Food Insecurity and Community Needs in Diverse and Under-Resourced Populations in Howard County, Maryland

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ABSTRACT/SUMMARY

Background: Howard County, Maryland is a racially and ethnically diverse county of 325,000 residents. Despite its affluence, nearly one in six residents in 2021 reported being food insecure. This study further explores food insecurity among under-resourced populations.

Objective: The study objective is to assess food security needs of Howard County residents to inform interventions to reduce food insecurity.

Study Design, Settings, Participants: A survey was created using the Hunger Vital Sign™ screening tool and questions recommended by providers of food pantries. The survey was available in five languages and community partners assisted with data collection. A total of 406 participants completed the survey between October 2022 and January 2023 with 91% completion rate. Participants recruited for the study include families of the Head Start and Women, Infant, and Children programs, and those accessing food from food banks and pantries.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis: Data analysis was done using R to estimate the proportion of food insecurity with 95% confidence interval (CI). Logistic Regression modeling was done to jointly assess the association between certain demographic covariates and food insecurity. Participants were “food insecure” if they selected ‘sometimes’ or ‘always’ on at least one of the two Hunger Vital Sign™ questions. The study also reported the three most common recommendations from participants to increase access to healthy food.

RESULTS

Hunger Vital Sign™ screening questions

Q1: Within the past 12 months, how often did you worry whether your food would run out before you got money to buy more?

Q2: Within the past 12 months, how often did the food you bought just didn’t last and you didn’t have money to get more?

CONCLUSIONS

Broadly, findings from the regression results indicate that:
• Blacks are statistically more food insecure
• Bilingual homes, irrespective of race and ethnicity, are more food insecure relative to English-only speaking homes

Main barriers to accessing food include cost and language (Bilingual speakers included)

Additional community needs:
• Awareness of food places
• Community gardens, farmers’ markets, mobile food pantries
• Other items in donations (e.g., detergents, diapers)
• Non-food needs (e.g., trainings, utility assistance, housing)

Next steps:
• Roundtable sessions and creation of collaborative plan
• Continue community engagement (e.g., Pop Up pantries, planting parties, health fairs)