

ISSUE BRIEF

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HUNGER IN SAN DIEGO September 2023 Data Release & Analysis

Nutrition Insecurity Again on the Rise in San Diego County

As of September 2023, the nutrition insecurity rate for San Diego County has increased to 25%, meaning that **one in four people in the county cannot afford three nutritious meals per day**. This comes amid about 6 months of gradual increases in nutrition insecurity, up from 22% in September 2022.

In total, there are now 832,000 nutrition insecure people in the county, including 214,000 children, 170,000 older adults (age 60+), and 141,000 living with disabilities. The charts below show the monthly nutrition insecurity rate for San Diego County over the previous 15 months and a breakdown of nutrition insecurity by population, **highlighting how nutrition insecurity disproportionately affects people of color, children, and people with disabilities**.

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Figure 1) Estimated Nutrition Insecurity Rate since March 2022

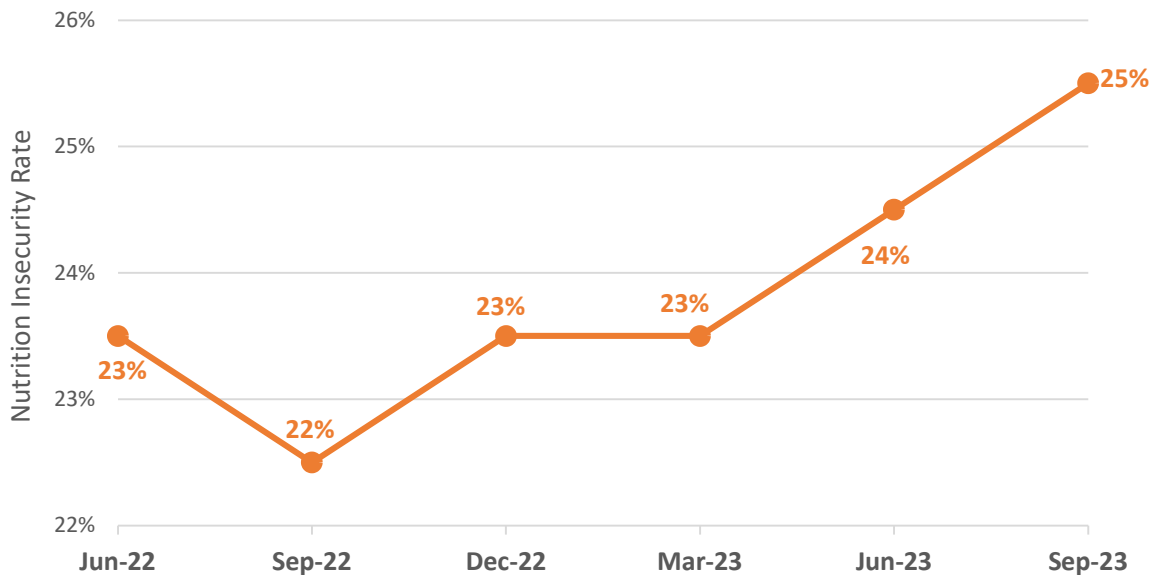
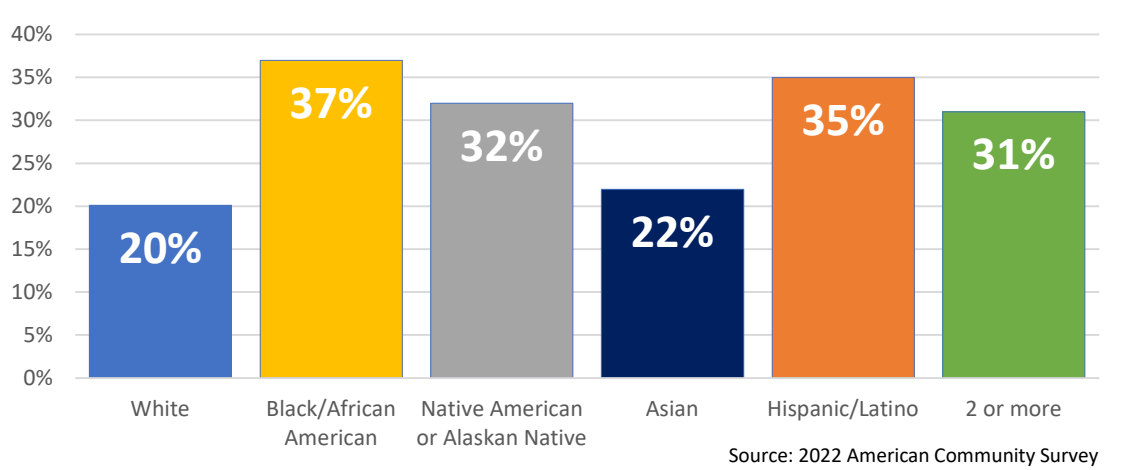




Figure 2) Nutrition Insecurity by Population in San Diego County, September 2023

San Diego County	Children (0-18)	Older Adults (60+)	Population with Disabilities
25%	32%	25%	40%
1 in 4	Nearly 1 in 3	1 in 4	2 in 5
~ 832,000 People	~ 214,000 Kids	~ 170,000 Seniors	~ 141,000 People w/disabilities

Figure 3) Nutrition Insecurity Rate by Race/Ethnicity in San Diego County



Why is nutrition insecurity increasing?

- **Decrease in Weekly Earnings**
 - While recent **Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)** data clearly show that **hourly pay is increasing in San Diego¹**, these wage rate increases are not translating to higher paychecks. In Q3 2023, the BLS reported a 3% decrease in the average weekly wage of workers in San Diego County compared to the previous quarter and a 2% weekly wage decrease from a year prior². The **decrease in weekly wage means that workers are working fewer hours per week, resulting in a lower paycheck.** So while hourly rates are

¹ San Diego County wages are up. Here are the jobs with the most gains. San Diego Union-Tribune. 08/25/2023. Retrieved from <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/business/story/2023-08-23/san-diego-wages-are-down-annually-heres-the-industries-hardest-hit>.

² Data obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Census on Employment & Wages. Series ID: ENU0607340010.

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up, this doesn't automatically translate to a higher paycheck, and the lower paychecks across the board result in more nutrition insecure families.

- **Increase in Cost of Living**

- Alongside a decrease in weekly wages, San Diegans are still experiencing inflation, making it harder to provide three meals per day. The BLS reported another 3.8% increase in prices for consumer goods and services in January 2024 (compared to 2023 prices) for the San Diego metro area. This represents a 10% increase compared to 2022 and a 20% increase from 2021 prices³, showing that the increase in the cost of living in San Diego still isn't slowing, resulting in painful consequences for San Diegans, especially since their wages are now lower than they were last year.
- Continued higher prices for housing (including rent), gas, and food are the major ways in which San Diegans continue to struggle with the higher prices. While gas prices are currently the highest that they've been in months, up to an average of \$5.154⁴, a recent report from the nonpartisan State Legislative Analyst's Office also shows that housing in California's major metro areas remains unaffordable even for workers with wages well above the minimum wage. The report shows that **for a single adult working the minimum wage with one child, housing is unaffordable in almost every California county, especially San Diego**. The report also details wage gaps by gender and race, showing that more work must be done to address these inequities.⁵
- The San Diego Union-Tribune reported that in December 2023, San Diego home prices were rising faster than any other city in the nation, at an 8.8% annual increase⁶. As of February 2024, KPBS reported that the median home price has risen 11.6% from a year prior, up to \$980,000 for a single-family home in San Diego County⁷.

To adequately address the root cause of hunger, a living wage would be necessary for all San Diego County workers to compensate for the cost of living. Fast-food workers in California earn an average wage of \$16.21 per hour, but starting in April 2024, most fast-food service workers are slated to receive a raise such that the minimum wage for all fast-food workers at major chains will be set at \$20 an hour.⁸ While this bill has the potential to greatly decrease nutrition insecurity, its effects on San Diegans are still unclear. If the trend of decreased work hours continues, it is possible that Californians will continue to see stagnant wages despite the statewide hourly raise. Employers around the state have also warned that the bill may

³ Data obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U). Series ID: CUURS49ESA0.

⁴ Average San Diego County gas price rises to highest amount since Nov. 17. KPBS. 04/02/2024. Retrieved from [Average San Diego County gas price rises to highest amount since Nov. 17 | KPBS Public Media](#).

⁵ Is the Minimum Wage High, Low, or Somewhere in Between? Legislative Analyst's Office. 03/11/2024. Retrieved from [California's Low-Wage Workers and Minimum Wage](#).

⁶ San Diego home prices rising fastest in nation. San Diego Union Tribune. 02/27/2024. Retrieved from <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/business/story/2024-02-27/san-diego-home-prices-fastest>.

⁷ Home prices rise in San Diego County. KPBS. 03/19/2024. Retrieved from <https://www.kpbs.org/news/quality-of-life/2024/03/19/homes-prices-rise-in-san-diego-county>.

⁸ California Increases Minimum Wage, Protections for Fast Food Workers. 09/28/2023. Office of Governor. Retrieved from [California Increases Minimum Wage, Protections for Fast-Food Workers | California Governor](#).

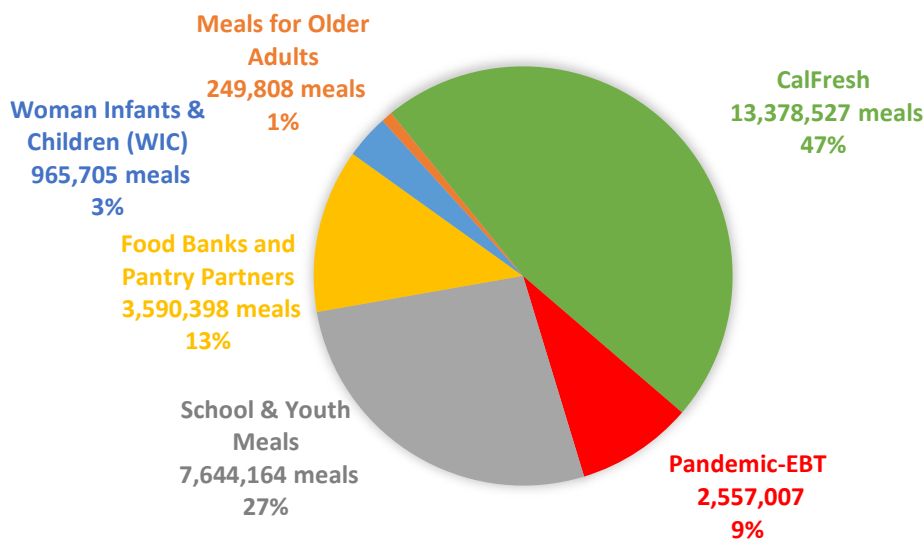
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create store closures or layoffs⁹. Regardless, any major decrease in nutrition insecurity requires higher wages. Ongoing inflation means that the level for a living wage last year needs to be updated to account for the new cost of living. **A living wage calculator from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) reports that a single adult with no children in San Diego County in 2024 would need to be earning at least \$29 an hour (working full time) to afford all basic expenses.**¹⁰

Food Assistance & the Meal Gap

The increase in nutrition insecurity results in more people looking for food assistance around the county, and to assess how the county’s food assistance sector is doing in mitigating its effects, it’s essential to measure how many meals are being provided. Food assistance in San Diego County comes from government programs, such as CalFresh/SNAP, WIC, school meals, and charitable food distributions provided by food banks and pantries. Figure 4 illustrates how much assistance came from each of the major provider types in September, with CalFresh/SNAP continuing to be the largest source with 47% of all assistance. All food assistance combined provided 28.3 million meals to San Diegans in September.

Figure 4) Food Assistance Meals Provided by Type in San Diego County, September 2023



Of note, the last round of Pandemic-EBT was issued in September 2023, resulting in an additional 2.5 million meals (\$11.7M) to families in need and marking the final round of all pandemic-era food assistance. Although the upcoming Summer-EBT (SUN Bucks) program will have different eligibility criteria, Pandemic EBT gives us an indication of how many meals this new permanent program will provide in San Diego County each summer month. Hunger Coalition estimates that this program will provide roughly 1 – 2 million meals (roughly \$7.2M in issuances) per summer month from this program.

⁹ Fast food workers are losing their jobs in California as new minimum wage law takes effect. USA Today. 03/26/2024. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/food/2024/03/26/california-minimum-wage-jobs/73107149007/>.

¹⁰ Living Wage Calculator for San Diego County, California. Updated 02/14/2024. Retrieved from [Living Wage Calculator - Living Wage Calculation for San Diego County, California \(mit.edu\)](https://livingwage.mit.edu/lwc/#/san-diego-county-california).



With all Sept. food assistance accounted for, the hunger sector provided about 77% of the estimated need for assistance, leaving a **meal gap of 8.5 million meals** that would have been needed in San Diego County to account for all nutrition insecurity. Areas such as El Cajon, Escondido, and Fallbrook continue to face the largest individual meal gaps.

To see our new **interactive maps** that allow for an in-depth look at each zip code in San Diego County, please visit sdhunger.org/maps-tables.

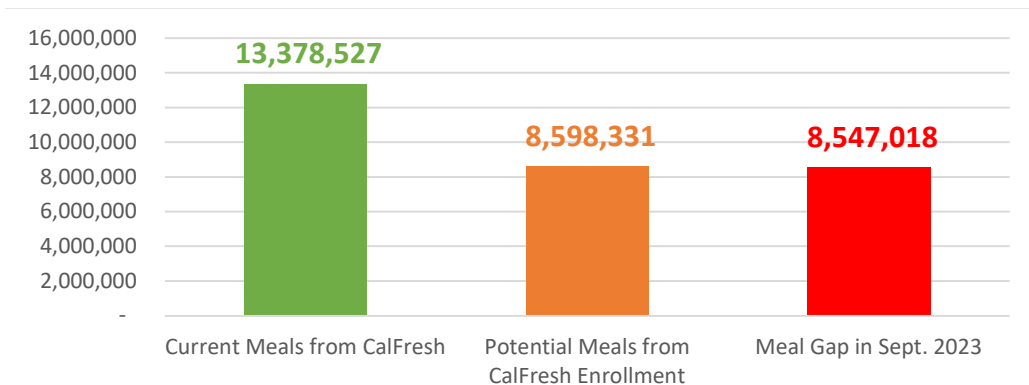
CalFresh Participation & Closing the Meal Gap

While achieving permanent nutrition security would require a living wage, the CalFresh (SNAP) program along with the other forms of food assistance can collectively ensure that anyone experiencing nutrition insecurity can receive consistent access to food.

In September 2023, only about **60% of people eligible for CalFresh were enrolled**, leaving about 240,000 eligible but not enrolled people in the county. Figure 5 demonstrates that **enrolling these eligible families would have completely closed the meal gap in September**. Since studies also show that every dollar spent through CalFresh injects roughly \$1.79 into the local economy¹¹, Figure 6 shows that enrolling these eligible families would also provide a potential \$72 million to San Diego County’s economy.

New data shows that the county is making progress on CalFresh enrollment. In March 2024, the county reported that **CalFresh enrollment numbers show a record high** with 389,000 people enrolled¹². Hunger Coalition’s March 2024 analysis will show what effects this had on the March meal gap, likely decreasing it by roughly 900,000 meals. However, well over 200,000 people likely remain eligible but not enrolled, even with this increase.

Figure 5) Comparing Current & Potential CalFresh Meals to the Meal Gap in September 2023

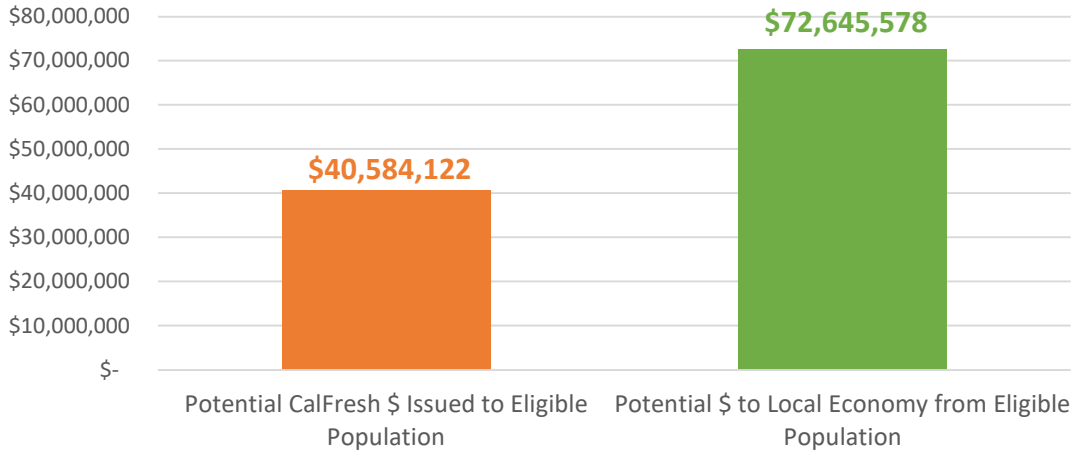


¹¹ Myths & Facts about CalFresh for Older Adults. California Department of Social Services. Retrieved from https://www.cdss.ca.gov/calfreshoutreach/res/Toolkit/Appendices/OlderAdult/OlderAdultsAppendix_A_MythsandFactsAboutCalFreshforOlderAdults.pdf.

¹² Disaster CalFresh Applications Illustrate Unprecedented Need. County News Center. 03/28/2024. Retrieved from [Disaster CalFresh Applications Illustrate Unprecedented Need | News | San Diego County News Center](https://www.sandiegocountynewscenter.com/news/disaster-cal-fresh-applications-illustrate-unprecedented-need).



Figure 6) Estimated Economic Impact from CalFresh Potential Enrollees in September 2023



These figures show that there is a path to close the meal gap in the short term while stimulating the San Diego County economy with millions of dollars in economic activity, but much work still needs to be done. Hunger Coalition encourages all community-based organizations, community members, and government agencies to help enroll anyone under 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (about \$62,000 of income for a family of four) to CalFresh (SNAP) or other food assistance programs.

By enrolling all eligible people into programs such as CalFresh (SNAP) or WIC, the meal gap would be closed, and the county’s food banks and pantries could be freed up to provide food for nutrition insecure people who do not qualify for government programs, relieving demand and increasing their capacity to operate effectively.

San Diego Hunger Coalition and its partners are committed to providing solutions to hunger right now to remove the barriers and harmful policies that prevent those who need assistance from receiving it:

- Our **Hunger Free Navigator Training™** is a comprehensive initiative designed to empower community-based organizations and residents in their efforts to address nutrition insecurity. To sign up for one of our Navigator trainings, please go to sdhunger.org/hunger-free-navigator.
- Our **CalFresh 101** training offers free application assistance monthly. We can also provide private training depending on community organization needs and escalate CalFresh cases to the county. For more information, please visit sdhunger.org/calfresh-training.
- Our new **food assistance resource brochure** provides more information on how to obtain different types of food assistance and is available in 13 languages. To download it to share, please visit sdhunger.org/resources.
- Our **Hunger Free Activists** initiative provides insider reports and calls to action on key hunger relief policies, provides advocacy training, and allows people to advocate for hunger relief in ways that work for them. To sign up, please visit sdhunger.org/hfa.