

# Recession's bite: Nearly 4 million Californians struggled to put food on table during downturn

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An estimated 3.8 million California adults — particularly those in households with children, as well as low-income Latinos — could not afford to put adequate food on the table during the recent recession, according to a new policy brief by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

In 2009, about one in six low-income Californians had "very low food security," which describes multiple instances in which people had to cut their food intake and experienced hunger, according to the study, which is based on data from the California Health Interview Survey. This is double the one-in-12 figure from 2001.

Food insecurity skyrocketed during the "Great [Recession](#)" of 2007-2009, when California's unemployment rate increased from 5 percent in 2007 to 11 percent in 2009. In addition, inflation-adjusted median household income decreased by nearly 5 percent from 2009 to 2010, the largest decline on record, the study's authors noted.

As California continues to struggle with a lethargic economic recovery, the authors noted that many families may still be struggling.

"With the economy still in a slump, many families are grappling with difficult choices: 'Do I pay the bills or buy food to feed my children?'," said study co-author Gail Harrison, a faculty associate at the Center for

Health Policy Research and a professor at UCLA's Fielding School of Public Health. "In a state that is the nation's breadbasket, it's sad to see that so many people don't know where their next meal is coming from."

Struggling households are not alone in facing difficult food choices. This week, the House Agriculture Committee holds hearings on the farm bill, which funds the nation's largest anti-hunger program. In June, the Senate passed its version of the farm bill and made \$4.5 billion in cuts to food stamp benefits.

"Congress can help families avoid food insecurity by maintaining an adequate and resilient safety net," said Matthew Sharp of California Food Policy Advocates, which funded the study.

Food insecurity is defined as not having enough food or not having enough income to ensure a balanced diet. It is associated with poorer physical and mental health, including an increased risk of depression, diabetes and hypertension, the study's authors said.

Among the study's findings:

## **The highest need**

Nearly half of low-income households with children could not afford sufficient food, and approximately 51 percent of Spanish-speaking, low-income adults experienced food insecurity — the highest level of food insecurity among all low-income groups.

## **Even married, employed individuals at risk**

From 2001 to 2009, the inability to buy sufficient food rose among all low-income groups, including people who were married (an increase of

29 percent to 40 percent) and those who were employed (28 percent to 43 percent).

## **Northern Bay Area/SoCal counties see steep increase**

Food insecurity increased in most California counties between 2007 and 2009. Northern Bay Area counties experienced a 14 percent increase, and in Southern California counties other than Los Angeles, there was a 10 percent increase.

## **Safety-net programs catch the neediest**

Only people who were enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which was formerly the [Food](#) Stamp Program and is known as CalFresh in California, did not experience an increase, highlighting the importance of such safety-net programs.

Also important was the effect of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009, which boosted SNAP benefits by 17 percent, the authors noted. Those subsidies are set to expire in 2013.

"Without the ARRC, many Californians would be in much deeper poverty," Harrison said. "And with millions of Californians still struggling economically, 2013 is too soon to consider ending this important life-support for our poorest residents."

The authors also recommend increased efforts to enroll low-income [Californians](#) in nutrition assistance programs, such as free school breakfast and lunch programs. More than half of the state's 6 million public school students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, yet less than 1 million children eat breakfast at school.

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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