



Californians tell their story about the recession and increased need for public assistance

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States has been experiencing the worst recession since the Great Depression in the 1930s. Economists mark the beginning and end dates of this recession as December 2007 through June 2009, based on broad economic indicators.¹ Although technically “over” in terms of these broad indicators, the recession is still strongly felt “on the ground,” particularly in terms of job loss, both nationally and in California.¹ A companion report to this one reported dramatic increases in Medi-Cal population in the years during and following the recession. However, the numbers do not tell the whole story. They do not fully explain, for example, how lives have changed as a consequence of the recession or the events that caused individuals to apply for public assistance. This present report fills the gap with data and personal stories from applicants themselves. Data in this report are from two sources: surveys of applicants for benefits in County Department of Public and Social Services (DPSS) Offices in two California counties (Sacramento and Riverside) and focus groups in four counties (Sacramento, Riverside, Alameda and Los Angeles). The focus groups were conducted by Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center researchers through a private research firm, PS:Research! & Consulting and were not conducted at County DPSS Offices. Highlights of the report follow.

Economic Distress Seen in Employment, Housing Problems and Need for Assistance

Life switching “from big to small” was evident among most focus group participants. When reflecting on life two years ago phrases used included “money in the bank, future, healthy, energy, eating out, and vacations;” these words were associated with living big or large. In stark contrast words and phrases such as “downhill roller coaster, no future, unhealthy, worried, no job, and fast food” were used to describe their lives in the recession, or living small. Job loss, housing problems, reduction in household income and reliance on public assistance were keenly felt.

Survey Findings from the County Assistance Offices

Employment

- 71% of the respondents had no job and another 15% only worked part time at the time of the interview.
- 31% had been out of work for more than one year
- Another 39% of the respondents reported that they worked or a family member worked

Income

- 17% of respondents had no source of income whatsoever;
- 38% were relying on public assistance as a source of income and 6% relied on "other" sources such as child support/alimony, student financial loans, or retirement funds.
- 39% of survey respondents in DPSS Offices maintained income through their or a family member's work, despite their need for assistance.

Housing

- 61% of respondents had housing problems
- Trouble paying rent/mortgage was the most common problem (34%), but some had also experienced eviction or foreclosure (5% and 3%)
- 21% did not have their own housing, but were staying with a friend or relative

Need for Assistance

- Need for assistance was felt by all surveyed races and education levels. (Respondents were of varying educational and ethnic backgrounds, none of which were specifically targeted for recruitment).
- 44% of those applicants completing the survey in English attended some college or completed a college degree.

- There were no significant differences in unemployment experiences between respondents of different races or education levels surveyed.

Focus Groups Underscored the Depth of Economic Distress

- Results from focus groups highlighted the impact of the economic downturn. Almost all focus group participants said they were much worse off financially than they were two years ago, before the recession began.
- Most participants had to borrow money; all said they had trouble paying bills in the last 12 months.

Survey Respondents were Applying for a Combination of Benefits

- 58% of the respondents were applying for Medi-Cal, either alone (20%) or in combination with other benefits (38%).
- Participants who were applying for benefits in combination with Medi-Cal, were applying for Medi-Cal and CalFresh (17%), or Medi-Cal, CalFresh and CalWorks (17%), or Medi-Cal and another program (4%);
- Surveyed applicants who were **NOT** applying for Medi-Cal (31%), generally because they already had Medi-Cal, were applying for CalFresh (17%), CalWorks (5%), both CalFresh and CalWorks (5%), or another program(s) (4%)

Focus Groups Showed More About Perceptions of Being on Public Assistance.

- Most focus group participants expressed reluctance to apply for and accept public assistance, but viewed it as an absolute necessity.

“I never thought I would be in this predicament. It’s tough to admit it to yourself.

The whole process is painful, but I have kids and family comes first.

It does help a lot.”

Survey Respondents Applying for Medi-Cal Were Without Coverage for a Variety of Reasons¹

- 38% applying for Medi-Cal reported that they could not afford private coverage
- Another 30%, of those applying for Medi-Cal, were experiencing medical emergencies that drove them to need Medi-Cal and 9.4% of these had a job loss on top of a medical emergency
- Most of those applying for Medi-Cal had been without coverage for less than a year (28%), but 21% had been without coverage for over a year.

Focus Group Respondents Underscored the Importance of Health Care in Their Lives

- Even in today's economy, focus group respondents pinpointed health care concerns as their biggest worry – more so than housing or food.

“I would take Medi-Cal even if I had to live in an ally.”

“If I am not healthy, the rent can't get paid.”

Focus Group Respondents also Recommended Making Information More Accessible and Clear

- Many participants were applying for public assistance for the first time. They found instructions and benefit explanations confusing, especially those who had and were used to private coverage. Spanish-speaking members of focus groups also experienced language barriers, and thus need for greater clarity.

¹Only those applying for Medi-Cal were used in this sample (n=287)

INTRODUCTION

The United States has been experiencing the worst recession since the Great Depression in the 1930s. Economists mark the beginning of the recession in December 2007 and ending in June 2009, based on broad economic indicators.¹ Although technically “over” in terms of these broad indicators, the recession has still been strongly felt “on the ground,” particularly in terms of job loss, both nationally and in California.¹ In November 2007, the month before the official start of the recession, the national unemployment rate was 4.7%; in October of 2009 it peaked at 10.1%, and by the official end date, June 2009, it reduced slightly to 9.5%.¹⁻²

At the same time, California experienced historically high unemployment rates, peaking in January 2010 at 13.2%, higher even than the national average.³ These high unemployment rates, and resulting loss of income for Californians, have led to an increased demand for public assistance programs such as food assistance (CalFresh), Medi-Cal (California’s Medicaid program), CalWORKS (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families – TANF), and unemployment insurance.

In a companion report, “A Steep Climb: High Unemployment and Increased Need for Public Assistance in California” the authors of the current report found dramatic increases in Medi-Cal enrollment in the years during and following the recession.⁴ However, the numbers do not tell the whole story. They do not fully explain, for example, how lives have changed as a consequence of the recession, or the events that caused individuals to apply for public assistance. Further, the numbers do not tell how many of the enrollees are new to public assistance or how many were on the road to escaping from poverty before the recession, only to fall backwards as a result of the adverse economic conditions. In addition, the numbers do not tell the depth and breadth of family needs.

The present report fills the gap by complementing data on enrollment and unemployment statistics in the companion report with data and personal stories from

actual and potential public assistance clients themselves. The information in this report comes from two separate sources and pools of individuals:

- *Surveys* of clients in County Department of Public and Social Services (DPSS) Offices in two counties: Sacramento and Riverside (a total of 553 clients completed the survey), and;
- *Focus groups* were conducted at independent research facilities in Sacramento, Riverside, Alameda, and Los Angeles Counties. (These had no affiliation with County DPSS Offices).

Client Survey Methods

The client survey instrument was designed by staff of Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC) and pre-tested at the Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services office in Cincinnati, Ohio. Nineteen questions were asked on the survey which was designed to collect information on clients' economic state, previous enrollment status, benefits for which they were applying, reasons for applying and demographic data. The survey was translated into Spanish by a PhD-level individual proficient in the language, back translated to English by a separate individual, and the final translation reviewed for clarity by an individual with Spanish as their first language. As such the survey was administered in both English and Spanish.

The survey was administered in four California County DPSS offices; one in Sacramento County (Susie Gaines-Mitchell) and three in Riverside County (La Sierra in the City of Riverside; Indio; and Riverside County Regional Medical Center in Moreno Valley). Surveys were administered in Sacramento for seven days in August of 2010. Administration in Riverside County was divided between two days in La Sierra, two in Indio and one in Moreno Valley in November of 2010. Both Sacramento and Riverside were selected for their diverse populations, the high volume of clients seen daily, level of unemployment prior to the recession, change in unemployment during the recession (Table 1), and geographic location (a county from Southern California and one from North Central California with sufficient population sizes and client volume for the study).

Table 1. California, Percentage of Unemployment, Not adjusted, by county, 2006-2009³

County	Average 2006	Average 2007	Average 2008	Average 2009
Alameda	4.4%	4.7%	6.2%	10.7%
Los Angeles	4.8%	5.1%	7.5%	11.6%
Riverside	5.0%	6.0%	8.5%	13.6%
Sacramento	4.8%	5.4%	7.2%	11.3%
All California	4.9%	5.3%	7.2%	11.4%

California, Percentage of Unemployment, Not adjusted, by city, 2007 and 2010³

City and County	Annual 2007	Oct 2010	% Change
Indio City, Riverside	6.5%	15.8%	143%
Riverside City, Riverside	6.1%	14.8%	142.6%
Moreno Valley, Riverside	7.0%	16.9%	141.4%
Sacramento City, Sacramento	6.4%	14.6%	128.1%
Parkway South, Sacramento	9.9%	21.5%	117.2%

Data Source: Employment Development Department, State of California

Table 2. Race and Ethnicity of California Residents at the State and County Level, 2009⁵

	White	Hispanic	Asian	Pacific Islander	Black	American Indian	Multiracial
California	42%	37%	12%	0%	6%	1%	2%
Alameda	36%	23%	24%	1%	12%	0%	3%
Los Angeles	28%	48%	13%	0%	8%	0%	2%
Riverside	46%	41%	4%	0%	6%	1%	2%
Sacramento	52%	20%	13%	1%	9%	1%	4%

Data Source: Department of Finance, State of California

A convenience sample was used in this study; clients in county office waiting rooms were asked to participate in the study. The only qualifications were the ability to read and write in English or Spanish and be at least 18 years of age. The surveys were administered by a CCHMC staff member and an independent/contracted bilingual

speaker. A total of 553 surveys were completed, 281 in Sacramento County and 271 in Riverside County.

Survey Participants Demographics

A total number of 553 participants completed the client survey; not all individuals completed every question. Most of the participants (82%) were 45 years of age or younger (Table 3). Over half of the participants were Latino/Latina (Table 4).

Table 3. Age in years of survey participants					
18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 ≤
25%	34%	23%	12%	4%	2%

Table 4. Race/ Ethnicity of Survey Participants				
White	Black	Latino	Mixed	Other
14%	14%	53%	4%	15%

Focus Group Methods

Five focus groups were conducted by an independent research firm, PS:Research! & Consulting, in four California Counties (Alameda, Los Angeles, Riverside and Sacramento) in April of 2010. The counties were selected for their diverse populations (reflected in the county demographics in Table 2), and a significant change in unemployment during the recession. Two focus groups were held with residents of Los Angeles County, one in Spanish and one in English. The focus groups were conducted at independent research facilities in each county; none were conducted at the County DPSS Offices. There were a total of 41 participants, including 10 in the Spanish-speaking focus group. Participants were recruited by trained recruiters through a short telephone interview and had to meet the following specifications;

- Be a resident in either Alameda, Los Angeles, Riverside or Sacramento Counties in California;
- Have children living with them at the time of the focus group interview;
- In the past year, someone living in the household (including children) was either covered by, or had applied for benefits from CalWorks, Medi-Cal or

CalFresh. The status of enrollment was self-reported and for privacy reasons was not verified by the researchers.

The Recruiters maintain opt-in databases of those individuals willing to participate in focus groups. The database contains detailed demographic as well as general health and consumer information. Respondents who meet selected specifications received a phone call and were asked to participate. Each participant received \$60 in compensation for their time; transportation and childcare were provided if they proved to be barriers to participation. There are several limitations to using focus groups; the small sample size used in qualitative research is often not large enough to be a representative sample of the study population.

The focus group discussion guide was developed by PS:Research! & Consulting based on areas of inquiry and specific questions provided by Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC) researchers. All focus groups were conducted by PS:Research! & Consulting staff trained in qualitative social research and sensitive subject interviewing, with CCHMC researchers present. Collected qualitative data was submitted to CCHMC via an executive report of key research findings, as well as written focus group transcripts and recordings of sessions.

The following sections of this report will first review the results of the survey of current and potential beneficiaries, beginning with signs of economic distress, and then move to the need for Medi-Cal and other public assistance as a result. Survey results will be followed by supporting results from project focus groups to further complete the "on the ground" picture.

SURVEY RESULTS: SIGNS OF ECONOMIC DISTRESS

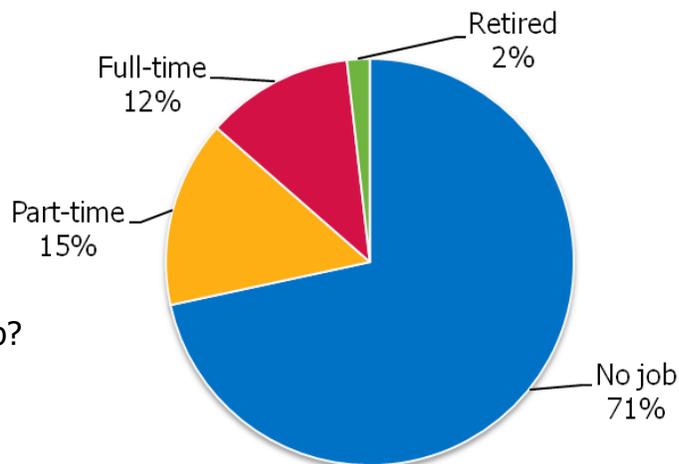
Economic distress was felt by a majority of surveyed individuals in terms of job loss, housing problems, reduction in household income and reliance on public assistance. A majority of surveyed respondents were unemployed (71%) and 61% were experiencing housing problems.

Job Loss

Signs of economic distress for Californians were evident in the responses of survey participants at county assistance offices. When respondents were asked the question “do you have a job,” a full 71% of respondents said that they were not working and 15% had part-time jobs. Only 12% had full-time jobs at the time of the survey.

Figure 1-Distress 1:
Most respondents
were unemployed

Question: do you have a job?
n=545

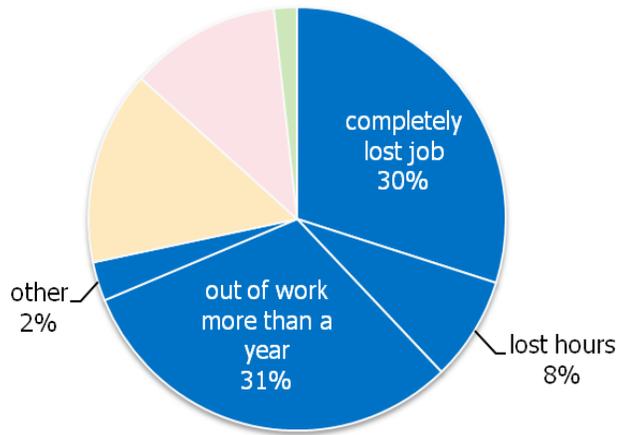


Over a quarter (30%) of respondents, had completely lost their job in the year prior to the survey and 8% lost hours at some point during the year. An additional 31% had been out of work for more than a year.

Figure 2-Distress 2:

Most of those that were unemployed completely lost their job or were without a job for over a year.

Question: Did you lose your job in the last year?
n=545

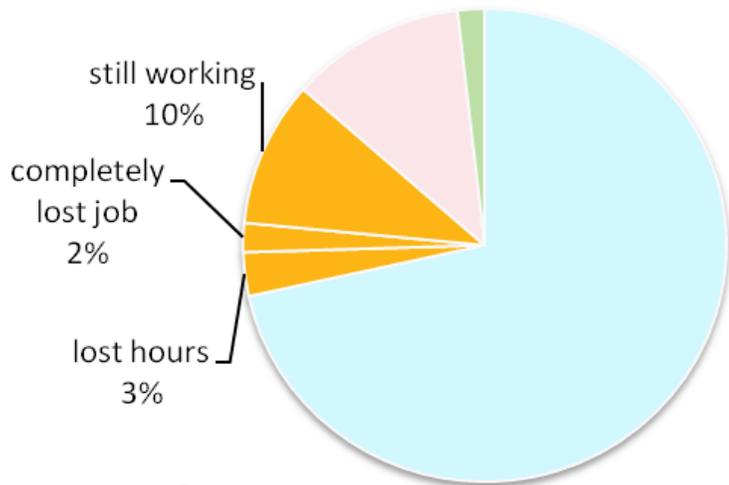


When further examining the individuals who were working part-time (15%), 2% had completely lost their job and 3% lost hours at some point during the year. The individuals who reported they had completely lost their job in the past year may have found another part-time job. Another 10% reported that they were still working (Figure 3).

Figure 3-Distress 3:

Some of those who were working part-time had lost their job or hours in the last year.

Question: Did you lose your job in the last year?
n=545



Respondents were Composed of Varying Ethnic and Educational Backgrounds

Our survey showed that the need for assistance was felt by a variety of races and educational levels. For example, 44% of the individuals taking the survey either had some college or were college graduates.

Furthermore, we examined the relationship of unemployment and race, educational attainment, and English proficiency of the applicants, but did not find statistical differences for any of these groupings (data not

shown). While the proportion of college graduates was smaller among those taking the survey in Spanish, it is still clear that the need for public assistance during the recession has been felt by a broad cross section of the population.

Table 5. Level of education of survey participants			
<i>(English version)</i>			
Less than high school	Some high school	High school grad/ GED	Some college or more
3.8%	18.0%	34.0%	44.1%
n=16	n=74	n=140	n=182
Level of education of survey participants			
<i>(Spanish version)</i>			
72.3%	12.3%	8.5%	6.9%
n=94	n=16	n=11	n=9
Level of education of survey participants			
<i>(both English and Spanish versions)</i>			
20.3%	16.6%	27.9%	35.2%
n=110	n=90	n=151	n=191

Income Loss: Increased Need for Public Assistance

Job loss often leads to a reduction in family income, which in turn may lead to need for public assistance.⁶⁻⁷ Respondents were asked about their source of income in the last 6 months; 38% of the interviewees were relying on public assistance as a source of income (Figure 4). For the most part, this was CalWORKs (32%), sometimes augmented by income from work or other sources (6%). It should be noted that the income eligibility criteria for CalWORKS is stringent, and it would not be possible for a recipient to earn much more than minimum wage and still be eligible. On the other hand, many of the respondents relied on salary from their own work or that of a spouse or other family member as the major source of family income (39%). A few applicants (6%) relied on “other” sources of income, such as child support/alimony, student loans, or retirement. Disturbingly, 17% of the respondents reported no source of income whatsoever.

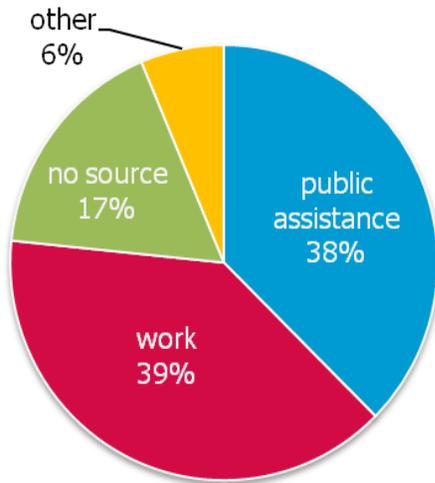


Figure 4-Distress 4:
Work and public assistance were the most common sources of income

Question: What has been your major source of income in the last six months?
n=553

Housing Loss and Troubles⁷

Likely similar to the rest of the nation, economic distress for Californians often began with job loss, which led to loss of income, which in turn led to housing loss or other housing problems.⁶⁻⁷ A full 61% of the survey respondents experienced some sort of housing problems in the last year (Figure 5).

Figure 5-Distress 5:
Most individuals, over half, reported experiencing housing problems

Question: Have you experienced housing problems in the last year?
n=553

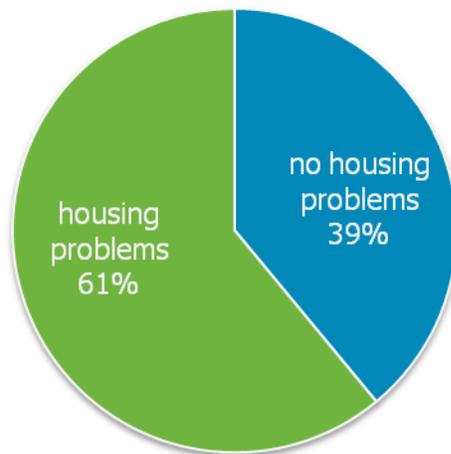
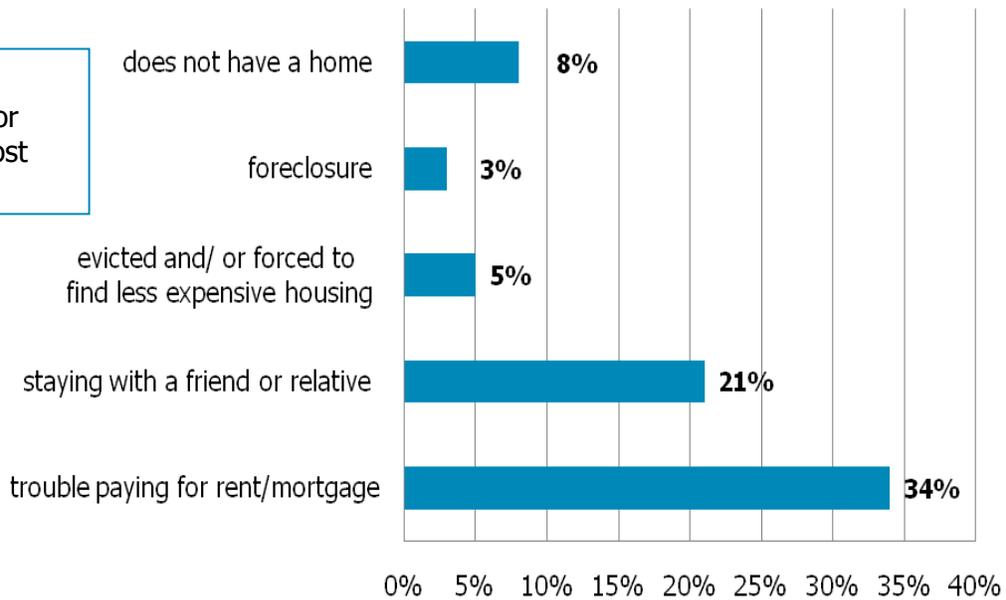


Figure 6-Distress 6:
Trouble paying for rent or a mortgage were the most common problems



**Respondents are the 61% who experienced housing problems. They were able to select more than one response.*

The housing problems varied and many respondents reported multiple issues. Among the 61% of surveyed individuals experiencing housing problems, the most commonly cited issue was having trouble paying rent or mortgage (34%), but there were also reports of being evicted or forced to find less expensive housing (5%), as well as foreclosure (3%). As a consequence of housing problems, 21% were staying with a friend or relative, and 8% did not have a home (Figure 6). The next section paints the picture of the economic downturn through reports of job loss, income, and housing from the perspectives of focus group participants.

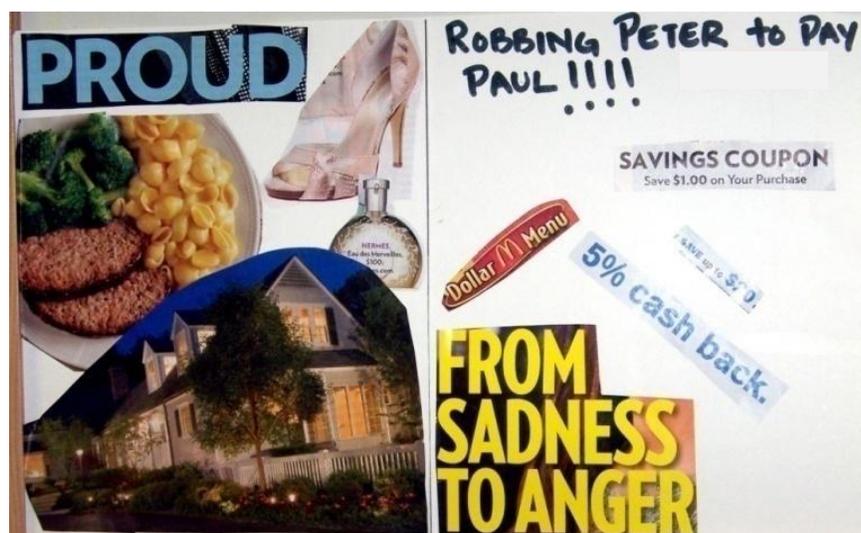
Focus Group Results: Reported Signs of Economic Distress

"PAINTING THE PICTURE"

Almost all focus group participants said that they were much worse off financially at the time of the research than they were two years prior to the research, before the recession began. One individual used the following saying to describe the change in lifestyle:

"Now everything is going from big to small"

Life switching "from big to small" was evident among most focus group participants. When reflecting on life two years ago phrases used included "money in the bank, future, healthy, energy, eating out, and vacations;" these words were associated with living big or large. In stark contrast words and phrases such as "down roller coaster, no future, unhealthy, worried, no job, and fast food" were used to describe their lives in the recession, or living small.



During the focus groups the participants were asked to create a collage to depict their lives two years ago and today. The collage at the bottom of the previous page, created during a focus group, displays what life was like for a particular individual two years prior to the focus group and at the time of the focus group. Two years ago (displayed on the left hand side) this individual was living comfortably, able to eat out at restaurants and purchase luxury items. The right hand side reflected their current life; inability to pay bills “robbing Peter to pay Paul,” eating off the dollar menus, and the feelings of sadness and anger. The two composite stories below are used to paint the picture of the recession through the stories of focus group participants; a combination of attendees’ experiences were used to create the stories. Rosa Garcia is an example of an individual living on the edge of poverty; after she and her husband lost their jobs they were forced to apply for public assistance. Susan Baker, on the other hand, was part of a middle class family; the economic downturn forced her family to close their business.

"I had a lot of trips. I went everywhere. I wore luxury clothing. I took my kids everywhere. I went to concerts or to the beach. I would change my car every three years. I would lease them out and return them, and I didn't cook. I went out to restaurants; it was the kind of life that was a fantasy life maybe. A luxury life."

*Focus group participant,
Los Angeles, Spanish speaking*

The Story of Rosa Garcia*

April 2007, Rosa, her husband, and two children are living comfortably in a three bedroom ranch. Rosa’s husband works full-time as an electrician and Rosa works part-time in a nearby private school. She and her husband are able to buy health insurance at a reasonable cost for themselves through work. The children are enrolled in the Healthy Families program and the Garcia’s pay a premium to keep the children enrolled.

Every Friday the family goes to their favorite sit-down restaurant and attends a movie. Rosa is able to buy new clothes for the children every season and school supplies at the start of the school year. Last August the family took a trip to Disneyland for a long weekend.

April 2010, Rosa lost her job and her husband’s hours were cut to part-time. After almost a year of looking for a job, Rosa has finally given up. The Garcia’s are facing foreclosure and the stress is causing material problems. Rosa spends most of her days looking for coupons and trying to make ends meet. The family has stopped going out to dinner and only rents movies once a month now. The stress has given Rosa’s husband migraines and he cannot sleep at night.

Rosa applied for Medi-Cal and food stamps three months ago. It was difficult for her to apply; she has always prided herself on being able to provide for her family. The process was overwhelming but she is thankful to have the extra support.

**not a real name of attendee*

The Story of Susan Baker*

Susan and her husband opened a small business in 2001, over four years the business grew steadily. In 2002 Susan and her husband were able to purchase a three bedroom house and pay for their children's college tuition. By 2007 the family's business employed ten individuals. Although it was costly, the family purchased health insurance for themselves and their employees.

The two were enjoying owning a business and were planning on expanding. By April of 2008 the Bakers experienced their second month of negative profits and had to lay-off five employees. In June of 2008 the Bakers had to lay-off the remaining employees and were struggling to pay their mortgage. With the economy worsening the couple could not keep the business open. With little choice, Mr. Baker turned to his family for monetary support. His family was able to help them pay their mortgage for an additional 3 months. Susan and her husband began looking for work but were unable to find jobs. By mid-2009 their house went into foreclosure, forcing them to move in with family members.

The monetary issues caused a great deal of stress between the Bakers and they constantly fought. Susan is not sure how much longer she will be able to stay in the marriage. She applied for Medicaid, cash assistance, food stamps, and entered the county's job placement program. She is incredibly depressed, but cannot pay for her anti-depression medicine. However, she says she is "not ashamed," and is determined to get through all of this.

** not a real name of attendee*

Job Loss

Unemployment and loss of hours were reasons for most participants to initially apply for public assistance. For participants who had a family member working, they often cited insufficient pay or reduction of pay as a problem and barrier to economic stability.

Although working people may

still be eligible for public assistance, insufficient/low wages still caused a few participants to cease working and depend solely on public assistance as a source of income. This decision was caused by a fear that if they were working they would not be eligible to receive benefits. A few participants returned to school instead of looking for another job.

"You lost your job?" "Yes. I looked and looked. And then when I could get one, changing resume, going on interviews—couldn't get one, my housing came through, moved to the County, applied for disability and decided I'm going back to school, because I'm not having luck with jobs. Because the rate of pay never matches the cost of living."

*Focus group participant,
Alameda County*

Income Sources

Focus group participants also noted a reduction in their disposable income; prior to the downturn they were able to eat out at sit-down restaurants, take trips or purchase luxury items. When they did eat out participants were limited to restaurants with dollar menus. Most had to borrow money from family and friends. One respondent said “it was difficult and embarrassing” and another said it left them feeling “inadequate and bruised”.

Housing Troubles

To make ends meet, many respondents had to move to smaller apartments, take in roommates, or live with family or friends. Several had lost their homes. A few even had times when they had to live in their cars.

“Actually I took a roommate. I have a 2 bedroom with my daughter. She and I share a room...”

*Focus group participant,
Alameda County*

All said that they have had difficulty paying bills in the last 12 months, and most said that at some time in the past 12 months they could not pay their mortgage, rent or utility bills. Some had electricity shut off and have had to apply for emergency financial assistance to pay bills. Most practice “selective bill paying” – paying only the most critical bills at the last minute.

Need for Assistance Felt at Diverse Levels

Data gathered during the recession through focus groups indicated that due to the poor economic situation and high unemployment rates, individuals of many educational levels may require various forms of public assistance. Over half of the focus group participants had either some college education or were college graduates.

Findings from the focus groups conducted with public assistance clients were mirrored by the results of focus groups that have been conducted with county workers.⁴ County assistance workers noted that some of the applicants were new to the system and were unaware of other resources (food banks, utility assistance, etc.) beyond Medi-Cal, CalFresh and CalWORKS. A worker in Sacramento stated, “A lot of them had very

good jobs, they are educated. So \$450 a week is nothing compared to what they were making. You are talking about people in severe crisis.”

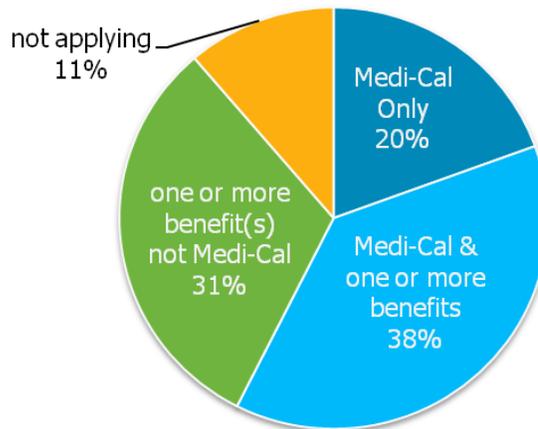
Survey Results: A Need for Assistance Programs for which Individuals Were Applying

In the previous section focus group respondents reported that economic distress led to a need for a variety of benefits. Most of the interviewees surveyed in county assistance offices were applying for a combination of Medi-Cal, food assistance (CalFresh) and cash assistance (CalWORKs). Approximately 60% of the respondents were applying for Medi-Cal, either alone (20%), or in combination with other benefits (38%). Another 31% were *not* applying for Medi-Cal at the time of the survey (sometimes because they already had it), but rather were seeking other benefits. Finally, a small percentage of respondents had not come to the county assistance offices to *apply* for benefits, but rather to address issues or questions around receipt of benefits they already had (11%). It is important to note that the survey was designed to gain insight into the program(s) for which individuals intended to apply at the time of the survey, and so does not necessarily indicate for which program(s) their applications would ultimately be evaluated by county eligibility staff. For example, individuals submitting applications to CalWORKS are evaluated for Medi-Cal and CalFresh as well, but the respondent may not have selected all three programs in his or her survey response.

Figure 7-Programs 1:

Individuals intended to apply for a combination of benefits

Question: What benefits are you applying for?
N=553



Figures 7 and 8 show other benefits for which applicants were applying for in combination with Medi-Cal. Of the 38% that were applying for Medi-Cal and one or more other benefit(s), most were expecting to apply for Medi-Cal and CalFresh, either alone or in combination with CalWORKs. Specifically, the intent of 17% (of all individuals applying) was to apply for Medi-Cal and CalFresh, while another 17% for Medi-Cal, CalFresh and CalWORKs. A very small percentage sought application to Medi-Cal and CalWORKs, but not CalFresh. It should also be noted that Medi-Cal eligibility is automatic with a positive determination for CalWORKs eligibility.

Figure 8-Programs 2:

Individuals who were applying for Medi-Cal often were applying for food or food and

Question: What benefits are you applying for?
N=553

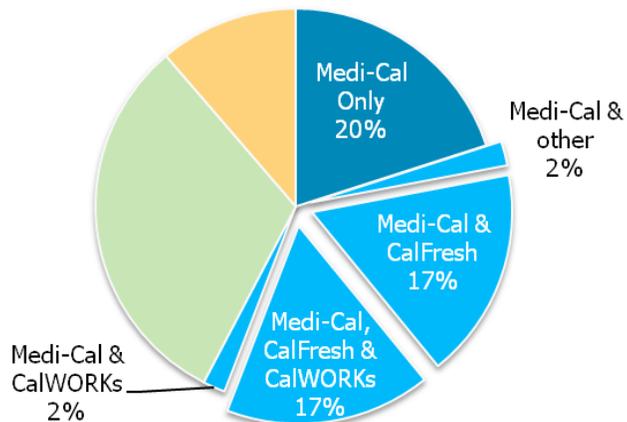
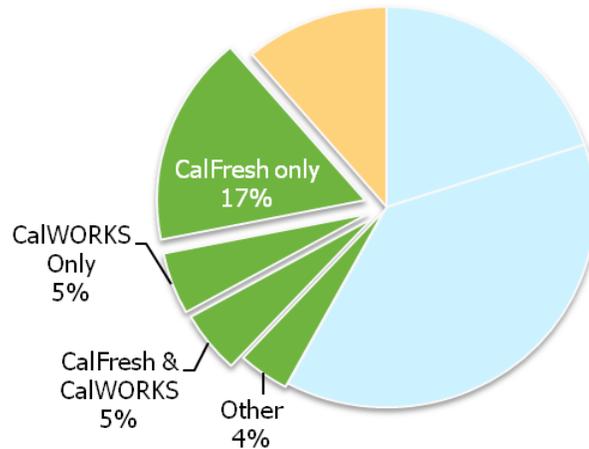


Figure 8 shows that 31% of respondents came into offices intending to apply for other benefits, but not Medi-Cal. Seventeen percent (17%) of these were applying for CalFresh, either alone or in combination with CalWORKs (5%); only 5% for CalWORKs

in the absence of either CalFresh or Medi-Cal. Eligibility criteria are more stringent for CalWORKs than for CalFresh or Medi-Cal; thus it is possible that individuals applying for CalWORKs only already had other supports.

Figure 9-Programs 3:
Individuals applied for food and cash even without Medi-Cal

Question: What benefits are you applying for?
N=553

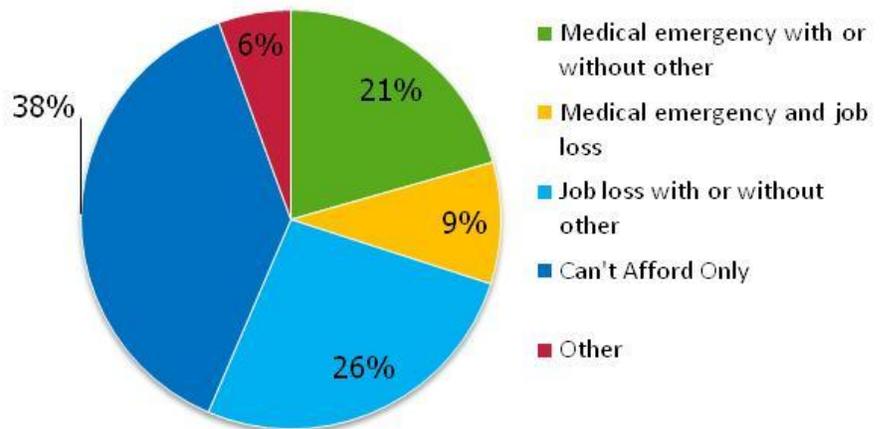


Applying for Medi-Cal

Those respondents who were applying for Medi-Cal were doing so for a variety of reasons. Of these 287 respondents, some reported having a current medical emergency that drove them to seek Medi-Cal coverage with or without an additional reason (21%). Another 66%, however, reported they could not afford alternate coverage (38%). Some respondents reported having a medical emergency concurrently with a job loss (9%).

Figure 10-Programs 4:
Job loss or a reduction in income and inability to afford insurance were the most common reasons for applying.

Question: Why are you applying for Medi-Cal?
N=287



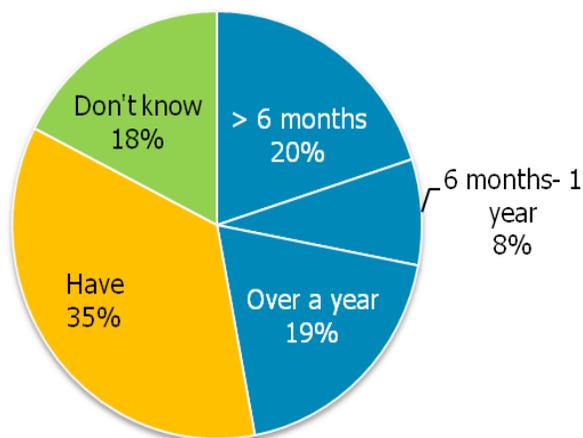
Most respondents were applying for themselves (70%) and/or for children (67%), but fewer than 20% were applying on behalf of a spouse. Around 8% of respondents were applying for a pregnant woman and 3% were applying for an individual who was disabled (data not shown).

Losing Insurance Coverage

Related to the most commonly cited reasons for application to Medi-Cal, specifically not being able to afford private coverage or experiencing job loss (and thus loss of employer-sponsored coverage), over half (65%) of respondents did not have health insurance at the time of the survey. The remaining 35% of the respondents reported that they already had health insurance (private or public). Twenty-eight percent (28%) of respondents reported being without insurance for less than a year, 19% for over a year, and 18% did not know how long they had been without insurance (Figure 12).

Figure 12-Coverage 2:
Most were without insurance for a year or less

Question: How long have you been without health insurance?
n=553



The level of education an individual had obtained corresponded to the length of time they were without insurance. Respondents who held a college or advanced degree were more likely to be without insurance for 6 months or less (31%) compared to individuals with less than a high school degree (22%) or high school degree (12%). Respondents with less than a high school degree were more likely to have been without insurance for over a year (data not shown).

Focus Groups Results: Underscoring the Importance of Medi-Cal "PAINTING THE PICTURE"

Survey results provided insight into the programs for which individuals were applying; while focus group respondents added depth of experiences to both the need for and perception of public assistance. Particularly, the role that Medi-Cal played in individuals' lives was told through the focus groups. When asked to rank the importance of having access to health care from one to ten (not important to very important), almost all focus group respondents reported that it was very important. Even in today's economy, access to health care was absolutely the top concern or worry for participants – more so than housing and food.

"I would take Medi-Cal even if I had to live in an ally."

- Respondents viewed access to health care as very important for their children and themselves.

"If I'm not healthy, the rent can't get paid."

- Prior to the economic downturn, most English-speaking respondents who were working, or who had spouses who were working, participated in some kind of health insurance plan through their work. As jobs were lost, so was group health insurance coverage.

- The costs of maintaining any kind of private health insurance coverage has been prohibitive for almost all respondents. This reflects the findings from the survey data; 27% could not afford health care.

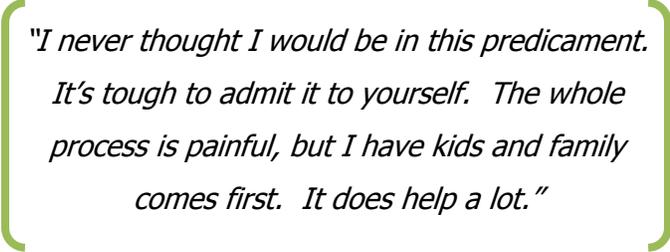
"We're all in the same boat – we have to have medical care but we can't afford hospital bills."

- Among Focus group participants, health care for children was seen as more important than health care for adults. In general all children living with the respondents were covered by some kind of health plan (mostly Medi-Cal or Healthy Families).
- Accidents, reports of “things outside of my control” or medical emergencies, were key reasons why health care for children was of primary importance, rather than preventive health care for family members.
- Some focus group respondents whose children were covered by Healthy Families reported moving to Medi-Cal due either to eligibility issues, or the parent just not being able to pay Healthy Families premiums.
- Although most respondents and their families generally had some form of health coverage, the costs of co-payments and deductibles, as well as program exclusions, still adversely impacted their ability to get proper health care when needed.

“It’s cheaper to pay for medications in cash than to pay premiums and co-payments through healthcare programs.”
- Most Spanish-speaking respondents had no health coverage reportedly due to their immigration status, and a small number of all respondents had no coverage due to Medi-Cal income guidelines. Well over half of the Spanish-speaking respondents not only could not afford co-payments for their children, they did not understand exactly what the co-payments covered.

Public Assistance: Perceptions of Medi-Cal from Focus Groups

For some respondents, the need to accept public assistance due to the struggling economy fostered feelings of inadequacy and lowered self-esteem. Most focus group participants were reluctant to accept public assistance, but viewed it as an absolute necessity. In fact many respondents were at some time eligible for public assistance but did not apply, and knew others who were currently eligible but had not applied. These barriers are described further below.

- Although most focus group respondents see the need to accept public assistance as critical to their family's current existence, most also see it as a temporary measure until the economy changes, they find work, and get back on their feet. Even though they admit their present financial situation causes increased stress, respondents also admitted that public assistance lowered that stress level somewhat. 

"I never thought I would be in this predicament. It's tough to admit it to yourself. The whole process is painful, but I have kids and family comes first. It does help a lot."
- In general, focus group respondents would encourage others in similar situations to apply for public assistance, and would actively help them navigate the process. Several respondents put it this way: *"Necessity beats pride."*
- The economic downturn impacted most participants' overall health and wellbeing; they cited headaches, weight gain or loss, depression, lack of sleep, and increased stress on their relationships. They reported that their life today is extremely stressful because there is a feeling of "no light at the end of the tunnel."

Altruism, Pride, Embarrassment and the Application Process

Four themes regarding how English speaking focus group respondents felt about Medi-Cal appeared throughout the focus groups: altruism, pride, embarrassment and the application process. Often these feelings prohibited individuals from applying for public assistance sooner, leaving them eligible but uninsured.

- ***Altruism***

Younger focus group respondents (perhaps with a greater sense of resiliency) were more likely to apply selectively for only those programs that were most critical. Usually, this included Medi-Cal for their children. They were more inclined to apply for CalWorks than for CalFresh. One respondent commented on public assistance money this way: *"Why waste it. Maybe someone else needs it more than me."*

- ***Pride***

In general, respondents did not want to apply for public assistance other than health care for their children. It was a matter of personal, ingrained pride, and applying for public assistance was seen as acknowledging some failure on their part. One respondent put it this way: *"I didn't need help – I wasn't on the streets."* This same respondent is, however, receiving Medi-Cal benefits for their child.

- ***Embarrassment***

Some respondents who were first time applicants felt embarrassed by their current need for public assistance. They believed that because of it their friends would think less of them.

- ***Application Process Itself***

In addition to eligibility workers attitudes, the actual application process was cited as a deterrent to applying for public assistance. Respondents believed there was too much paperwork, too much time involved, and too much personal information required.

Cultural Pride, Fear Regarding Future Documentation, and Reverse Discrimination

Three additional, related themes regarding how Spanish speaking respondents felt about Medi-Cal appeared throughout the focus group. These are similar to those that were previously described for English language focus groups.

- ***Cultural Pride***

The husbands of half of the respondents in the Spanish-speaking focus group did not want their wives to apply for public assistance because it might appear the husband was unable to provide for their family. These female respondents said that generally, this cultural pride dictates that women should not apply for assistance. Some women indicated that they had to go behind their husband's back to apply for Medi-Cal for their children. While there are likely different cultural undertones between the two, this relates to the pride expressed by English-speaking focus group participants.

- ***Fear Regarding Future Documentation***

While English-speaking respondents reported issues with the application process, Spanish-speakers had different fears in that some undocumented immigrants were told that if they apply for public assistance for their U.S. citizen children it will have an impact on their own ability to obtain legal resident status. One respondent who was denied coverage for her children said she was afraid to appeal due to fear that the appeal would impact her documentation status.

- ***Reverse Discrimination***

Like English-speaking respondents, those participating in the Spanish language focus group reported embarrassment in county offices, but distinctive was that this was culturally driven. There was general agreement amongst Spanish-speakers that they felt discrimination from other Latinos in authority – a sense that they were bad or wrong for taking advantage of the social services system. Most said that non-Latino workers were more tolerant and compassionate toward Latino applicants than Latino workers.

FOCUS GROUP RESPONDENT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEDI-CAL

- ***Accessibility of information***

Provide easily accessible information regarding all public assistance program offerings and requirements. Due to the economic downturn, many focus group respondents were in need of public assistance for the first time in their lives, and so they felt lost encountering the social services system for the first time. They were unaware of what programs were available, what the qualifications for the programs are, or how to go about filling out an application. Respondents in every focus group suggested greater information as well as coverage in the media regarding various public assistance programs – some suggested a user friendly website with information.

Spanish-speakers suggested easy to understand information, particularly in terms of how various programs impact immigration status, and what programs might be available to those who are undocumented. Spanish-speakers also commented that when information is put directly in their hands, as opposed to sitting on a table or in a stand, the likelihood that they will read it increases.

- ***Clarity of Information***

Clarify Medi-Cal benefits and policies and publish in a format that is easy to understand, both for beneficiaries as well as county eligibility workers.

It was clear that most respondents did not fully understand specific health-related benefits Medi-Cal provides and what the limitations are. For example, most respondents said that they believed eye care and dental care were excluded from Medi-Cal coverage, while one respondent insisted that these benefits had been reinstated. Respondents also commented that some of their eligibility workers were unable to answer some of their questions regarding the benefits provided under the Medi-Cal program.

Respondents who formerly had private health insurance through their work were used to seeing a clear presentation of their plan's benefits and limitations. As some commented, they fully understood their health coverage. Under Medi-Cal, they are

extremely confused about the extent of coverage, which leads to frustration with the entire Medi-Cal system. Some respondents commented that they only found out what was covered, or what various co-pays were, after the fact when they received a bill.

APPENDIX – Survey Instrument

1. What benefits are you applying for?

(Mark **ALL** that describe your situation)

- Medi-Cal Food Assistance CalWORKs/Cash
 SSI/SSP Not applying for any benefits today
 Other – *please specify* _____

2. Did you come today to apply for Medi-Cal?

- Yes No

3. For whom are you applying for benefits?

(Mark **ALL** that describe your situation)

- Myself Children under 21
 Disabled person Pregnant woman
 Spouse or other relative living with me
 Other _____

4. For how many children are you applying for benefits?

- None 1 2 3 4 More than 4

5. Why are you applying for Medi-Cal?

(Mark **ALL** that describe your situation)

- I am **NOT** applying for Medi-Cal
 Medical emergency
 Job loss
 I make less money than I did before
 My job no longer provides health insurance
 I cannot afford to buy health insurance
 I lost public benefits (e.g. Medi-Cal, Healthy Families, Unemployment)
 Other _____

6. How long have you been without health insurance?

- Less than 6 months
 Between six months and a year
 Over a year
 I **HAVE** health insurance
 I do not know how long

7. When have you most recently been on Medi-Cal?

- In the past year
- Between one and two years ago
- More than two years ago
- I have **NEVER** been on Medi-Cal before

**8. Why have you lost Medi-Cal coverage in the past?
(Mark ALL that describe your situation)**

- I have **NOT** lost coverage in the past
- I did not complete or turn in paperwork
- My paperwork was not filled out correctly
- My income increased
- I was eligible for private coverage or another program
- I do not know why
- Other – *please specify* _____

9. Why have you been denied Medi-Cal Coverage in the last year?

- My income was too high
- My paperwork was not filled out correctly
- I don't know why I was denied coverage
- I have **NOT** been denied coverage
- Other _____

10. Do you have a job?

- No
- Part-time job
- Full-time job
- Retired

11. What has been your **MAJOR source of income in the last six months?**

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> CalWORKs/Cash Assistance | <input type="checkbox"/> Work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Social Security/SSI/Disability | <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployment insurance |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Child Support/Alimony | <input type="checkbox"/> Veterans Benefits |
| <input type="checkbox"/> No source of income | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |

12. Did you lose your job in the last year?

- Yes – Lost hours
- Yes – Completely lost job
- No – I am still working
- No – It has been more than a year since I had a job

**13. Have you experienced housing problems in the last year?
(Mark ALL that describe your situation)**

- No – No problems or forced changes
- Yes – Trouble paying for rent/mortgage
- Yes – I was evicted and/or forced to find less expensive housing
- Yes – Foreclosure
- Yes – I am now staying with a friend or relative
- I do not have a home

14. Are you:

- Male
- Female

15. How old are you?

- 18 – 24
- 25 – 34
- 35 – 44
- 45 – 54
- 55 – 64
- 65 or older

16. Are you:

- Married
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Part of an unmarried couple living together
- Separated
- Single – Never Married

17. How much school have you had?

- Elementary school or less
- Middle school/junior high
- Some high school
- High school graduate/GED
- Some college
- Hold a college degree
- Hold an advanced degree

18. What language do you speak at home?

- English Spanish Other_____

19. Which best describes you?

- White, not Latino/a Asian or Pacific Islander
 Black, not Latino/a American Indian or Alaskan Native
 Latino/a Other_____

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