

The CalFresh Food Assistance Program MARCH 2016

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➤ **CalFresh is the largest food assistance program in California and the nation.**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—called CalFresh in California, and popularly known as the food stamp program—is the largest food assistance program in the nation. Together with the **school meals** and **WIC** programs, CalFresh provides a nutrition safety net for low-income Californians. The federal government underwrites most benefits; it also determines how benefits rise or fall as household incomes change and sets other key rules. The state determines certain conditions of eligibility and oversees county administration of the program. Eligibility is pegged to the official poverty line. For example, a family of four with an annual adjusted income under about \$24,000—after deductions for expenses such as housing and child care—could qualify for SNAP in 2014.

➤ **Californians received about \$7.5 billion in CalFresh food assistance in 2015.**

An average of 4.4 million Californians living in 2.1 million households received CalFresh benefits each month in fiscal year 2015. Each recipient received, on average, \$142 a month toward their household grocery bill. Overall, Californians received nearly \$7.53 billion, or 10.8% of the total national spending on SNAP benefits. California has a small state-funded program (\$80 million in fiscal year 2015) to assist non-citizen legal permanent residents who are ineligible for federal benefits.

➤ **The program plays a major role in mitigating poverty.**

In 2013, CalFresh moved roughly 890,000 Californians above a poverty line that is adjusted for varying costs of living across the state. In other words, the program lowered the state's **poverty rate** by 2.4 percentage points, the largest amount among social safety net programs.

➤ **California is catching up to the nation in enrollment.**

California's SNAP enrollment has lagged behind the nation for more than a decade, but the gap is narrowing. During the Great Recession and its aftermath, the share of *all* Californians receiving CalFresh rose sharply—from 5.7% in 2008 to 11.3% in 2015. Still, in the rest of the United States, 14.7% of residents received SNAP benefits in 2015.

➤ **Participation among low-income Californians varies across counties.**

In 2014, about 37.2% of Californians with low household incomes (under 200% of the federal poverty line) who met other eligibility criteria received CalFresh benefits. Enrollment ranged from a low of 19.7% in San Luis Obispo County to a high of 58.8% in Tulare County.

➤ **Needier families and poor children are more likely to participate.**

National research has shown that the lowest-income households (those eligible for the largest SNAP benefits) are more likely than other eligible households to receive food assistance. Children—particularly younger children—are more likely than adults to receive assistance. In California, about 62.2% of low-income children ages 0 to 5, 58.7% of those ages 6 to 12, and 44.7% of those ages 13 to 17 received CalFresh benefits on average in any given month in 2014. In contrast, 25.2% of low-income adults obtained assistance from CalFresh.

➤ **CalFresh is continuing to evolve at both the federal and state levels.**

In recent years, state policymakers have enacted laws to make CalFresh more accessible to those who meet its basic income criteria. CalFresh enrollment has been streamlined for all low-income families. School districts can work with county welfare departments to help families with children who qualify for subsidized school meals access CalFresh if they are not already enrolled. The governor's 2016–17 budget proposal sets a goal of increasing coordination with Medi-Cal and WIC to boost CalFresh enrollment among eligible children. At the national level, the expected reinstatement of strict work requirements for non-disabled, working-age adults without dependents in 2018 could make the program less accessible for some poor adults.



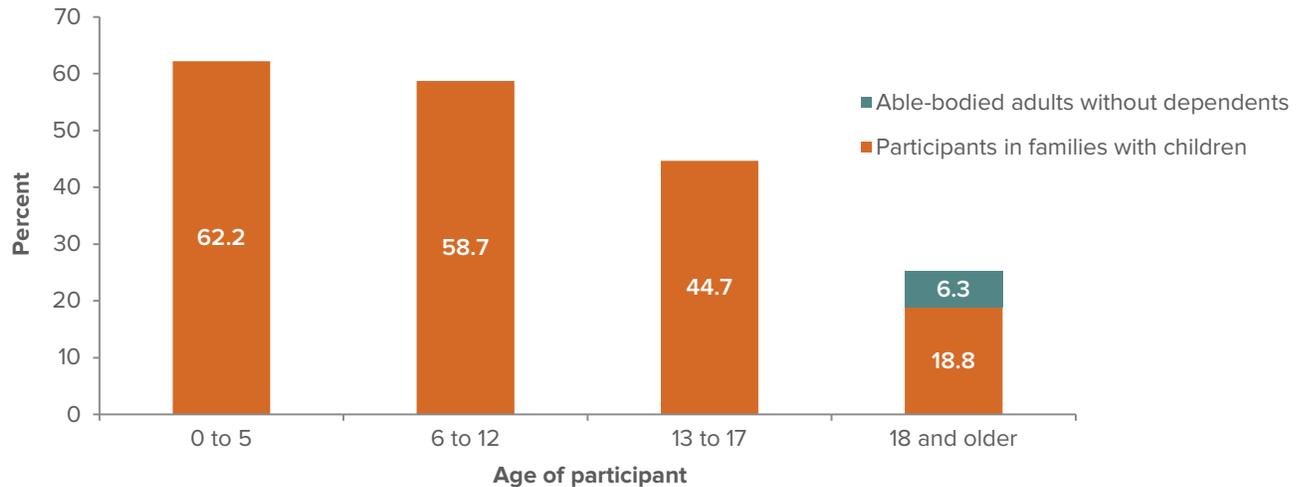
CalFresh participation among low-income residents varies across the state

	Low-income residents on CalFresh (%)		Low-income residents on CalFresh (%)		Low-income residents on CalFresh (%)
Statewide	37.2	Los Angeles	34.6	San Joaquin	46.8
Alameda	34.7	Madera	43.4	San Luis Obispo	19.7
Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Inyo, Mariposa, Mono, Tuolumne	32.9	Marin	22.7	San Mateo	29.9
Butte	34.6	Merced	44.9	Santa Barbara	22.7
Colusa, Glenn, Tehama, Trinity	38.2	Monterey, San Benito	33.2	Santa Clara	35.5
Contra Costa	32.8	Napa	23.9	Santa Cruz	29.8
Del Norte, Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Siskiyou	30.7	Nevada, Sierra	30.9	Shasta	40.4
El Dorado	28.4	Orange	33.9	Solano	39.5
Fresno	51.5	Placer	25.7	Sonoma	30.8
Humboldt	34.2	Riverside	38.2	Stanislaus	47.6
Imperial	48.4	Sacramento	45.1	Sutter, Yuba	41.2
Kern	40.5	San Bernardino	47.5	Tulare	58.8
Kings	32.3	San Diego	30.7	Ventura	37.7
Lake, Mendocino	39.5	San Francisco	29.4	Yolo	25.5

Sources: [DFA 256 reports](#), California Department of Social Services; American Community Survey, Census Bureau.

Notes: The numerator is monthly average individuals calculated from DFA 256 reports for calendar year 2014 and includes both those eligible for federal benefits and those eligible for state benefits. The denominator represents people under 200% of poverty calculated from the American Community Survey (ACS) for 2014. Low-income unauthorized immigrants and SSI recipients are excluded from the denominator. Counties that are grouped in the table cannot be separately identified in the ACS microdata.

Higher percentages of low-income children than adults participate in CalFresh



Sources: American Community Survey, Census Bureau; [SNAP quality control public use files](#), Mathematica Policy Research.

Notes: The numerator is the monthly average calculated from the 2014 SNAP quality control data for California. The denominator represents people under 200% of poverty calculated from the American Community Survey (ACS) for 2014. Low-income unauthorized immigrants and SSI recipients are excluded from the denominator. Able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) are between the ages of 18 and 49.

Sources: American Community Survey, Census Bureau; [DFA 256 reports](#), California Department of Social Services; [SNAP data](#), Food and Nutrition Service; [SNAP quality control public use files](#), Mathematica Policy Research; [Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates, Fiscal Year 2010 to Fiscal Year 2013](#).

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