

RESEARCH BRIEF

2021 Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County

Food insecurity is an ongoing crisis that needs attention and investment

Although rates of food insecurity have improved since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 1 in 4 low-income households in Los Angeles (L.A.) County remained food insecure in 2021, and racial and gender inequalities in food security persist. As we work to recover and build more resilient communities and food systems post-pandemic, striving to eliminate food insecurity should be a public health and social justice goal.

COVID-19 created a food insecurity crisis in 2020

Food insecurity — a disruption in regular eating because of limited money or other resources — was already a challenge facing 1 in 10 Californians before the COVID-19 pandemic (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021). When the pandemic hit, rates of food insecurity quickly spiked. Our research team documented that between April and December 2020, 34% of all L.A. County residents, and 42% of low-income residents (residents with household incomes less than 300% of the federal poverty level [FPL]), experienced food insecurity (de la Haye et al, 2021). This coincided with a spike in unemployment, increasing from 4% in February 2020 to 21% in April and May 2020 (L.A. Office of the Controller, 2020), causing many residents to lose incomes and money needed for food.

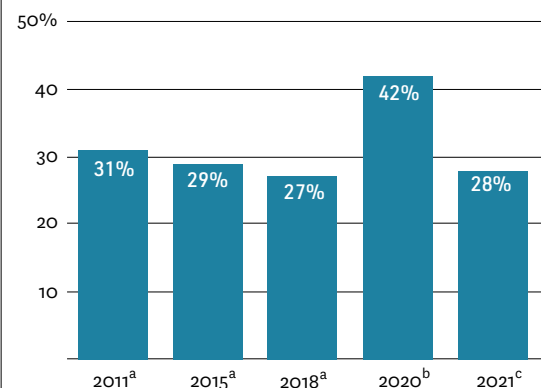
Rates of food insecurity improved in 2021, but remain high

In December 2021, we asked L.A. County residents participating in USC's Understanding America Study about their food insecurity experiences during the past 12 months. We found:

- **18% of all households experienced food insecurity in 2021**
- **28% of low-income households (<300% FPL) experienced food insecurity in 2021**

Compared to historical data in L.A. County from the Los Angeles County Health Survey (LAC DPH, 2017, 2021) that has measured food insecurity among low-income residents only, rates of food insecurity in 2021 appear to have returned to pre-pandemic levels (Figure 1). Although this is an improvement from the alarming rate of food insecurity in 2020, **1 in 4 low-income households remained food insecure in 2021.**

Figure 1. 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 Food Insecurity Module; ^b USC Understanding America Study, Food Insecurity Experience Scale; ^c USC Understanding America Study, USDA Short Form Food Insecurity Module (LAC DPH, 2021).

Food insecurity in 2021 continued to impact low-income households, females, Latinos, and younger adults the most

The characteristics of L.A. County adult residents who experienced food insecurity in 2021 are depicted in Figure 2, in contrast to those who were food secure during this timeframe. Of the adults who experienced food insecurity, the majority were low-income, female, Hispanic/Latino, and 18-40 years old. About 4 in 10 have children in their household. Characteristics associated with being *more likely* to experience food insecurity included: being female, Hispanic/Latino, 18 to 30 years old, living in poverty, and having children in the household.

Figure 2. Profile of L.A. County population with food insecurity 2021

Characteristics of adults who experienced food insecurity in 2021, compared to people who did not experience food insecurity during this time (food secure)

	Food Secure (N=933)	Food Insecure (N=202)
Living in poverty (< 100% of FPL)	15%	43%
Low income (100-300% of FPL)	35%	47%
High income (> 300% of FPL)	50%	11%
Female	49%	64%
Hispanic/Latino	43%	68%
Black/African American	8%	8%
Asian	15%	10%
White (non-Hispanic)	32%	14%
18-30 years old	17%	32%
31-40 years old	24%	28%
41-50 years old	15%	16%
51-64 years old	25%	16%
65 years old	19%	9%
Children in household	29%	43%

This research brief is an update to other public reports on the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity in L.A. County released in [2020](#) and [October 2021](#).

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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 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 Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research (CESR). UAS respondents are members a probability-based internet panel who participated in tracking survey waves conducted between December 9, 2021 and January 9, 2022. 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 is 1,135. Participants were recruited for the UAS internet panel using an addressed 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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