

## America's dirtiest secret

*In one of the richest agricultural areas of the country, too many of Sacramento's working poor don't have enough to eat*

By **Sasha Abramsky**

**"I have four kids and I'm pregnant.** My husband works, but not full-time, in construction. When it's rainy days, he doesn't have work. When it's cold days, there's no work," 30-year-old Isabel says as she loads the trunk of her heavily paint-spluffed 2000 Chevy Cavalier with boxes of food from the large warehouse-like operations at the 3rd Avenue Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services organization.

Isabel, who left school after the 10th grade, receives just over \$900 a month in welfare and another \$500 worth of food stamps for her family. Her husband, Hector, an undocumented migrant from Michoacán, Mexico, brings in \$700 in a good month. That's a total of about \$1,600 in cash, plus food stamps, to keep four children and two adults above-water. Take out the \$625 rent the family pays for a one-bedroom apartment in Midtown, the \$200 in car payments and insurance, and the \$150-plus a month Hector spends on gas so he can drive to his construction jobs, and the family has about \$600 in cash for the month. It's enough to squeak by on ... but barely. They have literally no savings. When they have extra bills to pay, Hector and Isabel end up at the food bank, standing in line with other working-poor families--as well as with mentally ill people, ex-prisoners and others on the margins of society whom one more often associates with hunger--waiting for the rice and pasta and peanut butter, the canned goods, and the occasional fresh meat or vegetables that supermarkets and local individuals donate to the agency. The line snakes along a grim-looking concrete hallway. As people wait to reach the windows, at which volunteers process their details and make sure they haven't been more than once in the previous month, fights frequently break out. None-too-rarely, staff say, the police have to be called to quiet down the situation.

For some of the clients, the monthly visits are something akin to a trip to the local supermarket. They arrive with wire carts to take home their food. They know, from local gossip, when the food bank is giving away specific items. Local Russians, for example, are said to flock to the food bank whenever supermarkets have donated large amounts of cheese.

For Isabel, however, each visit feeds her insecurities. "I wouldn't tell my friends I come to a food bank," she says, her long brown hair pulled atop her head, her body clothed in black pants, a gray shirt and a black zip-up sweater. "It's embarrassing to me. I have friends who pretty much can support themselves. One of my friends just bought a house."

## Scale of Sacramentan hunger

In 2003, in the most recent countywide survey of the issue, the Sacramento Hunger Commission issued a study titled "Hunger Hits Home: A Report on Food Security in Sacramento County." It reported that, in 2001, 56,000 adults in the county were worried about whether they'd be able to feed themselves and their families. Since then, food-bank staff believe, based on their own observations, that the problem only has grown larger.

In fact, the scale of Sacramentan hunger seems to broadly match that present in other large metropolitan regions throughout the state, as well as in many other cities nationally. In 2005, researchers for America's Second Harvest found the country's food-bank network was serving between 24 million and 27 million Americans each year, over a third



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of whom were children. In any given week, about 4.5 million received emergency food assistance.

For longtime Sacramento hunger activist Father Dan Madigan, it's an age-old problem that only has gotten worse in recent years. Madigan's an Irish immigrant who's lived in the area some 40 years, and over the past three decades largely has built from scratch the city's nonprofit food-distribution network. Too many residents, he says, are paid "small, insignificant wages that just don't go anywhere. They're no good. You can't raise a family on the minimum wage. It's impossible. Absolutely impossible."

California's growing hunger problem is part of a growing national epidemic. Quite simply, more and more Americans are being forced into low-wage, non-benefit-paying jobs. They're struggling to pay ever-increasing utility costs to heat and cool their homes, buy gas to drive to work, and pay for skyrocketing housing. They're increasingly vulnerable to economic catastrophe if a family member gets sick. Given this situation, these low-income Americans oftentimes find they have no choice but to shortchange themselves and their families on food.

Madigan, who recently retired from the food bank on 3rd Avenue, says there are large numbers of people not eating properly. "You can see it in their faces--hardship and agony written all over them. That's the way it is."

"California's extremely high cost of living is a barrier to accessing food, as is poor distribution of supermarkets in poor neighborhoods," argues Nidia Kapadia of Sacramento's Hunger Coalition. Kapadia also believes that food insecurity "is starting to grow to endemic proportions--in low-income communities, [among] people of color, immigrants, seniors and children. That covers a lot of people."

Generally, American hunger doesn't manifest itself in literal starvation, but paradoxically in obesity from a reliance on fast food and junk food rather than fresh produce.



People waiting for the window to open at the Sacramento Food Bank. SN&R Photo By Larry Dalton

"Neighborhoods that are low-income and lack the resources to be able to buy fresh produce and have limited access to transportation, their diet suffers and their health suffers," explains Melissa Guajardo, program director at Sacramento's Health Education Council, a group that has made it a mission to try to get more supermarkets and farmers' markets placed in low-income neighborhoods. "They're not getting a fair shake in getting access to the resources most people have access to easily."

In recent years, food activists have managed to get a farmers' market up and running on Norwood Avenue in the impoverished Del Paso Heights community. They also have worked to start community gardens to grow fruit and vegetables in several low-income areas. Yet progress has been spotty. In fact, Kapadia says, access to good food has become such a problem that obesity in poor communities is now a far larger issue than malnutrition or hunger. "It's more about the quality of food here than it is about the quantity," she argues.

The problem in California is made worse by a startlingly poor food-stamp enrollment rate, one of the lowest in the country. For those who enroll, the benefits are fairly generous: A family can access hundreds of dollars worth of federally funded food stamps each month.

Two million Californians receive food-stamp benefits. Sacramento County, according to researchers with the California Association of Food Banks, has one of the largest food-stamp enrollments of any county in the state, despite the fact that the Hunger Commission detailed a decline of over 30 percent in the number of Sacramentoans on food stamps from 1997 to 2003. In 2005, 34,556 Sacramento families received food stamps. And more than 80 percent of those lived in households where at least one family member was employed.

Not to mince words, there are a lot of very poor people in the county, many working long hours for tiny recompense. In 2006, the federal government set poverty levels at \$9,800 for a single person, \$13,200 for a family of two, \$16,600 for a three-person household and \$20,000 for a family of four. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 17.6 percent of Sacramento County residents live in households with incomes either below these poverty lines or within 25 percent of this threshold (capping out at an annual income of \$25,000 for a family of four).

Despite the high numbers on food stamps, the underside of this is that there are at least an equal number--another two million or so across California--who are eligible yet don't claim their benefits. That number's grown considerably in the past six years. Many who don't apply for food stamps are scared off by the state's requirement that they be fingerprinted. While undocumented immigrants are not eligible for food stamps, their children are. But they fear the information given on the application will be handed to immigration authorities.

California makes it more difficult to apply for food stamps than other states do by requiring recipients to report in to the system every three months, instead of six months like most other states. Unlike in many other states, applicants here cannot enroll online--they must appear in person, often taking time off work. So non-user-friendly is the state's food-stamp system that it only got around to installing an 800 help line in 2006.

Moreover, the federal government calculates food-stamp eligibility according to gross income. If a person's gross income is more than 180 percent of the poverty level, they aren't eligible for food stamps, regardless of other expenses such as health-care bills or sky-high housing.

The result is that evermore people are relying on private charities to survive. An extraordinary number of people rely on their services. About 60,000 people a year get help from the three main food banks in town, according to estimates by Blake Young, executive director of the largest of these, the Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services organization on 3rd Avenue on the edge of Oak Park. Many thousands more rely on food boxes given out by churches and other smaller organizations, such as River City Community Services, which feeds another 2,000 per month, and the Elk Grove Community Food Bank, which sees about 600 clients monthly.



Steve Caruso, director of the Elk Grove Community Food Bank.  
SN&R Photo By Larry Dalton



Patrick McLoughlin, a volunteer from AmeriCops at the Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services in Oak Park.  
SN&R Photo By Larry Dalton

Several miles south of the Oak Park food bank, Steve Caruso runs the Elk Grove Community Food Bank out of some trailers in back of the fire-department building. Each month, he says, the food bank sees about 600 people from the 10 nearby ZIP codes.

"We don't see a lot of homeless people, maybe four or five a month," Caruso estimates. "You've got fixed-income, people with jobs, the unemployed. We see a lot of retail, minimum-wage jobs. We see people showing up in their Wal-Mart uniform, fast-food uniforms. People don't expect this in Elk Grove. It's supposed to be an affluent community."

Caruso's executive assistant is 25-year-old Kelly Whitcack, a single-mom who used to be a client at the food bank back when she was working for near-minimum wage at her parents' plant nursery and spending a large portion of her weekly paycheck on diapers, baby formula and day care for her infant daughter. "Right before the rent was due," she recalls, "money was short. So we'd go grocery shopping and then come here and get the rest of the stuff we needed."

On the walls of Young's high-ceilinged office is a color photograph of the most recent Run to Feed the Hungry race in Sacramento, which raised \$450,000 to help provide food for the city's poor. Each year, the food bank raises about \$2 million in private cash donations and, Blake estimates, it distributes about \$15 million to \$20 million in products and services. All the food given out is donated by individuals dropping off food around the back of the food bank, local supermarkets and restaurants, and farmers in the region.

The effort to feed Sacramento's working poor also involves thousands of volunteers. Sacramento's 3rd Avenue food bank alone has more than 800 volunteers and 30 paid staffers; dozens of volunteers, including school children, help man the Elk Grove facility. Volunteers at churches around the region also give out food to the hungry. Another 1,100 members of the Senior Gleaners network--a group of senior citizens, many well into their 80s--pick unharvested crops and gather soon-to-be-thrown-away food from stores. They sort their gleanings in warehouses on Bell Avenue and box them up for distribution food banks in the county and beyond.

For Cleo Downs, helping the hungry is something everybody should care about. On the Senior Gleaners' chief field supervisor's office wall is this motivational text: "This is a story about four people--Everybody, Somebody, Nobody and Anybody. There was an important job to be done. Everybody was sure Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Anybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done."

Without volunteers like the Senior Gleaners, a lot of locals would be going to bed hungry. The 75-year-old Downs, a short-but-powerful-looking man who grew up during the Depression on a farm in Northwest Oregon and was a career Air Force airplane mechanic at bases around the world, says: "People shouldn't be hungry here. If you drive around the Sacramento Valley and look at the farms after harvest time, there's a lot of stuff left in the fields."

## Pockets of hunger among affluence

These days, Whitcack works to feed others. The clientele is a polyglot crowd. On one recent morning, clients included a number of women from the Philippines, a middle-aged African-American man, several young African-American women with their children, a white woman with her toddler son, several Asian men, and a white man—a tanker driver whose wife recently had left him and who said he was on unpaid leave to look after his children, three of the four in tow. All waited in line under a cold winter sun, their food boxes filled by student volunteers from a local Catholic school.

One 64-year-old Filipino lady worked 17 hours a week as home-help for an elderly woman. Every two weeks, she receives \$670 in wages. To stretch this out, she relies on monthly visits to the food bank. Her friend, 55-year-old Clarita Mercado, works in a local nursing home. A widow with four children, aged 15 through 21, Mercado lost her house in bankruptcy after her husband died, and said she, too, couldn't feed her family without help.

## The new face of American hunger

The Filipino woman, Mercado and the young single mom in line behind her, who works at a local brewery but doesn't bring home enough to pay all her bills, are the new faces of American hunger. They are the working poor who, like millions of others in this wealthiest nation on Earth, cannot afford three square meals a day. Conditions today force them to choose among paying the rent, buying gas, paying utility bills, getting medical care or buying food.

It's not just adults go hungry in Sacramento. Too often low-income kids turn up with empty bellies in area schools on Monday mornings, having not eaten properly over the weekend, according to food experts like Melissa Guajardo of the Health Education Council. Guajardo says she's watched the problem grow as housing prices in the region have spiked recently.

The new hungry turn up at food banks, embarrassed and unsure of themselves, looking for a bit of help to tide them over until their next paycheck. Many have never had to go onto any kind of assistance.

"I've never been on assistance in my whole life," says the tanker driver, who acknowledges that while he'd earned good money, he'd spent freely and neglected to put aside sufficient quantities of cash for a rainy day. "I can't think of a word to describe it. Embarrassing. But you've got to swallow your pride when your kids need to eat. I got a four-bedroom, three bath, two story in a court. I got three cars. It happens to everybody. Sometimes it just happens."

Naturally, large numbers of the "food insecure"—the hungry and those who, if not actually hungry, are concerned about where their next meals will come from—live in poor communities such as Oak Park. But surprisingly large numbers also live in affluent neighborhoods like Elk Grove, a part of the region with a median household income of \$87,766, more than the \$50,653 median household income in the city of Sacramento.



Blake Young, director of Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services.  
SN&R Photo By Larry Dalton



Eileen Thomas, Director of River City Community Services.  
SN&R Photo By Larry Dalton

"We think of the homeless as the face of hunger," asserts Eileen Thomas, executive director of River City Community Services, located on a Midtown block of 27th Street. "But the face of hunger is children in apartment complexes, people who come from minimum-wage jobs, people who live on SSI or general assistance, or senior citizens."

Many, Thomas says, work in McDonald's restaurants, in hotels, at Wal-Mart or do casual cleaning work.

In Sacramento County, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 5.1 percent of residents live on income that is less than half the federally defined poverty level. Perhaps more pertinent here, 6.2 percent of the region's quarter-million-plus part-time workers fall into this income bracket. Another 4 percent live on or just above the poverty threshold.

"These are moderately educated families with average jobs, raising children, who simply can't get to the end of the month without some sort of assistance," says the Sacramento Food Bank's Young. The 39-year-old Army veteran was raised by a single mother in Bakersfield, and he recalls his own family standing in line for food and feels a strong empathy with the clients who attend his organization for their monthly boxes of groceries. "Unless you make an above-average income, your engine exploding in your car can be catastrophic to your wallet. I would say, in Sacramento from 2000 on, we're seeing more people with jobs coming to our organization for help. The cost of living is higher and I'm not sure wages are keeping up with that."

## Hunger: America's dirtiest secret

As more and more people come to rely on food banks, one of contemporary America's dirtiest secrets, mass hunger amid all the wealth, can no longer be denied or swept under the carpet. It is no longer possible to say it's "only" the mentally ill or the drug addicted or the otherwise dysfunctional who fall through society's basic safety nets. Increasingly, in Bush's America, it's the working poor who can't afford to eat.

"My rent is too high," one 53-year-old woman at the 3rd Avenue Food Bank explained. "I need a cheaper home. I need a good job. I don't eat much. It's just myself, so I don't need much food. I just control myself."

"It's always a struggle," said another lady, in line with her husband and one of their three children. "We come when I run out of food stamps. It'll give me enough 'til the next time. They have fruits and veg, eggs, noodles, sauce, milk, pastries. Whatever helps, helps."

"It is just unconscionable to me that somebody goes to bed hungry," Caruso says angrily as he ponders the moral implications of so many growling bellies amidst extraordinary affluence. "We live," he reminds his listeners, "in one of the richest agricultural regions in the world."