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Issue Brief

Reaching Those Missing Out on CalFresh

Who Is Likely Under-Enrolled in LA County, and How to Reach Them

Based on data from the USC Understanding America Study (UAS) · Los Angeles County · 2024–2026



November 2026

Supported by: ANGELL FOUNDATION

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Acknowledgements

This work was supported by an award from the Angell Foundation (AG-2508-03188) and by the University of Southern California (USC) Dornsife Public Exchange. We would also like to acknowledge the USC Schaeffer Center for Economic and Social Research, which administers the Understanding America Study and provided support for the data collection and analysis.

Disclaimer

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

Research Methods

This report is based on data from the **Understanding America Study** (UAS), administered by the USC Schaeffer 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: July–October 2024 and February–April 2025. All respondents are 18 years or older, and sampling is representative of all households in LA 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 1408 (2024) to 1165 (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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The Challenge

CalFresh — California's version of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) — provides monthly food assistance to low-income individuals and families. Media campaigns, community outreach, and referral strategies have increasingly been used to reach eligible households. Perhaps as a result, the estimated percentage of qualifying households enrolled in CalFresh increased *in the last decade*, from 47% in 2010 to 82% in 2021 (California DSS, 2026).

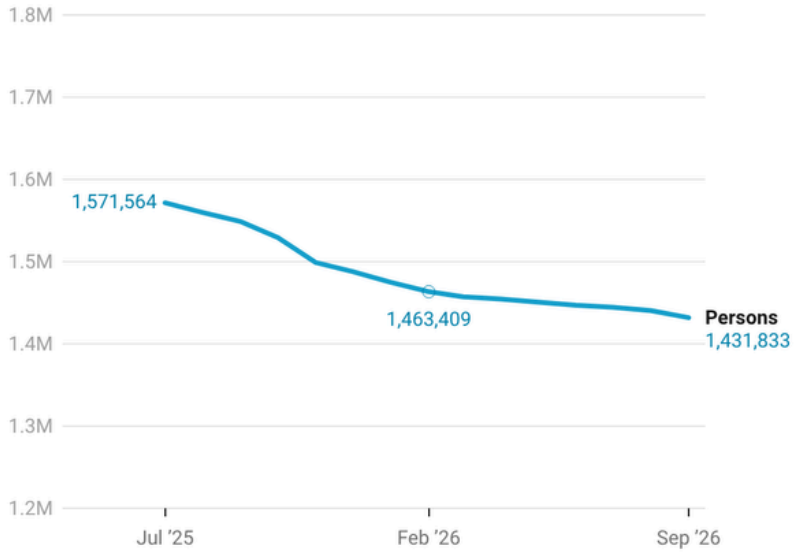
In the past year, new challenges have emerged. In July 2025, the passage of H.R.1 (*the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, OBBBA*) resulted in the largest cuts to SNAP in the program's history. The bill also introduced stricter work and eligibility rules. Together, these changes are creating new barriers: direct restrictions on who is eligible, indirect "chilling effects" and confusion that discourage participation, and administrative burden and churn for states and municipalities that run the program. Nationally, this has led to a 13% decline in SNAP use since H.R. 1 passed, with participation falling by 5.5 million people — including about 2 million children (CBPP, 2026). The number of Los Angeles (LA) County residents participating in CalFresh dropped by about 140,000 (9%) — from 1.57 million in July 2025 to 1.43 million in September 2026 (**Figure 1**, Source: LA County DPSS, 2026).

Amidst these challenges, this brief summarizes the results of a study profiling who in LA County may be eligible for CalFresh but not enrolled, and revisits strategies for reaching them.

"Likely Eligible" vs. Actually Eligible

This study's goal was to broadly **identify residents worth reaching through CalFresh outreach** — people we'd want to make aware of the program and encourage to seek out information and check their own eligibility. **Thus, the report uses a lenient, income-based definition of "likely eligible." People's actual eligibility depends on additional factors,** including immigration status and work requirements for some adults, so we treat this group as people who may qualify rather than people who we can confirm are eligible.

Figure 1. CalFresh Participating Persons: Los Angeles County, July 2025 to September 2026



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

The Approach

We summarize the results of surveys and interviews with county residents from low-income households, who were recruited through the USC Understanding America Study (UAS). We compare two groups of low-income households: (i) those who are currently **enrolled** in CalFresh, and (ii) those who appear to be "**under-enrolled**," meaning that they may be eligible for CalFresh but are not enrolled.

How did we determine who is likely "under-enrolled" in CalFresh?

First, we identified survey respondents who were **"likely eligible" for CalFresh**. Income is one of the primary factors determining eligibility, and the one we can observe directly in our survey data, so we used it to define two eligibility thresholds:

> A '**lenient**' definition: household income below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) — about $64,300 a year for a family of four in 2025.

> A '**conservative**' definition: household income below 150% of the FPL.

Next, we looked at the respondents who met the lenient eligibility definition. Within that group, we identified someone as likely "**under-enrolled**" if they reported *not receiving CalFresh benefits in the past month*. Again, people's actual eligibility depends on additional factors, including immigration status and work requirements for some adults, so we treat this group as people who may qualify rather than people who we can confirm are eligible.

There are many benefits to closing the CalFresh enrollment gap in LA County

For individuals and households

CalFresh participants receive money they can spend on food and groceries. The program lifts households out of food insecurity and financial hardship, and can improve self-rated health, lower feelings of distress, reduce health care use, and improve children's development (Carlson, 2022). For households who are not food insecure — i.e., who are not struggling with hunger and skipping meals — but who may be struggling with affordability and covering living expenses, the extra money for food can help alleviate other financial pressures and help to put healthy and nutritious food more within reach.

For the community

Historically, CalFresh has brought roughly $3.5 billion in federal dollars into LA County each year. This money is spent at local grocers, food retailers, and farmers markets. Every $1 of CalFresh benefits is estimated to generate about $1.50 in economic activity (Canning, 2019). Connecting eligible residents to these federal benefits also relieves pressure on our overburdened food banks and pantries — which continue to report record numbers of people seeking help — allowing them to focus their resources on households facing acute food emergencies rather than filling gaps the federal program is designed to cover.

Insight #1: CalFresh outreach should target the ~785,000 households that may be eligible but not enrolled

~512-854K*
LA County Households likely eligible for CalFresh but **not** enrolled from 2024 - 2025

Based on UAS survey income data from 2024 and 2025, an estimated 38–40% of LA County households are likely eligible for CalFresh. Of those, only about one-third were actually enrolled, while two-thirds were not.

The latest data from 2025 indicate that about 785,000 households in LA County are likely under-enrolled, meaning that they may be eligible for CalFresh, but are not enrolled and thus not receiving benefits they may qualify for.

*This gap was consistent across both 2024 and 2025 data, with the size of the gap dependent upon whether income eligibility was defined at 150% or 200% of the FPL.



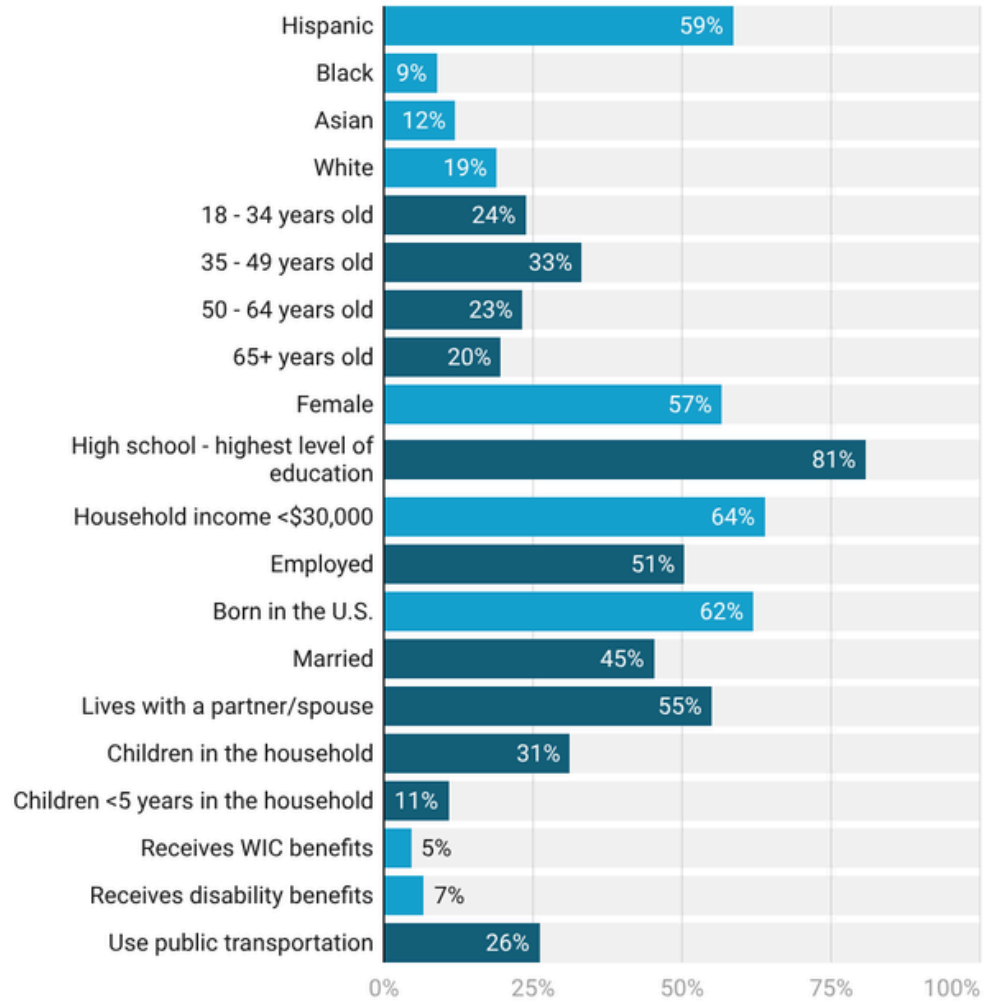
Insight #2: The profile of under-enrolled residents is diverse, yet certain segments like Hispanic residents, young adults, and foreign-born residents are most likely to be left out

The **majority** of residents who are likely under-enrolled are:

- Hispanic
- 18 – 49 years old
- Female
- High school diploma as highest level of education
- Employed, with household incomes under $30,000
- Born in the U.S.
- Living with a spouse or partner
- Don't have children in the household
- Not receiving WIC or disability benefits

The data paint a portrait of LA County adult residents who live in households that may be under-enrolled in CalFresh (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2. Profile of Los Angeles County residents who may be under-enrolled in CalFresh, 2025



Source: Understanding America Study

Insight #2: The profile of under-enrolled residents is diverse, yet certain segments like Hispanic residents, young adults, and foreign-born residents are most likely to be left out (cont'd)

Residents at higher risk of under-enrollment

By comparing LA County residents who were successfully enrolled in CalFresh vs. those who may be eligible but were ***not*** enrolled, we identified **specific characteristics associated with a higher risk of under-enrollment** (listed below, and in **Figure 3**). Because the patterns were consistent across both 2024 and 2025, only data from 2025 are presented below. These community segments may need more targeted outreach to help close their disproportionate participation gaps.

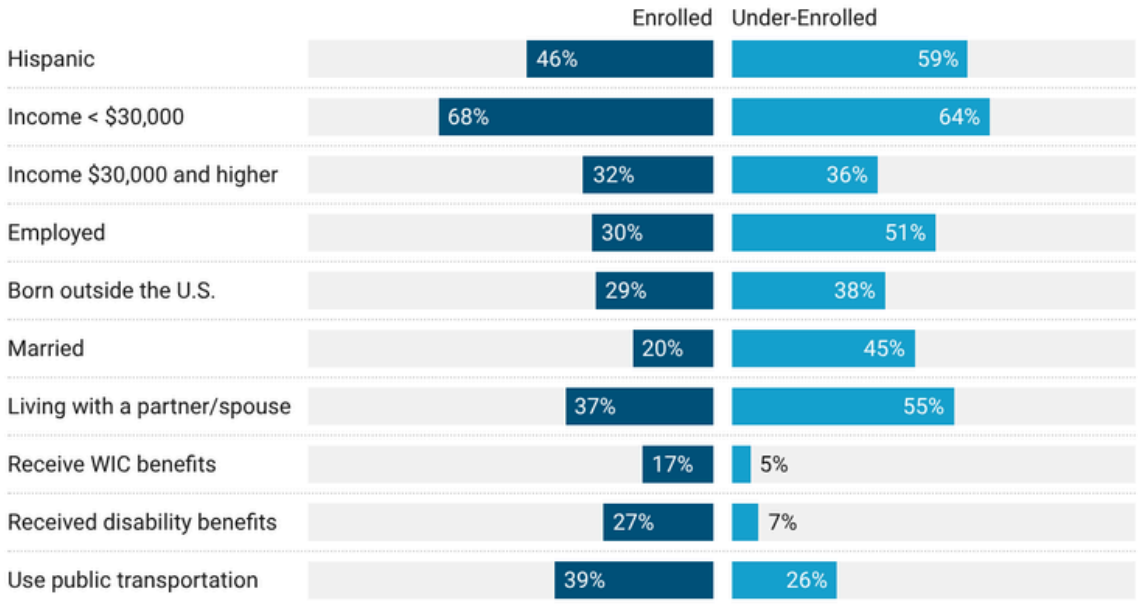
Race & Ethnicity

Hispanic residents are substantially over-represented among likely under-enrolled households. While Hispanics make up 46% of enrolled households, they account for 59% of under-enrolled households. Non-Hispanic white residents show the opposite pattern — more represented among enrolled (26%) than under-enrolled (19%).

Income

Residents in under-enrolled households tended to have somewhat higher incomes than those enrolled: those with household incomes at or above $30,000 make up 36% of under-enrolled households, and 32% of enrolled households.

Figure 3. Comparing Characteristics of Los Angeles County Residents Enrolled vs. Under-Enrolled in CalFresh, 2025



Source: Understanding America Study

Insight #2: The profile of under-enrolled residents is diverse, yet certain segments like Hispanic residents, young adults, and foreign-born residents are most likely to be left out (cont'd)

Employment Status

Employment is one of the strongest predictors of under-enrollment. About half (51%) of under-enrolled individuals are employed, compared to only 30% of enrolled individuals. This suggests that working individuals or families with low household incomes may not realize they qualify — a perception that emerged in our qualitative research, with individuals making statements like "I think because I work and dad works, so I feel like I'm not eligible." Working individuals and families may also face other barriers to applying. As one interviewee stated, "I don't have the bandwidth." H.R.1 also now requires a higher share of CalFresh participants to be employed, making this a particularly important group to reach.

Nativity

About 38% of under-enrolled individuals were born outside the United States, compared to 29% of enrolled individuals, making foreign-born residents notably over-represented among those who may qualify but have not enrolled.

Public Transit Use

About 26% of under-enrolled individuals reported that they used public transportation in the past year, compared to 39% of enrolled individuals, meaning that residents who do not use public transit are over-represented among those who may qualify but have not enrolled.

Household Benefits

Household enrollment in other public programs is also strongly associated with being enrolled in CalFresh. This suggests that benefits navigation and cross-program outreach have been an effective strategy to increase participation in CalFresh in the past. Indeed, in our qualitative research, CalFresh recipients often described having been connected to the program through Medi-Cal: *"I knew about the medical [insurance] California has, and when I was applying for that, I was informed about CalFresh."* However, future efforts may also need to prioritize reaching households under-enrolled in CalFresh that *are not already engaged* with other safety net programs.

- WIC benefits: Only 5% of under-enrolled households receive WIC benefits, compared to 17% of enrolled households. Those already connected to WIC appear significantly more likely to also be enrolled in CalFresh.

- Disability benefits: Only 7% of under-enrolled households receive disability benefits, compared to 27% of enrolled households. As with WIC, existing benefits connections are strongly linked to CalFresh enrollment.

Insight #3: Under-enrolled residents face nutrition and health challenges

Among LA County residents who are likely under-enrolled in CalFresh, almost **1 in 3 (31%) reported experiencing food insecurity in 2024**, meaning they lacked access to enough affordable food.

In 2025, they also listed diet-related health challenges that CalFresh may help to address: more than 1 in 3 (35%) had high blood pressure, and more than 1 in 5 (22%) had diabetes.

LA County residents who are likely under-enrolled report somewhat better overall health than those already enrolled in CalFresh. Even so, only 39% of those under-enrolled rated their health as very good or excellent in 2025. This suggests that medical settings are potentially a high-impact context for CalFresh outreach.

Insight #4: Under-enrolled residents were affected by the 2025 wildfires

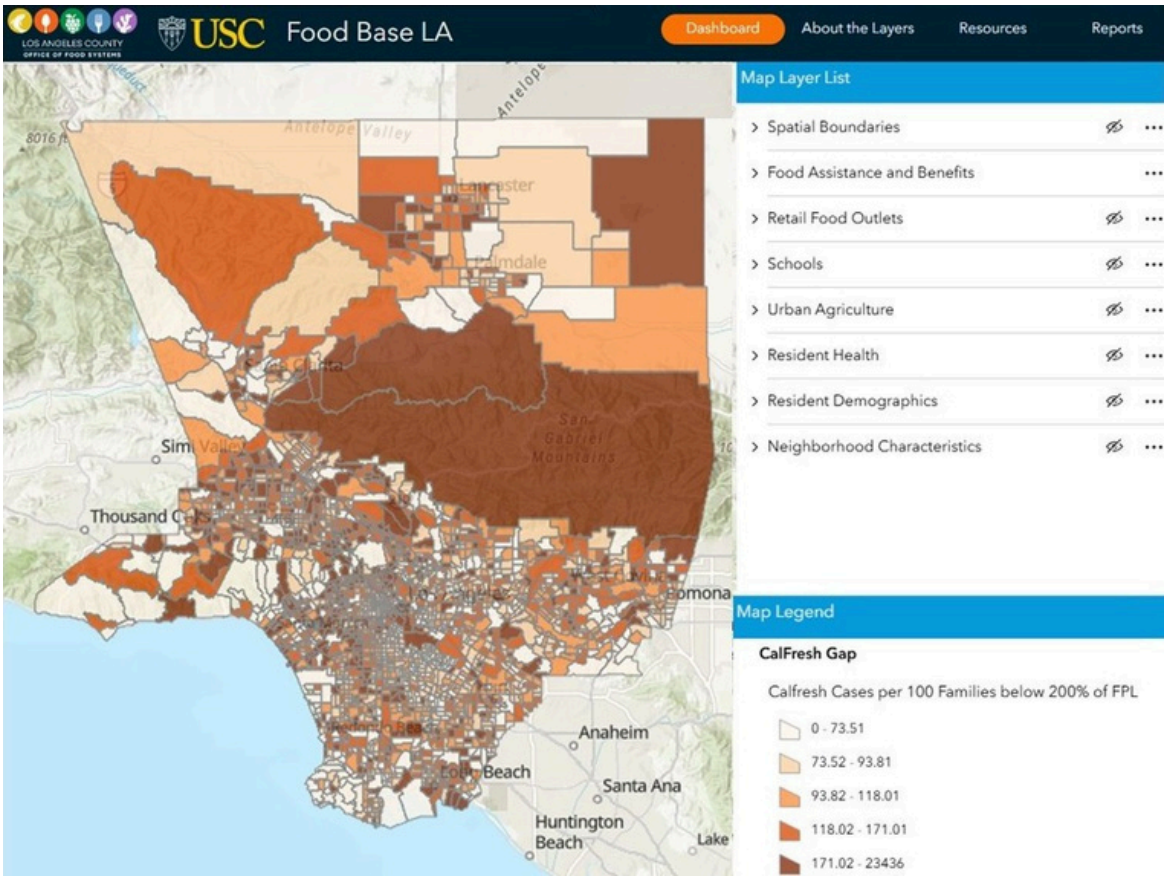
A notable share of the LA County residents who may be under-enrolled in CalFresh were affected by the January 2025 wildfires. Residents who were likely under-enrolled in 2025 reported the following wildfire impacts:

- 8% had been evacuated from their homes
- 18% reported negative health impacts
- 11% reported negative financial impacts

Ensuring CalFresh outreach continues to be connected to wildfire recovery efforts remains an important strategy to reach this segment of under-enrolled residents.

Insight #5: Under-enrolled residents live in clusters and in both low- and high-income neighborhoods

Targeting CalFresh outreach geographically may also be an effective strategy. Residents who are likely under-enrolled in CalFresh are scattered throughout high-income neighborhoods, and are also clustered in South LA, East LA, and the San Gabriel Valley. In the map below, **lighter census tracts** have the fewest CalFresh Cases per 100 households living below 200% FPL — meaning the largest share of likely-eligible residents that are not enrolled (i.e., the biggest 'CalFresh Gap').



An interactive map that allows you to zoom in on areas with a high CalFresh Gap can be accessed via the Food Base LA dashboard here.

Zooming out to the **city level**, there are high rates of under-enrollment in CalFresh in cities with both high and low wealth. **Table 1** lists cities based on their level of likely under-enrollment in CalFresh. Cities with the highest under-enrollment are highlighted in red, and include wealthy cities like Palos Verdes Estates (median household income: $242,014) and La Cañada Flintridge (median household income: $241,875) as well as cities with much lower levels of wealth like South El Monte (median household income: $72,990) and Bell (median household income: $61,020).

Table 1. Cities across LA County with the highest to lowest levels of under-enrollment in CalFresh, based on their CalFresh Gap (lower number = larger gap)

Highest under-enrollment		Above average under-enrollment		Below average under-enrollment		Lowest under-enrollment	
City	CalFresh Gap	City	CalFresh Gap	City	CalFresh Gap	City	CalFresh Gap
Palos Verdes Estates	23	Westlake Village	86	Downey	110	Irwindale	143
Rolling Hills	31	Paramount	89	City of Industry	114	Long Beach	151
San Marino	34	Manhattan Beach	91	Beverly Hills	114	Carson	152
Hidden Hills	39	Monterey Park	92	La Mirada	114	Pasadena	153
La Habra Heights	57	Artesia	93	Whittier	116	Compton	156
Bradbury	60	Lawndale	94	Cerritos	116	Signal Hill	157
Bell Gardens	62	Malibu	95	Santa Fe Springs	117	Norwalk	159
El Segundo	62	La Puente	95	Pico Rivera	119	Lomita	166
Maywood	66	Temple City	101	Glendora	120	Burbank	167
Cudahy	68	Torrance	103	Hermosa Beach	121	Inglewood	168
Bell	68	Alhambra	103	Gardena	121	Santa Monica	171
Walnut	70	Rosemead	104	Covina	125	Glendale	176
Arcadia	70	Montebello	104	Palmdale	125	El Monte	188
Rolling Hills Estates	71	Baldwin Park	106	Calabasas	126	Redondo Beach	198
Huntington Park	71	San Gabriel	106	Sierra Madre	127	Culver City	198
Rancho Palos Verdes	72	Bellflower	106	San Dimas	128	Lancaster	236
Agoura Hills	77	Monrovia	107	Lakewood	128	Los Angeles	253
La Cañada Flintridge	78	Azusa	107	Duarte	129	Pomona	279
South Gate	79	South Pasadena	107	West Covina	134	Vernon	309
South El Monte	79	Diamond Bar	107	Claremont	135	Hawthorne	576
Lynwood	80	La Verne	108	Santa Clarita	137	West Hollywood	611
Hawaiian Gardens	82	Commerce	108				
San Fernando	82						

Note: Cities are grouped into four groups (quartiles) based on their **CalFresh Gap**, which is the number of CalFresh Cases per 100 families <200% of the federal poverty line (FPL) in 2022 (*Source: County of Los Angeles*). Because there are often multiple 'CalFresh Cases' (people) per household, and the average household size in LA County is 2.8 (*Source: U.S. Census, 2025*), the statistic can go well over 100 (where 100 = an average of 1 case per household).

The "highest under-enrollment" group in red has the *lowest* CalFresh Gap numbers (i.e., the least CalFresh cases per 100 families living below 200% FPL). The "lowest under-enrollment" group in green has the highest CalFresh Gap numbers (i.e., the most CalFresh cases per 100 families living below 200% FPL).

Insight #6: South LA, Antelope Valley, and East LA are the Service Planning Areas with some of the greatest food needs

Regions for targeted outreach for CalFresh should also include those where substantial CalFresh gaps are coupled with other barriers to food access, such as relatively high food insecurity, a high ratio of food deserts, and other neighborhood health vulnerabilities. ***The three Service Planning Areas (SPAs) with the highest overall food risks are South, Antelope Valley, and East*** (**Table 2**). San Gabriel is also a SPA with a low CalFresh Gap, indicating greater under-enrollment in CalFresh.

Table 2. Food-Access Risk Across LA County Service Planning Areas

SPA	CalFresh Gap (lower = larger gap)	% Food Insecure	% Food Deserts	Healthy Places Index	Overall Food Risk Score
West	330	9.8	0	0.74	**4**
San Fernando	176	13.6	0.2	0.53	**8**
San Gabriel	129	12	0.2	0.49	**9**
Metro	327	16.3	0.1	0.39	**9**
South Bay	183	12.3	0.2	0.51	**9**
East	107	13.2	0.3	0.38	**12**
Antelope Valley	171	13.8	0.6	0.3	**14**
South	149	16.8	0.5	0.14	**15**

CalFresh Gap: CalFresh Cases per 100 families <200% of the federal poverty line (FPL) in 2022 (*Source: County of Los Angeles*)
% Food Insecure: the estimated percent of residents who experienced food insecurity in 2022 (*Source: Feeding America*)
% Food Deserts: the percent of households living in a low-income, low-access food desert (*Source: USDA*)
Healthy Places Index (HPI) 3.0: a score by census tract that combines 25 community characteristics, like access to healthcare, housing, education, and more, into a single indexed HPI score. The healthier a community, the higher the HPI score (*Source: Public Health Alliance*)
Overall Food Risk Score: a combined score of the level of risk across the four indicators, with higher scores indicating the highest level of barriers to nutritious food access.

Implications for Outreach & Policy

These findings have direct implications for how LA County agencies and community organizations use their limited resources to approach CalFresh outreach:

Prioritize Hispanic and Latino communities

Given the large over-representation of Hispanic residents among under-enrolled households, outreach materials and messages should be culturally tailored, with investment in Spanish-language materials and trusted community messengers, such as community organizations, schools, faith-based organizations, and health clinics serving Hispanic and Latino residents.

Continue to strengthen cross-program referrals, but also invest in reaching households outside of the safety net

Cross-program referrals through Medi-Cal, WIC, and other benefit programs appear successful and should continue to be prioritized and strengthened through broad networks of case workers, social workers, and program staff. However, because many of those who remain under-enrolled in CalFresh are not receiving these benefits, strategies that also reach those with no safety net connection will be important — a goal that the workplace, healthcare, and community-based channels described below are well-suited to meet.

Target working families

The high rate of employment among under-enrolled individuals suggests that many working families with low incomes may not know they qualify. Conduct outreach at workplaces in low-wage sectors, job centers and fairs, and training centers, with clear messaging on eligibility for working families to encourage enrollment. Now that H.R.1 has implemented more extensive CalFresh work requirements, this outreach context is particularly important.

Leverage healthcare settings & trusted health workers

Healthcare settings are a near-universal touchpoint, and the meaningful share of under-enrolled residents managing diet-related chronic conditions makes community clinics and health workers a useful channel for connecting people to CalFresh — an appealing program for those looking to afford more nutritious food.

Reach people at moments of transition

Residents often become newly eligible or newly receptive during life changes, when they are already engaging with systems that can connect them to CalFresh: e.g., job loss (workplace and unemployment offices), a new diabetes diagnosis (healthcare screening), or childbirth (alongside WIC and Medi-Cal enrollment). Because many under-enrolled residents are working and outside the safety net, employment- and health-related moments are especially valuable for reaching households other channels miss.

Implications for Outreach & Policy (cont'd)

Address immigration-related concerns

The higher share of foreign-born residents among the under-enrolled calls for culturally sensitive outreach, which should address fears about public charge rules. This matters more now: under a DHS final rule effective September 18, 2026, CalFresh use can count as one negative factor in green-card and admission decisions (DHS final rule, Federal Register, July 20, 2026). Because this will affect only a subset of immigrants, outreach should clarify who is and isn't at risk, and connect affected families to trusted immigration legal counsel, so that fear doesn't drive away eligible residents who could safely enroll.

Prioritize community and digital advertising and messaging channels

Since approximately 74% of under-enrolled residents do not use public transit, outreach through digital tools (e.g., social media, targeted online campaigns, text messaging, and online screening tools) and community channels is likely to be more effective than transit advertising for reaching under-enrolled populations.

Reach eligible residents across neighborhoods of every income level, and target the highest under-enrollment communities directly

Under-enrollment does not map neatly onto neighborhood wealth. It clusters geographically — in South LA, East LA, and the San Gabriel Valley. Yet the cities with the highest under-enrollment span the income spectrum, from wealthy communities to lower-income ones. Outreach therefore cannot assume eligible residents live only in predominantly low-income areas. County-wide digital and mass-media campaigns are needed to reach the eligible households scattered across higher-income neighborhoods, while place-based tools such as mobile enrollment trucks can target the identified high under-enrollment clusters directly.

Address post-disaster vulnerability

The wildfire-related health impacts among residents who are under-enrolled in CalFresh suggest an ongoing need for proactive enrollment outreach in disaster recovery contexts.



Recommended Strategies for Outreach and Messaging

These survey findings, combined with qualitative interviews and behavioral science, informed a companion resource: "Strategy Guide: The 5 W's of Increasing CalFresh Enrollment in LA County." The strategies were developed by triangulating this demographic and geographic profile with in-depth interviews with 30 LA County residents (16 enrolled in CalFresh and 14 who were likely eligible but not enrolled) and established behavioral science. The Strategy Guide details who to reach, where, when, and how; its main conclusions not already covered above include:

Segment by readiness, not just demographics

Two groups need different messages:

> **Residents unaware of CalFresh or their potential eligibility** primarily need more awareness that "you may qualify." Messages like *"You might be surprised what you qualify for. Ask about CalFresh"* could suit this group.

> **Residents aware of CalFresh, but not enrolled**, need messaging that makes enrolling feel worthwhile and achievable. Messages should normalize program use, and be action-oriented, like: *"Your neighbors use CalFresh to put fresh food on the table — you can too."*

Correct the myths

Many likely-eligible residents mistakenly believe that new policies will restrict which foods they can buy with CalFresh benefits — which is untrue in California — or that new work requirements disqualify them. Correcting these misperceptions, and countering the "chilling effect" of policy uncertainty, can prevent unnecessary self-exclusion. Corrective messages could include: *"In California, CalFresh still covers the foods you need. Apply today."*; *"Heard CalFresh is changing what you can buy? Not in California. You still choose."*; and *"Working, job training, studying, or caring for family? You may still qualify for CalFresh. Find out today."*

When people lack motivation, encourage them

Messages should counter the stigma around program use, and beliefs that "others need it more than me," with motivational, non-shaming, social-norms messaging such as, *"Groceries cost more for everyone. CalFresh helps your dollars go further."*

***Note**: These messages should be tested with target audiences before deployment.*

Recommended Strategies for Outreach and Messaging (cont'd)

Reduce friction in the application process

Programmatic barriers are the points of friction in the program that make it difficult to apply or stay enrolled. Any opportunities to reduce this friction — through simpler forms, application help, and training frontline staff to be sensitive to stigma — could improve participation.

Deliver outreach through trusted, culturally relevant messengers

Community and faith-based organizations, workplaces, healthcare settings, and CalFresh participants themselves (as peer messengers) are likely to be the most trusted and effective routes for outreach and information dissemination.

Tailor messaging by context

Focus on dissemination through community, workplace, and healthcare settings, and test all messaging with the target audience before large-scale rollout. The Strategy Guide offers example taglines for three delivery contexts:

Community / general audience

- "Fresh food is closer than you think. That's CalFresh."
- "Over 1 million Angelenos use CalFresh to put food on the table — you could too."
- "Groceries keep getting more expensive. CalFresh helps stretch what you've got."

Workplace settings

- "CalFresh is available to people who work. Find out if you qualify."
- "Working full time and still stretched thin? CalFresh is for people like you."
- "Many working families use CalFresh to help make ends meet — you could too."

Healthcare settings

- "Better food. Better health. That's CalFresh."
- "Food is medicine. CalFresh helps fill the prescription."
- "More patients than you'd expect use CalFresh to eat well — could you?"

Pair these headline messages with a call to action to apply and determine eligibility, such as: "Apply for CalFresh, and find out if YOU are eligible at _____"

***Note**: These messages should be tested with target audiences before deployment.*

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