

### The Impact of the April 1992 Civil Unrest on the Los Angeles REI WIC Program and Its Participants

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#### Synopsis .....

*This paper discusses the findings of a study conducted in south central Los Angeles in August 1992 among women in the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children.*

*The goals of the study were to determine the current demographics of WIC participants; examine the financial hardship, need for relief services, and extent of hunger resulting from the civil unrest of*

*April 1992; look at the effects of the unrest on different ethnic groups; determine the unmet need for WIC services; and evaluate the State and local WIC responses to the unrest.*

*The 1,189 respondents were approximately 77 percent Latina, 20 percent African American, and 3 percent white. Half or more were recent immigrants, 19 percent were pregnant and parenting adolescents, 74 percent were school dropouts, and 56 percent were single mothers.*

*Only 1 percent had any problems using WIC vouchers after the unrest, although more than half of their grocery stores had closed. Thirty-five percent experienced food deficits in their households, and 33 percent of those who applied for emergency food stamps had trouble getting them. Four percent said their children had gone to bed hungry in the last week, and 9 percent said they, the respondents, had as well. Only 2 percent needed shelter, and 1 percent became homeless, but 6 percent had family members who lost jobs due to the unrest.*

*This study suggests that the chronically substandard conditions under which many families in south central Los Angeles live affect them more profoundly than did the dramatic consequences of the civil unrest.*

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**A**T THE END OF APRIL 1992, Los Angeles experienced the worst civil unrest in American history. It began in response to the acquittal of four police officers accused of using excessive force in arresting an African American motorist. During 2 days of looting and burning, curfews were imposed, and local law enforcement officials called on the National Guard to assist in restoring order.

Prior to the unrest, the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) operated one of its busiest sites in a small strip mall in south central Los Angeles. Administered by the

Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), WIC provides nutrition assessment, food assistance, nutrition education, and health care referrals to low-income women, infants, and children at nutritional risk. More than 7,000 WIC clients had been served monthly at this site, but on April 30, the second night of violence, the WIC outlet was burned along with the rest of the mall (1).

On Monday, May 4, the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services (LACDHS) offered temporary space to WIC at the nearby Hubert H. Humphrey Comprehensive Health Center. WIC re-

opened the following afternoon in the Humphrey staff lounge and operated there until January 1993. With the assistance of a special \$60,000 grant awarded in June 1992 by USDA, a new, permanent site opened in February 1993.

The unrest resulted not only in the loss of a WIC site but also in the destruction or temporary closure of many food stores patronized by WIC participants. As an emergency short-term measure, the State WIC Branch authorized the redemption of vouchers at any participating WIC vendor in Los Angeles County. Under normal circumstances in California, the State selects and closely monitors WIC food vendors, while local WIC agencies imprint vouchers with the names of vendors selected by participants. Once imprinted, vouchers are not negotiable at other stores.

As a result of the State measures, clients were able to use their vouchers, even if their usual food stores had been destroyed. Local agencies attempted to inform all their clients about the emergency rules, and State staff members communicated immediately with the WIC vendors affected by the rules.

## REI WIC

In the County of Los Angeles, eight local agencies provide WIC services. The Harbor-UCLA Research and Education Institute (REI), a private nonprofit organization that administers medical research, education, and health services programs, manages the largest WIC program in south central Los Angeles. REI WIC has operated in the area since 1975 and, at the time of the unrest, REI WIC was serving more than 40,000 clients monthly at its seven sites; it now serves more than 60,000 monthly. Other WIC agencies serving this community include the Watts Health Foundation and Public Health Enterprises.

To be eligible for WIC services, a woman or child must be living in a family whose income is less than or equal to 185 percent of the Federal poverty level. An exception to this rule is made for families participating in other programs such as the Food Stamp Program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or Medicaid. In those cases, the family is eligible for WIC even if its income is greater than 185 percent of the Federal poverty level.

All pregnant, breastfeeding (up to 1 year) and non-breastfeeding (up to 6 months) postpartum women, infants, and children younger than age 5 years who are nutritionally at risk are potentially eligible for WIC. However, WIC is not an entitlement program, and funding is insufficient to serve all who are eligible. Therefore, WIC uses a national priority system to determine who can receive services. During

the spring of 1992, under this system, REI WIC was serving only pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age 18 months.

## Purpose of the Survey

To many people in the city, it appeared that the damage from the civil unrest might elevate suffering in the impoverished communities of south central Los Angeles to intolerable levels. Since REI WIC serves women and children, we felt it important to assess whether the unrest had severely affected their lives, and if so, in what ways.

The goals of the survey were to

- determine the demographics of current WIC participants and applicants in south central Los Angeles;
- examine the effects of the unrest in the community, both during and after the events, with regard to homelessness, financial hardship, injury, the need for relief services, and the extent of hunger;
- investigate whether the effects of the disturbances differed by ethnic group;
- assess the unmet need for WIC services among current WIC families in south central Los Angeles, (primarily for children between age 18 months and 5 years); and
- determine whether or not the State and local WIC response to the unrest helped WIC participants to use all of their vouchers during the month of May 1992.

## Methodology

An instrument developed by REI WIC was used to question WIC participants about hunger, access to grocery stores, problems using WIC vouchers, family participation in WIC, homelessness, and unemployment. In addition, there were basic demographic questions about marital status, level of education, ethnicity, and preferred language on the questionnaire.

Several key agencies, including California Food Policy Advocates and the Western Center on Law and Poverty, reviewed the questionnaire.

Of the seven REI WIC clinics in south central Los Angeles, five were selected for the study because of their proximity to the areas that experienced the most looting and burning. These sites included the temporary facility at Humphrey, one in the Florence-Firestone area, two in Compton, and one in South Gate that also serves Watts residents.

Five young adults from the community, all fluent or conversational in Spanish, conducted the inter-

Table 1. Number and percentages of major ethnic groups by age categories in the Los Angeles REI WIC study population

Age group (years)	Latina		African American		White	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
10-14 .....	4	0.44	0	0.00	0	0.00
15-19 .....	174	19.18	48	20.87	1	3.13
20-24 .....	309	34.07	62	26.96	11	34.38
25-29 .....	227	25.03	75	32.61	12	37.50
30-34 .....	135	14.88	25	10.87	7	21.88
35 and older ...	58	6.39	20	8.70	1	3.13
Totals <sup>1</sup> ...	907	100.00	230	100.00	32	100.00

<sup>1</sup> Totals exclude missing responses for ethnicity or age.

NOTE: Women of Asian ethnicity are not shown in the table but are included in all totals and statistical calculations.

views. After 1 week of training, they pilot-tested the questionnaire for 3 weeks. Based on their experiences, the interview format was revised and simplified so that the final version took approximately 6 minutes per respondent. It consisted of 22 questions and was administered in both English and Spanish.

Throughout August 1992, women waiting for services at the five sites were approached by the interviewers. Only 8 percent of those approached declined to participate, and the final convenience sample consisted of 1,189 women. The two sites where we did not conduct interviews serve higher proportions of Latinas than the five sites where the survey was administered. Thus our sample contains a slightly higher proportion of African Americans than the total REI WIC population.

Frequencies, cross-tabulations, and chi-square analyses were performed using SurveyMate (A) software, while Student *t*-tests and analysis of variance were performed using SPSS/PC+ (B) software.

## Results

### Demographic characteristics of the REI WIC survey sample.

**Ethnicity.** Among the 1,189 respondents, 909 (76.5 percent) were Latina (including 3 respondents who stated that they were both African American and Latina), 232 (19.5 percent) of the respondents were African American, 32 (2.7 percent) were white, and 3 (.3 percent) were Asian. Overall, 674 (56.7 percent) of the women preferred to answer the survey in Spanish.

**Age.** The average age of the women was 25 and did not differ significantly (at the  $P = .05$  level)

among the sites or ethnic groups. Among all respondents, 4 (.3 percent) were between the ages of 10 and 14, and 225 (19.0 percent) were between the ages of 15 and 19 (table 1). Among the 368 pregnant women, 99 (26.9 percent) were adolescents (ages 10 to 19), and among the 811 postpartum women, 129 (15.9 percent) were adolescents. In addition, the percentages of Latinas (19.6 percent) and African Americans (20.9 percent) who were pregnant or parenting adolescents was significantly ( $P < .05$ ) higher than for whites (3.1 percent).

**Educational attainment.** Eleven of the women never went to school. The mean number of school years completed was less than 9, and Latinas had completed significantly ( $P < .05$ ) less school (8.2 years) than whites (10.8 years) or African Americans (11.4 years). Among those who attended school, 159 (13.6 percent) dropped out in elementary school, 284 (24.1 percent) in middle school, and 414 (35.4 percent) in high school. In total, 861 (73.7 percent) never completed high school (table 2).

The data show that Latinas were at higher risk for dropping out of school at younger ages than were African Americans or whites. Whereas, 56.9 percent of African Americans and 40.6 percent of whites had completed high school, only 17.8 percent of Latinas had done so. In addition, 611 (52.7 percent) of the respondents received all of their education outside of the United States. Of these, nearly all (602, 98.5 percent) were Latina.

**Marital status.** An analysis of marital status showed that 522 (44.4 percent) of the women were married, and 653 (55.6 percent) were single. Two hundred and fifty-five (39.1 percent) of the 653 single mothers were living with a partner, while the remaining 398 (60.9 percent) were living alone (divorced, separated, widowed, or never married). The proportions of Latinas (21.3 percent) and African Americans (39.2 percent) who reported that they had never been married and were living alone were significantly ( $P < .05$ ) higher than for whites (9.4 percent) (table 3).

**Children younger than age 5 not receiving WIC.** A total of 956 (81.2 percent) of the respondents had children who were younger than age 5. These respondents were asked whether all of their children younger than age 5 would be enrolled in WIC after the day of the interview, and 580 (60.7 percent) responded "Yes." The women who responded "No" (that is, not all their children would be enrolled after the day of the interview) were asked how many

children they had younger than age 5 who would not be enrolled and the exact ages of these children.

In total, there were 475 children younger than age 5 who were not enrolled in WIC but were apparently income-eligible. Most of them could have been receiving WIC services if the program had been fully funded because, according to the best estimates available—which probably undercount the number of people eligible for WIC (2)—approximately 75.2 percent of income-eligible children ultimately qualify for WIC (3).

This finding suggests that at least 357 of these children could have been receiving WIC services if the program had been fully funded. Twenty-seven (5.7 percent of the 475) were younger than age 18 months, and thus, at least 20 (75.2 percent of 27) should have been receiving WIC services under the then current priority system.

Of the 956 women with children younger than age 5, 77 (8.1 percent) reported that some of their children had never been on WIC because either they had not known about WIC at the time their older child or children had been eligible (25 respondents, 41.0 percent of answers), their older child or children had been in another country at the eligible age (12 respondents, 19.7 percent of answers), or they had not felt they needed WIC at the time their older child or children had been eligible (10 respondents, 16.4 percent of answers).

No respondent stated that she or her child had been denied WIC services after being appropriately referred and completing the application process.

*Enrollment versus return visits.* Whereas, 339 (28.8 percent) of the women surveyed were enrolling themselves and their children, 840 (71.2 percent) were returning for their standard visits on the day of the interview.

**Access to and availability of food sources during and after the unrest.** Participants who had been receiving WIC services before the unrest were asked detailed questions about their WIC vendors, about how long their usual stores had been closed, and whether they had had trouble using their food vouchers in the available stores. In addition, participants were asked whether they had needed emergency food assistance, had had trouble getting it, or were still having trouble getting it.

*Access to customary food vendor.* Among the 840 respondents who enrolled in WIC prior to the unrest, 444 (52.9 percent) said the grocery stores where they had been using their WIC vouchers closed at least

Table 2. Educational attainment, by ethnicity, for the Los Angeles REI WIC study sample, showing number and percentage of those who dropped out at elementary, middle, and high school levels

Level of drop out	Latina		African American		White	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Elementary (grades 1-6) ..	158	17.59	1	.43	0	0.00
Middle school (grades 7-9) ..	274	30.51	10	4.31	0	0.00
High school (grades 10-12) .....	306	34.08	89	38.36	19	59.38
High school graduate .....	160	17.82	132	56.90	13	40.62
Totals <sup>1</sup> ..	898	100.00	232	100.00	32	100.00

<sup>1</sup> Totals exclude missing responses for ethnicity or highest grade completed in school.

NOTE: Women of Asian ethnicity are not shown in the table but are included in all totals and statistical calculations.

Table 3. Marital status, by ethnicity, for the Los Angeles REI WIC study population, showing number and percentage of women in each category

Marital status	Latina		African American		White	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Married .....	451	49.67	52	22.42	18	56.25
Divorced .....	5	.55	7	3.02	0	0.00
Separated .....	69	7.60	20	8.62	3	9.38
Widowed .....	4	.44	1	.43	0	0.00
Living with somebody .....	186	20.48	61	26.29	8	25.00
Never married, living alone .....	193	21.26	91	39.22	3	9.38
Totals <sup>1</sup> ..	908	100.00	232	100.00	32	100.00

<sup>1</sup> Totals exclude missing responses for ethnicity or marital status.

NOTE: Women of Asian ethnicity are not shown in the table but are included in all statistical calculations.

temporarily because of the unrest. Of these respondents, 80 (18.0 percent) said their stores were still not open. By the time of the interview, among stores that reopened, the mean number of days they had been closed was 8.7.

*Use of WIC vouchers.* Of the 444 women whose stores closed, 220 (48.3 percent) had heard about the emergency rules allowing WIC clients in Los Angeles to use their vouchers at any participating WIC vendor, and 109 (24.9 percent) tried using their vouchers in other stores.

Asked whether they had had any trouble using WIC vouchers in their usual or alternative store, only eight (1.0 percent) said they had. Furthermore, only

*'The unrest resulted not only in the loss of a WIC site but also in the destruction or temporary closure of many food stores patronized by WIC participants.'*

4.3 percent of the women who had vouchers for April or May reported that they had not used all the vouchers they had wanted to for those months.

**Access to food services.** Overall, 409 (34.6 percent) of the respondents said they needed or had needed food because of the unrest, and the percentage was significantly ( $P < .05$ ) higher for whites (78.1 percent) and African Americans (51.7 percent) than for Latinas (28.9 percent). Among these respondents, 373 (91.2 percent) said they had had some sort of trouble getting food, and by the time of the interview, 34 (8.3 percent) said they were still having trouble getting it.

**Access to extra food stamps.** Immediately after the unrest, the County of Los Angeles asked USDA for permission to issue emergency food stamps. In response, USDA officials said they had assessed the situation and concluded that release of emergency funds for additional food stamps was not warranted.

Because of USDA's decision, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, and the Western Center on Law and Poverty jointly filed a lawsuit to compel USDA to provide emergency short-term food relief for low-income people affected by the unrest, including those who would not normally have qualified for food stamps. The law suit, *Delaney v. Madigan*, was filed on May 18, 1992. By June 5, a settlement was approved, and USDA began implementing distribution procedures for emergency food stamps (4).

Combining the responses of all participants—both those who were and were not receiving food stamps prior to the unrest—a total of 107 (9.0 percent) said they had applied for the Delaney emergency food stamps. Of these, 35 (32.7 percent) reported having difficulty getting the emergency food stamps, and 22 (20.6 percent) reported never having received them.

**Hunger in the community during and after the unrest.** To measure hunger, researchers commonly ask whether less food has been available in the household or anyone has gone to bed hungry in the

last week (5–8). Overall, 117 women (12.2 percent of those with children younger than age 5) stated that their children had eaten less than they should have during the last week because there had not been enough food in the household. Thirty-five (3.6 percent) said their children had gone to bed hungry during the last week because there had not been enough food in the household, and according to 13 (1.4 percent) of these women, this happened more often after the unrest.

Furthermore, the percentage of respondents who said that their children had eaten too little in the last week was significantly higher ( $P < .05$ ) for Latinas (13.2 percent) than for African Americans (8.3 percent) or whites (4.0 percent). Similarly, the percentage who said that their children had gone to bed hungry in the last week was significantly higher ( $P < .05$ ) for Latinas (4.2 percent) than for African Americans (1.1 percent) or whites (0.0 percent).

In total, 184 (15.7 percent) of the women said that they had eaten less than they should have during the last week because there had not been enough food in the household. This was true for 55 (14.9 percent) of the 368 pregnant women. Among all respondents, 103 (8.7 percent) had gone to bed hungry during the last week, and this happened more often after the unrest to 52 (4.4 percent) of them. Among pregnant women, 27 (7.3 percent) said they had gone to bed hungry during the last week, and this happened more often after the unrest to 10 (2.7 percent) of them.

Neither eating less nor going to bed hungry was related to the type of WIC appointment (first or return visit). In other words, previous WIC participation and possession of WIC food vouchers did not reduce the participants' likelihood of experiencing hunger.

**Measures of individual and community suffering as a result of the unrest.** In addition to hunger, many other factors reflect the degree of suffering in a community, and we felt it important to examine those that might prevent clients from using WIC or might otherwise increase the degree of difficulty in their lives. Thus, there were survey questions about homelessness, the need for emergency shelter, clothing, household items, loans, whether anyone in the family had lost a job because of the unrest, whether they had found a new job, and whether anyone in the family had been hurt physically during the unrest.

**Homelessness and the need for emergency shelter.** Overall, only 24 (2.0 percent) of the respondents said they needed or had needed shelter because of the un-

rest, but the percentage was marginally higher ( $P = .052$ ) for African Americans (3.9 percent) than for whites (0.0 percent) or Latinas (1.5 percent). Of the 24 who had needed shelter, 14 (58.0 percent) had had trouble getting it, and by the time of the interview, 8 (33.3 percent) were still having trouble getting shelter. Fourteen (1.2 percent) of the participants had actually become homeless because of the unrest.

*Unemployment, lost money, and injury.* Seventy-four (6.2 percent) of the participants said that they or some other family member had lost their job because of the unrest. The percentage was significantly higher ( $P < .05$ ) for Latinas (7.3 percent) than for whites (0.0 percent) or African Americans (3.5 percent). These respondents mentioned losing positions in the food services sector (18.0 percent), factory work (15.0 percent), and the clothing industry (13.7 percent).

By the time of this survey, of the 74 people who lost jobs, 49 (65.3 percent) had not found new jobs. Of the 25 people who found new jobs, 10 (45.5 percent) were earning less money, 10 (45.5 percent) were earning the same amount, and 2 (9.0 percent) were earning more than they did prior to the unrest.

Three hundred and nine (27.7 percent) of the women stated that their families had lost money during the unrest because of unearned wages or damaged property, while 49 (4.2 percent) said that a family member had been hurt physically. Two said that their husbands had been killed during the unrest.

## Discussion and Implications

Interviewing WIC participants after the civil unrest highlighted the potential for working with this population in future studies of maternal and child health but, more importantly, it helped define the issues facing the residents of south central Los Angeles.

**Limitations of the methodology.** Care should be taken in generalizing the results of this survey for several reasons. First, baseline data are not available for most variables because we did not collect this type of information prior to April 1992. Second, convenience sampling instead of random sampling was used to recruit respondents. Third, there are no data on WIC participants who did not respond either because they were not approached, refused to participate, or missed their appointments at WIC.

In the last case, if many women who experienced hardship as a result of the April unrest missed their August WIC appointments, then our results would be

biased. Our sample would exclude women who suffered the most, which would lead us to underestimate the effects of the unrest.

We have several reasons, however, to believe these women were attending WIC in August. First, since the interviews were conducted between 3 to 4 months after the unrest, most families had had time to recover from the immediate effects. Second, families experiencing enduring hardships probably needed WIC vouchers more than ever. Third, the demographic profile of our sample looks similar to that of our clients prior to the unrest. Fourth, the number of missed appointments in August (1,404 at the five sites) was around what we would have expected in the absence of the unrest. (In 1992, the average monthly "no show" rate was 1,454 and ranged from 1,258 to 1,646.) Fifth, our voucher distribution rate in August (28,947 at the five sites) was also about what we would have expected had there been no unrest. (In 1992, the average monthly voucher distribution rate at the five sites was 29,488 and ranged from 26,273 to 33,923.)

**Vulnerable populations.** Our survey showed that a high proportion of our clients were recent immigrants, adolescent and single mothers, and school dropouts—all particularly vulnerable groups of people.

Given that the majority of participants received all of their schooling outside the United States (52.7 percent) and preferred to answer the survey in Spanish (56.7 percent), it is not unreasonable to estimate that at least half of the respondents were recent immigrants to the United States and hence are more likely to lack health insurance, work in low-paying jobs, and generally live in poverty. Furthermore, since nearly three-quarters of our respondents did not complete high school, they are likely to confront similar problems (9a).

In the United States in 1991, 12.9 percent of the live births were to women younger than age 19 (10), and in California in 1990, 11.6 percent of the live births were in this age group (11). Among our respondents, however, 26.9 percent of the pregnant women were adolescents. All together, 19.3 percent of our respondents were pregnant or parenting adolescents who are more likely to drop out of school, work in low-paying jobs, rely on AFDC, and raise their children in poverty than women who postpone childbearing (12).

In 1990, 24.7 percent of children in the United States were living in single parent families (13), whereas 55.6 percent of our respondents were single mothers. This is a further indication of the at-risk

*'... the most important information emerging from this study ... is ... that for WIC participants in south central Los Angeles, circumstances changed very little as a result of the unrest, a relatively low percentage needed additional relief services, and a majority found ways of supplying their families with the basic necessities by the time of the interview.'*

status of many families in south central Los Angeles, because children living in single parent households are more likely to be poor than children living in households with two parents (9b).

**Hunger and access to food services.** Of the 475 unenrolled children younger than age 5, at least 20 who were younger than 18 months should have been participating in WIC under the then current priority system. If WIC had been fully funded, however, then presumably approximately 357 (75.2 percent) could have been receiving food benefits. In addition, more outreach would have been targeted towards women like the respondents who said they had not known about WIC at the time their older children had presumably been eligible but had not participated.

More than half of the respondents reported that their grocery stores were closed for at least some period due to the unrest, yet only 1.0 percent expressed any problem in using their WIC vouchers following the unrest. Although there is no way to know based on this study, we believe that so few people had problems using their WIC vouchers because (a) the State WIC branch allowed WIC recipients to use their vouchers at any participating food vendor's store and (b) local WIC agencies took the necessary measures for implementing the temporary policy.

The timely provision of space by LACDHS also was a critical step in helping REI WIC get vouchers distributed during and after the crisis.

Women and children enrolling in and returning to WIC after the unrest were equally likely to have experienced hunger during and after the unrest. Clearly WIC food, alone, was not enough to prevent hunger. This reflects the facts that (a) WIC is not an anti-hunger program but a supplemental food program, and (b) additional emergency food assistance

programs are needed in south central Los Angeles.

Although more than a third of the women said they needed or had needed food, the Food Stamp Program only partly met the demand. As mentioned earlier, according to our respondents, almost a third of those who applied for the special emergency food stamps had trouble getting them, and approximately one-fifth never got them. We do not know, however, exactly how many of these people truly qualified.

Given that 3.6 percent of the women with children younger than age 5 reported that one or more of their children had gone to bed hungry in the last week, a significant number of children may have been at dietary risk during August 1992. Furthermore, since only 1.4 percent indicated that this was more likely to happen after the unrest than before suggests that many children may have been at dietary risk before the unrest. Although we do not know how many times per week children went to bed hungry, the results give us reason for concern.

Since 8.7 percent of the respondents (7.3 percent of pregnant women) reported that they had gone to bed hungry in the last week, a significant number of women and fetuses may have been at dietary risk during August 1992. In addition, given that only 4.4 percent indicated that this was more likely to happen after the unrest than before suggests that many women and fetuses may have been at dietary risk before the unrest. Again, although we do not know the frequency with which women went to bed hungry during the week, the results indicate reason for concern.

The survey showed that Latinas were significantly more likely than African Americans or whites to report that their children had gone to bed hungry during the last week, and they (the respondents) had eaten too little during the last week. Consequently, one might expect that Latinos would have been more likely to report that they needed or had needed food because of the unrest, but the opposite was true. Both whites and African Americans were more likely than Latinas to say that they needed or had needed food.

There are many possible explanations for these findings. On the one hand, the responses may indicate that Latino families were experiencing chronic hunger before and after the unrest, while African American and white families were experiencing acute food shortages during and after the unrest. This may be due, in part, to the fact that undocumented persons do not qualify for food stamps. Thus more African Americans and whites than Latinos in equivalent income groups may generally have better access to food.

On the other hand, the results may be reflecting

different coping mechanisms and social support networks within the different communities. For example, it is possible that the African American and white communities have highly effective ways of coping with hunger on an ongoing basis but have little experience in dealing with hunger resulting from an intensified crisis. Or perhaps the Latino community has particularly effective ways of coping with emergencies and short periods of decreased food access.

**Homelessness and unemployment.** Despite the extensive property damage, only 2 percent of the respondents' families had needed shelter due to the unrest. Nearly one-third had lost money because they could not go to work. Together these responses support the observation that businesses rather than residences were the primary targets of arson.

Even though unemployment rates chronically underrepresent the number of people without jobs who would like to be working (14), they provide a baseline of comparison for the unemployment resulting from the unrest. For example, given that incremental changes are closely monitored and a rate of 10.4 percent—Los Angeles in September 1992 (15)—is considered high, the overall 6.2 percent loss of jobs due to the unrest may fairly be called an emergency for the communities of south central Los Angeles.

Although the suffering was tangible throughout all of REI WIC's catchment area, as the results show, Latinas were significantly more likely than African Americans or whites to report that a family member had lost his or her job due to the unrest. This is probably because the types of jobs lost were in industries known to employ large numbers of Latinos—the food services sector, factory work, and the clothing industry.

The results also showed that African Americans were more likely than whites or Latinos to report that their families needed or had needed shelter because of the unrest. The reasons for this remain unclear.

**Recommendations.** The results of our survey suggest the need for significant social change in south central Los Angeles. The following recommendations would be of particular help to the vulnerable populations discussed earlier:

- More adult education, English-as-a-second language, and job training opportunities should be available.
- Programs such as WIC should be more adequately funded to serve all eligible postpartum women and children.

- Programs designed to help young mothers stay in school should be widely available.
- Printed material provided by health and social service agencies should be in English and Spanish and written at less than the sixth grade reading level.
- Additional food assistance programs should be widely available as a necessary complement to public food programs.

We also believe that a followup study, using a more generalizable design, should be conducted to assess more accurately the prevalence of hunger among pregnant women and young children in south central Los Angeles.

**Two interpretations.** As noted previously, this survey was designed to assess whether the unrest severely affected the lives of women and children in south central Los Angeles, and if so, in what ways. To our surprise, the most important information emerging from this study goes beyond the original purpose. That is, it seems to show that for WIC participants in south central Los Angeles, circumstances changed very little as a result of the unrest, a relatively low percentage needed *additional* relief services, and a majority found ways of supplying their families with the basic necessities by the time of the interview.

Two interpretations of these observations seem most plausible. On the one hand, it could be that only a relatively low percentage of families needed emergency relief services because the people of south central Los Angeles worked together and coped with the crisis extremely resourcefully. On the other hand, it could be that the problems in south central Los Angeles were so pervasive and serious prior to the unrest that the additional difficulties did not substantially change the lives of many families.

Perhaps both phenomena occurred. In any case, we must be careful in drawing conclusions, given the limitations of the methodology. Nevertheless, the results expose what appear to be extremely substandard living conditions for families in the inner city.

## Conclusion

In summary, this survey showed that a disproportionate number of south central Los Angeles WIC participants were recent immigrants, adolescent, single mothers, and school dropouts. It also showed that among WIC participants surveyed, 8.7 percent of the women and 3.6 percent of the children younger than age 5 went to bed hungry during the month of August 1992. However, the fact that this happened



almost as often before the unrest as after implies that the families were surviving in chronically substandard conditions all along.

In contrast, a much larger number of respondents (34.6 percent) said that their families had needed food because of the unrest, which may imply that they faced more acute difficulties in accessing food during and immediately after the crisis than they normally do. In addition, because of the unrest, 6.2 percent of the people surveyed had a family member who had lost his or her job, and 27.7 percent had a family member who had lost wages or property. In contrast, only 1.2 percent lost their homes as a result of the unrest.

Although it appears that within our service area Latinos lost more jobs, and African Americans and whites may have needed more emergency food supplies, overall, no one ethnic group in the area suffered much more than any other.

Participants also appeared to have a significant number of children younger than age 5 who could presumably have participated in WIC if the program had been fully funded. And finally, it seems the State and local WIC programs responded well to the civil unrest, helping to maintain food voucher distribution and access to available food vendors by taking several key, temporary measures.

To a large degree, the chronic poverty in the inner city fueled the civil unrest in Los Angeles. Thus the effort to rebuild the city requires recognition that many of the factors identified with WIC families, such as low educational attainment and adolescent motherhood, tend to be interrelated. To improve conditions in the inner city, these factors must be addressed in a coordinated, comprehensive manner.

While policy makers at the national, State, and local levels grapple with the challenges of urban areas, social service agencies and health providers like the WIC Program must continue to address significant problems by using available resources and much ingenuity.

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## Equipment

- A. SurveyMate. Henry Elkins and Associates, Inc., 15 Willow Circle, Bronxville, NY 10708.
- B. SPSS/PC+. SPSS Inc., 444 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611.