

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG FARM WORKERS IN THE SALINAS VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

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The Salinas Valley, in Monterey County, with dark, rich soils highlighted by contrasting rows of greens invokes a picture perfect image of California agriculture. It has been nicknamed "the salad bowl of the United States," and grows an abundance of fresh greens and fruit. Despite this seeming abundance, the Salinas Valley is not a stranger to poverty and hunger.

Monterey County is the third highest grossing agricultural crop producing county in the US, with sales of more than \$4 billion in 2010. Despite this agricultural bounty, Monterey County has the highest rate of adults in food insecure households out of all California counties, with a ranking of 58th in the state. There are approximately 51,000 individuals, or 49% of adults, in this county with incomes lower than 200% of the Federal Poverty Level who are food insecure.



To gain insight into the current level of food security among farmworkers in the Salinas Valley, the California Institute for Rural Studies, in collaboration with the [Agriculture and Land Based Training Association \(ALBA\)](#) and the Monterey County Health Department, conducted the Salinas Valley Food Security Assessment and Planning Study. The study also assessed the feasibility of increasing food access through community gardens and other related activities.

Agricultural workers are the backbone of California's \$37 billion-dollar agricultural industry and are responsible for producing many of the fresh fruits and vegetables that feed our nation and the rest of the world. Nonetheless, many agricultural workers are food insecure and suffer from hunger and poor diet and nutrition.

Food insecurity is a major public health concern in the United States. At some point during 2008, 14.6% of American households suffered from food insecurity. This translates to 17 million households, or 32.4 million adults and 16.7 million children. The leading risk factors associated with food insecurity include: earning a below-poverty income level, living in a Hispanic or African-American household, and residing in households run by single mothers.

This project's objective was to identify strategies to increase food security among agricultural workers in the Salinas Valley (Monterey County). We began by administering a survey to farmworkers to assess food security status, fruit and vegetable consumption, interest in raising their own food, preferred locations for raising food, and interest in nutrition education.

Additionally, we interviewed key informants to determine the feasibility of different approaches to improving food security among agricultural workers, including developing community gardens, providing access to land on farms where they can grow food for personal consumption, establishing gardens in apartment complexes, and providing free or low-cost inputs. The following report outlines the survey results and findings from the key informants along with recommendations for the future, including next steps for implementation.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

Farmworker survey

- The participating Salinas Valley farmworkers reported high levels of food insecurity. Only 34% of farmworkers participating in this study were food secure.
- Sixty-six (66%) percent of respondents were food insecure. Fifty-three percent (53%) of participants had low food security while 13% had very low food security.
- About one-third (39%) of respondents had used food stamps in the past year, which is slightly higher than the percent of the food stamp eligible population who receive food stamps in Monterey County.
- Of the survey respondents with children younger than five years of age, 78% participated in the WIC program.
- Four in ten (42%) of farmworkers surveyed reported that their employer "always" or "almost always" allowed them to take fruits and/or vegetables from the farm for personal or family consumption.
- However, 38% of respondents were "rarely" or "never" allowed to bring home fruits or vegetables from the farm for personal or family consumption.
- Thirty-seven percent (37%) of respondents indicated that they already grow fruits and/or vegetables for personal or family consumption, while only 7% reported raising chickens or other small animals for the same purpose.
- Seventy-one percent (71%) of respondents not currently producing their own food were interested in growing fruits and/or vegetables for personal or family consumption.
- Nearly half (47%) of farmworkers not currently raising chickens or other small animals for personal or family consumption were interested in doing so.
- Fifty-five percent (55%) expressed interest in growing fruits and/or vegetables to sell and 45% indicated that they were interested in preparing food to sell.
- Survey findings indicated that participating farmworkers ate an average of 4.1 servings of vegetables per day, with a median of 3.8 servings.
- Seventy-one percent (71%) of survey participants ate less than five servings of fruits and/or vegetables per day,
- One-third (33%) of the respondents consume less than three servings of fruits and/or vegetables per day, with 16% of the respondents consuming less than two servings per day.
- A very high percentage (93%) of participants would like to eat more fruits and vegetables than they currently eat and the vast majority (96%) of farmworkers participating in this study expressed a strong preference for eating natural or organic foods, if they were more accessible.
- Farmworkers demonstrated a strong interest in a wide array of nutrition education topics including balanced portion sizes, nutrition for children, how to eat/prepare healthy food, types and quantities of healthy beverages, how to prepare healthy food inexpensively, how to eat to prevent and control diseases, and health benefits of specific foods.

Key Informant Interviews:

- Key informants, including stakeholders and public officials, were overwhelmingly supportive of increasing access to food for farmworkers by setting up gardens (whether it be a community, school, or apartment garden). Several indicated interest in collaborating on the implementation of this idea. Stakeholders identified several possibilities for establishing or expanding gardens.

- Because we were only able to speak to a few growers, we are unable indicate the feasibility of the potential for growers to provide land for farmworkers to raise food for personal consumption. However, several concerns were presented in the few interviews conducted including limited amount of land not already in production, risk to organic certification, impact of seeds or weed pressure on adjacent crops, issues with liability, added expenses due to water, tools, and equipment.
- Employee gardens may be one potential strategy for growers to help with improving farmworker food security. While this approach may only provide access to farmworkers who work on specific farms offering this benefit, this strategy does provide a potential avenue to increase access to food and increase employee satisfaction at the same time.
- Key informants also pointed out the importance of including farmworkers in the planning and implementation of the project, locating the gardens in a convenient place for gardeners, including the larger community (elderly, children, non-farmworkers, students, experts, etc.).
- Finally, key informants emphasized the additional benefits that community gardens can provide the community at large including crime reduction, neighborhood beautification through cleaning up and functionally using dumping grounds or vacant lots, community building, leadership development, and youth engagement.

To download the full report go to: <http://www.cirsinc.org/index.php/publications/current-publications.html>

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