

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS IN CALIFORNIA & EXCLUSION FROM NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS



Among California’s undocumented immigrants, more than two in five are affected by food insecurity.

California is home to the largest economy in the United States—and our nation’s highest rate of poverty.^a That experience of deep hardship in the face of great prosperity holds true for many California immigrants. An estimated 11 million immigrants—including approximately 2.3 million undocumented immigrants—contribute to the rich diversity of the Golden State.^b

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated hardship and driven inequitable outcomes for immigrants across California.^c But hardships such as poverty and food insecurity persisted well before this public health emergency. Exclusionary policies continue to perpetuate poverty and food insecurity, inflicting harm on California’s immigrant communities and the state at large.

This brief draws on quantitative data and community voices to provide a novel, state-specific analysis of food insecurity and poverty among undocumented immigrants in California. These findings are essential to advance evidence-based policies that can make California a more equitable, inclusive place for all who call it home.

KEY FINDINGS

Food Insecurity

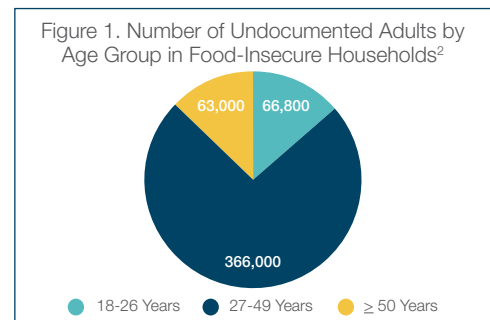
Food insecurity is having limited, uncertain, or inconsistent access to the food necessary for a healthy life. A preponderance of research links food insecurity to harmful outcomes for children and adults.^d Food insecurity is tied to poor physical, mental, and social well being, adverse effects on child development, and increased health care costs. These negative implications underscore the urgent need to prevent food insecurity for all.

- Forty-five percent of non-citizens without legal permanent resident status (described throughout these key findings as “undocumented immigrants”)^e are affected by food insecurity (Table 1).^e

Table 1. Percent Undocumented Immigrants, Per Age Group, in Food-Insecure Households¹

0-17 Years	18-26 Years	27-49 Years	≥50 Years	All Ages
64%	36%	46%	42%	45%

- Rates of food insecurity are especially acute for children. Sixty four percent of undocumented children are affected by food insecurity (Table 1).^f
- Nearly 500,000 undocumented adults (18 years and older) live in households struggling with food insecurity. The majority of these adults are 27 to 49 years old (Figure 1).^g



¹ Source: California Health Interview Survey, CHIS 2017-2020 (pooled). Food insecurity by age group among non-citizens without legal permanent resident status and with household income below 200% of the official federal poverty threshold. Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

² Ibid. Values <100,000 rounded to the nearest hundred. Values >100,000 rounded to the nearest thousand.

The data presented in this food insecurity section are sourced from the 2017-2020 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), a statewide representative survey conducted by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. CHIS assesses food insecurity among respondent households with incomes below 200% of the official federal poverty threshold. However, food insecurity can also affect households with higher incomes.^h Subsequently, these findings may not fully capture the prevalence of food insecurity among all populations.

The impact and prevalence of food insecurity across all age groups necessitate inclusive solutions that help Californians meet their most fundamental needs.

Poverty

Food insecurity is one means of measuring access to basic resources. Consequently, it is intrinsically tied to poverty. Throughout our state, undocumented immigrants disproportionately bear the brunt of policies that perpetuate poverty, including systemic exclusion from social services and safety net programs based solely on immigration status.^h An estimated 625,000 undocumented adults in California have household incomes below the official federal poverty thresholdⁱⁱⁱ (\$26,246 for a household of two adults and two children).ⁱ **Across our state, undocumented adults experience these poverty conditions^{iv} at more than twice the rate of the total adult population.^j**

Persistent Hardship

For the years 2011 through 2019, food insecurity rates among non-citizen adults^v in California ranged from 37% to 54%.^k For those same years, the percentage of non-citizens^{vi} in households with income below the official federal poverty threshold ranged from 24% to nearly 40%.^l **This history of sustained hardship demonstrates the need for systemic solutions that disrupt poverty and mitigate food insecurity for the long term.**



I'm a mother of three daughters who were born in the U.S. My daughters had CalFresh but my husband and I were not eligible. The limited benefits in CalFresh were not enough to feed my whole family and many times we didn't have enough food. In December 2020, all of us got COVID and life became more difficult. We couldn't work and pay our bills. **It was very painful telling my daughter that we didn't have milk and having to put her to bed without something to eat.**

- Herling from Lindsay, California

EXCLUSIONARY POLICIES CAUSE HARM

Effects of Nutrition Assistance

CalFresh (known federally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP) provides benefits that help households afford enough food. The California Food Assistance Program (CFAP) is the state-funded counterpart to CalFresh that serves certain immigrants who are excluded from federally funded SNAP due solely to their immigration status. CalFresh and CFAP are associated with improved health outcomes, reduced food insecurity, and decreased levels of poverty.^m Participating in CalFresh prevents poverty for nearly 700,000 Californians annually, including more than 300,000 children.ⁿ

Immigrant Exclusions

The federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 severely restricted immigrants' access to public benefits, including nutrition assistance through SNAP. In response, California established CFAP to reach some immigrants who lost eligibility, but many people are still shut out. Undocumented immigrants, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders, and certain visa holders remain ineligible for CFAP due to their immigration status.

Beyond these programmatic exclusions, a long history of xenophobic policies has kept immigrants from accessing programs and services for which they are eligible. In recent years, the Trump administration's changes to the public charge^{vii} rule intensified the "chilling effect" on immigrant Californians seeking out public programs. A 2021 study found that one in four adult immigrants with low income avoided public programs such as nutrition assistance for fear of harming their immigration status or that of their family members.^o The study showed that even immigrants not subject to the public charge rule, including more than one quarter of legal permanent residents, avoided public programs.^p

Despite the Biden administration's 2021 reversal of the Trump administration's changes to the public charge rule, misinformation and confusion persist. A recent nationwide survey of immigrant families found three out of four respondents did not know that the changes to the public charge rule had been reversed.⁹ Such findings indicate the need for effective outreach and education to mitigate the continued chilling effect.



My two U.S. citizen children had CalFresh but I canceled it because of my fear of public charge. But now, because food prices have been going up, I'm thinking about applying for CalFresh for my two children. I'm still scared of public charge because you never know who the next president will be.

- Rocio from Madera, California

INCLUSIVE NUTRITION ASSISTANCE: NO EXCEPTIONS. NO EXCLUSIONS.

Food4All

While the California Food Assistance Program reaches some immigrants who are excluded from federally funded CalFresh, the program should be expanded to address the actual needs and makeup of California's immigrant population.

California can mitigate food insecurity, alleviate poverty, invest in health equity, and foster well being by eliminating the exclusion of income-eligible undocumented immigrants, DACA recipients, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders, and certain visa holders from CFAP.

For more on inclusive state legislation (SB 464, Hurtado) and the Food4All state budget proposal (Asm. Santiago) to expand CFAP, visit <https://act.nourishca.org/campaign/food4all>.

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Nourish California is a nonprofit policy advocacy organization working to ensure all Californians have fair access to nutritious, affordable food. We prioritize our fellow Californians who face the greatest needs and the starkest inequities.



The **California Immigrant Policy Center** is a constituent-based organization advocating for policies that uphold the humanity of immigrants and refugees while advancing racial, social, and economic justice.

This brief is the first in a series exploring food access and food security among California's undocumented immigrants. Learn more at nourishca.org/food4all-briefs/.

TECHNICAL APPENDIX

Documentation of the design and methods for the California Health Interview Survey are accessible via <https://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/chis/>.

Notes

[i] The CHIS category “non-citizens without legal permanent resident status” includes all undocumented immigrants but is not exclusive to undocumented immigrants. For instance, this category includes individuals such as refugees and asylees. Acknowledging this limitation of the CHIS data, we are not aware of any source that allows for a more detailed analysis of immigration status in conjunction with statewide estimates of food insecurity.

[ii] Analyses of food insecurity among higher income households are uncommon. However, an analysis of the Los Angeles County Health Survey found that among households with income below 300% of the federal poverty level, more than 13 percent are food insecure. (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology, Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County, September 2017. http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/docs/LaHealth_FoodInsecurity_final_yr2017.pdf). Similarly, a nationwide analysis by the United States Department of Agriculture found that food insecurity “did not decline to negligible levels until income rose to about five times the poverty threshold” or 500% FPL. (Food Insecurity in Higher Income Households, Nord, M., and C. Brent. Food Insecurity in Higher Income Households, E-FAN-02-016, USDA, ERS, September 2002)

[iii] Official federal poverty thresholds for 2020: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html>.

Federal poverty thresholds are updated annually. This brief cites 2020 thresholds to better align with the temporality of our CHIS data analysis.

[iv] The official federal poverty threshold does not take into account a localized cost of living and has been shown to underestimate levels of need in California. Similarly, these estimates of undocumented immigrants with income below the federal poverty threshold likely do not account for the full depth and scale of poverty among undocumented immigrants in our state.

[v][vi] These data are specific to all non-citizens, a population which includes both documented and undocumented immigrants and excludes U.S.-born citizens as well as naturalized citizens.

[vii] When determining whether to grant some applicants lawful permanent resident status, a visa, or admission into the United States, an immigration officer decides whether a person is likely to become dependent on certain public benefits in the future, which would make that person a “public charge.” If the government deems someone likely to become a public charge, the government can deny that person admission to the U.S. or refuse an application for lawful permanent residency.

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Note: Poverty ranking based on state-specific estimates from the Supplemental Poverty Measure, excluding the District of Columbia.

[b] Hans Johnson, Cesar Alesi Perez, and Marisol Cuellar Mejia. Public Policy Institute of California. Immigrants in California, March 2021. <https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/jtf-immigrants-in-california.pdf>. Accessed March 2022.

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[d] Steven Carlson and Brynne Keith-Jennings. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. SNAP Is Linked with Improved Nutritional Outcomes and Lower Health Care Costs, January 2018. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-is-linked-with-improved-nutritional-outcomes-and-lower-health-care>. Accessed March 2022.

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[e] California Health Interview Survey. CHIS 2017-2020 (pooled). Food insecurity among non-citizens without legal permanent resident status and with household income below 200% of the official federal poverty threshold.

[f] California Health Interview Survey. CHIS 2017-2020 (pooled). Food insecurity among non-citizens without legal permanent resident status who are under 18 years of age and have household income below 200% of the official federal poverty threshold.

Note: Coefficient of variation for percent food secure = 0.3673

Coefficient of variation for percent food insecure = 0.2073

[g] California Health Interview Survey. CHIS 2017-2020 (pooled). Food insecurity by age group among non-citizens without legal permanent resident status and with household income below 200% of the official federal poverty threshold.

[h] Elisa Minoff, Isabella Camacho-Craft, Valery Martínez, and Indivar Dutta-Gupta. Center for the Study of Social Policy and Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality. The Lasting Legacy of Exclusion: How the Law that Brought Us Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Excluded Immigrant Families & Institutionalized Racism in our Social Support System, August 2021. <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Lasting-Legacy-of-Exclusion-FINAL-ACCESSIBLE.pdf>. Accessed April 2022.

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[l] UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. AskCHIS, CHIS 2011-2019. Adults (ages 18 years and older) with household income below 100% of the official federal poverty threshold.

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[q] No Kid Hungry. Public Charge was Reversed—But Not Enough Immigrant Families Know. https://www.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/NKH_Public%20Charge_Micro-Report_English_0.pdf. Accessed April 2022.