**Title: Food Insecurity Rates Among WIC Participants During COVID-19**

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**Abstract**

**Background**: The WIC program serves low-income, pregnant and breastfeeding women and children under 5. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased food insecurity and reduced access to healthy foods essential during critical periods of growth and development, thereby increasing health disparities. The objective of this study is to determine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food insecurity and food access in an online/virtual nutrition education program conducted in partnership with the WIC Program in Ventura County, CA.

**Methods**: Mixed methods were used in a pilot study with adult English- and Spanish-speaking WIC clients (n=358) utilizing the Family Kitchen online cooking education program to meet their WIC nutrition education requirements. Surveys were self-administered before and after watching an online cooking education video. Descriptive statistics and bivariate relationships including Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine the association between demographic variables (e.g,. age, education, race/ethnicity, income, and language spoken at home) with rates of food insecurity measured using the USDA six-item short-form food security (FS) scale and a question about the impact of COVID-19 on food access. Responses regarding food access were coded for themes and subthemes using thematic analysis.

**Results:**

A total of 47.5% of study participants were food insecure (35.5% low FS, 12.1% very low FS) and 36.1% reported difficulty with food access. Older study participants (30+ years) were more food insecure than younger participants (18-29 y) - 51.7% versus 38.8% (p=.05).  Spanish-speakers experienced greater difficulty accessing food during the pandemic than English-speakers - 44.1% versus 31.4% (p=0.02).  Major themes identified for these difficulties included fear of leaving the house, lack of food available at local stores, loss of employment, and increased childcare responsibilities.

**Conclusions**:

Low-income, Spanish-speakers are particularly at-risk for higher rates of food insecurity and more difficulty accessing food, due in part to minimal resources and fragile work-life relationships.  Increasing cooking skills among WIC parents may support better outcomes and merits further research.