

Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County, December 2022

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Food insecurity in Los Angeles County increased in 2022

Food insecurity refers to a lack of access to enough food to live an active, healthy life. New data from interviews and surveys with Los Angeles (L.A.) County residents participating in the University of Southern California's Understanding America Study indicate that **1 in 4 (24%) households in L.A. County experienced food insecurity in 2022.**

"[During the pandemic] that was my fear, that [my children] didn't have enough. I started skipping a meal to make sure they were fed. And it's worse now. Because the bills went so [high]. And it's kind of scary."
— Los Angeles County resident, December 2022

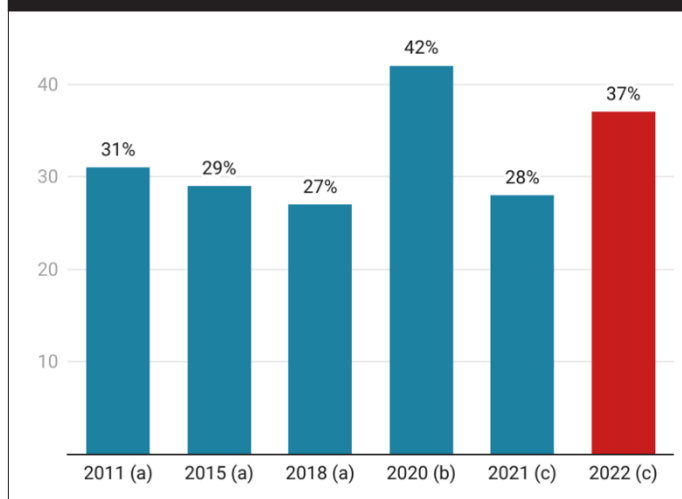
Rates of food insecurity in L.A. County spiked in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic but returned to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2021 (de la Haye, 2022). However, this positive trend changed in 2022 where there was a **significant rise in food insecurity**. Specifically, the proportion of households who reported experiencing food insecurity over the past 12 months was:

- 17% in December 2021 (approximately 553,000 households)
- 24% in July 2022 (approximately 802,000 households)
- 24% in December 2022 (approximately 802,000 households)

This parallels data from the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank (LARFB): in 2022, the food they delivered through partner agencies and direct distributions was more than double the amount compared to pre-pandemic levels, and they continued to serve 800,000 to 900,000 people each month (LARFB, 2022).

Among low-income households, food insecurity is now higher than pre-pandemic levels

Figure 1. Food insecurity trends among low-income households (<300% FPL) in Los Angeles County over time



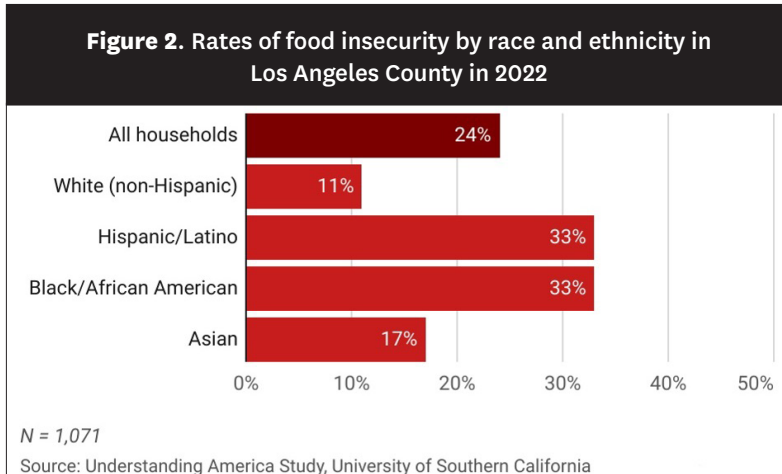
Source of data: ^a Los Angeles County Health Survey, *USDA Short Form Food Insecurity Module*; ^b Understanding America Study, *Food Insecurity Experience Scale*; ^c Understanding America Study, *USDA Short Form Food Insecurity Module* (LAC DPH, 2021).

Poverty is a major risk factor of food insecurity, and compared to the whole population, a larger proportion of low-income residents (residents with household incomes less than 300% of the federal poverty level [FPL]) experience food insecurity in a given year. **The rate of food insecurity among low-income residents in L.A. County is now worse than it was in the decade before the pandemic (Figure 1):**

- Prior to the pandemic, rates of food insecurity among low-income households had been improving, from 31% in 2011 down 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.

- In 2021, the rate of food insecurity returned to pre-pandemic levels: 28%.
- In 2022, the rate of food insecurity among low-income residents was worse than pre-pandemic levels: 1 in 3 (37%) reported experiencing food insecurity in surveys conducted in July 2022 and December 2022.

Food insecurity disproportionately impacts women, young adults, and Latino and Black residents



As in 2021, the majority of L.A. County residents who experienced food insecurity in 2022 were:

- Low-income (<300% FPL)
- Female
- Hispanic/Latino
- 18-30 years old

More than 4 in 10 households reporting food insecurity have children in the household.

Note: The Research Methods section describes the analyses by race and ethnicity.

Our research also shows that food insecurity disproportionately impacts communities of color in L.A. County (**Figure 2**). **In 2022, we found that rates of food insecurity were 3 times higher among Hispanic/Latino (33%) and Black/African American (33%) residents, compared to white residents (11%).**

The need for action is urgent, as this trajectory of rising food insecurity may get worse

The decreased food insecurity rates in L.A. County in 2021 may have provided a false sense of hope that food issues that were exacerbated by the pandemic had been alleviated. **Food insecurity clearly worsened throughout 2022, and there is mounting concern that 2023 will be more dire.** There are concerns of a looming “hunger cliff”: as inflation and food costs remain high, this March millions of Californians will lose the increased amount of CalFresh benefits (previously known as “food stamps”) they received during the pandemic that was giving them extra money every month to buy food (CAFB, 2023).

Echoing the calls of many county residents and stakeholders (LAC FER, 2022), it is time for action and investment to alleviate food insecurity in L.A. County.



Authors

Kayla de la Haye, PhD, Associate Professor of Population and Public Health Sciences, University of Southern California

Michelle Livings, MPH, PhD Candidate, Spatial Sciences Institute, Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, University of Southern California

Wändi Bruine de Bruin, MSc, PhD, Provost Professor of Public Policy, Psychology, and Behavioral Science, Sol Price School of Public Policy, Dornsife Department of Psychology, and Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics, University of Southern California

John Wilson, PhD, Professor and Founding Director, Spatial Sciences Institute; Professor of Sociology, Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, Population and Public Health Sciences, Keck School of Medicine, Civil & Environmental Engineering and Computer Science, Viterbi School of Engineering, and the School of Architecture, University of Southern California

Jose Scott, MPA, PhD Candidate, Sol Price School of Public Policy, University of Southern California

John Fanning, Project Manager, Public Exchange, Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, University of Southern California

Rachel Wald, Director of Strategy and Operations, Public Exchange, Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, University of Southern California

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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 of a probability-based internet panel who participated in tracking survey waves conducted between December 2021 and December 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 ranges from 1,071 to 1,176. 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 is designed to have a representative sample of adult residents in L.A. County and can therefore provide reliable estimates of food insecurity rates for the county as a whole. Because the study is not explicitly designed to be representative of sub-groups of county residents who identify with specific racial and ethnic identities, the margin of error for food insecurity rates for these subgroups may be larger. However, our confidence in these estimates and the relative difference between groups is strengthened based on national data from 2021 that also show that rates of food insecurity were approximately 2 to 3 times higher for Latino and Black Americans, compared to white Americans (Coleman-Jensen et al, 2021).

We also conducted 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, with a diverse sample of L.A. County residents. They were interviewed because they had self-reported experiences of food insecurity at least once between April 2020 and July 2021, as part of the Understanding America Study. Interviews were professionally transcribed, and transcripts were reviewed by the research team for accuracy. All participants gave informed consent for their stories and experiences to be shared anonymously and without attribution.

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Southern California.

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