

Putting food on the table rises in Inland Empire, state

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The percentage of low-income people living in San Bernardino and Los Angeles counties - along with the rest of California - spiked during the last year of the Great Recession to reach levels much higher than during the previous downturn, UCLA researchers said Monday.

"We knew that things were going to get worse in 2009 because of the economic impact of the recession," said UCLA public health professor Gail Harrison said.

Harrison is one of the authors of a policy brief the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research published Monday.

The researchers based their estimates on the 2009 California Health Interview Survey, which includes responses from nearly 50,000 households. The survey takes place every two years and 2011 estimates are not yet available.

The UCLA paper reports about 40 percent of low-income Californians - nearly 3.8 million people - could not afford enough food in 2009, which was officially the last year of the recent recession.

Nearly 12 percent of those Californians had such a hard time they cut back on food purchases to the point they went hungry.

In 2001, the year of the recession that followed the dot-com bubble, about 28 percent of low-income Californians reported difficulty affording food.

In San Bernardino County, an estimated 241,000 people, about 43 percent of the county's low-income population, experienced what researchers call "food insecurity."

Among that number, an estimated 19,000 San Bernardino County residents went hungry at some point in 2009.

UCLA researchers also reported that in Los Angeles County, about 38 percent of low-income residents, or more than 1.1 million people dealt with food insecurity in 2009.

An estimated 421,000 in Los Angeles County experienced hunger in 2009.

In 2001, San Bernardino and Los Angeles counties had food insecurity rates of 28.5 percent and 30.1 percent, respectively.

For the study, households described as low-income could earn no more than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. In 2009, the poverty level was set at \$22,050 for a family of four.

The UCLA paper encourages broader participation and support for welfare programs such as CalFresh and Calworks as well as maintenance of the earned-income tax credit to alleviate food insecurity. The study received funding from California Food Policy Advocates, a group that seeks to increase CalFresh participation, helped pay for the UCLA report.

"The only people who were not really affected very much were the people participating in SNAP or CalFresh," Harrison said.

SNAP, which stands for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and CalFresh are the federal and state names for what used to be called food stamps.

Half of CalFresh participants reported food insecurity in 2001 and 2009, according to the UCLA report.

The percentage of eligible households who did not participate but reported food insecurity rose from 34.5 percent to

45.7 percent.

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