1-2020

Characteristics of a Food Insecure Population in North Philadelphia

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Introduction: A 2018 report by Hunger Free America showed that food insecurity increased in Philadelphia by 22%, even though it decreased nationally. The objectives of this study were to perform food insecurity screens, and to describe the demographic characteristics in terms of age, gender, primary language, body mass index (BMI), and zip code. We hypothesized that older, overweight, Hispanic females would be more likely to be food insecure.

Methods: After obtaining consent, the validated Hunger Vital Sign screening tool was used in the Summer of 2019 in North Philadelphia by teams of trained students in the Summer Medical Institute program. The tool consisted of two questions, with a possible response of never, sometimes, or often. The data, which excluded children, was de-identified, and summary statistics, two-tailed t-tests and chi-squares were performed.

Results: Out of the 379 people screened for food insecurity, 140 were positive (37%). Of those, 69 were male and 71 were female. 82 primarily spoke English, 55 Spanish. The following zip codes, in order from greatest to least, were most food insecure: 19134, 19140, and 19133. It was found that a lower age, English as primary language, and a lower BMI was statistically significant, but gender was not.

Conclusion: The data demonstrated that food insecurity in North Philadelphia was 37%, much higher than reported in greater Philadelphia and nationwide. We speculate that our hypothesis was not upheld because our population was young, predominantly Spanish-speaking, and received additional resources for women. Therefore, programs to combat food insecurity should target young, English-speaking individuals.