

OPINION (/OPINION)

Guest commentary: While food is an obsession for some, it is uncertain for others

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By many measures, we Californians are preoccupied with food. We adore cooking for and eating with family and friends, especially during the holiday season. Local food trucks and farmers are celebrities. Restaurant reviews and ratings have enormous reach and influence. Selfies with food are commonplace all over the Internet -- try searching the hashtags #nomnomnom and #foodporn.

But for a significant number of Californians, the preoccupation with food is very different. It is the worry of not having enough. According to the UCLA, more than 4 million households in California are food insecure, which means "consistent access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources at times during the year."

Put simply, these neighbors are preoccupied with whether their food will run out before they get money to buy more. Ironically, this food preoccupation is common among those whose occupation is food production, food retail, and food service.

Grocery and food service workers are more than twice as likely as other Californians to worry about having enough to eat.

Two-thirds of agricultural workers in the Salinas Valley are food insecure. Some struggle to afford enough food year-round, while others see seasonal spikes in their food security tied to crop production cycles. This means that hunger is an urban problem, a rural problem, and now -- with many low-wage workers on the move in the Bay Area in search of relief from high rents -- it is a suburban problem as well.

Given the extent of this hunger problem, the food preoccupied of California can and should channel our food preoccupation into action, to ensure that our fellow Californians are not going hungry.

What can we do? We should be instigating or continuing the push for higher wages and benefits for low-income workers in the food industry. We should address inequities in the distribution of lucrative food industry jobs, so that the privileged are not the only ones getting the lucrative high-end server and retail management positions. We don't just need higher wages -- we need greater equity in opportunity as well.

As we work toward higher benefits and wages, we must also work to ensure that an adequate food safety net is in place.

CalFresh can help, but it is woefully underutilized by working-poor households in California. One effective step would be to make it easier for eligible low-wage workers accessing health care through the state benefit exchange to be automatically connected with food resources like CalFresh as well.

And if we do care about equitable opportunities, we should be committed to ensuring that children of low-wage workers are adequately fed so that they can reach their academic potential.

School breakfast is a critical part of keeping food insecure students adequately fed. Simply moving school breakfast into the school day, after the school bell, helps ensure that the academic and behavioral benefits of breakfast reach many more students.

Ultimately, this support for children's growth and development may allow them better employment opportunities than those that were available to their parents.

Let's get preoccupied with ways to bring the power of good food back to the people who grow, sell, and serve it.

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