California is home to the largest economy in the United States—and our nation’s highest rate of poverty. 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated hardship and driven inequitable outcomes for immigrants across California. 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. 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”) are affected by food insecurity (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Percent Undocumented Immigrants, Per Age Group, in Food-Insecure Households ¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-17 Years</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
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<tr>
<td>64%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- Rates of food insecurity are especially acute for children. Sixty-four percent of undocumented children are affected by food insecurity (Table 1).

- 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).

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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 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. An estimated 625,000 undocumented adults in California have household incomes below the official federal poverty threshold ($26,246 for a household of two adults and two children). Across our state, undocumented adults experience these poverty conditions at more than twice the rate of the total adult population.

**Persistent Hardship**

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

**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. Participating in CalFresh prevents poverty for nearly 700,000 Californians annually, including more than 300,000 children.

**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 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. 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.
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. Such findings indicate the need for effective outreach and education to mitigate the continued chilling effect.

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The UCLA Center for Health Policy Research provided consultation and data on food insecurity and poverty from the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS). Herling and Rocio shared their lived experiences and expertise. We gratefully acknowledge all of these contributions and the important issues they bring to light.

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/.
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)


[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] 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.

Citations


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


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.

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

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.


California Health Interview Survey. CHIS 2017-2020 (pooled). Non-citizen adults (ages 18 years and older) without legal permanent resident status and with household income below 100% of the official federal poverty threshold.


California Health Interview Survey. CHIS 2017-2020 (pooled). Non-citizen adults (ages 18 years and older) without legal permanent resident status and with household income below 100% of the official federal poverty threshold. UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. ASKCHIS 2017-2020 (pooled). Adults (ages 18 years and older) with household income below 100% of the official federal poverty threshold. Available at https://ask.chis.ucla.edu/. Exported April 19, 2022.


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.


Ibid.