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Agricultural Workers In Salinas Valley Are Food Insecure, Study Finds

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Staff Reporter

The 'Salad Bowl of America' is a long bite from health perfection.

Roughly two-thirds of agricultural workers surveyed in the Salinas Valley are "food insecure," according to report by the [California Institute for Rural Studies](#) (CIRS) expected to be released at the end of May.

Out of 93 farmworkers who answered a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) household food security questionnaire, the study found only 34 percent of respondents had high or even marginal food security. In contrast, 53 percent had low food security and 13 percent had very low food security.

"It's a pretty clear message that we should rethink our food system if the very people who are putting the food on our table are unable to have access to enough healthy food," said Lisa Kresge, the project director, in a phone interview.

California's agricultural workers are responsible for producing much of the fruits and vegetables that feed the nation and the rest of the world. Salinas Valley is located in Monterey County, the third highest grossing agricultural county in the nation, according to the USDA. In 2007 the county's agricultural industry had sales of \$3.8 billion.

Despite the region's agricultural abundance, the CIRS' year-long assessment of food security among farmworkers indicates they continue to be one of the poorest segments of the population.

Many of the respondents relied on food assistance programs in the previous 12 months. More than two-thirds indicated they participated in the Women, Infants and Children program. Thirty-nine percent received food stamp benefits, a figure slightly higher when compared to the income eligible population of Monterey County who participated in the program in 2008.

At the same time, farmworkers indicated very high levels of interest in healthy eating and nutrition education.

Almost all farmworkers said they prefer to eat organic or natural fruits and vegetables without pesticides if these products are more accessible; 81 percent said they are interested in more information about how to eat or prepare food to control or prevent diabetes, blood pressure or high cholesterol.

Similar state and national nutrition trends were found in the study. For example, 71 percent of farmworkers indicated they consumed less than five servings of fruits and vegetables per day. According to 2007 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention figures, the general population statewide consumed the same amount and 76 percent of the general population nationwide consumed the same amount.

Some sources of food for farmworkers came from an employer's farm and personal gardens.

Forty-two percent of farmworkers indicated they always or almost always were allowed to take fruits and/or vegetables home from work for personal and/or family consumption. Thirty-seven percent also indicated they grew fruits and/or vegetables for personal and/or family consumption. Only seven percent raised chickens or other small animals for food.

A major part of the project examined the feasibility of increasing food security among farmworkers. Growers, public officials, community garden experts, farming supply companies and housing complex managers were among the dozens of key informants in the study.

"An overwhelming majority expressed support for increasing access to food for farmworkers," Kresge said. The study found one potential option is to expand community gardens onto properties such as schools, churches, housing complexes and farms.

Two of the five growers in the study indicated they already provide a plot of land to employees for personal use. The approach revealed benefits for farmworkers, such as community building. The remaining three growers in the study indicated they were interested in the idea but saw such significant barriers as access to equipment and insurance issues.

"Because our sample is not randomized and our sample size is rather small, our data is really exploratory in nature rather than representative of farmworkers in Salinas, Calif. or otherwise," Kresge said. However, previous CIRS research also found high levels of food insecurity among farmworkers in Fresno County.



Those responsible for producing our nation's food don't have enough access to healthy food. (Creative Commons)

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Monterey County Health Department and the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association collaborated on the USDA-funded project.

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