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Testimony: A Snapshot of Food Insecurity in California

Tess Thorman



PPIC research associate Tess Thorman testified before the Senate Human Services Committee on March 11, 2025. Here are their prepared remarks.

Good morning. My name is Tess Thorman. I am a researcher at the Public Policy Institute of California, an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit research institute dedicated to informing and improving public policy in California. Thank you for inviting me to provide testimony today.

Households meet the USDA's definition of food insecurity when they lack the resources to ensure that all members have enough to eat to support active, healthy lives. This can involve stretches of time during which some or all household members skip or cut down the size of meals, shift to a lower-quality or more limited diet, or both; the frequency and duration of these insecure periods can and do vary. Research finds that while food insecurity is harmful to health for people of all ages, it is particularly damaging to children's health and development.

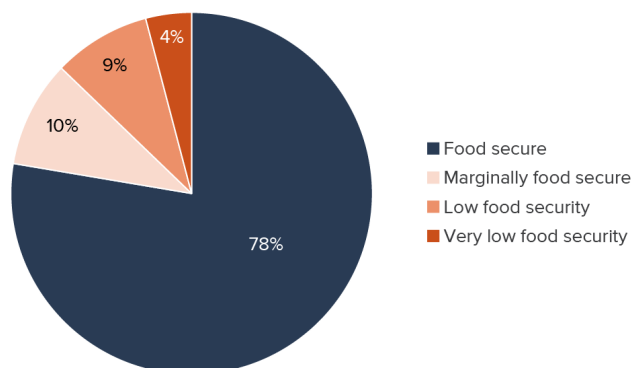
In this testimony, I will discuss the prevalence of food insecurity in California, the impact of nutrition safety net programs on food insecurity and poverty, and some of the big picture challenges that make it harder for these programs to achieve their goals, based on PPIC research and my assessment of the broader research landscape.

How prevalent is food insecurity in California?

In California, 1.8 million households (13%) experienced food insecurity at some point in 2023, according to the most recent data. More than half (1.1 million, or 9% of all households) had to make changes to their diets but did not necessarily cut back on meals. The remaining 700,000 (4% of all households) cut back on food; this group experienced very low food security. An additional 10% (or 1.1 million households) were technically able to afford enough food, but were only marginally food secure because they couldn't afford balanced meals or worried that food would run out.



Almost a quarter of California households experienced marginal or low food security in 2023



SOURCE: Author's analysis of CPS Food Security Supplement data, 2023.

NOTE: Chart shows food security among households.

FROM: PPIC Blog, March 2025.

California's rate of food insecurity is near the national rate of almost 14%. Across states, the share of households experiencing food insecurity over the past year ranges from about 7% to 19%; some other large states, including New York, Florida, and Illinois, have rates close to California's.

Annual rates of food insecurity in California are up, but remain below the Great Recession peak of more than 15%. The rate declined between 2011 and about 2017, when it reached a low of around 10% that held steady through the start of the pandemic. Monthly experiences of food insecurity may even have declined in 2021, amid rising employment and wages (and prices), and a surge of temporary assistance, including CalFresh benefit increases, stimulus, expanded Unemployment Insurance, and advance Child Tax Credit payments. Food insecurity rates ticked up in 2022 and 2023, as inflation continued and safety net expansions expired.

Households with children are more likely than those without to experience food insecurity at some point during the year: about one in six (17%) households with children experience food hardship, compared to about one in ten (11%) of those without children. It's important to note, however, adults often shield children from the effects of food insecurity; nearly half of children in California *households* that experience food insecurity do not

experience it themselves.

White and Asian households are less likely than Californians overall to be food insecure (7%), while 18%—nearly one in five—of Latino, Black, and other households experience food insecurity. Available data allow us to examine food insecurity across these racial/ethnic categories, but they are broad; economic well-being also varies across smaller racial and ethnic groups.

To what extent does California's nutrition safety net reduce food insecurity and poverty?

More than 15 public programs in California aim to help individuals and families afford nutritious food. Research on the largest—CalFresh (known federally as SNAP), school meals, and WIC—indicates that they reduce food insecurity using different approaches.

These programs are designed to improve food security for different groups. School meals target children enrolled in K–12 education, and WIC enrolls new or expecting parents and young children. CalFresh reduces food insecurity more broadly because its primary requirement for eligibility is having a low income.

Several nutrition program expansions enacted during the pandemic have become permanent. After federal funding that expanded free school meals expired, California's Universal Meals program began ensuring that two meals a day at school were free for all students. SUN Bucks, a summer EBT program that helps cover meals for students when school is out, replaced summer Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) benefits. And WIC's cash-value benefit increase has been made permanent.

For some families, these permanent expansions likely lessened the impact of the expiration of the largest pandemic increase in the nutrition safety net: federal boosts of CalFresh benefits. Boosting CalFresh reduced food hardship during the pandemic; nationwide, the expiration of enhanced benefits in spring 2023 was associated with increased food insufficiency—a metric that overlaps with but is less detailed than food insecurity. The data that USDA uses each year to measure food insecurity are not yet available past 2023. The best estimates on changes since then rely on other data sources and generate different values, but they

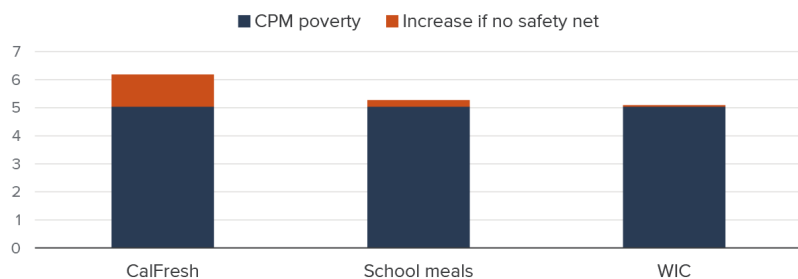
suggest that food insecurity in California has not changed substantially.

The state’s nutrition safety net also reduces poverty by making it easier to meet basic needs. Poverty and food insecurity overlap but are not fully aligned. Being unable to afford food is one manifestation of poverty, but some households that struggle with poverty may not experience food insecurity for a variety of reasons, including having limited income but drawing on savings, and covering food costs by not addressing other needs, such as housing or medical care.

The PPIC/Stanford California Poverty Measure calculates poverty rates after accounting for taxes and safety net resources as well as variation in the state’s cost of living. According to this measure, about 5 million Californians (13.2% of the population) lived in poverty at the beginning of 2023. Absent CalFresh, school meals, and WIC, that group would have increased by 1.5 million. Without just CalFresh, 1.1 million more people would have been in poverty. Absent school meals, the number would have increased by about 240,000, and without WIC food benefits, the number would be 50,000 higher.

More Californians would be living in poverty without the nutrition safety net

Millions of people



SOURCE: Author’s analysis of California Poverty Measure data, 2023 quarter 1.
NOTES: Chart shows number individuals in poverty, and in poverty absent program. Program effects may overlap instead of being additive.
FROM: PPIC Blog, March 2025.

Some pandemic CalFresh benefit increases were still in place during the period covered by these poverty estimates. CalFresh’s impact on poverty may now be smaller than we estimated for

early 2023, since the increases were large enough to lift a substantial number of people out of poverty. When they ended in February 2023, monthly food assistance was cut by at least \$95 per household. Notably, cuts were larger for those with higher incomes, since their temporary benefit increases were proportionately larger than increases for participants with the lowest incomes

Effective safety net support provides sufficient benefits, extends eligibility to those in need, and reaches eligible people. Since California primarily implements national nutrition programs, many decisions about support and eligibility happen at the federal level. However, the state can make the most of federal funding by taking steps to maximize participation among eligible Californians; it can also supplement and/or seek modifications to programs. Still, federal funding is a cornerstone of California's nutrition safety net. Reductions to federal funding for nutrition programs would likely make it difficult to continue reducing poverty and food insecurity at current levels without new state investments.

TOPICS

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