

**Documenting Vulnerability:
Food Insecurity Among Indigenous Mexican Migrants
In California's Central Valley**



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Introduction: Vulnerable Populations and Food Insecurity

Mexican migrants who are of indigenous origin face vulnerability both as immigrants and as members of an ethnic minority. This vulnerability stems from a number of factors including poverty and discrimination, which puts them “at risk of poor physical, psychological, and/or social health.”¹ In fact, “Recent immigrants and non-citizens are more than twice as likely to be living in poverty compared to native-born Americans and naturalized citizens.”² Indigenous Mexican migrants who are employed as farmworkers in the San Joaquin Valley are part of the most productive agricultural region of the United States, but also in an employment sector that is characterized by job insecurity, low wages, and exploitation. For this reason, “Migrant farmworkers are the poorest of America’s working poor.”³ Indigenous migrants face additional social barriers and discrimination and are considered “by far the most vulnerable farm workers.”⁴ The vulnerability of indigenous Mexican migrants in California is compounded by economic, occupational, social, and ethnic marginality as well as their relative invisibility to the government and social service providers.

This research focuses on the relationship between indigenous Mexican migrants, poverty, food insecurity, and the Food Stamp Program, one of several federal nutrition programs.⁵ Anti-hunger advocates herald the Food Stamp Program as “the first line of defense against hunger and malnutrition in the United States.”⁶ However, many eligible people do not receive food stamps due to a number of barriers to accessing this entitlement program. California has among the lowest participation rates in the country, and among the strictest and most strident procedures for applying and recertifying. In addition, many immigrant families, especially those headed by undocumented workers, often do not realize that some members of their household may be eligible for the Food Stamp Program.

This report highlights the specific story of Mixtecos in the San Joaquin Valley, one of many ethno-linguistic minority groups in California, in an effort to illuminate their rich and complex history, both as indigenous people, and more recently, as migrants.⁷ A brief review of their cultural and linguistic heritage is offered in order to provide a historical context before discussing the conditions of their daily existence: their social, political, and economic struggles on both sides of the U.S. - Mexico border, as well as the strengths of their community organization. The implications of the U.S. Census

¹ Joseph O’Neill and Katherine Maroni, “Access to Palliative Care in the USA: Why Emphasize Vulnerable Populations?” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 94, (2001): 452-454.

² Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, “Fast Facts on Immigrant Work and Health Issues. National And California Figures.” The California Wellness Foundation. April 2006. www.gcir.org/resources/gcir_publications/Immigrant_Work_Health.pdf

³ Migrant Legal Action Program, “About Farmworkers.” www.mlap.org/about_farmworkers.htm

⁴ According to Jeff Ponting, an attorney with California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA). Brett Wilkison, “An Unspoken Class System.” *Isolated By Language*, <http://journalism.berkeley.edu/ngo/reports/language/Hierarchy.html>

⁵ Poverty is associated with food insecurity and hunger. Food insecurity, the inability to acquire enough food, is a managed process on the household and community level.

⁶ Food Research and Action Center, “State of the States: 2007. A Profile of Food & Nutrition Programs Across the Nation.” Washington, DC. June 2007.

⁷ In California there are several groups of indigenous Mexican migrants. There are over 60 indigenous languages spoke in Mexico.

undercount of both migrants and indigenous people of Latin American origin are reviewed. Information gathered from three focus groups of Mixtec participants, one in Madera and two in Fresno, reveals high rates of food insecurity, some knowledge and use of the Food Stamp Program, and the current challenges of the emergency food system to adequately address the dietary needs of the Mixtec community. The report concludes with recommendations and potential strategies for community-led interventions that are based on information gathered from key informant interviews with Mixtec community leaders as well as researchers knowledgeable about the Mixtec community. These recommendations support a dynamic, multi-pronged approach for addressing hunger and poverty in this community. Ultimately, it is with Mixtec knowledge and sensibilities, and their extraordinary leadership and community organizing, partnered with the experience of anti-hunger and rural rights advocates, that this community can realize a well-nourished, food secure future.

Binational History: Mixtecos in Mexico and the United States

The Mixtec people are one of seventeen pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican ethnic groups indigenous to Oaxaca, Mexico.⁸ The Mixteca region also spans into the states of Guerrero and Puebla. Descents of these original peoples call themselves *ñuu-savi*, which means “people of the rain.”⁹ The Mixtec people speak a tonal language that has two main dialects, Mixteco Bajo and Mixteco Alto. The Mixtec language was originally written in codices, but is no longer a written language. Along with the Mixtec language, Mixtec culture has also survived the Spanish conquest. Cultural traditions such as the Guelaguetza, a festival of music, dance, and food in celebration of the harvest, continue in Oaxaca and as well as in Los Angeles and Fresno, California.¹⁰

Membership in Oaxacan indigenous society is rooted in community involvement, interdependence, group identity, and solidarity. These values are expressed through voluntary work and civil election of community leaders. All men over 18 years of age contribute to community projects called *El Tequio*. Men must also fulfill roles as *mayordomos*, which are annually elected to provide for events in honor of saints called *mayordomías*. Extended families are very important to indigenous communities. The father chooses the *padrinos* (godparents) for his children. The relationship between *compadres*, adults who are godparents to each other’s children, is as important as the relationship between godparents and godchildren. This tradition extends family and kinship. Respect and loyalty to the family, extended family, neighborhood, and larger community is an important aspect of this culture and community.¹¹

Environmental, economic, and political factors have contributed to poverty in Oaxaca. According to the Secretary of Social Development (SEDESOL), 73% of Oaxacans live in extreme poverty. Oaxaca has some of the lowest rates in Mexico for income, literacy, health status, and access to healthcare.¹² The majority of indigenous

⁸ Leonico Vásquez Santos, “Oaxacan Culture.” Presentation given at the Service Integration Brown Bag Lunch *Reaching and Serving Oaxacan Clients*. Watsonville, CA. September 21, 2007.

⁹ The term Mixtec was created by the Aztecs and means “country of the clouds.”

¹⁰ Centro Binacional Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño, *Oaxacan Culture: Cultural Competence Guidebook*. (Fresno, CA: CBDIO, 2007), 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

Oaxacans are agricultural workers and have been affected by policies, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), that undermine Mexican agriculture.¹³ “The Mixteca region of Mexico’s Southern Oaxaca has a tragic, but well-deserved reputation...The region confronts the double challenge of fighting the negative impact of erosion on their lands and the effects of free trade.”¹⁴ Free trade agreements coupled with a lack of price supports for Mexican agriculture have undermined Oaxacan development.

Along with high rates of poverty and other characteristics of underdevelopment, the Mixteca region also has high rate of immigration to the United States.¹⁵ As Rufino Domínguez Santos, Executive Director of Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO) writes, “This migratory process is easy to understand if one takes into account the poverty of Oaxacan indigenous communities as well as these communities’ strong social networks and the mutual support their members give one another.”¹⁶ The rural poor of Oaxaca migrate to the United States in an effort to find jobs and support their families. “To bring families to the United States at the same time as integrating them in the labor market is to virtually guarantee the transference of the rural poverty of Mexico to the United States.”¹⁷ Without economic opportunities in Oaxaca, Mixtecos migrate to survive.

Mixtec migration to other regions of Mexico and the United States is a binational phenomenon. In the early 1900s, Mixtecos had already begun migrating to other parts of Mexico in search of jobs, a process that continues today. Mixtec migration to the United States started during the 1940s with the beginning of the Bracero Program (1942-1964), which through a series of bilateral agreements between the United States and Mexico, granted temporary labor contracts for work in the United States to millions of Mexican farmworkers.¹⁸ The 1970s were marked by a “rapid increase and mass flow of migration to northwest Mexico” and a “constant migration flow to the United States.”¹⁹ The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 granted some migrants amnesty and allowed them to settle, obtain legal status, and improve their working conditions.²⁰ IRCA legalized 50% of Oaxacan migrants in the United States. However, the Mixtecos that were legalized under IRCA were mainly circular male migrants working as seasonal farmworkers.²¹ In this case, legalization facilitated settlement of Mixtecos but did not

¹³ Jonathan Fox and Rivera-Salgado-Salgado, “Building Civil Society Among Indigenous Mexican Migrants.” *U.S.-Mexico Policy Bulletin* 7, (2005).

¹⁴ Laura Carlsen, “Building a Future in the Mixteca.” *IRC Americas Program*. Silver Spring, NM: International Relations Center, 2006.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rufino Domínguez Santos, “The FIOB Experience: Internal Crisis and Future Challenges,” in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, ed. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado (California: University of California, 2004) 70.

¹⁷ David Runsten and Michael Kearney, “Encuesta Sobre las Redes de los Pueblos Oaxaqueños en la Agricultura de California,” in *La Ruta Mixteca*, ed. Sylvia Escárcesa and Stefano Varese (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2004) 73.

¹⁸ Rural Migration News. *The Bracero Program*. http://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/more.php?id=10_0_4_0

¹⁹ Felipe H. López and David Runsten, “Mixtecs and Zapotecs Working in California: Rural and Urban Experiences,” in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, ed. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado (California: University of California, 2004) 254.

²⁰ Fox and Rivera-Salgado, “Building Civil Society,” 3.

²¹ Circular migrants return to their place of origin.

change seasonal employment patterns.²² In addition, legalization under IRCA was less accessible for agricultural workers who had language and education barriers. IRCA did not discontinue undocumented immigration, but it did allow some migrants to enter through family reunification, which led to a significant increase of family migration in the 1980s.²³

The migration of Mixtecos to the United States is characterized by recruitment from labor contractors and smugglers (*coyotes*). Through recruitment of impoverished people, labor contractors direct and control the flow of migration to the United States.²⁴ It is important to note that rural Mexicans "... could not afford to come here, nor would they know where to go, unless someone provides the financing and the jobs. Impoverished Mexicans cannot afford to risk many years annual income on a high-stakes adventure *al norte*. Yet they do get the money - directly or indirectly - from US employers."²⁵ Mixtecos, like many other undocumented laborers, often arrive to the United States with debt to the labor contractor for the price of being smuggled across the border.

Anti-immigrant measures, such as the increased U.S. border control under the 1994 "Operation Gatekeeper" or changes in border security since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have impacted Mixtec migration to the United States. However, rather than discontinue unauthorized migration, these measures have precipitated the settling of what were previously temporary, seasonal migrants. Increased vigilance on the border has intensified the danger and expense of unauthorized border crossings, and thus created a "forced settlement" of indigenous migrants in the United States.²⁶ In addition, Oaxacan migrant community networks have developed enough to support settlement.²⁷

As a result of increased immigration and settling, the indigenous Mexican migrant population in California is growing, especially among the farmworker population.²⁸ According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the amount of "American Indians of Hispanic Origin," a new racial / ethnic category used to describe people who answered that they are both Hispanic and Native American, increased by 146% from the 1990s to 2000. It is estimated that there are over 407,000 indigenous Latin Americans in the United States; 154,362 are in California. Researchers consider this to be minimum estimate due to problems of undercounting.²⁹ The estimate of Mixtecos working in the Central Valley

²² David Runsten and Michael Kearney, *A Survey of Oaxacan Village Networks in California Agriculture*. Executive Summary. (Davis: California Institute of Rural Studies, 1994) 3.

²³ Rufino Domínguez Santos, "Migración y Organización de los Indígenas Oaxaqueños" in *La Ruta Mixteca*, ed. Sylvia Escárceca and Stefano Varese (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2004) 83.

²⁴ López and Runsten, "Mixtecos and Zapotecs Working in California," 254.

²⁵ Fred Krissman, "'Them' or 'Us'?: Assessing Responsibility for Undocumented Migration From Mexico." *The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies*. University of California, San Diego. Working Paper 46. (2001) 16.

²⁶ David Bacon, *Communities Without Borders: Images and Voices from the World of Migration*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006) 60.

²⁷ Fox and Rivera-Salgado, "Building Civil Society," 2.

²⁸ Aguirre International, "The California Farm Labor Force Overview and Trends from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS)." California, June 2005, 10. Available online at <http://www.epa.gov/region09/ag/docs/final-naws-s092805.pdf>

²⁹ Javier Huizar Murillo and Isidro Cerda, "Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the 2000 U.S. Census: 'Hispanic American Indians.'" in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, ed. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado (California: University of California, 2004) 283-288.

agricultural production in the early 1990s ranged from 45,000 - 55,000. By 2000, indigenous migrants were 10.9% of California's labor production.³⁰ Researchers from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) estimate that in 2005 there were between 100,000 - 128,000 indigenous farmworkers, or 16% - 20% of the total agricultural labor force in California.³¹

Tracking the amount of indigenous Mexican migrants is problematic due to the undercount of both indigenous Latin Americans and migrants in U.S. Census data. Some of the structural reasons for the undercount of indigenous Mexican migrants include: the concepts of race, ethnicity, and Hispanic origin, marginalized and crowded housing, linguistically isolated households with limited literacy, recent immigration, working conditions, as well as issues with the quality of training, follow-up, and procedures for surveying migrant labor camps. In addition, some people may not admit to speaking an indigenous language due to the stigmatization of indigenous heritage. NAWS researchers believe that many indigenous Mexicans report that they speak Spanish, despite speaking an indigenous language natively.³² For these reasons, it is estimated that more than 50% of farmworkers in California and as much of 80% of rural indigenous households are not identified in the Census. An undercount of farmworker and indigenous families implies that the number of children born in these families may not be adequately captured in Census data. As Edward Kissam and Ilene Jacobs write,

These concerns escalate for practical social-policy and service planning issues that affect indigenous communities in California because they are minorities among minorities, 'outliers' for better or worse, whose perspectives, concerns, priorities, and needs are obscured by the power of large numbers, where regression to the mean rules supreme, making California's indigenous immigrant populations 'marginal' to policy development and civic dialogue about our collective priorities.³³

Undercounts of indigenous Mexican migrants are a major concern for researchers and advocates because they affect funding block grants for needed programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Medicaid, education, childcare, community development, as well as Title I funding for programs needed for U.S. born children of indigenous Mexican descent.³⁴

Institutionalized racism in Mexico has impacted the experience of Mixtecos in the United States, both as workers and as immigrants.³⁵ Discrimination against indigenous Mexican migrants is insidious and binational. Racism against indigenous migrants comes from Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and people in the United States who are not of Mexican origin. As Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado write,

Both in the United States and in Mexico, indigenous migrants find themselves excluded- economically, socially, and politically- both as migrants and as indigenous people. They work in ethnically segmented labor markets that relegate

³⁰ Fox and Rivera-Salgado, "Building Civil Society," 3.

³¹ Aguirre International, 10.

³² Ibid., 12.

³³ Edward Kissam and Ilene J. Jacobs, "Practical Research Strategies for Mexican Indigenous Communities in California Seeking to Assert Their Own Identity," in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, ed. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado (California: University of California, 2004) 304.

³⁴ Ibid., 304-310.

³⁵ López and Runsten, "Mixtecos and Zapotecs Working in California," 249.

them to the bottom rungs. In the social sphere, in addition to the well-known set of obstacles that confront cross-border migrants, especially those without documentation, they also face entrenched racist attitudes and discrimination from other Mexicans as well as from the dominant society in the United States.³⁶ In addition to the current and historical aspects of racism against indigenous and prejudice based upon their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences, is the idea that indigenous people cannot self-govern, and must be civilized, controlled, or assimilated.³⁷ This is a long history, beginning with the colonization, and it continues today.

Monolingual Mixtecos face additional barriers in all aspects of their lives. These barriers include not having adequate information in their native language as well as the systematic exclusion from English and Spanish speakers. “Indigenous migrants who do not speak Spanish well experience intense language discrimination at the workplace and in their interactions with legal, educational, and health institutions... Long-standing Mexican prejudices are widespread in immigrant communities in the United States.”³⁸ Mestizos, Mexicans of mixed European and indigenous descent, or Spanish-speaking Mexican-Americans are not necessarily appropriate cultural ambassadors or interpreters for monolingual Mixtecos, due to racism as well as a lack of cultural and linguistic competency.

For many Mixtecos, the conditions of poverty, including inadequate housing, underemployment, labor exploitations, poor health, and food insecurity characterize life in California. Housing is a major health and security issue for this community.³⁹ Many Mixtec families live in overcrowded and unconventional arrangements, often with several families living together in a small apartment, or many unaccompanied males living together.⁴⁰ Some Mixtecos live in caves, under trees, or in labor camps. This aspect of poverty leads to a host of other health and food security problems. For example, poor housing accommodations and lack of cooking facilities are detrimental to many Mixtec farmworkers’ diets because they are unable to prepare a lunch and bring it into the fields, and therefore must rely on the catering truck or *lonchera* that generally only carries foods that are expensive and of low nutritional value, such as chips and soda.⁴¹ Other health concerns about housing include issues such as basic sanitation and pest control. The right to housing is therefore crucial for Mixtec migrants to preserving their social and physical health.⁴²

The health of Mixtecos in California is compromised by poverty, housing, and inadequate access to appropriate health insurance and care. Most adult Mixtecos are uninsured or underinsured, although many pregnant Mixtec women use Medi-Cal that covers pregnancy and emergency related care. In addition to lack of adequate insurance coverage, Mixtecos face cultural and linguistic barriers when trying to obtain healthcare

³⁶ Fox and Rivera-Salgado, “Building Civil Society,” 1.

³⁷ Key informant interview with Rebecca Hester. December 28, 2007. Oakland, CA.

³⁸ Fox and Rivera-Salgado, “Building Civil Society,” 6.

³⁹ Key informant interview with Rufino Domínguez Santos, Fresno, CA, January 8, 2008; Key informant interview with Leoncio Vásquez Santos, Fresno, CA, January 8, 2008

⁴⁰ Bonnie Bade, “Alive and Well: Generating Alternatives to Biomedical Health Care by Mixtec Migrant Families in California” in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, ed. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado (California: University of California, 2004) 214.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁴² Bacon, 55.

in the United States. Mixtec traditional holistic medicine is very distinct from mainstream Western medicine. Different perceptions and experiences involving wellness, as well as preventive and curative measures impact the experience of Mixtecos within the U.S. healthcare system.⁴³ Some of the other health issues faced by Mixtecos include injuries and illnesses associated with farm labor, including exposure to pesticides and other ailments. In addition, type 2 diabetes is now a major health concern for Mixtecos in California. According to community leaders from CBDIO, diabetes was not a health problem that their community faced in Oaxaca. However, changes in diet have contributed to diabetes among Mixtecos.⁴⁴

Indigenous farmworkers face additional challenges to having their rights as workers - an essential part of having one's economic security and social health - respected. Indigenous workers compete with mestizos for work and are often preferred by growers because of the assumption that the indigenous are less likely to know their rights. "Mixtecos have been used by farm labor contractors and other farm employers to undermine existing agricultural labor markets; accelerating migration makes stabilizing such labor markets more problematic without increased labor protection."⁴⁵ Indigenous migrants are therefore poorer and more often exploited than their mestizo counterparts.⁴⁶ Recent immigrants and those who do not speak English or Spanish are the most vulnerable to labor abuse, such as nonpayment, being forced to pay for rides and tools necessary for work, or denied basic labor rights such as times to rest or use a bathroom.⁴⁷

While asset building is difficult for low-income people in the United States in general, some issues make it especially difficult for Mixtec farmworkers. These issues include short-term, seasonal work, low pay, migration for work, side payments to labor intermediaries, labor law violations, and remittances sent to family in Mexico.⁴⁸ Remittances from the United States are significant in Mexico on both the national and the household level. In 2003, remittances represented the second biggest contributor to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), after oil.⁴⁹ Money sent home to Mexico often increases the family's income by five times.⁵⁰ According to Nayamín Martínez, indigenous migrants in the United States must survive on the absolute minimum in order to be able to send money home to their families in Mexico, who cannot survive without the remittances. In addition, the costs associated with voluntary community work, especially when men are required to return to Mexico to fulfill their civic duties or when they must pay for celebrations that invite the entire community, represent a significant expense to a family that is unique to indigenous migrants.⁵¹

⁴³ CBDIO, 35-45.

⁴⁴ Key informant interview with Rufino Domínguez Santos, Fresno, CA, January 8, 2008; Key informant interview with Leoncio Vásquez Santos, Fresno, CA, January 8, 2008

⁴⁵ Runsten and Kearney, "A Survey of Oaxacan Village Networks," 3.

⁴⁶ Runsten and Kearney, "Encuesta Sobre las Redes de los Pueblos Oaxaqueños" 73.

⁴⁷ López and Runsten, "Mixtecos and Zapotecs Working in California," 260; Vásquez Santos, "Oaxacan Culture."

⁴⁸ López and Runsten, "Mixtecos and Zapotecs Working in California," 258.

⁴⁹ Raúl Hernández-Coss, "The U.S.-Mexico Remittance Corridor: Lessons from Shifting from Informal to Formal Transfer Systems." *World Bank Working Paper* No. 47 (2005), 4.

⁵⁰ Fred Krissman, 9.

⁵¹ Key informant interview with Nayamín Martínez, Fresno, CA, January 8, 2008.

Despite extreme poverty, institutionalized racism, and exclusion, it is necessary to understand Mixtec history by framing indigenous Mexican migrants “as social actors rather than passive victims or faceless flows of amorphous masses.”⁵² Indigenous Mexican migrants have extraordinary “cultural capital which helps communities survive” through challenges and hardships.⁵³ When Mixtecos migrate to the United States they “...bring with them a wide range of experiences with collective action for community development, social justice, and political democratization, and these repertoires influence their decisions about who to work with and how to build their own organizations in the US.”⁵⁴ In addition, indigenous Mexican migrants have a working knowledge of at least three social and political systems: their home community and indigenous knowledge systems, as well as an understanding of both Mexican and U.S. societies.⁵⁵ It is essential that indigenous expertise is recognized by researchers, social service providers, and community-based organizations that work with this population, while at the same time acknowledging their struggles.

Among indigenous Mexican migrant civil society in the United States, there are two main types of groups. Hometown associations (*organizaciones de pueblo*) raise funds to send home for community projects in the form of remittances. There are also coalitions that “bring people together among a broader, regional ethnogeographic sphere” that often have political and social aims.⁵⁶ Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB), which founded the Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO), is an example of a group that has built coalitions among different ethnic groups that share objectives of serving indigenous communities and fighting for social justice.⁵⁷ The leaders of these binational organizations demonstrate extraordinary leadership and have had tremendous impact. “In their own way, the members of FIOB are trying to build spaces that will allow for the development of their ethnic group, their home state, the Mexican American community, and American society. Their activities are transforming Fresno and have redefined the concept of local and national community in Mexico and the United States.”⁵⁸ The following research on Mixtec food security is the result of a partnership between CBDIO and the California Association of Food Banks (CAFB).

⁵² Fox and Rivera-Salgado, “Building Civil Society,” 5.

⁵³ Ruben Puentes in Bacon, xvii.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Fox, “Reframing Mexican Migration.” *Latino Studies*. Vol 4, (2006):39-61, 41.

⁵⁵ Personal communication with Rebecca Hester, September 14, 2007.

⁵⁶ Fox and Rivera-Salgado, “Building Civil Society,” 4.

⁵⁷ Domínguez Santos, “Migración y Organización de los Indígenas Oaxaqueños”, 86.

⁵⁸ Jesús Martínez-Saldaña, “Building the Future: The FIOB and Civic Participation of Mexican Immigrants in Fresno, California,” in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, ed. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado (California: University of California, 2004) 129.

Mixtec Voices From the San Joaquin Valley: Results from Three Focus Groups

Three focus groups were conducted on food security issues and the use of the Food Stamp Program among Mixtecos in the San Joaquin Valley. Fresno metropolitan area, which includes both Fresno and Madera counties, is home to many people of Mexicans and Oaxacans. According to the 2000 Census, 37.8 % of residents of Fresno metropolitan area were of Mexican origin. “Fresno and other regions with large migrant communities offer countless examples of the effort to make human potential coincide with daily reality.”⁵⁹ Fresno is considered a success story both in terms of political incorporation of Mexican-Americans, as well as community-based organizations and advocacy.⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, Fresno is home to one of regional offices of Frente (FIOB) and CBDIO. Madera is “the center of the Mixtec universe in California.”⁶¹ However, in Madera “... the political incorporations of Mexicans has been limited and uneven.” According to Jesus Martínez-Saldaña, “Mexicans’ lack of political power in Madera has contributed to a deterioration of public services, especially in education.”⁶² Both counties offer a glimpse into the lives of Mixtec migrants in California.

Methodology

Community leaders from CBDIO reviewed both the screener tool and the focus group guide prior to recruiting participants. Members of CBDIO recruited participants for three focus groups based on the following criteria: migrated from Mexico and currently live in the Central Valley, at least 18 years of age, identify as Mixteco and/or speak Mixteco, contribute to the household food purchasing and/or preparation, and live in a household with at least one child (17 years of age or under). The criteria for focus group participants aimed to find adults living in *mixed-status households*, in an effort to focus this research among households that are likely to have at least one family member who may be eligible for the Food Stamp Program.⁶³ It was likely that a large number of Mixtec families with children would be mixed-status households because the majority of children in immigrant families living in Fresno are U.S. citizens.⁶⁴

CBDIO staff arranged for Mixtec facilitators for each of the three focus groups. Rosa López facilitated the focus group of Spanish speakers in Madera. Leoncio Vásquez Santos facilitated and interpreted a focus group of women who speak Mixteco Bajo in Fresno. Oralia Maceda facilitated the final focus group of Spanish speakers in Fresno.

The focus group guide had three main sections: food security, knowledge of the Food Stamp Program, and food stamp outreach. First, facilitators asked eleven questions that focused on economic difficulties and food security. Questions were designed to increase our knowledge of if and when there is food insecurity in this community, and how they manage food insecurity when it occurs. Questions were asked about how

⁵⁹ Martínez-Saldaña, “Building the Future,” 135.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 128-135.

⁶¹ Runsten and Kearney, “Encuesta Sobre las Redes de Los Pueblos Oaxaqueños,” 55.

⁶² Martínez-Saldaña, “Building the Future,” 34.

⁶³ U.S. Citizens, lawful permanent residents (LPRs), sponsored immigrants, asylees / refugees may be eligible for the Food Stamp Program, if they are at 130% of the federal poverty line and meet other requirements.

⁶⁴ Children Now, *Children in Immigrant Families: A California Data Brief*. www.childrennow.org, 3.

economic conditions affect both adult and children's diets to determine food insecurity. The second section of the focus group guide asked questions about food stamps in an effort to learn more about the participants' knowledge and opinions about the program. Questions asked where they had learned about the program, if they had been encouraged or discouraged to apply, and if they had been exposed to any media campaigns in print or on the radio. The third section of the focus group guide began with a basic explanation of the Food Stamp Program, its purpose and two key issues for immigrant and mixed-status households interested in the program: the possibility for undocumented parents to apply on behalf of citizen children and the fact that use of Food Stamp Program is not considered a public charge by the U.S. government. This information was given to clarify some of the most common misunderstandings of the Food Stamp Program, and discuss participants' views about the program in light of this information. After telling participants this basic information about the Food Stamp Program, the facilitators asked the participants what they thought about the program, if they thought it could help members of their community, if they had fears or worries about it, if they would be interested in applying if someone they knew might be eligible, and what kind of information or help they would need to apply or decide if they wanted to apply. Finally participants were asked for suggestions on how to reach their community.

Results

The screener and recruitment tool obtained information about participants such as Mexican state of origin, years in the United States, languages spoken, types employment, family structure, food security, and use of WIC, food stamps, and the emergency food system.

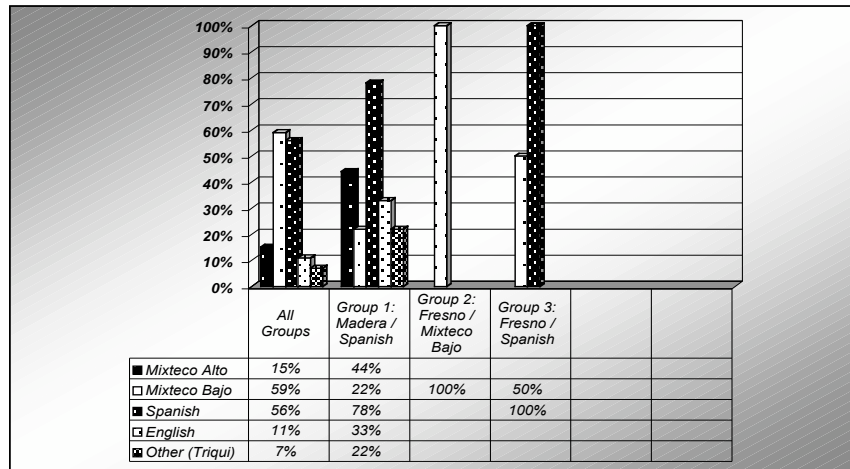
Just under half (44%) of respondents were from Oaxaca and 56% were from Guerrero. On average, respondents had been living in the United States for 7.2 years.⁶⁵ The participants of the first group, which was conducted in Madera, had been in the United States for an average of 13 years. The second group of Mixteco Bajo speakers in Fresno had been in the United States an average of 5.9 years. The third group, which was conducted in Fresno of Spanish speakers, had been living in the United States for an average of 3.25 years.

Overall, 59% of the participants spoke Mixteco Bajo; 15% spoke Mixteco Alto; 56% spoke Spanish; 11% spoke English; two participants (7%) spoke Triqui.⁶⁶ The first group, which was conducted in Spanish in Madera, was by far the most linguistically diverse group. Two participants were monolingual: one in Spanish and the other in an indigenous language, however five participants were bilingual in an indigenous and European language, while two participants were trilingual (Mixteco, Spanish, and English). The second group was conducted in Fresno of 100% monolingual Mixteco Bajo speaking women. The third group was conducted in Fresno of Spanish speakers, however, 50% of participants were bilingual in Mixteco Bajo and Spanish. (Figure 1)

⁶⁵ This question was not phrased in a way that allowed respondents to explain the specifics of multiple border crossings.

⁶⁶ Triqui is the name of another language and ethnic group indigenous to Oaxaca.

Figure 1: Languages Spoken



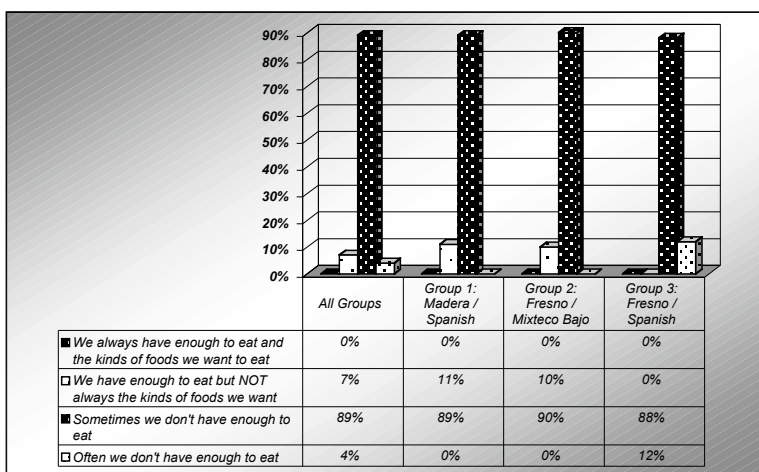
Of the 27 participants, 41% worked outside the home. Of those that worked outside the home, 91% worked in agriculture, all of which was seasonal, 27% of them migrated for work. One respondent said she worked in the service sector, and one respondent who worked in agriculture also did community work. Sixty-seven percent of participants in the first group worked outside of the home; 83% of them worked in seasonal agriculture, 50% of the agricultural workers in the group migrated for work. Of the second group, none of the participants worked outside of the home, but their comments revealed that their partners and community members worked in agriculture, and were therefore affected by seasonal employment. Sixty-three percent of participants of the third group worked outside of the home. Of these respondents, 100% worked in seasonal agriculture, and one participant migrated for work.

All but one of the participants (96%) had at least one U.S. born person in the household. The number of U.S. born family members per household ranged from zero to nine, averaging at more than two U.S. born family members per household. Only one participant reported having a sponsored immigrant in the household.

The screener and recruitment tool reveals that the vast majority 93% (25/27) of participants reported that they experienced household food insecurity in the last year. CBDIO staff asked the standard USDA food sufficiency question that asks the interviewee to pick one of four phrases that best describes the food situation of his or her family in the last 12 months.⁶⁷ Not a single respondent answered, “We always have enough to eat and the types of foods that we want to eat.” Two in 27 respondents (7%) answered that, “We have enough to eat but not always the kinds of food that we want to eat.” Eighty-nine percent of participants (24 of 27) answered, “Sometimes we don’t have enough to eat.” One respondent answered, “Often we don’t have enough to eat.” These answers were consistent among the different focus groups. The majority of each group answered that they sometimes do not have enough to eat. (Figure 2)

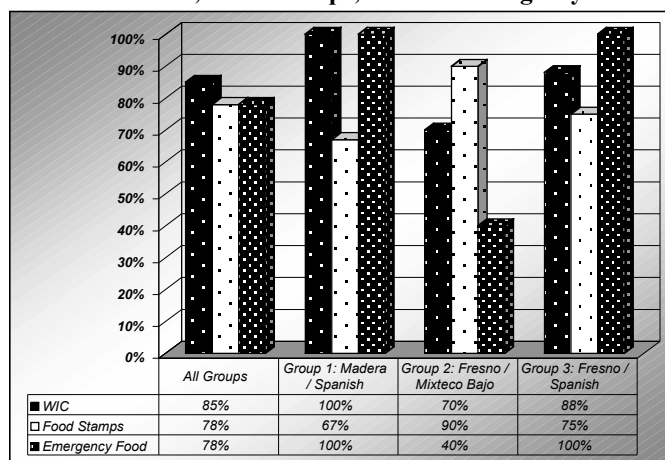
⁶⁷ The USDA food sufficiency question can “provide a single-question measure” of food security, however, it is not always included in the food security scale. Gary Bickel et al., “Guide to Measuring Household Food Security.” *Measuring Food Security in the United States*. USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Office of Analysis, Nutrition, and Education. 2000, 21.

Figure 2: Food Security



The respondents of the focus group screener had a high rate of participation in federally funded nutrition programs and the emergency food system. Eighty-five percent of participants reported that someone in their households had at one point received WIC. Seventy-eight percent (21 out of 27) reported that someone in their household had at some point received food stamps (two respondents were not sure if they received food stamps or not.) Seventy-eight percent of respondents had at some point received emergency food from a food bank, food pantry, soup kitchen, or other type of food donation. Each of the respondents in Madera had at some point received WIC and emergency food, while 67% of the same group had at some point received food stamps. Seventy percent of the second group of Mixteco Bajo speakers in Fresno had at some point received WIC, 40% had at some point received emergency food (2/10 reported that they were not sure), and 90% had at some point received food stamps (10% reported that they were not sure). Eighty-eight percent of the third group in Fresno had at some point received WIC, 100% had at some point received emergency food, and 75% had at some point received food stamps, (1/8 was not sure). (Figure 3)

Figure 3: Use of WIC, Food Stamps, and the Emergency Food System



The participants of the first focus group in Madera had the lowest rate of participation in the Food Stamp Program, but higher use of WIC and emergency food. It is of particular interest that the participants of the second group, which consisted of monolingual Mixteco Bajo speakers, had the highest rate of participation in the Food Stamp Program, but lower rates of participation in WIC or use of emergency food. The third group was more likely to receive emergency food than WIC or food stamps.

The participants in all three focus groups expressed that it is difficult to make enough money to provide for all of their household needs. Some participants reported that it is hardest at the beginning of the month because they have to pay rent, which is a significant portion of their income. Participants mentioned that it is difficult to pay for rent, electricity, gas, water, clothing for children to wear to school, clothing for cold weather, and also have enough money for food for children and adults. Another major expense that takes away from a family's food budget is childcare. One woman mentioned that she earns \$30 a day, and pays half of her daily income for someone to care for her daughter while she is working. Several participants also mentioned not having enough money to buy other household necessities such as soap.

The winter is associated with decreased incomes, higher costs of living, and increased food insecurity. Seasonal work makes it difficult to have economic or food security. Participants mentioned that the hardest time of year is from January through the first few weeks of April because "there is no work." Participants also mentioned that during the winter school vacations, children are not able to eat meals provided at school. The colder months are also difficult because of increased costs of warm clothing and increased utility bills. These costs often reduce the household food budget. As one participant said, during difficult economic times, "We don't eat well so we can pay for these things" such as rent and utilities.

Although the comments of many participants focused on the times when there is not work as being the hardest, some participants also mentioned that there are barriers to food security when they are working. As one woman said, "During the times of heat, they [farmworkers] suffer from thirst and hunger while working." Many farmworkers work on a piece rate system, and are paid depending on how much they pick. In order to maximize working time, many farmworkers do not take lunch breaks, in an effort to earn more money. In the times of the year that there is work, employment is still not guaranteed. Certain times of the year, such as October and November, available work pays less than in the summer.⁶⁸ Annual incomes are very low. Many families must use a significant part of their income to pay off personal debts that they accumulated during months when they were not working.

Participants mentioned that not having sufficient money to pay for all of their household needs affects the quantity of the food that they eat. Some participants noted reducing the amount and frequency of meals from two to three times a day, to strictly once in the morning and later in the afternoon / evening, or even less when there is little to no money for food. Some participants mentioned not having enough food to feed all of their family members.

Focus group participants also mentioned that the variety of the kinds of food they purchase decreased when they do not have sufficient income. When asked what they eat during times when they are working and have more access to money, they listed a variety

⁶⁸ Key informant interview with Leoncio Vásquez Santos.

of foods including the staples of their diet: rice, beans, and tortillas, as well as different kinds of fruits, vegetables, meat, chicken, eggs, milk, and cheese. When there is not enough money, participants said that they mainly eat only rice, beans, and tortillas.

Food insecurity that affects children is considered particularly severe. Parents try to shield their children from hunger by reducing their own consumption of food or of other adults in the home. However, it is not always possible to completely protect children from food insecurity, and in many of the most food insecure households, children's diets are disrupted.⁶⁹ Some participants mentioned that their children eat less amounts and less varied foods when they are struggling economically. One mother mentioned that her child eats only a "tortilla with salt" during particularly difficult economic times, in contrast to their preferred diet which includes sources of protein and other essential nutrients such as beans, eggs, dairy, chicken, fruits, and vegetables. Others mentioned how painful it is to witness the effect of food insecurity on their children. As one father said,

In the times that there is work and the parents have some money, they can buy food, and the children like it. In the times that there isn't [work], the children have to put up with it... The children eat less when there isn't [enough food]... They have to put up with it ... The children become more depressed when there isn't [enough food]... This is the difficulty of the situation.

For a parent, the stress of watching a child suffer from hunger is untenable. Food insecurity among young Mixtecos has dire consequences for their physical, psychological, and social health, wellbeing, and development.

Participants mentioned various strategies for managing food insecurity including: buying less food, buy less kinds of food, waiting for sales, looking for reduced prices for food and clothing, buying large quantities of staples such as rice, beans, and maseca (corn tortilla flour) when they have money and then saving them to be rationed them during times when there is no money, and borrowing money from friends and family. Some participants mentioned that they make their own tortillas because it is less expensive than buying them pre-made. Participants also mentioned seeking help from the emergency food system when they experienced food insecurity as well as receiving various forms of public assistance.

Although the focus group guide did not pose specific questions about the emergency food system, the use of emergency food was brought up in each of the three focus groups. Information from the focus groups reveals that the emergency food system struggles to meet the needs of Mixtec clients. Most participants had experience with the food banks and pantries, but some participants did not know where to access emergency food assistance. One participant mentioned that he could not access a particular pantry when he is working because it is only open during regular business hours. He stated that farmworkers, especially those who travel significant distances to find work, cannot access a pantry that does not stay open in the evenings. For those participants who have been able to find food banks and go during their open hours, other barriers to access exist.

Many participants reported struggling to provide acceptable identification in emergency food distribution sites. Some of the participants reported that they have no identification documents whatsoever; some respondents said that their FIOB membership

⁶⁹ Bryan Hall, "Understanding Food Security Data and Methodology." *Hunger Issue Brief*. Food Security Institute. Brandeis University: 2004, 2.

cards were their only form of identification. (Appendix 1: FIOB Membership card) One participant had problems because she had received food in the past, but could not pick up food during the times that she was working, and once her work ended she returned to the distribution agency, but was told that she was no longer “registered” and was not “on the list.” Some participants mentioned the feeling of shame when they were told that they were ineligible for emergency food due to identification or registration requirements.

The participants who did manage to access emergency food found that the food was inappropriate to their cultural and dietary needs. When asked about the food received from food banks and pantries the participants responded “Everything in cans!” and that indigenous Mexicans are not accustomed to eating canned foods. The staples of food banks, canned foods such as baked beans (“*frijoles dulces*”), creamed soups, and beef stews are unfamiliar to Mixtec families. Many participants stated that they do not know how to prepare these foods. The consensus among participants was that they would rather receive foods such as dried beans, rice, and maseca, so that they can prepare the foods that they are accustomed to eating.

Participants mentioned various federally funded nutrition and public assistance programs such as the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), food stamps, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) also known as welfare or “*el cheque*,” as well as Medi-Cal. Some participants mentioned that they never received these programs, while others mentioned that they do. Among participants that receive WIC or food stamps, they mentioned that the benefit level is generally not high enough to last the month, but instead lasts for just over two weeks.

Many participants exhibited familiarity and knowledge of the Food Stamp Program. When asked, “What are food stamps?” one responded answered, “Food stamps are used to buy healthier food,” and another commented that, “Food stamps help buy food for children.” Some participants knew that food stamps came on the electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card. The specific level of knowledge about the various aspects of the Food Stamp Program, including pertinent issues such as the effect of the use of the Food Stamp Program on immigration status, varied greatly among participants. Some respondents, such as the ones mentioned above, expressed accurate information about the Food Stamp Program, while others asked questions that exhibited that they did not have a full understanding of the program.

The participants who knew about food stamps learned about the program from both formal and informal sources. Several participants said that they learned about food stamps from doctors and nurses in the hospital or clinic when their first child was born. Some participants reported first hearing about food stamps from eligibility or caseworkers when they were pregnant and applied for Medi-Cal. Many participants mentioned that they had heard about food stamps from friends or neighborhoods, and that they themselves tell members of their community about food stamps. One participant from Madera mentioned that she learned about food stamps from the Latino 5 a Day Campaign literature. None of the participants reported having learned about food stamps from people working at food banks, pantries, churches, or their children’s schools.

Participants generally expressed a positive opinion of the Food Stamp Program, stating that it could help eligible members of their community. Several stated that food stamps are very helpful. Many agreed that if they made enough money, they would not need this program. As one woman in Fresno said, “They receive it because the need

exists.” Some participants who stated that even though they were ineligible they thought it was a good program.

Discussion

Some of the barriers to accessing emergency food mentioned by focus group participants are the result of different regulations for the distribution of different types of food. Emergency food distribution agencies, also known as food pantries, generally create their own standards and rules on how to distribute donated and purchased food. Some distribution agencies require identification or registration, while others pantries ask recipients to “self-certify” or verbally identify themselves and their residence. When a food pantry distributes U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) surplus commodities under The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the federal government requires that food banks and pantries ask recipients to prove their identity and residence, but allows flexibility as to which documents are considered acceptable.⁷⁰ This information is used to verify that recipients live in the area for which TEFAP food is intended.⁷¹ While these regulations serve distribution, record keeping, and other institutional purposes, they can be confusing to people unfamiliar with the system and create barriers for undocumented immigrants, who may be unable to produce any kind of document - from a piece of mail to an official identification card - that verifies their name and address. Although there are measures such as signing a particular form that would allow a person to receive food despite not having proof of residence, the comments of focus group participants revealed that these requirements are still serving as a barrier to accessing emergency food.⁷²

Barriers to accessing appropriate emergency foods by focus group participants are part of the systemic challenges of the emergency food system, which relies on donations and volunteers. The frustrations expressed by the focus group participants are not unique to the Mixtec population and are consistent with some of the major critiques of the emergency food system. “Demoralization” of emergency food recipients, cultural “inappropriateness” and “nutritional inadequacy” of distributed food items are among the many well-documented criticisms of the emergency food system.⁷³ These criticisms are also part of a larger context in which food banks are suffering from decreased supply of foods due to a decrease in federal surplus commodities, as well as improved manufacturing and inventory technology that results in less donations. In addition, many foods that were previously donated are now sold in secondary markets such as discount stores in the United States and retailers overseas. Decreased supply of nutritious foods and increased demand on the part of recipients often results in difficult distribution choices made by food bank staff and volunteers.

⁷⁰ Personal communication with Daytra Latin of the Community Food Bank of Fresno, CA, January 1, 2008.

⁷¹ Personal communication with Bridget Galvan of the Alameda County Community Food Bank, February 5, 2008.

⁷² California Department of Social Services. *Emergency Food and Assistance Program Policy and Procedure Manual*. Revised Edition. (California: CDSS, 2006) 19.

⁷³ Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*. (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998) 213-233.

Despite these challenges, food banks have taken steps to respond to these criticisms and address these issues in an effort to better serve emergency food recipients. Food banks are purchasing more food, rather than relying on donations, as a strategy to increase both the nutritional value and the cultural appropriateness of emergency food. The Community Food Bank of Fresno currently buys several types of food for distribution, including rice and dried beans.⁷⁴ Many food banks in California, including the Community Food Bank of Fresno, participate in the Farm to Family program which works to deliver culled and surplus produce to food banks.⁷⁵ Other strategies such as giving clients more agency and choice in selecting pantry items have also been implemented as a way to address issues of recipient demoralization. The amount of funds available to particular food banks impacts the quality and quantity of purchased foods, participation in the Farm to Family program, and initiatives to increase client choice and satisfaction.

The barriers to accessing the Food Stamp Program identified from these focus groups surrounded the difficulty of applying, especially in terms of problems due to lack of literacy and the difficulty of obtaining all of the necessary supporting documents. Some participants said that they have been denied food stamps and do not understand why they are ineligible.

Lack of information and misinformation represent major barriers to access. Network communication, which relies on people passing on information to community members, is a very important aspect of how Mixtecs learn about the U.S. system of social services. According to Nayamín Martínez, “Word of mouth is the most powerful tool in the indigenous community.”⁷⁶ However, network communication paired with misinformation can serve as a barrier to accessing social services. One woman said that her neighbor discouraged her from applying for food stamps by telling her that she is ineligible because she has several children, but only one who was born in the United States. This is an example of how incorrect information and informal communication about food stamps can discourage potentially eligible households from applying.

For many immigrant groups, fear is a major deterrent to applying for assistance programs. Focus group participants reported a number of fears, some of which are not legal possibilities under existing laws. One woman said that she was afraid that the government could take away her children if she asked for help. Many participants expressed fears that their U.S. born children would have to pay back money once they became adults. Another woman reported that she was afraid to apply because she would have to report her income, and an eligibility worker told her that the police could investigate unauthorized work. One person mentioned wanting to apply, but being afraid because she did not know how the program worked, and she did not want to accumulate debt to the government.

Another major source of confusion is the difference between nutrition assistance programs and cash assistance, such as TANF or Special Supplemental Income (SSI). Generally, advocates and outreach providers do not encourage undocumented immigrants to apply for cash assistance such as TANF or SSI because the use of these programs can be deemed a public charge and be a grounds for denying lawful permanent residency.

⁷⁴ Personal communication with Daytra Latin.

⁷⁵ Personal communication with Ron Clark. February 1, 2008.

⁷⁶ Key Informant interview with Nayamín Martínez.

The use of federally funded nutrition programs, such as food stamps, WIC, or school lunch, is not considered a public charge issue and is therefore encouraged as a source of support for many immigrant families. It is particularly confusing to potential clients - especially those with language and cultural barriers - that although one goes to the same county office, and fills out the same application for both food stamps and TANF, and the benefits come on the same EBT card, the government views the use of food stamps and TANF very differently. As one participant in Madera stated, “No one explains that welfare and food stamps aren’t the same.” Some participants in Madera expressed an abstract fear of “welfare.” One respondent said, “With this fear, I never went [to apply].” In some cases, fear of the negative consequences of receiving cash assistance discourages immigrant households from applying for food stamps.

An equally problematic result of not having a complete understanding of the difference between nutrition assistance and cash assistance programs is when undocumented immigrants receive TANF on behalf of their U.S. born children. Some participants reported that when they apply for Medi-Cal or food stamps, the eligibility worker also offers the possibility of applying for TANF. Their comments demonstrated that they are not receiving the full explanation of the difference of these programs in the eyes of the federal government. The Mixteco Bajo speakers in the second focus group did not express a fear of being deemed a public charge. One participant disclosed that she received TANF. While it is unclear how this perceived lack of fear should be interpreted, it was suggested that for some families who have few resources, the chances of obtaining lawful permanent residency is so small that they do not worry about this issue.⁷⁷ However, the conventional wisdom is that it may not be in some immigrants’ best interest to receive TANF. If eligibility workers give immigrants incomplete or misleading information on the potential consequences of receiving cash assistance, they are doing the immigrant client a great disservice, should that client ever apply for lawful permanent residency. Without a concrete and accurate understanding of the implications of receiving cash assistance and how it differs from food stamps, immigrants cannot make informed decisions that may affect both their food security and their future immigration status.

Participants in each focus group expressed that income reporting for food stamps is problematic due to seasonal farm work. Farmworkers experience waves of income and unemployment. As one person mentioned in regards to the fluctuation of her income during different times in the year, “There are good times for us, and there are very bad times. I wish that they would help us when we most need it.” Current policy of quarterly income reporting does not reflect the needs of seasonal farmworkers who constitute a significant population among the working poor in California.

Many participants mentioned problems with the customer service at the county offices. Some participants mentioned that some of the eligibility workers are more helpful than others, while others mentioned specific problems with their caseworkers. One woman told a story about how an eligibility worker refused to assist her in filling out the form, even after she told the worker that she is illiterate and cannot read the forms. The participant did not know that her rights as a food stamp applicant were violated.

Finally, it is important to note that the information that we gathered from the focus groups, and the recommendations based upon it, may not fully address the entire

⁷⁷ Key informant interview with Nayamín Martínez; Key informant interview with Leoncio Vásquez Santos.

population. There are Mixtecos who are not connected to the CBDIO network. CBDIO has a difficult time reaching some Mixtecos because they live in such marginalized conditions. The needs of unaccompanied males or other Mixtec adults without children were not captured in this study. There are other groups of indigenous Mexican migrants living in California. Other groups that are smaller in numbers are more likely to be neglected by academic, policy, and community based efforts. The information gathered on Mixtec families is not necessarily applicable to all indigenous Mexican migrants in the United States.

Recommendations and Considerations

To adequately address food insecurity among the Mixtec population of California, a multi-pronged approach is necessary. Various strategies that respect and maintain indigenous culture must be pursued to fully address the food security needs of this community. Great efforts must address the current lack of cultural and linguistic competence of health, social, and community based service providers. The emergency food system must be made more accessible in all counties that have a significant farmworker and indigenous population. There are various possibilities to improve food stamp regulations in California that could make the program more accessible to seasonal farmworkers. Finally, possibilities for food stamp outreach and partnerships between indigenous community based organizations and anti-hunger advocates are suggested.

A successful and appropriate plan to address the food security needs of the Mixtec community must recognize and value indigenous knowledge and expertise. The unique cultural capital that Mixtecos bring with them to the United States can help contribute to the solutions. The Mixtec community solves problems as a community. Efforts to increase food security must help pull the community together and encourage this culture.⁷⁸ In addition, more research about how the community problematizes hunger and food insecurity, and the solutions that the community wants to pursue would support these efforts. One solution to health and nutrition issues that is in the works is the creation of a community garden in Fresno.⁷⁹

Part of valuing Mixtec knowledge and culture that is also relevant to promoting food security is the importance of keeping indigenous languages alive. “A critical part of strengthening communication has been the effort to encourage the use of indigenous languages, both as part of the political struggle for rights and as an endeavor in cultural survival.”⁸⁰ The speaking of Mixteco should be encouraged, especially for U.S. born youth who may prefer not to speak Mixteco and instead speak English and Spanish. Mixtec youth may not realize that their ability to speak Mixteco is an asset.⁸¹ However, the ability to speak two or more languages, including indigenous languages, will create leadership and professional opportunities for Mixtecos as their communities and networks continue to grow in California. The importance of retaining the Mixtec language and valuing multilingualism among younger generations has implications for food security measures and outreach.

⁷⁸ Key informant interview with David Bacon, December 28, 2007.

⁷⁹ Key informant interview with Leoncio Vásquez Santos.

⁸⁰ Fox and Rivera-Salgado, “Building Civil Society,” 6.

⁸¹ Personal communication with Jonathan Fox, September 24, 2007.

The traditional Mixtec diet is another aspect of indigenous knowledge that should be recognized, as food has significant cultural resonance. There are health and nutrition benefits to maintaining the traditional Mixtec diet and avoiding processed foods that are low in nutritional value and high in fat, sugar, and salt. The focus groups revealed that what participants wanted to eat is a nutritionally sound diet, rich in fresh produce and protein. However, the effect that migration has on eating habits cannot be underestimated. According to Rebecca Hester, it is not always effective to tell indigenous people, “You know what to eat,” because in her experience some have replied, “No, we don’t. We *no longer* know what to eat.”⁸² It appears that the inclusion of inexpensive and easily accessible fast food, sodas, and other low nutritional “junk food” in Mixtec migrants’ diets has not only undermined their health and nutrition, but also their confidence in selecting or accessing appropriate foods.⁸³ More research should be done on the effect of years in the United States and poverty has on Mixtec food preferences, but in the meantime, a better approach may be to ask, “What did you eat in Oaxaca?” The answer to that question may provide the guidelines for a nutritionally sound diet of traditional and familiar foods that can be encouraged in an effort to promote physical health and maintain cultural traditions among Mixtecos in California.

Improved cultural and linguistic competency can increase access to services provided by county workers, educators, healthcare providers, and community based organizations. Advocating for cultural competency in the emergency food system and social services could begin by holding trainings about this population, and distributing the CBDIO publication *Oaxacan Culture: Cultural Competence Guidebook* to employees and volunteers. County offices, hospitals, and clinics can also improve cultural competency by learning more about the Mixtec community and using their interpreting services.

Various changes can make the emergency food system more accessible to Mixtecos and other migrant populations. One approach is to work with existing distribution sites; another approach is to create a new distribution site within the indigenous community network that could cater to the needs of the indigenous and farmworker community. Potential strategies to better serve the indigenous migrant community within the existing emergency food system include: changing or modifying identification and registration requirements, extending hours of pantries during times of the year when farmworkers are in the fields, and distributing foods that meet the cultural and dietary needs of indigenous Mexicans. Recognizing and accepting the FIOB membership card as proof of identify for emergency food could increase access for some Mixtecos; however, this would not address the problem for indigenous Mexican migrants who are not yet connected to the FIOB / CBDIO network. The second approach would be to create a new distribution site that caters to the needs of the indigenous farmworker population. This pantry would ideally be run under the auspices of trusted indigenous community members who understand the needs of their community. Policies regarding identification requirements, hours of operation, as well as distributed food and goods could be tailored to meet the needs of indigenous farmworkers. This second option could adequately and appropriately address the emergency food needs of the indigenous

⁸² Key informant interview with Rebecca Hester, Oakland, CA, December 28, 2008.

⁸³ This point is based upon Hester’s research and experience working with indigenous Mexican migrants, not information gathered from the focus groups in December 2007.

community, but entails increased capacity of opening a new distribution site. Both approaches, to improve existing emergency food distribution as well as work towards creating a new site aimed at indigenous Mexican migrants, could potentially help individuals and families when they most need food assistance. Although emergency food is only a temporary remedy for hunger, it is an essential component to a food security plan, as many members of the community will have a need to access emergency food.

One strategy to increase food security in the Mixtec community includes exploring methods of food stamp application and recertification that would better serve this population. The issue of seasonal employment should be seriously investigated in an effort to adequately address the needs of the working poor in California. This problem could be addressed by examining the ways that income is reported in other states. The majority of states use semi-annual income reporting for recertification. This could aid seasonal farmworkers by averaging their incomes over the course of a six-month period, thereby giving a more accurate portrayal of their food assistance needs. Another possibility would be considering ways of suspending, rather than terminating, food stamp benefits during times that incomes rise, and then starting the benefits again when incomes decrease. This strategy could aid both food stamp recipients and county eligibility workers by decreasing the administrative burden of canceling food stamp benefits and then having to have the same household reapply.

Improved food stamp policy is only valuable to the Mixtec community if Mixtecos have access to information about food stamps, know where and how to apply, and receive the assistance they need with the application and recertification process. A Mixtec food stamp outreach provider would serve the Mixtec community best. This outreach provider could be either bilingual (Mixteco and Spanish) or trilingual (Mixteco, Spanish, and English). A person with these skills would be able to combine the expertise of his or her community of origin as well as navigate the universe of social services provisions and non-profit infrastructure. A Mixtec food stamp outreach provider could provide food stamp outreach as well as support for nutrition education and other community needs. This person could explain and assist Mixtecos with their applications, re-certifications, and explain the differences between nutrition and cash assistance programs in relation to immigration issues.

A Mixtec community member can provide outreach in culturally and linguistically appropriate way that supports the community and values indigenous knowledge. However, it is important to note that there should be a careful implementation of food stamp outreach in this community. Rebecca Hester notes that outreach and health promotion in indigenous communities can be problematic, even if the person doing the outreach is indigenous.⁸⁴ The *promotora*, or community health worker, model is used by CBDIO in California because it has been used in Mexico for almost 30 years. “The primary job of the *promotoras*, then, is to translate not only between languages, indigenous, Spanish and to some extent English, but also between medical and social systems in order to facilitate access to health information and care for indigenous migrants in California.”⁸⁵ *Promotoras* also help indigenous women fill out applications

⁸⁴ Key informant interview with Rebecca Hester.

⁸⁵ Rebecca Hester, “Bodies in Translation: Health Promotion in Indigenous Mexican Migrant Communities in California.” *Translocalities/Translocalidades: Feminist Politics of Translation in the Latin/a Americas*, Forthcoming, 17.

for Medi-Cal, food stamps, and WIC. This model is celebrated by many organizations that work with Latino immigrants in California for its effectiveness in outreach and direct service. However, Hester writes that adopting the “Mexican model of health promotion” to support outreach efforts in California is problematic because of “...the historic exclusion of indigenous groups from social services in rural Mexico and the profound racism they experience when they do access clinical services...” However, she notes that “social aspect of health promotion” of the relationship between *promotoras* and their community members is “much more important and empowering than the focus on individual autonomy” of other health promotion strategies.⁸⁶ An outreach plan that employs a Mixtec food stamp outreach provider based on the *promotora* model has the potential to provide outreach and services effectively, but is also complex and should be implemented with careful consideration.

Another potential challenge to existing models of outreach is the aspect that mimics educational workshops. Outreach efforts that expect “classroom like behavior” from adults who have little formal education may be problematic approaches. Hester observes that, “Health promotion workshops are conducted in a way that marginalizes some of the participants even as they are attempting to involve them.”⁸⁷ This critique challenges advocates and outreach providers to create new strategies that deliver relevant information to people and does not reinforce existing inequalities.

Outreach, in any community, is complex and not always successful. People do not always act upon the information given to them. Leoncio Vásquez Santos mentioned the difficulty of getting people to eat better in an effort to address diabetes in the indigenous community.⁸⁸ According to Rebecca Hester, the assumption that information it will translate into action must be challenged.⁸⁹ The complexity and difficulty of effective outreach and health promotion is not unique to the indigenous community. However, it is a challenge to be more dynamic and innovative as well as more culturally appropriate.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁸ Key informant interview with Leoncio Vásquez Santos.

⁸⁹ Key informant interview with Rebecca Hester.

Conclusion: Towards a Just Food System


Food insecurity among farmworkers and their families epitomizes the injustice of the U.S. food system. The poverty of indigenous Mexican migrants is endemic to the inequality that is perpetuated by unfair labor practices. A truly just food system is one in which farmworker families have access to all of the conditions and resources necessary to obtaining physical, social, and psychological health.

Increasing access to the emergency food system and the Food Stamp Program are two important aspects of improving food security among indigenous Mexican migrants. However, increased access to food assistance does not guarantee that all of the needs of the Mixtec community will be met. Organizations that are working for labor standards, living wages, employment benefits, accessible healthcare, affordable and safe housing, childcare and education, anti-racism, respect, cultural competency, progressive immigration reform, and human rights also play indispensable roles securing that the needs of this vulnerable population are met.

This reports identifies the specific needs and barriers to access of a minority within a minority, however, it is important to emphasize that this community exists within the larger context of migrant and immigrant rights. As this report is written, the debate over immigrants' access to social services and assistance programs is fervently debated, with many arguing solely on behalf of documented immigrants. This political approach draws a familiar division between the seemingly "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, the "good" and the "bad" immigrants. Instead, undocumented status can be understood as a source of vulnerability, rather than evidence of criminality. Only with a historic and humanistic approach can the needs of all society members be understood, and a more just society and food system be created.

Appendix 1: FIOB Membership Card

FRENTE INDIGENA DE ORGANIZACIONES BINACIONALES

CREDENCIAL NUM. **0080** 

CARGO: _____

NOMBRE: _____

El portador es miembro de pueblos indígenas, por lo que es sujeto a la protección, respeto y reconocimiento de estos derechos. FECHA DE NACIMIENTO: ____/____/____

Domicilio: _____


Firma _____

'POR EL RESPETO A LOS DERECHOS DE LOS PUEBLOS INDIGENAS'

Con fundamento en los artículos 2o y 115o de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos y en el Convenio No. 169 de la Organización Internacional del Trabajo (OIT) sobre Pueblos Indígenas, se extiende la presente para el respeto de los derechos del portador.

Based on the rights embodied in Article 2nd and 115th of the Constitution of the United States of Mexico and on the Convention No. 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in reference to the Indigenous peoples, this card is issued to the person named on the front for the protection and recognition of these rights.

Vigencia: de ____/____/____ a ____/____/____

 **Rufino E. Domínguez Santos**
Coordinador General 2005-2008

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DESARROLLO INDÍGENA OAXAQUEÑO
OF OAXACAN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES