

California's Nutrition Safety Net

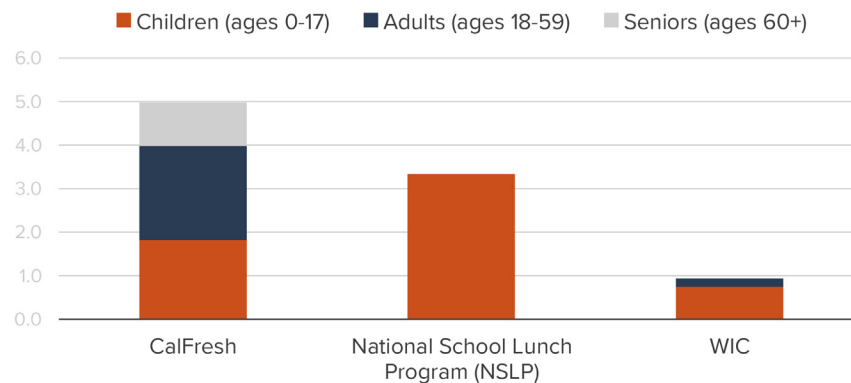
Tess Thorman and
Patricia Malagon

More than 15 public programs aim to ensure that all Californians can access nutritious food.

- ▶ In early 2023, 4.2 million households participated in one or more of the three largest nutrition programs—CalFresh, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and school meals—according to the [California Poverty Measure \(CPM\)](#). [Smaller programs](#) support nutritional assistance provided by care facilities for young children and older adults, food banks, and other settings.
- ▶ Although many participate in one or more program, about one in ten (1.5 million) California households lack the resources to meet their food needs—a rate of [food insecurity](#) that is slightly lower than the national rate.
- ▶ Food insecurity is experienced by disproportionate shares of Latino households (47% vs. 30% of the population overall) and households with children (42% vs. 30% overall).

CalFresh serves all ages, while other large nutrition programs focus on children

Number of participants (millions)



Sources: CDSS [CalFresh Data Dashboard](#); USDA FNS [Child Nutrition Tables](#); USDA FNS [WIC Data Tables](#).

Notes: Chart shows July 2022 CalFresh participation, October 2023 NSLP estimated daily participation, and federal fiscal year 2024 WIC average monthly participation. NSLP estimate includes students enrolled in K–12 schools and residential childcare institutions; count may include some participants up to age 21. WIC adult count includes some parents under age 18.

CalFresh provides low-income families with monthly resources to buy food.

- ▶ CalFresh, known federally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), enrolls over 5 million Californians whose adjusted household incomes fall under the federal poverty line (\$24,864 for a family of three in 2024). [Three in four eligible Californians](#) are enrolled, but the statewide [participation rate is lower than the national rate](#).
- ▶ CalFresh benefits are federally funded (expected to be about [\\$12 billion](#) in state fiscal year 2023–24). Program administration costs (\$2.6 million in 2023–24) are shared by county, state, and federal governments.
- ▶ The California Food Assistance Program (CFAP) provides [\\$99 million](#) (in 2023–24) in state-funded assistance to about 50,000 immigrants with legal status who are ineligible for CalFresh. Undocumented immigrants ages 55 and over will gain eligibility for CFAP in 2025.
- ▶ The average monthly CalFresh and CFAP benefit was \$193 per person in December 2023.

WIC supports low-income Californians who are pregnant or caring for young children.

- ▶ WIC is a federal program that provides healthy food, breastfeeding support, and health care referrals to individuals with incomes under 185% of the federal poverty line who are new caregivers, pregnant, postpartum, or under age 5, and at nutritional risk. [Participation in California](#) (67%) is higher than the national participation rate (51%).
- ▶ During federal fiscal year 2023, WIC provided \$742 million in food benefits to about 960,000 Californians; services and administrative costs totaled \$355 million.

- ▶ The average monthly benefit, which covers items including milk, infant formula, and produce, was \$64 per person in 2023, including substantial [pandemic increases](#) currently extended through September 2024.

About half of California’s public school students eat free breakfast or lunch at school.

- ▶ An estimated [3.5 million](#) of California’s 5.9 million public K–12 students are income-eligible for federal free or reduced-price meals. California’s Universal Meals Program, launched in 2022, supplements federal funding to ensure that **all** students can get two free meals at school. In fall 2023, more than 3.2 million students had school lunch each day; 1.9 million ate school breakfast.
- ▶ The federal government also funds afterschool and summer meal programs and is replacing an expired pandemic-era program for low-income students that reimbursed [missed school meals](#) (Pandemic EBT) with a [permanent summer benefit](#) (Summer EBT, or SUN Bucks) totaling \$120 per child in 2024.
- ▶ Federal funding for California’s meal programs for school-age children totaled [\\$2.6 billion](#) in fiscal year 2023. California appropriated about [\\$1.7 billion](#) in 2023–24 for child nutrition programs, and will cover part of the cost of administering Summer EBT (an estimated [\\$35 million](#) in 2024–25).

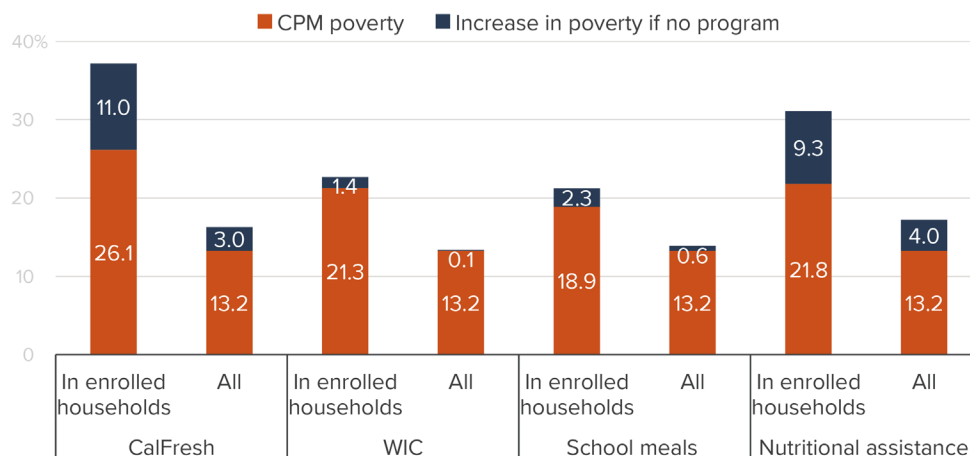
CalFresh, school meals, and WIC lift 1.5 million Californians out of poverty.

- ▶ In early 2023, more than one in eight Californians (13.2%) lived in poverty. Without CalFresh, poverty would have been 3 percentage points higher. School meals and WIC lower poverty to a smaller degree.
- ▶ Program effects are substantially larger for enrolled families. For example, without CalFresh and school meals, participating families would have seen poverty rise by 11 and 2.3 points, respectively.

State policymakers are navigating changes in the nutrition assistance landscape.

- ▶ The end of the public health emergency in [May 2023](#) halted temporary federal measures, including [benefit increases](#), expanded CalFresh eligibility for [college students](#), federal funding for universal school meals, and Pandemic EBT.
- ▶ With the Farm Bill up for reauthorization, federal lawmakers may be eyeing lessons learned from the pandemic, including the impact of expanded benefits and procedural flexibility. Lawmakers recently [modified the population](#) subject to SNAP time limits, added work to the program’s statutory goals, and may have prompted a [re-evaluation of state-funded SNAP supplements](#) for some families also enrolled in CalWORKs.
- ▶ At the state level, policymakers continue to discuss expanding eligibility for state-funded CFAP to all undocumented Californians. In addition, the state will be responsible for rolling out the federal Summer EBT program replacing P-EBT later this year.

California’s nutrition programs reduce poverty



Source: California Poverty Measure, early 2023.

Notes: Chart shows program impacts on people in households with one or more members enrolled. There may be overlapping program participation. “Nutritional assistance” includes CalFresh, WIC, and school meals.

Sources: CDSS [CalFresh Data Dashboard](#); CDSS [2024–25 Governor’s Budget Local Assistance Estimates](#); IPUMS CPS FSS 2020–2022; Legislative Analyst’s Office [The 2024–25 Budget: Food Assistance Programs](#); PPIC and Stanford CPI [California Poverty Measure, early 2023](#); USDA FNS [WIC Data Tables](#) and [Child Nutrition Tables](#).