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Research Brief

Food and Nutrition Insecurity in Los Angeles County in 2025



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Disclaimer

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

Introduction

This brief report on the status of food and nutrition insecurity in Los Angeles (L.A.) County is based on data collected in December 2025 through the Understanding America Study. It updates our last report (de la Haye et al., 2025), which was based on data from October 2025 — before the federal government shutdown that caused a lapse in key food assistance programs.

The December 2025 survey found a persistent, and in some ways worsening, picture. In 2025, nearly **1 in 4 (23%) L.A. County households experienced food insecurity**, lacking access to enough food, which often means cutting portions or skipping meals. The rate of nutrition insecurity was the same: 23% of households lacked regular access to nutritious food that supports good health. Low-income households (<300% of the federal poverty level, or FPL) were hit hardest, with more than 1 in 3 (36%) experiencing food insecurity and 1 in 3 (33%) experiencing nutrition insecurity. But affordability pressures are spreading: a rapidly growing share of higher-income households (>300% FPL) have experienced food insecurity since 2021. And the safety net is reaching fewer of the people who need it — only about 1 in 3 households experiencing food or nutrition insecurity received CalFresh in December 2025, and participation is falling as new federal restrictions take effect.

Why does this persist in a wealthy county with an abundant food supply, where more than a third of food goes to waste (FoodCycle LA, 2026)? L.A. County's food insecurity rate remains higher than in most comparable cities, including New York and Chicago (Feeding America, 2026), even though the County sits within one of the most productive agricultural regions in the country for healthy food, including an abundance of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes. Food insecurity is not a failing of individuals, but a problem that communities and societies need to solve. So what should L.A. do differently to fix this paradox of scarcity amid abundance?

We know this problem can be solved. Following significant local, state, and federal investment at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity among low-income households in L.A. County fell from 42% in 2020 to 28% in 2021, back to pre-pandemic levels, demonstrating the impact of coordinated, concentrated investment. Rates rose again once that pandemic-era support ended. The consequences are devastating: in the short term, food and nutrition insecurity mean hunger and stress for our neighbors, children and adults alike. Over the long term, the food people can afford and access shapes diet-related disease and can limit their ability to live a full life as members of our community.

There is progress to celebrate from the past year: food insecurity among low-income households fell from 41% in 2024 to 36% in 2025, and countywide nutrition insecurity fell from 29% in 2024 to 23% in 2025. As during the pandemic, these improvements likely reflect substantial countywide investment and collaboration to strengthen the food system. But this progress is fragile, and rates remain

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Introduction (continued)

unacceptably high. 2025 was also a difficult and volatile year that strained healthy food access in several ways:

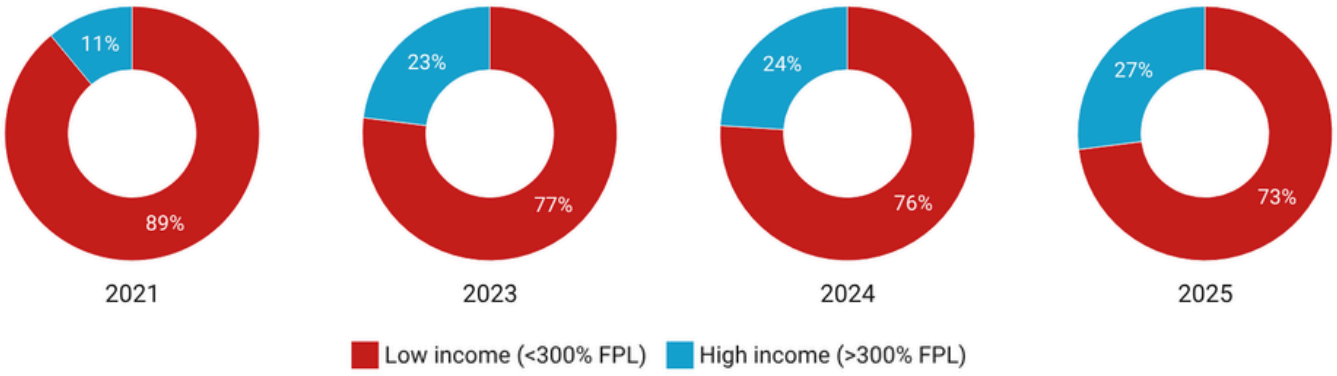
- **Wildfires**. In January, unprecedented wildfires burned 57,500 acres and destroyed more than 18,000 structures, causing significant health and financial impacts.
- **Immigration enforcement.** Highly visible operations and raids across the county kept many immigrant families from public spaces, making it harder to buy groceries or access food assistance, and disrupted the agricultural and broader workforce.
- **Affordability**. Rising costs for food, housing, gas, and other basic needs continued to strain household budgets.
- **Federal policy changes**. In July, the federal budget reconciliation law (H.R. 1, the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act") made major changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known in California as CalFresh. These include expanded work requirements, changed eligibility for some immigrant groups, and additional administrative and benefit costs shifted to states. These changes likely led to reduced participation in this program, which has been proven to reduce food insecurity.
- **Federal shutdown**. During the October 1 to mid-November 2025 federal government shutdown, November CalFresh benefits were delayed, causing widespread uncertainty and strain on families and food banks. Full benefits began reaching recipients in early November following court orders, but some applicants faced longer delays.

Together, these pressures strained families and the community organizations and local governments working to ensure people have access to the food and nutrition they need. They also made the case for sustained, local monitoring, particularly as the federal government terminated the USDA's national food insecurity survey and working group in September 2025, which had tracked food insecurity across the U.S. for nearly 30 years (USDA, 2025). With national monitoring ending, local data are essential to understanding how these pressures are affecting L.A. County residents, whose experiences may differ from those in other regions. This brief summarizes key insights on food and nutrition insecurity in L.A. County in 2025.

Insight 1. Most households experiencing food insecurity have low incomes, but a growing share now have higher incomes too.

In 2025, **23% of L.A. County households experienced food insecurity** (about 786,000 households). Among these 786,000 food insecure households, 73% had low incomes (<300% of the federal poverty level, or FPL) and 27% had higher incomes (>300% FPL). The higher-income share has grown since 2021, from 11% to 27%, with most of that increase occurring between 2021 and 2023, when the share reached 23% (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Among L.A. County households with food insecurity, the percent living with low incomes (<300% FPL) or high incomes (>300% FPL)



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

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Insight 1. (continued)

Federal poverty levels (FPL) are updated yearly by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and apply to 48 contiguous states; Alaska and Hawaii set their own thresholds. In 2025, a household was considered "high income" (>300% FPL) if it earned $46,950 or more per year with 1 household member, or $96,450 or more per year with 4 household members, as shown in Table 1 (U.S. DHHS, 2025).

Table 1. Household income in US Dollars per year for different federal poverty level (FPL) thresholds and household sizes, 2025

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

In L.A. County, it is not hard to see how a household of four (e.g., two working adults and two children) could struggle to make ends meet on a "high income" of $100,000, which is above 300% of the FPL. The estimated annual income needed to cover food, housing, transportation, medical care, and other basic needs for a family like this in L.A. County is $135,996 (Glasmeier, 2025). A household at this income level would also likely not qualify for most safety net programs, including CalFresh.



Insight 2. In 2025, 23% of L.A. County households experienced food insecurity and 23% experienced nutrition insecurity.

Food Security

Food security focuses on whether people have enough to eat.

A household that is food insecure doesn't have enough food; they may cut portions, skip meals, and worry about running out of food.

In L.A. County in 2025:

- **23%** of all households experienced food insecurity (about 786,000 households)
- **36%** of low-income households (<300% FPL) experienced food insecurity

Nutrition Security

Nutrition security focuses on ensuring access to nutritious food, not just enough calories.

A household that is nutrition insecure reports that it is hard for them to regularly eat healthy foods that support their health and wellbeing.

In L.A. County in 2025:

- **23%** of all households experienced nutrition insecurity (about 786,000 households)
- **33%** of low-income households (<300% FPL) experienced nutrition insecurity

Although the two rates are the same — 23% — they don't necessarily describe the same households.

Among the ~786,000 households that experienced *food insecurity* in 2025:

- Two thirds (63%) also experienced nutrition insecurity.
- One third (37%) were nutrition secure: although they didn't have enough food, they *did not* report struggles to eat healthy food.

Among the ~786,000 households that experienced *nutrition insecurity* in 2025:

- Two thirds (63%) also experienced food insecurity.
- One third (37%) were food secure: although they had enough food, they reported it was hard to regularly eat healthy foods.

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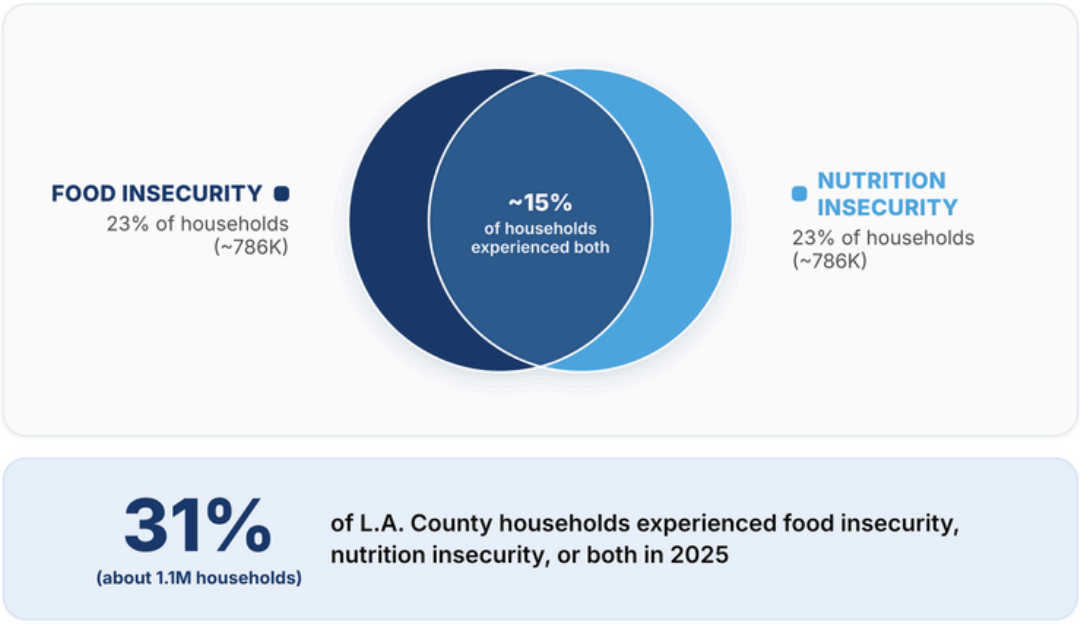
Insight 2. (continued)

Households with food insecurity tend to have lower incomes, while households with nutrition insecurity tend to have somewhat higher incomes and be first-generation immigrants (see Insight 5 for more details).

Altogether, 31% of L.A. County households experienced food insecurity, nutrition insecurity, or both in 2025. The overlap of food and nutrition insecurity is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Food Insecurity and Nutrition Insecurity Overlap Among L.A. County Households, 2025



Source of data: Rates of food and nutrition insecurity are from the Understanding America Study, University of Southern California. L.A. County household counts are from the U.S. Census Bureau (2020-2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates).

Addressing food and nutrition insecurity requires tracking and tackling both the lack of food (food insecurity) and the lack of access to nutritious food (nutrition insecurity). These are related but distinct challenges, and even where they call for different, tailored strategies, those strategies should be coordinated to work alongside each other.

Addressing food and nutrition insecurity matters for residents and for the community as a whole. Going without enough food does not just mean an empty stomach. It can lead to poor-quality diets that damage health, sometimes for life. Adults facing food insecurity are two to three times more likely to have type 2 diabetes and are more likely to live with conditions like heart disease, while children experience more hospital visits, developmental delays, and setbacks in school (Thomas, 2021). Nutrition insecurity also compounds the risk for chronic diet-related diseases (Craig, 2025). These effects also ripple into the wider community, adding an estimated $52 billion a year in health care costs nationwide, a burden shared by families, hospitals, and taxpayers alike (Berkowitz, 2019).

Insight 3. Only about 1 in 3 households who experienced food or nutrition insecurity received CalFresh, and participation is falling.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known as CalFresh in California, is the country's largest anti-hunger program. In 2025, about 1.5 million L.A. County residents participated in CalFresh (LAC DPSS, 2026).

Among the ~786,000 L.A. County households that experienced food insecurity in 2025, 38% were receiving CalFresh benefits in December 2025.

Among the ~786,000 L.A. County households that experienced nutrition insecurity in 2025, 32% were receiving CalFresh benefits in December 2025.

Decades of evidence show that CalFresh helps alleviate food insecurity for enrolled households who receive monthly benefits to spend on groceries. However, some program participants still struggle to meet their food needs: ***among CalFresh recipients in L.A. County, 46% experienced food insecurity and 39% experienced nutrition insecurity in 2025.***

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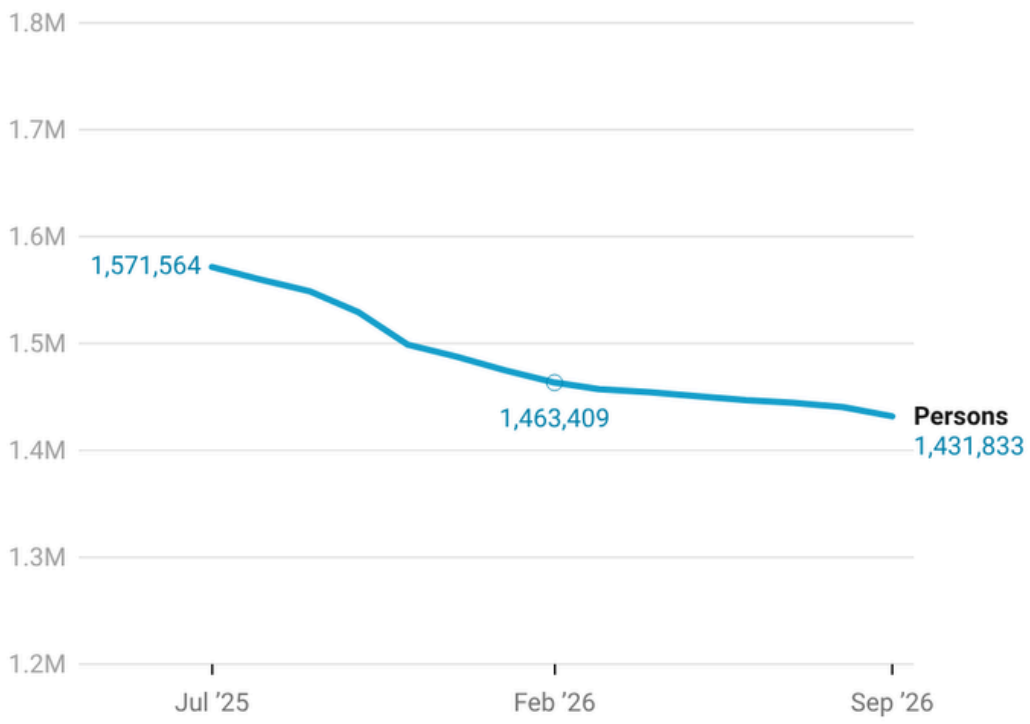
Insight 3. (continued)

In July 2025, H.R. 1 (the One Big Beautiful Bill Act) enacted the largest cuts to SNAP in the program's history. It also introduced stricter work and eligibility rules. These changes create new barriers: direct restrictions on who is eligible, "chilling effects" and confusion that may discourage participation, and administrative burden and churn for the states and counties that run the program. Since then, national SNAP participation fell by 13%, which is about 5.5 million people, including 2 million children (CBPP, 2026). In L.A. County, CalFresh participation fell by about 140,000 people (9%), from 1.57 million in July 2025 to 1.43 million in September 2026 (LAC DPSS, 2026; Figure 3). The decline coincides with the rollout of H.R. 1, and other factors may also play a role. Many of the law's provisions are still taking effect, so participation may continue to fall. A further drop could worsen food and nutrition insecurity and increase demand on charitable food assistance in the coming years.

Figure 3. CalFresh Participating Persons, L.A. County, July 2025 to September 2026



Source of data: Los Angeles County DPSS, DPSS-at-a-Glance

Insight 4. Food insecurity among low-income households and nutrition insecurity have improved since 2024, but rates remain unacceptably high.

Food insecurity, countywide. Since 2022, countywide food insecurity has held relatively steady at 23–25%, with one exception: a spike to 30% in 2023. That spike was likely driven by the end of the pandemic-era boost to CalFresh benefits, which cut the money recipients had for groceries (de la Haye et al., 2023). In 2025, the rate was 23%.

2020	Dec 2021	Dec 2022	Jul 2023	Oct 2024	Dec 2025
34%	17%	24%	30%	25%	23%

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

Food insecurity among low-income households. Almost half of L.A. County households (47%, or about 1.6 million) had low incomes in 2025, defined as below 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL). Because of limited financial resources, low-income households face persistently high rates of food insecurity. Food insecurity among this group has been tracked in the county for about 15 years. In 2018, before the pandemic, 27% of low-income households were food insecure. The rate surged to 42% at the pandemic's onset in 2020, fell back to 28% in 2021, then rose to 44% by mid-2023 as pandemic-era benefits ended. It has since improved for two straight years, to 41% in 2024 and 36% in 2025 (an estimated 576,000 households in 2025). Even so, this rate remains well above the pre-pandemic level (Figure 4).

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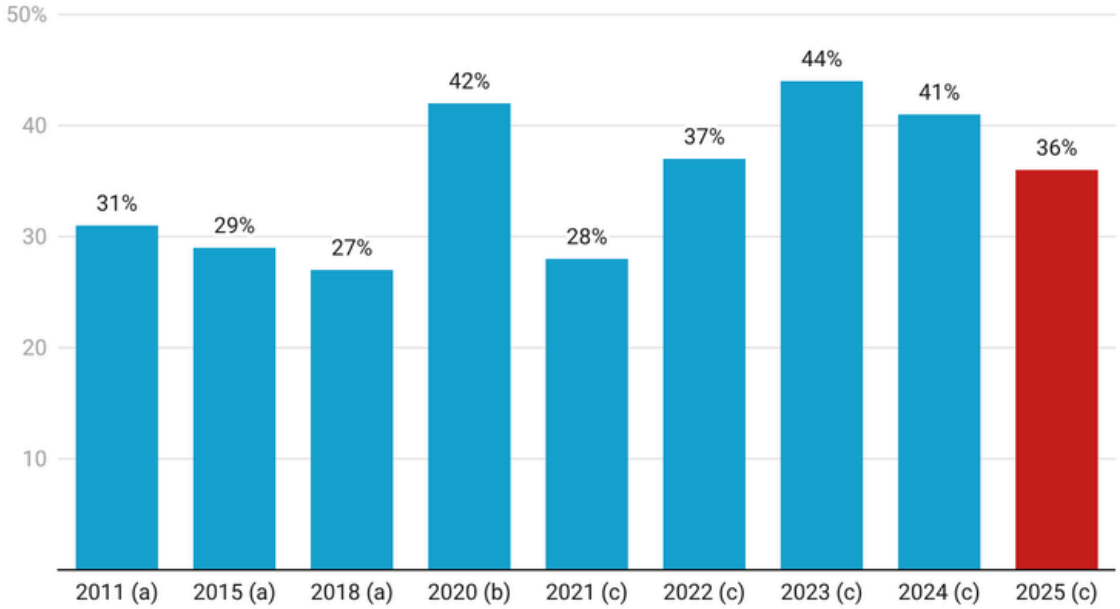
Figure 4. Food insecurity trends among low-income households (<300% FPL) in L.A. County over time



Source of data: [a] Los Angeles County Health Survey, USDA Short Form Household Food Security Module (LAC DPH, 2021); [b] USC Understanding America Study, Food Insecurity Experience Scale; [c] USC Understanding America Study, USDA Short Form Household Food Security Module.

Insight 4. (continued)

Nutrition insecurity, countywide. Nutrition insecurity is a newer measure, tracked in our survey only since 2022. It is less tightly linked to income compared to food insecurity, and can affect households across the income spectrum. The countywide rate of nutrition insecurity fluctuated between 29% and 27% from 2022 to 2024, and then fell to 23% in December 2025 – a meaningful improvement in nutrition security at the county level.

July 2022	July 2023	Oct 2024	Dec 2025
29%	27%	29%	23%

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



Insight 5. Most L.A. County residents facing food and nutrition insecurity in 2025 were low-income, female, and Hispanic/Latino, and many were younger adults.

The majority of residents experiencing **food insecurity** and **nutrition insecurity** throughout 2025 were:

- **Low-income (<300% FPL)**: 73% of those with food insecurity, and 68% of those with nutrition insecurity
- **Female**: 61% of those with food insecurity, and 58% of those with nutrition insecurity
- **Hispanic/Latino**: 56% of those with food insecurity, and 65% of those with nutrition insecurity

Many were also **younger adults** (ages 18–40): 56% of those with food insecurity, and 49% of those with nutrition insecurity.

Households with children accounted for about 35% of food-insecure households and 33% of nutrition-insecure households. **Figure 5** shows additional characteristics of these groups.

Although residents experiencing food insecurity and nutrition insecurity are similar in many ways, they differ along a few dimensions. Food-insecure residents include a higher share of younger adults (18–40 years), Black residents, and low-income residents (<300% FPL), while nutrition-insecure residents include a higher share of older adults (>40 years), Latino residents, and first-generation immigrants.

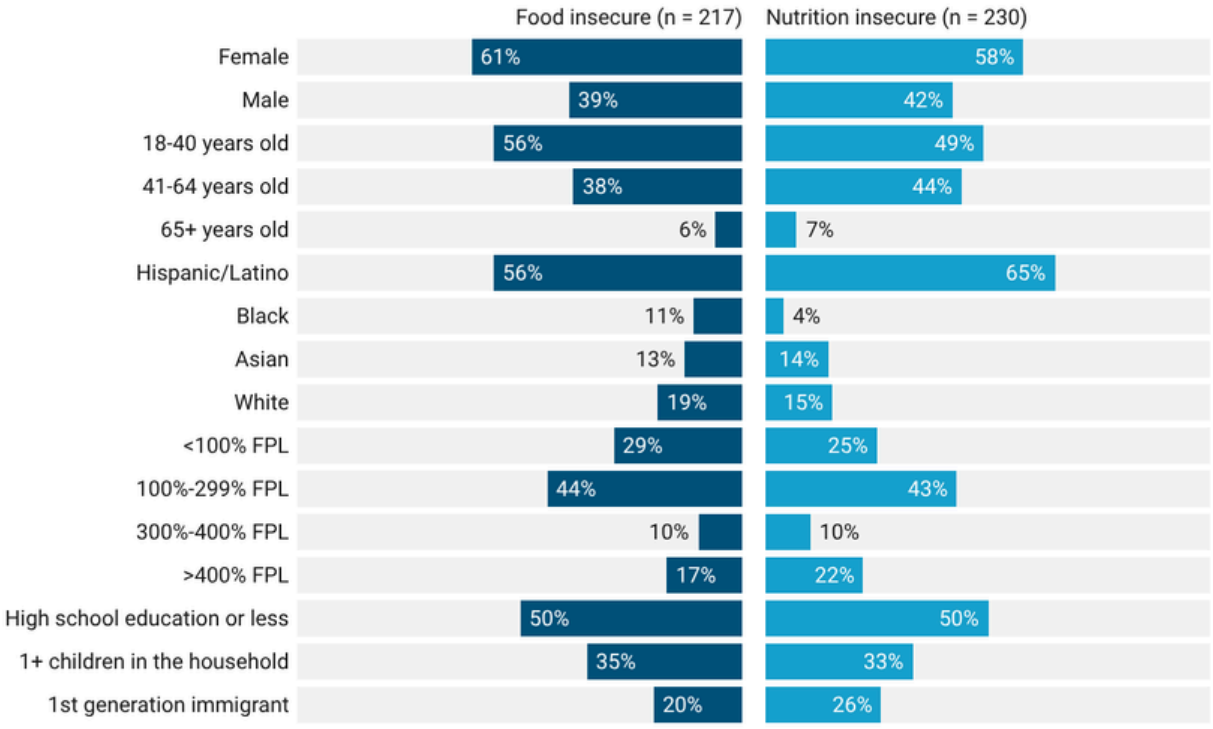


Figure 5. Profiles of L.A. County residents who experienced food and nutrition insecurity, 2025

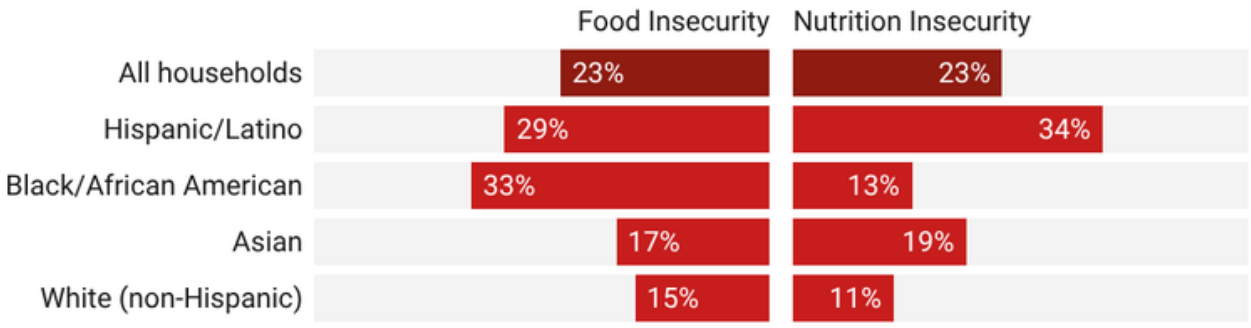
Source of data: Understanding America Study, University of Southern California

Insight 6. Latino and Black residents face about double the rate of food insecurity of white residents, and Latino residents also face especially high rates of nutrition insecurity.

Food and nutrition insecurity have historically been more common among Latino and Black individuals, and these inequities continued in 2025. The rates of food insecurity among Latino (29%) and Black (33%) residents in L.A. County are about double the rate among white residents (15%). The rate of nutrition insecurity is three times as high among Latino residents (34%) compared to white residents (11%).

Among Black residents, rates of food insecurity were notably higher than rates of nutrition insecurity (33% vs. 13%). The opposite was true for Latino residents, who had somewhat higher rates of nutrition insecurity (34%) than food insecurity (29%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Rates of food insecurity and nutrition insecurity by race and ethnicity in L.A. County in 2025



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



Key Conclusions

In a challenging year, there is progress to celebrate: food insecurity among low-income households fell from 41% in 2024 to 36% in 2025, and nutrition insecurity was lower than in 2024 (23% vs. 29% in 2024). These gains may reflect major efforts by government and community food leaders, including the **L.A. County Food Equity Fund** (more than $20 million to over 80 organizations since 2023) and the Affordable Healthy Food Initiatives of the **L.A. County Office of Food Systems**, established in January 2025.

However, food and nutrition insecurity remain a crisis for too many L.A. County residents, and a crisis we need to solve. About 786,000 households (23%) experienced food insecurity in 2025, including more than 1 in 3 low-income households. At the same time, progress is uneven: while there have been some improvements noted above, countywide food insecurity has changed little, and other challenges either persist or are newly emerging:

- more than a quarter of food-insecure households now have incomes above 300% FPL and may not qualify for safety net programs;
- Latino and Black residents experience food insecurity at about twice the rate of white residents;
- CalFresh reaches only about 1 in 3 households affected by food or nutrition insecurity, and participation fell by about 140,000 people since July 2025, when H.R. 1 was passed.

These are not private failings. The evidence shows that the clearest drivers are income and the cost of living: wages and federal poverty thresholds fall short of what it takes to live in L.A. County, and policy choices, often made outside the County, determine who gets help. The question for L.A. County is what we will do together so that every neighbor has enough nutritious food to live a full and healthy life.



Food and nutrition insecurity remain a crisis for too many L.A. County residents, and a crisis we need to solve.

Recommendations

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

1. **Invest in healthy food to lower its cost.** Many L.A. County households struggle to afford nutritious, culturally relevant food. Higher-income households are a growing share of those affected: many earn too much to qualify for CalFresh, yet still face real financial barriers to buying healthy food. The public and civil society sectors are investing, and should continue to invest, in dedicated food hubs and distribution models that connect local producers to retailers and food assistance programs at cost; in increasing local and healthy food procurement at scale; and in expanding incentive programs like Market Match, which matches CalFresh dollars spent at farmers markets. Investment in food hub and distribution infrastructure lowers the aggregation, storage, and logistics costs that would otherwise pass on to buyers, while procurement at scale strengthens buying power — together narrowing the price gap between local, healthy food and conventional options. Scaling these efforts further, alongside sustained public investment, is key to making healthy food truly accessible and affordable countywide.

2. **Strengthen household financial stability.** Lack of income is a primary driver of food insecurity, and federal poverty thresholds do not reflect local costs: a household of four is “high income” at $96,450, yet an estimated $135,996 is needed to cover basic needs in L.A. County. Support living wages, explore adjusting poverty thresholds or local eligibility criteria so more households can qualify for programs like CalFresh, and expand guaranteed income pilots that help free up money for food.

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Recommendations (continued)

3. **Protect CalFresh access and backfill lost benefits locally.** Continue and expand outreach, enrollment, and retention efforts like DPSS's Keep Your Benefits campaign, and support employers and community organizations helping households meet new work requirements. Because CalFresh participation is falling despite its proven ability to reduce food insecurity, and existing benefit levels don't fully meet the food needs of all participants (46% still experienced food insecurity), local governments should also consider a capped pilot monthly food benefit, delivered through existing EBT and DPSS systems, for income-eligible residents who lose CalFresh because of H.R. 1. It could draw on county and city funds, philanthropy, health system partners, and county health revenue such as Measure ER, and expand if local survey data show impact.

4. **Replace lost nutrition education funding.** H.R. 1 eliminated federal SNAP-Ed funding for nutrition education and food skills, such as cooking and budgeting. Although short-term local funding (e.g., $9M from the Care First Community Investment) has partly offset this loss, ongoing state and local investment is needed to sustain programs that help residents buy and prepare healthy food on a budget, and that build consumer demand for nutritious foods.

5. **Strengthen food banks and pantries, and reach people falling through the cracks.** Food banks and pantries were critical responders to the wildfires, immigration enforcement, and the November 2025 CalFresh delays, and will face rising demand as people lose or avoid CalFresh. Invest in their capacity — including mobile distribution and home delivery — and in state and local programs that reach residents newly excluded from federal assistance, as well as communities afraid to use public spaces.

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Recommendations (continued)

6. **Keep investing in local data and coordinated action.** With national food insecurity monitoring discontinued, L.A. County needs timely local survey data and interviews to track how federal changes affect residents and identify emerging needs. Combined with community and stakeholder knowledge, this can guide action across the food system, from production and distribution (such as urban agriculture, community gardens, and food hubs) to retail and consumer education.



Research Methods

This report is based on data from the Understanding America Study (UAS), administered by the USC Center for Economic and Social Research (CESR). UAS respondents are members of a probability-based internet panel who participated in tracking surveys conducted between December 1 and December 31, 2025. Food security was measured using the USDA U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module: Six-Item Short Form. Nutrition security was measured using the Nutrition Security Screener (Craig, 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. The sample size for this report is 1,142, and all results are weighted to CPS benchmarks, accounting for sample design and non-response. 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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