



# Energy Insecurity

When basic energy needs are **out of reach** for families.



## The 3 Parts of Energy Insecurity<sup>4</sup>



**Bills Beyond Reach.** Families struggling to pay high energy bills are also faced with rising housing costs, forcing them to make difficult tradeoffs between utilities and rent, food, and healthcare.



**Poor Quality Housing.** Due to the **persistent legacy of discriminatory housing policies**, low-income families of color are more likely to live in substandard housing with faulty heating or cooling and poor insulation that is unhealthy and unsafe and demands higher utility bills.



**Desperation.** Families are forced to tolerate unsafe temperatures or alternative heating or lighting, like stoves or candles to live without lights, heat or cooling.

Energy bills are a major concern for California families just like **housing** and **food**. Even with utility discount programs, our elders, low-income families, and people of color are left behind.



**3.9 million low-income households** in California—over two-thirds—spend more than 30% of their income on housing.<sup>1</sup>



**4.1 million low-income adults** in California—about 2 out of 5—are unable to afford enough food.<sup>2</sup>



**3.3 million low-income households** in California—about 2 out of 3—are energy insecure.<sup>3</sup>



Energy insecurity threatens the **health** and **safety** of low-income families, especially **children** and people who are **medically vulnerable**.



### Respiratory Illness

An especially cold, hot or humid house as well as related mold can cause or trigger respiratory illnesses like asthma or bronchitis.<sup>5</sup>



### Hunger

People consume fewer calories and lose weight during cold months when forced to choose between spending money on energy over food, known as the “heat or eat” dilemma.<sup>9</sup>



### Early Childhood Health and Development

Children in energy insecure homes are more likely to be in poorer health, to have been hospitalized, and to be at risk for developmental delays.<sup>6</sup>



### Stress



Families who worry more often about their home energy bills have higher levels of stress, which can increase the risk of illness, and physical and emotional exhaustion.<sup>10</sup>



### Heat and Fire Risks

Poor households and the elderly are more likely to “sweat it out,” risking heat-related illness like heat stroke during extreme heat. These individuals often find it difficult to access community cooling stations.<sup>7</sup> Also, candles, space heaters, and extension cords used to compensate for heat or light have resulted in documented fire-related injuries and death.<sup>8</sup>



### Life-Support & Chronic Illness

A shutoff can threaten lives of people on life-support equipment like oxygen, dialysis machines, asthma nebulizers or electric wheelchairs. Others are left unable to refrigerate medications like insulin.

Energy insecurity creates other problems – **children unable to do homework** without the lights, parents **without phone access** if unable to charge a cellphone or families forced to **forego basic needs** like childcare in order to keep the lights on.



In a state where housing costs are already high, energy insecurity **makes it even harder to find and keep housing.**



### Displacement

Forced to choose between paying the rent or mortgage or paying a utility bill, families are put at risk of displacement through an **eviction** or **foreclosure**. Utility debt can even trigger a tax lien to be placed on the home, which can lead to a foreclosure. For families using Section 8 vouchers or living in other subsidized housing, a utility shutoff can mean an **eviction** and a **loss of affordable housing benefits permanently**.



### Homelessness

For families who are **homeless**, unpaid debt can stand in the way of leaving the shelter or the street and moving into stable housing.



### Housing Quality & Safety

Unable to establish utility service elsewhere, utility debt can effectively **trap families who want to leave poor quality or unsafe housing**. Renters with physical housing issues may be hesitant to raise these concerns to their landlord for fear of an eviction or other retaliation. Additionally, renters often lack the authority to make **energy efficiency upgrades** to their homes, which could lower their monthly utility bill.

There is no stable housing without utilities . . .

and no utilities without stable housing.

Although illegal, it's not uncommon for landlords to take advantage of tenants by **coercing tenants into paying outstanding bills of previous tenants**, using **tenant electricity for personal or shared spaces**, or **circumventing rent stabilization through inflated utility fees**.



## What's at stake?

- + Utility bills are too high.
- + Shutoffs are happening too often.
- + Energy insecurity disproportionately burdens our elders, low-income families, people of color, children and people with medical vulnerabilities.



*And it's jeopardizing the health, safety, housing, and stability of millions of California families!*

## How can we address the problem?

### Affordability

The cost of utilities must be affordable. We need reasonable utility rates, discount programs, payment plans, arrearage management and collections practices that are equitable, humane and effective.

### Protections

It is essential that we protect certain households from ever facing a utility shutoff, including our elders, people with serious medical vulnerability and young children.

### Efficiency & Renewables

We need energy efficiency programs, renewable energy, and related jobs with an explicit focus on communities of color who have long shouldered the inequitable burden of energy injustice. These policies must not encourage housing displacement.

And, all our efforts must uphold the values of affordability, accessibility, health, climate justice, and economic equity.

## What can you do?

### Spread the Word

To raise awareness, [coordinate a training for your staff](#), testify at a California Public Utilities Commission Public Participation Hearing or participate in a [TURN action](#).

### Advocate and Litigate

Legislative and regulatory advocacy as well as litigation are key strategies. To start, [contact your representative](#) to share why this issue matters to you.

### Measure It

By measuring and reporting data on energy insecurity, we make a statement that the issue is important and track our progress.

### Organize & Build Power

We need the knowledge, people power, and leadership of the communities most impacted by these issues. The first step is to [become a member of TURN](#) and an [organizational partner of the Utility Justice Coalition!](#)

### Research It

Energy insecurity is significantly understudied, and research on prevalence, consequences and effectiveness of programs and policies is critical.

#### Sources

<sup>1</sup> 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, table B25106 Low-income households included are those earning between \$0 - \$49,999 a year.

<sup>2</sup> 2014 California Health Interview Survey. Low-income is defined as below 200 percent of the federal poverty line.

<sup>3</sup> Economics, Evergreen. "Needs Assessment for the Energy Savings Assistance and the California Alternate Rates for Energy Programs." prepared for the California Public Utilities Commission, December 16 (2013). The percentage of low-income customers who are energy insecure was determined from this report; Low-income is defined as below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. The total number of customers was calculated by applying this percentage to the total number of CARE customers across the four investor-owned utilities in 2016. Because CARE does not have a 100 percent penetration rate with eligible customers, this total number of energy insecure customers is likely a conservative estimate.

<sup>4</sup> Hernández, Diana. "Understanding 'energy insecurity' and why it matters to health." *Social Science & Medicine* 167 (2016): 1-10.

<sup>5</sup> Hernández, Diana. "Energy Insecurity: A Framework for Understanding Energy, the Built Environment, and Health Among Vulnerable Populations in the Context of Climate Change." *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 4 (February 14, 2013): e32-34. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2012.301179.

<sup>6</sup> Cook, John T., et al. "A Brief Indicator of Household Energy Security: Associations with Food Security, Child Health, and Child Development in US Infants and Toddlers." *Pediatrics* 122, no. 4 (October 2008): e867-875. doi:10.1542/peds.2008-0286; Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (C-SNAP). "Balancing Acts: Energy Insecurity among Low-Income Babies and Toddlers of Color Increases Food Insecurity and Harmful Health Effects," March 2007. [http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/SEDC\\_energy\\_report\\_2007.pdf](http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/SEDC_energy_report_2007.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Hernández, Diana. "Energy Insecurity: A Framework for Understanding Energy, the Built Environment, and Health Among Vulnerable Populations in the Context of Climate Change." *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 4 (February 14, 2013): e32-34. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2012.301179.

<sup>8</sup> Ahrens, Marty. "Home Fires Involving Cooking Equipment." National Fire Protection Association, November 2016. <http://www.nfpa.org/news-and-research/fire-statistics-and-reports/fire-statistics/fire-causes/appliances-and-equipment/cooking-equipment>.

<sup>9</sup> Bhattacharya, Jayanta, et al. "Heat or Eat? Cold-Weather Shocks and Nutrition in Poor American Families." *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 7 (July 1, 2003): 1149-54. doi:10.2105/AJPH.93.7.1149; Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (C-SNAP). "Balancing Acts: Energy Insecurity among Low-Income Babies and Toddlers of Color Increases Food Insecurity and Harmful Health Effects," March 2007. [http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/SEDC\\_energy\\_report\\_2007.pdf](http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/SEDC_energy_report_2007.pdf); Nord, et al. "Seasonal variation in food insecurity is associated with heating and cooling costs among low-income elderly Americans." *The Journal of nutrition* 136, no. 11 (2006): 2939-2944.

<sup>10</sup> Hernández, Diana. "Exploring the Housing and Household Energy Pathways to Stress: A Mixed Methods Study." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 13, no. 9 (September 14, 2016): 916. doi:10.3390/ijerph13090916.