

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CALIFORNIA'S EMERGENCY FOOD SYSTEM

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CALIFORNIA  
ASSOCIATION OF  
FOOD BANKS

# CONTENTS

|                                                       |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Acknowledgements</b> .....                         | 5  |
| <b>Introduction</b> .....                             | 7  |
| <b>Key Terms</b> .....                                | 9  |
| <b>Part 1: Spring 2020</b> .....                      | 10 |
| <i>Pivoting in a Pandemic</i> .....                   | 12 |
| <b>Part 2: Summer 2020</b> .....                      | 16 |
| <i>The Summer Peak</i> .....                          | 17 |
| <b>Part 3: Fall 2020</b> .....                        | 19 |
| <i>Approaching the Cliff</i> .....                    | 21 |
| <b>Part 4: 2021 and Beyond</b> .....                  | 23 |
| <b>Conclusions &amp; Policy Recommendations</b> ..... | 27 |
| <i>Federal Action</i> .....                           | 27 |
| <i>State Action</i> .....                             | 30 |
| <i>County Action</i> .....                            | 31 |
| <b>Appendix</b> .....                                 | 32 |
| <i>Methodology</i> .....                              | 32 |
| <i>Charts</i> .....                                   | 33 |
| <b>References</b> .....                               | 36 |

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A blurred background image showing several people, likely volunteers or recipients, at a food distribution event. They are wearing white shirts and are positioned behind long tables. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an indoor or well-lit outdoor setting.

“Food banks can’t operate the way they were in the past. We have to be prepared for a situation like COVID-19, a natural disaster, or economic dislocation. The pandemic has shown us that food banks must step up and broaden the scope of our services. We must collaborate with government agencies to be ready for this type of situation in the future.”

—Erik Talkin, CEO, Foodbank of Santa Barbara County

“Between CalFresh and food banks, we’re becoming the sole source for some people’s food, and it is heartbreaking. It’s not just about feeding people; it’s about the production of a community. We just won’t have communities as productive as they once were. I hope the conversation shifts toward sustainability because we’re going to be in this for some time. What are we doing to support food banks through 2021, and beyond, frankly?”

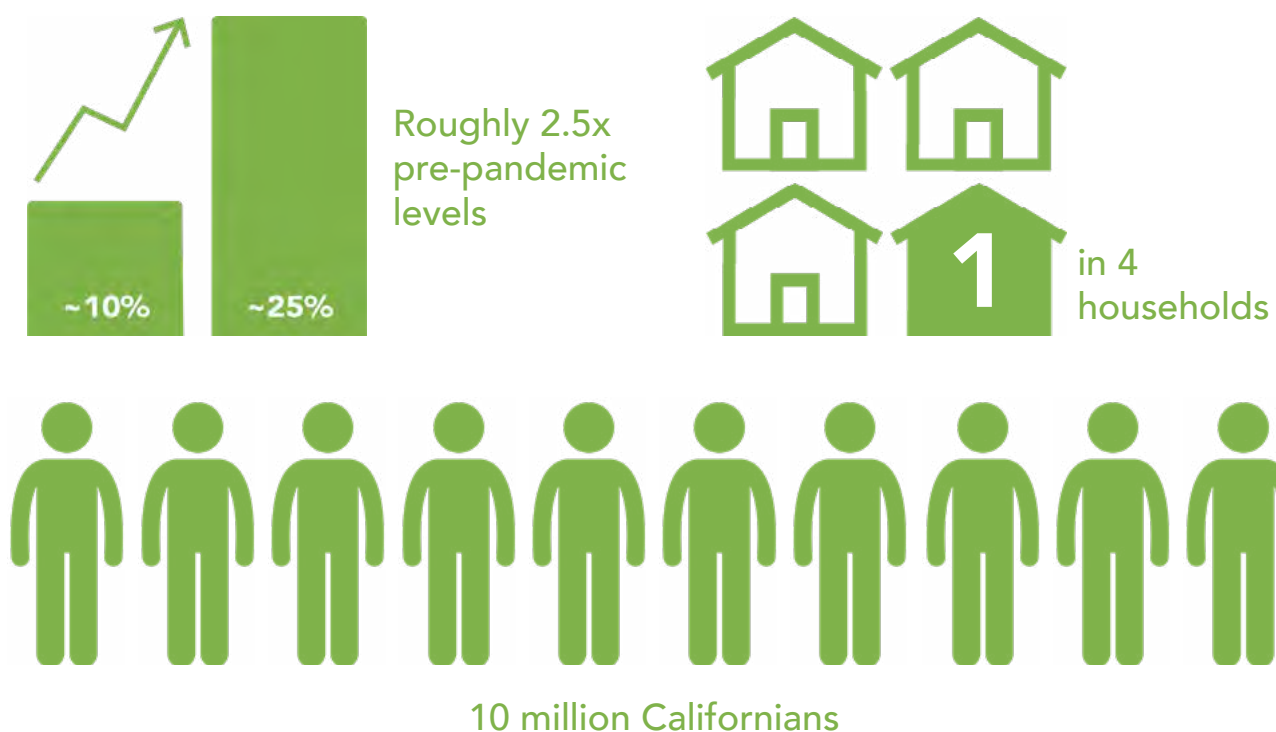
—Blake Young, CEO, Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services

# INTRODUCTION

From its onset, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to California's low-income populations and the emergency services network that serves them. On March 4, 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom responded to the public health impacts of COVID-19 by declaring a state of emergency in California.<sup>1</sup> While a few counties had already issued similar emergency orders, Governor Newsom's declaration elevated concern about the COVID-19 virus throughout the state. Shortly thereafter, several counties implemented regional Shelter-In-Place orders. These orders protected public health, but simultaneously caused confusion around which rules different communities needed to follow. On March 19, 2020, Governor Newsom announced that a Stay-At-Home order would be implemented statewide.<sup>2</sup> This escalation forced the physical closure of operations deemed "non-essential" by the government, resulting in many personnel layoffs — especially within the service and hospitality sectors. The first weeks of the pandemic-induced shutdown caused extreme stress and uncertainty for California's emergency food system and the millions of individuals who depend on its services. From those first chaotic moments until March 2021, one trend has been unequivocal: the state's emergency response networks, especially the emergency food system, have experienced heightened demand from Californians in need.

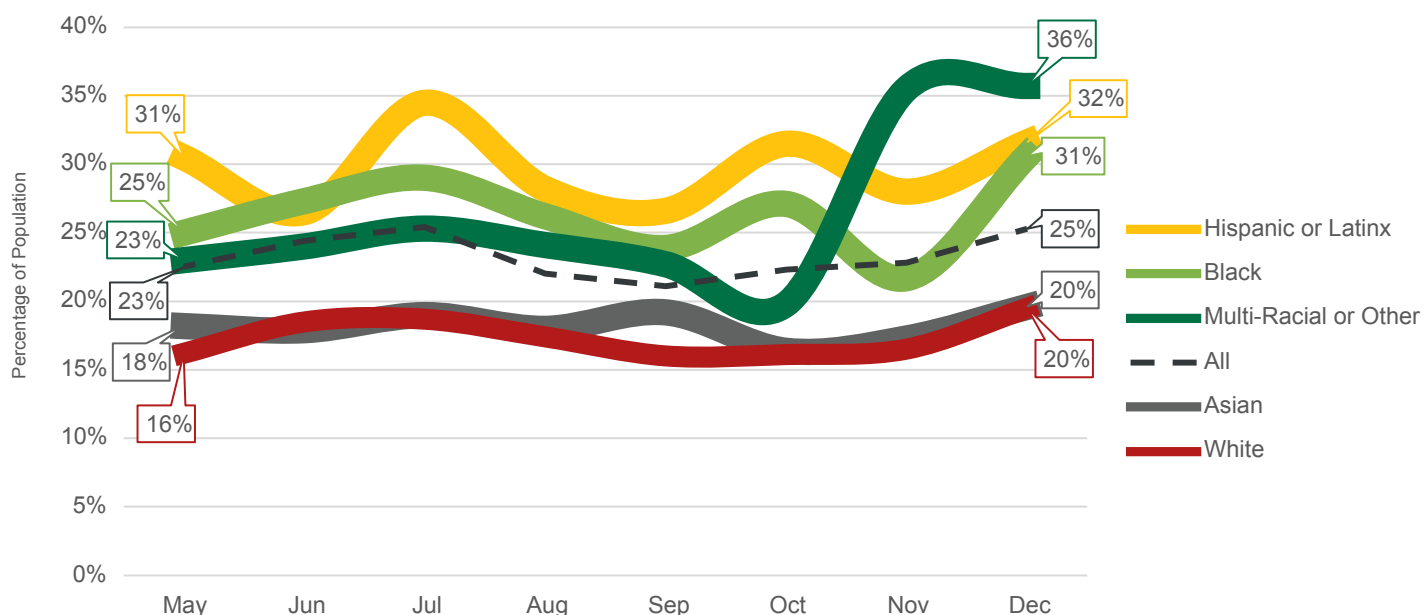
No Californian should go hungry, yet even prior to the pandemic, 9.9% of Californians suffered from food insecurity.<sup>3</sup> Now, the unprecedented economic impact of COVID-19 has exacerbated this dire situation. As households lose hours of wages, entire incomes, or jobs, families and individuals become more prone to food insecurity (if not already experiencing this hardship due to inadequate wages and the high cost of living in California)<sup>4</sup>. According to economist Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach of Northwestern University, food insecurity rises approximately .70 to .79% for every 1% increase in unemployment<sup>5</sup>. As summarized in Appendix Chart 1 on page 32, the data from California as of December 21, 2020 demonstrate that overall food insecurity spiked to more than 25% of all California households. That is equivalent to approximately 10 million people<sup>6</sup> and is 2.5 times higher than before COVID-19.<sup>7</sup> Beyond that, there are deep racial and ethnic disparities, as shown by the 31.6% of Latinx and 30.6% of Black households facing hunger and the harm that comes with it.<sup>8</sup>

## Food Insecurity in California During 2020



It is no surprise, then, that food banks have seen sizable and sustained increases in community demand for food. In comparison to 2019, food banks across the state have reported an extraordinary increase in their distribution, such as the doubling of services at Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services<sup>9</sup> and a 40% increase in the demand for food in April 2020 for Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County.<sup>10</sup> As recently as January 18, 2021, the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, which serves the most populous county in the state, reported that demand remained at 145% of pre-pandemic levels<sup>11</sup>. In addition to deepening the need among those already food insecure before March 2020, these impacts have forced a new population of individuals and families to line up for hours in order to receive the food necessary to survive.

### California Average Monthly Food Insecurity in 2020



Due to the unparalleled nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic effects, we recognized an opportunity to analyze the manner and magnitude of its impact on daily operations, such as food procurement and distribution, as well as other dynamics that affect the state's emergency food system. Our analysis spans from March 2020, when Governor Newsom issued his first Stay-At-Home order, through December 2020. A combination of descriptive statistical analyses and research interviews conducted with food bank representatives have identified historical and current trends within the emergency food system. The following data does not intend to reflect total inputs or outputs for any food bank or county in California. For more information about our methodology, please see the Appendix on page 32.

Our intent with this report is to illuminate the unique ways in which need has manifested in California throughout the pandemic, and to provide guidance in building the requisite infrastructure for a stronger future response. Daily life has altered greatly since March 4, 2020. All signs indicate that, similar to the Great Recession, the pandemic's economic downturn will continue to wreak havoc on the emergency food system and the communities it serves for years to come. The overwhelming conclusion from the trends highlighted throughout this report demonstrate the consistent and ongoing elevated food needs of our neighbors and the need for a sustained public policy response to support the emergency food system in its efforts to feed our communities in a sustainable and healthy way. This report outlines key moments of the COVID-19 crisis that California Association of Food Banks (CAFB) member food banks identified and described spanning from unique challenges to consistent issues.

While our analysis is limited to those several months of 2020, we hope that the information laid out will be used by food banks and policymakers to better inform current response policy and to better prepare for any future disasters, whether they are pandemics, fires, power shutoffs, or earthquakes that have impacted, and will continue to impact, California.

# KEY TERMS

**Food insecurity:**

Defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), food insecurity is “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.”<sup>12</sup> Food insecurity is a broader measure than hunger, capturing the toxic stress and other factors that come from lacking consistent access to food, such as not knowing where your next meal will come from.<sup>A</sup>

**Food bank:**

In this report, “food bank” refers to a regional hub that solicits, stores, and distributes food to their defined service area, typically countywide.<sup>B</sup> For example, the California Association of Food Banks has 41 member food banks who partner with more than 5,000 partner agencies. Prior to COVID-19, food banks did limited direct distribution to households, but as described later in this report, that practice shifted due to impacts on partner agencies.

**Partner agency:**

These agencies receive food from food banks and distribute that food to households, typically on-site or through localized networks to the communities they serve. Examples of partner agencies include churches, senior centers, and childcare centers. Many of these temporarily or permanently closed during the pandemic, especially those that rely on all-volunteer or older adult crews.

**Emergency food system:**

The emergency food system encompasses all organizations supporting community members in accessing food in California. This term includes, but is not limited to: food banks, partner agencies, and other community food-providing organizations such as gleaning associations.

A. Normally assessed annually, the Census Household Pulse Survey (CHHPS) is providing biweekly data to track pandemic-related trends. The CHHPS asks about “food insufficiency,” which is a subset of “food insecurity.” For a detailed discussion, see work of Diane Schanzenbach, Northwestern University Institute for Policy Research: <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/reports/ipr-rapid-research-reports-pulse-hh-data-1-june-2020.pdf> B. Learn more about food banks here: <https://www.cafoodbanks.org/food-bank-facts/>

# PART 1

## SPRING 2020

Immediately following Governor Newsom's Stay-At-Home order, California faced an exceptional array of challenges. With such uncertainty, household products flew off of retail shelves as Californians who could afford to stocked their pantries. With skyrocketing demand and limited supply, prices of food and other essentials rose, while the state's residents faced devastating furloughs and layoffs due to the closure of non-essential businesses. The 9.9% of Californians already experiencing food insecurity were forced to increase their reliance on the emergency food system in order to sustain themselves. Additionally, the economic conditions of the pandemic more than doubled the number of clients relying on the emergency food system for support.

These new clients reflected the rapidly growing need for food in every county, especially among children, migrant workers, and communities of color. By mid-May 2020, statewide food insecurity had more than doubled from its pre-pandemic 9.9% to 22%. For communities of color, averages of food insecurity were even higher: 25.6% for Latinx, 26.1% for multi-racial and other races, and 37.8% for Black Californians — at the same time, white and Asian-American communities experienced food insecurity at a rate of 17.5 and 17.3% respectively.<sup>13</sup>

**Statewide Average Number of People Served Weekly**

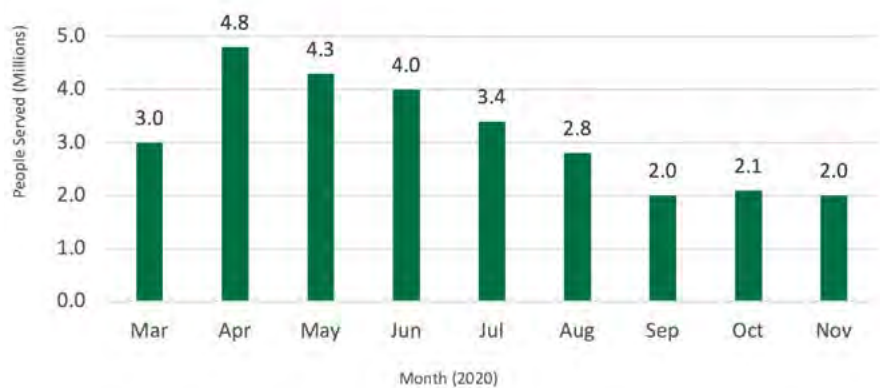


Figure 1. Statewide Average Number of People Served Weekly

In urban centers such as Los Angeles, counties experienced consistent growth in their food insecurity rates. As shown below in Chart 1, from April to May 2020, Los Angeles County's food insecurity grew from 25.7% to 28.3% of residents. Similar ~2% growth trends could be found in other populous counties such as San Francisco and Santa Clara counties, where in May 2020, residents experienced food insecurity at rates of 19.3% and 17.2%, respectively. However, food insecurity increases were not strictly limited to these densely populated areas. By that same time in May, rural counties like Colusa, Imperial, and Mono counties experienced extremely high levels of food insecurity, at 40.0%, 37.0%, and 33.1%, respectively. These counties had the highest food insecurity rates of all counties in California at the early stages of the pandemic. Regardless of the severity of change, every county saw food insecurity rise to rates that placed tremendous pressure and demand on the state's emergency food system.

**% of Population with Food Insecurity**

| County        | April 2020 | May 2020 |
|---------------|------------|----------|
| Los Angeles   | 26%        | 28%      |
| San Francisco | 18%        | 19%      |
| Santa Clara   | 16%        | 17%      |
| Colusa        | 36%        | 40%      |
| Imperial      | 34%        | 37%      |
| Mono          | 30%        | 33%      |

Chart 1. Percentage of Population With Food Insecurity in April And May 2020

This sudden need, especially among communities of color, forced food banks to scale their operations quickly. As Debbie Espinosa, CEO of FIND Food Bank, remarked, **"We are the free 'grocery store' for low-income people who struggle with food insecurity. The majority of low-income people we serve are people of color. So if you don't protect food bank operations, the community is told that equitable access is not available to, one, people that are food insecure, and two, many people of color, who already struggle in regards to equitable access to resources."**

Initial impacts of the pandemic were longer lines, greater waiting times, and food supply concerns for many food banks. These problems were especially prominent for food banks that suffered from a high rate of partner agency closures, and food banks that faced challenges



accommodating social distancing guidelines. As shown in Figure 1 on page 10, the weekly average number of people served statewide dramatically rose to its highest point in April. The 51 reporting food distribution organizations served more than 4.7 million people each week.<sup>C</sup> Unfortunately for data-gathering purposes, as fears of public charge and other risks persist, food banks maintain strong client privacy protections, so it is impossible to gather a definitive pre-pandemic assessment of people served statewide.<sup>D</sup> Our best estimate, however, is approximately 1 million people served each week. These data show the almost five-fold increase in service during April's peak, and the sustained, approximately doubled demand continuing through November 2020.<sup>E</sup>

**"If you don't protect food bank operations, the community is told that equitable access is not available to, one, people that are food insecure, and two, many people of color, who already struggle in regards to equitable access to resources."**

*—Debbie Espinosa, President & CEO, FIND Food Bank*

The drop in donations and spiking demand meant food banks saw a depletion of their food supply, despite having to expand their distributions. A unique combination of factors limited supply at food bank warehouses: the first weeks of the pandemic saw Californians stocking their pantry shelves, with the unintended consequence that retailers would have less, and in some situations no, food to donate. Food banks' inability to run food drives due to safety concerns for staff and the public also severely limited supply. Additionally, the delays at other intersections of the food system, especially production and distribution, resulted in a delay in receiving many food orders. During interviews, one food bank reported their food orders were delayed by six to eight weeks in the initial months of the pandemic. Excerpts from weekly reports to the State show the dire situation across California:

#### **Central Valley:**

*"Even though we increased the amount of food, anticipating additional families, we still had to turn people away because we ran out of food for the day."*

#### **Southern California:**

*"We had to stop daily distributions and move to a twice weekly model, because we can't keep up packing boxes for the 1,000+ households that come for food. These distributions have been so popular that the line of cars backed up the freeway for at least a mile."*

#### **Central Coast:**

*"We have been caught unprepared for the volume of food needed to be pre-packed during the COVID-19 crisis. We did not have adequate inventory of these items to meet the COVID-19 demand and have been struggling to find supplies on short notice."*

In interviews, food banks discussed that their inability to provide enough food to their partner agencies created tensions as partner agencies were forced to turn elsewhere for their food supply. Nonetheless, food banks continued to receive and distribute the maximum amount of food possible under those circumstances.

At the same time, because many partner agencies had to close due to social distancing concerns or loss of volunteers, food banks significantly shifted their operations from regional hubs serving local partners to direct distributions to households — often through large-scale, drive-through sites. For instance, Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County erected a massive drive-through distribution at the Honda Center in Anaheim, California. They initially planned to serve 2,000 households on the first day of their drive-through distribution, but ended up serving 2,728.<sup>14</sup> Soon afterwards, they were planning for 8,000 households.<sup>15</sup> Partner agency closures also increased operational costs for food banks. As food banks purchased necessities such as personal protective equipment (PPE) and additional cleaning products, they were simultaneously forced to accommodate rising prices of other goods necessary to their operations, such as food, gas, trucks, and labor. These higher prices,

C. Please see Appendix: Chart 3 on page 35 for more information regarding the number of food banks reporting each month. D. On February 24, 2020 the U.S. Customs and Immigration Services instituted the [Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds](#) final rule nationwide. This final rule requires non-citizens attempting to extend their stay or change their status to show that, since obtaining the nonimmigrant status they wish to change, they have not received public benefits, including CalFresh, over the designated threshold. E. The fall decline is likely an overestimate of decrease in service as the number of reporting food banks decreased. This time period is typically one of the most intense periods for food banks as they served their communities through the holidays and simultaneously experienced the return to Stay-At-Home. For more information, please refer to the Methodological Appendix on page 32.

along with the need to expand operations to meet growing demand, increased food banks' costs substantially.

Despite the emergency food system's ability to service the 4.8 million individuals and families each week, March and April 2020 simultaneously saw the largest weekly shortages of staff and volunteers throughout California. As seen in Figure 2 below, the emergency food system reported an average weekly shortage of 1,127 staff and volunteers in March, and 1,107 people in April.

These overlapping challenges many food-distributing organizations faced during the first months of the pandemic demanded a coordinated government response that addressed the interconnectedness of these food-chain issues. As reported by the emergency food system, these responses varied at the federal, state, and local levels.

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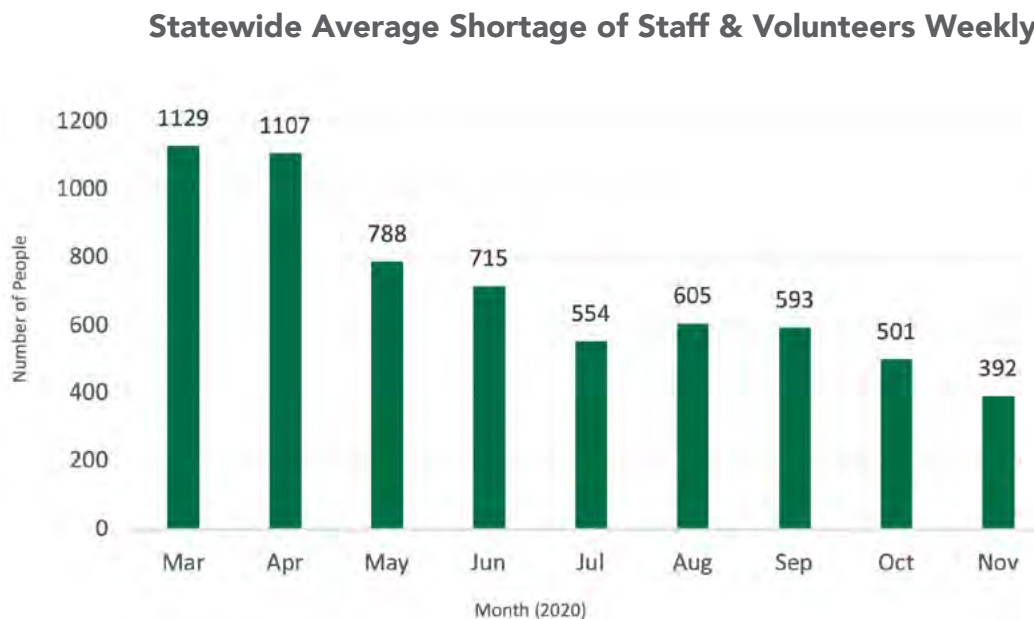


Figure 2. Statewide Average Shortage of Staff and Volunteers Weekly

## PIVOTING IN A PANDEMIC

*Large Scale Federal Response Was Insufficient, Suffered Delays, & Created New Issues*

The power and scale of the federal government's ability to respond to crises is unmatched. However, in this first phase, the emergency food system reported that this potential was not only unfulfilled, but that some federal responses created new challenges that further complicated on-the-ground efforts.

By March 18, 2020, the U.S. Congress passed, and the President signed, the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act (FFCRA; Public Law 116-127), addressing the rising levels of food insecurity across the nation.<sup>16</sup> The FFCRA provided emergency CalFresh allotments for all families enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (called CalFresh in California), boosting food benefits at this critical time. During implementation, however, the USDA issued guidance that denied these allotments to the 40% of CalFresh-eligible households already receiving the maximum benefits for their household size.<sup>17</sup> Through this denial of emergency allotments, the reach and effectiveness of this policy was limited.<sup>f</sup> The FFCRA suspended the harsh time limit for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents, ensuring CalFresh access for adults without children at home, struggling to find work during the pandemic.

Another new program approved by Congress in the FFCRA was Pandemic EBT (P-EBT). Families with children who are eligible to receive free or reduced price meals at school were provided with monetary assistance to buy groceries, in the form of an EBT card. The goal was to replace the meals a child would have normally received had they been in school. Although the USDA delayed implementation in California and other states for several weeks during this period of intense need, once implemented, P-EBT brought \$1.4 billion in food aid to 3.7 million California children.<sup>18</sup>

Congress also provided increases in funding for the emergency food commodity programs that support food banks, particularly The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), but the inability of these programs to respond quickly meant significant delays. For example, Congress provided \$400 million in the FFCRA and \$450 million in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act; Public Law 116-136), including elevated storage and distribution funding, vitally needed given the operational costs of predominantly direct distributions.<sup>19</sup> This was an important improvement, but the time to order and ship these foods meant that they did not reach California food banks until July 2020.

**Some concerns that food banks repeated in interviews were inconsistencies in vendor access, inequitable geographic distribution, quality of food products, and lack of coverage for “last mile” storage and distribution costs due the perception of CFAP boxes flowing directly from “truck to trunk.”**

Using CARES Act authority, the USDA also created the Farmers to Families food box program within the larger Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP).<sup>20</sup> CFAP was primarily created to address farmer economic burdens and emergency food system food supply shortages, as well as provide a rapid-response food program. The program purchased crops from affected farmers, packaged them into boxes by distributors, and then redistributed those boxes to food-distributing organizations. CFAP Round 1 began in May 2020 and continued until June 2020, with two additional rounds initially announced.<sup>21</sup> Food banks reported mixed efficacy of the program. Despite the USDA's intention to provide rapid services, some concerns that food banks repeated in interviews were inconsistencies in vendor access, inequitable geographic distribution, quality of food products, and lack of coverage for “last mile” storage and distribution costs due the perception of CFAP boxes flowing directly from “truck to trunk.” Moreover, inconsistent information about the program created planning difficulties for food banks, as they could not prepare appropriately for their supply and storage capacity. Food banks in agricultural regions also emphasized how the program disrupted relationships with existing producer-donors. If a farmer was not selected for CFAP and had excess product to donate, but food banks accepting and distributing CFAP boxes had a reduced capacity for farmer donations, these important relationships could be threatened. Ultimately, food banks commented on the necessity of such food and its importance in meeting food-supply needs, even as they signaled the importance of equitable access and improved program design.

Additionally, the USDA instituted waivers regarding several of their food-providing programs, such as TEFAP, CSFP, and child nutrition programs. These waivers permitted food banks and schools to service additional families rapidly and efficiently by reducing barriers, such as paperwork and requirements to provide meals in congregant settings. Food banks across California highlighted the critical nature of waivers to their pandemic operations. In an interview, Suzan Bateson, CEO of Alameda County Community Food Bank, emphasized this point by stating, “Waivers give us hope. When restrictions are relaxed, it gives us hope that we will have enough food to serve immediate need. When restrictions are loosened more children, adults, and seniors will be assisted through the good work of government.”

F. Court challenges began in Pennsylvania and California. Despite a successful injunction by the U.S. District Court of Eastern Pennsylvania in September 2020, USDA appealed the decision. Since taking over, the Biden Administration has issued a directive to USDA to create and implement new guidance allowing for these 40% of SNAP households to receive supplementary benefits. More information regarding this new directive can be found: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/22/fact-sheet-president-bidens-new-executive-actions-deliver-economic-relief-for-american-families-and-businesses-amid-the-covid-19-crisis/>.





## ***State of California Responded Quickly With Multiple, Significant Supports***

Food banks appreciated the California state government's response to this unprecedented demand placed on the emergency food system. Shortly after issuing the Stay-At-Home order, the Governor's office created an informal, interagency Feeding and Supplies Task Force that brought together relevant State personnel to discuss, plan, and coordinate efforts to mitigate the harshest COVID-19 impacts.<sup>22</sup> The State further expanded the emergency food system's capacity by supporting access to skilled personnel and volunteers, as well as developing an emergency food box program to distribute additional food to Californians in need.

Responding to dramatic volunteer shortages witnessed around the state, Governor Newsom swiftly activated the California National Guard (CalGuard) on March 20, 2020.<sup>23</sup> Deployment of the CalGuard, as well as creation of State-coordinated volunteer programs, supplied the emergency food system with necessary personnel to complete basic functions.<sup>6</sup> This experience was further complicated in many counties where food banks were forced to turn away volunteers if unable to provide COVID-19-safe facilities. By May 2020, through the combined efforts of CalGuard and recruitment of 17,000 volunteers through CalVolunteers' "Californians for All" initiative, the emergency food system reported a 29% decline in personnel shortages to less than 800 people weekly from nearly 1,200 in March; that gap continued to close throughout the year.

State officials also quickly provided financial support for the emergency food system. In just a few weeks, the State approved \$20 million dollars to support emergency food system operations, which was followed by an additional \$5 million in emergency appropriations to ensure a steady supply of funding. This funding provided access to critically needed food supply. With logistical support from the California Association of Food Banks, the California Department of Social Services created state-funded food boxes. These boxes increased organizational capacity within food banks by reducing pre-bagging demands on food banks and their staff, providing shelf-stable items needed to ensure complete nutrition, and enabling safe, contact-free distributions like the large-scale "drive-throughs" established by many food banks.

6. A number of food banks declined personnel assistance from CalGuard. When interviewed, these food banks emphasized discomfort of having militarized personnel onsite. Some food banks highlighted these concerns in reference to the communities they serve. Others however commented that this was a concern raised by their internal staff, leading to their refusal of CalGuard.

**In contrast to those beginning months, multiple food banks later reported a deep relationship and better collaboration between their operations and local governments as a result of the pandemic.**

### ***Local Governments: Period of Relationship Building & Some Direct Supports***

California's system of governance is decentralized, with many programs, including emergency services, administered by counties and, in some cases, city jurisdictions. Interviews with food bank representatives revealed that local government-food bank relationships were not particularly strong prior to the pandemic. Facing the initial impacts of COVID-19, many food banks recounted that county governments and local agencies were unaware of or misunderstood the role of food banks in their communities. Some organizations encountered confusion about various organizations and programs of the emergency food system, resulting in unsuccessful attempts at government assistance. These difficulties caused delays in food banks accessing personnel and PPE across the state. During this period, the California State Association of Counties was a key partner in identifying primary contacts and connecting food banks to local decision-makers. In contrast to those beginning months, multiple food banks later reported a deep relationship and better collaboration between their operations and local governments as a result of the pandemic. An example of this was redirected County staff, such as librarian teams, supporting the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank.

Federal government efforts, combined with state and local assistance, enabled public nutrition programs and the emergency food system to drastically shift and expand their operations, but did not allow them to fully meet the overwhelming need during those first months. Even with these combined interventions, food banks were only able to feed around 5 million people per week — and yet, statewide food insecurity data showed that approximately 10 million Californians were food insecure at the time. Insufficient resources and limitations in funding use restricted food banks' ability to maximize the efficacy of funding. Yet despite restrictions, the emergency food system accomplished the heroic task of feeding millions of people each week. Additional supports reduced the overall demand placed on the emergency food system, but were still insufficient to meet the entirety of statewide need. By June 2020, California was beginning to reopen with modifications.<sup>24</sup> This reopening marked a turning point for emergency food systems, as some individuals returned to work, and government response, especially at the national level, weakened.

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# PART 2

## SUMMER 2020

The reopening of California from statewide Stay-At-Home began in May and continued into late July 2020. Food insecurity continued rising across counties in California through that same period. The emergency food system received additional food through national and state programs, and personnel shortages continued to decline as some food-distributing organizations were able to secure enough volunteers with the help of the state's Californians for All and continued CalGuard presence. The combination of reopening and implementation of food systems programs enabled California's emergency food system to address changes in food insecurity even as the enormous new challenges of wildfires and blackouts created new crises on top of the pandemic.

In June and July 2020, the receiving and distribution of food by the emergency food system peaked. As seen on the right in Figure 3, weekly food distributions averaged more than 26 million pounds of food in June, the highest of the entire year. As shown below in Figure 4, the weekly average of food received by the emergency food system was recorded at over 24 million pounds in July. Food insecurity steadily rose until the end of July, where food insecurity hit a peak of 25.4%.<sup>H</sup> This demonstrated the widespread consequences of hunger due to job loss and unemployment, despite work to expand emergency food system capacity and all interventions in anti-hunger programs.<sup>J</sup>

August 2020 data demonstrated that 22% of Californians were experiencing food insecurity—a slight decrease from the July peak, but still an unprecedented level.<sup>26</sup> Between June and August, food banks around the state also saw a decrease in the number of people served weekly. In August, the emergency food system reported serving a weekly average of 2.76 million Californians.<sup>J</sup> However, these small decreases in demand coincided with additional natural disasters around the state: throughout the summer months and into the early fall, California suffered the worst wildfire season in state history.<sup>27</sup> The fires, Public Safety Power Shutoffs (PSPS events), and the first widespread blackouts in 20 years<sup>28</sup>

**Statewide Average Poundage of Food Distributed Weekly**

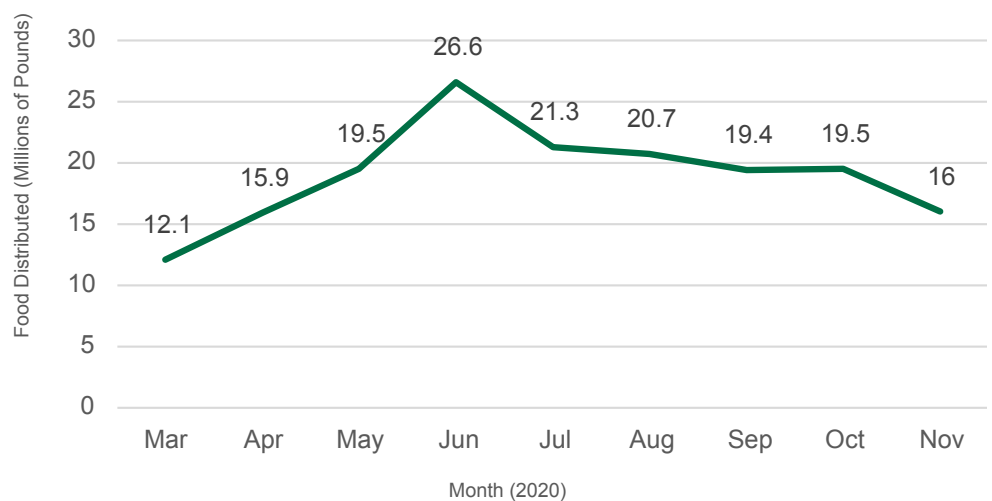


Figure 3. Statewide Average Poundage of Food Distributed Weekly

**Statewide Average Poundage of Food Received Weekly**

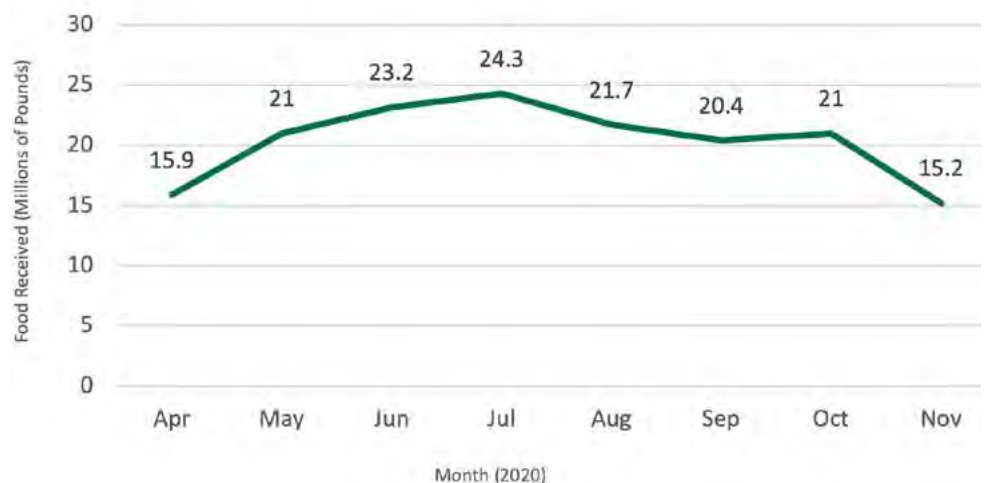


Figure 4. Statewide Average Poundage of Food Received Weekly

H. See Appendix: Chart 1  
J. See Figure 1

converged to intensify many of the challenges already experienced by the emergency food system. The compounding of pandemic and wildfires revealed the dually critical nature of N95 masks for frontline emergency food system staff. In Humboldt county, Heidi McHugh, Community Education & Outreach Coordinator of Food for People, recounted, “The summer months were very hard. Wildfires choked the region with smoke for most of July and August. It was unsafe to be outside for nearly eight weeks. Our frontline staff with asthma and other respiratory conditions desperately required N95 masks for COVID-19 safety and smoky air conditions.”

**“The summer months were very hard. Wildfires choked the region with smoke for most of July and August. It was unsafe to be outside for nearly eight weeks. Our frontline staff with asthma and other respiratory conditions desperately required N95 masks for COVID-19 safety and smoky air conditions.”**

*—Heidi McHugh, Community Education & Outreach Coordinator of Food for People*

While interviews with food banks from other regions revealed that fires were less impactful on their distribution than initially expected, representatives emphasized how these situations exacerbated operational difficulties and heightened burnout among emergency food system staff. For Food for People, coordination of food distribution was particularly important for the Hoopa Valley Tribe, which has been largely closed to the public since the pandemic began. Working closely with the Hoopa Office of Emergency Services and the Department of Health and Human Services, Food for People requested monthly permission to distribute food on reservation lands through their Mobile Produce Pantry.

Prior to COVID-19, the Mobile Produce Pantry operated farmers market-style with an unofficial “community resource fair,” bringing health services and public benefits assistance to one central location each month. Unfortunately, COVID-19 safety protocols forced the Mobile Produce Pantry to pre-bag produce, reducing organizational capacity to distribute items such as eggs or frozen meat. Responding to these impacts, Heidi McHugh explained, “Thankfully, we were able to coordinate with the Hoopa Food Distribution Program, who operates the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). Through our collaboration, Hoopa Office of Emergency Services was able to distribute CFAP Farmers to Family food boxes to households in need this summer, alongside our Mobile Produce Pantry.” Wildfires compounded the overwhelming impact of COVID-19 on the emergency food system, influencing aspects of operations from food procurement to distribution.

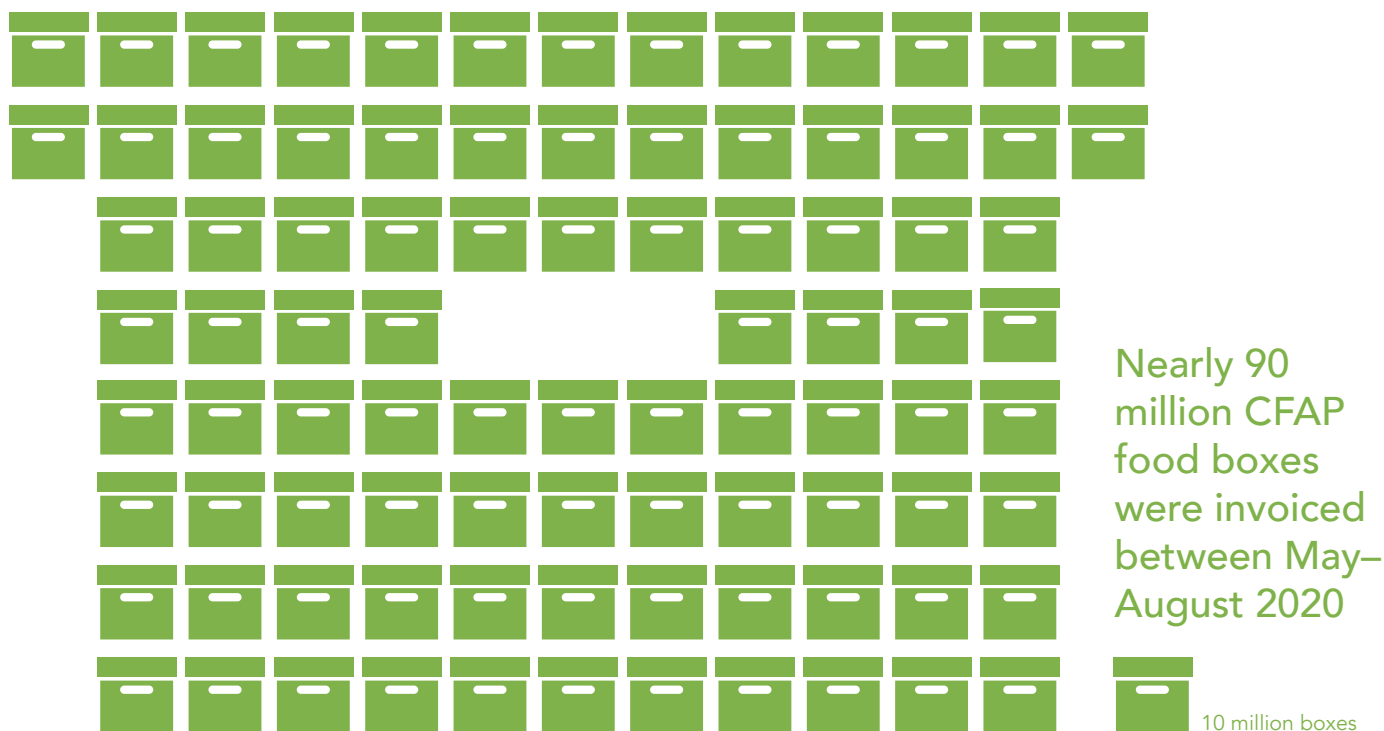
## **THE SUMMER PEAK**

*Initial Federal Legislation Delivers Relief, but Legislative Inaction Sets In*

The summer peak poundage reported in Figure 3, on page 16, highlights the critical role of federal nutrition programs, especially the influx of TEFAP and CFAP foods (and the ongoing State-funded emergency food boxes), in supporting emergency food system operations. By July, TEFAP orders from the FFCRA and the CARES Act reached food banks

across the state, bringing significant relief to food supply concerns and demand in Figure 1 on page 10.<sup>29</sup> Nationally, nearly 90 million CFAP food boxes were invoiced between May and August 2020 for Rounds 1 and 2.<sup>30</sup> While concerns remained, CFAP food boxes helped food banks (with access to the program) to ensure substantial food supply.

However, federal policy response stalled with no new legislation approved during this period. The House of Representatives passed \$3.4 trillion in additional relief in the Heroes Act on May 15, 2020<sup>31</sup> including significant investments in SNAP, TEFAP, and other anti-hunger programs, but no action was taken in the Senate to move the legislation forward.<sup>32</sup>



## State Supports Continue

In contrast to federal inaction, the State of California continued to provide significant support for the emergency food system. In the State's 2020-21 Budget, food banks received an additional \$50 million to continue the food box program well into the State's fiscal year that began on July 1, 2020. The State also provided PPE access for food banks, but certain items, such as masks, were only available in limited quantities due to tight supplies and competing demand.

The State also continued providing skilled labor and volunteer supports, as well as recruiting new personnel assets. CalVolunteers placed 22 AmeriCorps VISTAs (Volunteers in Service to America) at food banks across the state as well as providing Regional Coordinators to manage VISTAs and emergency food system staffing needs. The State continued to supply CalGuard to food banks, but began to assess other assets such as subsidized employment, Civil Air Patrol, and the California Conservation Corps. These assessments were initiated following the President's August 4, 2020 memo, which reduced the federal cost share of the National Guard to 75% on September 30, 2020.<sup>33</sup> The resulting expense, as well as competing demands for state priorities such as for wildfires, contributed to the eventual recall of CalGuard from many food banks.

Because of the deployment of CalGuard, July's personnel shortages declined to a weekly average of less than 575 individuals. While there was an increase in August to a shortage of about 600 personnel each week — perhaps due to the phasing out of some CalGuard members at the end of July — these values continued to trend downward. CalGuard served varying roles at food banks, and the exact removal date for guard members depended on food bank needs and volunteer accessibility. For this reason, it is hard to define an exact period of deployment and recall. At Second Harvest of Silicon Valley, CalGuard members served a critical role on the food assistance hotline. According to representatives,

the food bank “had four or five of members of the Guard who were multilingual and were invaluable in helping clear up a backlog of calls from people looking for help, particularly from the Vietnamese community.” The critical role of CalGuard took on different forms in each space, but clear communication between operations staff and CalGuard enabled smooth processes and transitions whether on the phone, in the warehouse, or at a distribution site.

Despite gains made during the summer, food bank interviews indicated concerns about rising case numbers, changing seasons, and how the pandemic would run its course through the fall and winter. Food banks also cautioned of the impacts on food distribution from the upcoming presidential election. As fall and winter came into view, the emergency food system shifted focus towards the long-term economic effects of COVID-19.

**Because of the deployment of CalGuard, July’s personnel shortages declined to a weekly average of less than 575 individuals.**

## PART 3

### FALL 2020

Against the backdrop of a worsening pandemic and the return of Stay-At-Home orders, the emergency food system braced for the return of urgently needing food and personnel support. An uneven pace of economic reopening continued into the fall as more counties were categorized into safer tiers and more indoor spaces were opened to the public, which provided some localized improvement in employment sectors. Simultaneously, the average weekly number of people served by food banks stabilized at significantly elevated levels, approximately double pre-pandemic estimates, as shown in Figure 1 on page 10. Food insecurity also was relatively stable in the fall before returning to record highs. Shortage of staff and volunteers in food banks continued to decrease from summer levels. These trends occurred alongside concerns about a resurgence of COVID-19 cases and its potential to reverse the precarious progress made. That fear was reinforced as average food received, shown in Figure 4 (page 16), was not far off the summer highs, raising renewed supply concerns.<sup>K</sup>



California National Guard workers help assemble food boxes at LA Regional Food Bank

The fall also saw the continued impact of wildfires on the emergency food system. Areas of primary concern were partner agency closure and local coordination issues when engaging in wildfire recovery efforts. Natalie Caples, co-CEO of Central California Food Bank, emphasized the unexpected side effect of September’s Creek Fire: increasing outreach with local Indigenous communities. This enhanced relationship with Tribal organizations in Madera County enabled the food bank to service Indigenous community members more efficiently and effectively than before. While

<sup>K</sup>. Decrease reporting from food banks may result in overestimates. Please see Appendix on page 32 for more information.



wildfires created these unique opportunities to strengthen relationships, they also resulted in heightened demand on food bank operations. With reopening of more indoor spaces and the return of related service-sector jobs, fall 2020 saw the steadying of weekly averages of people served. In September and November, reporting food banks were serving



approximately 1.96 million people weekly. October's weekly average was slightly higher, but still fell below 2.1 million people. The stability of these averages reinforces what food banks have described as a "new normal" of elevated service that is expected to continue for at least several years, and potentially longer given the trends seen in the aftermath of the Great Recession.<sup>34</sup>

Statewide food insecurity had risen more than two and a half times the rate in 2019, and levels did not appear to be declining soon. In Los Angeles County, food insecurity grew almost three times from the 2019 state average.<sup>L</sup> This drastic growth is

not restricted to urban epicenters; counties like Butte, Shasta, and Ventura have seen food insecurity double from pre-pandemic levels. Even these high numbers are thought to undercount the true severity of food insecurity throughout the state.<sup>35</sup> As shown in Appendix: Chart 2 (page 33), in December 2020, Colusa, Imperial, and Mono counties continued to experience the state's highest rates of food insecurity at approximately 42.8%, 39.6%, and 35.4%, respectively. These counties face a set of interconnected challenges in addressing severe levels of food insecurity. Food banks in rural or remote locations face the highest transportation and food acquisition costs, as well as fewer food or monetary donations than in urban areas. California's emergency food system must continue collaborating with State officials and community leaders to address this critical need in non-urban areas.

By the end of December 2020, statewide food insecurity set a new record of 25.3%, spiking above the national average.<sup>36</sup> As seen on the right in Figure 5, there are even higher levels of food insecurity for certain racial and ethnic populations within the state. As reported in December 2020, 35.7% of multi-racial/other households, 31.6% of Latinx households, and 30.6% of Black households in California were experiencing food insecurity. Meanwhile, for white and Asian communities, food insecurity rates were 19.5% and 19.6%, respectively. The stark contrast of Latinx, Black, and multi-racial/other households compared to white households highlights the inherent legacy of racial inequity and white supremacy in our country, our state, and our food systems. As Willy Elliott-McCrea, CEO of Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz stated, "We can't address food insecurity without addressing racial inequity. What is our role and responsibility as food banks around catalyzing change in our community, locally and more broadly?" Ending racial inequity and addressing white supremacy were identified by food banks as crucial aspects to ending hunger in California.

**"We can't address food insecurity without addressing racial inequity. What is our role and responsibility as food banks around catalyzing change in our community, locally and more broadly?"**

*—Willy Elliott-McCrea, CEO, Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County*

Food bank interviews also underscored the presidential election and its potential legislative impacts as an area of high priority during the fall months. Interviews revealed that staff members were fearful of the potential for election-spurred civil unrest affecting distribution operations, especially because the CFAP boxes contained a letter from President Trump that politicized food banks during the divisive election cycle. Food banks also raised concerns about whether future election-related civil activities could trend toward interrupting emergency food system distributions. Food insecurity resurgence in the fall was expected to continue as COVID-19 cases

### California Average Monthly Food Insecurity in 2020

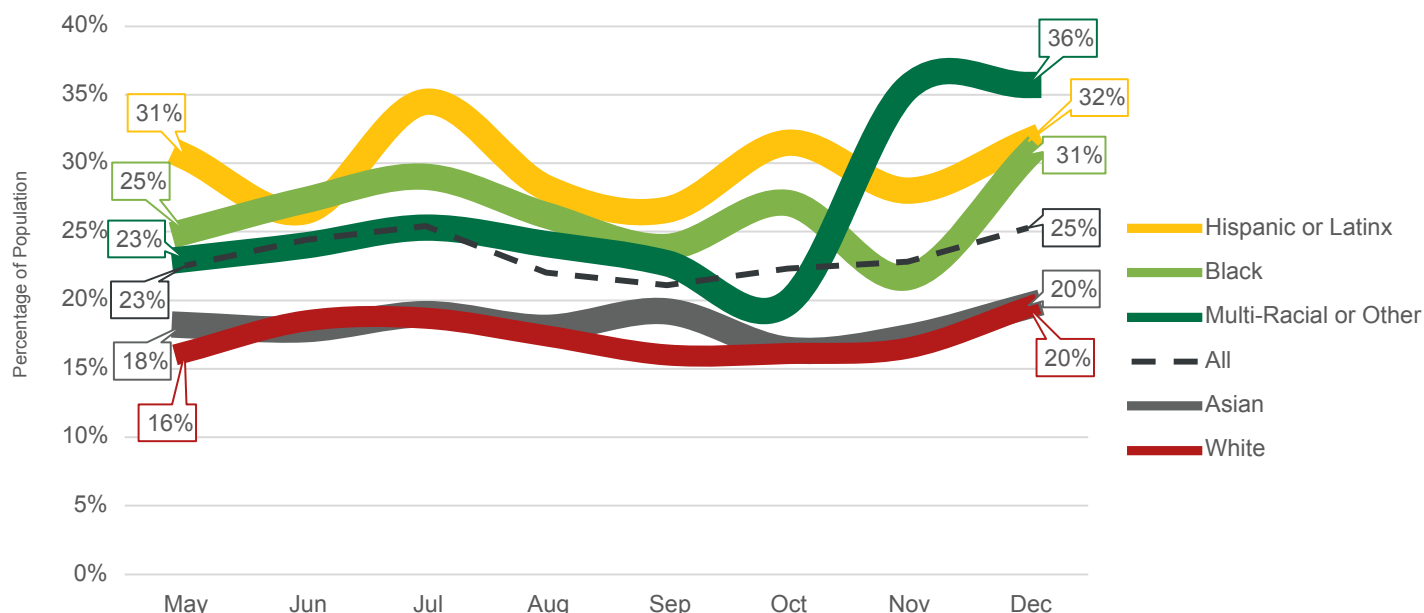


Figure 5. California Average Monthly Food Insecurity in 2020

continued to rise. December 2020 saw a re-issuance of Stay-At-Home orders and regional travel restrictions by Governor Newsom, as well as regional shutdowns as ICU capacity dropped around the state.

## APPROACHING THE CLIFF

### *Urgent Federal Food Cliff Emerges Amid Continued Policy Inaction*

While food banks across the country continued to advocate for substantial federal intervention, no new stimulus legislation was passed during this period. In October, the U.S. House passed a reduced Heroes Act that retained several key anti-hunger provisions, but it was not taken up in the U.S. Senate. The Continuing Resolution (H.R. 8337) funding the federal government was the only bill that included anti-hunger policies. This resolution extended key administrative and operational flexibilities through September 30, 2021 that were necessary for operators and recipients to safely operate and access SNAP. It also provided clarification regarding P-EBT eligibility, and provided additional funding to the USDA Office of the Secretary that included authority for food purchases.

During this time, the USDA executed what was expected to be the final round of CFAP (Round 3). This program delivered approximately 34 million boxes of food nationally from September 1, 2020 to October 31, 2020.<sup>37</sup> Despite moving this large amount of food, the program continued to be imbued with previous downfalls such as inequitable access, lack of funding for last-mile costs, and other limitations. Due to months of federal legislative inaction, food banks in California and across the country brought attention to the pending federal food cliff: the looming termination of CFAP and the Food Purchase & Distribution Program within TEFAP would have ended \$5.5 billion in federal emergency food aid starting October 31, 2020.

The USDA then announced a Round 4 of CFAP, using CARES Act authority and funding from the Continuing Resolution to mitigate the cliff and provide some 12.3 million boxes through December 2020. Round 4, however, further exacerbated inequity in access. For example, CFAP Round 4 had only one provider for the entire state of California, with substantial limitations on their ability to service statewide and direct shipment requirements, which meant that many smaller food banks were excluded.<sup>38</sup> California's only vendor for CFAP Round 4 was located in Southern California and did not provide extra-regional transport opportunities. These limitations ensured local supply, but greatly inhibited Northern and Central California food bank access to this crucial form of food supply.

### CFAP Round 1/2 (May-Aug)



90 million boxes

### CFAP Round 3 (Sep-Oct)



34 million boxes

### CFAP Round 4 (Nov-Dec)



12.3 million boxes

CFAP Round 4, however, exacerbated inequity in access. For example, Round 4 had only one provider for the entire state of California, with substantial limitations on their ability to service statewide and direct shipment requirements, which meant that many smaller food banks were excluded.

## State Redoubles Food & Sustains Personnel Supports

While the federal government provided no new supports, the Coronavirus Relief Fund available to California and local governments from the CARES Act proved critical to emergency food system operations. The State more than doubled prior funding with an additional \$75 million for food and \$15 million for an unmet need for diapers.<sup>39</sup> Some food banks received additional support through their county CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Fund allocations, a sign of local relationships built or strengthened by the pandemic. As impactful as this funding was, food banks commented that it was challenging to operationalize, as it required funds to be spent entirely in a matter of weeks, with the majority spent specifically on food. This renewed concerns about limited appropriations for personnel, storage, transportation, and other non-food expenses incurred in food distribution.



A worker walks through warehouse at Imperial Valley Food Bank

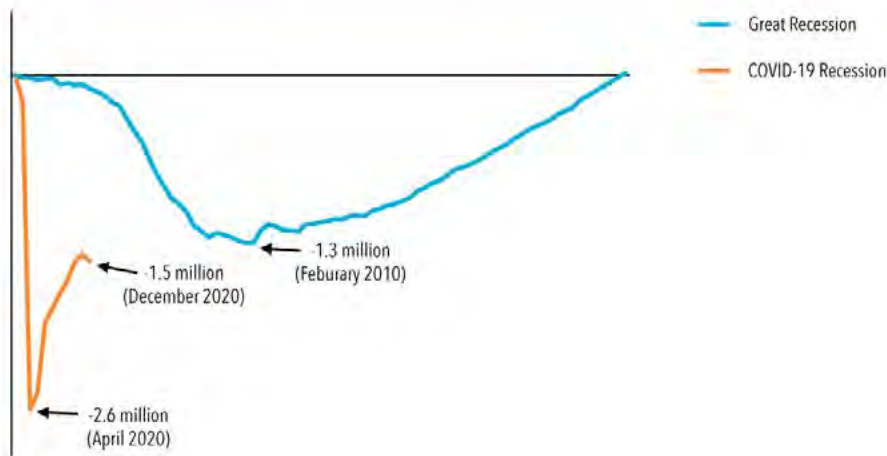
# PART 4

## 2021 & BEYOND

Perhaps the only certainty within the emergency food system is that the hunger crisis is far from being over — and may even worsen in the near term. At the start of 2021, the needs of the emergency food system and those they serve had never been greater. Rising food insecurity, recent economic and pandemic trends, and food bank metrics indicate an elevated and potentially increasing number of households relying on food banks to survive. Meanwhile, California's unemployment rate in December 2020 rose to 8.9%, nearly a full percentage point from November, and the highest since the spring surge.<sup>40</sup> In late January 2021, the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank reported that they tripled the number of people served per month from 2019, to a staggering 900,000.<sup>41</sup> January call volume to the Alameda County Community Food Bank remained 10 times higher than pre-pandemic levels, with half being first-time callers.<sup>42</sup> This reality underscores the continued economic suffering deepening and broadening food insecurity.

### California Is Still Down More Jobs Than the State Lost During the Great Recession

Change in Number of Seasonally Adjusted Nonfarm Jobs from the Pre-Recession Peak



Note: Change in jobs is measured from the month in which the number of nonfarm jobs in California reached its highest point before declining due to the economic downturn. California jobs peaked in July 2007 prior to the Great Recession and in February 2020 prior to the COVID-19 recession. Source: Budget Center analysis of US Bureau of Labor Statistics data



California Budget & Policy Center

Figure 6. Change in Number of Seasonally Adjusted Nonfarm Jobs from the Pre-Recession Peak. California Budget & Policy Center

In interviews, food banks universally expected to maintain increased services for the next few years at minimum. These concerns were particularly high for food banks in counties which have primary industries of hospitality or tourism, both of which are expecting a slower revival period once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. The scale of the economic downturn is unparalleled in post-World War II history: the California labor market has not yet recovered even to the worst levels seen during the Great Recession, indicating that it will take many years to achieve a full recovery.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, a larger percentage of unemployment during COVID-19 has been long-term (lasting six months or more), causing deeper economic hardship as well as longer timeframes for retraining and re-entry to the labor force.<sup>44</sup>

While there is great hope for vaccines to hasten re-opening, state epidemiologist Dr. Erica Pan predicted in January 2021 that full vaccination would take some time for older adults,<sup>45</sup> causing even greater delays to other groups such as schools and other sectors, which are critical for full economic activity.

**In late January 2021, the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank reported that they have tripled the number of people served per month from 2019, to a staggering 900,000.**



## Great Recession Ushered Era of Reliance on Food Banks, Magnitude of COVID-19 Hardship Likely to Deepen, Lengthen Demand for Emergency Food

The demonstrated record of hunger and food banks' demand during the Great Recession reinforces this long-term forecast, with critical lessons for the eventual COVID-19 recovery. Food insecurity did not return to pre-recession levels until 2018, a full decade after the 2008 financial crisis,<sup>46</sup> and still left more than one in 10 California households food insecure.<sup>47</sup>

The Great Recession also marked a shift in the emergency food sector, with a significant increase in the long-term, and in many cases nearly permanent, reliance of households on food banks to make ends meet. The official jobs recovery following the Great Recession masked significant wage erosion and exacerbated inequality as most mid-and lower-wage workers comparatively lost ground during the overall economic expansion.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, skyrocketing housing prices triggered by high-income Californians put enormous pressure on renters and became a driving force of homelessness and poverty.<sup>49</sup> Other groups, such as the more than 1.1 million older adults and people with disabilities receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) in California, saw significant and ongoing cuts to state cash assistance, with some food banks reporting a doubling of demand as a result.<sup>50</sup> These combined forces culminated in the "new normal" of substantial populations relying on food banks as their staple source of food.<sup>51</sup> The emergency food system was designed as just that: a last-resort safety net to ensure temporary access to food,<sup>52</sup> not a widespread and near-permanent support to provide food access for substantial portions of the population.<sup>M</sup>

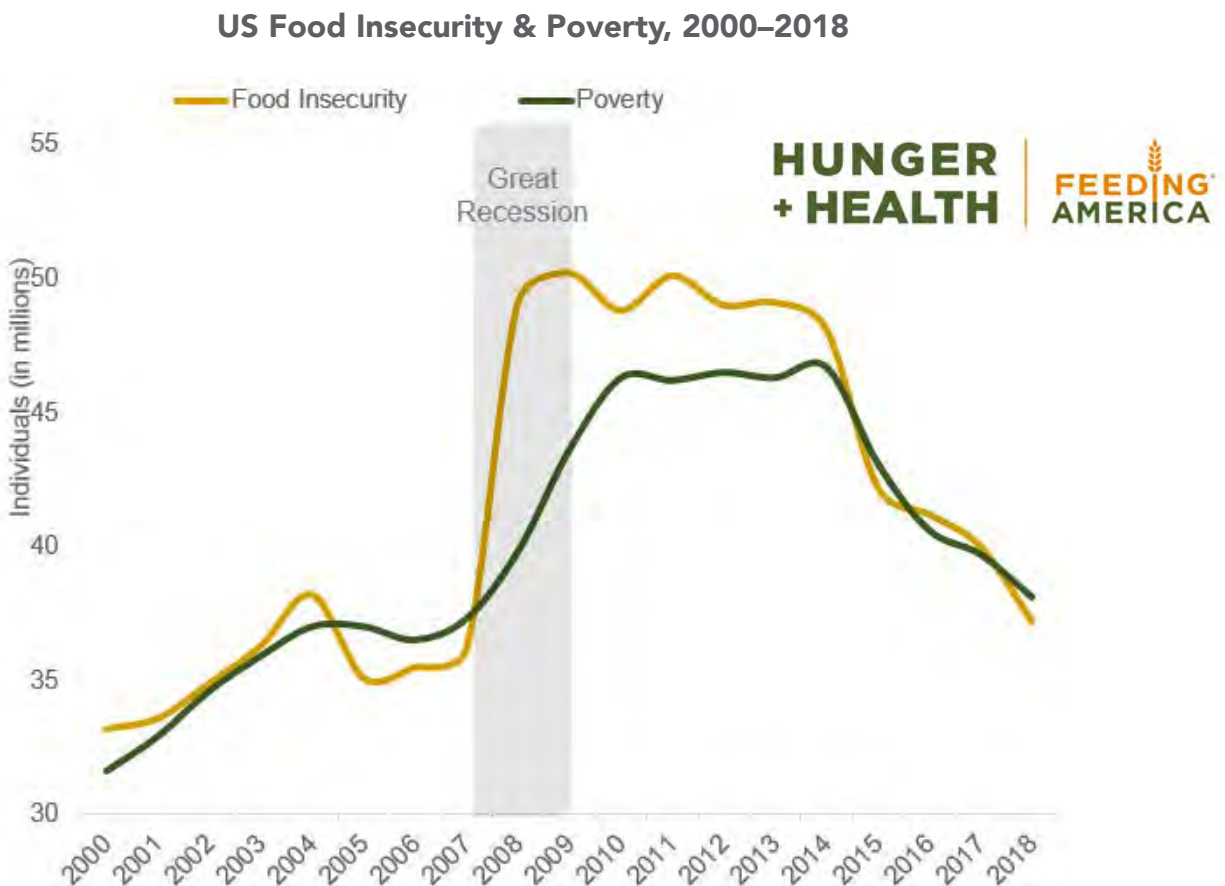


Figure 7. Food Insecurity and Poverty in America, 2000-2018. Feeding America.

### Food Banks Resilient & Innovative, Need Robust Policy Support

Despite the severity of current conditions and sobering expectations of long-term elevated demand, interviews with food bank representatives resoundingly spoke to their positive outlook and excitement about the new programs, partnerships, and other "silver linings" that COVID-19 has created opportunity for. The overarching concern is the sustainability of these efforts and the critical need to prevent the public and policymakers from the endangering presumption that hunger will subside as soon as the public health emergency ends.

M. The Alameda County Community Food Bank, for instance, serves one in five county residents.

**Several food banks mentioned a strong desire to retain some of the unique programs created to support operations during COVID-19. However, most interviewed food banks do not intend to maintain direct service distribution in perpetuity, given the substantial costs and logistical requirements.**

In addition to the anticipated elevated service levels, several food banks mentioned a strong desire to retain some of the unique distribution programs created to support operations during COVID-19. Food banks were forced to shift their distribution patterns and partnerships to accommodate partner agency closure, lack of personnel, and evolving community needs. Most interviewed food banks stated that they hope to not have to maintain direct service distribution in perpetuity, given the substantial costs and logistical requirements, but also that returning to pre-pandemic practices with partner agencies will be challenging. A common challenge is the need to eventually terminate the current system of food banks pre-bagging food for partner agencies, and return to pre-pandemic practices of partner agencies bagging food onsite. Through current state and federal funding, pre-made food boxes and personnel supports to create food packages have provided critical, albeit temporary, capacity at food banks to provide this service to their partner agencies. However, such capacity would be difficult for food banks to sustain alone.

This pandemic has also enabled food banks to learn from new experiences and adjust accordingly in order to continue serving their communities through years to come. One example of such innovation is the Food Bank Coalition of San Luis Obispo (SLO Food Bank). Through the use of CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds, SLO Food Bank purchased client vouchers for produce boxes through a local vendor, Talley Farms. With Talley Farms' pre-existing infrastructure, clients received a voucher that would provide them with four to five deliveries or five to six pick-ups of produce boxes, depending on the requested box size. Informational flyers and vouchers, created in English and Spanish, explained the program and enrollment process. Talley Farms also created an assistance phone line and email with bilingual (English/Spanish) staff to ease barriers to enrollment.

Emily Hansen, Operations Director of SLO Food Bank, described the benefits of the program: "Our clients had access to fresh, local, in-season produce. Boxes could be picked up or delivered to 14 different regions throughout our county. While many clients have chosen to pick-up the boxes themselves, the delivery options have been particularly helpful for those with transportation or mobility issues. The boxes allowed us to put funds into our local economy and support many of our agriculture producers and workers." Such programs have the potential to strengthen local emergency food systems — further creating powerful pathways to fight hunger, improve community health, and drive local economic activity. Even such promising practices, however, require sustained resources.

**"Our clients had access to fresh, local, in-season produce...delivery options have been particularly helpful for those with transportation or mobility issues. The boxes allowed us to put funds into our local economy and support many of our agriculture producers and workers."**

*—Emily Hansen, Operations Director, SLO Food Bank*



The California National Guard arrives at FIND Food Bank in Indio, CA

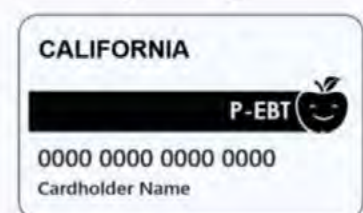
Food banks across California echoed the importance of all sectors continuing to provide resources, especially in response to the higher operational costs caused by direct distributions. Informed by the impact of the Great Recession, many food bank representatives expressed concerns about long-term donor fatigue, potential reductions or inconsistency in government funding, and maintaining access to substantial personnel supports. Food banks identified the vital need for ongoing governmental support as well as new funding streams for “last mile” storage and distribution costs. The changing federal administration has shown that it will more fully leverage the nation’s food safety net. As of this writing, President Biden and the USDA have made substantial increases to SNAP and P-EBT benefits, and announced their intention to make Summer-EBT permanent in the American Families Plan.<sup>53</sup> These policies can relieve significant pressure on the emergency food system. SNAP (known as CalFresh in California), the largest anti-hunger program in the nation, provides at least nine meals for every one distributed by food banks.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, P-EBT has been highly successful, reaching 95% of eligible children and providing \$2 billion in food benefits so far.<sup>55</sup>

## Do I need to apply for P-EBT benefits?

Families with children who receive CalFresh, CalWORKS, Medi-Cal, or Foster Care benefits **should get their P-EBT card in the mail between May 12-22.**

*\*Families with children who are eligible for free or reduced-priced school meals and do not receive a P-EBT card in the mail must apply before **June 30, 2020.***

For more information, visit [ca.p-ebt.org/info](https://ca.p-ebt.org/info)



Social media graphic posted by Berkeley Unified School District Nutrition Services



# CONCLUSIONS & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Amidst the still-evolving challenges of COVID-19 and informed by current and historical trends, food banks are preparing for heightened service to their communities for five to 10 years. The following policy recommendations are derived from the scale and duration of food banks' emergency response, and emphasize the critical need for flexibility to address unique local circumstances. These recommendations highlight national and state-level policies to best support the emergency food system and the Californians they serve throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and any future disasters. The recommendations span from direct emergency food system supports to policies that would prevent Californians from falling into poverty and food insecurity in the first place:

## FEDERAL ACTION

### *Enact Upstream Policies to Prevent Hunger & Root Causes of Poverty*

- Seek any legislative or administrative path to secure sufficient affordable housing, wages adequate to meet the cost of living, access to affordable childcare and public transit, and other supports needed to prevent hunger and promote prosperity. For example, the Congressional Joint Economic Committee showed in 2019 that increasing the minimum wage would lift 1.3 million people above the poverty line. Besides reducing hardship and instability caused by poverty, this would save taxpayer dollars and reduce stress on the overburdened emergency food system, given the rise of low-wage workers who rely on SNAP/CalFresh to support their food budget.
- Use the federal Administration's messaging pulpit to shine a spotlight on corporate good actors that are working to end hunger and poverty by reducing food waste, investing in local communities, paying living wages and providing opportunities for advancement, feeding a neighborhood, etc. Business is full of trade-offs and many choices are imperfect. But showing the Administration's dedication to helping sort out the mechanics of good corporate citizenship will go a long way towards socializing a private sector objective of helping to eliminate hunger and poverty.

### *Fully Leverage the Public Nutrition Programs as Our Nation's Best Defense Against Hunger, & Better Enable Food Banks to Serve Their Communities*

- Fully implement the initiatives in President Biden's American Rescue Plan and executive action to boost SNAP/CalFresh and P-EBT benefits, provide SNAP/CalFresh Emergency Allotments to households already receiving the maximum household benefit, and resource State agencies to continue administering these programs during crisis conditions. These should be sustained for the length of the economic downturn caused by COVID-19, past the end of the emergency public health order, and phased out in a way to prevent a benefits cliff as seen in 2013 following the premature sunset of the 2010 American Recovery & Reinvestment Act SNAP/CalFresh benefit increase.<sup>N</sup>
- The USDA should fully implement the announced executive action to permanently address SNAP/CalFresh benefit inadequacy by basing SNAP/CalFresh allotments at least on the Thrifty Food Plan, and indexed for food inflation. Currently, SNAP/CalFresh benefits are so inadequate that the Institute of Medicine has deemed them insufficient for a healthy life,<sup>56</sup> and nearly one-third of SNAP/CalFresh households report needing food banks because benefits do not last the full month.<sup>57</sup> COVID-19 has brought record increases in food costs as well.<sup>58</sup>

N. A harmful 'benefits cliff' effect occurred when temporary ARRA SNAP boosts were terminated in November 2013. See [https://1giqgs400j4830k22r3m4wqg-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Cover\\_Policy-Brief\\_NYC-on-Edge-of-Hunger-Cliff.png](https://1giqgs400j4830k22r3m4wqg-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Cover_Policy-Brief_NYC-on-Edge-of-Hunger-Cliff.png)



- Expand SNAP/CalFresh access so that low-income Americans, regardless of background, are not excluded from the program: including immigrants, college students, those unable to find work, and others in need of aid.
- Recognize employment discrimination as a serious obstacle to achieving the various work requirement provisions of SNAP/CalFresh, like time limits for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents and mandatory SNAP/CalFresh Employment & Training programs. Remove harsh restrictions grounded in racial stereotypes, such as time limits, denying food to those with drug felonies, and other policies in SNAP/CalFresh and other public benefits that maintain racially disparate access to basic needs.
- Enact similar improvements in eligibility, access, and benefits for all anti-hunger safety net programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).
- Permanently provide universal school meals to children in school and childcare settings. No child should go hungry, and all research indicates the power of school meals for all to improve health and academic outcomes, prevent lunch shaming and debt, and better support school nutrition departments and their critical workforce.
- Build on the highly successful Pandemic EBT program to permanently provide a SNAP/CalFresh EBT-type benefit to children when schools are closed for regularly scheduled breaks or during disasters, the times when child hunger is proven to spike.<sup>59</sup> The Summer EBT evaluation demonstrates the effectiveness of this intervention to reduce Very Low Food Security,<sup>60</sup> showcasing a policy tool with the rare achievement of making maximum impact on the population with highest need.
- Provide robust fiscal relief to state and local governments to prevent harsh budget cuts like those seen during the Great Recession — cuts that weakened safety net programs when they were needed most, and increased long-term demand at food banks.

## ***Continue Existing Supports & Provide New Ones to Meet the Long-Term Needs of the Emergency Food System***

- Prevent a federal food cliff for the duration of the economic crisis caused by COVID-19 by continuing to provide substantial federal food supports, using the existing emergency food safety net and established formulas to ensure equitable access to the food resources needed in every community. This should include purchasing additional USDA foods using Section 32 and the Commodity Credit Corporation, extending the Food Purchase and Distribution Program (FPDP), and increasing funding for TEFAP to help food banks meet emergency need in communities across the country.
- Ensure that all federal programs adequately resource food banks and partner agencies with the costs to receive, store, and distribute foods to the community while maintaining food safety/freshness. Storage and Distribution costs within TEFAP, for example, have been historically under-funded, and CFAP provided little if any last-mile cost reimbursement. This requires food banks to offset that loss by raising private funds, which takes vital resources away from purchasing additional food. All federal programs should provide storage and distribution support for emergency food providers — whether as a percentage of the total allocation, per truckload of food received, or other bases appropriate to the program structure.
- Make substantial investments in the infrastructure capacity and disaster resilience of the emergency food system. This will allow food banks and partner agencies to reduce bottlenecks and better serve their communities by helping to address the severe shortage of vehicles, refrigerators and freezers, and other needs across California.
- Revise USDA procurement policies across programs to ensure participation by small and mid-size growers, especially California's specialty crop producers and others growing foods critical to a healthy population. This can be done by addressing barriers presented by GAP certification and tightening contract requirements with local and regional producers who often cannot access USDA programs.
- Augment successful programs, such as TEFAP's Farm to Food Bank Projects, that build upon existing agricultural and emergency food partnerships like CAFB's Farm to Family program, that effectively support farmers and direct food to those in need while avoiding the unintended inequitable food distribution experienced during COVID-19.

- Expand the Commodity Supplemental Food Program so that it can adequately reach the rapidly growing population of lower-income older adults, and allow home delivery to ensure the program safely supports access to food during the pandemic.
- Continue the approval, and update as necessary to ensure the effectiveness of, COVID-19 related flexibilities for all federal nutrition programs to support safe and ongoing operation of these programs during the pandemic.
- Replace the Federal Emergency Management Authority guidance that emergency food organizations can only be reimbursed for COVID-19-related food provided to those over 200% of the federal poverty limit — guidance that has undermined the ability to feed those hurt most by the pandemic, and led to the perverse outcome that those with higher incomes are served through FEMA Public Assistance.<sup>61</sup>
- Immediately extend the National Guard mission, with 100% federal funding for all states, through the end of the pandemic to replace the dramatic loss of volunteers and staff at emergency food providers as they continue to face record demand.

## *Take Actions to Address Deep Racial Inequities of Hunger*

- Ensure that data are collected to track and address the food insecurity needs of all Californians. For example, California is home to more Native Americans than any other state, with 109 federally recognized Tribes,<sup>62</sup> yet there are rarely data necessary to develop interventions that are culturally appropriate, prioritize populations in greatest need, and are available at the necessary scale.
- Ensure that federal anti-hunger policy is informed by people with low incomes who are given the opportunity to participate in the policymaking process.
- Use existing authority or invite legislation to end the ban that disallows receipt of both SNAP/CalFresh and The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).<sup>63</sup>
- Support states to strengthen partnerships between food banks, schools, and Indian Tribal Organizations by the USDA encouraging states to allow these organizations to more easily distribute TEFAP foods provided by food banks.
- Support food banks that seek to utilize procurement policies to prioritize viability of Black and other historically marginalized farmers, including small, first-generation, or young farmers who face well-documented challenges, such as proposed in the Justice for Farmers Act (S.4929).



# STATE ACTION

## *Maximize Federal Nutrition Programs as the State's Best Defense Against Hunger*

- Continue recent efforts to seek 100% participation in SNAP/CalFresh, as has been achieved in western states,<sup>64</sup> such as dedicated efforts to address inequitable language access,<sup>65</sup> fulfill the CalFresh Expansion to SSI recipients, improve low participation by older adults not receiving SSI,<sup>66</sup> and other efforts to build on recent success.
- Address any gaps and inequities in the federal food safety net by providing food assistance to all populations excluded from federal nutrition programs, delivering emergency supports during the pandemic, and expanding state anti-hunger programs as a permanent solution.
- Ensure that no child goes hungry while at school or in child care, maximizing federal provisions and utilizing additional State resources to permanently provide universal school meals. Provide immediate resources to support nutrition service departments that have suffered alarming losses due to reduction in federally reimbursable meals due to COVID-19.<sup>67</sup>
- Fully utilize P-EBT to provide critical food aid now available to both school aged children as well as newly-eligible young children. Because child hunger repeatedly spikes when schools are not open, build on the highly successful P-EBT program, complementing any federal efforts to permanently provide food benefits when schools are closed during regularly scheduled breaks and unanticipated closures due to disasters.
- Enact the provisions in the Master Plan for Aging to prevent hunger and poverty and ensure affordable aging for all.<sup>68</sup>

## *Invest in the Emergency Food System to Address the Long-Term Economic Impacts of COVID-19*

- Sustain the Governor's Feeding & Supplies Task Force to coordinate interagency action to address food insecurity throughout the remainder of the pandemic. The Task Force is well-placed for an inter-agency effort to develop a plan for a hunger-free California, as several states have done and has been previously proposed.<sup>69</sup>
- Prevent in-state impacts from any federal food cliff, and ensure sufficient supply across the emergency food system, by continuing critical food supply supports such as the CDSS' emergency food box resource, and modifying such programs as needs evolve.
- Invest in capacity and disaster resilience of the emergency food system, to address bottlenecks preventing fully meeting community needs, and prevent potentially catastrophic food loss that has threatened Humboldt and other counties during recent PSPS, fires, and blackouts. Food banks commented on the need to resource their partner agencies in order to build capacity and meet local needs, making long-term improvements with one-time investments.
- Maintain personnel and volunteer supports, especially given the likelihood of sustained elevated demand, the shift to direct distribution requiring significant staffing and volunteers, and the long-term impact of COVID-19 on food bank staff.
- Permanently maintain an emergency food resource, as the federal resource through TEFAP is limited and consists of large-scale commodity food often inappropriate for families displaced in a disaster. The State reacted quickly at the outbreak of COVID-19, but should ensure funds are available in future disasters to enable a timely, flexible response.
- Expand the highly successful CalFood program that enables food banks to purchase healthy, California-grown foods, further supporting California agriculture.
- Prioritize food banks in the State's vaccination plan, given their frontline status serving low-income communities of

color, older adults, and others at highest risk for COVID-19.

- Convene emergency food stakeholders to analyze actual last mile storage and distribution costs to ensure sufficient funding allocations exist across state programs.
- Develop and regularly update a statewide emergency food response plan, such as to catalogue local assets (kitchens, vehicles, food, and other resources), as well as protocols for state supports to local jurisdictions during disasters, like fires or earthquakes, that can isolate communities and require external aid.
- Continue to provide resources for food, personnel, PPE, and other needs unmet by the federal government as well as needs unique to Californians.

## COUNTY ACTION

- Include food banks in county emergency food planning to ensure that effective communication, information sharing, and other local infrastructure is in place to facilitate rapid response and resource allocations in future disasters.
- Continue to build relationships between the emergency food system stakeholders and county emergency operations systems, to better equip local government to address community-specific challenges during future disasters.
- Continue to provide resources for food, personnel, PPE, and other needs unmet by federal and state governments as well as needs unique to local community conditions.





# APPENDIX:

## METHODOLOGY

This report blends analysis of existing quantitative data sources as well original qualitative research with emergency food system leaders, public officials, and other experts who informed the findings and policy recommendations.

### *Food Insecurity Data*

The state-level food insecurity data reported here is as reported by Diane Schanzenbach and her team at the Northwestern University Institute for Policy Research. County-level food insecurity estimates were derived using a method developed by Kristin Schumacher at the California Budget and Policy Center. We are deeply grateful to each of these scholars for their work and support for this project that would not have been otherwise possible.

### *Food Bank Operations Data*

To assess COVID-19's impact on California's emergency food system, weekly food bank survey response data from the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services was analyzed. These surveys asked 21 questions weekly. Upon the initial creation of the survey, 51 food banks and food serving organizations across California responded. Throughout the course of the pandemic, response rates fell to their lowest value in November at 34 organizations (approximately 67%). Thus, reported drops in all metrics during the fall 2020 are overstated as they partially reflect limited data availability. Primary analysis was conducted on survey data regarding food supply, households served, and shortage of staff and volunteers. All data provided was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Because data was reported weekly, the month indicated at the start of the "Reporting Start Week" was incorporated into that month's averages. (For example, data reported for the week starting June 29, 2020 is used in calculating June averages.) Moreover, when only one week's worth of data was submitted for a month, those monthly values are not displayed. Averages were rounded to the closest whole number for narrative and analysis purposes.

The survey requested a total number of households served weekly. These data points were transformed into an average as described above. After such transformation, "weekly households served" averages were multiplied by the average household size of California, 2.95,<sup>70</sup> in order to estimate the number of people served. Once converted to people served, the number was rounded to the closest whole digit.

For visualization purposes, county-level data is a cumulative display of the data from all food banks servicing that county. (For example, Los Angeles County has three food banks reporting for that region. Weekly averages for Los Angeles County is summative of averages calculated for all three food banks.) Multi-county food bank averages are displayed consistently in every county that that food banks services. (For example, San Francisco-Marin Food Bank averages are displayed for San Francisco County and Marin County).

### *Interviews Regarding Emergency Food Systems*

In order to assess COVID-19's impact on the statewide emergency food system, we conducted semi-structured interviews with eight food banks, three government departments, and three food systems experts. Interviews were held during October, November, and the first week of December. Interviewees are listed in the Acknowledgements.

Food banks ranged in size as well as geographic location. Interview questions primarily spoke to COVID-19's impact on food bank operations, distributions, partner agencies, and costs. There were additional questions regarding experiences with changing public policy throughout the course of the pandemic. Final questions also spoke to post-pandemic

impacts of current operation practices and policy. All interviews were approximately an hour in length and held with food bank leaders/department heads (for example, the Director of Public Policy or Operations).

Additional interviews were conducted with public sector representatives, most specifically from the California Department of Food and Agriculture, the California Department of Social Services, and the California National Guard. These interviews discussed how these state departments interfaced with emergency food system operations and what new knowledge was gained as a result of the pandemic. These interviews ranged between 30-45 minutes.

Finally, interviews were conducted with additional individuals involved in food systems, regarding national trends in emergency food systems operations and national policy implications for California. These interviews covered the same topics as food bank interviews in order to provide national context for the trends being witnessed in California. These interviews lasted approximately one hour.

## CHARTS

*Chart 1: California Monthly Food Insecurity Average for 2020*

| Population            | Phase 1 |       |       | Phases 2-3* |       |       |       |       |
|-----------------------|---------|-------|-------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                       | May     | Jun   | Jul   | Aug         | Sep   | Oct   | Nov   | Dec   |
| All                   | 22.5%   | 24.4% | 25.4% | 22.0%       | 21.1% | 22.3% | 22.8% | 25.3% |
| Asian                 | 18.2%   | 17.9% | 19.0% | 18.0%       | 19.2% | 16.4% | 17.3% | 19.6% |
| Black                 | 25.0%   | 27.3% | 29.0% | 26.2%       | 23.9% | 27.1% | 21.7% | 30.6% |
| Hispanic or Latinx    | 30.5%   | 26.5% | 34.5% | 28.2%       | 26.6% | 31.5% | 28.0% | 31.6% |
| Multi-racial or Other | 23.0%   | 24.0% | 25.3% | 24.1%       | 22.7% | 19.8% | 35.5% | 35.7% |

*Chart 2: California County Level Food Insecurity By Month for 2020*

| County       | Phase 1 |     |     |     | Phases 2-3* |     |     |     |     |
|--------------|---------|-----|-----|-----|-------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
|              | Apr     | May | Jun | Jul | Aug         | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
| Alameda      | 18%     | 19% | 20% | 22% | 21%         | 18% | 20% | 21% | 25% |
| Alpine       | 26%     | 29% | 29% | 32% | 31%         | 27% | 29% | 31% | 36% |
| Amador       | 15%     | 17% | 17% | 19% | 18%         | 16% | 17% | 18% | 21% |
| Butte        | 18%     | 20% | 20% | 22% | 21%         | 19% | 20% | 21% | 25% |
| Calaveras    | 16%     | 17% | 18% | 19% | 19%         | 16% | 18% | 19% | 22% |
| Colusa       | 36%     | 40% | 41% | 44% | 43%         | 38% | 41% | 43% | 51% |
| Contra Costa | 18%     | 20% | 20% | 22% | 21%         | 19% | 20% | 21% | 25% |
| Del Norte    | 14%     | 15% | 16% | 17% | 16%         | 15% | 16% | 17% | 20% |
| El Dorado    | 19%     | 21% | 21% | 23% | 22%         | 19% | 21% | 22% | 26% |
| Fresno       | 22%     | 24% | 24% | 26% | 25%         | 22% | 24% | 25% | 30% |
| Glenn        | 19%     | 21% | 22% | 23% | 23%         | 20% | 21% | 23% | 27% |
| Humboldt     | 17%     | 18% | 19% | 20% | 20%         | 17% | 19% | 20% | 23% |
| Imperial     | 34%     | 37% | 38% | 41% | 39%         | 35% | 38% | 40% | 47% |

|                 |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
|-----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Inyo            | 17% | 18% | 19% | 20% | 19% | 17% | 19% | 20% | 23% |
| Kern            | 23% | 25% | 26% | 28% | 27% | 24% | 26% | 27% | 32% |
| Kings           | 20% | 22% | 22% | 24% | 23% | 20% | 22% | 23% | 27% |
| Lake            | 18% | 20% | 20% | 22% | 21% | 19% | 20% | 22% | 25% |
| Lassen          | 11% | 12% | 13% | 14% | 13% | 12% | 13% | 13% | 16% |
| Los Angeles     | 26% | 28% | 29% | 31% | 30% | 27% | 29% | 30% | 36% |
| Madera          | 20% | 22% | 22% | 24% | 23% | 21% | 22% | 23% | 28% |
| Marin           | 14% | 16% | 16% | 17% | 17% | 15% | 16% | 17% | 20% |
| Mariposa        | 21% | 23% | 24% | 26% | 25% | 22% | 24% | 25% | 29% |
| Mendocino       | 18% | 19% | 20% | 22% | 21% | 18% | 20% | 21% | 24% |
| Merced          | 23% | 26% | 26% | 29% | 27% | 24% | 26% | 28% | 33% |
| Modoc           | 15% | 17% | 17% | 19% | 18% | 16% | 17% | 18% | 21% |
| Mono            | 30% | 33% | 34% | 37% | 35% | 31% | 34% | 35% | 42% |
| Monterey        | 26% | 29% | 30% | 32% | 31% | 27% | 29% | 31% | 37% |
| Napa            | 21% | 23% | 24% | 26% | 25% | 22% | 24% | 25% | 29% |
| Nevada          | 17% | 19% | 19% | 21% | 20% | 18% | 19% | 20% | 24% |
| Orange          | 18% | 19% | 20% | 22% | 21% | 18% | 20% | 21% | 24% |
| Placer          | 16% | 18% | 18% | 20% | 19% | 17% | 18% | 19% | 23% |
| Plumas          | 22% | 24% | 25% | 27% | 26% | 23% | 25% | 26% | 31% |
| Riverside       | 19% | 21% | 21% | 23% | 22% | 20% | 21% | 23% | 27% |
| Sacramento      | 18% | 20% | 20% | 22% | 21% | 19% | 20% | 21% | 25% |
| San Benito      | 26% | 29% | 29% | 32% | 31% | 27% | 29% | 31% | 36% |
| San Bernardino  | 17% | 18% | 19% | 20% | 20% | 17% | 19% | 20% | 23% |
| San Diego       | 19% | 21% | 21% | 23% | 22% | 19% | 21% | 22% | 26% |
| San Francisco   | 18% | 19% | 20% | 21% | 21% | 18% | 20% | 21% | 24% |
| San Joaquin     | 22% | 25% | 25% | 27% | 26% | 23% | 25% | 26% | 31% |
| San Luis Obispo | 17% | 19% | 19% | 21% | 20% | 18% | 19% | 20% | 23% |
| San Mateo       | 16% | 17% | 18% | 19% | 18% | 16% | 17% | 18% | 22% |
| Santa Barbara   | 17% | 19% | 20% | 21% | 20% | 18% | 19% | 21% | 24% |
| Santa Clara     | 16% | 17% | 18% | 19% | 18% | 16% | 17% | 18% | 22% |
| Santa Cruz      | 22% | 24% | 24% | 27% | 26% | 23% | 24% | 26% | 30% |
| Shasta          | 18% | 20% | 20% | 22% | 21% | 19% | 20% | 21% | 25% |
| Sierra          | 16% | 18% | 18% | 19% | 19% | 17% | 18% | 19% | 22% |
| Siskiyou        | 18% | 19% | 20% | 22% | 21% | 18% | 20% | 21% | 24% |
| Solano          | 18% | 20% | 21% | 22% | 22% | 19% | 21% | 22% | 26% |
| Sonoma          | 19% | 21% | 21% | 23% | 22% | 20% | 21% | 22% | 26% |
| Stanislaus      | 21% | 23% | 24% | 26% | 25% | 22% | 24% | 25% | 30% |
| Sutter          | 23% | 26% | 26% | 29% | 27% | 24% | 26% | 27% | 32% |
| Tehama          | 17% | 18% | 19% | 20% | 20% | 17% | 19% | 20% | 23% |

|          |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Trinity  | 14% | 15% | 15% | 17% | 16% | 14% | 15% | 16% | 19% |
| Tulare   | 24% | 27% | 27% | 30% | 28% | 25% | 27% | 29% | 34% |
| Tuolumne | 19% | 21% | 21% | 23% | 22% | 20% | 21% | 23% | 27% |
| Ventura  | 18% | 20% | 20% | 22% | 21% | 19% | 20% | 21% | 25% |
| Yolo     | 15% | 16% | 16% | 18% | 17% | 15% | 16% | 17% | 20% |
| Yuba     | 19% | 21% | 21% | 23% | 22% | 19% | 21% | 22% | 26% |

\* Note: Phase 1 and Phases 2-3 are not directly comparable. While the food insecurity questions are identical, the Census Bureau added questions to the survey, which affected response rates.

### Chart 3: Count of Responses to Weekly Reporting

| Month (2020) | Total Organizations Reporting |
|--------------|-------------------------------|
| March        | 51                            |
| April        | 51                            |
| May          | 49                            |
| June         | 49                            |
| July         | 47                            |
| August       | 45                            |
| September    | 43                            |
| October      | 39                            |
| November     | 34                            |



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