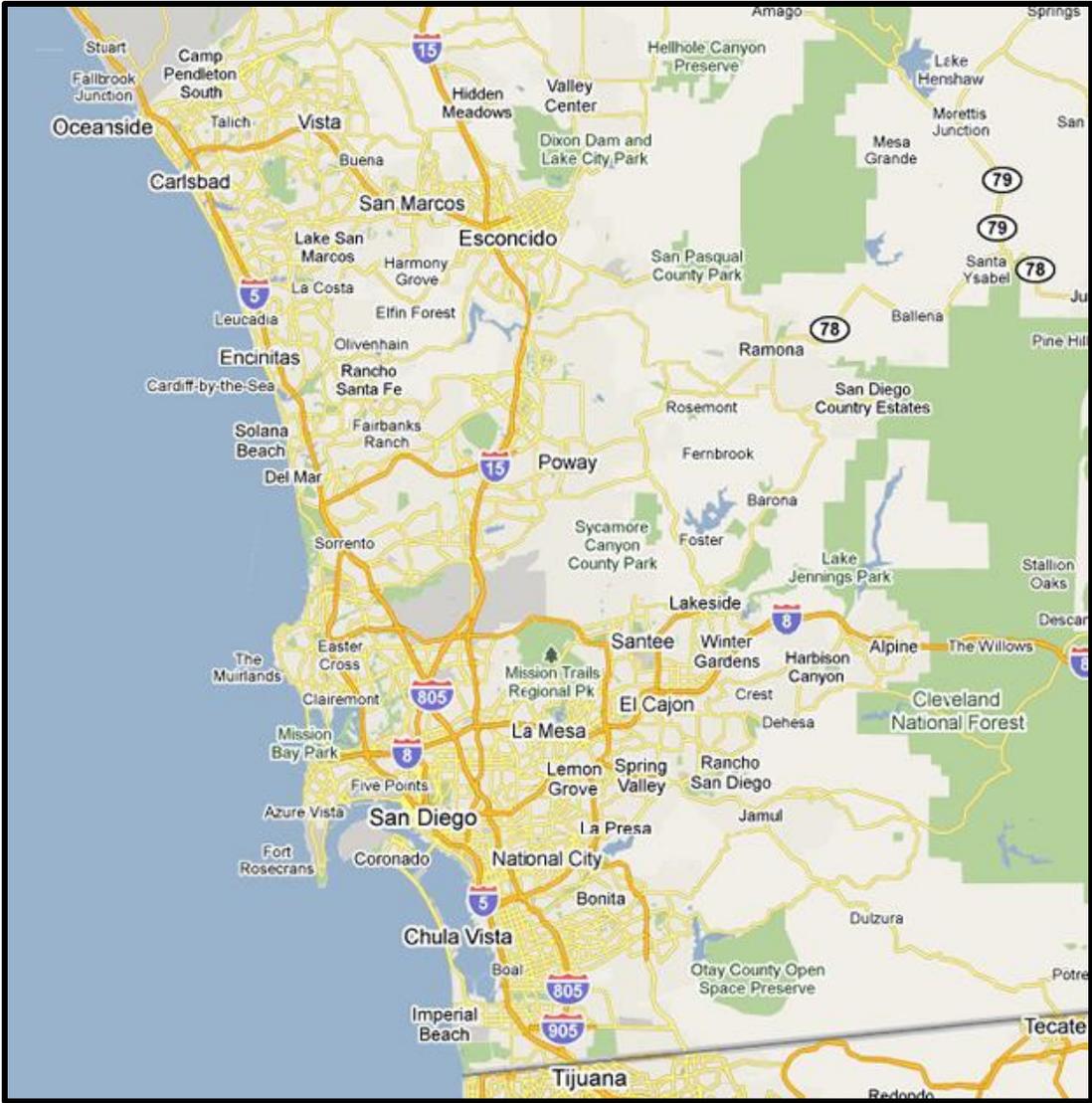


CalFresh: The Most Vital Anti-Hunger Intervention in San Diego County



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Please note that the views expressed in this report are of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the San Diego Hunger Coalition or the Congressional Hunger Center.



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Executive Summary

San Diego County, California is known for its year-round warm weather and lengthy stretches of beaches, parks, and palm-tree-lined streets. While San Diego County is a vacation paradise for many, 1 in 6 San Diego County residents do not have enough food for an active, healthy life.¹ Food insecurity is a serious problem in San Diego County that disproportionately affects women, people of color, single-parent households, and people living with disabilities.²

Food insecurity in San Diego County is not the result of poor choices made by individuals, but a result of the complex relationship between the ability to acquire and maintain a living wage job, the cost of food, time, and transportation, food assistance policies, and enduring historical inequalities. In a county like San Diego, with a staggeringly high cost of living and limited availability of affordable housing and living wage jobs, residents often forgo food to pay for other basic expenses.

CalFresh – federally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP or, formerly, food stamps) – is the largest and most effective anti-hunger intervention in San Diego County. Nationally, there is a growing body of research that indicates that SNAP is a highly effective safety net that benefits the economy while producing a negligible amount of fraud.

CalFresh is a vital anti-hunger intervention throughout California. Between 2009 and 2012, CalFresh kept 2,418,000 Californians out of poverty, including 1,251,000 children.³ CalFresh has provided tremendous economic benefits, as well, contributing about \$7.2 billion to California's economy in 2016.⁴ However, there is room for this highly effective, efficient program to reach more eligible individuals. In San Diego County, far too many individuals who are eligible are not receiving CalFresh because of complex guidelines, excessive paperwork, or lack of awareness.

One of the most powerful ways an individual can break the cycle of poverty and contribute to society is through obtaining a college degree. However, facing the rising costs of education, college students are experiencing food insecurity at alarming rates. In 2016, 48% of college students experienced food insecurity in the previous 30 days.⁵ For these students, CalFresh is essential in ensuring that they can focus on their studies and achieve academic success. Ending food insecurity in San Diego County, for college students and for all those who are food insecure, requires increased investment in the largest and most effective anti-hunger intervention in the county: CalFresh.

Introduction

Overview of San Diego County

San Diego County, a 4,546 square mile county encompassing the City of San Diego, sits at the base of Southern California, adjacent to Mexico. According to the 2016 American Community Survey estimates, San Diego County's population was 3,317,749, making it the 5th largest county in the nation.⁶

This Pacific Coastal county boasts lengthy stretches of beaches, parks, and palm-tree-lined streets. Its year-round warm weather brings a steady stream of tourists and a competitive real estate market. At the same time, San Diego County is home to a relatively large population of immigrants and refugees, homeless, and veterans.

Immigrants, Refugees, and Native Americans

The population of San Diego County is relatively diverse: 46.7% White, 33.1% Hispanic, and 11.3% Asian.⁷ The county is the largest refugee hub in the nation, and continues to be despite recent federal changes to reduce the number of refugee arrivals.⁸ A majority of refugees in recent years have been from Iraq and Iran.⁹

The county is also home to a large population of immigrants. According to the most recent U.S. Census data, approximately 698,000 immigrants currently live in San Diego County, comprising 23% of the total population.¹⁰ San Diego County's immigrant population is largely comprised of immigrants from Mexico, with immigrants from the Philippines being the second largest group.¹¹

While only 1 in 16 children is an immigrant, 44% have at least one immigrant parent and 26% of households are headed by an immigrant.¹² San Diego County's Native American population is relatively small – only 1.3% – but the county is home to 18 Native American reservations, more than any other county in the United States.¹³

Homeless

Due, in part, to the county's high cost of living and lack of affordable housing, San Diego County experiences a high rate of homelessness. As of January 2017, 9,116 people were counted as homeless in the county, the 3rd largest population of homelessness in the nation.¹⁴ Since 2016, the number of unsheltered individuals has increased and the number of sheltered individuals has decreased.¹⁵

Veterans

San Diego County is home to 16 naval and military installations of the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Marine Corps, and the U.S. Coast Guard. This contributes to a sizable population of veterans in the

county: San Diego County has nearly 236,000 veterans, the third-highest raw number of veterans of any county in the country.

Food Insecurity in San Diego County

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.¹⁶ A person who is food insecure may need to use emergency food supplies, eat less than sufficient to survive, or buy expensive foods that are not sufficient in order to maintain an active, healthy life.

Hunger refers to the personal, physical sensation of discomfort that arises from food insecurity.¹⁷ Since a majority of existing research uses measurements of food insecurity and not hunger, this paper will primarily use the term food insecurity, with the understanding that food insecurity and hunger are equally concerning and interrelated.

The latest estimates^A provided by the San Diego Hunger Coalition indicate that 504,829 people in San Diego County are food insecure.¹⁸ This represents 343,972 adults and 160,857 children living below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level who do not always have enough food for an active, healthy life.¹⁹

San Diego County Food Insecure Population

- 1 in 6 people (16.0%) are food insecure.
- 1 in 7 adults (14.2%) are food insecure.
- More than 1 in 5 children (22.0%) are food insecure.

San Diego County Food Insecure Rates

- 42.4% of low-income adults (i.e. adults living below 200% of Federal Poverty Level) and nearly half (46.9%) of low-income children are living in a food insecure household.
- More than half (52.7%) of low-income food insecure adults are Latino. More than one quarter (26.3%) are White.
- Nearly 2 out of 3 (64.6%) low-income single parent households are food insecure.
- More than half (56.1%) of low-income food insecure adults have a job.
- 71% of low-income food insecure adults are U.S. citizens and 29% are non-citizens.^B

^A Estimates determined as of August 2017. These estimates are the most reliable and up-to-date information that exists on food insecurity in San Diego County. They are based on the San Diego Hunger Coalition's analysis of data from the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) administered by UCLA's Center for Health Policy Research.

^B "Non-citizen" includes all people without U.S. Citizenship, including Lawful Permanent Residents (green card holders), visa holders, and undocumented individuals.

San Diego County Food Insecure Demographics^{CD}

- 64.6% of low-income single parent households are food insecure.
- 59.1% of food insecure adults are women and 40.9% are men.
- 49.1% of food insecure adults are disabled.
- 71.0% of food insecure adults are U.S. citizens and 29.0% are non-citizens.
- 56.1% of food insecure adults are working.
 - 44.5% of food insecure adults are employed full-time (defined as 21+ hours/week).
 - 11.6% of food insecure adults are employed part-time (defined as <20 hours/week).
- 6.7% of food insecure adults are veterans.
 - Disproportionately lower incidence (11.0% of all adults are vets).
- 11.1% of food insecure adults are seniors.
 - Disproportionately lower incidence (14.5% of all adults are seniors).
- 52.7% of food insecure adults are Latino.
 - Disproportionately higher incidence (33.2% of all adults are Latino).
- 26.3% of food insecure adults are White.
 - Disproportionately lower incidence (47.2% of all adults are White).

Root Causes of Food Insecurity

It is important to contextualize San Diego County's food insecurity statistics within a broader understanding of the root causes of food insecurity. Often an inability to purchase food is attributed to a person's individual choices and decisions. Perhaps they didn't budget their money wisely that month. Perhaps they haven't put in the effort to find a higher-paying job. Perhaps they rely on government food assistance and already used all of their monthly benefits.

However, the reality of food insecurity in San Diego County – and across the nation – is far more complex than individual choice and isolated moments at the checkout line.

Living Wage Jobs

Unless a person sustains themselves entirely on food they grow themselves – something that has become increasingly rare in the United States – they need a source of income. Finding and securing a living wage job is not a simple feat. One needs training, education, work experience, and connections to gain employment.

^C Note: These statistics only represent households below 200% FPL, as CHIS currently does not ask food insecurity questions of households at 200% FPL or above.

^D Note: Sample size not large enough to analyze African American population or other races/ethnicities.

In San Diego County, a staggeringly high cost of living and high competition for a limited number of living wage jobs intensifies the challenge. If a San Diegan does not have a basic adult education and lacks work experience, it may take anywhere from three to five to as many as ten years to overcome this barrier. While a person pursues career training or education, they must survive with a limited income. When faced with costs related to career and education, food often becomes a “flexible expense.”

College students, who pursue higher education in an effort to attain living wage jobs post-graduation, are particularly affected by these challenges. In 2016, nearly 20% of University of California students reported experiencing very low food security.²⁰ Facing the rising costs of books, supplies, and tuition, college students may skip meals to pay for their education.

Cost of Food, Time, and Transportation

Food prices (and the relative prices of other necessary goods) impact whether people experience food insecurity. In San Diego County, the average cost of a meal is \$3.23, higher than the national average of \$2.94.²¹ Further, to shop for and cook food at home requires time, food literacy, and cooking skills. This means that more affordable (and less healthy) prepared food is often the only viable option.

Lastly, a person may struggle to make it to the checkout line at all. For residents who live in a “food desert,” the nearest grocery store may be far enough away to necessitate a car ride. The cost of owning, maintaining, and fueling a car can add up. In car-dependent San Diego County, the weight of these costs is particularly heavy.

Policies

Federal food assistance programs act as vital safety nets for those experiencing financial hardship. However, these programs are not always available to those who need them. The Federal Poverty Level – the metric that determines eligibility for these programs – is an outdated measure that only captures extreme deprivation.

For example, to be eligible to receive federal food assistance benefits,^E a person must have a household gross monthly income below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. The 2017 Federal Poverty Level threshold for a family of four is \$24,600, so 200% of that level is \$49,200. In San Diego County, however, a family of four may need as much as 300-365% of the Federal Poverty Level (or \$73,800 - \$89,790) to meet their most basic needs, especially if their children are not yet in school and require childcare.²²

^E CalFresh, California’s name for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Further, the structure of federal food assistance is such that as a person gradually rises in income level, attaining more skills and training, they experience sharp cuts in benefits. This “benefits cliff” traps people between ineligible for benefits but not making enough to make ends meet.

Lastly, many of those who are eligible for federal food assistance do not receive benefits because of complex eligibility guidelines, excessive paperwork, or lack of awareness. In a borderland like San Diego County, with a large population of immigrants, many who are eligible for benefits do not apply. There is often fear that applying to federal food assistance will affect their immigration status, hurt their chances of becoming a U.S. citizen, or result in deportation.²³ This barrier has particularly intensified in light of the Trump Administration’s rhetoric and restrictions on immigration.

Household and Individual Characteristics

Many factors outside of individual choice affect whether a person has enough food for an active, healthy life. A person’s mental and physical health status may serve as a barrier to food access. This often includes veterans, the elderly, and those living with disabilities, among others. For example, in San Diego County, 49.1% of food insecure adults are disabled.²⁴ Whether a person has a partner or spouse to supplement income can influence their ability to access food. For example, in San Diego County, 64.6% of low-income single parent households are food insecure.²⁵

Persistent Historical Inequality

Perhaps the most enduring root cause of food insecurity in the United States is racial, ethnic, and class-based inequities that span generations. Inequity has been deeply entrenched in policies and practices, both formal and informal, throughout our history. Historical inequity has created a divide in the accumulation of wealth (via assets – such as savings, home, or business equity) that historically advantages some populations, while disadvantaging others. Low-income people, people of color, women, single mothers, people with disabilities, etc. are more likely to experience food insecurity because of intergenerational inequality.

For example, over the past 30 years, the average wealth of white families has grown by 84% — 1.2 times the rate of growth for the Latino population and 3 times the rate of growth for the African American population.²⁶ This mirrors the reality of food insecurity in San Diego County, where food insecure adults are disproportionately Latino. 52.7% of food insecure adults are Latino, versus 26.3% that are White.²⁷

The Reality of Food Insecurity

In sum, food insecurity is the result of a complex relationship between the ability to acquire and maintain a living wage job, the cost of food, time, and transportation, food assistance policies,

and enduring historical inequalities. Food insecurity is not a result of poor individual choices, but a result of a complex array of environmental, social, and historical factors.



By the Numbers: Food Assistance in San Diego County

Food insecure individuals can access food through various federal nutrition assistance programs and/or charitable sources such as food pantries. The San Diego Hunger Coalition estimated the relative contribution that each source provided in San Diego County in 2016. Data were obtained from each type of food assistance about how much was provided in 2016.

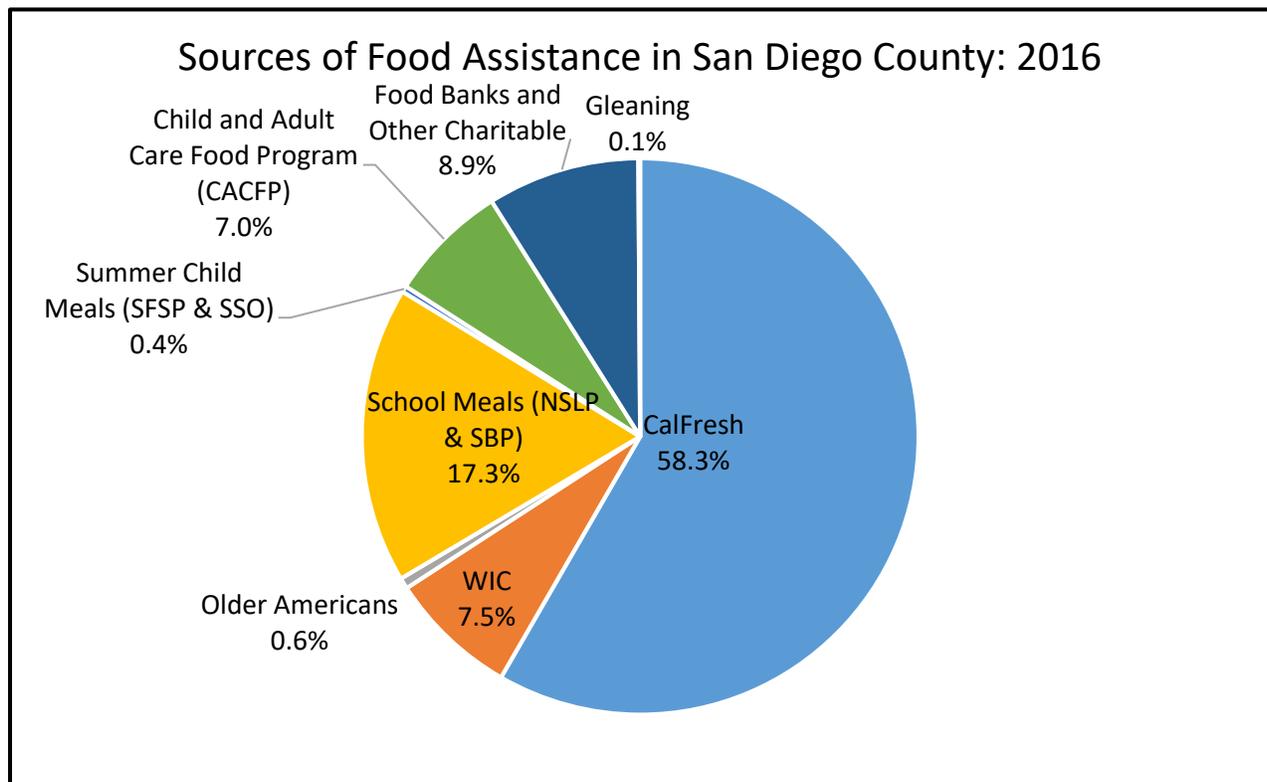
The measure of output varies, depending on the type of assistance. For example, the California Department of Social Services reports the total value (in dollars) of CalFresh benefit issuances. Food banks measure their output in terms of pounds of food distributed. The California Department of Education reports the number of meals claimed by schools through the National School Lunch Program.

To provide a common measure for all sources, output was converted to meals. The San Diego Hunger Coalition uses the Official USDA Food Plans weekly cost of food for the Moderate-Cost Plan, weighted by San Diego County's age and gender distribution, and divided by 21 to estimate the cost of a meal (\$3.20). The Moderate-Cost Plan is also used to estimate the weight of a meal (1.79 pounds). These numbers are used to convert all measures to meals.

The largest source of food assistance in San Diego County was CalFresh, providing 144,714,860 meals, which constituted 58.3% of all meals provided. A table and pie chart illustrating the breakdown is provided below, along with a brief description of each food assistance program. The percentages given for each type of food assistance represent an estimate of how much of each was provided in the calendar year 2016. It should be noted that these numbers are currently under review and do not represent final estimates. There will likely be minor changes in the relative contribution of food assistance types. This pie chart should be used as a general representation of food assistance sources in San Diego County in 2016.

Sources of Food Assistance in San Diego County: 2016^F

Type of food assistance	Number of meals provided in 2016
CalFresh	144,714,860
WIC	18,597,895
Older Americans	1,583,553
School Meals (NSLP & SBP)	42,811,977
Summer Child Meals (SFSP & SSO)	887,499
Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)	17,282,084
Food Banks and Other Charitable	21,971,033
Gleaning	251,332



^F Data provided by the San Diego Hunger Coalition, 2018.

CalFresh:

In California, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is referred to as CalFresh. This is a federally-mandated USDA program that is administered by the states and provides monthly assistance to low-income families to purchase food through EBT cards.

WIC:

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a USDA program that provides federal grants to States to provide food for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to their infants and children up to age five.

School Meals (NSLP & SBP):

The National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program are USDA federally-assisted meal programs that operate in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. They provide free or reduced-price lunches and breakfasts to children of low-income households each school day. Free snacks during afterschool activities are also provided to these children through the NSLP Afterschool Snack Service.

Summer Child Meals (SFSP & SSO):

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) are USDA programs that operate when school is not in session. Meals and snacks are served free of charge to children, 18 years and under, from low-income areas.

Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP):

The Child and Adult Care Food Program provides meals and snacks to children in day care in low-income areas and emergency shelters, as well as snacks and suppers to youth participating in eligible afterschool care programs. This USDA program also provides meals and snacks to adults who receive care in nonresidential adult day care centers.

Older Americans:

The federal Administration for Community Living provides grants to states to provide meals to older people throughout the country. Meals are provided in group settings, such as senior centers and faith-based settings through the Congregate Nutrition Program, as well as to the homes of isolated older adults through the Home-Delivered Nutrition Program.

Food Banks and Other Charitable:

Most food that is donated in some form passes through a food bank before being distributed through a vast network of pantries and other agencies. San Diego County has two food banks, Feeding San Diego (a member of Feeding America) and the Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank.

Gleaning:

Several nonprofit groups in San Diego County send volunteers to residential properties to harvest crops (mainly citrus) that would otherwise be wasted. In addition, volunteers collect food donations from farmers markets.

The CalFresh Program

SNAP: The Largest Federal Food Assistance Program



The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly referred to as the Food Stamp Program, is the largest food assistance program in the United States and acts as the primary domestic hunger safety net for families experiencing financial hardship.²⁸ SNAP provides a monthly allotment of money to low-income families to purchase food via an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card. EBT cards can be used, like debit cards, at most grocery stores and other food retailers. SNAP is financed primarily by the federal government, with the states sharing administrative costs and responsibilities.

A growing body of research indicates that SNAP is highly effective at reducing food insecurity, leading to important short-run and long-run benefits for low-income families.²⁹ The benefits of SNAP are particularly pronounced for those who receive food assistance as children. Beyond the immediate benefits of alleviating hunger and improving short-run health, receiving SNAP benefits as a child leads to improvements in academic performance, long-run health, educational attainment, and economic self-sufficiency.³⁰

SNAP is an Effective Safety Net

There is evidence that SNAP is an effective safety net. When SNAP was temporarily expanded during the Great Recession, the program protected millions of Americans from experiencing food insecurity in the face of rising unemployment.³¹ This is, in part, because SNAP eligibility is not restricted to specific subgroups of people (apart from income-eligibility requirements). SNAP serves a wide range of low-income households, such as families with children, elderly people,

and people with disabilities. Further, in many places, SNAP reaches a vast majority of those who are eligible. In 2012, SNAP reached 83% of all eligible individuals.³²

SNAP Benefits the Economy

SNAP is an efficient form of stimulating the economy. Low-income individuals generally spend all of their income on daily necessities, so every dollar in SNAP that a low-income family receives enables the family to spend an additional dollar on food – generally immediately. About 80% of SNAP benefits are redeemed within two weeks of receipt and 97% percent are spent within a month.³³ Further, every dollar allocated in SNAP benefits puts approximately \$1.70 back into local economies.³⁴

SNAP Fraud is Negligible

Research also indicates that SNAP has one of the most rigorous quality control systems of any public benefits program. In the past two decades, increased oversight and improvements in program management have led to a dramatic decline in SNAP fraud.³⁵ In Fiscal Year 2011, SNAP overpayments, underpayments, and payments to ineligible households reached a record low.³⁶

SNAP in California: CalFresh



SNAP is a federally-mandated program that is administered by the states. While some states refer to the program as SNAP, others use names such as Food Assistance Program, Nutrition Assistance, and Basic Food Program. In California, SNAP is referred to as CalFresh. Like the national program, CalFresh provides monthly assistance to low-income families to purchase food through EBT cards, which are called Golden State Advantage cards in California.

CalFresh is a vital anti-hunger intervention in California. Between 2009 and 2012, CalFresh kept 2,418,000 Californians out of poverty, including 1,251,000 children.³⁷ In terms of economic benefits, CalFresh contributed about \$7.2 billion to California's economy in 2016.³⁸

While, nationally, SNAP reaches a vast majority of eligible individuals, California has had historically low participation rates. In 2012, California had the 2nd lowest SNAP participation rate in the country – 63% of eligible individuals participated, versus 83% nationally.³⁹ That same year, San Diego County's SNAP participation rate was 43.8%.⁴⁰ In San Diego County, far too many individuals who are eligible are not receiving CalFresh because of complex guidelines, excessive paperwork, or lack of awareness. It is clear that there is significant room for improvement in ensuring that this vital food assistance program reaches eligible individuals.

Case Study: The Impact of CalFresh on College Students

Data provides evidence of the critical role that CalFresh plays in addressing food insecurity for a wide range of individuals. It is important, however, that the voices of individuals with lived experience of food insecurity supplement the statistics. In this report, a case study is presented on a group that experiences staggering levels of food insecurity, yet remains relatively invisible in national discourse: college students.

College Student Food Insecurity

The fact that an increasing number of college students struggle to access food is something that has met resistance in national discourse. This is due, in part, to the changing nature of who attends college and what it takes to obtain a college education. Despite prevailing assumptions, the typical college student is not a recent high school graduate who lives in a dormitory and is supported by their parents. In fact, in 2013, fewer than 1 in 4 students could be categorized as having parents who were able to pay all of their college expenses.⁴¹

Further, the rising cost of college education means that an increasing number of students must balance both a job and school in order to pay for basic college expenses, such as books, supplies, and tuition. In 2013, nearly 1 in 5 college students worked while attending school, and the majority used their own money to fund their college-related expenses.⁴² In 2016, 56% of food insecure students reported having a paying job, with 38% working 20 hours or more per week.⁴³

While pursuing a college education, students survive on a limited income. Facing the rising costs of books, supplies, and tuition, college students may skip meals to pay for their education. In a 2016 college food insecurity report – the broadest study conducted to date – 48% of respondents reported experiencing food insecurity in the previous 30 days, including 22% with very low levels of food security.⁴⁴ Food insecurity is prevalent at both two-year and four-year institutions and disproportionately affects students of color. 57% of Black students reported experiencing food insecurity, compared to 40% of White students.⁴⁵ Food insecurity also disproportionately affects first-generation college students – 56 %, versus 45% who had a least one parent who attended college.⁴⁶

Food insecurity can seriously harm a student’s ability to achieve academic success. In 2016, of food insecure students, 32% believed that hunger or housing problems had an impact on their education.⁴⁷ Of those students, 55% reported that these problems caused them to not buy a required textbook; 53% percent reported missing a class; and 25% percent reported dropping a class.⁴⁸

California’s rates of college student food insecurity are similar to the national figures. In 2016, 42% of University of California students reported experiencing food security, with nearly 20% experiencing very low food security.⁴⁹ In San Diego County, a staggeringly high cost of living and high competition for a limited number of living wage jobs means that obtaining a college degree is both particularly challenging and particularly essential.

College Student Stories

The following story excerpts were collected at San Diego State University and Southwestern Community College at various points throughout the period of November 2017 – February 2018. Students were asked to sign an interview and photo consent form before anything was recorded. Students were given the option of having their photograph taken. For students who consented to being photographed, they were given the option of indicating whether they would like their photograph to be published with or without their name.

The first seven stories consist of general insights regarding food insecurity/hunger by students who were applying to CalFresh for the first time.⁶ The latter four stories consist of more specific insights about the impact of the CalFresh, by students who had received CalFresh in the past.

Overall Themes:

Regarding trying to make ends meet as a college student, students spoke to the high costs of tuition, food (particularly on-campus food), and the difficulty of juggling work and school:

- *“If you’re just a run-of-the-mill average individual, your financial aid barely covers your tuition.”*
- *“...because you’re super busy and everything is expensive. Food on campus is a higher price than it is in the grocery store.”*
- *“You can say that students can go work to get money, but it’s so difficult when you’re a full-time student because your first priority is getting good grades in school for a better future.”*
- *“...having to go to school full-time and trying to be able to work enough to be able to pay for food and basic things just gets harder and harder.”*
- *“Not having to decide whether or not I can go to school full-time this semester or whether I need to be able to put more time into work.”*

Regarding the impact of CalFresh while in college, students spoke to how the program allows them to focus on their studies, avoid cutting expenses critical to their learning, and stay out of debt:

- *“It was one more thing I could not have to worry about so that I could focus on school. I’m like 30 years old – so I’m a little late to the game. So this was a huge deal to me.”*

⁶ Specifically, were applying as individuals for the first time. Some students had used CalFresh as children, when their families had applied for benefits on their behalf.

- *“The first thing to go would be the internet at home, saving another, you know, 60, 70 dollars each month. But, you know, that would make my education a whole lot harder. I would probably end up spending that in gas, anyway, driving down here to use the internet at school in order to get my homework done.”*
- *“CalFresh makes it a lot easier so I don’t have to continue putting myself in credit card debt.”*

Regarding the impact of CalFresh in the long-term, students emphasized that they saw CalFresh as a cyclical investment. Students expressed desire to return the investment – through financially supporting the CalFresh program – once they obtain financial security post-graduation. Students spoke to a desire to see the CalFresh program available for future students in need, even once they no longer need the program themselves.

- *“I’m hoping that one day I’ll graduate and have the kind of money to give back what I took.”*
- *“I’m going to borrow for now, but one day I am going to give back and I am looking forward to that day.”*
- *“I hope to be in a position soon where I don’t need any government assistance and I can pay my taxes for the next generation of people that do need it.”*
- *“I don’t want those students to lose hope in the dream of fighting to get a career or to get educated or just to get basic needs.”*

College Student Stories: First-Time CalFresh Applicants



Student at San Diego State University^H

Can you speak to the challenges of student hunger?

“I’ve known a lot of friends that are worried about their money and it’s hard because you want to prioritize your money but you just don’t know how – so people become hungry. For us, we have to pay for rent, we need to pay for internet, and all those bills – so the money goes so fast – because you need shelter first. And then you think about food second. So, that’s hard. You know? Because you think, “oh, I can just buy a cup of noodles.” But, at the end of the day, your health is at risk and you don’t always have

money to buy the freshest foods, the healthiest things. So that’s that.”

If you could tell politicians or the media anything about CalFresh or about student hunger, what would you want to tell them?

“That they need to start paying attention to the students because I know a lot of students who are very vocal about everything that they’ve needed and they’ve been here for a long time. It’s only now that they’re starting to see change. But there are people out there that are homeless, living in their cars – and they’re just eating crap. So, they need to start doing something about it.”

^H Student requested that their name not be disclosed with their photo.



Arix Sanchez, Student at San Diego State University

Can you speak to the challenges of student hunger?

“Being a student is sometimes inconvenient – well, I’m considered a commuter, I don’t live on campus – and it’s harder for me to rely on the food I have at home because it’s inconvenient for me to be driving back-and-forth. And it just makes it harder to eat because you don’t want to spend money on campus knowing that you have food at home. But then, it just kind of triggers – and I just end up not having enough money to go grocery shopping in general because I just

spend it on something that I just have for a day when I could have spent it towards a supply for a month or two.”

If you could tell politicians or the media anything about CalFresh or about student hunger, what would you want to tell them?

“Well, thank you for CalFresh. Thanks for having the program. But maybe having the certain restrictions that they have – how limited they are with their money – I feel like they should be a little more flexible and considerate because even though it may seem like I make a lot of money, it goes towards a lot of other expenses that are more – not more important – but, I need them to live, too. And obviously food is the most important one but then I won’t have a car because I have to pay car insurance or I won’t have a phone – no, a phone is pretty important now – so I can’t live without that. And gas, that’s another important factor that won’t be considered as a bill, but your money goes to it.”



Haki Daniels, Student at San Diego State University

Could you speak to the challenges of student hunger?

“Yes, most definitely. I think, as a student, you’re starting out in life rather on an off-hand, especially if you’re not a student athlete or someone who gets scholarships, or if your parents aren’t rich so they can’t support you. If you’re just a run-of-the-mill average individual, your financial aid barely covers your tuition. And you have to do school and work just to pay your rent off, while being a full-time student...I know a lot of days I haven’t really eaten because I was waiting for

my next check to come in. At the time, I only had one job...My check would be about \$600 something, but I would have to wait until the 15th of the next month to get it for that month. So I’d be on the last L’s just eating Ramen and stuff...I think any aid that the government can provide is much-needed and well-appreciated.”

What were your perceptions of the CalFresh program?

“I thought it was cool! I was like, oh, I’m getting money for food? That’s always a good thing – getting money for food.”

If you could tell anything to politicians or the media about CalFresh, what would it be?

“Student hunger is real. We are not just leeching off the system. In fact, we are trying to become pillars of society. You know, it would be good to help assist your fellow citizens in the way that you help assist say, Israel. Help us become better people, we’ll do well for you – just feed us a little bit.”



Imani Hibbert, Student at San Diego State University

Could you speak to the challenges of student hunger?

“Yeah, it’s really hard as a college student because you’re super busy and everything is expensive. Food on campus is a higher price than it is in the grocery store. So, living on campus is really hard. If you don’t have a meal plan you’re basically – you’re out...I do see

a lot of people struggle in the community with finding food.”

I see you’re applying to CalFresh now – where did you first hear about it?

“I first heard about it through my friend who applied and she got approved – so I was like, ‘oh my gosh, if I can get approved it can make my life 100% easier!’ because I won’t have to worry about where my next meal is going to come from.”

What were your perceptions about CalFresh before you started the application process?

“Before I started this process, I thought that CalFresh was only – well I didn’t think that I would be approved, personally – I thought it was only given to people in super dire need, like you would have to have kids or like something like that. But when she got approved I was like, ‘okay, so I should be able to get approved.’”

If you could tell anything to politicians or the media about CalFresh or student hunger, what would it be?

“I would just say to listen – listen to what the community is saying, because obviously we are saying it for a reason. We are not complaining for no reason. Take notice of what is going on in the community because it is a dire need out there for food, people really are struggling.”



Student at San Diego State University¹

Can you speak to the challenges of student hunger?

“Right now, it’s really difficult to prioritize money. I’m starting to think I might have to end up going hungry because all of my money is going to different types of bills that are more important, so I can survive. I’m grateful that there is a school pantry here because I might have to end up using it sooner or later. But because of CalFresh, I might not, which is good.”

What were your perceptions of CalFresh?

“I thought it was a good program because I knew a lot of other people who went hungry and they didn’t have this program, I don’t think.

I was really grateful for this and I thought I might as well apply because the worst thing that can happen is that I just won’t get the money and then I will...starve...”

What would you tell politicians and the media about student hunger and CalFresh?

“That they should believe that it’s real. You can say that students can go work to get money, but it’s so difficult when you’re a full-time student because your first priority is getting good grades in school for a better future. So, they need to pay more attention because I know a lot of people who have gone hungry and they were not helped, at all. So they need to do something.”



Elaine Banks, Student at Southwestern Community College

Can you speak to why you are passionate about student hunger?

“I am passionate about student hunger because I know what it feels like. I’ve been there. I’m currently still there, in those shoes. And I wouldn’t want another student to feel hungry or even to go through those kind of feelings that I’ve been through...I

¹ Student requested that their name not be disclosed with their photo.

know what it feels like to be hungry and homeless...I don't want those students to lose hope in the dream of fighting to get a career or to get educated or just to get basic needs or just even to have someone to talk to. I don't want students to hit rock bottom and feel isolated. When my mother passed away, I didn't know that there would be this many resources...I want students to chase their dreams like I'm chasing mine, with the resources we have here on campus. Because life takes unexpected turns, like death."

In terms of resources, are you and other students at Southwestern College familiar with CalFresh?

"I am familiar with CalFresh. CalFresh helps out a lot. If more students know about CalFresh I believe that we can tackle hunger, you know, just by students finding out about CalFresh and learning that they can get food and that's like a security – it's making them feel safe – it's like a safe zone for them."

If you could tell politicians or the media about CalFresh, what would it be?

"I would tell politicians and the media that CalFresh is more than just the next bite to eat – it's literally the next hope. It restores faith and motivates people. It's not just about food...it motivates students who don't have hope...I would like to tell them to get involved with fighting hunger: to spread the word – to do something about it – so that we can end it."



Mitzy Lopez-Olivares, Student at San Diego State University

Could you speak to the challenges of student hunger?

"It's kind of tough, you know. Sometimes I just survive on granolas. I could show you the amount of granolas I have in my backpack – it's so many. Because sometimes I just don't have enough money to go buy food every day. The sandwiches here are \$5.69! I'm like, wow – I could just make myself a sandwich at home. But, you know, sometimes I just don't have the time."

What perceptions did you have about CalFresh before applying?

"That it was good – because my mom used to use it. It was pretty good. We could buy a lot of food with that and we could make a lot of lunches. It meant more cooking-at-home instead of having to go out to eat."

If you could tell anything to politicians or the media about CalFresh, what would it be?

“That it’s really good and that they should keep it! It’s very efficient. I like it a lot.”

College Student Stories: CalFresh Alumni



Edward Yannaccone, Student at San Diego State University

How did CalFresh help you in your time of need?

“I am in a significant amount of student loans. I don’t work anymore – I have not worked ever since I started taking school seriously and I was in desperate need of any help I could get, financially or in any way possible from any organization that was willing to help me. CalFresh has made life significantly easier for buying groceries on a fairly regular basis. So it allows my food problems, for the most part, to be helped – because I don’t eat that much and the amount awarded is usually significant enough for me to live, month-to-month, without having to worry about starving or going to some more extreme measures.”

How did receiving food assistance make you feel?

“Good! I was super, super excited about it – I was like, oh man, I can’t believe I actually got accepted – [me and my girlfriend] both got accepted. It was great. It was one more thing I could not have to worry about so that I could focus on school. I’m like 30 years old – so I’m a little late to the game. So this was a huge deal to me.”

Have you been using any other food assistance programs, like pantries or meal delivery?

“No. This was my first program that I’ve ever used. Up until this point, I was a working-stiff, you know, odd jobs here-and-there. When I finally attended college, I didn’t know how it was going to work out. So, I had never needed it – I had always made it paycheck-to-paycheck, I had never really needed assistance. But, now that I’m in school, it’s a lot harder for me to get by without an income.”

How do you make ends meet without CalFresh?

“Badly! I get federal student aid from the federal government and a little bit of state money, but really, I am living very frugally. My life consists of mostly just going to school. The money that is given to me is used for books and stuff for school, such as transportation. CalFresh helped ease the food burden. I rent out a room out of a small, old house. I don’t have a whole lot of extra money at the end of the month. CalFresh makes it a lot easier so I don’t have to continue putting myself in credit card debt.”

What do you think some common misconceptions people have about CalFresh are?

“I think one of the misconceptions is that it’s wrong to ask the government for help. I’m hoping that one day I’ll graduate and have the kind of money to give back what I took. Some people are really stubborn – they don’t want to have other people help them. But, I think I see it as: I’m going to borrow for now, but one day I am going to give back and I am looking forward to that day.”

What are you most proud of in your life and what are your hopes for the future?

“To be honest with you, I graduated high school in a charter school. I didn’t think I was ever going to go to college. I definitely didn’t think I would go to SDSU. So this is probably my proudest moment – right here – that I am in this school. Because up until to this point, I didn’t think I would be doing anything with my life. This is my one chance – I’m looking forward to doing something with it.”

What would you want people to know about food assistance like CalFresh?

“It’s a great program. If you are eligible, I recommend getting help...It has made my life so much easier so that I don’t have to struggle, you know. I’m going to have eggs, milk, and that kind of thing – CalFresh is so great. It’s just awesome. I don’t know what else to say about it – it helped me out at a really hard time and I really appreciate it.”



Student at San Diego State University¹

How did receiving food assistance at the time make you feel?

“A lot more confident. Definitely in the beginning, we were struggling a lot more. To this day we struggle but, as we grow older, we’re slowly starting to help our family more. So, it helps you start your life.”

¹ Student requested that their name not be disclosed with their photo.

How do you make ends meet without CalFresh?

“We definitely would have to spend more money on food. So, we would have to take away money from, probably what we would spend on clothing or rent – we’d have to take from that.”

What do you think some common misconceptions are that you’ve heard about CalFresh or people who use CalFresh?

“Some might think that people take advantage of it. But, like food – you’d be surprised how much people spend on food.”

What are you most proud of in your life, or what are your dreams for the future?

“I definitely want to graduate and get my master’s and one day have a family where I won’t need assistance – where I could help.”

What would you want people to know – whether its politicians, the media, or an average person in San Diego – what would you want them to know about CalFresh?

“I mean, they might not be in those people’s footsteps – they might not experience what they’re experiencing – but they should definitely try to do that. It would help out the people who actually need it so that the government won’t cut it.”



Student at San Diego State University^k

How did CalFresh help you in your time of need?

“I suppose in the basic way it was meant to – feed me when I couldn’t afford anything but Ramen Noodles. I was able to actually buy real food and not have to worry about choosing between what I can afford to eat and whether I can pay my car insurance or something.”

Could you speak to the specific challenges of being a student and facing hunger?

“Well, I have been going to school since – basically since getting out of high school – and, early on, we had a lot more help from family. But, in the recent years, you know, you get older and

^k Student requested that their name not be disclosed with their photo.

you get farther along in school, and it gets more and more expensive – especially coming from community college into San Diego State. You start having to be able to handle it on your own a lot more. So, having to go to school full-time and trying to be able to work enough to be able to pay for food and basic things just gets harder and harder.”

When you first starting getting CalFresh, how did you feel?

“It was pretty big deal. The fridge started filling in. The pantry started filling in. It was just nice to have options. Not having to stress so much. Not having to decide whether or not I can go to school full-time this semester or whether I need to be able to put more time into work.”

Have you used any other food assistance programs, like pantries or meal delivery services?

“No – but it got a little close one time when I didn’t get my financial aid paperwork. It had gone to my parents’ house and they didn’t get it to me in time. I was able to call and jump through hoops and that month was a little tight, but they told me over the phone about pantry options...I am starting to get worried because we are down to \$60 left on my card right now. It can maybe get me through another two weeks if I try really hard. So it was great to hear about this opportunity to apply to CalFresh, when I happened to meet with my advisor yesterday.”

How do you think you would make ends meet if you didn’t have CalFresh?

“Well, we’d just be cutting. The first thing to go would be the internet at home, saving another, you know, 60, 70 dollars each month. But, you know, that would make my education a whole lot harder. I would probably end up spending that in gas, anyway, driving down here to use the internet at school in order to get my homework done. As time goes on, it becomes less and less of an option, right? Beyond that, well, there’s ways we were cinching down before – just focus less on nutrition and end up eating more canned chicken soup and Ramen Noodles.”

What would you want people to know about food assistance programs like CalFresh?

“Anyone, at any time, could be in a position where they need it. You think you’re not going to need it – you think it’s just drug addicts and homeless people that use that. But, you know, as a full-time student, I can attest to the fact that anybody can fall into that position. I don’t expect to need it for much longer. I am only here for another year and half. Then, I will be able to get out there and focus more on career instead of schooling. I will be happy to have the program still available for people, but not have to need it myself.”

What are you most proud of in your life and what are your hopes for the future?

“I am proud to have made it this far, even though it has taken longer than I had expected – made it this far in my schooling, that is. I hope to be in a position soon where I don’t need any government assistance and I can pay my taxes for the next generation of people that do need it.”



Vivian Gomez, Student at San Diego State University

How did CalFresh help you in your time of need?

“Well, I’m a student and my parents aren’t the wealthiest, so I’ve always had to support myself and try my best getting through college. CalFresh has really helped me not have to worry about groceries or food or going hungry.”

How did it make you feel?

“Relieved! As I said before, I didn’t have to worry about going hungry or opening the refrigerator and seeing it completely being barren, expect maybe a box of baking soda.”

How would you make ends meet without CalFresh?

“I would have to dip into financial aid and my student loans because I don’t get much parental assistance.”

What are some common misconceptions that you’ve heard about CalFresh?

“I think one of the most common misconceptions is that CalFresh is abused welfare. People think that, “they’re just low-lives,” “they don’t do anything,” “they’re good-for-nothing.” But the reality is that it’s there to help people who need it – starving students, mothers, etc.”

What are you most proud of in your life and what are your hopes for the future?

“I’m probably most proud of the fact that I’m at college – at SDSU. I’m first-generation American. My parents are from Guatemala. I’m just here trying to make them proud.”

What do you want people to know about food assistance programs like CalFresh?

“They should know that it’s great. It’s incredibly helpful. If you’re out there worrying about money, worrying about food – it’s a really hard position to be in – especially in college where you also have to focus on school and grades, pushing out homework assignments, projects. I think it’s a really important program to help students like me out.”

Conclusion

Food insecurity is a serious problem in San Diego County, where 1 in 6 residents do not have enough food for an active, healthy life. Food insecurity disproportionately affects women, people of color, single-parent households, and people living with disabilities. In a county like San Diego, with a staggeringly high cost of living and limited availability of affordable housing and living wage jobs, residents often forgo food in order to pay for other expenses.

Ending food insecurity in San Diego County requires increased investment in the largest and most effective anti-hunger intervention in the county: CalFresh. There is a growing body of research that indicates that this program is a highly effective safety net that benefits the economy while producing a negligible amount of fraud. It is imperative that lawmakers continue to support this vital food assistance program for college students and all those who struggle to get enough food for an active, healthy life.

Perhaps best said by Southwestern Community College student, Elaine Banks, when she was asked what she would tell politicians and the media about CalFresh:

“I would tell politicians and the media that CalFresh is more than just the next bite to eat – it’s literally the next hope. It restores faith and motivates people. It’s not just about food...it motivates students who don’t have hope...I would like to tell them to get involved with fighting hunger: to spread the word – to do something about it – so that we can end it.”

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