

# Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County, July 2023

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Food insecurity refers to a lack of access to enough food to live an active, healthy life because of limited money or other resources. Recent surveys with Los Angeles (L.A.) County residents participating in the Understanding America Study show that **food insecurity increased in 2023, with 3 in 10 (30%) households experiencing food insecurity.** This is a 6 percentage-point increase from 2022, when rates were 24%.

This increase in food insecurity could be due to inflation and high food prices, and the end of a pandemic-era boost to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, known as CalFresh in California. In L.A. County, although unemployment is at a low 5%, worker strikes among screenwriters, actors, hotel employees, and city staffers have also cut employment and incomes for some.

## Food insecurity in Los Angeles County has been steadily increasing since 2021

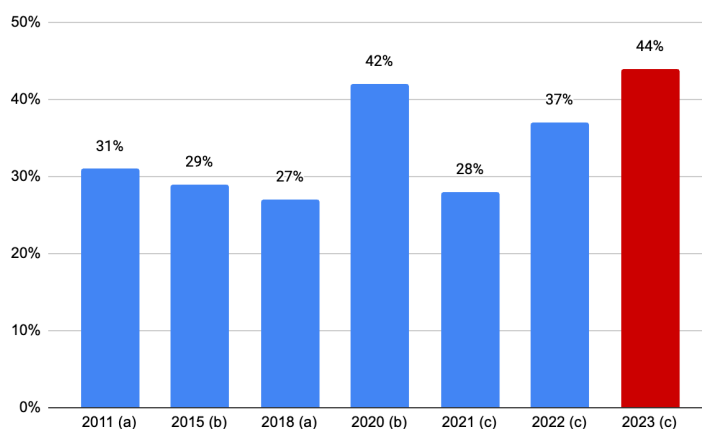
Food insecurity in L.A. County surged during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 34% of households experiencing food insecurity in 2020 (de la Haye, 2021). Rates returned to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2021 (de la Haye, 2022). But food insecurity has increased throughout 2022 and 2023. **About 1 million L.A. County households are now food insecure.**

Data from the Understanding America Study show that the proportion of L.A. County households who reported experiencing food insecurity in 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)
- 30% in July 2023 (approximately 1,002,000 households)

## Among low-income households, food insecurity is the worst in 10 years

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



Source of data: <sup>a</sup> Los Angeles County Health Survey, USDA, Short Form Food Insecurity Module (LAC DPH, 2021); <sup>b</sup> USC Understanding America Study, Food Insecurity Experience Scale; <sup>c</sup> USC Understanding America Study, USDA Short Form Food Insecurity Module. FPL = Federal Poverty Level.

Food insecurity among low-income<sup>1</sup> residents in L.A. County is worse now than during the pandemic (**Figure 1**):

- **Before 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 among low-income households

<sup>1</sup> Low-income is defined as having a household income below 300% of the federal poverty level [FPL].

returned to pre-pandemic levels: 28%.

- **After 2021**, the rate of food insecurity among low-income households increased to 37% in 2022 (higher than pre-pandemic levels) and 44% in July of 2023 (statistically equivalent to the high rate in 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic).

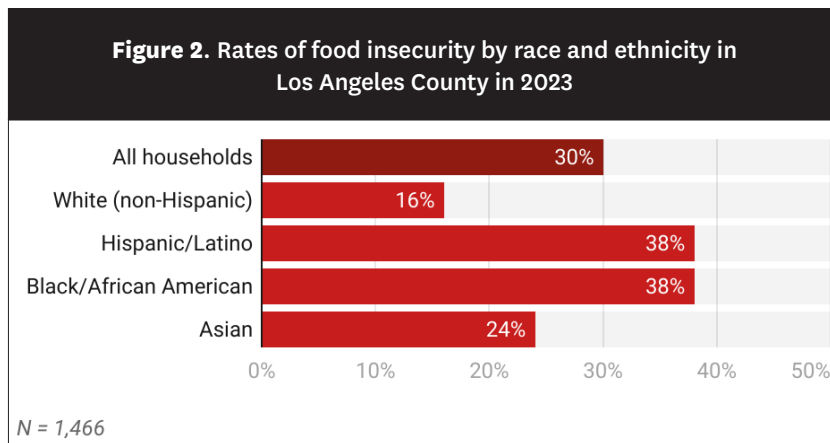
## Food insecurity is impacting low-income households, women, Hispanic/Latinos, and young adults the most

In L.A. County, most residents experiencing food insecurity in 2023 are:

- Low-income<sup>1</sup> (77%)
- Female (59%)
- Hispanic/Latino (62%)
- 18- to 40-year-olds (55%)

4 in 10 (41%) households experiencing food insecurity in 2023 have children.

## Food insecurity disproportionately impacts communities of color in L.A. County



In 2023, we found that rates of food insecurity were more than 2 times higher (**Figure 2**) among Hispanic/Latino (38%) and Black/African American (38%) residents, compared to white residents (16%).

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

## Use of food pantries is increasing as CalFresh benefits decrease

**Table 1. Percentage of the L.A. County population using different food assistance programs in 2022 and 2023**

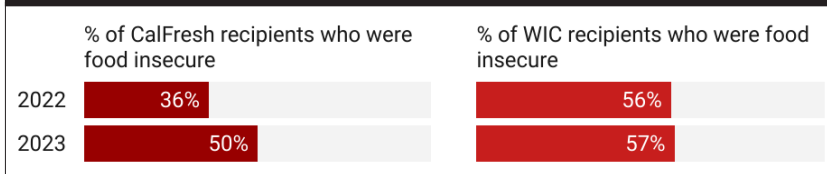
	December 2022	July 2023
CalFresh (known nationally as SNAP) <sup>a</sup>	28% (940,857 households)	29% (982,794 households)
WIC (Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) <sup>b</sup>	6% (≈201,000 households)	7% (≈234,000 households)
Food pantry <sup>b</sup>	7% (≈234,000 households)	10% (≈334,000 households)

Source of data: <sup>a</sup>LAC DPSS, Statistical Reports. <sup>b</sup>Understanding America Study, University of Southern California

As food needs have increased, so has the use of some types of food assistance. **Table 1** shows the percentage of *all* L.A. County households who received different types of food assistance in the past month. Between 2022 and 2023, enrollments in CalFresh and WIC were fairly flat, but there was an upward trend in the use of food pantries.

Residents who experience food insecurity are often those *who seek out* food assistance. However, these programs and services do not always meet all food needs. CalFresh is one program that has been proven to

**Figure 3. Percentage of CalFresh and WIC recipients who were food insecure in December 2022 and July 2023**



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

that CalFresh is not alleviating food insecurity as effectively as before. CalFresh gave many recipients less money after March 2023, when the pandemic-era boost to benefits ended, with the average monthly benefits in L.A. County dropping from \$470 per household in December 2022 to \$299 in July 2023 (LAC DPSS, 2023).

**Figure 3** also shows that among residents who had received WIC in the past month, just over half were food insecure. This percentage did not change significantly from 2022 (56%) to 2023 (57%). Unlike CalFresh, WIC did not lower the benefits it gave out during this time.

Worryingly, CalFresh and WIC are not reaching everyone who is in need. Our data collected in July 2023 indicate that of the more than 1 million L.A. County households who had experienced food insecurity in the past year, 59% (≈592,000 households) were not receiving CalFresh or WIC benefits.

## Urgent action is needed to address worsening food insecurity



Multiple waves of robust survey data show that food insecurity in L.A. County is worse than pre-pandemic levels. This is despite low levels of unemployment, but in the context of high food prices and cuts to CalFresh benefits. This makes it clear that urgent action is needed to help households at risk for hunger.

We recommend pursuing multiple actions, including initiatives that:

- (1) lower food prices,
- (2) increase enrollment in government food assistance programs and the amount of benefits those programs provide,
- (3) increase support for food banks and pantries to help alleviate immediate food needs and address gaps that other initiatives are not yet addressing, and;
- (4) offset other known barriers to food access and food security in L.A. County, which include a lack of personal transportation and the closure of food stores (Livings, 2023).

In the long term, we must strengthen the entire food system so that all households can access sufficient healthy food, and inequities in hunger among many segments of our community are eliminated. This will require action from multiple sectors that address barriers to food access within households, communities, and food environments. A roadmap for these actions is laid out in the Los Angeles Food Equity Roundtable's recent Strategic Action Plan (<https://lacountyfoodequityroundtable.org>).

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## Research Methods

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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 May 2020 and August 2023. 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 1,466. 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 or who receive food benefits, the margin of error for food insecurity rates for these subgroups may be larger. Our confidence in these estimates and the relative difference between groups is strengthened based on national data that also show that rates of food insecurity are approximately 2 to 3 times higher for Latino and Black Americans, compared to white Americans (Coleman-Jensen et al, 2022).

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## Disclaimer

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

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