

A Research Brief from USC Dornsife
Public Exchange

Food & Nutrition Insecurity in Los Angeles County

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Disclaimer

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, the Price School of Public Policy, the Keck School of Medicine, or the University of Southern California as a whole.



Introduction

Food insecurity occurs when people lack access to enough food—an experience that harms people’s physical and mental health, disrupts children’s development, strains families, and makes it harder for individuals and communities to thrive. Data collected in October 2025 from surveys with Los Angeles (L.A.) County residents participating in the University of Southern California’s Understanding America Study show that **1 in 4 (24%) of all county households experienced food insecurity in the past year**. Among households with low incomes (<300% of the federal poverty line), **1 in 3 (35%) experienced food insecurity**, down from 41% in 2024. Nutrition insecurity also dropped from 29% in 2024 to 21% in 2025. These improvements likely reflect substantial countywide investments and collaboration to strengthen the food system, even as significant challenges remain.

2025 has been a difficult and volatile year for many Angelenos. High living costs—especially rent, inflation, and food prices—have continued to strain

household budgets. In January, unprecedented wildfires burned 57,500 acres and destroyed more than 18,000 structures, displacing families and damaging homes, businesses, and community centers. Immigrant communities have also faced heightened challenges as federal agents conducted highly visible immigration operations and raids across the city. Fear of deportation has kept many families from public spaces, making it harder to buy groceries or access food assistance. These enforcement actions have also disrupted the agricultural workforce, which plays a vital role in our regional food system, further affecting the food supply.

This brief report summarizes several key insights on the state of food and nutrition insecurity in L.A. County as of October 2025.



About 1 in 4 L.A. County households remain food insecure

Data from the Understanding America Study collected in October 2025 show that about 1 in 4 (24%) households experienced food insecurity in the past year. This is statistically similar to the rate of food insecurity recorded in our 2024 report: 25% (de la Haye et al., 2024).

Data collected from this study over the past five years show that the proportion of L.A. County households who reported experiencing food insecurity in the past 12 months was:

- 17% in December 2021 (approximately 553,000 households)
- 24% in July 2022 (approximately 802,000 households)
- 30% in July 2023 (approximately 986,000 households)
- 25% in October 2024 (approximately 852,000 households)
- 24% in October 2025 (approximately 814,000 households)

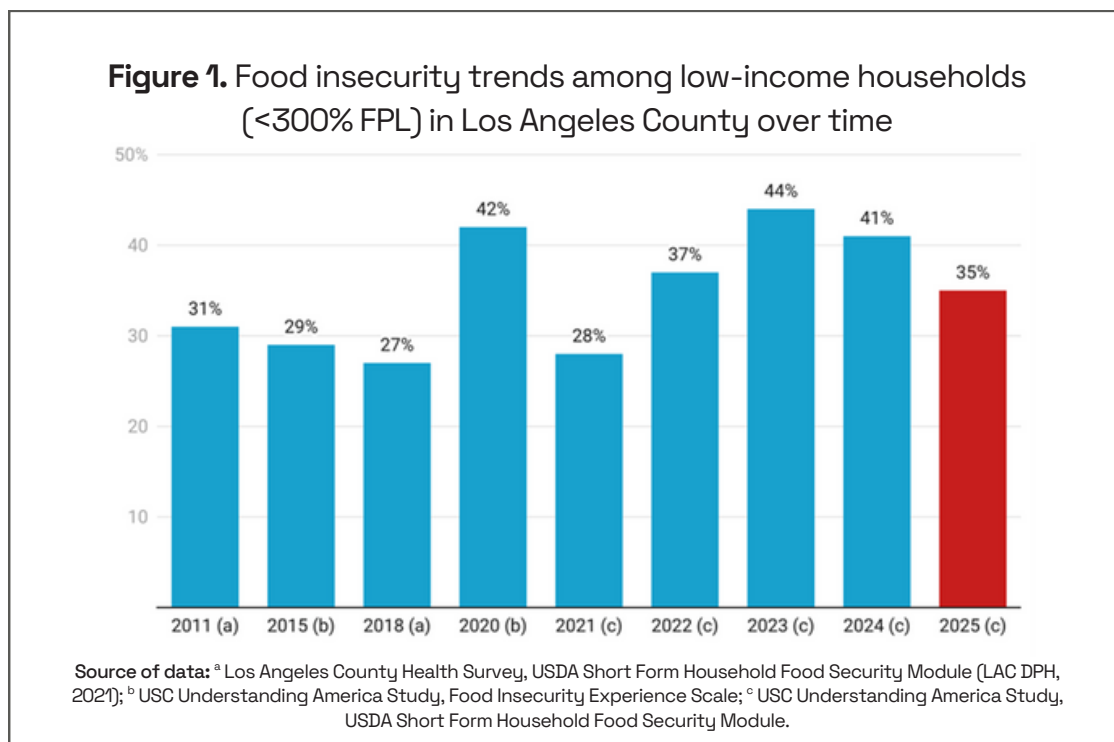
Countywide food insecurity has remained relatively steady at 24–25% since 2022, except for a spike to 30% in 2023. Our prior report indicates this spike was likely caused by the end of the pandemic-era boost to CalFresh benefits, which reduced the amount of money recipients had available for groceries (de la Haye et al., 2023).



The rate of food insecurity among low-income households improved from 2023 to 2025, but remains unacceptably high

Lack of financial resources is the main cause of food insecurity. Individuals with lower incomes (household incomes below 300% of the federal poverty level; FPL) face a higher rate of food insecurity compared to the general population. The rate of food insecurity among low-income households in L.A. County has been volatile since the COVID-19 pandemic, but has significantly improved in the past two years (**Figure 1**):

- **Before the pandemic**, rates of food insecurity among low-income households had been improving, from 31% in 2011 to 27% in 2018.
- **When the pandemic hit in 2020**, our research documented a large spike in food insecurity among low-income households: 42% experienced food insecurity that year, compared to 27% in 2018.
- **In 2021**, food insecurity returned to pre-pandemic levels, 28%, following significant local, state, and federal investments.
- **After 2021**, amid inflation and expiration of pandemic-era benefits, food insecurity among low-income residents rose rapidly to 37% in 2022, higher than pre-pandemic levels. By July of 2023, shortly after many COVID-era benefits expired, rates had increased to 44%, similar to the highest levels of food insecurity (42%) seen at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **In 2024**, food insecurity among low-income residents decreased modestly to 41%, but remained markedly higher than pre-pandemic levels.
- **In 2025**, food insecurity among low-income residents decreased to 35%; an improvement but a rate that is still unacceptably high, and higher than pre-pandemic levels.



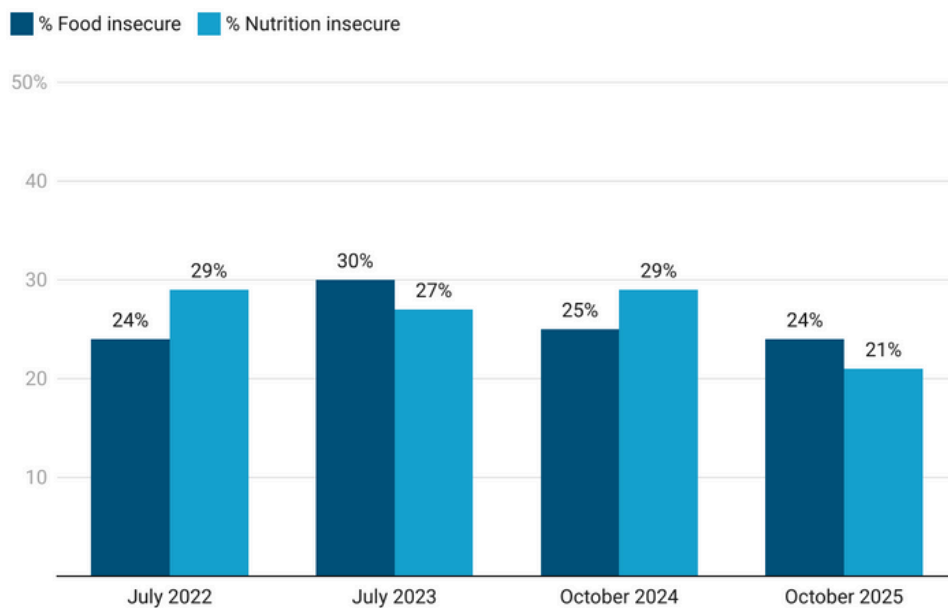


Nutrition insecurity improved in 2025

Nutrition security focuses on ensuring access to nutritious food, not just enough calories. A household that is nutrition secure has consistent access to healthy, safe, affordable foods that will support good health and well-being.

In L.A. County, the rate of nutrition insecurity declined from 29% in October 2024 to 21% in October 2025, even though the overall rate of food insecurity remained fairly stable.

Figure 2. Food insecurity and nutrition insecurity trends among adults in Los Angeles County from 2022 to 2025



Source of data: Understanding America Study, University of Southern California. Food insecurity was measured by the USDA Short Form Household Food Security Module; nutrition insecurity was measured by the Center for Nutrition and Health Impact's Brief Nutrition Security Screener.





The majority of Angelenos facing food and nutrition insecurity in 2025 were low-income, female, Hispanic/Latino, and younger adults

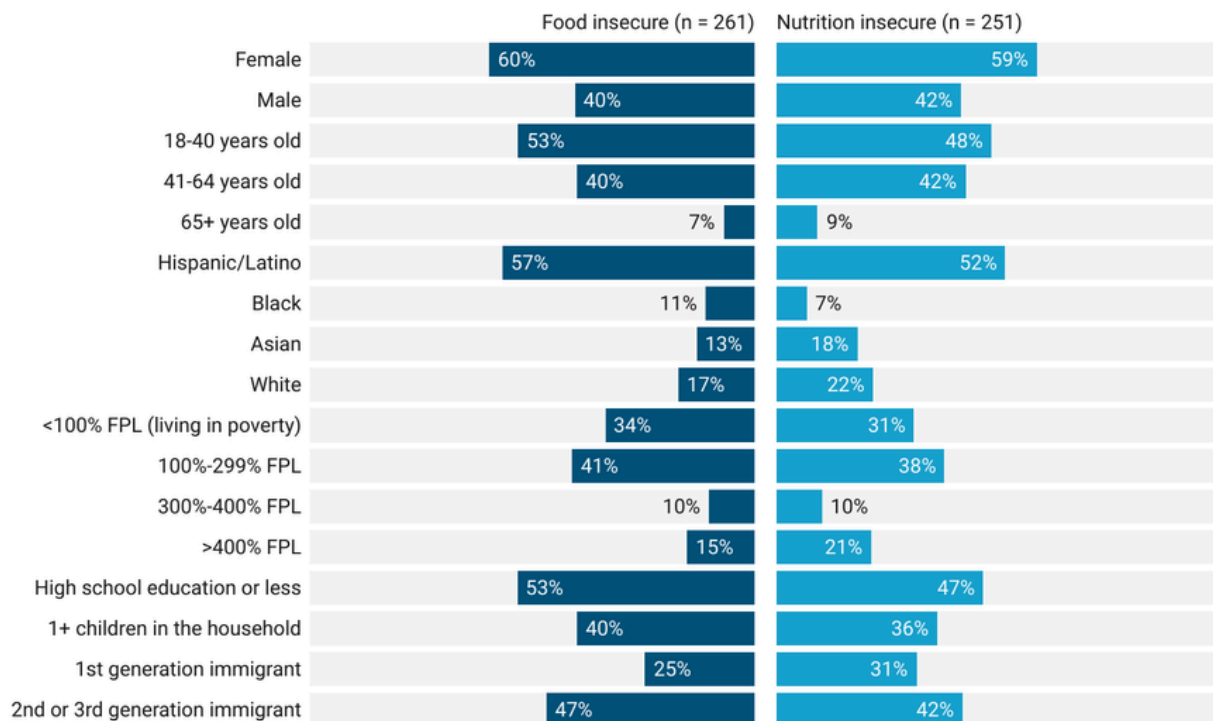
The majority of residents experiencing food insecurity and nutrition insecurity in October 2025 were:

- **Low-income (<300% FPL):** 75% of those with food insecurity, and 69% of those with nutrition insecurity
- **Female:** 60% of those with food insecurity, and 59% of those with nutrition insecurity
- **Hispanic/Latino:** 57% of those with food insecurity, and 52% of those with nutrition insecurity
- **Younger adults (18-40 year olds):** 53% of those with food insecurity, and 48% of those with nutrition insecurity

Households with children also represent a substantial share of those affected, accounting for 40% of all food-insecure households and 36% of those experiencing nutrition insecurity.

The profiles of residents who experienced food and nutrition insecurity in the past year (**Figure 3**) illustrate additional characteristics of these groups.

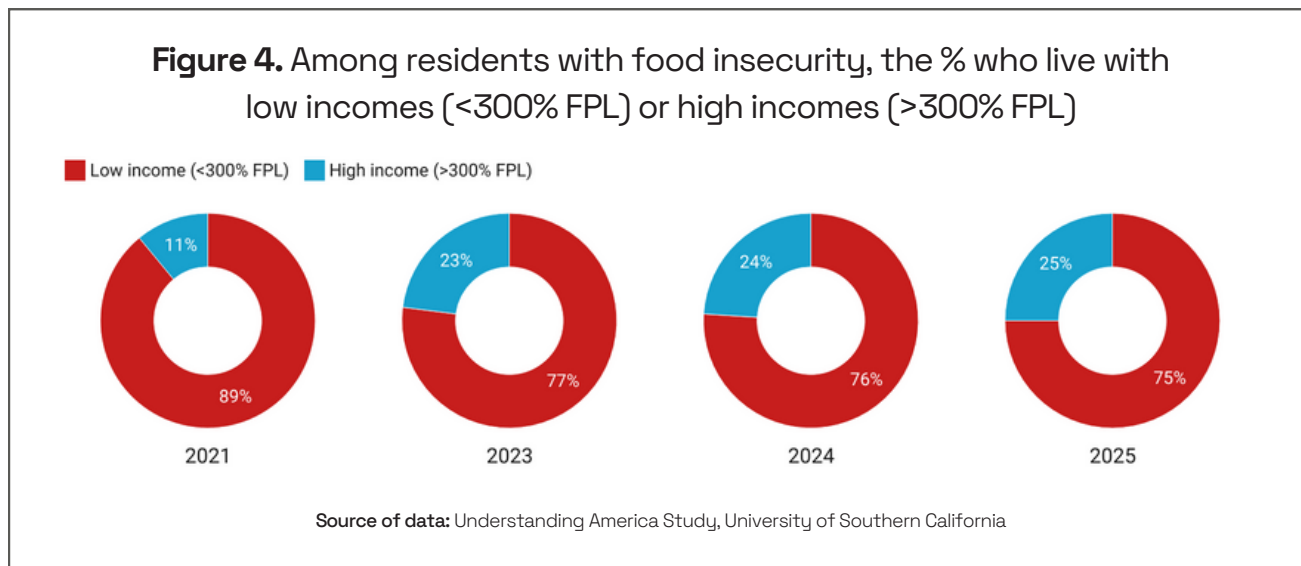
Figure 3. Profiles of Los Angeles County adults who experienced food and nutrition insecurity, October 2025



Source of data: Understanding America Study, University of Southern California



While most residents experiencing food or nutrition insecurity are living in poverty or have low incomes (<300% FPL), a substantial share—25% of those with food insecurity and 31% of those with nutrition insecurity—have incomes above 300% FPL. Historical data show that this group has grown over time and now consistently represents a significant portion of food-insecure households in L.A. County (**Figure 4**). Although food insecurity declined among low-income households from 41% in 2024 to 35% in 2025 (**Figure 1**), the rate among all county households remained essentially unchanged (25% in 2024 and 24% in 2025). This indicates that food insecurity has not improved for higher-income residents.



For context, federal poverty levels (FPL) are updated yearly by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (U.S. DHHS, 2025), and apply to 48 states (Alaska and Hawaii set their own thresholds). In 2025, a household was considered “high-income” (i.e., >300% FPL) if they earned \$46,950/year or more with 1 household member, or \$96,450/year or more with 4 household members, as shown in **Table 1**.

However, the cost of living in L.A. is about 50% more than the national average (CC&ER, 2025), and the estimated required annual income to meet basic needs (food, housing, transportation, medical, etc.) is \$57,841 for 1 adult, and \$135,996 for a household with 2 working adults and 2 children (Glasmeier, 2025). It is likely challenging for many Angelenos in the “high income” >300% FPL bracket to cover their expenses and afford the food they need. Additionally, these high-income households do not qualify for safety net programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Table 1. Household income in US Dollars per year for different federal poverty level (FPL) thresholds and household sizes

Household size	100% FPL	200% FPL	300% FPL	400% FPL
1 person	15,650	31,300	46,950	62,600
4 people	32,150	64,300	96,450	128,600
8 people	54,150	108,300	162,450	216,600



Following the January 2025 wildfires, residents that appeared to be especially vulnerable to food insecurity were those living in poverty, residents with less education, and 1st generation immigrants

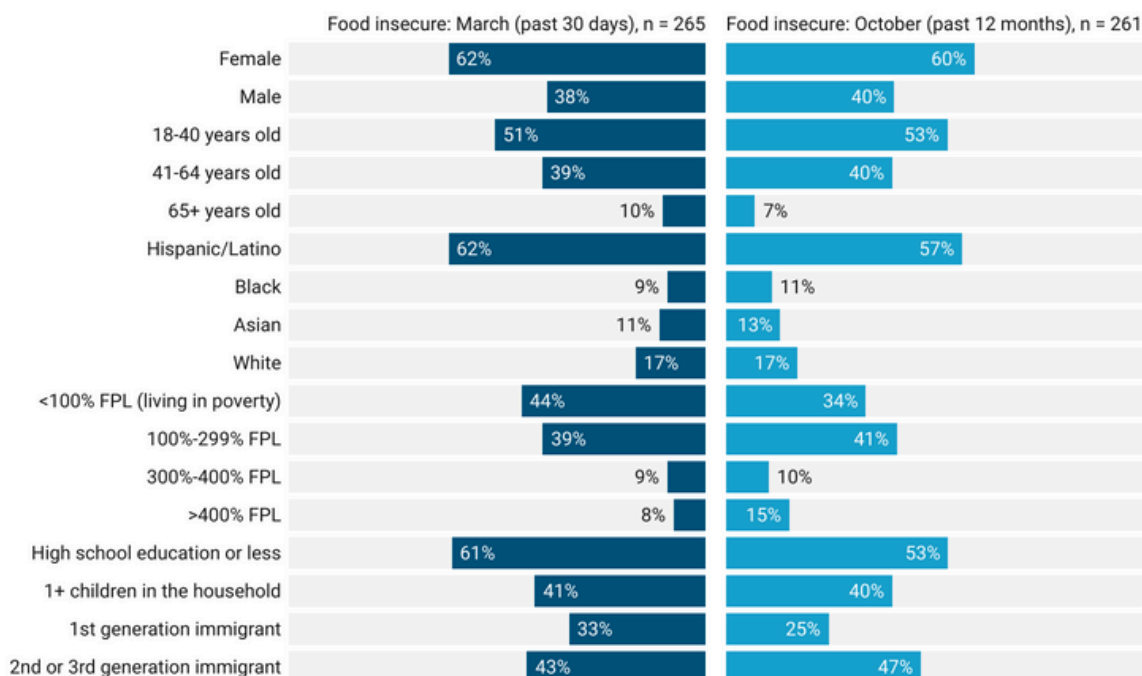
Following the devastating January 2025 wildfires, the Understanding America Study's LABarometer conducted surveys with L.A. County residents from February to March 2025. The surveys asked about many ways in which residents were impacted by the fires, including their experience of food insecurity *in the past 30 days*.

The profiles of residents who experienced food insecurity in March 2025 were similar to the profiles of those experiencing food insecurity throughout the year, from October 2024 - October 2025 (**Figure 5**). In both cases, the majority of those experiencing food insecurity were low-income (<300% FPL), female, younger adults (18-40 year olds), and Hispanic/Latino.

However, **notable differences were that households living in poverty, those with less education, and 1st generation immigrants appeared to have been especially vulnerable to food insecurity following the wildfires.** Specifically, among those who experienced food insecurity in March 2025:

- 44% were living in poverty (<100% FPL), compared to 34% with this characteristic among residents who experienced food insecurity throughout 2025.
- 61% had a high school education or less, compared to 53% with this characteristic among residents who experienced food insecurity throughout 2025.
- 33% were 1st generation immigrants, compared to 25% with this characteristic among residents who experienced food insecurity throughout 2025.

Figure 5. Profiles of Los Angeles County adults who experienced past-month food insecurity in March 2025, compared to those who had experienced food insecurity in the year preceding October 2025



Source of data: Understanding America Study, University of Southern California

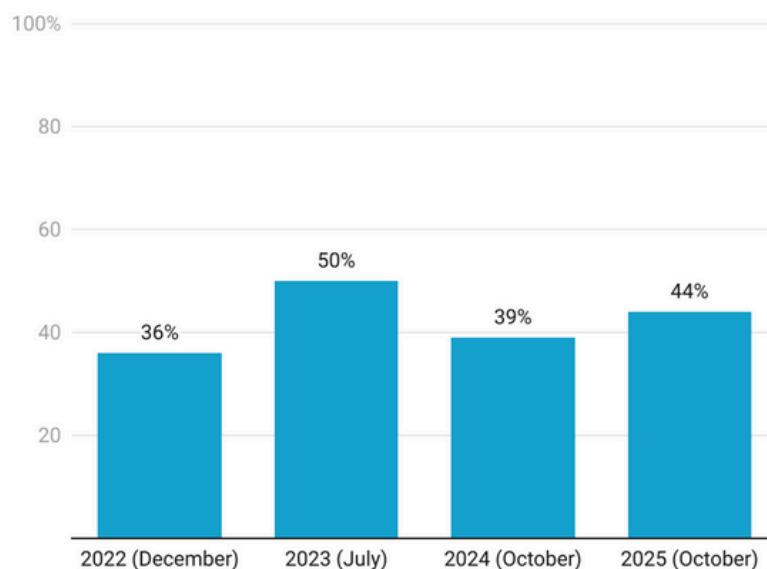


More than 2 in 5 CalFresh recipients experienced food insecurity; a rate that is likely to rise after October 2025

CalFresh, known nationally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), is the country's largest anti-hunger program, serving 41.7 million people nationwide (Pew Research Center, 2025) and 1.5 million people in L.A. County (LAC DPSS, 2025a). Decades of evidence show that the program helps to alleviate food insecurity for households who are enrolled and receive monthly benefits to spend on groceries.

However, many enrolled households still struggle to meet their food needs. In October 2025, 44% of CalFresh recipients in L.A. County remained food insecure, indicating that current benefit levels, combined with household food budgets, are often not enough. Food insecurity among program recipients has fluctuated over time (**Figure 6**), with a notable spike in July 2023 after the end of the pandemic-era boost to SNAP benefits. It is likely that rates of food insecurity among program recipients will rise again due to the lapse in benefits that occurred during the October-November 2025 government shutdown, and as new federal eligibility restrictions and benefit reductions, under H.R. 1, the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act," take effect in 2026 and beyond.

Figure 6. Percent of CalFresh recipients in Los Angeles County who experienced food insecurity from 2022 to 2025



Source of data: Understanding America Study, University of Southern California



Key Insights

In the face of a challenging year, it is important to celebrate progress: food insecurity declined among low-income residents, and nutrition insecurity declined county-wide. These positive shifts potentially reflect the major investments in the food system being made by stakeholders across L.A. County to improve residents' food access, in the face of inflation, high cost of living, and high food prices. For example:

- Since 2023, the county invested over \$20 million from a Food Equity Fund, allocated as grants to more than 80 organizations working on food issues across the region (County of Los Angeles, 2025). In the past two years this has enabled grantees to invest in food production and distribution infrastructure, community gardens and kitchens, nutrition education and outreach, and more.
- The L.A. County Office of Food Systems was established in January 2025 at the directive of the L.A. County Board of Supervisors, and is dedicated to cultivating a fair, resilient, and healthy food system for all county residents. They collaborate with a broad network of stakeholders to address food system challenges across the county, and improve residents' food and nutrition security.

Continued investment across this breadth of the food system is warranted, given food and nutrition insecurity rates remain unacceptably high in L.A. County. Food insecurity also appears to be *increasingly impacting middle-class Angelenos*, who don't qualify for safety net programs and are struggling with the affordability of basic needs like food.



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Recommendations

We recommend pursuing and coordinating actions across local, state, and federal levels, including initiatives that address the following:

- 1. Advance policies that lower the cost of healthy, culturally relevant foods and increase access across neighborhoods.** Continued investment is needed to make nutritious, culturally relevant foods more affordable and widely available. This includes supporting culturally diverse farmers and food businesses, strengthening distribution infrastructure that connects these producers to local retailers and food assistance programs, and expanding incentive programs like Market Match so more Angelenos can afford fresh, healthy foods. Partnerships with culturally tailored retailers can help ensure these programs meet community preferences.

- 2. Build on recent progress by expanding outreach, enrollment, and retention in CalFresh, and identify strategies for state and local benefit protections.** Given that nearly half of CalFresh recipients remained food insecure in 2025 and that federal cuts to SNAP eligibility and benefits are imminent, under recently enacted federal legislation, L.A. County should invest in targeted outreach and application assistance for CalFresh to ensure eligible families are able to enroll and stay enrolled. A recently launched example of this is L.A. County DPSS's [Keep Your Benefits campaign](#) (LAC DPSS, 2025b). We also encourage workforce agencies, regional employers, and community-based organizations to support new initiatives being developed and implemented by L.A. County to help CalFresh/SNAP households maintain benefits as expanded work requirements take effect. In addition, it will be important to identify state and local strategies to protect benefits, expand access where possible, and support community-based and charitable food assistance organizations that will face increasing demand as federal benefits decline.



Recommendations

3. **Invest in nutrition education.** With the recent loss of federal SNAP-Education funding—which previously supported evidence-based nutrition education and cooking, budgeting, and food-resource management skills for CalFresh/SNAP participants—there is an urgent need for state, county, and local investment to fill this gap. Strengthening community-based nutrition education will help residents make informed, healthy choices and build the skills needed to acquire and prepare nutritious meals, complementing broader policy and structural efforts to improve food access and affordability across L.A. County.
4. **Advance policies that increase household financial stability and ensure wages reflect the true cost of living in L.A. County.** Food insecurity remains unacceptably high in part because wages and federal poverty thresholds, which determine eligibility to social assistance programs, fail to match local living costs. Policymakers should support efforts that ensure more Angelenos earn a living wage and explore adjustments to federal poverty level thresholds—or alternative local safety net eligibility criteria—so more residents can qualify for programs like CalFresh.





Recommendations

- 5. Strengthen the capacity of food banks, food pantries, and emergency food providers to respond to disasters and widening benefit gaps.** Food banks and pantries played a critical role following the January wildfires, immigration enforcement actions, and the November SNAP delays that occurred with the federal government shutdown, and will continue to be essential as SNAP cuts from H.R. 1 take effect. Investments are needed to help these organizations expand food distribution (including mobile pantries), reach communities facing displacement or fear of public spaces, and provide support for residents newly excluded from CalFresh, including some immigrant, refugee, and unemployed groups. In particular, continued investments in state-funded food assistance programs—including CalFood, which provides funding to food banks to purchase and distribute California-grown and produced foods—would both strengthen California’s charitable food system and help mitigate the impacts of H.R. 1.
- 6. Invest in local data collection and coordinated action to monitor and strengthen the food system and respond to changing needs.** With national food insecurity monitoring recently discontinued, L.A. County must continue to invest in timely, local survey data and interviews to track the impact of federal policy changes and identify emerging food needs. This data should be triangulated with community and stakeholder knowledge and expertise, to inform countywide action that is essential to support both low- and middle-income households struggling with food and nutrition insecurity. This includes investments across the food system—from food production and distribution (e.g., urban agriculture, community gardens, food hubs) to food retail (e.g., healthy food procurement and sales in corner stores and grocery stores in high-need areas) to consumer education that increases access to and demand for nutritious foods.



Research Methods

This report is based on data from the [Understanding America Study](#) (UAS), administered by the USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research (CESR). UAS respondents are members of a probability-based internet panel who participated in tracking surveys conducted at two time points: 1) between February 2025 and March 2025 2) between August 2025 and October 2025. All respondents are 18 years or older, and sampling is representative of all households in L.A. County. The survey is conducted in English and Spanish. All results are weighted to CPS benchmarks, accounting for sample design and non-response. The weighted sample size for this report ranges from 1357 (March 2025) to 1248 (October 2025). Participants were recruited for the UAS internet panel using an address-based sampling (ABS) method; methodological details for the UAS panel are available at <https://uasdata.usc.edu>. The UAS has been funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the National Institute on Aging, the Social Security Administration, the National Science Foundation, the University of Southern California, and many others who have contributed questions to individual waves or sets of waves.

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