefits, their experience with home searches, etc. Respondents who were not receiving public benefits were asked to explain why.

In addition to the interviews, a second set of data were collected on the FRCs. The research design team developed a form for rating the FRCs on Customer Service, Facilities, and Family Friendliness.³⁸ The category of "Customer Service" was further broken down into "Procedures" and "Client-Staff Interaction," and the category of "Facilities" was broken down into "General Conditions" and "Sanitary Conditions." After a brief orientation and training, a team of volunteers visited thirteen out of fifteen County FRCs and rated them. The outcome of these ratings is included in this section.

In addition to these sections, the report includes an appendix which describes the methodology in detail and includes several anecdotes to provide a fuller picture of respondents' experiences.

³⁷ This is the survey used by the US Census Bureau, Economic Research Service to measure food security. For more details on how food security was measured, see the Methodology Section

³⁸ See the Methodology Section for greater detail on these ratings

PART A: HUNGER IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

FOOD INSECURITY

The US Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) latest report on food security states that “Eighty-five percent of American households were food secure throughout the entire year in 2008. . . . The remaining households (14.6 percent) were food insecure at least some time during the year, including 5.7 percent with very low food security . . .” “*Food security*” is defined as “access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members,” while “*food insecure*” is defined as “the food intake of one or more household members was reduced and their eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year because the household lacked money and other resources for food.” Food-insecure households are further classified as having either *low food security* or *very low food security*. The very low food security category identifies households in which food intake of one or more members was reduced and eating patterns disrupted because of insufficient money and other resources for food.³⁹

Using the USDA’s definition, this study found a significantly higher level of food insecurity among respondents than reported for both the general population and people living below the federal poverty line in the USDA study. As can be seen in Table 4, none of the respondents fit

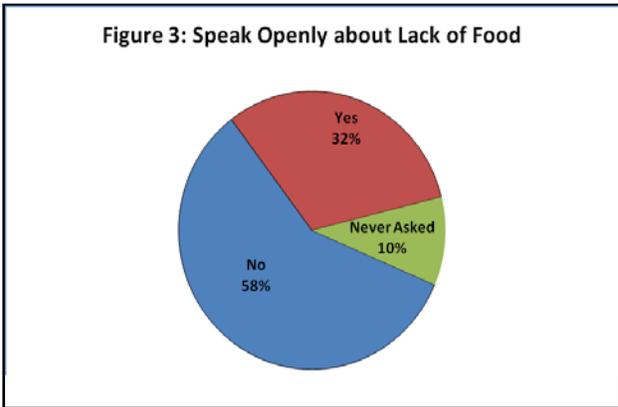
	Food Secure	Marginal Food Security	Low Food Security	Very Low Food Security
All Respondents	0%	6%	9%	85%
Households with Children	0%	3%	10%	87%
Households with Adults Only	0%	15%	5%	80%
Food Stamp Recipients: All	0%	4%	7%	89%
SNAP/FSP: Children	0%	4%	8%	88%
SNAP/FSP: Adults Only	0%	7%	0%	93%
Non Food Stamp Recipients: All	0%	11%	12%	77%
Non SNAP/FSP: Children	0%	4%	16%	80%
Non SNAP/FSP: Adults Only	0%	24%	9%	67%

the criteria necessary to be considered food secure, and only 6% were classified as marginally food secure. Eighty-five percent were classified as having very low food security, and 9% were classified as having low food security. A higher percentage of households with children were classified as having very low food security (87%) as contrasted with adult-only households (80%). Inversely, more adult-only households were classified as having marginal food security

³⁹ See: the USDA Economic Research Report Number 83 (November 2009). **Household Food Security in the United States, 2008**

(15%) compared to households with children (3%). Respondents who reported receiving SNAP/FSP showed a higher level of food insecurity (89% very low and 7% low food security) than respondents who did not receive SNAP/FSP (77% very low and 12% low food security). Food stamp households with children also showed a higher level of food insecurity (88% very low and 8% low food security) than food stamp households that are adult-only (80% very low and 16% low food security). Interestingly, the demographic that having the highest percent classified as very low food security was adult-only households receiving SNAP/FSP (93% very low food security).

Respondents' high levels of food insecurity is not surprising, since more than half of the respondents in this study have incomes that classify them as living in extreme poverty, and the deeper the poverty, the greater the food insecurity. The USDA report reflects this pattern in its data. While only 14.6% of the total population is classified as food insecure, the USDA report found that 42% of people living below the federal poverty line fit that classification. It also found elevated levels of food insecurity among Latinos and African-Americans. The respondents in the SPIN study most resemble those defined as having "very low food security" in the USDA study. In part, the differences in levels of food security in these two studies are due to the fact that respondents in this study are more likely to be living in extreme poverty than the USDA sample. However, the SPIN study also found that people are very likely to deny their food insecurity when asked. As can be seen in Figure 3, 58% of the respondents indicated that they do not feel free to speak openly with someone such as a nurse, case manager, teacher, etc. concerning how much food they have.⁴⁰ Thus, the data from this study suggest that the USDA study may be underreporting food insecurity. That so many respondents would admit to denying the need for food calls into question the following claims by the USDA study:



Even when resources are inadequate to provide food for the entire family, children are usually shielded from the disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake that characterize *very low food security*.

Households classified as having *low food security* have reported multiple indications of food access problems, but typically have reported few, if any, indications of reduced food intake.

Overall, the pattern of hunger found in the SPIN study is similar to that found in the USDA study. The difference between the two studies is depth and prevalence of hunger. The data from this study strongly suggest that hunger is more widespread and deeper than indicated in the USDA conclusions. In particular, the data to be presented later in this section will show that parents do all they can to protect their children from hunger, including denying food to themselves. However, the fear of losing their children leads many to underreport their hunger. The data presented here will show that the claim by the USDA that children are shielded from disrupted

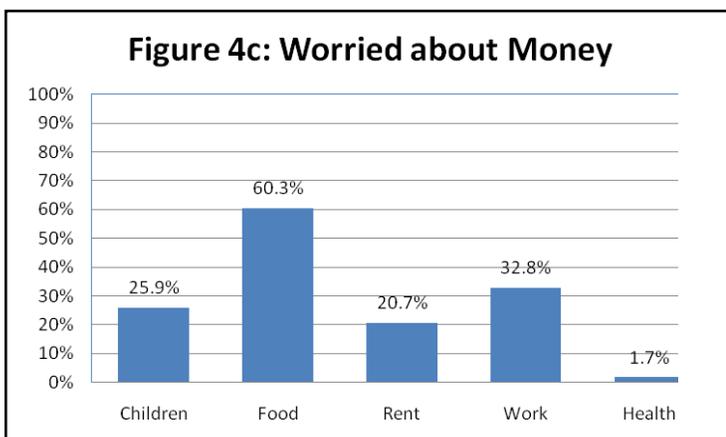
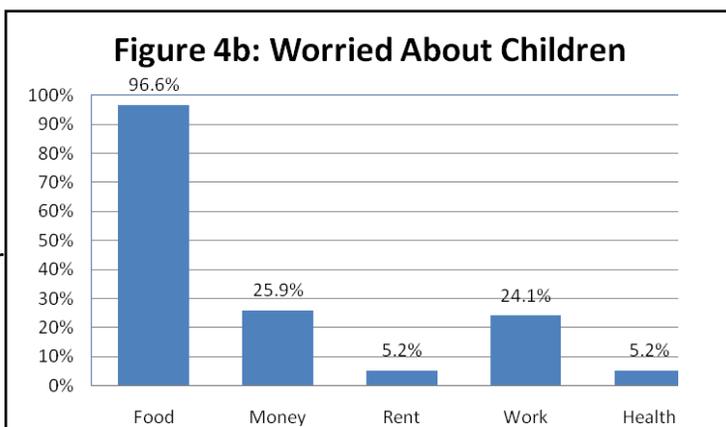
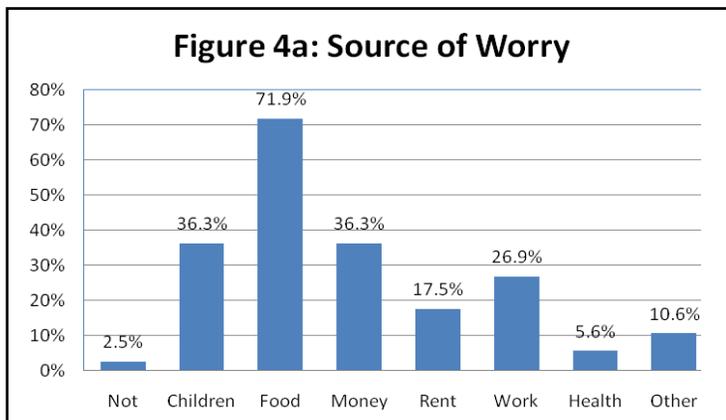
⁴⁰ When asked why people denied the need for food, 39.2% reported fear as the reason. Two thirds of those respondents (65.5%) reported that they feared having their children taken away because of their inability to feed them. See Figure 3 in Part B.

eating patterns and reduced food intake is only partially true. Parents do make a strong effort to shield their children. However, these efforts lessen but do not prevent the disruptions in eating patterns and reductions in food intake. Additionally, the high rate of underreported hunger calls into question the USDA conclusion that people categorized as experiencing low food security do not experience reductions in food intake.

ALL ENCOMPASSING NATURE OF HUNGER

Because the team that designed the study has experienced hunger and the SNAP/FSP application process, they understood that the challenge of feeding a family goes through a monthly cycle. The questions in the interview were designed to capture the experience of respondents throughout that cycle. The interview began by asking respondents to identify what worried them the most. As can be seen in figure 4a, providing food for the family was named twice as often as the second most frequently named concerns, i.e. concerns about their children and having enough money to meet their financial responsibilities (71.9% v. 36.3%). A closer look at these responses shows that the concern for providing food for the family permeates the other worries as well. Figure 4b shows that 96.7% of the people who named children as a worry also identified food as worry, four times as often as the second most frequently named worry (Money – 25.9%). Figure 4c shows that 60.3% of the people who named money as worry also identified food as a worry almost twice as often as the second most frequently named worry (Work – 32.8%).

What this data show is that the respondents' worry about "being able to feed their families" is an all encompassing worry, i.e., it feeds their other major worries. For example, data presented here indicate parents are concerned about their children's success in school, and they see hunger as a barrier to their children doing well in school. Thus, their worries about feeding their children are directly connected to their worries about their children's



school achievement. The data also indicate people worry most about feeding their family when bills are due, because they know they can't both pay the bills and buy the food.

To the question, *what makes you worry more*, respondents said:

"When my son goes hungry . . . I worry because I don't like my son going hungry." – *Mother of two in a two-parent household*

"Having no food and having them get sick - My children" – *Mother in household of five adults and two children*

". . . trying to plan the meals around the money that I receive" – *Single mother with two children*

"There's not enough for the kid or for us too. I mean, one worries because there's not enough to give them food, I mean one does worry. He has no work and no food." – *Mother in household of five adults and one child*

"What worries me the most is my son's food, because he's little . . . , well if he, I mean, if there isn't [food] well then there isn't, but a child asks you [for food], and what are you going to tell him?" – *Mother in household of two adults and one child*

"I worry because each month, I wait, wait, if the stamps are going to come, with that concern, if the social worker sends the stamps or not, then once they arrive, I say, now it's ok, I'm saved at least for this month." – *Household of two elderly adults*

"Not having enough income, not having enough money to provide for my kids. Sometimes I had to not buy shoes for my family just to feed them." – *Single mother of five children*

"If I run out of money, how do I get more food?" – *Single mother of one child*

"That my boy asks me and I have nothing to give him. Well, I get desperate because sometimes my son asks me for juice or opens the fridge and there's none." – *Mother in household of three adults and four children*

"Right now we're spending almost all of the money that we have for just to keep the rent of the house" – *Household of two elderly adults*

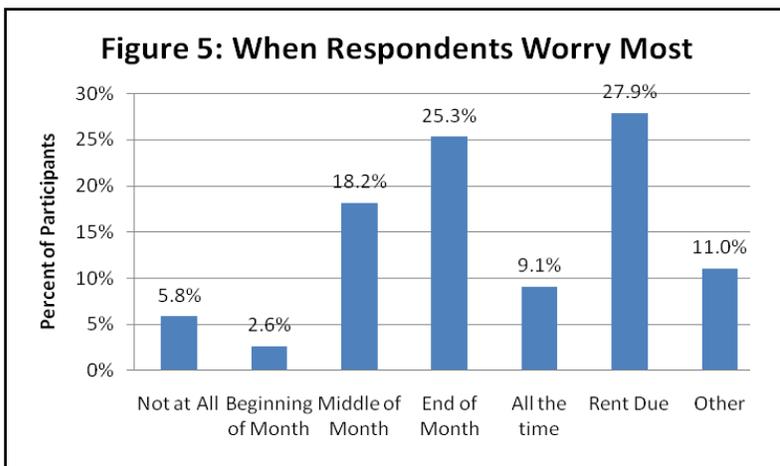
". . . there's not much work and it's not enough for rent or food." – *Mother in household four adults and two children*

"It's very hard since I am mother and father for my children and . . . I do not have a job and is difficult to deny something to them that they want to eat." – *Single mother of two*

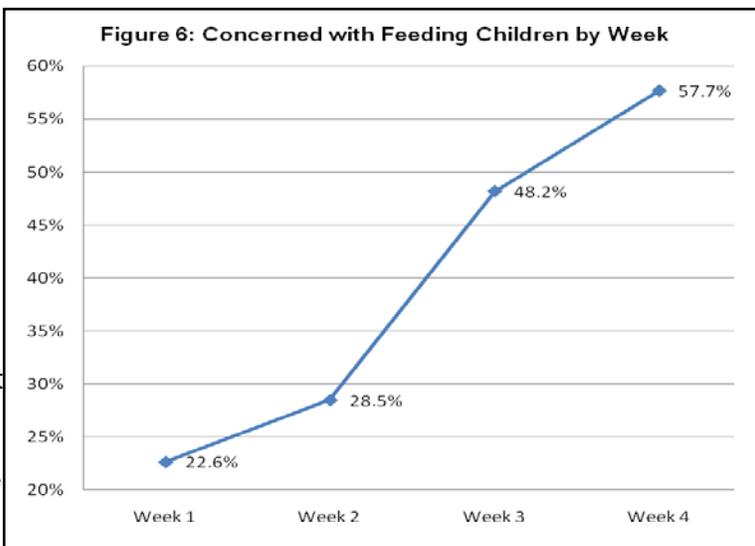
"I worry about everything, because the rent is coming, there is no food and the bills . . . I have to pay them." – *Single mother of two*

"What worries me more is that right now we're practically eating off of the stamps. It worries me that at any time they might take the help away from us and we won't have enough to eat." – *Mother in household of two adults and three children*

Figure 5 shows the responses to the question about when respondents worry most within the month. As can be seen, “when rent is due” was the most frequent response (27.9%). The second most frequent time of worry is at the end of the month (25.3%). Respondents reported the least amount of worry in the beginning of the month (2.6%). Figure 6 shows how concern about feeding one’s children increases significantly throughout the month. While 22.6% of respondents expressed concern about feeding their children in Week 1, 57.7% expressed concern in Week 4. The percent of respondents who report this concern jumps substantially from Week 2 to Week 3, an increase of 19.5% as opposed to increases of 5.9% and 9.5% from Week 1 to Week 2 and Week 3 to Week 4, respectively.



Thus, respondents were increasingly concerned about feeding their children throughout the month, and the time of greatest concern is the “end of the month,” when “rent is due.” This provides a picture of families forced to choose between providing housing or providing food for their families.



As the data below suggests, when forced to choose between paying for food and rent, respondents chose rent.

MONTHLY MENUS

Much of the interview was dedicated to identifying household menus throughout the month. Each respondent was asked to consider the first week of the month and identify what the children in the household were fed for breakfast, lunch, supper and snacks that week. Respondents were then asked to identify what the adults in the household ate for breakfast, lunch, supper and snacks that first week. These questions were then repeated for each of the four weeks of the month.

Responses to these questions were analyzed by week for both adults and children. The data presented is based on the number of times a particular food was referenced by the respondent. Those foods were then placed into one of six categories⁴¹ based on the food pyramid, with a

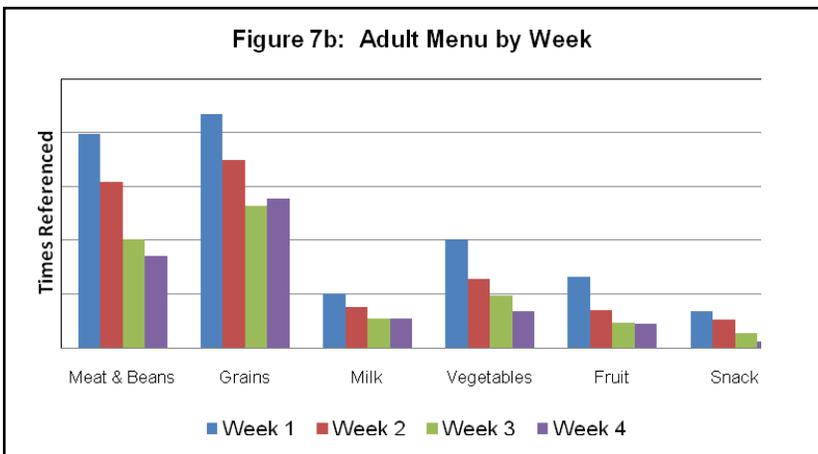
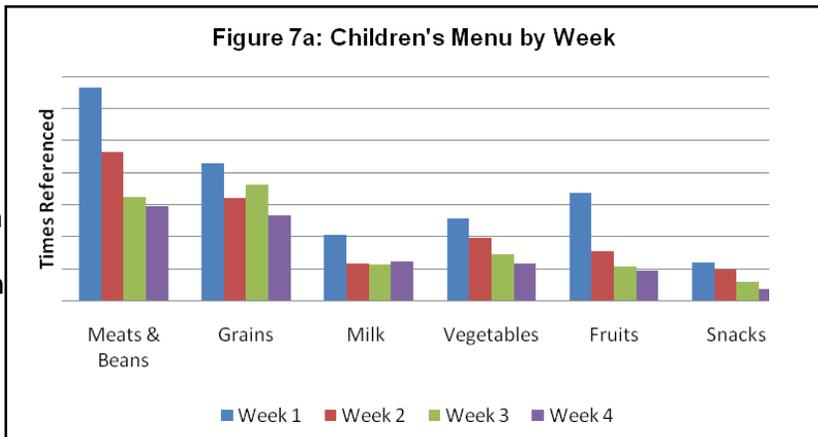
⁴¹ Five of these categories were drawn from the food pyramid: Meat & Beans, Grains, Milk, Vegetables, Fruits. The sixth category was “Snacks.”

separate category for snacks.⁴² While this approach does not yield specific menus, it does provide a strong indicator of the foods being consumed by respondents over a month's period. The data presented here will show:

- Both children and adults experience a disruption in eating patterns and a reduction in food intake
- Adults sacrifice and do without to minimize or shield the children from hunger
- The strategies available to address dwindling food resources are extremely limited and do not prevent the disruption of eating patterns and reduction of food intake

Figures 7a and 7b show the patterns of consumption for each of the categories by week for adults and children separately.

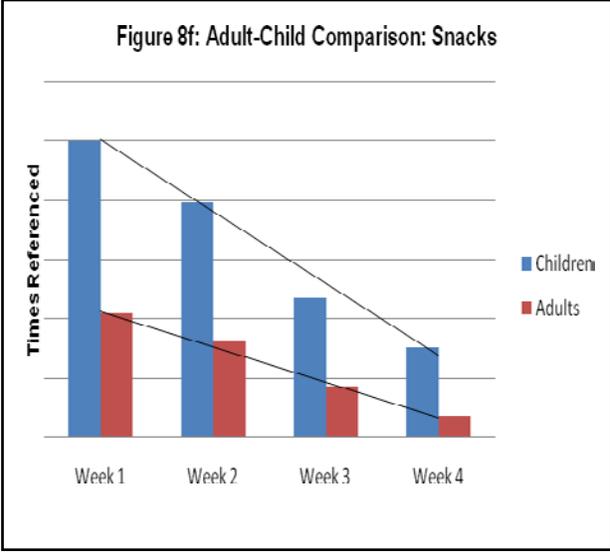
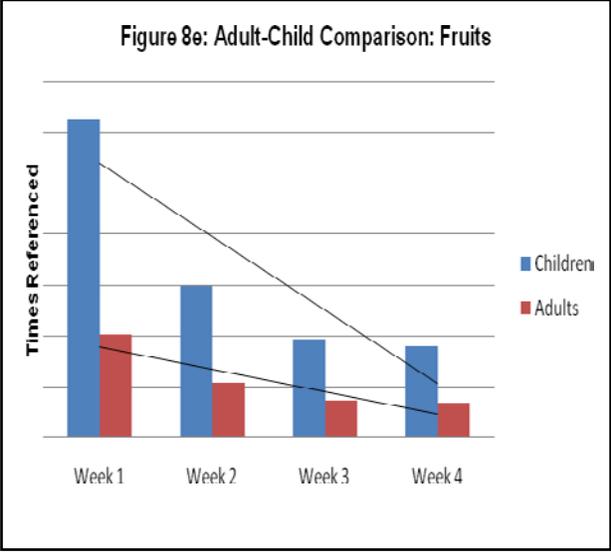
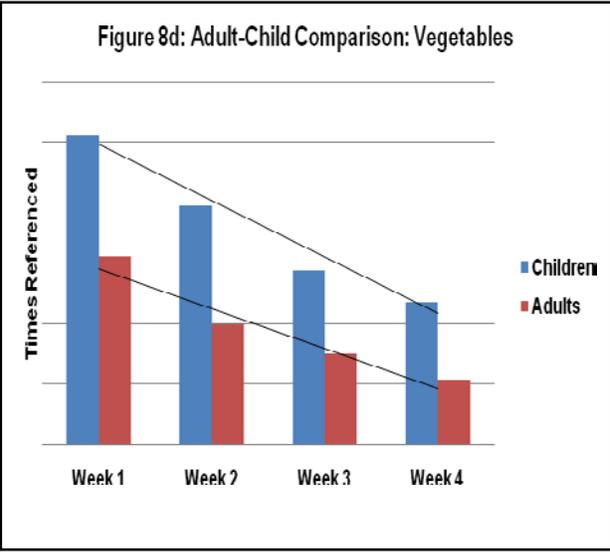
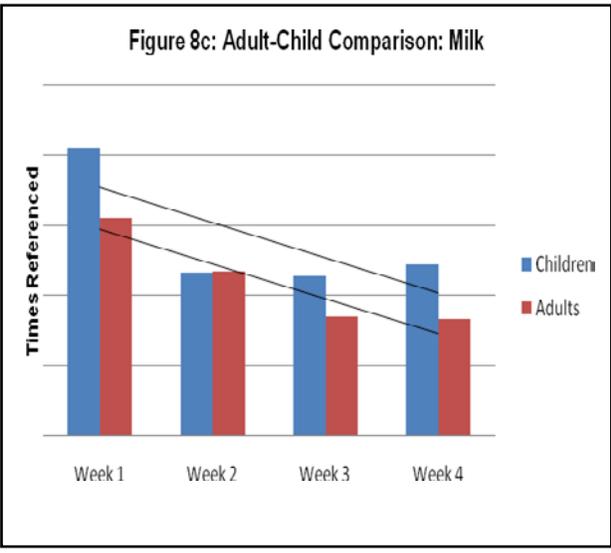
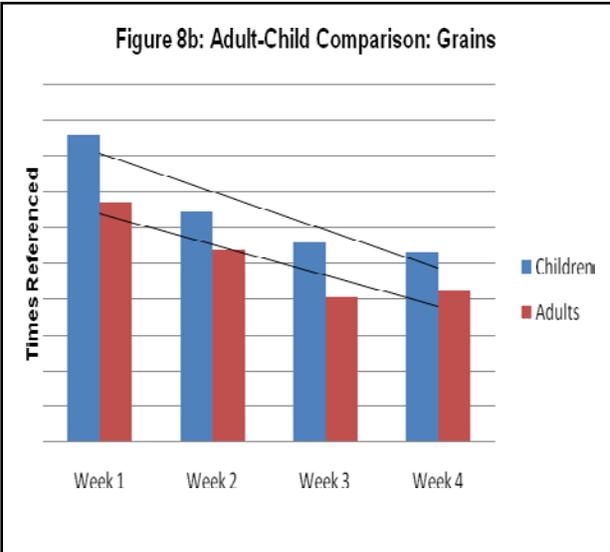
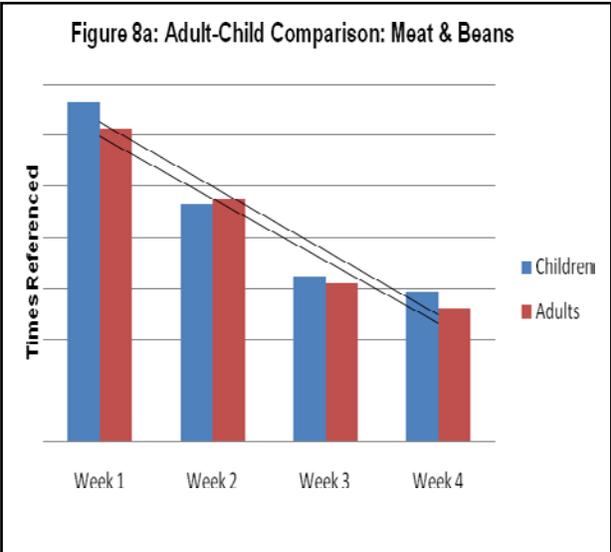
Figure 7a shows the pattern for children while Figure 7b provides the adult consumption pattern. What can be seen in both these figures is that the food consumption index drops in almost all categories for both children and adults as the month progresses. For the children, there are two exceptions to this pattern. "Grains" increase in consumption in Week 3, and "Milk" consumption remains constant from Week 2 to 3 and increases slightly in Week 4 (though it drops from the first to the second week). Additionally, the ranking of the categories in terms of consumption are slightly different between adults and children. For children, the top category for consumption is "Meat & Beans," while "Grains" were the top category for consumption by adults. Also, adults show an increase in the "Grains" category in Week 4.



Figures 8a through 8f (on the following page) compare the consumption pattern of adults to children for each of the categories for each week.⁴³ Taken as a whole, this set of figures highlights important patterns. The smallest gap in consumption between children and adults was in the category of "Meat & Beans." In fact, this is the only category where adult consumption exceeded child consumption as the index was slightly higher in Week 2 for adults than for children. The largest gap between adult and child over the month was in "Fruits" and

⁴² For more detail see the Methodology section

⁴³ The numbers for adults were adjusted to account for the larger sample size so the indexes could be compared directly. For details see the Methodology section



“Vegetables.” There is much evidence in this data to suggest that these disparities in consumption of “Fruits” and “Vegetables” are a result of adults making sacrifices to ensure that children have access to these foods first.

Each of these figures also exhibits a trend line that highlights the rate of change in consumption over the month. Four of the six categories (Meat & Beans, Grains, Milk, and Vegetables) show almost identical rates of change for adults and children within the category. Fruits (Figure 8e) and Snacks (Figure 8F), however, display different patterns as the rate of decline for children is steeper than for adults. This pattern is particularly true for the category “Fruits.” A closer examination of the fruit category will show that there is a precipitous drop in references to fruit for children between Week 1 and Week 2. In fact, this is the largest drop from one week to another for any of the categories for either adults or children.

Comparing the indices of consumption with respondents concerns about feeding children over the month (see Figure 6) reveals a close relationship as the number of people concerned about feeding their children increases as the quantity of food consumption decreases.

This data partially support the claim by the USDA in its hunger study that “Even when resources are inadequate to provide food for the entire family, children are usually shielded from the disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.” The data from the SPIN study indicate that adults are shielding children as best they can. However, it also suggests that households are limited in how much they can shield their children. The data show that despite parents’ efforts to absorb insufficiencies of food by denying themselves while directing food to their children, the children still experience disrupted eating patterns and reduced levels of food. As with the differences in reported levels of food security described above, the differences in the SPIN study’s conclusions from those of the USDA concerning disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake are likely related to the extreme poverty experienced by respondents in this study. Such respondents are likely to experience food insecurity more intensely than those in the USDA study. Additionally, the SPIN study suggests that hunger is underreported in the USDA study because of people’s unwillingness to acknowledge hunger. As a Participatory Action Research project, the SPIN study was able to overcome this problem because of the quality of the rapport developed between the interviewer and the respondent. In other words, this study indicates that the USDA is correct in its observation regarding the shielding of children, but that it may very well be overestimating the degree to which this is true. Respondents in the USDA study may have reported shielding children from hunger because of fear of what would happen if they disclosed hunger among their children. In addition, the USDA study may have obscured the intensity of food insecurity experienced by persons living in extreme poverty.

Dealing with Declining Resources: Respondents were asked to describe strategies they used to “make the food go further or last longer” and/or “make the food budget go further.” This set of responses shows that worry over feeding members of the household not only consumes peoples’ emotional energy, but also consumes mental energy, as a great deal of time is spent thinking about how to deal with dwindling food resources.

Several strategies for dealing with the dwindling resources were revealed in the interviews. People purchased food in bulk, rationed food, hid food from their children, diluted foods with water, bought less expensive and less healthy foods (like chicken legs and quarters rather than chicken breasts), etc. Figure 9a shows these strategies and how many respondents used them each week of the month. Of the five strategies listed, three (Reduce, Limit, Ration) were used more frequently than the other two. However, all strategies increase in use as the month

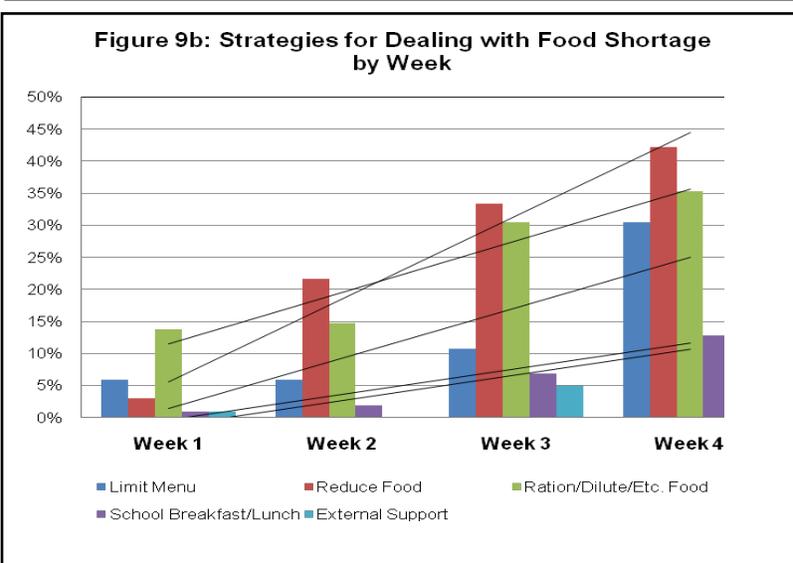
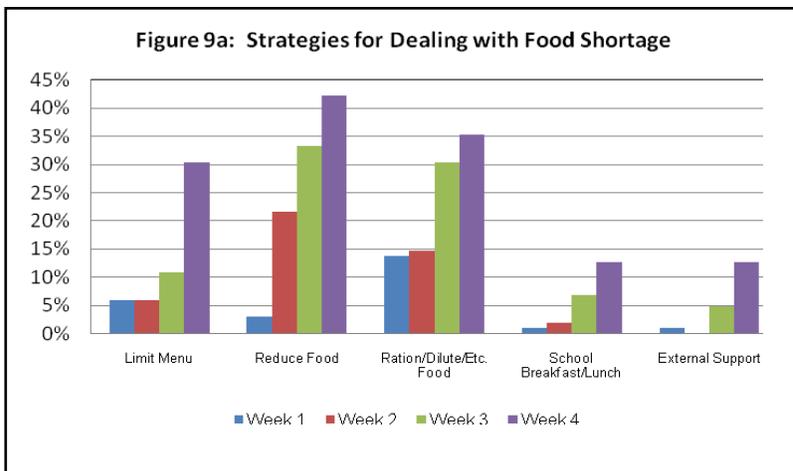
progresses. “Reduce Food” is the most widely used strategy with “Ration/Dilute/etc.” the second most widely used and “Limit Menu” the third most frequently used.

Figure 9b shows the same data arranged by week. In addition to how showing how frequently a particular strategy is used from week-to-week, it also shows the trend for each strategy over the month. What immediately stands

out in this figure is that, while all strategies increase, the patterns of change are not the same for all strategies. “Reduce Food” goes from being the third most frequently used strategy in Week 1 to the most frequently used strategy for the rest of the month. “Limit Menu” remains stable for the first two weeks, used by only 5.9% of respondents, but doubles in the number of people using it from Week 2 to Week 3 (10.8%). It then increases even more between Weeks 3 and 4, jumping 19.6% to 30.4%. The set of strategies under

“Ration/Dilute/Etc.” show a similar pattern as the number of people using this strategy is stable from Week 1 to Week 2 (13.7% and 14.7% respectively) but doubles in the percent of people using the strategy from Week 2 to Week 3, jumping 15.7% to 30.4%.

A review of the ranking of these strategies from week to week shows a pattern that provides some insight into how households are responding to their lack of resources. Table 5 compares the ranking of these strategies. As can be seen in Week 1, “Rationing” is the most frequently



Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Ration	Reduce	Reduce	Reduce
Limit	Ration	Ration	Ration
Reduce	Limit	Limit	Limit
External Support	School	School	School
School	External Support	External Support	External Support

used strategy. In fact, it is used on average by five times as many respondents than the other strategies. By Week 2 rationing drops to second in the rankings while reducing food becomes the most frequently used strategy. Both maintain their ranking for the remainder of the month.

The pattern exhibited by “Limit Menu” and “Ration/Dilute/Etc.” indicate that households struggle to maintain as healthy a diet as possible for as long as possible. The use of these two sets of strategies remains constant and relatively low for weeks 1 and 2. Both sets of strategies, however, double in the number of respondents using them in the next week with “Limit Menu” jumping up significantly again for Week 4. This data suggest that households resist substituting healthy food with cheaper, unhealthy food and diluting their food until they are forced to do so. It appears that Week 3 is when households are forced to do that.

This data provide strong evidence for the claim that nutrition problems among people living in poverty are related to access, not ignorance. When the greatest amount of food is available to a household, its most common strategy is to ration it. By the second week the household has seen their food resources dwindle and begins to reduce the amount of food served while continuing to use the strategy of rationing. As can be seen in Figure 9a, even though the ranking of rationing drops from first to second in Week 2, the percentage of people using it continues to increase over the rest of the month.

Again, this data leads to three conclusions: 1) both children and adults experience disruption in eating patterns and reductions in food intake over the month; 2) because of sacrifices by adults children experience less disruption and reduction than adults; and 3) the strategies available to adults to shield the children are not sufficient to prevent the disruptions in eating patterns and reductions in food intake that children suffer. These conclusions are reinforced by the following excerpts from the interviews:

Disruption in eating patterns and reductions in food intake by both children and adults:

“You have to buy you know, or adjust to it, or a bit less or divide the food a little bit more or add some beans you know.” – *Household of two elderly adults*

“There is a time when there is not enough . . . but we always split it. . . . We share . . . if there is only 2 eggs so I split it one egg for you and another for me” – *Household of two elderly adults*

“We go out to the park to distract ourselves and not think about food until it’s time for lunch or for dinner.” – *Household with three adults and one child*

“The milk . . . I had half a gallon left, so I have to add water to make it last.” – *Single mother with five children*

“It is true that we have to cut the size of the meals many times” – *Single mother of two*

“Yes we have to limit ourselves to stretch the food so it lasts the whole month” – *Single mother of three*

“Yes, some members of the family eat smaller portions so the food lasts for everyone.” – *Mother in household of nine adults and three children*

“To be honest, sometimes I go to bed like without eating. Like sometimes a lot, actually a lot of times I don’t eat dinner and I’ll wait till the next morning to eat cereal. And when I do eat dinner, I just dig through our fridge or whatever and just put something together and eat it.” – *Household of a mother and daughter, both adults*

Adults sacrificing and doing without in order to shield the children:

“I eat less because there are two of my kids who eat more, and like I eat less so I can give him more. More when he’s practicing sports.” – *Single mother of four*

“I’ve had to restrict my nutrition so they [child and other adults] eat well.” – *Mother in household of three adults and one child*

“. . . first the children, then the adults. If there’s anything left, good, if there isn’t, no.” – *Household of three adults and eight children*

“Sometimes I have to give him [respondent’s son] his food apart so he can eat even if we all don’t eat to make him eat.” – *Mother in household of three adults and one child*

“I worry more about my kids so if I have to eat less so I can give it to them I will do that. I will do that because my kids are more important because they go to school.” – *Single mother of two*

“Sometimes I don’t have enough eggs I just give it to her [daughter] and I don’t eat.” – *Single mother with one child*

“I skip meals so there is more food for the kids.” – *Household of three adults and two children*

Limited options in addressing the disruption in eating habits and reductions in food intake:

“I put like a little bit out and when I see that is leaving, then I put a little bit more out otherwise they’d eat it all up in 2 weeks” – *Single mother of two*

“Definitely hide [food]. Even when I hide, when it gets to the end of the month there’s nothing left to hide” – *Single mother of two*

“So it could last, if it’s beef I add potato, carrots, a little amount water to make a watery stew. And since we’re Latinos I make them eat more tortilla in order to satisfy them because with only the stew, they’d be hungry again later.” – *Single mother of four children*

“I’ve had to add more water so it lasts. And yes, I’ve been in need of hiding things, so they don’t eat it fast or waste it. I measure food, I tell them, if you’re going to eat something, you eat it all.” – *Single mother of five*

“When it’s cheap we have to stock up like when it’s cheaper say on special and keep it for times when there’s nothing else.” – *Household of two adults*

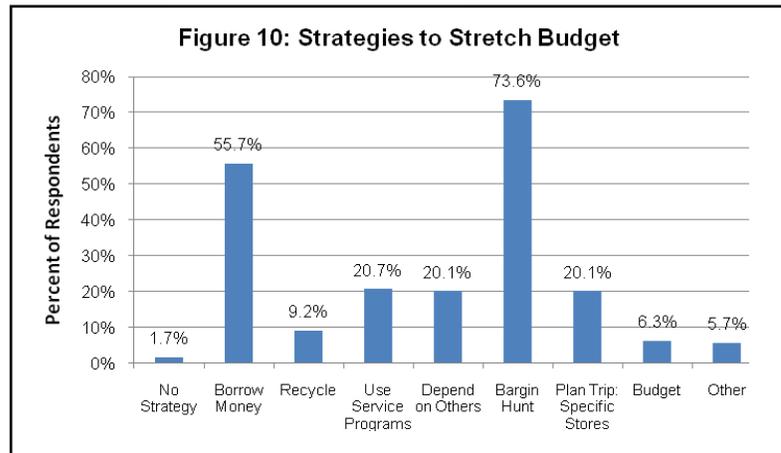
“But I also add smashed vegetables, and I make the chicken breaded because it acquires a generous size on the plate, and it lasts longer.” – *Single mother of three*

“With \$13 a month coming up in March in food stamps . . . I’m going to have to discipline myself and do some fasting. I’m going to have to go some days without eating and I may drink a glass of juice like cranberry apple.” – *Single elderly woman*

“Yeah well all my groceries . . . I distribute it in two to three portions so I know that I have. Week number one we’ll have that, week number two we’ll have that and number three. I do it in different ways. That way I know that at least in the week we’ll have vegetables.” – *Single mother of four*

In addition to working to stretch their food resources over the month, respondents also shared information as to how they stretched their money. As can be seen in Figure 10, the most

common strategy was “Bargain Hunting” which was identified by almost three-quarters (73.6%) of the respondents. “Borrow Money” was the second most frequently used strategy (55.7%). In fact, these two strategies stand out as they were reported being used on average by three times as many people as the third most frequently used strategy, i.e., using service programs such food banks, soup kitchens, etc..



A close look at these strategies shows a pattern of behavior that belies the image of people living in poverty as passive recipients of service. Only two of the strategies named (Use Service Programs and Depend on Others) reflect a one-way and potentially passive relationship. All other strategies involve the respondent taking action to address his/her situation. Three-quarters of the respondents reported bargain hunting and a fifth (20.1%) indicated that they planned shopping trips to specific stores to take advantage of sales, double coupons, etc. Some respondents (9.2%) reported collecting bottles and cans to earn extra money from recycling. Only a very small percentage (1.7%) indicated they had no plan for addressing their lack of resources. The following excerpts from the interviews describe some of the most common strategies used by respondents:

“I go store to store, I look for ads . . . you get the ads on Thursdays in the mailbox and I look to see what store. And I go into different stores, depending on what it is that they have on sale.” – *Single mother of three*

“I . . . look for lower prices or to go to the 99 cents stores, sometimes they have cheaper vegetables and they have what I look for. And I compare prices and I search for more in order to have food for my kids and make them feel satisfied.” – *Single mother of four*

“I use coupons for everything . . . from the mills, from the newspapers, from the store, from the newspapers. I check the specials in the news that they send home each day or week. I see the store specials and then I go to that store.” – *Household of three adults and one child*

“I do recycle. In fact, I recycle at my job too. I recycle too and take it with me. Because now it’s, it’s a little bit of extra income, but it helps me for getting gas.” – *Single mother with five children*

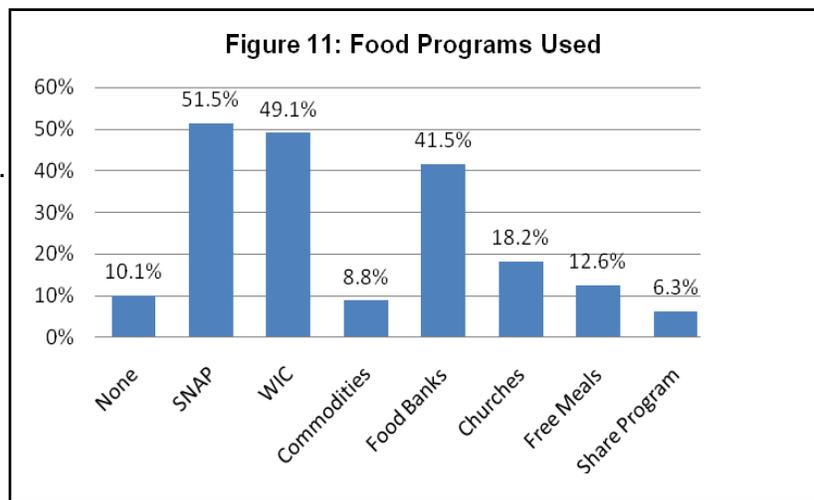
“I tried to cut my budget, I tried to build like a budget to make it last longer, but it’s not enough” – *Single mother of five*

“I have a friend who lives in San Ysidro so sometimes she invites me over and I go with my kids and we all eat there.” – *Single mother of three*

“It’s like we make a budget and schedule the money that they give us and we schedule it week by week. Yes because I also get a little help of WIC.” – *Household with two adults and three children*

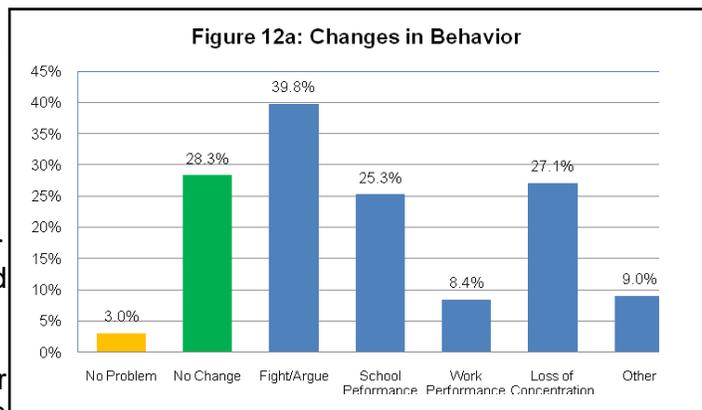
“I take some money out of my bills and use that for food. I’d rather my kids eat than starve.” – *Single mother with six children*

It is clear from the data that people struggle to stave off hunger in many proactive ways. It is also clear that these efforts are rarely enough. Other ways respondents fight their hunger is through the use of a variety of food programs. Figure 11 shows the range of programs used and what percent of the respondents used those programs. As can be seen, SNAP/FSP, WIC, and food banks stand out as places people most often go for support. SNAP/FSP was the most widely used program (51.1%), closely followed by the WIC program (49.1%). Forty-one percent of respondents also used food banks. Beyond these government-funded programs, churches were also used for support by a substantial number of people (18.2%). Only 10.1% of respondents reported not using any additional programs for support, further supporting the assumption that the respondents in this study are drawn from the ranks of people living in extreme poverty.

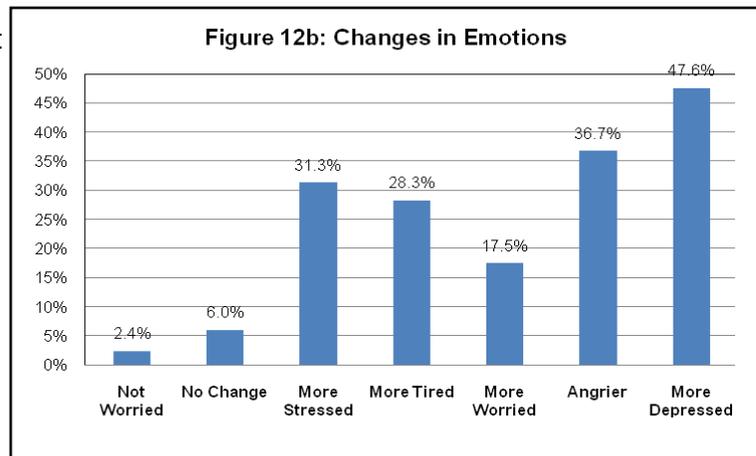


THE IMPACT OF HUNGER

Family Dynamics: The data presented here show that hunger and food insecurity create an all encompassing worry that touches every part of a person’s life. The interview asked respondents to describe changes in their household when comparing a week when it was adequate to a week when it was not. Figures 12a and 12b show the negative impact that the lack of food has on family dynamics. While slightly more than a quarter (28.3%) of the respondents reported no increase in negative behavior between the two weeks, only 6% reported no emotional changes. An increase in fighting and arguing was reported by more respondents (39.8%) than any other behavioral change. Loss of concentration



(27.1%) and deterioration of school performance (25.3%) were next most frequently named changes. Figure 12b shows that nearly half of the respondents (47.6%) reported an increase in feelings of depression. Anger, which was reported to have increased by 36.7% of respondents, was the second most frequent change in emotions. Almost a third (31.3%) reported feeling more stressed, while 28.3% were more fatigued, and 17.5% worried more when there was no food. The following excerpts from the interviews describe changes in household environment:



“The first week my children and me are happy. We have everything. We have the food we have ok. Then the other week she’s crying, she has headaches you know, she frustrating, anger. Who give the money to buy food, who borrow, who is to knock the door to ask the money borrow?” – *Household with six adults and four children*

“There’s diminished motivation . . . when you don’t eat right you’re not thinking as well as you normally can, you’re not doing as well in school and so on and so forth.” – *Single mother of three*

“They are very exasperated. ‘Mommy there’s no milk!’ They get angry because I tell them that there’s none because we don’t have more money. Yes, yes, even over a slice of bread they fight.” – *Single mother of four*

“Yes, they fight with each other. Sometimes because someone ate more or that ‘it’s for me,’ or if they are at the table and one is eating slowly, one goes and steals his meal, and things like that.” – *Single mother of four*

“I used to get really sleepy every afternoon at work. I would be falling asleep at my computer at work.” – *Household of two elderly adults*

“Well, when there’s more food in the house, there’s more laughs, more comfortable, nobody’s really stressed or fighting. And I’m not on edge trying to tell everybody, ‘Don’t eat that, don’t eat this, don’t eat that.’ There’s more freedom. They have to eat what they wish to eat. At the beginning of the second parts of the week, I’m consistently having to say no, just let that left and they’re, they’re hungry.” – *Single mother of three children*

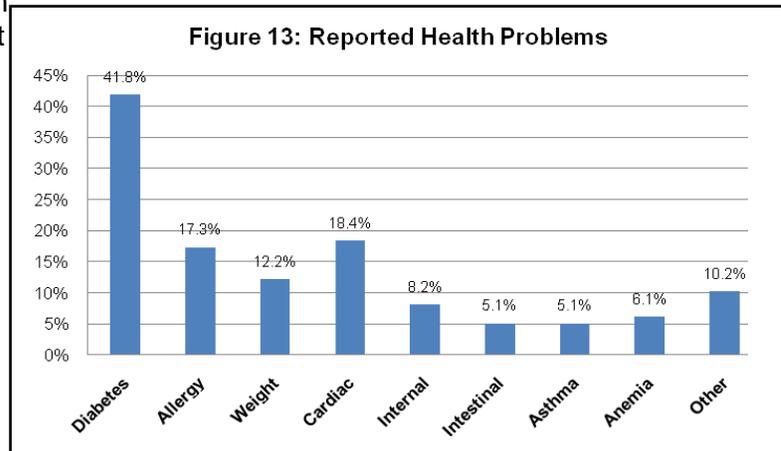
“I become very sad, crying, angry, worried.” – *Household with two adults and three children*

“My daughters when there is food, they are happy and we eat, and plan on what we are going to do. Now we are going to do this, prepare that. But when there is nothing to eat, well there is nothing . . . They are all angry, yelling, grumbling.” – *Household with two adults and three children*

“You feel with very low spirits or sad, depressed, because you can’t give to your family what they need.” – *Single mother of two*

Health: As would be expected, this study found that hunger is negatively impacting health with 77% of respondents reported having some health concerns. Figure 13 shows the array of health issues reported and the percent of respondents that reported them. As can be seen, diabetes is by far the most common health problem, with 41.8% percent respondents reporting having it. Cardiac problems were the second most common health problem, reported by 18.4%. Allergies, reported by 17.8% of the respondents, were the third most common health problem. Weight problems were reported by 12.2% of respondents.

The relationship between these health problems and hunger is made quite clear by these excerpts from the interviews:



“I have diabetes . . . my diet is very special, I have to eat special stuff . . . Right now I am not going to the doctor because I don’t have money, and if I am not eating right and I don’t go to the doctor, I have no medicine, and I am the only one that is working right now.” – *Household with three adults and two children*

“Well, now she’s [respondent’s wife] sick and, she’s got diabetes. And she has to follow a diet but she doesn’t, due to lack of money.” *Household of two adults and five children*

“I am a diabetic . . . I haven’t been able to buy a lot of the stuff. I just dilute the regular stuff, like juices. They have certain juices and certain beverages and stuff that are for diabetics that I can’t afford to buy. So I just take what juices I do get from work or whatever. What I have I just dilute to cut the sugar down or dilute milk, you know stuff like that.” – *Household of two adults and two children*

“I can’t choose what to give to my child. I don’t have [anything] to give him except the cheapest cereal with a lot of sugar. I have to give him that with milk, and it affects him. It’s bad for him. He has attention deficit disorder.” – *Household of two adults and one child*

“Well I try to do everything I was told the last time I met a doctor and try to avoid harmful food or try to do what the doctor suggested. But this goal can’t always be achieved because, you know, these special diets are expensive. So in consequence I can’t have the food I really need.” – *Single mother of one*

“And he has a special diet. He cannot eat wheat, he’s allergic to wheat. So we can’t afford the price for the special food . . . Like if you get something from the food bank, he’ll eat something, and if it has the wheat in it, then he’ll have the allergic reaction.” – *Household of two elderly adults*

“I get sick. I have to get the cheaper foods, and they have more sugar. It raises my diabetes.” – *Household of five adults and two children*

“She [respondent’s daughter] has an ulcer right now because she’s not eating. It’s affecting me a lot. I went to the hospital. This is the second time that I went to the hospital because my stress level is really bad . . . when I talked to my psychologist, he says: ‘Why is this stressing you so much?’ . . . because I [am not] able to provide for my family . . . every day. When they send me a letter that says probably the government is going cut the food stamps it really worries me. ‘Where am I going to go, what I’m going to do now?’ Thinking about I have so many kids and it’s, you know, It’s not their fault.” – *Single mother of five*

CONCLUSIONS

Taken in its entirety, the insights into hunger gained from these interviews are significant. First, it must be recognized that the respondents in this study are most representative of people living in extreme poverty, and that any generalization beyond this sample must take this into account. In many ways, the respondents in this study are most similar those categorized as having “very low food security” in the USDA study. It is also important to emphasize that the population living in extreme poverty is almost always underrepresented in this type of research. This study breaks the barrier and provides insight into how this nearly invisible segment of our population deals with hunger. From this data we have learned:

- Food insecurity appears to be more wide-spread than existing research acknowledges: While the USDA study found food insecurity among people living below the federal poverty line to be 42%, this study found that more than double that number reported “very low food security.” Again, some of this difference is likely due to the higher percentage of people experiencing extreme poverty in this study. This study also found that 58% of its respondents reported denying needing food when they actually did need it. This level of misreporting of hunger raises questions about some of the conclusions drawn by the USDA study. In particular, this finding challenges the USDA’s claim that “[h]ouseholds classified as having *low food security* have reported multiple indications of food access problems, but typically have reported few, if any, indications of reduced food intake.”
- Hunger is an all encompassing worry: Hunger touches the entirety of a person’s life. Respondents speak to their worry about food in many contexts. They see their hunger as weakening their concentration and therefore their ability to carry out their responsibilities. They worry about the impact on their jobs and with their ability to keep up with their children. They see their children also struggle to do their school work as the hunger increases, and they worry that their inability to do school work is negatively affecting their futures. They know that the family will eat less when the rent is due or that the utility bill must be paid this month because they bought food instead of paying it last month. They know they are undermining their own health and ability provide for the children because they are giving the food they need for their diabetic condition to their children. These stories validate the findings in the study that name three things that most worry the respondents: ability to feed their family (71.9%); their children (36.3%); and their ability to meet their financial responsibilities (36.3%). The data also show that these three worries are highly interrelated. Almost all the people who named their children as a worry also identified food as a worry (96.6%). Food was also named as a worry for 60.3% of the people who identified money as

a worry. Respondents' concerns about hunger increase as the quantity of food in the household decreases. Food and rent directly compete for many people's resources.

- Disruptions in eating patterns and reductions in food intake increase over the month: It is clear from the reported menus that disruptions in eating patterns and reduction of food intake are common experiences among the respondents. The consumption index used in this study shows that all food groups decline in quantity over the course of each month for both adults and children. It also shows that adults consume less than children in every food category. There is strong evidence that adults are reducing their vegetable and fruit intake in particular in order to save these foods for children. The USDA study found that children were often shielded from hunger by the adults. This study found the same pattern. However, the adults in this study were only able to reduce but not prevent the disruption in eating patterns and reduction in food intake for children.
- Hunger negatively impacts family dynamics and health: A clear change in household environment was demonstrated as negative behaviors and emotional challenges increased as food resources decreased. Respondents reported increases in fighting and arguing, loss of concentration, deterioration in school performance, increased depression and feelings of anger, etc. as food resources decreased. Respondents often reported being unable to afford the foods required for their special dietary needs.
 - Households use several strategies to deal with declining food resources: The three most common strategies for dealing with declining food resources were reducing the amount of food consumed, rationing food over the month, and stretching food resources by purchasing cheaper food, diluting food, etc. This data provide strong support for the claim that nutritional problems are related to access to healthy food, rather than from ignorance among the poor. The most common strategy for stretching food during first week of the month when it is most plentiful is to ration it. Starting in the second week, reducing food intake becomes the dominant strategy, and rationing, though still practiced, becomes a secondary strategy. It is also clear from the data that households attempt to maintain as healthy a diet as they can for as long as they can. Households seem to be able to maintain a relatively healthy diet for the first two weeks of the month. The menu begins to deteriorate by the third week with total collapse in the final week of the month where the cheapest food is bought with the simple goal of relieving hunger pangs.

This data show that respondents also work to stretch their money over the month. Bargain hunting and going from store-to-store to take advantage of specials, coupons, etc. is practiced by almost all respondents. It is also common for respondents to borrow money to purchase food at the end of the month. It should be noted that bargain hunting requires a great deal of time and energy especially among those who have limited transportation, and as gas prices and bus fare increase, extremely poor households have a harder time employing this strategy.

When this data is viewed holistically it becomes clear that hunger lies at the root of many problems. It impacts the school system, the healthcare system, the business sector, and the social service system by creating ever-increasing demands on each of these sets of institutions. The data presented here suggest that the solution to the problem of hunger and poor nutrition is in creating greater access to healthy food, though not primarily through education or controlling the food purchases of people in poverty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no silver bullet that will end poverty. However, there are interventions that are more efficient and have larger impacts than others. Eliminating hunger is one of those interventions. We can see from this data that resolving hunger would impact schools, since it would increase school performance and possibly attendance, and it would decrease disruptive behaviors. There would be a drop in demand on our healthcare system, as there would be fewer hospitalizations, better control of chronic diseases (e.g., diabetes), higher birth weights in children, and less obesity. The ultimate recommendation is to create greater access to healthy food in as many ways as possible. First among these would be improving the way in which San Diego County HHS operates its public assistance programs. A full critique and set of recommendations for this can be found in Part B.

In addition, the following recommendations are offered:

1. **Expand eligibility and increase the benefit levels in SNAP/FSP:** Research shows that it only takes a relatively small increase in a household's income to increase the quantity and quality of food purchases. Raising the cut-off for SNAP/FSP eligibility from 130% to 185% of the federal poverty line would significantly increase a household's purchase of fruits and vegetables.⁴⁴ In addition, it is clear that present food stamp levels are inadequate to provide enough food resources for a household and should be increased by 100%.
2. **Eliminate the asset test for SNAP/FSP eligibility for all recipients:** SNAP/FSP is meant to be a short term solution to temporary situation. Requiring a household to spend down all its assets before it can become eligible for SNAP/FSP is a counter-productive policy that forces people to fall more deeply into poverty and makes the goal of self-sufficiency more distant and onerous. There is much research to support the claim that such policies foster dependency rather than self-sufficiency because they undermine the ability to build or maintain the assets one needs to remain above poverty regardless of economic times.⁴⁵ California law allows for the elimination of the asset test for everyone. However, the California Department of Social Services has applied this policy only to families with children.⁴⁶ This policy should be applied to all otherwise eligible food SNAP/FSP recipients regardless of the household composition.
3. **Join Food Research and Action Center's call to end childhood hunger by 2015:** Presidential hopeful Barack Obama took a stand on hunger claiming, "My top priority is making sure that people are able to get enough to eat."⁴⁷ He also called for the end to childhood hunger by 2015. FRAC has taken up this call and offered seven strategies to achieve this goal.⁴⁸ These are:

⁴⁴ See: Steward, H., Blisard, N. (January 2008). Are Lower Income Households Willing and Able to Budget for Fruits and Vegetables? Economic Research Report Number 54, USDA.

⁴⁵ See: Parrish, Leslie. (2005). To save or not to save? Reforming Asset Limits on Public Assistance Programs to Encourage Low-Income Americans to Save and Build Assets. Washington, DC: New America Foundation (www.newamerica.net) and, Sharpiro, Thomas M. & Wolff, Edeard N. (eds). (2001). Assets for the Poor: The benefits of Spreading Asset Ownership. NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

⁴⁶ California AB 433 allows the State Department of Social Services (DSS) to use categorical eligibility to remove the asset test for Californians. CDSS has instructed Counties to apply this change to families with children by January 2010.

⁴⁷ Meet the Press, 5/4/08.

⁴⁸ See www.frac.org

- a. Restore economic growth and create jobs with better wages for lower-income workers. A broad recovery that creates good jobs with benefits will help parents attain family-supporting incomes.
 - b. Raise the incomes of the lowest-income families by bolstering refundable tax credits that help low-income families, increasing the minimum wage and improving other supports for lower-earning workers.
 - c. Strengthen the SNAP/Food Stamp Program by increasing benefits to levels sufficient to purchase a minimally adequate diet, expanding eligibility, and make other overdue, targeted improvements.
 - d. Strengthen Child Nutrition Programs to ensure that more children at school and in out-of-school settings, such as child care centers and summer and afterschool programs participate and receive ample and nutritious food.
 - e. Engage the entire federal government in ending childhood hunger. Ending childhood hunger should be a government-wide priority and meeting it will require not just the U.S. Department of Agriculture, but a new focus in such agencies as the Departments of Health and Human Services, Justice and Education, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and key White House offices.
 - f. Work with states, localities and nonprofits to expand and improve participation in federal nutrition programs. These government entities and local intermediaries should expand their efforts to make sure they are taking full advantage of federal nutrition programs and meeting the nutrition needs throughout their communities, and the federal government should provide more support for outreach and strong state performance.
 - g. Make sure all families have convenient access to reasonably priced, healthy food. Ending hunger also means giving low-income families better access to reasonably-priced healthy food; one key step is a new national focus on having good grocery stores accessible in low-income communities.
4. **Develop alternative ways to access healthy foods:** The recommendations thus far require action on a national level. This recommendation, however, calls for local action, i.e., creation of community gardens, farmers markets that take SNAP/FSP and WIC, food coops, buying clubs, etc.

PART B: THE SAN DIEGO COUNTY SAFETY NET: A CULTURE OF FEAR & DEGRADATION

The previous section paints a clear picture of households in dire need of food. It also shows the creative ways in which they stretch the few resources they have, struggling to maintain a healthy diet for as long as they can. The depth and breadth of the need and the proven record of SNAP/FSP's capacity to ease some of the worst hunger raises an important question. Why is the performance of the County HHSA so consistently poor in providing access to food stamps among eligible populations? The data presented in this section answers that question. As stated in the introduction, research points to the application process as the primary barrier to participation in SNAP/FSP. The research here will show how the application process administered and implemented by San Diego County Health & Human Services Agency (HHSA) influences participation.

ORIGINS OF THE CULTURE

The overwhelming consensus of the researchers conducting these interviews was that when people approached the County for help, they did so with a great deal of fear and shame, and these feelings were reinforced as they moved through the process of applying for assistance. Specifically, there is a **Culture of Fear and Degradation** that envelops the County's Family Resource Centers (FRCs). Just how this culture manifests itself and its impact on people's access to assistance is highly complex. It is possible, however, to parcel out some critical elements of this culture so they can be addressed.

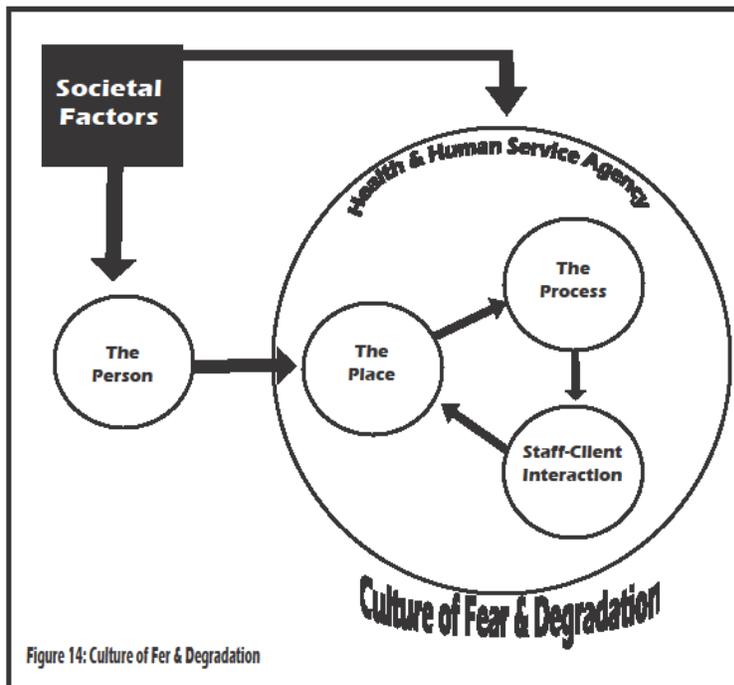


Figure 14: Culture of Fear & Degradation

Figure 14 attempts to capture that complexity. The data from the SPIN study suggest that a distinct culture exists within the County's FRCs and that this culture is determined by how business is conducted. In particular, the Culture of Fear and Degradation is the result of a dynamic interaction between the person attempting to access County services and her relationship to the views of the larger society concerning persons in need (i.e., Societal Forces), the County's processes and procedures, and the interaction with front-line staff serving individual persons in need. The pejorative way in which society characterizes and views economically needy persons creates the basis of the

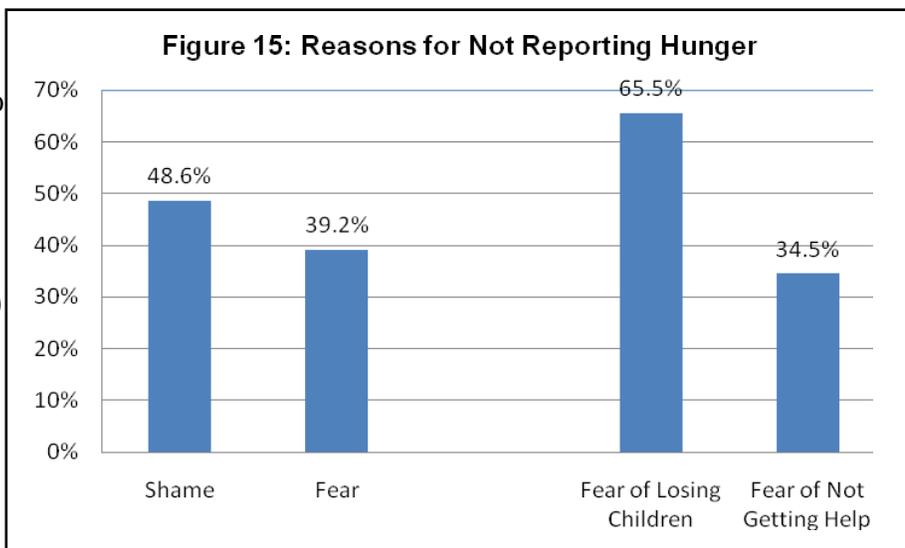
shame felt by the potential clients, while the HHSA's policies and processes provide the foundation for the fear felt by clients. This fear and sense of degradation appear to arise from

how the County conducts its business. The SPIN study results specifically point to the place, the procedures and the client-staff relationship, which are the interactive elements that produce the Culture of Fear and Degradation which applicants experience at the FRCs. The data show that the culture within San Diego County's FRC makes the process of getting help difficult and painful for a large number of people. The issue of low participation cannot be resolved until the culture changes within the FRCs. It is within the three elements of the process that the change must occur. The analysis presented below begins by looking at the person in need and the feelings and emotions she carries into the process. The societal factors that influence those feelings and emotions and their impact on the County's process are examined next. Finally, the analysis examines the County. In particular, it examines how place, procedures, client-staff relationship, and the interaction of the three shape the culture of the FRCs.

The Person in Economic Need:

Feelings of shame and fear permeate individual responses to questions about needing and getting help. These feelings, as the data show, are powerful deterrents to seeking assistance. Perhaps the clearest statement of these feelings are seen in the responses to the question: *Did you feel you could talk openly about how much food you have with someone like a nurse, case manager, teacher, etc.?* As was shown in Figure 3 of Part A, more than half (58%) of the respondents indicated they did not feel they could talk openly and, in fact, said they reported to these professionals that they had adequate food when in reality they did not.

Figure 15 shows that embarrassment (48.6%) and fear (39.2%) are the most frequently given reasons for not disclosing the lack of food. Looking more closely at the issue of fear, it can be seen that, of those reporting fear, 65.5% are afraid of having their children taken away while 34.5% fear they will not receive the help they need.



The emotions of fear and shame are powerful barriers to obtaining assistance. As the following quotes from interviews imply, there is a powerful tension parents experience when confronted by their children's need for food and their shame at not being able to provide it. Even more prominent is the fear that their children will be taken away if the parents disclose their need and attempt to get help.

“Embarrassed to tell them. Afraid that they . . . turn you in for not being able to provide enough for your children to eat and take your kids.” – *Single mother with three children*

“I was very insecure, more tense, maybe I won't qualify or I'll have problems or something.” – *Household of two adults and one child*

“Nervous, scared, I was shaking. Yes because I was working and they were saying I couldn’t get help because I had a job.” – *Household of three adults and eight children*

“I’m scared to tell them, because I’m afraid they’re going call CPS, because we don’t have hardly anything to eat. I don’t want them to take my kids away because I don’t have nothing to eat” – *Single mother of five*

“I was afraid that the worker could come. Because I was afraid that the social worker could come and take my children because there was no food.” – *Single mother of four*

“. . . the teacher asked if they eat at home . . . because . . . she said he looks like he’s getting skinny. And I just said I feed him what I could feed him. I can’t tell her that there’s not enough food to give him what he needs because I don’t want them to report me.” – *Household of five adults and two children*

“I wouldn’t, never tell a social worker . . . and I probably wouldn’t tell my kids teacher so no. I wouldn’t . . . I just wouldn’t want them to know that I couldn’t feed my kids” – *Single mother of two*

“It’s kind of embarrassing. . . it’s kind of hard to tell somebody that’s not going through your situation or problem because they think you’re exaggerating and so you’re not exaggerating you’re just telling the truth and sometimes they’re so high up that they don’t want to hear it.” – *Household of two adults and five children*

Societal Factors:

Taking a step back from the person in economic need, the next question is: *Where does this sense of shame and fear come from?* We are suggesting here that, for the most part, the shame arises from societal factors which are reinforced by how the County interacts with the potential client. Fear, on the other hand, originates more directly from the County itself.

While the SPIN study did not focus on societal factors that may influence the shame of being economically needy in the United States, respondents readily spoke about a self-perception of failure and their resulting shame even before entering the welfare office door. The simple fact that a parent had no other recourse than to apply for SNAP/FSP or public benefits was overwhelmingly associated with personal shame for not being able to provide for one’s family.

The people of the United States are very ambivalent about people in poverty. Recent polling has shown overwhelming support for setting a national goal of reducing poverty by 50% within ten years even if it would “require higher taxes on the wealthy and new government spending.”⁴⁹ In an earlier set of polls⁵⁰ more than 60% expressed the belief that “most poor people in the United States are people who work but can’t earn enough money. . .” However, the very same polling showed that 69% believed that “there are jobs available for anyone who is willing to work” and that 46% believed that “poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return.” In addition, 78% reported that they believed “there are jobs available for most welfare recipients who really want to work,” and 57%

⁴⁹ Tiexeira, R. (2009). Public Opinion Snapshot: The Public Supports a Major Effort to Fight Poverty. http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/01/opinion_0112.html, January 12, 2009

⁵⁰ NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Poll (2001). Poverty in America. www.npr.org/programs/specials/poll/poverty/summary.html

believed that “welfare encourages women to have more children than they would have if they were not able to get welfare.”

These conflicting perceptions play out in terms of political support for public assistance. Universal social insurance programs such as Social Security and Medicare have widespread support while the means-tested program TANF (Temporary Assistance for Need Families – welfare) has much less support. The negative feelings toward people in poverty are aimed specifically at those receiving means-tested cash benefits. As described in the next paragraph, the image Americans have of TANF recipients is extremely derogatory and often internalized by those living in poverty.

The fact that people internalize the negative attitudes of the public at large is made painfully clear by the words of the respondent who said, “. . . I felt I should know better, I was educated and should have known how not to be in that situation, so I was embarrassed. To find myself in that situation in spite of everything that I had tried to do.”

These attitudes are associated with the theory of poverty that provides the foundation for most public policy dealing with the issue. This theory, i.e., the “**culture of poverty**,” defines the cause of poverty as lying within the very personalities of the people in poverty. It defines this culture as one of “resignation, dependence, present-time orientation, lack of impulse control, weak ego structure, sexual confusion, and the inevitable inability to defer gratification.”⁵¹ Ending poverty from this perspective requires changing the behavior of those who seek help from public benefits. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996

<i>The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964</i>	<i>PRWORA of 1996</i>
<p>FINDINGS AND DECLARATION OF PURPOSE <i>SEC. 2. Although the economic well-being and prosperity of the United States have progressed to a level surpassing any achieved in world history, and although these benefits are widely shared throughout the Nation, poverty continues to be the lot of a substantial number of our people. The United States can achieve its full economic and social potential as a nation only if every individual has the opportunity to contribute to the full extent of his capabilities and to participate in the workings of our society. It is, therefore, the policy of the United States to eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty in this Nation by opening to everyone the opportunity for education and training, the opportunity to work, and the opportunity to live in decency and dignity. It is the purpose of this Act to strengthen, supplement, and coordinate efforts in furtherance of that policy.”</i></p>	<p><i>The purpose of this part is to increase the flexibility of States in operating a program designed to—</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="818 1121 1401 1199"><i>(1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;</i> <li data-bbox="818 1230 1401 1308"><i>(2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;</i> <li data-bbox="818 1339 1401 1451"><i>(3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and</i> <li data-bbox="818 1482 1401 1535"><i>(4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.”</i>

(PRWORA), or welfare reform as it is commonly known, expresses its goals as a kind of behavioral change designed to break the “dependency” of those who seek or receive public benefits in the form of TANF the new term for cash aid for needy families. Legislative intent underlying TANF illustrates the belief that the core of the problem lies in this dependency, a dependency that is seen as rooted in the same characteristics listed in the description of the

⁵¹ [Lewis, Oscar](#) (1996 (1966)). "The Culture of Poverty". in G. Gmelch and W. Zenner, eds. *Urban Life*. Waveland Press.

Culture of Poverty. PRWORA goals contrast sharply with earlier public sentiments embodied in earlier anti-poverty legislation, as depicted in the sharply divergent purposes listed above.

The current view, as detailed in PRWORA and other policies based on a perspective of a “culture of poverty,” encourages public benefits processes aimed at correcting or abating the flaws in persons who are economically needy. This punitive approach stems from the belief that people can work their way out of poverty if they are willing and able to put in maximum effort, and that people will choose dependence over work if they are not made uncomfortable.

In the case of San Diego County, which has long held claim to the poorest performance in the nation for food stamp participation among eligible households, a view of public benefits applicants as flawed inheritants of a culture of poverty seems to potentiate the impact of societal disdain for those in need. Furthermore, this view seems to provide the foundation for a process of application and maintenance of benefits that reinforces fear and shame.

To be fair, San Diego County, like all counties that rely on SNAP/FSP and TANF to maintain a minimum level of subsistence for their residents despite the vagaries of the economy, are subject to severe monetary penalties for failure to meet federal work participation rates.⁵² These penalties are imposed within margins that offer little escape for counties in which job opportunities and economic growth are burdened by substantial forces that have nothing to do with the willingness of people to engage in work⁵³. The easiest way for a State or County to avoid these penalties is to reduce the number of people on the TANF rolls. Reports from anti-poverty activists across the United States and SPIN’s experience in San Diego County provide substantial anecdotal evidence that counties across the nation have devised procedures that make it more difficult for persons applying for TANF (called “CalWORKs” in the California version) to obtain help, keep their cases open, and get the services they need to prepare for a competitive work place. Since CalWORKs applications are typically accompanied by food stamp applications due to the deeper level of poverty required for CalWORKs, applicants for both types of aid can suffer from the same procedural problems. However, all counties in the nation which operate programs reliant on TANF funds are under the same imperatives of federal work participation rates, and other counties have consistently shown substantially higher food stamp participation rates among eligible populations. This strongly suggests that something is wrong with the essential elements of the public benefits process in San Diego County.

One theme that seems to resonate throughout San Diego County’s public benefits process is the belief that persons who apply for or receive public benefits are apt to commit fraud rather than engage in work, unless they are deterred. A great deal of money is spent on “program integrity,” a vague umbrella under which a host of so-called anti-fraud activities are conducted. For instance, of the approximately \$12 million the County receives from the State to administer SNAP/FSP each year, about \$4 million is spent on anti-fraud activities.⁵⁴ With all of these additional expenditures, San Diego’s fraud rate is no different than that of the rest of the State or

⁵² See Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (Pub. L. 109-171, 120 Stat. 4, enacted Feb. 8, 2006; (**Personal Responsibility & Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act [PRWORA]**, [Pub.L. 104-193](#), 110 Stat. 2105, enacted August 22, 1996)

⁵³ A recent article in the New York Times reported that there were ten people seeking employment for every job available. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/business/economy/27jobs.html>

⁵⁴ See: Davis, K. (2009). Feed the Need. Voice of San Diego 4/29/09. www.voiceofsandiego.org

the nation.⁵⁵ In addition to the State-required fingerprinting (California is only one of three states requiring fingerprinting)⁵⁶, the County requires that all applicants for cash assistance have their homes searched by a welfare fraud investigator from the District Attorney's office before they can receive any public benefits.⁵⁷ According to data from the California Department of Social Services, this policy (named Project 100%) directly affects about 25% of SNAP/FSP applicants countywide who are also applying for CalWORKs. Federal law prohibits home searches of food stamp-only applicants except in cases of suspicion or discrepancies. In testimony before a meeting of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors on April 21, 2009, HHSA officials stated that approximately 4.5% of food stamp-only applicants are subjected to home searches, as contrasted with 100% of applicants for the combined benefits of CalWORKs and SNAP/FSP. Sixty-nine percent of the participants receiving SNAP/FSP in the SPIN study received both CalWORKs and SNAP/FSP. Hence, their homes were subjected to unannounced searches without limits as to what rooms, drawers, cupboards, closets or containers could be inspected. It is these very practices that feed the fear that people have as they approach the County for help.

The SPIN study shows that these 'anti-fraud' policies make the application process more difficult and degrading for applicants. Almost a third (32.6%) of the participants in this study who were fingerprinted reported that the process made them feel like a criminal, while another 17.6% reported other negative emotional responses to the process. Descriptions of the Project 100% searches varied greatly. Many reported experiences that were very intrusive and frightening, as reflected in these statements:

“. . . he was asking me private things that would happen between me and my husband, and I think that's between me and him. And I'm not talking about violent, I'm talking about relationship.”

“. . . he went into the house and started checking my house, like I said; I've been treated like a criminal. He goes to look in at my freezer, and he goes through my clothes, he goes through my things, and my husband was not living there, like why you treat me this way? Why do you treat me like a criminal, like I was having drugs or I'm selling drugs or doing something bad? Yeah, my cabinets, opened the cabinets to find, I don't know what they're looking for. They treat us as a criminal, they treat you with no respect. No, they don't ask for permission for what they want.”

A few respondents reported that they were hardly searched at all, and a few others stated that the investigator's conduct was polite and courteous. Seventy-three out of 79 respondents (92%) who were searched reported that the investigator showed up unannounced and demanded to conduct the search regardless of what the applicant was doing at the time.

Regardless of the purpose of home searches and fingerprinting, these procedures are aligned in respondents' minds with criminalization, intimidation and humiliation. In this respect, the procedures are contributors to the shame, degradation, and fear that respondents identified as

⁵⁵ The actual fraud rate for San Diego County as reported to the California Department of Social Services is well below 1% which is similar to national and state rates reported by Food & Nutrition Services and other sources (www.fns.gov)

⁵⁶ Texas, Arizona and California require fingerprinting. In New York State, only New York City still requires it. The practice is under review by U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Undersecretary Kevin Concannon, who voiced the concern as to whether fingerprinting might be dissuading eligible persons from applying for SNAP/FSP. *"Fingerprinting for SNAP/FSP Under Scrutiny,"* by Kaomi Goetz, NPR Morning Edition, Dec. 18, 2009.

⁵⁷ See "Recommendations" for a more detailed discussion on the ineffectiveness of these programs in detecting fraud.

barriers to food stamp application and participation. Potential clients expect to be treated suspiciously and disrespectfully when they approach the County for assistance.

This “culture of poverty” mentality also shapes the County’s attempts to remedy its low SNAP/FSP participation rate and its efforts to improve nutrition for people who suffer from food insecurity or outright hunger. The Nutritional Safety Plan⁵⁸ guides HHSA’s food and nutrition programs toward three goals:

1. Promote Nutrition And Health Improvement
2. Strengthen Outreach, In-Reach & Education
3. Continue to Enhance Eligibility & Enrollment by Offering Superior Services while Assuring Program Integrity

Three components stand out in this plan: outreach, education, and advocacy. “Advocacy” under the County plan proposes legislative changes that would alter UPC codes so selected food items could be labeled as “non-nutritional.” If so labeled, the items would then be banned for purchase with SNAP/FSP. In outreach and education, the County plan calls for an increase in resources for nutrition education programs and SNAP/FSP outreach. Essentially, the HHSA proposes three types of actions: changing access to food, streamlining the process, and increasing incentives for SNAP/FSP outreach and nutrition education.

While the County’s plan for outreach would otherwise be commendable if the application process were not so inaccessible, the advocacy and education strategies as a means of relieving hunger are misguided. Taken together, the County’s proposals imply that the problem of nutrition among people in poverty lies in their ignorance about healthy eating habits and lack of awareness of the SNAP/FSP program. This conclusion is drawn from what is omitted from this plan as much as from what is included. Completely ignoring the issue of access to healthy food due to the economic constraints of those living in poverty speaks volumes to how little importance the County assigns this issue. However, as the data in Part A clearly show, the healthiness of the food people give their families is directly related to access to healthy food. These findings are consistent with national studies on food choices by people in low-income households that show that eating habits of people in poverty are no different from other families when they have the same resources.⁵⁹ The data from the SPIN study provide additional evidence that it is lack of access to healthy food that is the root of nutritional problems for people in poverty, not a lack of awareness of good nutritional content

These quotes from respondents highlight the struggle parents face in attempting to keep their children healthy when resources are depleted at the end of the month.

“We’re broke. Now it’ll be just rice with a couple of eggs for each one.” – *Single mother of five*

“It’s like at the end of the month . . . when there’s nothing and go get them Top Ramen.”

“If there’s stuff to make pasta we make the pasta with just tomato and that’s what we have. Without meat. No fruit. There’s no snacks. No vegetables or just like this week -- rice and beans.” – *Household of three adults and one child*

⁵⁸ See the County’s Nutritional Safety Plan as presented to the County Board of Supervisors on April 21, 2009.

⁵⁹ See: Stewart, H. & Blisard, N. (2008). Are lower income households willing and able to budget for fruits and vegetables? Economic Research Report Number 54, USDA. This study shows that increasing people’s food resources by as little as 10% leads to a significant increase in amount of fruits and vegetables in their diets.

“For dinner is potatoes with onions and beans, that’s all. No meat.” – *Household of two adults and two children*

“Toast. We have toast every day for breakfast because we went to church and they give us a bunch of bread so like we have toast.” – *Single mother with one child*

“Dinner looks like a can of peas. You know between three people. . . . Telling your son that you don’t have any apple juice for him is not a good thing. Or milk . . . That last week is really a lot about scrambling through my cupboards and seeing what I can throw together. Or, you know rice or there’s Top Ramen, there’s marinara spaghetti sauce. . . .”
– *Single mother with two children*

Additionally, 87% of the families with children in this study reported Very Low Food Security, as that condition is defined by the United States Census Bureau.⁶⁰ Almost half (49%) reported that they can never afford to purchase balanced meals, and another 45% reported only being able to afford to purchase a balanced meal sometimes.

The picture that emerges from this data is a parent or parents struggling to do their best for their children – parents who know what healthy eating habits are, but have too few resources to plan and provide a menu that is consistently nutritious throughout the month, particularly in the last two weeks of the month. This data suggests that increasing access to healthy food by improving access to economic and nutrition resources would change the food choices families make, particularly at the end of the month.⁶¹ It also suggests that limiting food purchase choices by changes in UPC codes and EBT cards without increasing access to food would do more harm to families than good. If, as this data points out, families are forced to buy “non-nutritious” foods such as Top Ramen at the end of the month for economic reasons, preventing them from making such purchases will only increase the family’s hunger.

The County:

As Figure 1 on the opening page of this section indicates, the role of the County HHSA in the process is both significant and complex. As the data here suggests, the Culture of Fear and Degradation emerges from a dynamic interaction between a person who seeks food stamp assistance and (1) the place (2) process, and (3) staff tasked with answering this need. The data further suggest that this interaction accentuates the fear and shame people feel when approaching the County for assistance. The image that emerges from stories told in interviews is that of a woman already feeling depressed and ashamed to ask for help. She enters the welfare office, a depressing and dirty place, and waits for hours. The staff treats her with indifference to mild hostility. The procedure for obtaining help is burdensome and criminalizing. The place is called a “Family Resource Center” but is not at all family friendly.

Place: In addition to the interviews conducted in February and March of 2009, thirteen of the fifteen County FRCs were rated for Customer Service, Condition of Facilities, and Family Friendliness during the last two weeks in October 2009. In these ratings Customer Service was further broken down to “Procedure” and “Client-Staff Interaction,” while the Facilities rating broken down into “General” and “Sanitary.”⁶² Table 6 provides the grades received by each of the Centers in each of the categories. These grades were derived from scores given to each

⁶⁰ See section on Methodology for description of how Food Security levels were measured.

⁶¹ See USDA studies reported footnote 6

⁶² See Appendix for description of the methodology

center in each category based on their maximum score relative to a perfect score. The traditional grading system was then applied to the score.⁶³ As can be seen, the composite grade for all sites in all categories is F. In fact, the composite grade for each of the categories shows that only one category, “Client-Staff Interaction,” received a passing grade, albeit the lowest possible passing grade. Only three of the thirteen Centers (El Cajon, Escondido, and

Center	Customer Service		Facilities		Family Friendly	Composite Score
	Procedure	Interaction	General	Sanitary		
Oxford Street	F	D+	F	D+	F	F
Center City	F	F	F	F	F	F
Market Street	F	F	F	F	F	F
El Cajon	F	F	F	F	B+	D-
Lemon Grove	D	F	F	F	C	F
Ramona	D	F	F	F	F	F
Escondido	F	C+	D+	F	F	D-
Metro	F	F	F	F	F	F
Northeast	F	C	F	F	F	F
Southeast	D	F	F	F	F	F
City Heights	F	D+	F	F	F	F
Fallbrook	F	F	F	B+	F	D-
Oceanside	F	D+	F	F	F	F
Average	F	D-	F	F	F	F

Fallbrook) received a passing grade. Again, those that received passing grades did so with the lowest possible passing grade (D-). Three Centers (Center City, Market Street and Metro) received failing grades in every category.

A close look at the FRCs with passing grades shows that they achieved this grade by doing relatively well in one or two categories. Two of the passing FRCs did so by achieving a relatively high grade in one category while failing in all others. The El Cajon FRC failed in every category except “Family Friendliness” in which it received a B+, and the Fallbrook FRC failed in every category except for Facilities -- “Sanitary” where it also received a B+. The Escondido FRC received passing grades in two categories, “Client-Staff Interaction” (C+) and “General Facilities (D+).”

These grades are consistent with findings from the interviews. The following statements by SPIN study respondents describe their experience with a County FRC.

“I didn’t feel like anyone really cared . . . my worker [is] very difficult to get a hold of, it was hard to get the appointment . . . it took a month for me to even get the SNAP/FSP

⁶³ A=90-100; B=80-89; C=70-79; D=60-69; F=0-59

and we had already been without food. My worker lost my paperwork three times. And I was lucky enough that I had my receipt.” – *Single mother of three*

“I didn’t know anything. It was like drawing blood, you know, it probably was easier for me to draw blood, [than] to get food stamp money. So that’s all I can say; my first experience was like drawing blood.” – *Single mother of two*

“Well, my first experience was that I was dying of sadness and suffering and pain. I spend all day there, doing paperwork, paperwork, one person attended me, then another and they said you are going to be attended right now and they didn’t and my girls were crying and crying and me crying also.” – *Household of three adults and two children*

“The office looked depressing, full of people, full of kids and they never attend to you.” – *Household of three adults and two children*

“My feeling was to go out and run. Because they didn’t attend to me and I filled out papers . . . and all that kind of stuff that make you feel like the worst thing in the world.” – *Household of three adults and two children*

“[The place was] dirty, and everyone looked like overwhelmed, upset, all of them that were in the office. There were a lot of people like me, long wait . . . It’s just wait, and wait, children crying, ladies upset with their children because they were hungry. We couldn’t have water, we can’t have a cookie, they want everything in order, but it’s just going in and out. Well, you bother, but you need it.” – *Household with three adults and one child*

“It wasn’t a very welcoming environment. It was more of a, I don’t want to say hostile, although it did become hostile at times.” – *Single father with two children*

“I felt ignored, that my word doesn’t matter at all. That’s what I felt. *I am not going to be heard*, was what I thought.” – *Single mother of two*

“I mean I was afraid, I was scared at the beginning, I was scared but I said, *what if they tell me that they’ll take my daughter away because I have no papers or something like that?*” – *Household with three adults and three children*

“It, it was kind of like jail. It’s an institution, you know? Gray and wait for your name to be called.” – *Single mother with one child*

“The tension among the place, people were mortified, full of fear, afraid that they would not get what they were looking for . . . People were frightened. I felt like them. I felt their pain . . . I thought, *this is a general fear, everyone is afraid. I feel like one of them, afraid.*” – *Single mother of three*

“I feel like a failure going in there. Because you already know you can’t do it by yourself and then you’re around all the posters that say you know food stamp fraud [is] a felony. . . you really don’t feel like you’re going to get the help you need there. But you’re internally pushing yourself to go because you know that this is one of your few options.” – *Single mother with one child*

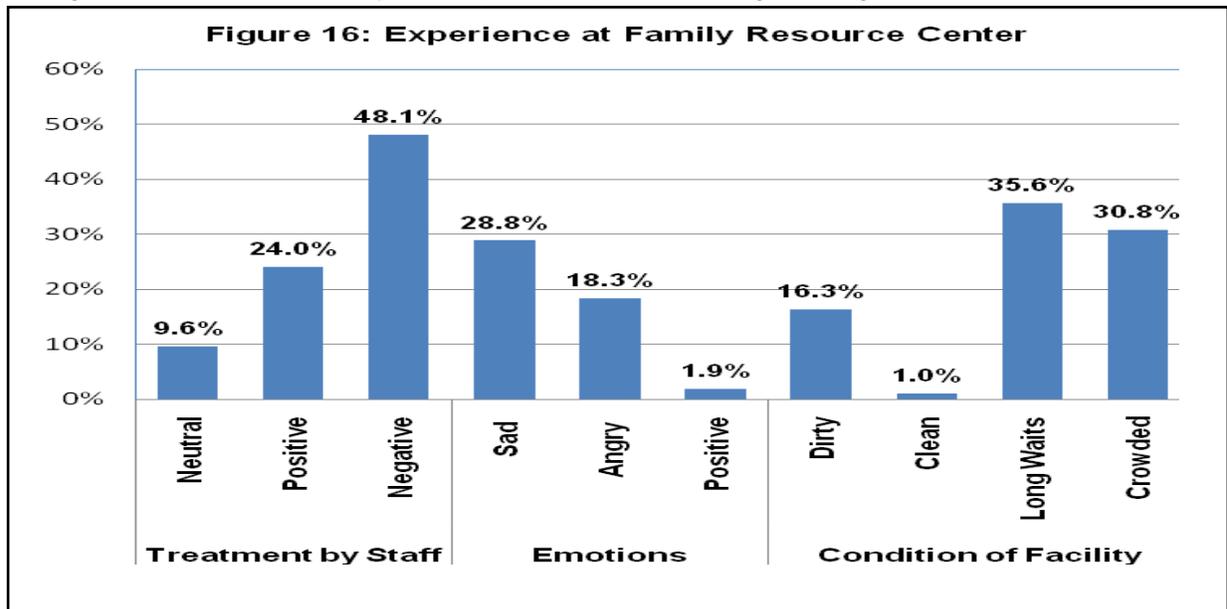
“The whole environment, people are very negative, sitting in that one room for many, many hours . . . so people next to you are not very friendly. It's a cold environment.” – *Single mother of three*

“It was full of people, many kids crying with hunger, many people with anguished faces because they had appointments and it was more than 2 o'clock and they didn't call them. . . . [They] were told that if they left they will have to start their cases again. That gave me lots of anguish but I saw much hunger in the kids.” – *Single mother of two*

“It was overwhelming. It really was overwhelming. There were a lot of people and no visual direction of where you should go, which line you should wait in, which form needs to be completed before you get in line . . . I've never seen that many people and I really didn't trust that they would be able to help me because they didn't seemed organized.” – *Two-parent household with two children. The mother has a degree in Communications, and the father has a Masters in Social Work*

“[I felt] completely demoralized. You know every single person I encountered there had not one ounce of care, [not] one ounce of compassion, not one ounce of anything . . . You could see the stress on their faces. It was, and you know, it was like in their eyes it was just next, next, next.” – *Single mother with two children*

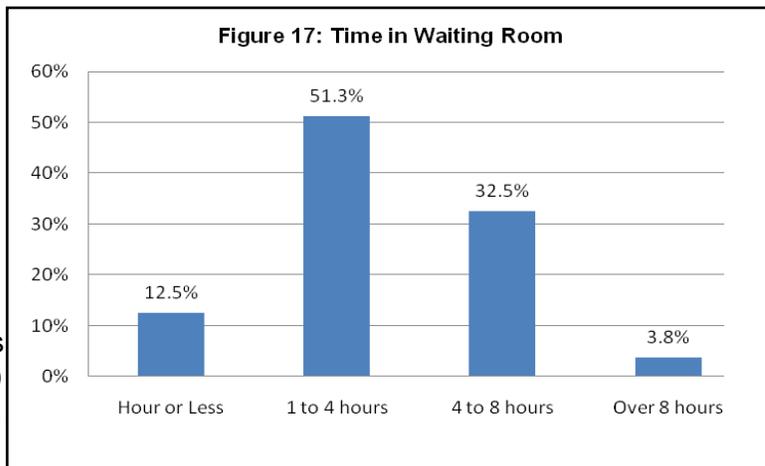
These quotes reflect the importance of the FRC environment in defining people's experience. In this case, the environment is indifferent at best and hostile at worst. For many persons, these feelings originate from a sense of being ignored or neglected, and are reinforced by the long lines and waits in an uncomfortable, child unfriendly place. Figure 16 shows that almost half of the respondents (48%) reported having a negative experience with the staff while 29% reported feelings of sadness and nearly a fifth (18%) reported feelings of anger. Less than 2% reported



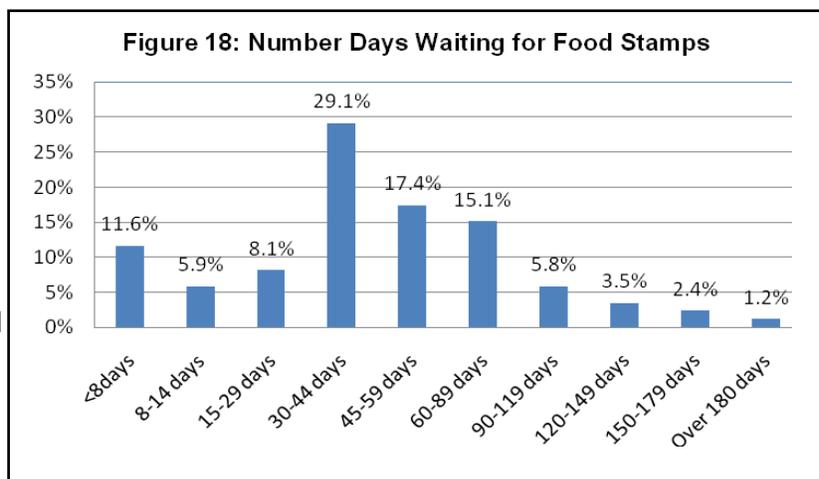
positive emotions. While not asked directly about the condition of the facilities in the interview, a significant number of respondents (16.3%) commented on the dirtiness of the place, while 36% and 31% commented respectively on the long lines and crowdedness. In rating the FRCs, reviewers were asked to estimate the number and age of people waiting. This estimate serves only as a snapshot of waiting rooms at various times in FRCs throughout the County. Yet, it is

illustrative of an environment that can be heavily taxing to those who wait. Reviewers found the average number of persons waiting was nearly 30 (28.8) adults and five infant/toddlers. The range of those waiting in FRCs ran from one to 90 adults and zero to 20 infants/toddlers.

As the interviews and ratings show, FRCs are bleak places. Respondents in the SPIN study reported FRC waiting times that averaged 3.9 hours per visit during the application process. As can be seen in Figure 17, more than half (51.3%) of the respondents waited between one four hours per visit for assistance, while almost a third (32.5%) waited between four and eight hours per visit. Only 12.5% of respondents waited less than one hour per visit for help. Respondents averaged more than four trips (4.35) to complete the application process, each time waiting several hours.⁶⁴



For many, completing the application was just the first step in a long process, as almost three-fourths of the respondents waited more than thirty days to receive their benefits. Figure 18 shows that 29.1% of the respondents waited between 30 and 44 days to receive their food stamps. Only a quarter (25.6%) received their benefits within the thirty days required by federal regulations. The remaining three-fourths (74.4%) waited much longer. More than a quarter (28%) waited more than sixty days before receiving a response to their application.



The Procedure: The picture that emerges thus far from the data is a person burdened with feelings of shame upon entering a San Diego County FRC, and encountering therein a depressing environment in which he or she is treated with neglect or hostility. Yet the data points to another significant contributor to the Culture of Fear and Degradation that frustrates the efforts of one who seeks help. This is the application process itself. SPIN study respondents found the application procedures burdensome, criminalizing, confusing, and complicated, reinforcing the sense of worthlessness so clearly expressed by one respondent who stated: “I have always felt that I am worth nothing, but with them I felt even worse, very ugly.”

⁶⁴ To get perspective, the Union Tribune (Jeff McDonald, 11/10/06)

A key finding in this study was how significantly the procedures themselves contributed to the Culture of Fear and Degradation. In response to the prompt, *“Please tell me your experience with the fingerprinting?”* respondents commented:

“I was marked because of being poor” – *Single mother of three*

“I felt like it was an invasion of my privacy. Yeah they said [it was] because there was WELFARE fraud and they wanted to make sure that I was who I said I was. So it was almost like, you know, you’re guilty you’re already a criminal unless you can prove you’re not a criminal.” – *Single mother with two children*

“That mortifies me a lot. In their system just because I am poor. I did no crime, I committed no mistake but the one of being poor and asking for help for my daughters.” – *Single mother of three*

Almost a third (32.6%) of the respondents to this prompt indicated that the very process of being fingerprinted made people feel like a criminal. Interestingly, these feelings were expressed both by respondents who reported respect and those who reported disrespect from the fingerprinting staff.

To the prompt, *“Can you describe your first experience at the food stamps office?”* Respondents described how the procedures at the FRC made them feel.

“Violated. They went through my purse, they checked me for weapons, they talked to me through a bullet-proof glass, I felt like a criminal that has been violated.” – *Household with two adults and one child*

“I thought I was in jail, I did, because there was a time I didn’t know what was going on.” – *Single mother of three*

“You feel bad, like, you know, you’re not part of this country or something. Like you don’t have rights.” – *Single mother of two*

“You feel like you’re a criminal or a vagrant that nobody wants to have around.” – *Single mother of five*

The feeling of being criminalized was also evident among respondents who described their experience with a home search.

“I got worried. But at the same time I told to myself, I must not be worried. I am committing no crime, I am telling the truth, I am alone, I have evidence and this lady said it all was going to be okay. She saw me worried.” – *Single mother of five*

“Bad. It made me feel bad because I didn’t expect they would check [everything] ... He didn’t say anything offensive; he only looked everywhere from head to foot, even under the tongue.” – *Single mother of two*

“At the beginning the person was very distrustful about who I was . . . he already was like that before even talking to me. When he told me ‘I am here to make the interview,’ I said, ‘Of course, come on in, and when he saw that there was no inconvenience he

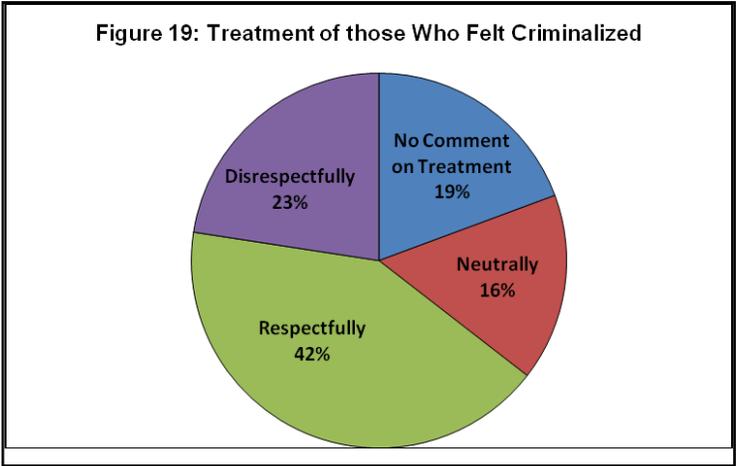
became more relaxed. But at the beginning, his attitude was like, ‘I am going to find something, I know it.’” – *Single mother of two*

“Like, violated almost. Like trying to, like, am I in investigation? Is there something? Are you trying to find something wrong that’s why you can’t give me aid? That’s how I felt.” – *Household of two adults*

“She made me feel like I was lying, like I was doing something bad or, you know, just, it was just really frustrating.” – *Single mother with one child*

“But I guess their thing is to try and catch us in the act. So my thing is you’re automatically thinking that we’re bad, automatically you’re just assuming we’re bad.” – *Single mother with one child*

There is some evidence in this data that indicates that “Procedures” such as fingerprinting and home searches may play a particularly important role in defining the experience for the applicant. As stated above and shown in the Figure 19, those who reported being treated respectfully and those who reported being treated disrespectfully both reported feeling criminalized by the process. Among those who felt criminalized by the process of being fingerprinted, 16% reported having been treated neutrally and 42% reported having been treated respectfully. This suggests that the procedure of being fingerprinted has an intrinsic negativity, at least in the food stamp and CalWORKs application setting, which supersedes client-staff interaction.



Client-Staff Interaction: As the data show, a person already bearing the shame of societal failure and carrying the fear that arises from a hostile or uncaring environment, experiences the added burden of procedures that confuse, complicate and criminalize the effort to seek help. The descriptions of the first experience at an FRC make clear how uncomfortable the experience is. As gatekeepers to the system, the FRC staff person has the power to play a facilitative role or act as a barrier to service. Would a welcoming, pleasant, positive interaction with FRC staff contribute to reducing the negativity attached to the place and the process? Would the participation rate be higher if staff were to be incentivized or directed to act differently? These questions are posed by the data in the SPIN study but not answered by it. Instead, the data (shown in Figure 7) show a highly charged atmosphere inside FRCs where clients experience a high degree of negativity in their interactions with staff. Almost half (48.1%) of respondents felt they were treated disrespectfully by staff while only one-fourth (24%) reported being treated respectfully. Without articulating an appropriate standard by which to judge the acceptable percentage of positive or negative interactions between clients and staff, it can be said that those whose task it is to help others in need might be expected to achieve a higher degree of positive interactions than negative, at least as a simple starting point. And from the standpoint of “customer” relations, it is troubling for any enterprise engaged in service to the public to find that only 1.9% of respondents reported positive feelings in their interactions with staff, while 28.8% felt saddened and 18% felt angry. This data coincides with the high

percentage of respondents who experience FRCs as places of neglect, hostility, confusion and criminalization.

Interaction among parts: In analyzing systems as complex as this it is not enough to understand how each part works. The whole picture cannot be understood without understanding how those parts interact. What stands out from this examination is that FRC staff are the one common element in each of these parts. While, as stated above, this study does not address the relationship between County policy and staff behavior, there is enough evidence in the data to suggest that some relationship exists. The fact that 48% of the people feel disrespected by the staff and only 1.9% report positive feelings suggests the negative behavior on the part of staff is either endemic or systemic or both. The fact that all FRCs project the same negative image as described in the interviews and illustrated by the ratings suggests these conditions are acceptable to the County. Additionally, when the County consistently ranks last among metropolitan areas in the nation in participation rate and among the worst Counties in the State in compliance rates,⁶⁵ it is reasonable to assume there are fundamental problems with the system itself, i.e., that the reasons for these poor outcomes are embedded in the very way the County conducts its business. In other words, these results are the natural consequences of the County's approach to public assistance and not the result of mistakes or errors. Providing an acceptable level of "customer service" and improving the participation rate requires identifying and rectifying these fundamental problems.

Research in the field of organizational management is clear and unambiguous about the connection between personnel policies and customer service. Satisfied staff have happy customers, and dissatisfied staff have unhappy customers. Factors like the complexity of the work, reward/punish systems, degree of flexibility in work design, etc. all contribute to worker satisfaction.⁶⁶ If there is a connection between County personnel policy and staff behavior, as this research suggests, then personnel policies must be examined along with those policies responsible for identifying and reaching agency goals in administering public benefit programs. What kinds of incentives and/or disincentives are used to shape staff behavior? What behaviors are rewarded? What behaviors are punished and/or ignored? If the negative behavior of staff that leads 48% of the applicants to feel disrespected is condoned by the County, how is the permission or acquiescence to act in such a manner communicated? What are the formal and/or informal consequences for different staff behavior? If an applicant complains about his/her treatment, what is the follow-up process? If the staff is found to have been inappropriately negative, what are the consequences to the staff? Are determinations such as approvals/denials/appeals/etc. part of a staff person's performance evaluation? The answers to these questions would bring a great deal of clarity as to why the patterns of interaction identified here exist and persist.

CONCLUSIONS

The data from the SPIN study suggests that hunger abounds among low-income families in San Diego County. These families regularly experience a steep decline in nutritious foods after the second week of each month, with a marked decline in quality and quantity of all foods by the beginning of the fourth week of the month. Weekly menus indicate these deficiencies have nothing to do with lack of awareness about a healthy diet, nor with inability or refusal to buy and

⁶⁵ Federal regulations require that applicants receive a determination of their eligibility within 30 days. San Diego County consistently fails to do this for at least a fifth of applicants, almost three times the state average of 7%.

⁶⁶ See the works of Chris Argyris, Peter Drucker, Amitai Etzioni, Peter Senge, and others.

prepare healthy foods, but with simple math: there is not enough money to buy healthy food all month, and in the last week of the month, there is not enough food to make healthy choices or to feed in adequate amounts.

With these deficiencies in mind, it is all the more shocking that San Diego County remains at the bottom levels of national food stamp participation rates for eligible populations. The SPIN study indicates that neither outreach nor education will improve food stamp participation unless FRCs change the way they do business. They must engage in strategies that alter the experience of applying for SNAP/FSP. Data indicate the place, the process, and the client-staff interactions are so vastly negative that they burden most of those who seek help with feelings of shame, humiliation, fear and degradation. In the process, people who desperately need to feed their families must overcome significant barriers to obtaining SNAP/FSP.

If the County is authentically interested in improving the SNAP/FSP participation rate and the quality of “customer service,” it must examine how it interacts with its clients. It must be open to making deep changes in how it sees its clients and conducts business. It must find a way to make the facilities more welcoming, the process less punitive, and the service more personal. It must find a way to be more responsive to the client, and it must redirect its policy to support the client-staff relationship rather than undermine it. Finally, it must address the elements of “program integrity” that widely deter or criminalize applications by those who need help, without adding substantially or reliably to the determination of eligibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The mission of San Diego County HHSA is “to make people’s lives safer, healthier and self-sufficient by managing essential services.” This is to be achieved by providing “*outreach and links to services to help at-risk children, families and vulnerable adults lead safe and healthy lives, and become self-sufficient.*” The County intends these services to be “responsive to customers” by being “customer-focused and culturally competent” and provided accurately in a timely manner.⁶⁷ The responses of the persons interviewed in the SPIN study make clear that the County is falling far short of this goal. If it is sincere about these statements, it must address the concerns raised in this study.

The following recommendations emerge from the data presented here:

- 1. Reinstate the client-caseworker relationship, decrease caseloads, and all negative County actions generated by CalWIN be reviewed by a Caseworker.**

Public benefits have been hampered greatly in San Diego County by two systems—CalWIN and ACCESS—which HHSA identifies as remedies to low food stamp participation rates. The CalWIN program is a software program designed to reduce employee time per case and to make all cases “paperless.” However, it papers clients with countless contradictory and confusing notices, warnings and requests without ever passing these actions in front of a caseworker for review or approval. The ACCESS program is a version of “business process re-engineering (BPR),” which transforms the caseworker staff into a kind of assembly line with no particular caseworker responsible for any particular caseload. Theoretically, any person can handle any case. In practical reality, no staff person is responsible for anything, and when something goes wrong with a client’s case, it has been

⁶⁷ Taken from the County HHSA website: http://www.sdcounty.ca.gov/hhsa/programs/sd/documents/09-14_Strategy_Agenda-one_page_110708.pdf

reported that the ACCESS telephone line is typically busy for 20-30 minutes, and the referring number given to clients has a voicemail that is full or never returns a call. While the interviews in the SPIN study were conducted before HHS fully implemented these changes, SPIN's experience with people attempting to obtain SNAP/FSP is that these changes have made the application processes for any kind of public benefits, including SNAP/FSP, harder to complete successfully. The study does show, however, that people who need help so desperately that they will bear the humiliation and shame of entering a welfare office need to see a real person with whom they can establish a respectful relationship. This relationship strengthens them, gets them through hard times and empowers them to re-enter the competitive mainstream. People who help other people for a living, such as caseworkers, need to feel they are contributing to the lives of people they know, whose fortunes they follow, whose performance they encourage, and whose compliance with abundant regulations requires intelligent review. This is the heart and soul of the client-caseworker relationship, but it has been reduced to a paper and voicemail war by CalWIN and ACCESS (BPR).

In addition to the personal cost to both staff and client, there are significant organizational problems related to the assembly-line approach created by CalWIN and ACCESS. Assembly line systems are designed for product delivery. The County, however, is not delivering a product; it is delivering a service. Service delivery is inherently more complex than product delivery, and simple delivery systems do not work for complex services. While simplistic approaches may appear efficient in the short-term, organizational research has repeatedly shown that such simplistic approaches to complex issues are not very efficient in the long-term.⁶⁸ While the cost savings that come with the reduction in staff provide a strong immediate incentive to adopt such systems, the long term costs eventually come to outweigh the short term budget gains. Problems created by CalWIN and BPR are already emerging. Several Counties in the State have had to respond to lawsuits regarding some of the many persistent problems with the CalWIN software program. Also, there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence to suggest that appeals due to erroneous decisions made by staff and CalWIN are on the rise. What the County saves in personnel costs due to the reorganization and use of these systems may quickly be eaten up by legal fees and the additional staff resources necessary to address the rise in appeals. Additionally, the repetitive nature of the work will begin to erode worker productivity and lead to a greater staff turnover. All these factors may more than erase any initial savings and contribute to the low food stamp participation rate.

2. End Project 100%

There are ample and detailed requirements for documentation, verification, computerized matches and other data that are much more effective in ensuring compliance with eligibility standards than Project 100%. This home search, conducted for every CalWORKs applicant (CalWORKs applicants are normally also food stamp applicants), is at best a walk-through of the rooms of a home. At worst, it is a limitless invasion of cupboards, closets, medicine cabinets, drawers, refrigerators and other private areas of the home. It is less effective at verifying eligibility than the array of leases, bank statements, school attendance records, immunization records, employment documents, immigration and citizenship documents, birth certificates, computerized databases and a host of other verifications already required in the application process. San Diego County is the only one of California's 58 counties employing this home search practice. Even Los Angeles County, which implemented a

⁶⁸ See works by authors cited in footnote 16

similar project based on San Diego County's example, abandoned it in 2009 in the interest of cost-effectiveness. Without losing any vigilance against fraud, San Diego County could redirect the money it spends needlessly criminalizing innocent applicants to improve staffing and facilities at FRCs.

3. Lobby to end all fingerprinting

The County's Nutrition Safety Plan calls for lobbying to end fingerprinting for foster youth. It is clear from this study that fingerprinting is a major issue for many applicants. The State Auditor has reported that fingerprinting, a multimillion dollar expense, does nothing to contribute to the integrity of the SNAP/FSP program.⁶⁹ Given the significant negative effect fingerprinting has on the applicant, the County should direct its lobbyists to work to end fingerprinting for all SNAP/FSP applicants.

4. Reduce wait times in Family Resource Centers to one hour or less

For the participants of this study, the average wait for assistance at a County FRC was 3.9 hours. This time was spent in an area where no food or drink are allowed and, with little exception, there is no space for children to be fed, to play or to be cared for. Reports from the interviews and from the ratings of the FRCs indicate they are not "responsive to customers" or "customer-focused." In fact, they reinforce or exacerbate the negative feelings people already have when they are forced to apply for public benefits.

5. Upgrade the facilities

There are several ways that the County FRCS could be upgraded to reduce the feelings of indifference, hostility and neglect. These are:

- a. Remove the bulletproof glass: This glass was mentioned several times in the interviews as respondents attempted to understand its purpose.⁷⁰ In addition to sending the message that staff need to be protected from clients, it also makes communication more difficult. In nine of the thirteen (69%) FRCs, reviewers found the bulletproof glass caused some difficulty in hearing or being heard.
- b. Create a space for eating & drinking: Asking someone to sit for several hours and not allowing them to eat or drink seems harsh, especially when there are children involved. Creating a small space within the waiting room that has a clean, working water fountain and a place to snack while waiting to hear one's name called would be helpful.
- c. Create a children's space: It seems obvious that a place called a "Family Resource Center" would be equipped to deal with children. However, County FRCs are ill-equipped to do so. Only two of the FRCs (15%) had a space (El Cajon, Lemon Grove) and only three FRCs (23%) had materials for children (Market Street, El Cajon, Metro). In the El Cajon FRC in East County, the only FRC with children's furniture, space and

⁶⁹ See: Statewide Fingerprint Imaging System: The State Must Weigh Factors Other than Need and Cost-Effectiveness When Determining Future Funding for the System, a report by the California State Auditor in January 2003. Can be found at: www.bsa.ca.gov/bsa/

⁷⁰ A notable example of the inefficacy of bullet-proof glass exists in the FRC at 690 Oxford St., Chula Vista, where, in the same building, the same clients that speak to their county case workers through bullet-proof glass may interact with their privately contracted employment case managers in welfare-to-work without that barrier,

materials were quite limited. In addition to the furniture, the space contained a functioning changing table and a few children's materials. Creating a space that is quietly engaging for children would do much to reduce the tension in the waiting rooms. It also would provide a space for enrichment through materials made available.

- d. Provide stimulating reading material: Magazines covering issues such as child development, nutrition, and family life would also contribute to a more positive atmosphere, while providing important information.
- e. Decorate walls with child/family friendly materials: Make the FRC warmer and more welcoming by decorating the walls with children's art, as the County Board of Education does in its main offices. Schools can create art on specific topics for display at FRCs.

6. Meet with SPIN/Caring Council to discuss the study

The County's Nutrition Safety Plan calls for the County to hold "focus groups/surveys and interviews with community partners and food stamp customers [to] assess program inefficiencies and barriers to SNAP/FSP participation."⁷¹ The data collected for the SPIN study and the information obtained by the Caring Council in this joint project provides enormous insight into the perspective of the "SNAP/FSP customers" and could be of great assistance in guiding the County in their attempt to improve its participation rate.

⁷¹ See the County's Nutrition Safety Plan, Goal 3, Objective E4.1

APPENDIX I

ANECDOTES

In a study like this it is easy to get lost in the numbers and lose the heart of the story. Numbers, while helpful in understanding the whole picture, are sterile and cannot provide a window into what life is like for the individuals represented in this study. This appendix is an attempt to present a fuller picture by giving examples of more complete stories. These anecdotes were chosen because they are illustrative of the lives of the people interviewed, not because they tell the worst of the stories.

This single mother lost her job in December 2008. She has a 12-year-old daughter and 9-year-old son.

It gets worse when watching food commercials. It breaks my heart having no food and watching a McDonald's commercial. Please Mother Earth swallow me, I'd like to hide somewhere because I can't stand it, watching a well-dressed girl eating and my girl staring at it.

Well my daughter has this problem that I haven't been able to stop. She sucks her finger. I ask her to stop it and she responds, "I'm hungry so I'll suck my finger." Yeah every time I try to take it away from her mouth she says, "No because I feel hungry." And I tell her, "But you won't feel less hungry by sucking your finger." "No," she says, "I imagine its real food." She's twelve.

I took my son to the doctor. He asked me to step back and told me, "Do you know what your kid has? He's depressed due to the situation you're going through. So I'd like to know what problem he has." And I told the doctor it's because of having no food. He told me what his problem was. Not having what he wanted has caused his depression.

These are the words of an elderly woman who lives in San Diego with her husband. She has major health problems but lacks adequate health care. Each month, the couple survives on a food budget of only \$80.

Right now we're spending almost all of the money that we have just to keep the rent of the house that we're living in, to stay in it. So we don't have anything left over. We have only my husband's unemployment. I'm getting Social Security Disability, which is very small.

Well, we don't celebrate birthdays on the birthday anymore. We usually, we ask everybody if they can wait to, say, the next week or whenever the money would be coming in, you know. And that takes a lot of the fun out of it, the happiness out of it. And then it also hurts my husband's pride. Not me so much. I've always been flexible. But we even do holidays on a different day. If it's 3 days off for Thanksgiving, we wait. I think we've become more spiritual. Just being grateful that we have food.

I lost my job. The job I had for 9 and a half years. The whole laboratory of San Diego State closed. It closed. So we don't have that job, and I was getting disability and was able to work a little bit. But now, no work. And then at my age with my disability, trying to go for another job without medical care. If I get a certain medication, I can walk better. If I don't get it, then I'm very

crippled up, and I can barely walk. And nobody is gonna hire me if I look like that.

When there's no food, the arguments come. "Why don't you look harder for another job?" And he's criticizing me, "Well if you could've worked more, or if you could have got a better paying job." I say, "Well, if you could have finish your education, you could be the supervisor," and he complains about having to dig holes.

And I yell at him because I think he uses too much coffee. And it's like, "Oh, why did you take so much?" We can't make it. And he says, "I'm tired of having it watered down so bad so that I can't even taste it!"

And then we were in the embarrassing position of borrowing food from our daughter. Which we never, we swore we never would. You know, we would always provide for her, but life has not turned out that way.

And the temptation is there. And it is horrifying to think, "Oh, they didn't notice this that I didn't pay for this, this is in the bag." I never thought I would feel that way. I never thought I would feel that way! Sometimes, if they made a mistake, I don't go back to the store and tell them and make sure I paid it. You know.

He'll eat something from the food bank, and if it has wheat in it, then he'll have the allergic reaction. Yeah. And this will make him congested, and he can't breathe. And he's like swollen around the eyes and everything. And he's like choking, can't breathe and coughing. And so this keeps him from being able to take daily labor. Which he might earn \$25, \$50 in a day. And even if we have the food, if he gets that bad of a reaction, then he loses the food that he's eaten. You know, he can't keep it down.

So we have health problems, but we're not getting any health care. Not getting any health care. And I go to one free clinic once one Saturday. The third Saturday of each month, I have to go all the way to Nashville City. And they'll give me samples, if they have them. I have to go on the bus and on the trolley. And it takes about 3 hours every month. 3 hours waiting to see if the doctors have it. It takes an hour and half to get there. And an hour and a half to get home.

I got to tell you one health problem for me. My teeth have started breaking and falling out. And so now I have so many broken teeth. Even if I have food I couldn't eat it. I find it almost impossible to eat just, like, freshly cooked chicken.

None of my relatives would lend me any money any more. Which is embarrassing. But we borrow from friends that have their money coming in at a different time of the month. And when they don't have the money and we do, we lend them some.

Or we barter, we give some of the, you know, the fruits or avocados, the things that we harvested, you know. We grew pumpkins, we grew some. We got some seeds, we grew pumpkins and zucchini. We grew. We grew a lot; we had a lot of zucchini, a lot of squash to supplement. But whatever is the cheapest. Like sometimes they're clearing something out and they have like a lot of tomatoes or like roasted tomatoes.

I don't usually tell people about our situation. Because I feel I should know better. I was educated and should have known how not to be in this situation. So I'm embarrassed. To find myself in this situation in spite of everything that I have tried to do. It just became overwhelming.

This is the story of a single mother of four. She and her children have been staying in a domestic violence shelter in San Diego. She arrived at SPIN for help with bruises covering her face. She experienced problems obtaining food stamps and welfare for her children.

I have more stress because of my family situation right now. So alone, I can't attend their necessities. I'm homeless, I'm unemployed. So I need the cash aid and the food stamps. But sometimes it's not enough.

Most of all, you feel angry and depressed because an adult can hold, but a child or a baby is more difficult. Even over a slice of bread, the kids fight. If one is eating slowly, one goes and steals his meal. They get violent, aggressive. I understand the parents that murder their own children out of desperation, of not having anything to give them.

We make foamy flowers, and we place them in the entrances and exits of the stores with a little table and a little basket, my kids and I. And then we put the money together and with that we cover the costs of food. Yes, yes. My kids help me, someone cuts, someone pastes, and the others wrap.

One time I came out of the store crying. Yes, it was because my daughter had grabbed a box of cereal that had candies and a CD. But it cost almost \$5. I grabbed those cereals that cost less. I said that I don't have enough money. If I'd buy it to you, your siblings are going to eat the whole the box in just a day, and what am I going to do for the rest of the days?

So, this is what makes me cry. She told me, "One day I'll be a president and all the children will eat everything they want." And I told her "Don't worry baby, we'll have money."

But she didn't cry or anything. "Mom, someday I'll be the president. I'm going to be an important person," she said. And that's the reason why she is going to school.

What hurt me more was the lady was near me spoke Spanish. She looked like she had some money. She grabbed two boxes and told me, "She deserves a good Christmas gift; take them for the girl," she said. My daughter went and gave her a hug and told her "God bless you. God bless you and thanks for my cereal," that one I couldn't buy for her.

That was what hurt me a lot. They're children, how do you explain to them? The big one is looking for a job so he can help me with the food, because sometimes we don't have enough. And he says, "Mommy with what I will earn, we're going to buy food," and I tell him yes.

And the church, they gave a basket of food. We also share food with the women at the shelter because they've denied them welfare too. There's a lady that is three months pregnant, and they've denied her the stamps. Yes. I know it's wrong, I know it's wrong. She's pregnant, the name's Martita. I saw her need and had to give her some, she needs it.

SPIN was the ones that helped me. You don't know how much I battled all bruised up. You realized when I got here all banged up, without knowing where to go, with no money and no home.

These are the words of an unemployed single mother of two who is living below 75% of the federal poverty line.

My son is a big milk drinker. I mean him alone. Even though he's only 3-years-old! He puts away a gallon of milk easy every week.

And at the end of the month when you don't have it, he'll tell. He'll flat out tell me, "Mommy you need to go to the store and get some milk." And I'll say, ok. I'll just tell him "Yeah, I will, I will," and then I blame it on, like, I forgot. "Oh I forgot to go to the store," instead of saying I don't have any money to him. I'll say I forgot. And then he'll say "Mommy you forgot again!" and then he'll get all bratty, "You forgot again Mommy and you knew I wanted milk."

What are you gonna do? It's either admitting that you have no money or you admit that you forgot.

It's so often. It's like we can't afford that, we can't afford that. No, we can't get that. No, no, no. I mean every time we go anywhere.

That first week of the month when everything is kind of a little bit more abundant, she hordes. My 9-year-old. She hordes food. And she eats way too much. And she makes little secret trips to that refrigerator. 'Cause it's gonna go. It's gonna be gone. We've had talks. We've talked about it, and we've talked about it. It's just become a part of her now. When there's that abundance, she's gonna get as much as she can while it's still there. Meanwhile I'm trying to explain to her we could make it stretch. Or I have to hide it. I have to hide things from her, you know. So that it will be there the next week when we need it.

I didn't eat lunch today. I won't eat lunch tomorrow. You know? I mean that's just the way it's gonna be. And like I need it, you know. But still I'll cut my meals in half and give it to my kids. I know I need it, but not compared to my children. My children need it more.

[When I went to apply for welfare and food stamps,] I was crying for everything, you know, 'cause it was not a good day for me. 'Cause I was working. I worked. It wasn't like I was sitting on my butt doing nothing. I was working and found myself a month behind on my rent. A month behind on my car payment. Had no food, nothing. You know because, that's just the way it went at the time. And I just didn't want to be there any more than they did.

[I left the welfare office] completely demoralized. You know, every single person I encountered there had not one ounce of care, one ounce of compassion, not one ounce of anything. You could see the stress on their face. It was, like in their eyes. It was just next, next, next. And if you went up to the counter to say "When am I [gonna be called]," there was attitude. You were talked down to. You know? You, you got no respect. I mean it was like, "Oh you're begging."

I'm sorry. I paid taxes for 20 years. I worked. I was working then when I originally got on food stamps. It wasn't like I'm just sitting on my butt doing nothing, tossing, you know, a coin in the air, drinking a beer.

Now that you've had to experience this food stamp process and the application, would you go do it again, if you had to?

Definitely. You have no choice. You have children to feed. You know. That's what you do. You

lay down on hot coals for your kid. You walk over glass. You bend over backwards. That's what you do. You get humiliated.

These are the words of an African American woman with a degree in Communications. Her husband has a Masters in Social Work. They had previously been financial stable but descended into poverty over the last two years, when both lost their jobs. Her husband's job search efforts have been unsuccessful largely because he does not own a car. The positions he is qualified to take require him to be on-call and travel to sites all over the county. Her husband skips lunch every day to make sure their 4- and 5-year-old children have enough. But when he comes home every day, he's irritated and has a headache. The family is currently on welfare and food stamps, surviving on a total income of about \$1000/month. That puts their family at 50% of the federal poverty line.

This is how a college-educated adult felt about the process of asking for government aid.

We waited all day like we were supposed to. It was overwhelming. I had never seen so many people. There was no visual direction of where you should go. Where do you get the form? What form needs to be completed before getting into line? They don't give you information to help you save time.

We had to buy two \$5 bus tickets for the round trip to the welfare office. So it was \$10 out of the money we had. Since we had to come back the next day, they gave us a token. But that's if you have an appointment. If you made an error and need to come back, you don't get reimbursed.

Think of a factory. It seemed like people were being processed. There was no human connection. We waited all day at the welfare office like we were supposed to, then we went back there, and there's this glass. He's behind this glass, and you're on the other side. So that's the first type of interaction.

The case worker was very cold. Not interested. When I asked the case worker about housing, he just said, "That's why we give you the money." Then he got up and walked away. Later, when I tried to make sure we did everything correctly, his tone went up three levels. He talked to me like a child. I had shared something very intimate and personal about our needs, but he was not interested. He was very cold. We were tolerated. Everyone is tolerated.

There are people who are intimidated by the process. The forms are intimidating. You're not sure what information they're necessarily asking for. You have to have those completed before the interview. And if you don't, you'll be kicked out of the process. I've seen people finish the paperwork, wait in line for an hour, and get to the front of the line. Then they tell them that something is wrong, and they're told they have to wait in line again. The line takes 45 minutes to one hour. Standing up.

If we were not desperate for it, I would have walked out the door. If I was paying for the service, I would have called the manager. But you don't get the same kind of rights.

These are the words of a single mother of five kids. Her oldest daughter, age fifteen, has schizophrenia, and another child is mentally retarded. She is on disability. She skips meals often, and even her 15-year-old eats less so that the 5-year-old will have more. One week before our team interviewed this woman, she had to check herself into the hospital because she was so stressed from her inability to provide for her family. By the fourth week of every month, they have no food left. That week, they have to rely on whatever they can get from a church. The family barely survives on welfare, food stamps, and disability income. This is her account of the mandatory home search to which she had to submit in order to receive welfare for her family.

The investigator showed up, and I was not there. And they assumed I was not living there. And when I went to fight with them, because I had to fight with them (and that's why it took so long for me to get approved), I say, "I had to take my kids to school." And they say you [committed] fraud because they [did not] find you. But it's not my fault they don't call, because they know your number. When you fill out your application, you give your number and your address. So they can call you. At least have the respect to call you and say, "You know what, we're gonna be there."

The investigator asked me a lot about my private life. It was really bad, because he asked if I [had] my ex-husband [with] me. When I applied, I applied as a single parent. So it's obvious that I don't have him. And he said, "Do you know where he is?" And I said, "If I know where he is, do you think I would apply for welfare? I can [get] child support." He was quiet because he was thinking I was going to be quiet, because he was treating me like a criminal. I'm not gonna let no one treat me with no respect. If I had the money, a way to provide for my kids, I'm not gonna be on welfare. I'm not gonna humiliate myself and let people treat me that way, with no respect.

Then, he goes to look in my freezer, and he goes through my clothes, he goes through my things, to find out if my husband was not living there. I said, "Why are you treating me this way? I think you're treating me like a criminal, like I was having drugs, or I was doing something bad." He went through my cabinets to find out-- I don't know what he was looking for. He treated me like a criminal, with no respect. No, he did not ask for permission [to search in these places]. They think they have the tag [badge], the investigator, so they can do whatever they want.

My sister had the same experience. She said, "Search wherever you want. I got nothing to hide." It was the same thing as me. When we were doing that, I feel they violated my rights.

APPENDIX II

METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to address three questions:

1. How are people with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line experiencing hunger in San Diego County?
2. What are people with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line doing to address their hunger?
3. How do people with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line experience the safety net in San Diego County especially as it relates to SNAP/FSP?

Two assumptions were made in the design of this study. First, it was assumed that hunger was widespread among people with incomes below 200% of the poverty line and that most people at this income level are eligible for SNAP/FSP. The second assumption was that the low participation rate being experienced in San Diego was directly related to how the County HHS carried out the SNAP/FSP program.

A participatory action research (PAR) approach was used to address these questions. This methodology was chosen for three reasons. First, the membership of the organization conducting the study, SPIN, consists of people who have incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line, most of whom have and/or are receiving public assistance. The insights these individuals have into the process of applying and/or receiving public assistance are critical to the development of the instrument used in the study. Secondly, experiences have taught us that people near or below poverty line tend to be guarded about their financial and family situation. Applying for public assistance invites the government to intrude into all aspects of one's life. The application process requires responding to a countless number of questions and inspections designed to unearth any inconsistency in an individual's application, encouraging a guarded stance by the applicant. Because the individuals conducting the interview are in the same financial situation as the person being interviewed, it is possible to penetrate this guardedness and have a more honest conversation than would occur with a different interviewer. The final reason for using a PAR approach is that the purpose of the study was to document the perspectives of people struggling with hunger faced with engaging the San Diego County safety net as one of a very limited set of options. Having people who are living the experience conduct the study ensures that the desired perspective will be captured. The value of any research is limited by the validity of its data and this approach strengthens this study's validity.

This study was designed to assist in the development of a grounded theory as to why San Diego County consistently performs so poorly. Rather than beginning with a specific hypothesis as to why this phenomena is occurring, grounded theory development begins by exploring the phenomena and building the theory from the findings. It is not until the data are collected and analyzed that one begins to consider a theory or model to explain the phenomena.

Instrument Development:

Hunger/Safety Net Interview: Because the research team did not have a background in social science research, they went through an extensive three month training conducted by the principle investigator. This training included:

1. What is our Experience?

2. Is that a Fact? Truth v. Fact v. Opinion
3. How do we know what we know? Reliability & Validity
4. Government Benefits Programs – Means Tested v. Universal benefits
5. SNAP/FSP Program: Policies & Practices
6. What makes a good public policy?
7. Research Design
8. Interviewing skills

Once the training was completed the team began an interactive process to develop the instrument. Members of the team began the process by describing their own experiences with hunger and the safety net in detail. From those details emerged the broad questions that would shape the interview. Additionally, the team reviewed and critiqued the surveys used by the U.S. Census Bureau to assess food security. The decision as to whether or not to include a question in the interview depended on the answers to the following questions. Does it address the broad questions? Would the person being interviewed understand it? How would the question make the person being interviewed feel? How likely is the person being interviewed to give a truthful response? The experiences of the team provided a baseline for assessing the answers to these questions. From the dialogue a set of questions emerged that covered the following topics:

- What people worry about the most & when they worry
- Health concerns and the impact of hunger on those concerns
- The household menu for adults and children meal by meal, week by week
- Strategies used to stretch both food resources and food budget
- How the environment within the household differed with and without food
- Other programs used to access food
- Openness to report their hunger
- Experience applying for SNAP/FSP

In addition, the interview included six questions taken from the survey used by the U.S. Census Bureau, Economic Research Service to assess level of food security among the respondent. The inclusion of these questions allows the sample to be compared to national statistics on hunger. These questions asked respondents to rate how often they experience a disruption in eating patterns or a reduction in food intake. These were the only question in the interview with structured response sets.

Once the interview was completed, each member of the team piloted it with two respondents. These interviews were digitally recorded. These recordings were used to both assess the interview and as a training tool for the interviewers. Minor adjustments in language and order of questions were made based on the pilot interviews.

FRC Ratings: The instrument for rating the conditions at the FRCs was developed using a similar process as the one for the Hunger/Safety Net interview. The process began with the research team describing their experiences with the FRCs in detail. From those descriptions the key aspects of the FRC were identified for assessment. A rating form was developed and reviewed by the research team. After some adjustments, the instrument was pilot tested at three FRCs. From that experience the rating form was further modified, reviewed and approved by the research team. The form had reviewers rate the general conditions and sanitary conditions. They were also asked to make judgments as to the quality of the interaction between client and staff and the family friendliness of the center. Thirteen of the fifteen FRCs were rated by two reviewers. The inter-rater reliability ranged from .66 to 1.0.

Sampling Procedure:

Hunger/Safety Net Interview: The sole criterion for being eligible for the study was having a household income below 200% of the federal poverty line. A snowball/convenience sampling procedure was used to attain respondents. Techniques used included tapping into existing SPIN members and individuals who recently arrived at SPIN for help but are not active in the organization. Others were found by snowball sampling, where existing interview subjects referred their friends, relatives and neighbors for interviews. More interviewees were found at locations like community colleges, food distribution sites, and senior centers.⁷² The team successfully completed 187 intensive interviews during the months of February and March of 2009. Of those 187 interviews, eleven were lost due to technical problems with the digital recorders and four people were dropped because their incomes were higher than 200% of the poverty line.

FRC Ratings: The intent was to have all fifteen FRCs rated, however, only ratings for thirteen sites were submitted.

Procedure:

Hunger/Safety Net Interview: All interviews were conducted by two members of the team and all interviews were digitally recorded. Interviews were conducted in either Spanish or English depending on the language of the person being interviewed. Three of the interviewers were mono-lingual in Spanish, three were bilingual Spanish/English, and three were mono-lingual English.

The location of the interview was decided by the person being interviewed. Many were interviewed in the SPIN office and many were interviewed in their homes. Respondents who were engaged at social service programs were generally interviewed at the program.

FRC Ratings: As stated above, all FRCs were rated by at least two reviewers and the inter-rater reliability ranged from 0.67 to 1.0. The raters were both SPIN volunteers and students from local colleges. Each of the reviewers went through a brief orientation that reviewed the forms and procedures to be followed.

Data Analysis:

Hunger/Safety Net Interview:

While this study was a qualitative examination of hunger and the safety net, some quantitative data was generated. All interviews were professionally transcribed. Spanish interviews were first transcribed in Spanish and then translated into English. These translations were then spot checked to ensure that the translations were accurate. Once transcribed, the responses were sorted by question. The responses were then reviewed and examined for repeating patterns, words or concepts. Once these were identified, responses were re-examined and the number of times the pattern was repeated was counted. When appropriate, trends were identified using the "add trend line" option offered in MS Excel.

In addition, specific analyses were conducted to develop the following:

⁷² The complete data on the source of referral were not available at the time of writing. However, a random sample of respondents shows that 26% were SPIN members, 24% were people who came to SPIN for assistance but were not active in SPIN, 29% came through the referrals by those being interviewed, and 21% were interviewed in the community at the type of sites named in the body.

- Levels of Food Security: As stated above, the scale of six questions were taken from the U.S. Census Bureau Household Food Security Survey. The responses to the questions were then scored 0 or 1. Any response indicating food insecurity was rated as 1. The higher the rating the lower the food security. The range of minimum to maximum score is 0 to 6 with the categories of food security determined as follows:
 - 0 = High Food Security
 - 1 = Marginal Food Security
 - 2-4 = Low Food Security
 - 5-6 = Very low Food Security

- Food Consumption Index: This index was used to determine the pattern of food consumption over the month. The responses to the menu questions were sorted into adult/children and week by week. The food pyramid was used to categorize food choices. The categories used were: Meats & Beans, Grains, Milk, Vegetables, Fruits, and Snacks. The index was determined as follows:
 - A list of foods was generated from the responses within each category. For example, the Meats & Beans category would include words such as: meat, chicken, beef, turkey, chorizo, sausage, bacon, hot dog, carne, fish, tuna, shrimp, etc. The words in each category were generated from the range of words included in the responses.
 - Using the “find and replace” function in MS Word, each of the words in each of the categories within each week were highlighted and counted separately for both adults and children. This process included adjusting the number to take into account all of the negative references to the particular food. For example in the first step the word “meat” would be highlighted and counted. However, an examination of the responses would show that several times the word “meat” was accompanied by a negative reference such as “We didn’t have any meat that week.” It was also adjusted to account for the respondent using words such as “the same.” For example in response to the question, “what did the children have for lunch in the second week?” some people gave the response, “the same as last week.” In these cases, the number was adjusted accordingly.

This process yielded a number for each category and reflects the level of consumption of foods within that category; the higher the index, the higher the level of consumption.

FRC Ratings: The questions on the rating forms were placed into one of three categories, i.e., Customer Service, Facilities, and Family Friendliness. Customer Service was further divided into two subcategories: Procedure and Client-Staff Interaction. The Facilities category was also divided into two subcategories: General and Sanitary. Responses to the questions were then assigned numerical values with the higher the number the more positive the rating. These scores were then totaled and divided by the highest possible score for each item within each category or subcategory. The item was then assigned a grade using the same scale used in academia, i.e., A= 90-100; B= 80-89; C= 70-79; D= 60-69; and F= less than 60. The average grade was then determined for each category or subcategory combining the item scores within each category or subcategory.