

# Food and Nutrition Insecurity in Los Angeles County, October 2024

Published December 2024

Food insecurity is when people don't have enough to eat and don't know where their next meal will come from. The USDA defines food insecurity as a lack of access to enough food to live an active, healthy life because of limited money or other resources. In Los Angeles (L.A.) County, food insecurity is a complex and widespread challenge influenced by high costs of living, challenges to obtaining a living wage, and limited access to affordable food.

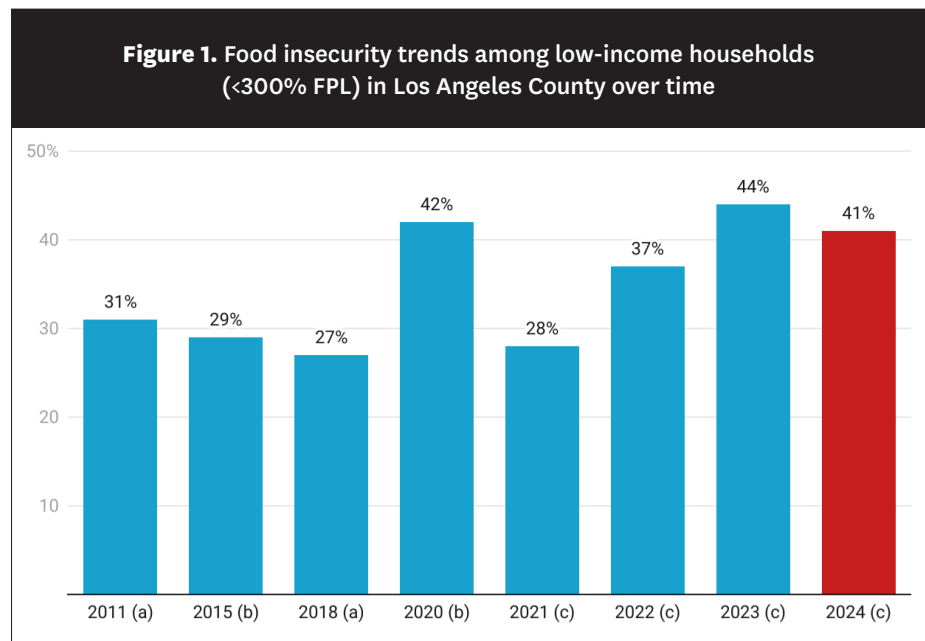
Data collected in October 2024 from surveys with L.A. County residents participating in the University of Southern California's Understanding America Study show that **25% of all households experienced food insecurity in the past year. Among low-income households, the rate is 41% (Figure 1)**. This is a modest decline from 2023, and while encouraging, rates of food insecurity remain unacceptably high, and notably higher than pre-pandemic levels in L.A. County as well as current national rates (14%).

## Food insecurity decreased modestly in the last year, but 1 in 4 L.A. County residents remain food insecure

Rates of food insecurity in L.A. County have been volatile since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the initial months of the pandemic, rates surged to unprecedented levels, with 34% of households in the County experiencing food insecurity in 2020 (de la Haye, 2022). Immediate and widespread efforts to address this food crisis were successful: rates of food insecurity were halved by the end of 2021, down to 17%. However, as inflation and food prices rose, at the same time as pandemic-era benefits and food initiatives were scaled back, food insecurity rose sharply throughout 2022 and 2023. Since 2023, food insecurity has decreased modestly, but 1 in 4 L.A. County residents remain food insecure in 2024.

Data from the Understanding America Study show that the proportion of *all* 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)
- 25% in October 2024 (approximately 832,000 households)



Source of data: <sup>a</sup> Los Angeles County Health Survey, USDA Short Form Household Food Security 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 Household Food Security Module.

## The rate of food insecurity remains alarmingly high among low-income households

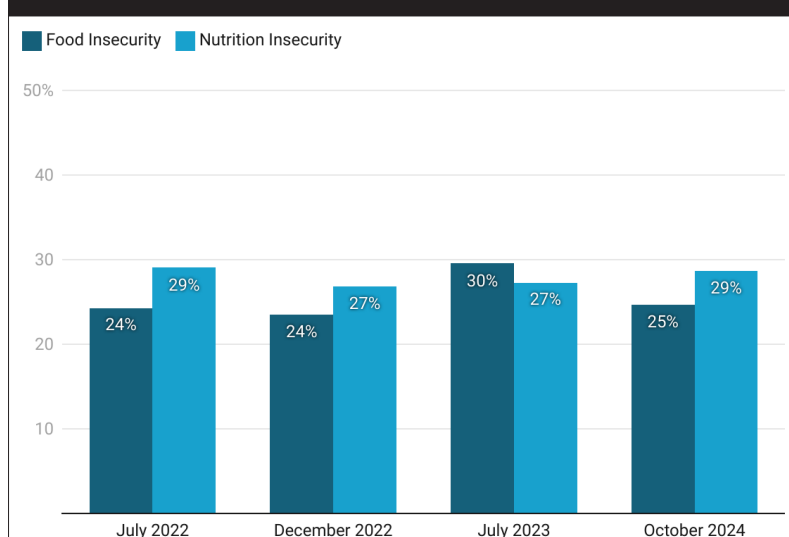
Financial insecurity is the primary driver of food insecurity. A higher percentage of individuals with lower incomes (household incomes below 300% of the federal poverty level [FPL]) face food insecurity compared to the general population. Data for 2024 show that food insecurity among low-income residents in L.A. County is worse than pre-pandemic levels (**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**, food insecurity among low-income households returned to pre-pandemic levels: 28%.
- **After 2021**, food insecurity among low-income residents rapidly rose to 37% in 2022, higher than pre-pandemic levels. By July of 2023, rates had reached 44%, similar to the highest levels of food insecurity (42%) seen at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **In 2024**, food insecurity among low-income residents decreased modestly to 41%, but remains markedly higher than pre-pandemic levels.

A key insight from these historical data is that **the policies and programs enacted and expanded in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic were effective at alleviating food insecurity, including among more vulnerable residents with low incomes**. For example, in L.A. County, local government, community organizations, and other partners quickly coordinated to scale up food programs and resources, such as emergency food distribution. Federally, emergency allotments for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, known as CalFresh in California) meaningfully increased the money people were provided to buy food, and helped households transition from food insecurity to being food secure (de la Haye et al., 2023; Wolfson & Leung, 2024). As many of these programs were scaled back or terminated through 2022 and 2023, food insecurity increased, particularly among low-income residents, and remains much higher than pre-pandemic levels. Our success addressing food insecurity in 2021 provides a roadmap for what is needed moving forward.

## New nutrition insecurity tracking shows inequality in who is impacted by a lack of access to healthy food

**Figure 2. Food insecurity and nutrition insecurity trends among adults in Los Angeles County from 2022 to 2024**



*N=7,120* Source of data: Understanding America Study, University of Southern California. Food insecurity was measured by the USDA Short Form Household Food Security Module; nutrition insecurity was measured by the Center for Nutrition and Health Impact's Brief Nutrition Security Screener.

One critique of food security measures is their focus on whether people have *enough* food, without a focus on the *nutritional quality* of that food. As a result, there are growing calls, including by the White House and USDA, to expand our focus to nutrition security. Nutrition security means having consistent and equitable access to healthy, safe, affordable foods that are needed to support good health and well-being.

**This report provides the first data tracking nutrition insecurity over time for adults in L.A. County.** From 2022 to 2024, the rates of nutrition insecurity remained fairly stable, between 27%-29%, and were typically a few percentage points higher than the rate of food insecurity (**Figure 2**).

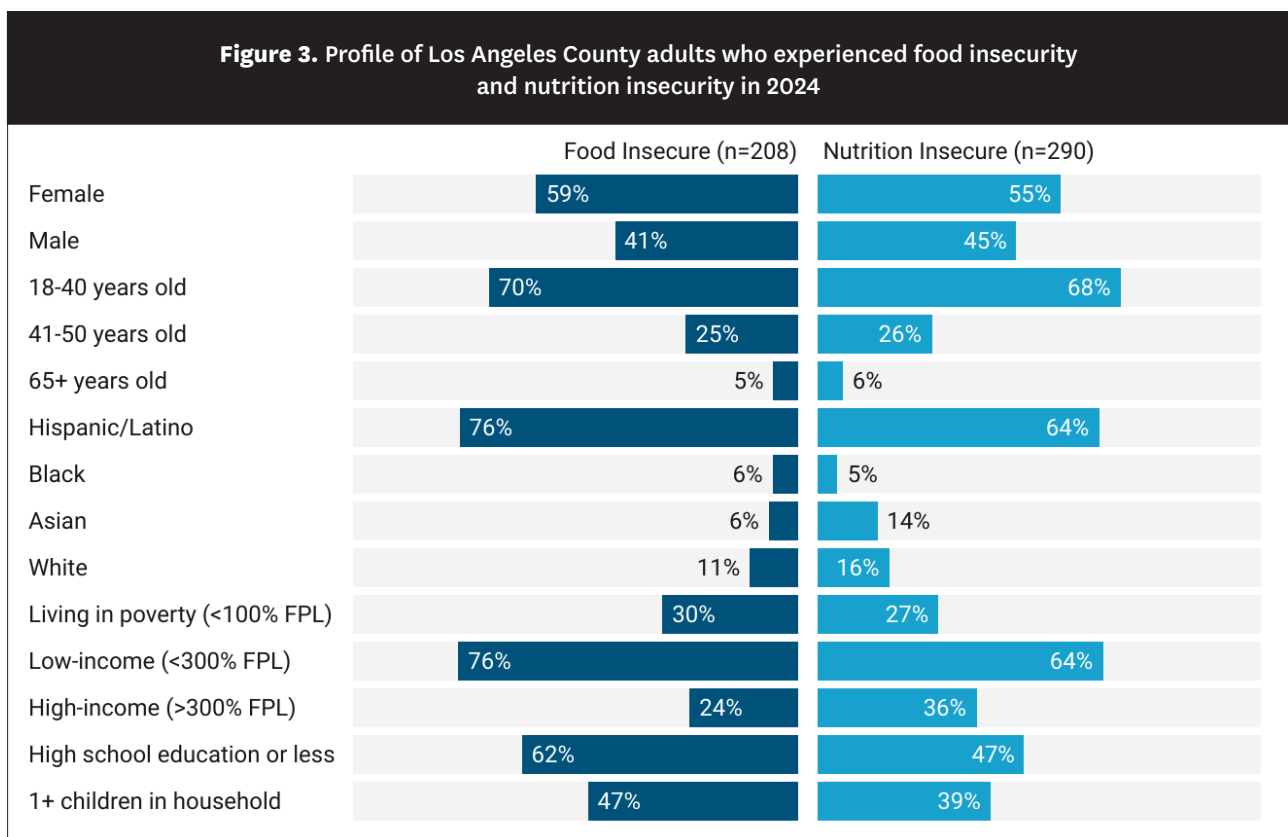
The profiles of residents experiencing food insecurity and nutrition insecurity show that some segments of the community are vulnerable to both conditions (**Figure 3**). The majority of residents experiencing **food insecurity** in 2024 are:

- **Low-income:** 76% of those who are food insecure are low-income (<300% FPL),
- **Hispanic/Latino:** 76% of those who are food insecure are Hispanic/Latino,
- **Younger adults:** 70% of those who are food insecure are between 18-40 years old, while 5% are 65 and older,
- **Female:** 59% of those who are food insecure are female.

Similarly, the majority of residents experiencing **nutrition insecurity** in 2024 are:

- **Low-income:** 64% of those who are nutrition insecure are low-income (<300% FPL),
- **Hispanic/Latino:** 64% of those who are nutrition insecure are Hispanic/Latino,
- **Younger adults:** 68% of those who are nutrition insecure are between 18-40 years old, while 6% are 65 and older,
- **Female:** 55% of those who are nutrition insecure are female.

The profiles of residents experiencing food insecurity compared to nutrition insecurity also highlight some differences (**Figure 3**). For example, 6% of food insecure residents identify as Asian, while 14% of nutrition insecure residents identify as Asian. Also, 62% of food insecure residents have a high school education or less, while 47% of nutrition insecure residents have this level of education. Understanding these profiles is relevant for programs that aim to address either food insecurity or nutrition insecurity, as the populations affected by each issue are somewhat different.

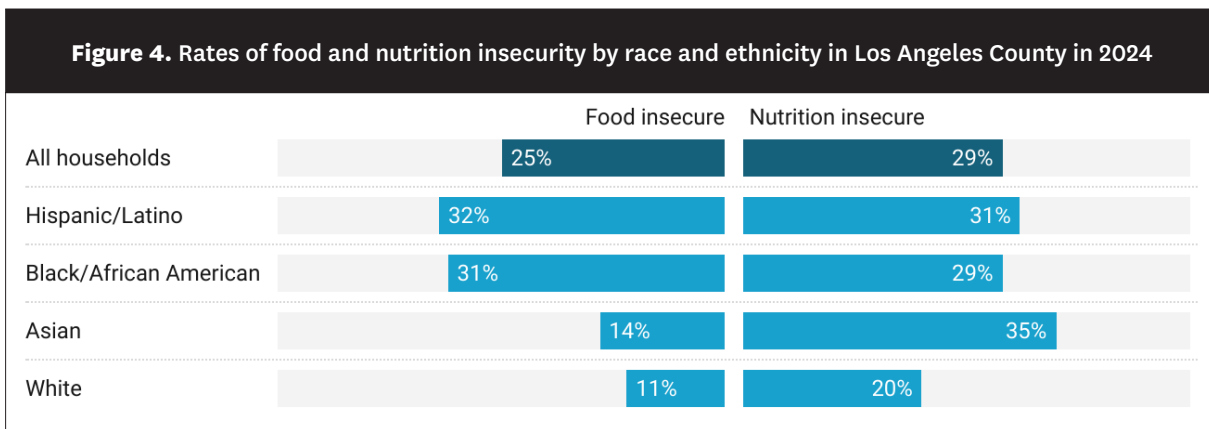


N=7,120 Source of data: Understanding America Study, University of Southern California

The inequalities in racial and ethnic groups who experience food and nutrition insecurity are particularly alarming (**Figure 4**):

- Food insecurity disproportionately impacts Black (31%) and Hispanic residents (32%), with rates almost triple those of White residents (11%), and double those of Asian residents (14%).
- In contrast, nutrition insecurity rates are highest among Asian residents (35%). Rates of nutrition insecurity are also higher among Black (29%) and Hispanic (31%) residents compared to White residents (20%).

These inequalities reflect systemic and historic barriers to wealth, resources, and healthy food access among communities of color. For example, underinvestment in neighborhood infrastructure and resources in areas that were home to predominantly Latino, Black, or Asian residents has led to “food deserts,” where grocery stores are scarce and available and affordable meal options are often high in calories but low in nutritional value. Asian residents may be especially susceptible to nutrition insecurity due to the diversity of this population, whose roots and food cultures stem from places as diverse as China, India, Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines. Residents from these diverse communities may have difficulties finding or traveling to stores that sell food specific to each of their cultural preferences and needs.



*N=1,120 Source of data: Understanding America Study, University of Southern California*

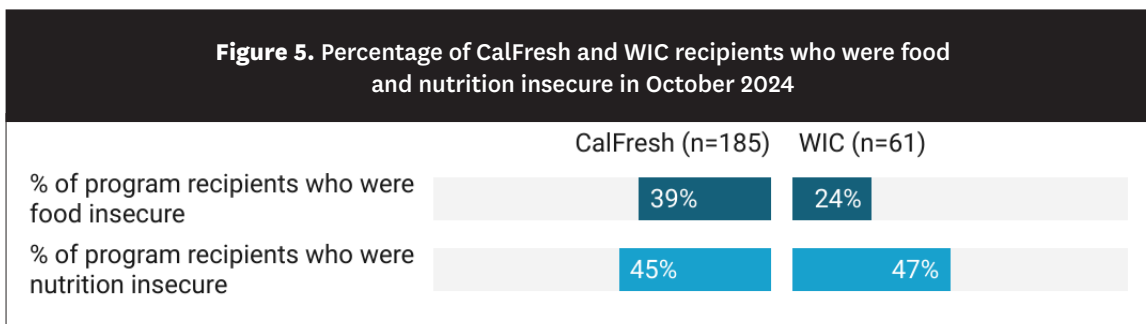
## Food assistance programs are not reaching everyone with food needs, or fully alleviating food and nutrition insecurity

Nationally, over 40 million Americans receive SNAP, and over 6 million receive WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) (Pew Research Center, 2023; USDA ERS, 2023). There is a wealth of evidence showing that these government food assistance programs can help households achieve food security.

In October 2024, data from the Understanding America Study found that 18% of L.A. County residents were enrolled in CalFresh (SNAP) and 9% were enrolled in WIC. However, the data reveal two pressing concerns:

1. **These programs are not reaching everyone with food needs:** Among the L.A. County residents with food insecurity in 2024, just 29% receive CalFresh and 9% receive WIC. Among those with nutrition insecurity, 29% receive CalFresh and 15% receive WIC. Thus, many individuals with food and nutrition insecurity who need financial assistance to access nutritious food are not enrolled in these programs. Although some will not be eligible, there are an estimated 300,000+ L.A. County residents who are eligible but not enrolled. Known barriers to enrollment include lack of awareness of the programs and eligibility, complexity of the enrollment process, stigma related to public assistance participation, and concern that participation may impact immigration status.

2. **These programs are not fully alleviating food and nutrition insecurity:** Among current CalFresh recipients, 39% experience food insecurity and 45% experience nutrition insecurity. Among current WIC recipients, 24% experience food insecurity, and 47% experience nutrition insecurity (**Figure 5**). Thus, many residents who experience food and nutrition insecurity are already receiving CalFresh or WIC benefits, indicating that the current benefits are not sufficient to alleviate these conditions for all program recipients.



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

## **Recommendations: We must learn from the success of expanded food programs and policies in 2020-21 to ensure all L.A. County residents have access to adequate, healthy food**

Despite modest improvements in food insecurity over the past year, food and nutrition insecurity rates remain unacceptably high in L.A. County, particularly among low-income households and communities of color.

From 2020-2021, major investments in the social safety net, as well as local food programs and policies, were successful in improving the food insecurity crisis in L.A. County that initially emerged from the onset of the pandemic. But, they were short-lived. The subsequent rollback of expanded benefits and other pandemic-era investments, coupled with inflation and lingering high prices, has led to food insecurity rates that remain markedly higher than pre-pandemic.

**Urgent action is needed to improve the conditions putting households at risk for hunger, poor nutrition, and poor health.** We recommend pursuing and coordinating actions across local, state, and federal levels, including initiatives that address the following:

1. Building on recent progress in L.A. County, continue to increase enrollment and retention rates in CalFresh (SNAP) and WIC by investing in targeted program outreach and application assistance. Additionally, expand eligibility criteria and program benefits so that more recipients receive more money for food. Given the incoming federal administration's commitment to SNAP budget cuts, there is an urgent need to advocate for benefit expansions.
2. Lower the price of healthy and culturally relevant foods, so they are affordable for all L.A. County residents, and increase opportunities to access them. This could include investment in culturally diverse farming and food businesses, and infrastructure that enables the distribution and procurement of these foods through local retailers and food assistance programs. Additionally, incentive programs that subsidize healthy food access, such as Market Match, could be expanded to reach more Angelenos, and be adopted by more culturally-tailored retailers.
3. Advance programs and policies that will ensure more Angelenos can earn a living wage, and thus afford the food they need for good health and well-being.

4. Increase support for food banks and pantries to help alleviate immediate food needs, and address gaps that other initiatives are not yet addressing. This could include resources to expand their capacity to distribute more food in more locations, including mobile pantries, and resources for culturally sensitive staff and culturally relevant food.
5. Continue investment in local, sustained initiatives that will strengthen the food system so that known barriers to the access of healthy food are reduced for all residents. This should include actions that span many levels, from food production and distribution (e.g., investments in urban farming, community gardens, and food hubs), to food retail (e.g., initiatives that support the procurement and sales of healthy and affordable foods at corner stores and grocers in high need areas), to consumer education aimed at increasing demand for and access to healthy foods.

A roadmap for many of these actions is laid out in the Los Angeles County Food Equity Roundtable's recent Strategic Action Plan (<https://lacountyfoodequityroundtable.org>). Related recent investments by the [L.A. Food Equity Fund](#) are supporting many local organizations who are implementing actions proposed in this Plan, while leadership to coordinate these efforts will be provided by a new [L.A. County Office of Food Equity](#). If this unprecedented local investment can be sustained and supported by state and national programs and policy, we will be poised to make marked improvements in the food and nutrition security of L.A. County residents.



## Authors

---

**Kayla de la Haye, PhD**, Director, Institute for Food System Equity, Center for Economic and Social Research, Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, University of Southern California

**Natasha Wasim**, PhD Student, Department of Population and Public Health Sciences, Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California

**Angela Zhang**, PhD Student, Spatial Sciences Institute, Department of Population and Public Health Sciences, 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, University of Southern California

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

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

## 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. The most recent survey data comes from participants in tracking survey waves conducted between October 1 and October 31, 2024. 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 1,120 to 1,201. 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.

## Acknowledgements

---

This work was supported by the University of Southern California (USC) [Dornsife Public Exchange](#) and by a grant from the National Science Foundation (Grant #2125616, S&CC-IRG Track 1: Smart & Connected Community Food Systems, PI: de la Haye). We would also like to acknowledge the USC Dornsife's 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 USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, the Keck School of Medicine, the Sol Price School of Public Policy, the Viterbi School of Engineering, the School of Architecture, or the University of Southern California as a whole.

## References

---

- de la Haye, K, Wilson, J, Bruine de Bruin, W, Li, K, Livings, M, Xu, M, et al. (2022). [Enough to eat: The impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity and the food environment in L.A. County April 2020 – September 2021](#). USC Dornsife Public Exchange, University of Southern California.
- de la Haye, K, Saw, HW, Miller, S, Bruine de Bruin, W, Wilson, JP, Weber, K, ... & Kapteyn, A. (2023). [Ecological risk and protective factors for food insufficiency in Los Angeles County during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Public Health Nutrition, 1-12.
- Pew Research Center. (2023). [What the data says about food stamps in the U.S.](#)
- USDA Economic Research Service (ERS). (2023). [WIC Program](#).
- Wolfson, JA, & Leung, CW. (2024). [Food insecurity in the COVID-19 era: A national wake-up call to strengthen SNAP policy](#). Annals of Internal Medicine, 177(2), 255-256.