

The CalFresh Food Assistance Program SEPTEMBER 2020

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► **CalFresh is the state's largest food assistance program.**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—called CalFresh in California and sometimes known as food stamps—is the largest food assistance program in the nation. Together with school meals and WIC, CalFresh provides a nutrition safety net for low-income Californians. Between January and March 2020, before the coronavirus pandemic prompted shelter-in-place orders, an average of 4.1 million Californians living in 2.2 million households received CalFresh benefits, with each individual receiving an average of \$123 monthly. By June 2020, 4.8 million Californians in 2.6 million households received CalFresh benefits, and each participant received an average of \$166 monthly. California has a small state-funded program (\$50 million for state fiscal year 2018–19) to assist green card holders ineligible for federal benefits.

► **During the pandemic, federal and state changes expanded access.**

The federal [Family First Coronavirus Response Act \(FFCRA\)](#), passed in March 2020, preserved and expanded access in key ways. First, the FFCRA [temporarily suspended](#) time-limited benefits for certain adults ages 18 to 49 without dependents. Second, emergency supplementary benefits were expanded to the maximum for families previously receiving smaller amounts. Further, California was federally approved to launch a pilot that enables CalFresh households to buy groceries online from certain retailers. The state was also able to waive, or extend timeframes for, some paperwork and interview requirements. However, in contrast to the last recession, benefits have not to date been increased for all families, and certain state waiver requests—for example, to relax requirements that limit access for postsecondary students—were denied.

► **The federal government underwrites most benefits.**

In addition to funding most of CalFresh, the federal government determines how benefits change with household incomes and sets other key rules. The state determines some aspects of eligibility and oversees county administration of the program. After allowed deductions for certain expenses such as housing and child care, families must have income under 100% of the federal poverty line to qualify. In 2020, this translated to an annual adjusted income of about \$26,000 for a family of four. Unlike many safety net programs, CalFresh does not only target families with children; households with no children made up more than half of all participating households in 2018.

► **CalFresh lowers poverty and supports local economies.**

CalFresh plays an important role in mitigating poverty in California. Without the program, nearly 700,000 additional Californians would be in poverty. CalFresh also serves as a fiscal stimulus to the economy: low-income individuals tend to spend their benefits quickly and use the cash freed up by their benefits on other essentials. A [recent national analysis](#) finds that a \$1 billion increase in SNAP benefits would raise GDP by \$1.54 billion during recessions.

► **CalFresh participants reflect the state's diversity.**

The share of eligible Californians who participate in CalFresh has been growing. In 2018, [71% of eligible Californians](#) accessed benefits. California's shares of naturalized citizens (19%), refugees (15%), and other noncitizens (15%) participating in CalFresh are among the highest nationwide, reflecting the state's large immigrant population as well as its racial/ethnic diversity. Revisions to the [public charge rule](#), which may deter immigrants from using benefits for which they are eligible, would have an outsize effect in California; implementation of the rule has been subject to legal proceedings. Regionally, participation rates are higher (over 90%) in inland counties such as Fresno, San Bernardino, and Tulare, while Bay Area counties tend to have lower rates, although the range is wide (37% to 96%). In Los Angeles County, the largest county in the state, 74% of eligible Californians accessed benefits.



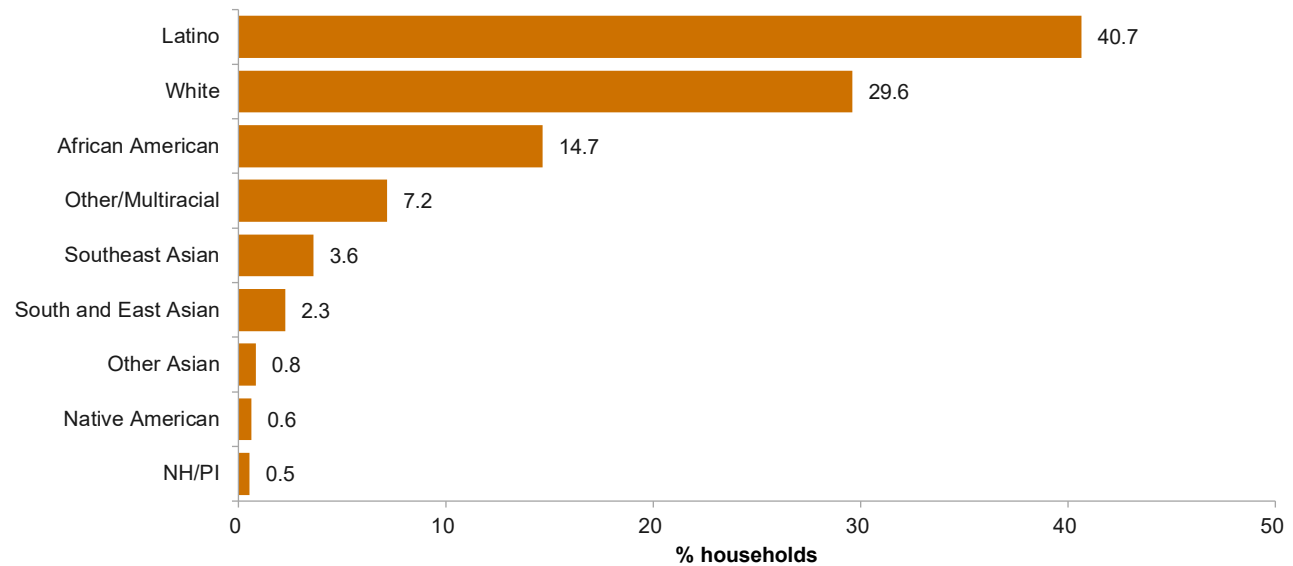
CalFresh moves nearly 700,00 Californians out of poverty

County/county group	Number of additional children and adults in poverty absent CalFresh assistance							
	Children	Adults	County	Children	Adults	County	Children	Adults
Statewide	311,700	378,500	Los Angeles	86,000	106,700	San Joaquin	7,900	8,700
Alameda	5,800	9,100	Madera*	2,500	2,000	San Luis Obispo*	200	500
Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Inyo, Mariposa, Mono, Tuolumne*	1,300	2,100	Marin*	200	200	San Mateo	1,000	1,300
Butte*	2,800	4,100	Merced*	4,900	4,600	Santa Barbara	2,600	3,300
Colusa, Glenn, Tehama, Trinity*	1,300	1,300	Monterey, San Benito	5,400	5,100	Santa Clara	6,400	7,300
Contra Costa	6,000	8,200	Napa*	1,000	700	Santa Cruz*	1,800	2,600
Del Norte, Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Siskiyou*	1,600	2,000	Nevada, Sierra*	400	800	Shasta*	1,500	2,700
El Dorado*	1,200	1,000	Orange	14,200	18,500	Solano	3,200	3,300
Fresno	18,800	20,300	Placer	900	700	Sonoma	2,500	2,500
Humboldt*	900	1,500	Riverside	17,900	23,000	Stanislaus	6,100	7,500
Imperial*	3,100	4,200	Sacramento	14,700	19,400	Sutter, Yuba*	1,700	2,200
Kern	14,700	14,800	San Bernardino	31,700	36,900	Tulare	10,500	12,200
Kings*	1,800	2,000	San Diego	16,300	20,600	Ventura	5,700	6,100
Lake, Mendocino*	2,100	2,700	San Francisco	1,400	4,200	Yolo*	1,700	1,300

Source: California Poverty Measure (CPM) data for 2016–18.

Notes: Numbers are rounded to the nearest 100 and indicate those with family resources under the CPM poverty line if CalFresh is excluded from the calculation. Counties whose poverty rates cannot be calculated individually are grouped. Asterisks (*) indicate counties with fewer than 2,000 children in the sample. All estimates are subject to uncertainty due to sampling variability; uncertainty is greater for less-populous counties and county groups because of smaller sample sizes. Children are age 0–17 and adults are 18 or older. All family members (not just direct recipients) are assumed to share resources from CalFresh and other sources. For more about the CPM, see our [poverty fact sheet](#). For more county-level information and for poverty rates by state assembly, state senate, and federal congressional districts, see our [interactive maps](#).

CalFresh participants are racially and ethnically diverse



Source: California Department of Social Services, [CF 358S](#) and [CF 358F](#).

Notes: “NH/PI” refers to Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. “Southeast Asian” is a combination of the Cambodian, Filipino, Laotian, and Vietnamese categories, and “South and East Asian” is a combination of the Asian Indian, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese categories. Ethnic breakdowns for other racial groups were not available. Percentages based on author calculations from program participation on July 2019. “Other/multiracial” includes 4.6% where case contact’s race was undetermined.

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