

HOME AND HARVEST

Improving Food Security among Youth in Permanent Supportive Housing

Food insecurity is a critical issue among minors and young adults who experience homelessness and unstable housing. In the 2013 San Francisco Point-in-Time count, 61% of unaccompanied minors and homeless young adults ages 18–24 reported food as their greatest need.¹ Even for youth who manage to obtain permanent supportive housing, many continue to face barriers to obtaining healthy and adequate nutrition. In our prior work, we found that among youth living in San Francisco’s first city-funded permanent supportive housing building specifically designated for transitional-age youth (ages 18–24), 71% of residents scored at a level of severe food insecurity on the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale,² and an additional 16% were moderately food insecure.

This study was launched in order to better understand the barriers to obtaining adequate nutrition among youth with a history of homelessness/unstable housing who are now living in permanent supportive housing. We chose a participatory, arts-based methodological approach using the project platform PhotoVoice to enable the youth participants to take ownership of the research process. In doing so, participants explored issues of food insecurity in their lives in a creative, engaging manner.

Objectives

1. Assess and document barriers to obtaining adequate, healthy foods faced by youth living in permanent supportive housing.
2. Inform programs and practices around food security for housing providers working with youth who have experienced homelessness.



“An EBT card inside a Carl’s Junior sandwich.” Photo by Jade.

3. Increase public awareness and engage community members, businesses, and policymakers in discussions about the experiences of hunger among homeless, unstably housed, and other marginalized youth.
4. Inform potential philanthropic or policy solutions to food insecurity among vulnerable youth populations.

The Research

The Young Adult PhotoVoice Project (YAPP) is a community-based participatory research study designed to assess, document, and disseminate an understanding of the barriers to obtaining adequate healthy food faced by formerly homeless youth. The project utilizes PhotoVoice, a research methodology that combines photography and group discussion to amplify the voices and visions of marginalized communities.

Nine young adult residents (ages 18–24) participated in the study. The project consisted of eleven 2.5-hour long sessions over a period of four months. Study participants were given digital cameras and received training in photography as well as in the safety and ethics of taking pictures. Each week participants chose a prompt to guide their photo-taking, and participated in critical reflection and dialogue around their photos. Participants subsequently created captions and wrote narratives for their photographs. All group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and were coded using thematic analysis. The project culminated in a final photography exhibit in downtown San Francisco.

“I wish my food stamps didn’t get cut off. I don’t know why they got cut off. So I had to go to the food bank and get all of this crap. I spent all of my money on my dog’s food.” – Nick, YAPP participant

Findings

Group discussions of photographs revealed several important barriers to food security. These included:

- Inadequate funding through government assistance programs to cover monthly food expenses
- Lack of accessible, affordable healthy food outlets near the supportive housing facility
- The importance of pets as emotional support and the willingness to prioritize limited funding on food for pets over food for the self
- Challenges associated with communal living, such as the lack of hygiene in a communal kitchen
- The stigma associated with seeking free meals at homeless shelters and soup kitchens
- Restrictions imposed by restaurants and grocery stores on giving away unused food
- The lack of fresh, healthy foods included in the food boxes given out by non-profits
- Health issues that impede some participants from being able to leave the building on a regular basis to seek out food



“Your Trash, My Treasure.” Photo by Josh.

Implications

Findings highlight the challenges related to food security of youth entering into permanent supportive housing. The work of youth photographers presented through the final photo exhibition helped to increase awareness among community members, businesses, and policymakers in San Francisco of the issue of food insecurity.

Research Team

Youth photographers: Amber, Apple, Jade, Jessica, Jessica, Josh, Justin, Mercedes, and Nick

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External Collaborators: Sarah Dobbins (photography mentor; San Francisco Department of Public Health)

References

1. *Homeless Point-in-Time Count and Survey: Comprehensive Report.* Applied Survey Research (ASR). 2013.
2. *Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) for Measurement of Household Food Access: Indicator Guide (v. 3).* USAID. Washington, D.C.: Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance Project, Academy for Educational Development, August 2007.