**Assessing Affordable and Nutritious Food Programs in City Heights**

**Final Report**

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Children at the City Heights Farmer's Market

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## Executive Summary

The work reported here provides information relevant to funding and operational decision-making in programs concerned with food insecurity in the City Heights area of San Diego. This report describes the system of organizations and programs that distributes food to families that are currently or potentially food insecure, identifies the social and economic characteristics of those most likely to be food insecure, and assesses utilization and reception of these resources among residents of City Heights. The underlying study serves as a basis for recommendations of measures to increase the collective impact of these programs.

The study began with an environmental scan to identify the range of relevant programs serving City Heights and semi-structured interviews of directors and staff of these programs. To determine risk factors for food insecurity in City Heights and utilization of available resources, a survey was conducted of people residing in the area's geographic core. To better understand the perspective and concerns of consumers possibly missed in the survey, depth interviews were conducted with a small sample of Somali women.

At the time of this study, 28 separate programs for food-insecure people operated in City Heights. Key public programs include the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as "food stamps" and called CalFresh in California, and food distributions by the San Diego Unified School District. Privately-supported interventions included the Fresh Fund (which subsidizes fresh food purchases by low income shoppers at the City Heights farmer's market), a community garden program, a community farm program, and a system of food pantries primarily operated by local non-profits and churches. Organizations such as Feeding American San Diego

and the San Diego Food Bank provide substantial support to the pantries in the form of shelf stable and fresh food.

The survey covered six census tracts entirely with City Heights, stratified to over-represent residents of lower income tracts. Within census tracts (areas usually containing about 5,000 people), census blocks (areas typically containing a few hundred people) were sampled with stratification by block size. Within the census blocks selected, individual addresses were selected on a probability proportional to size basis. A total of 809 individuals were interviewed, who were representative of the City Heights core area. Administered by residents of City Heights or nearby neighborhoods, interviews took place in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

A total of 18.4 percent of City Heights core area residents indicated that they had sometimes or often not had enough to eat over the preceding 12 months, and were considered food insecure according to United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) criteria. The strongest risk factors for food insecurity were poverty (below 100 percent of the federal poverty line) and membership in a household of five or more individuals. Among the food insecure, 32.2 percent reported obtaining food through school food programs, 41.4 percent through WIC, 37.1 percent at the farmers' market, 8.6 percent through the community gardens, 32.3 percent through SNAP, and 46.2 percent from food pantries. Economic and social factors affecting use of pantries included ethnicity (Asian/Pacific Islander less likely) and age (older people more likely).

Apparent challenges to the food distribution system included lack of coordination among the organizations involved, coordination across programs, and concerns regarding sustainability. The sufficiency of current programs also appeared uncertain, as many who used the programs remained food insecure. Although food pantries were widely used, their offerings were

considered of lower quality than food obtainable through the other programs. Continuing issues include the remaining level of food insecurity in City Heights despite an abundance of programs, reluctance of some food insecure people to use food pantries, non-use by some of available resources, and lack of consumption by some community residents for fresh and nutritious food. Key lessons learned by program operators include ways to minimize clients' inconvenience and sense of stigmatization.

Study findings support these recommendations:

- Recognizing the importance of all programs;
- Expanding outreach;
- Assisting food banks and pantries in providing fresh foods;
- Coordinating food pantry operations;
- Reducing stigma associated with pantry use;
- Safeguarding the Fresh Fund
- Promoting flexibility in assistance to the food insecure.

## Introduction

This report addresses the organization, utilization, and impact of programs intended to promote food security among residents of the City Heights area of San Diego, California. The foregoing study has aimed at producing evidence-based findings capable of helping improve interventions to reduce food insecurity. The study has made possible a comprehensive picture of the system of organizations and programs that provide food to the people actually or at risk of food insecurity. Managers of related programs have been interviewed to learn about the best practices they have developed. A large-scale survey of people living in the geographic core of City Heights was conducted to determine who is most at risk of food insecurity and how they have responded to resources available in the community. The study concluded with a small number of intense, face-to-face interviews with City Heights residents. Information in this study supports a set of recommendations for helping the food security programs in City Heights increase their collective impact.

Food security is becoming an increasing concern in the United States and throughout the world. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has estimated that 14.9 percent of American households were food insecure at some time during 2011. This was true even among many families that participated in major federal food and nutrition assistance programs. Increasing food security is widely seen as essential to the health of Americans. The importance of nutritious foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables, has received increasing attention, partly in response to the prevalence of childhood obesity. Foundations and public agencies have increasingly supported efforts to make fresh and local food more readily available to disadvantaged people.

The City Heights area of San Diego constitutes an ideal laboratory for observing multiple interventions designed to promote food security among the disadvantaged and to assess the individual and collective impact of these interventions. Over half the families in City Heights are reported to have incomes below the federal poverty line. The high percentage of foreign-born in City Heights has led some to call it "the Ellis Island of the 21st Century." The area is racially and ethnically diverse. Multiple African and Asian languages, as well as Spanish and English, are widely spoken.

The research first focused on understanding the system by which food is distributed to the food insecure in City Heights. Initially, the research team sought detailed information on the interventions now in operation. Special attention was paid to distribution of fresh foods. Once this task was completed, the researchers concentrated on understanding how organizations involved in distributing food conceive of their mission and conduct their work.

The research team then conducted a large-scale survey of residents of the central core area of City Heights. Objectives of the survey included determining which City Heights residents were at greatest risk of food insecurity, who utilized available resources and how they may have benefitted, and how residents felt about the programs. Special attention was paid to food pantries, operations often conducted by churches and local non-profits which directly distribute food without charge. Following the survey, representatives of the food programs initially interviewed in the study were invited to a presentation of survey findings and asked for comments.

## Methods

### Environmental Scan and Key Informant Interviews

Familiarization with nutritious and affordable food interventions in City Heights was facilitated by the professional network of the co-principal investigator, who directed the Farm to School Program of the San Diego Unified School District. This professional network generated an initial list of organizations, programs, and personnel. Initial key informant interviews were conducted with 17 of the individuals so identified.

A basic initial task was to construct a list of all organizations and programs concerned with nutritious and affordable food in City Heights. An initial list was constructed before key informant interviewing began. This list was shown to all interview subjects, who were asked whether any relevant organizations or programs with which they were familiar had been omitted. Organizations and programs that had been omitted were added to the list.

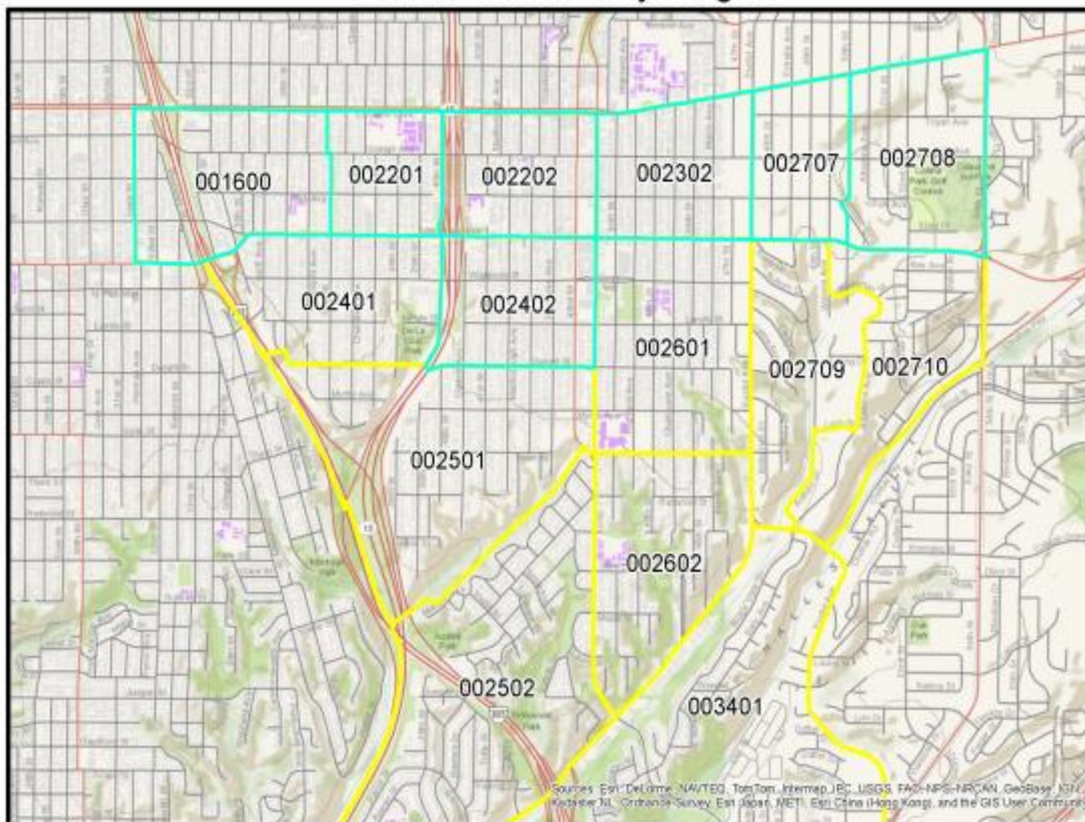
Key informants from 15 different organizations were interviewed. Unlike interviews in population-based surveys, key informant interviews focus not on personal experience or opinions but elicit reports on events and issues within an organization or community. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, although a few took place via telephone. A semi-structured interview schedule was used. Instruments of this kind contain a core of specific questions, but allow the researcher to pursue topics of special interest introduced by the interview subject. Interviews were conducted of both "inside" key informants, individuals involved in delivery of food or associated services, and "outside" key informants, individuals not directly involved in nutritious and affordable food programs, but familiar with the objectives, methods, and challenges of these programs.

**City Heights Resident Survey**

For the purpose of better understanding challenges and resources regarding food security in City Heights, a survey was conducted between March and June, 2013, in six census tracts located completely within City Heights. This set of census tracts is referenced below as the City Heights core area. The survey itself is referenced as the City Heights Core Survey in the pages to follow.

A sampling design with probability proportional to size of sampling units and stratification by median income was used in the City Heights Core Survey. Blocks within the six census tracts were selected in a manner that ensured equal representation of individuals living in blocks of varying population sizes. The map below indicates the location of the census blocks sampled (2201, 2202, 2302, 2402, 2501, 2601).

Census Tracts - City Heights



To ensure adequate representation of individuals using resources such as WIC and food pantries, blocks in relatively low income census tracts were over-sampled. Interviewing took place door-to-door and was conducted by residents of City Heights or nearby communities. Each household was approached a minimum of three times; if unsuccessful after these repeated attempts, interviewers selected additional households from the sampled blocks. Interviewing was conducted in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

A total of 809 responses were obtained. Comparison of respondents with recent findings from the US Census American Community Survey (ACS) suggests that the households sampled here may have, on average, had lower incomes. However, margins of error in the census data were sufficiently large to suggest reasonable similarity with the findings obtained in the City Heights Core Survey.

In the initial analysis, weights were applied to the observations obtained to compensate for the oversampling described above. However, weighting made very little difference in the resulting statistics. For example, differences in percentages between the weighted and unweighted sample were generally lower than a single percentage point.

The City Heights Core Survey sampled households rather than individuals. Responses to questions on the survey were intended to reflect characteristics of the household rather than of individual answering the interviewers' questions. It was assumed that responses to questions about food insecurity applied to the entire household. Similarly, it was assumed that all household members would be of the same race and ethnicity as the respondent. The terms "family" and "household" are used interchangeably in discussion of the survey findings.

To provide context for the survey findings, comparisons were made of data from the City Heights Core Survey, the 2011 California Behavioral Risk Factor Survey (BRFS), and the United States Census American Community Survey (ACS). Conducted continuously by the State of California, the BRFS covers the entire population of California and collects both demographic and public health data. In 2011, the BRFS also obtained data on key food security dimensions. The City Heights Core Survey instrument contained several food security items identical to those of the BRFS. Although the 2011 BRFS sample size was 17,501, food security questions were asked of only 5,865 individuals. As in the City Heights Core Survey, unweighted findings from the BRFS are presented in this report. Differences between the weighted and unweighted statistics from the BRFS are minor, and the available BRFS weights were not used.

**Depth Interviews**

It was understood that data obtained from the survey would be incomplete. Although the sampling procedure was designed to minimize underrepresentation of any subpopulation, missing or underrepresenting some ethnic or other groups was unavoidable. Several groups of special interest (such as Hmong and Somali) represent very small percentage of City Heights core area residents. These individuals are unlikely to be selected in a random sampling procedure and often speak none of the languages in which interviews were conducted. Survey data themselves are limited by the breadth of closed-ended questions. To help remedy these limitations, face-to-face depth interviews were conducted with four Somali women identified through personnel at Price Charities. All had come to City Heights as refugees ten or more years prior to the interviews, were now elders, and spoke little or no English. Lasting up to 45 minutes, the interviews featured open-ended questions. The women were encouraged to comment freely on their food consumption and their utilization of food sources in City Heights.

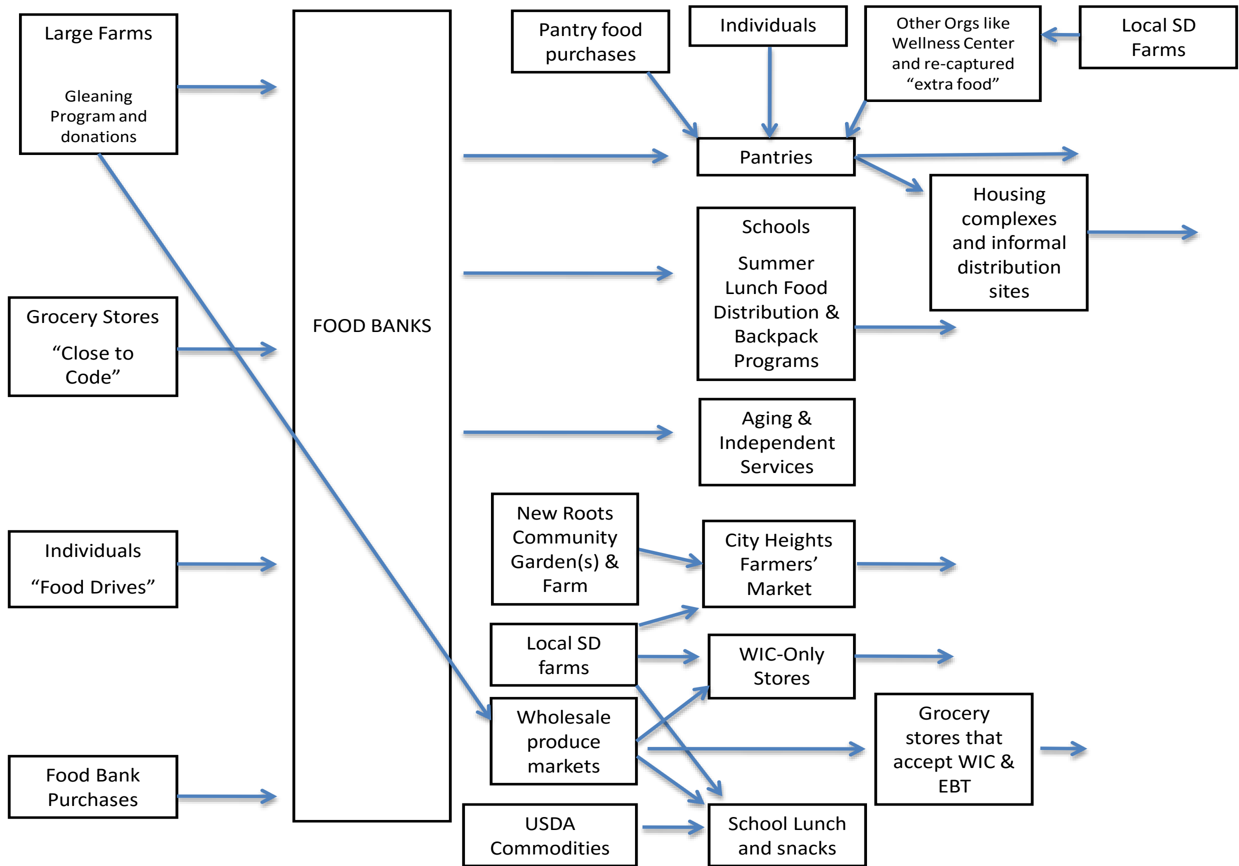
# Findings

## Organization and Challenges of Food Programs

### *The Food Assistance System*

Review of information collected on programs involving nutritious and affordable food in City Heights reveals both a network of interrelated organizations and a food assistance supply chain. This supply chain is illustrated in Figure 1 (below). Distinct stages in the supply chain include (1) production/supply, (2) aggregation, and (3) distribution. The production/supply category includes large and small farms. In addition, this category includes donations received from retail stores (including "close to code" foods soon-to-be unsalable due to expiration) and individual contributions via food drives.

**Figure 1. Food Assistance Supply Chain in City Heights**




Two large food banks, Feeding America San Diego and the San Diego Food Bank, serve City Heights as both aggregators and distributors of donated food. These agencies also purchase food, seeking discounts on the open market. Actual distribution of food to end users takes place through multiple channels and outlets. Most food obtained by food banks is distributed to consumers through "pantries," small outlets operated by community organizations such as churches, community centers, and residential facilities. In Figure 1, arrows pointing to the right at the end of each channel designate the point at which food is delivered to the end user.

It is important to note further complexities in the system. Not all food distributed to the community, for example, is obtained from food banks. Pantries themselves may purchase food or obtain it as donations from individuals. The food banks themselves operate some distribution

programs. In addition, some important outlets obtain food from non-food bank sources. For example, the San Diego Unified School District obtains resources for its feeding programs from the USDA and the open market. Stores specialized in servicing exclusively WIC enrollees obtain food on the open market, their suppliers including local farms. The City Heights Wellness Center distributes surplus food from mini-farmer's markets operated by the Scripps system for its employees.

Small-scale food production is another feature of the system outlined in Figure 1. Two innovative programs operated under the International Rescue Committee enable City Heights residents to grow food on city plots or a farm in rural San Diego County.

Table 1, below, lists the programs found to be active in City Heights at the time of this study, along with their administrative or parent organizations. These are the operating elements whose interrelationships are schematically described in Figure 1. The table, which approaches an exhaustive listing of relevant programs serving City Heights, illustrates the extensiveness of activity related to distribution of food outside mainstream business channels. At least 28 separate programs for the food-insecure currently operate in City Heights, and food distribution takes place at 20 separate pantries.

Five organizations administer the plurality of these programs. These include: the International Rescue Committee (an organization that has assisted refugees worldwide since the 1930s), the San Diego Food Bank, Feeding American (a food bank operation), the San Diego Unified School District, and the San Diego Farm Bureau. Support for these organizations, both funding and food donations, come from individuals, organized philanthropy, and government.

**Table 1. Food Distribution Programs and Activities**

| Program | Administration |
| --- | --- |
| | |
| **Production** | |
| Local and non-local farms | Independent Farmers |
| New Roots Aquaponics & Garden Center | International Rescue Committee |
| New Roots Community Farm | International Rescue Committee |
| City Heights Community Garden | International Rescue Committee |
| Hoover High School, School Garden | International Rescue Committee |
| Crawford High School, School Garden | International Rescue Committee |
| | |
| **Aggregation** | |
| Feeding America San Diego | Feeding America San Diego |
| San Diego Food Bank | San Diego Food Bank |
| | |
| **Distribution** | |
| **Indirect** | |
| City Heights Farmers' Market (CHFM) | San Diego Farm Bureau |
| WIC at the City Heights Farmers Market | San Diego Farm Bureau |
| EBT at the City Heights Farmers Market | San Diego Farm Bureau |
| Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) at CHFM | Fernanda De Campo |
| Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) at IRC called "Eat City Heights" | International Rescue Committee |
| Fresh Fund at CHFM | International Rescue Committee |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Direct** | |
| Farm to WIC | Mother's Nutritional Center |
| Youth in Transition Department | San Diego Unified School District |
| School Breakfast (BIC) | San Diego Unified School District |
| School Snacks | San Diego Unified School District |
| School Lunch | San Diego Unified School District |
| School Supper | San Diego Unified School District |
| Summer Fun Café | San Diego Unified School District |
| Summer BBQs | San Diego Unified School District |
| Community Food Distribution Programs (CFDP) | San Diego Food Bank |
| Food 4 Kids Backpack Program | San Diego Food Bank |
| Mom & Children Program | San Diego Food Bank |
| Community Food Distribution Programs (CFDP) | Feeding America San Diego |
| Farm2Kids, School Pantry | Feeding America San Diego |
| Mobil Pantry Program | Feeding America San Diego |
| Summer Back Pack Programs | Feeding America San Diego |
| Villa Alta Apartments | City Heights Family Health Centers |
| East African Community and Cultural Center | Independent |
| Senior Food Program & Mom and Children Food Program | Colinas Head Start |
| Saboteurs Kitchen | Saboteurs Kitchen |
| | |

| **Pantries*** | |
|---|---|
| St. Mark's Episcopal Church | |
| International Rescue Committee | |
| City Heights Community Development Corporation | |
| City Heights Assembly of God | |
| New Hope SDA | |
| New Ark of the Covenant Church | |
| Catholic Charities Food Resource Center | |
| President John Adams Manor Apartments | |
| Mid-City Christian Fellowship | |
| Home Start | |
| Bridge of Hope | |
| San Diego Coalition Homeless | |
| Calvary Cupboard | |
| Church of the Nazarene aka Bread of Life | |
| Church of Jesus Christ | |
| Teen Challenge | |
| Mamas Kitchen | |
| La Maestra Clinic | |
| Crook Center Salvation Army | |
| Treasure Box | |

*Pantries are considered administratively independent because they are free-standing or functions of parent organizations such as churches.

Though extensive, Table 1 does not include some areas of relevance to nutritious and affordable food. Informal distributions are significant. These include delivering foods to apartment complexes by pantry operators. In addition, significant programs are offered in nutrition education, including the storage and preparation of fresh food. The City Heights Wellness Center, the San Diego Hunger Coalition, San Diego State University, and the Red Cross are active in this area.

***System Operations and Challenges***

Key informant interviews focused on perceptions by program leaders and others knowledgeable about the operation of their own programs, programs operated by others, or the system that distributes nutritious and affordable food as a whole. Of particular importance were the challenges identified by key informants. These are summarized in Table 2, below.

Three types of challenges were identified. Because the number of key informants whose comments are reported here is small, the frequency with which these themes were expressed does not appear in the table. Instead, impressionistic designations of the degree to which informants shared an observation are reported under the label *prevalence*.

**Table 2. Challenges Reported by Food Programs**

| Category | Description | Prevalence |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| **Community** | | |

| Consumer behavior | Preferences for less nutritious food | Occasional |
|---|---|---|
| Social structure | Ethnic differences in access | Occasional |
| Reach | Gaps in contact | Unknown |
| | | |
| **Distribution** | | |
| | | |
| Point of service | Client discomfort, shortages | Occasional |
| Unit management | Insufficient infrastructure or experience | Occasional |
| Unit coordination | Sharing information and schedules | Widespread |
| | | |
| **System** | | |
| | | |
| Institutional | Blockages to collaboration | Unknown |
| Environment | Changing food markets | Unknown |
| Sustainability | Uncertainty of funding | Widespread |

*Community challenges* signify concerns related to the consumer and the social milieu in which she or he lives. Several key informants identified consumer behavior and preferences as a concern. Not all City Heights residents value nutritious food over convenient and low priced alternatives, such as fast food. In this connection, adaptation to life in the United States, for either the foreign born or their children, is part of the picture. Some key informants commented that their programs include the objective of healthy adaptation to the American food

environment. This may involve selection of healthy foods within the conventional American diet, continuation of healthy food traditions from the old country, or adaptation of traditional diets to the availability of food in the United States.

In the area of *social structure*, key informants described some unexpected phenomena. It was commented by several, for example, that the diversity of City Heights creates issues for food distribution. To some extent, different ethnic groups are served by different food outlets. In City Heights, it was said that non-Christian residents may feel uncomfortable about receiving food from the many churches that operate food pantries. Divisions within ethnic groups were also thought to function as barriers, as different segments of an ethnic community identify with different political leaders or tribal backgrounds. Some individuals, it was reported, were reluctant to accept free food from persons lower in status than they according to traditional criteria.

Finally, the *reach* of individual programs or all programs taken together was cited as a concern. Key informants suggested that an undetermined percentage of food-insecure individuals and families in City Heights were isolated from the non-commercial distribution system. Barriers to utilization suggested by the key informants included lack of publicity and inadequate outreach regarding food assistance, distance to distribution points, time constraints among potential consumers, and inconvenience of operating hours. One key informant illustrated this possibility by describing a domestic employee who had little time to make contact with other community members due to work and family responsibilities.

Challenges in the area of *distribution* focus on operation of programs, particularly the food pantries. At the point of service, informants note that clients may experience anxiety, shame, or

physical confrontations in lines or crowded waiting areas. In the programs and organizations involved in food distribution themselves, lack of sufficient space, staff experience, and other infrastructure was mentioned as a challenge. Many of the organizations involved in food distribution have primary concerns elsewhere, yet feel it important to help provide nutritious and affordable food to the community. Insufficient experience by pantry staff or inadequate infrastructure may contribute to development of bottlenecks in supply distribution to consumers.

Of potentially significant concern have been comments that too little coordination takes place in the food distribution process. Informants used words like “siloed” and “tribal” in this connection. Concretely it was commented that operators of some pantries do not know enough about the operations of their counterparts elsewhere. Thus, a pantry might run out of food and be unable to advise a client of where and when another pantry might help meet his or her needs. Blockages to exchange of surplus food among pantries exist.

Challenges on the *system* level also seemed to occur in the area of collaboration. Few if any organizations appeared to operate on the basis of complete independence. But it was noted that most if not all organizations in the system competed for grant funding, which can discourage collaboration. The broader environment also posed challenges. A secondary market has developed, for example, for food items that once were readily donated. Accordingly, items such as bent cans are now sold at dollar stores rather than being given to food banks. This new market has reduced shelf-stable donations to food banks. A strong movement has developed in support of fresh foods as a component of support for the food insecure. This creates special problems in storage, distribution, and turnover of stock.

Finally, widespread concern was evident in the key informant interviews regarding sustainability. It was commented that concern with policy change among funding partners, while important, has drawn attention and resources away from more concrete and immediate community needs. The degree to which philanthropy and other funding sources might eventually shift emphasis away from the food insecure was an implicit concern.

Best practices that surfaced in the key informant interviews include steps some programs have taken to make the point of service experience more acceptable to residents. Innovations at some of the food pantries, for example, make it possible for small numbers of clients to obtain food at specific times by taking numbers or being given appointments. Innovations such as these reduce crowding and anxiety over the possibility that insufficient supplies will be available. Time thus saved can be used for socializing, signing up for programs such as SNAP, or becoming familiar with other services offered by the panty operator. Outreach workers of the same ethnicity as the clients play an important part in familiarizing newcomers with the food assistance system. One informant indicated that her organization employed *promatoras*, individuals familiar with the community who are able to make contact with potentially isolated residents. Similarly, the International Rescue Committee employs outreach workers to inform recent African immigrants about community resources.

## City Heights Core Area Survey

### *Overview*

Context on food security in the City Heights core is provided by comparison with the State of California and San Diego County as a whole. Table 3, below, compares selected demographic features of the State of California, San Diego County, and the City Heights core area.

**Table 3. Selected Demographics: California, San Diego County, and City Heights Core Area (Percentages)**

| | California | San Diego County | City Heights Core Area |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Economy** | | | |
| Families at or below 100 % Federal poverty line | 15.9 | 14.4 | 42.2 |
| Families at or below 130% Federal poverty line | 21.3 | 19.3 | 65.5 |
| **Education** | | | |
| Adults over 25 who have not completed high school | 19.2 | 14.7 | 41.6 |
| **National Origin** | | | |
| Born outside the United States | 27.2 | 23.1 | 65.9 |
| **Race** | | | |
| African-American/African Immigrant | 5.8 | 4.7 | 8.4 |
| White | 40.1 | 48.5 | 11.8 |
| Latino/Latina | 37.6 | 32.0 | 58.5 |
| Asian/Pacific Island | 12.8 | 10.6 | 16.7 |
| Other or multiple | 3.7 | 4.2 | 4.6 |

Note: California and San Diego County data on 100 and 130 percent poverty are from the 2011 BRFS. California and San Diego data on education and race are from the US Census American Community Survey, 2006-2010. All other data are from the City Heights Core Survey.

Table 3 indicates clear demographic distinctions between the California, San Diego County, and the City Heights core area. In comparison with San Diego County residents in general, families in the City Heights core area are twice as likely to have incomes below both 100 percent of the federal poverty line and 130 percent of poverty (the approximate criterion for SNAP benefits). Because it focused on households rather than individuals, the survey does not provide definitive information on the total demographic breakdown. Only one member of each household was interviewed, and these interviewees were selected through a non-random procedure. However, Table 3 presents strong evidence that adult residents of the City Heights core area are far more likely than those of California and San Diego County in general to lack high school diplomas and to be ethnic minorities. A majority of City Heights core area residents are Latino.

A strong majority of City Heights residents were born outside the United States, double the percentage of California and San Diego County. Of those born outside the United States,65.4 percent were born in Mexico, 19 percent in Vietnam, 6.7 percent in Central America, 4.3 percent in Africa, 2.0 percent in Cambodia, and 2.0 percent elsewhere in Asia.

Table 4 provides an overview of food security in California, San Diego County, and the City Heights core area. The table presents findings on five dimensions of food security, each of which correspond to individual items on a standard USDA composite measure. These items appear on a number of important public health surveys.

On some dimensions of food insecurity, the table does not suggest gross disadvantage among City Heights core area residents relative to those of California and San Diego County. Over the past 12 months, approximately equal percentages (and small minorities) of California, San

Diego, and City Heights core area residents report having cut meal sizes, skipped meals, or eaten less than they felt necessary because they did not have enough money.

More often than people elsewhere, City Heights core area residents report that the food they bought did not last sufficiently long, and they could not afford to eat balanced meals. City Heights residents were about 50 percent more likely to report insecurity according to these dimensions than California or San Diego County residents in general. Particularly noteworthy is the report by 8.4 percent of City Heights core area residents that they had been hungry at some time during the past 12 months because they didn't have enough money to buy food. This figure is about 25 percent higher than in California and San Diego County as a whole.

Table 4 suggests that food security is a complex area. Although most City Heights core area residents are food secure, a significant minority are not. It would appear that even these households may generally have sufficient food, but may run out of resources between pay or public assistance checks. Even periodic inability to afford balanced meals suggests that many, at least periodically, rely on inexpensive but not fully nutritious foods.

**Table 4. Food Insecurity: California, San Diego County, and City Heights Core Area (Percentages)**

| | **California** | **San Diego County** | **City Heights Core Area** |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |

| In the last 12 months: | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Food bought did not last and didn't have money to get more | 15.2 | 15.9 | 23.6 |
| Couldn't afford to eat balanced meals (sometimes or often) | 15.4 | 16.7 | 22.3 |
| Cut size of meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money | 11.4 | 13.1 | 13.1 |
| Ate less than felt necessary because there wasn't enough money for food | 10.3 | 11.8 | 11.5 |
| Hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food | 6.8 | 6.8 | 8.4 |

Note: California and San Diego County data on food insecurity are from the 2011 BRFS. All other data are from the City Heights Core Survey

Table 5 underscores the varying forms food insecurity can take. This table presents findings on an indicator of general food security included among the USDA standard questions. Households are considered to be generally food secure if they always had enough food over the preceding 12 months. According to this criterion, 81.6 percent of City Heights core area residents are food secure. However, only 46.4 percent were both food secure and indicated that they always had the food they wanted; 35.3 percent, though food secure, indicated that they had not always had the kinds of food they wanted. The remaining City Heights households (18.4 percent) are considered food insecure according to the general federal criterion. Of the food insecure, most reported that they "sometimes" had not had enough to eat. A small percentage of households surveyed, 3.3 percent, indicated that they "often" had not had enough to eat.

**Table 5. General Food Security Among City Heights Core Area Households**

| Food In Household | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| | **Households** | |
| | Number | Percent |
| **Food Secure** | | |
| Enough of the kinds we want | 370 | 46.4 |
| Enough but not always the kinds we want | 281 | 35.3 |
| **Total secure** | **651** | **81.7** |
| | | |
| **Food Insecure** | | |
| Sometimes not enough to eat | 120 | 15.1 |
| Often not enough to eat | 26 | 3.3 |
| **Total insecure** | **146** | **18.4** |

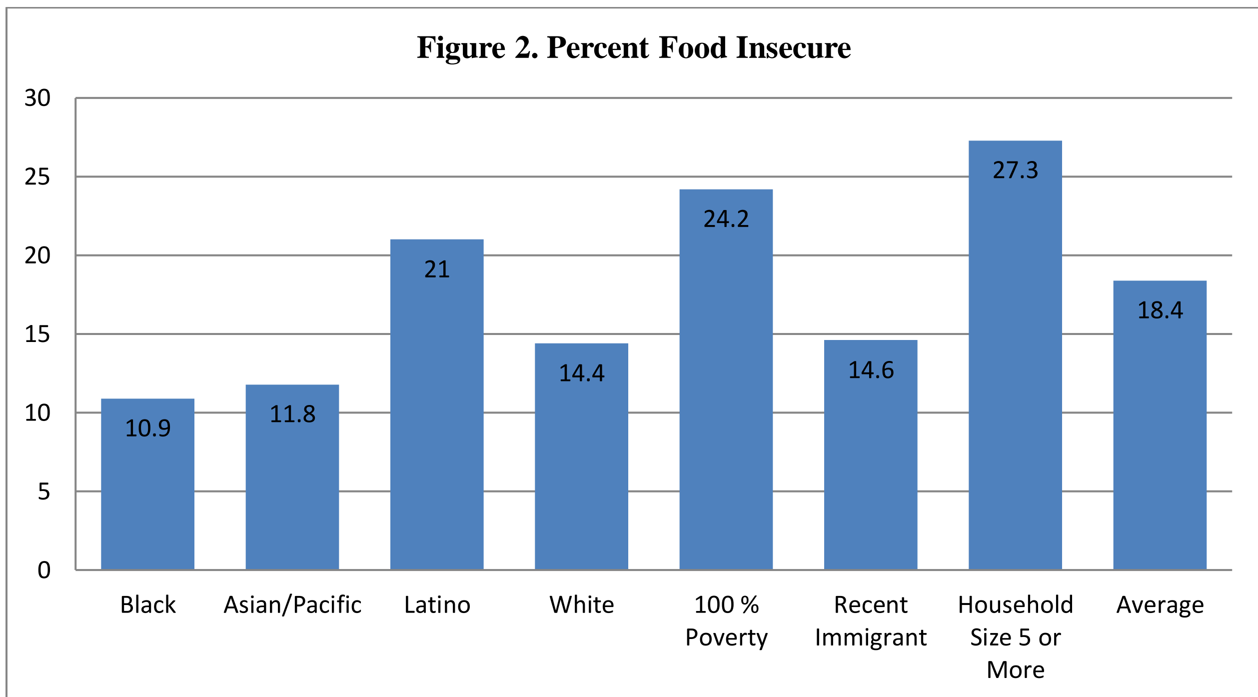
Note: Total households represented in table = 797. Data unavailable from 12 households.

Findings reported above regarding balanced meals and having enough food but not the items wanted underscores the dietary importance of not only volume but content. In this connection, the City Heights Core Area Survey asked responds how often they ate fresh fruits and vegetables. The vast majority of respondents (75.2 percent) reported eating at least one fresh fruit or vegetable per day, but a significant minority (24.8 percent) indicated that at least some days they ate neither a fresh fruit nor a fresh vegetable. .

***Who is Food Insecure in City Heights?***

The general federal food security criterion (always having enough food over the preceding 12 months) was used to determine who in the City Heights core area was most likely to experience food insecurity.  Findings are presented as a graphic, in Figure 2, below. This figure presents percentages of individuals who either reported that they had, over the preceding 12 months, sometimes or often had not had enough food to eat.  Comparisons are made among a number of key demographic categories.

The graphic suggests that three types of City Heights core households are more likely than average to be food insecure: Latino, below the 100 percent federal poverty line, and relatively large (five or more members).  Notably, neither race (other than Latino/Latina) nor recent immigrant status (within the past five years) is apparently related to food security.



A logistic regression analysis helps to further distinguish those most likely to be food insecure. This analysis adjusts the influence of each of the factors displayed in Figure 2 to the influence of other variables. According to this analysis, being Latino/Latina has no independent effect of food security. The apparent effect of being Latino in Figure 2 is due to the facts that Latino households are, on average, poorer than others in the City Heights core area. The most likely households to experience food insecurity are those below the poverty line and with a large number of members (including both adults and children).

Food insecurity did not seem to correspond to neighborhood characteristics at the census tract level. A census tract with one of the highest median family incomes had among the highest percentages of food insecure households. The census tract with the lowest median family income had the lowest percentage of households that were food insecure. The areas of highest food insecurity seemed to be scattered in small pockets throughout the area surveyed.

The household characteristics represented in Figure 2 represent only a few of those needed to fully explain food insecurity. A procedure (multiple regression) that took all the factors represented in Figure 2 into consideration provided only a very partial explanation of which households were or were not food insecure, less than five percent of the variance. Many other factors, some probably not capable of being quantitatively measured, also make a difference.

***Use of Food Services***

As indicated in the beginning section of this report, several major programs contribute to food security in City Heights. These include a number of school programs, WIC, SNAP, the City Heights Farmers' Market, a community garden and farm program, and the system of food banks and food pantries. The City Heights Farmers' Market has received national attention because of

an associated program that provides low income shoppers with tokens enabling them to double their purchases. Food pantries distribute limited amounts of free food to walk-up clients at specified times each week.

Table 6 indicates the percentage of City Heights core area residents who use these resources. Separate percentages are presented for households that are and are not food insecure. As above, food insecurity is defined as sometimes or often not having had enough to eat over the preceding 12 months.

The figures in Table 6 indicate widespread use all programs, with the exception of community gardens (the survey did not ask about the community farm program). Among the food insecure, food pantries are most widely used, followed by the farmer's market, WIC, SNAP, and school programs. Over 83 percent of food insecure families report using one or more of these programs. Many people who are not food insure also use these programs. But a far higher percentage of the food insecure use food pantries.

**Table 6. Percentages of City Heights Core Area Households Using Specified Food Resources**

| | **Households which are:** | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Resource** | **Food Insecure** | **Food Secure** | **All Households** |
| | | | |
| **School programs** | 32.2 | 21.6 | 23.5 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **WIC** | 41.4 | 26.2 | 28.9 |
| **Farmer's Market** | 37.1 | 38.4 | 38.2 |
| **Community Gardens** | 8.6 | 5.7 | 6.2 |
| **SNAP** | 32.2 | 28.1 | 28.9 |
| **Food Pantries (at least one)** | 46.2 | 18.3 | 23.4 |
| **Any of above** | 83.4 | 69.5 | 72.0 |

Comparison of levels of poverty yields another perspective on use of services. Table 7 compares percentages of households that use each specific resource according to level of poverty. As stated earlier, poverty is a key risk factor predicting food insecurity. The table compares use of services for households at or below 100 percent of poverty, 133 percent of poverty, and above 133 percent of poverty (designated here as "non-poor"). Use of resources generally parallels degree of poverty. However, use of community gardens is approximately equal across all economic categories.

As would be expected, the households most likely to use food resources are those that are both under the 100 poverty line and are food insecure. Among such households, 89.9 percent report using one or more resources; 37.6 have utilized the SNAP program and 58.0 percent have utilized food pantries.

**Table 7. Percentages of City Heights Core Area Households (Poor, Near-Poor, and Non-Poor) Using Specified Food Resources**

| | Households which are: | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Resource** | **≤ 100 % Poverty** | **≤ 133% Poverty** | **Non-Poor** |
| | | | |
| School programs | 32.3 | 29.8 | 13.0 |
| WIC | 41.3 | 38.8 | 14.5 |
| Farmer's Market | 39.0 | 40.3 | 34.1 |
| Community Gardens | 6.4 | 6.2 | 7.0 |
| SNAP | 41.7 | 37.6 | 13.5 |
| Food Pantries (at least one) | 32.2 | 28.1 | 15.1 |
| Any of above | 85.8 | 82.0 | 55.0 |

***Program Efficacy***

An attempt was made in this study to assess the effect of the programs referenced here on food insecurity. Evidence was sought to indicate that households using these programs experience lower food insecurity than those that do not. Instead, it was found that households utilizing the programs were more likely to be food insecure.

This observation can be explained by the fact that food-insecure households are the most likely to utilize food security programs. At the same time, these programs often do not meet all their needs. Thus far, analysis of the survey data has only assessed the effects of programs on the gross distinction between food secure and insecure. Continuing analysis will focus on a finer measure, the degree to which food insecurity may have been reduced by the programs in City Heights.

Limitations on the ability of the programs referenced here to completely solve the food insecurity problem are also apparent in Table 8. The numbers (coefficients of correlation) in this table correspond to the likelihood that users in one program will also utilize another. Coefficients of correlation fall between 0 and 1, with higher magnitudes indicating stronger relationships. Almost all of the numbers in this table are positive, indicating that a household's participation in any one program does not reduce its likelihood of participation in any of the others. No single program can be said to completely address food security in many households, and the presence of many programs in City Heights still leaves many households food insecure.

**Table 8. Correlations Among Utilization of Food Programs**

| | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. School programs | 1 | | | | | | |
| 2. WIC | .311** | 1 | | | | | |
| 3. Farmer's Market | .116** | .099** | 1 | | | | |
| 4. Community Gardens | .091** | .063 | .117** | 1 | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5. SNAP | .189** | .180** | .045 | .032 | 1 | | |
| 6. Food Pantries (at least 1) | .198** | .152** | .102** | .055* | .153** | 1 | |
| 7. Food insecurity | .078* | .129** | -.01 | .03 | .06 | .269** | 1 |

*p < .05. **p < .01.

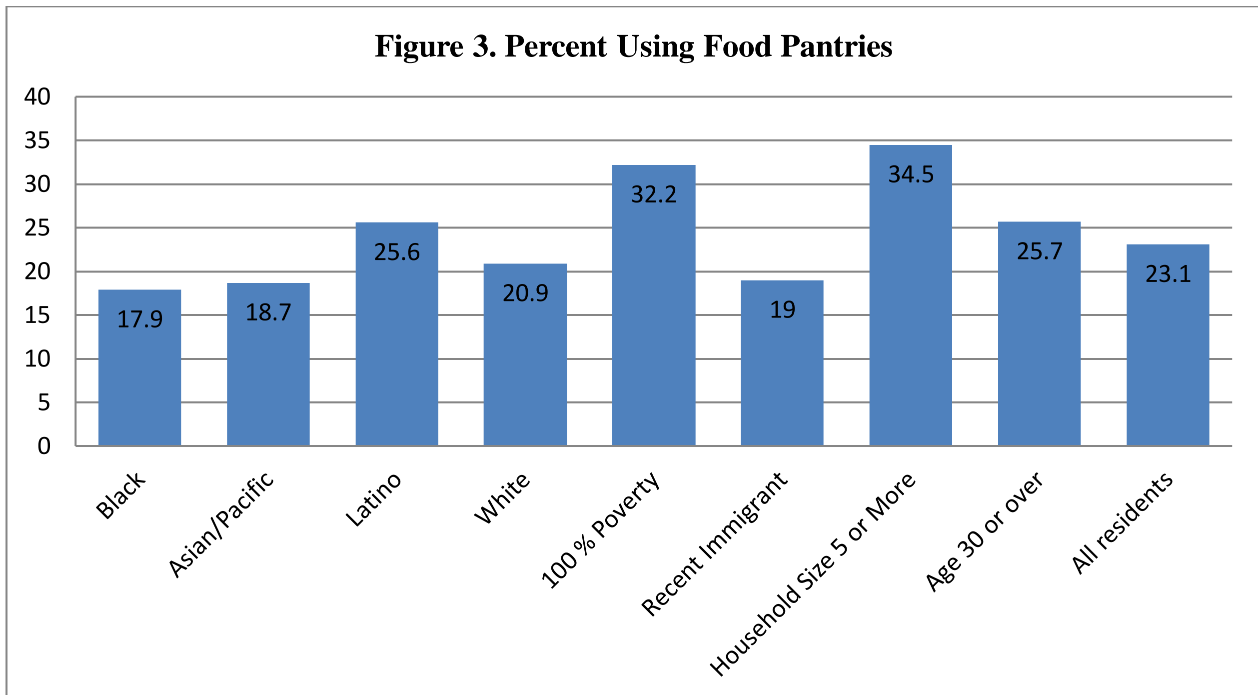
***Food Pantries***

This study paid special attention to utilization of food pantries. Operations of this kind are widespread throughout the United States and receive significant charitable support. Little if any research has been conducted on this important approach to food insecurity.

The environmental scan described above identified 20 food pantries operating in the City Heights core and vicinity. Each of these was used by at least one survey respondent over the preceding 12 months. These facilities were most frequently used: Church of the Nazarene (60 respondents), La Maestra Clinic (27), and Catholic Charities (16). Fifty-two respondents indicated that they had used a food pantry that had not been previously identified. Most of those who reported having used pantries (82.9 percent, 155 individuals) indicated that they had used only one; most of the remainder (16 percent, 30 individuals) said they had used two pantries; only two people said they had used more than two pantries.

Figure 3 presents percentages of households using food pantries by demography and social background. Overall, 23.1 percent of survey respondents reported having used a food pantry in the past 12 months. The graphic suggests that poverty (at or below the 100 percent poverty line), household size, age (30 years or older), and Latino ethnicity are associated with use of food

pantries. A logistic regression, adjusting the influence of each of the factors displayed in Figure 3, confirms these relationships (Latino ethnicity is marginal in the analysis). In addition, the regression found that respondents who had higher levels of education or Asian/Pacific Islander ethnicity were less likely to report having used pantries.




Tables 9 and 10 present information on the experiences and perceptions of people who said they had obtained food at pantries during the preceding 12 months. These tables present findings on those who visited only one pantry, or, for those who visited several pantries, only answers to questions regarding the first one visited. Again, most of the people who reported using pantries had contact with only one.

Table 9 presents findings on day-to-day experience with the food pantries. According to the table, contact with food pantries seems to be irregular for a plurality of users. Over 75 percent of those who used a pantry in the past 12 months reported having gone no more than once per month. For most, travel to the local food pantry seems not to have constituted a major challenge: most were able to walk or had access to private automobile transportation. A majority obtained six or more items and waited for service no more than one half hour.

**Table 9. Selected Dimensions of Food Pantry Use**

| | **Percent** |
|---|---|
| **How often used pantry** | |
| Once per week | 8.6 |
| Two or more times per month | 16.2 |
| Once per month | 42.2 |
| Once or twice in past 12 months | 33.0 |
| **How travel to pantry** | |
| Walk | 46.7 |
| Bus | 12.8 |
| Private car | 40.6 |
| **Length of trip to pantry** | |
| Under 15 minutes | 47.0 |
| 15 minutes to half hour | 37.7 |
| More than half hour but less than one hour | 11.5 |

| | |
|---|---|
| One hour or more | 3.8 |
| **Number of items usually obtained** | |
| 2-3 | 6.6 |
| 3-5 | 42.1 |
| 6-10 | 40.4 |
| More than 10 | 10.9 |
| **Time waited at pantry** | |
| Less than five minutes | 10.3 |
| 5-10 minutes | 9.2 |
| More than 10 but less than 20 minutes | 14.9 |
| 20 minutes to half hour | 16.7 |
| More than half hour but less than an hour | 19.0 |
| An hour or more | 29.9 |

Table based on 624-639 cases; individuals to whom question was inapplicable (due to not having used programs) were omitted.

While Table 9 captures concrete experience with the food pantries, Table 10 addresses assessments made by City Heights core area residents in response to interviewer questions. The interview schedule contained items asking respondents to rate the level of convenience, healthfulness of food, and quality of food provided by four major food resources: school programs, WIC, the City Heights Farmers' Market, and food pantries.

Findings presented in Table 10 would be consistent with some degree of dissatisfaction with food pantries. Food pantries ranked below both school programs and the farmer's market on all three dimensions: convenience, healthfulness, and quality. Food pantries were the lowest ranked on the healthfulness and quality.

**Table 10. Perceptions of Convenience, Healthfulness, and Quality**

| | **Percent reporting that each program is:** | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Resource** | Most Convenient | Most Healthy | Highest Quality |
| | | | |
| **School programs** | 11.0 | 9.9 | 7.7 |
| **WIC** | 30.4 | 23.2 | 22.3 |
| **Farmer's Market** | 45.0 | 60.5 | 65.5 |
| **Food Pantries (at least one)** | 13.5 | 6.4 | 4.6 |

Respondents who had had not contact with the school programs, WIC, the farmer's market, or food pantries are omitted from this table.

**Depth Interviews**

Comments by the Somali women interviewed provide clues to the impact of the immigrant experience regarding food and use of community resources. The women recalled that on arrival in the United States they had to learn such basics as how to use a can opener and how to cross a street. They found some aspects of diet in the United States similarly unfamiliar. Camel milk

and meat, believed to promote health, was unavailable.  Meat was obtained through different processes in Somalia and the United States, the consumer in Somalia selecting a goat from among live animals in the seller's pen.  Frozen foods were not sold in Somalia.  The women commented that unprocessed or unpackaged foods ("live foods") were often unavailable to them in their new home, and that food smelled and tasted different here.  Food in cans was suspect, as it was feared that these provisions might contain pork, and some of the women said they had trouble reading the ingredients in the cans.

The women said they learned about food resources from friends and neighbors, but importantly from the International Rescue Committee caseworker.  The women indicated that they received SNAP benefits.  Use of food pantries varied.  One woman she went to food pantries three times per week.  Another said she tried these facilities during her first year in City Heights, but stopped after that.  All commented that the wait at the food pantries, reported by them to be from one to two hours, made utilization of these resources inconvenient.  Yet, they went to food pantries when they ran out of money. Positive comments were made about the farmer's market, although one woman said she lived too far away. None of those interviewed participated in the community gardens.

All of the women commented that they preferred to obtain their food from a Somali grocery known as Minnehaha Food Market.  This store accepts SNAP, and, according to the women, sells provisions that they are confident are *halal*.

A Woman Tends Her Plot at a Community Garden in City Heights

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings presented above are intended to serve as a resource for decision-makers, including executives of philanthropic organizations, non-profits involved in distributing affordable and nutritious food, and government officials. Although the observations reported here are directly relevant to City Heights, their implications may be applicable to many communities throughout the United States. By some measures, food insecurity in City Heights is roughly comparable to the national average.

Interviews of key informants and survey responses by City Heights core area residents generally indicate that all resources (except for community gardens) are widely used. Data analysis conducted thus far has not positively demonstrated that any interventions currently operating in City Heights have reduced food insecurity. Yet efficacy can be safely inferred. Significant percentages of families that are food secure receive benefits under WIC and SNAP, and participation in these programs may have enabled many of these families to be food secure. A very high percentage of families most at risk of food insecurity utilize food pantries, and would likely be even less secure without them.

As suggested by key informants, the racial and ethnic diversity of City Heights affects utilization of resources capable of reducing or preventing food insecurity. Asian/Pacific Islanders, for example, are relatively unlikely to use food pantries, while Latinos at the same poverty level or immigrant status are more likely. However, no evidence emerged from the survey that individual pantries serve any particular racial or ethnic group predominantly or exclusively.

The City Heights Farmer's Market appears widely used by both the food secure and insecure, and is considered convenient and high quality. It is likely that the Fresh Fund, an International Rescue Committee-supported program that subsidizes low-income shoppers, has helped attract people at risk of food insecurity to the farmers' market. Notably, support for the Fresh Fund has declined in recent years.

Evidence suggests that food resources in City Heights are underutilized by those who might benefit from them. Less than half the people who reported being food insecure utilized such resources as the food pantries and farmers' market. These resources are available to all low income people. Less than half of the food insecure are WIC or SNAP beneficiaries. Families must include expectant mothers or young children to qualify for WIC. SNAP is open to all people below 133 percent of the federal poverty line but requires formal application, a process that would exclude the undocumented and discourage those hesitant for any reason to approach government agencies.

The food pantries operating in City Heights are of special interest. These are heavily used by people most at risk of food insecurity. However, they are perceived as relatively inconvenient and of low quality. Indeed, items available at food pantries include some that might not have been salable to paying consumers such as expired items. Lack of familiarity or religious unacceptability of foods offered at the pantries deters some potential utilization. Somali women commented to this effect, and related comments might have been made by members of other ethnic groups had they been similarly interviewed. Key informants suggested that stigma and the need to wait in line might deter potential users.

The study reported here supports seven recommendations for enabling the food security programs in City Heights to achieve greater collective impact. Special attention has been paid to recommendations regarding food banks and pantries. Food pantries are the most widely used of the resources examined here. Because it is privately operated, the food bank/food pantry system is more likely than public programs to benefit from and be influenced by philanthropy.

1. *Recognize importance of all programs.* Many food-insecure City Heights residents utilize multiple programs. Even programs used by relatively few have value. Although a small minority of City Heights residents participates in the community gardens program, for example, the program's visibility has symbolic value. In addition, it represents a means by which people who have traditionally farmed can maintain their skills and by which all participants can work toward self-sufficiency.

2. *Expand outreach.* It appears than many if not all the resources addressed in this report are underutilized. Programs such as WIC, SNAP, and food pantries are utilized by fewer than half the food-insecure residents of City Heights. The *promatora* and caseworker functions described in this report represent best practices for publicizing resources and encouraging their use.

3. *Assist food banks and pantries in providing fresh foods*. Findings on the perceived quality food pantries may be symptoms of a broader problem associated with capacity of food banks and pantries. Expectations have

increased with the growing emphasis on fresh food. Food pantries and food banks alike need assistance with this transition, in training, infrastructure, and resources for client education.

4. *Coordinate food pantry operations.* City Heights residents would find food pantries more convenient if food distribution schedules were coordinated. Better coordination and dissemination in the community of a comprehensive schedule, would improve access.

5. *Reduce stigma associated with pantry use.* Elimination of the pantry food line described by one key informant should be recognized as a best practice. Under this arrangement, people are assigned a number rather than taking a place in line when they arrive. This allows users to return at their convenience or socialize or receive instruction on the food pantry premises rather than wait on line for what may be perceived as a "handout."

6. *Safeguard the Fresh Fund.* This resource is particularly important in view of the fact that about a quarter of City Heights residents eat no fresh fruit or vegetables on a typical day. The subsidy for low income customers at the Farmer's market should be sustained.

7. *Promote flexibility*. Food pantries have held a prominent place in City Heights, serving a higher percentage of the food insecure than any other program. However, City Heights residents prefer programs that allow them to obtain food at more mainstream establishments, such as WIC and SNAP. A system of credits akin to the tokens distributed under the Fresh Fund and

usable at local stores should be considered. Notably, food pantries would continue to serve an important mission if such a concept were implemented. This suggestion is for supplementation rather than substitution. Food pantries could in fact play a major role by distributing the coupons or tokens.

The authors of this report encourage program advocates, managers, and funding partners to support, dispute, or supplement these recommendations based on the findings presented here and their own experience.