



## State of Nutrition Security in San Diego County

### 2023 ANNUAL ISSUE BRIEF

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#### About this Issue Brief

This issue brief includes the most up-to-date estimates of our region's nutrition insecurity, the first and only estimates of the total quantity of food assistance currently provided in San Diego County, and the remaining countywide meal gap down to the zip code level. We hope this information will be used to inform program planning, prioritize resource allocations and efforts, and advocate for policies and practices that advance a Hunger Free San Diego.

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## Introduction: What is Hunger Free San Diego?

**Hunger Free San Diego is a multi-sector, collaborative initiative to ensure that anyone experiencing nutrition insecurity can readily access adequate, equitable, and appropriate food assistance to see them safely through their time of need.** Hunger Free San Diego uses data and technology to create a common framework of understanding regarding hunger in our region, track our progress toward solving it, and identify the most promising opportunities for collaborative action to close the meal gap and end hunger in our region.

The analysis outlined in this issue brief is part of ongoing Hunger Free San Diego research conducted by the San Diego Hunger Coalition. This work is guided by and co-developed with the Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board, a collaboration of leaders from local nonprofits, universities, school districts, and government agencies representing all aspects of hunger relief in San Diego County. Hunger Free San Diego is facilitated by the San Diego Hunger Coalition and is an active member of the national Hunger Free Communities network facilitated by the Alliance to End Hunger in Washington, D.C.

### 2023 Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board Organizations

- 2-1-1 San Diego
- Catholic Charities of San Diego
- Child Care Food Program Round Table
- The Children's Initiative
- County of San Diego
  - Health & Human Services Agency
    - Aging & Independence Services
    - Community Health Statistics
    - Public Health
  - Land Use & Environment Group
  - Office of Emergency Services
- Feeding San Diego
- Heaven's Windows
- Hospital Association of San Diego and Imperial Counties
- Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank
- Jewish Family Service of San Diego
- Kitchens for Good
- Leah's Pantry
- Mama's Kitchen
- Meals on Wheels
- Produce Good
- Project New Village
- San Diego Food System Alliance
- San Diego for Every Child
- San Diego Hunger Coalition
- San Diego Unified School District
- San Ysidro Health Center
- Scripps Mercy Hospital, WIC Office
- SDSU School of Exercise and Nutritional Sciences
- SDSU WIC
- True Care WIC
- UC San Diego Center for Community Health
- UC San Diego Foundation Relations

## Summary of Key Findings

- **Nutrition Insecurity in San Diego County:** About 1 in 4 people in San Diego County were nutrition insecure as of March 2023, showing that the nutrition insecurity rate hasn't changed for almost a year. Of the 743,000 that are estimated to be nutrition insecure, 199,000 were children, 151,000 were older adults (60+), and 113,000 were people with disabilities. People of color also continue to face nutrition insecurity at rates higher than all other populations.
  - Nutrition insecurity remains unchanged despite rising wages and a growing labor force because of historic increases in the cost of living. Wage gains have not kept up with inflation over the past two years, leaving people unable to achieve financial security and nutrition security.
  - As a result of the Federal Reserve raising interest rates to fight continued inflation, credit card interest rates and mortgage rates have also increased. The average family owes thousands of dollars on their credit card and is now seeing mortgage rates that make buying a home unattainable for many.
  - The current minimum wage in California is \$15.50/hour, which equates to \$32,240/year working 40 hours/week with paid sick, holiday, and vacation time (benefits that are usually not extended to minimum wage workers). This income is too low to cover a household's basic needs, resulting in families eating less nutritious food. Workers in San Diego County need to earn at least \$22.61 hourly to afford all their basic needs like food, rent, gas, healthcare, childcare, etc.
- **Current State of the Nutrition Security Sector:** In March 2023, all food assistance combined provided 35.1 million meals to San Diegans, resulting in no estimated meal gap. Unfortunately, though, 8.6M of those meals came from the now-expired CalFresh (SNAP) Emergency Allotments that were part of federal pandemic aid.
  - Without Emergency Allotments, the meal gap would have been over 6.2M meals, showing what the meal gap might look like in the months following March.
  - CalFresh (SNAP) provides more than half of all food assistance, yet the program continues to be underutilized. Only 63% of those eligible are enrolled, meaning an additional 230,000 people could be enrolled to address their household nutrition insecurity and help close the meal gap.
  - School and youth meals were the second largest provider in March and, despite the implementation of Universal Free Meals in California, there is still room for growth in school meal participation.
  - As the third largest provider of meals in March, food banks and pantries have seen increased demand for food since the end of CalFresh/SNAP Emergency Allotments while also facing capacity and transportation issues. More funding for these providers is needed to continue to meet the demand for food assistance and stay financially stable.
  - Home-delivered and congregate senior meals are seeing many of the same issues as food banks and pantries, and the senior population is more vulnerable to the effects of nutrition insecurity, especially when they have to worry about provider capacity.
  - The WIC program is another crucial federally-funded program that is currently underutilized and has capacity to serve thousands of additional eligible families, which could contribute significantly to closing the meal gap.

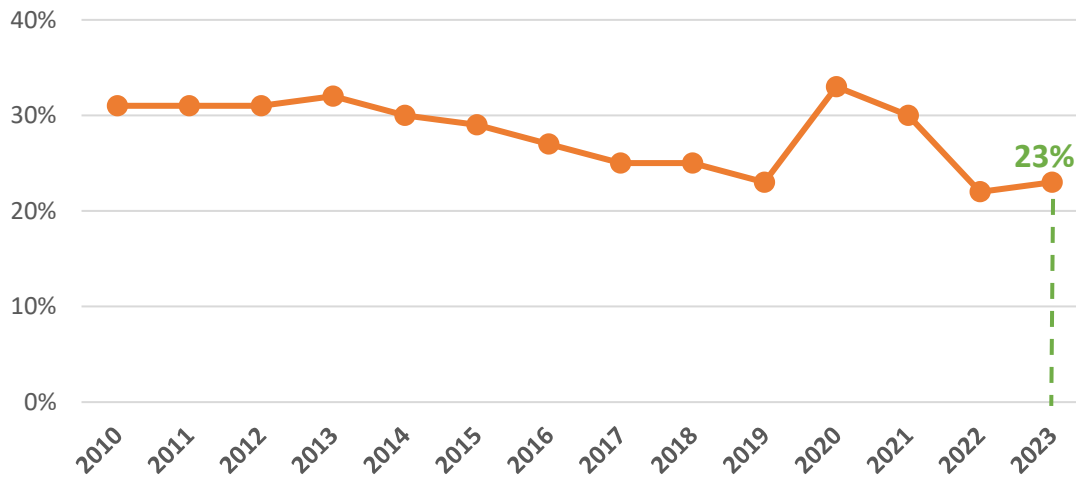


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## Nutrition Insecurity in San Diego Holding Steady at 1 in 4 People

As of March 2023, the San Diego County population continued to face a nutrition insecurity rate of about 1 in every 4 people. This comes after nutrition insecurity levels finally started decreasing in March 2022 after the sharp increase at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The chart below shows the annual nutrition insecurity rate for San Diego County.

**Figure 1) Estimated Nutrition Insecurity Rate by Year in San Diego County, March 2023**



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

Nutrition Insecurity by Population March 2023			
San Diego County	Children	Older Adults (60+)	Population with Disabilities
<b>23%</b> <i>+0%</i>	<b>28%</b> <i>+0%</i>	<b>22%</b> <i>+0%</i>	<b>34%</b> <i>-1%</i>
<b>Nearly 1 in 4</b> ~ 743,000 people	<b>More than 1 in 4</b> ~ 199,000 children	<b>Nearly 1 in 4</b> ~ 151,000 older adults	<b>More than 1 in 3</b> ~ 113,000 people

A map of the estimated nutrition insecure population in San Diego County by zip code, as well as the nutrition insecurity rate by zip code, can be found in [Appendix A](#).

## **Estimating the Nutrition Insecure Population**

Hunger Free San Diego methodology uses economic indicators to estimate the number of people who are experiencing nutrition insecurity each month. Consumer spending data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) indicates that households below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) do not have sufficient income to purchase three healthy meals per day as defined by the USDA's Moderate Cost Food Plan. We therefore identify the population in San Diego County with household income below 200% FPL as nutrition insecure, which comes out to \$60k of income for a family of four in 2023.

This remains a conservative estimate, though, as the BLS data show that families don't start spending enough to eat three healthy meals per day until they reach nearly 400% FPL<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Living Wage calculator reports that in March 2023, families in San Diego County would have needed to earn somewhere between 325% - 400% FPL to afford their basic needs<sup>2</sup>.

*For more information about the Hunger Free San Diego methodology, please see [Appendix E](#).*

## **Nutrition Insecurity is an Equity Issue**

Access to enough healthy food is a foundational step towards racial and economic equity. To examine nutrition insecurity from a standpoint of racial equity, it's crucial to look at the *prevalence of nutrition insecurity within each race/ethnic group*. **Figure 3 shows that Black, Indigenous, Latino and other people of color (BILPOC) experience much higher rates of nutrition insecurity.**

One reason for increased nutrition insecurity among BILPOC households is the disparity in wages and especially in the wage growth felt over the past 3 years. Wage growth for BILPOC workers has been far below the average, as discussed in the next section on economic impacts.

People of color are also disproportionately impacted by ongoing food assistance issues such as the stigma of the Trump-era public charge rule and the language barriers that often hinder non-English speakers from accessing benefits. The result of these barriers is under-enrollment in food assistance programs among BILPOC families.

An equitable approach to nutrition security is a necessary component of achieving a Hunger Free San Diego, and more research and analysis on barriers to equitable access to food assistance and the resulting disparities is needed to confront nutrition insecurity in an equitable manner. Specifically, we need more publicly available disaggregated data sets on nutrition insecurity and poverty by race/ethnicity for San Diego County.

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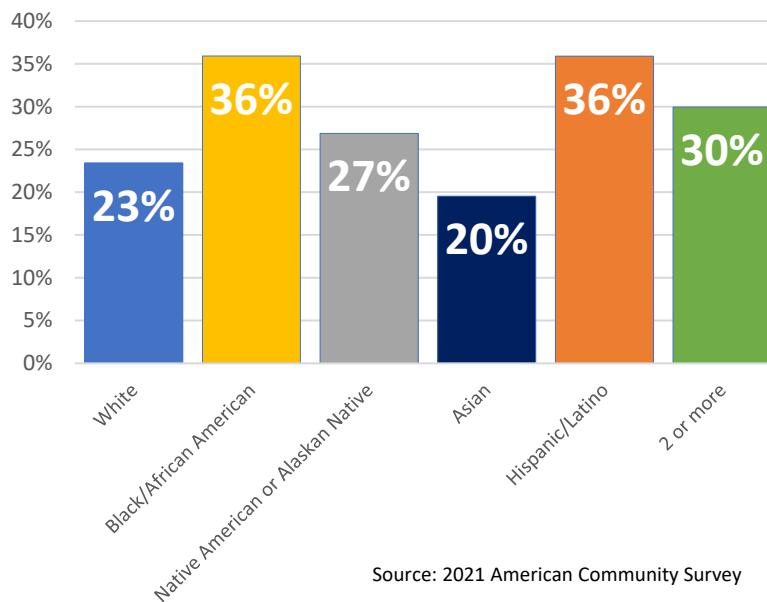
<sup>1</sup> Data analyzed by the San Diego Hunger Coalition and obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey.

<sup>2</sup> Numbers obtained from MIT Living Wage Calculator at <https://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/06073>.



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



## Economic Impacts: Why isn't nutrition insecurity decreasing in San Diego County?

- **Increases in wages and the size of the labor force aren't equitable and aren't enough.** The average weekly wage in the first quarter of 2023 in San Diego was 6.2% higher than a year prior<sup>3</sup>. As wages have been steadily increasing since 2020 and the county's labor force is finally returning to pre-pandemic levels, one would expect nutrition insecurity to decrease as families' incomes increase. However, these increases have been offset by an even larger increase in the cost of living throughout the county.
  - **Not enough to keep up with the increased cost of living.** San Diego County continues to see sharp increases in prices into 2023 that are offsetting the gains made by workers. The Consumer Price Index reported another 5% increase in overall prices in March 2023 compared to a year prior, and March 2022 prices were already 8% higher than March 2021, resulting in an overall 13% rise in prices over the past 2 years in San Diego County<sup>4</sup>. Over the past two years, wages have not been outpacing or even keeping up with inflation, therefore, continued increased prices in the grocery store, at the gas pump, and in home utilities are wiping out the potential for families to escape nutrition insecurity and attain financial stability, resulting in a stagnant nutrition insecurity rate.

<sup>3</sup> Data obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Census on Employment & Wages. Series ID: ENU0607340010.

<sup>4</sup> Data obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index. Series ID: ENU0607340010.



- **Wage gains haven't been equal.** Despite rising wages, *more work needs to be done to address income disparities among people of color.* Wages for BILPOC have not increased nearly as much as other populations. Notably, in the third quarter of 2022, the Census Bureau reported that wages in San Diego County for BILPOC people were far lower than the average. Black/African American wages were 28% below the average, Indigenous wages were 40% below, and Hispanic/Latino wages were 38% below<sup>5</sup>.
- **Impact of Interest Rates.** Perhaps the most alarming economic indicators in 2023 are the results of the Federal Reserve, the US central bank, raising interest rates to fight inflation. In their effort to bring down prices, the Federal Reserve has been raising the interest rate at which banks can borrow from each other to try to slow borrowing and economic activity. The short-term result of the increase, though, is that these higher interest rates are passed on to consumers. Both mortgage rates and credit card interest rates continue to increase, making it harder, especially for BILPOC families, to buy homes and pay off debt.
  - **Credit Card Debt.** The average interest rate on credit cards in the US is more than 24% in 2023<sup>6</sup>, and the number of people with credit card debt has jumped from 39% to 46%. Over the same period, the average credit card balance for borrowers was \$5,805, a staggering number showing just how much people need to borrow just to stay above water<sup>7</sup>. Research also shows that households of color owe more consumer debt and that they carry higher risks and costs of debt which ultimately hurts their chances of being able to build wealth and become financially stable.<sup>8</sup>
  - **Mortgage Rates and Housing.** In May 2023, the median monthly payment for new home loans rose by 14.1% from a year earlier, up to \$2,161. The average mortgage rate on a 30-year home loan is still more than double what it was in 2021, adding hundreds of dollars a month to home bills for borrowers and limiting not only how much people can borrow, but also who can borrow<sup>9</sup>. The rise in interest rates makes it more likely that people earning lower wages will be denied home loans or will be unable to purchase homes, especially after housing costs and rent have already increased by 17% over the past two years in the San Diego area<sup>10</sup>. As a result, evictions in San Diego sit at a five-year high as more families are kicked out of their homes<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Data obtained from Census Bureau Quarterly Workforce Indicators data. Retrieved from <https://qwexplorer.ces.census.gov/#x=0&g=0>.

<sup>6</sup> Average Credit Card Interest Rates - September 2023: Rates Move Up. 09/05/2023. Retrieved from <https://www.investopedia.com/average-credit-card-interest-rate-5076674>.

<sup>7</sup> Households plunged into vicious cycle of debt as interest rates soar. 2/3/2023. Retrieved from <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/households-plunge-debt-amid-inflation-high-interest-rates/story?id=96848731>.

<sup>8</sup> Households of Color Owe Costlier, Riskier Debt, Hurting Their Chances to Build Wealth. 12/28/2021. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christianweller/2021/12/28/households-of-color-owe-costlier-riskier-debt-hurting-their-chances-to-build-wealth/?sh=5907fce65600>.

<sup>9</sup> Average long-term US mortgage rate rises to 6.71% in first increase after three straight drops. 06/29/2023. Retrieved from <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/business/nation/story/2023-06-29/average-long-term-us-mortgage-rate-rises-to-6-71-in-first-increase-after-three-straight-drops>.

<sup>10</sup> Data obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index. Series ID: CUURS49ESA.H.

<sup>11</sup> Housing & Tenant Protections. City of San Diego. Retrieved from <https://www.sandiego.gov/citycouncil/cd9/housing-tenant-protections#:~:text=Evictions%20in%20San%20Diego%20are,with%20an%20increase%20in%20homelessness>.



This in turn has led to a sharp increase in homelessness, as official counts estimate that there are now at least 10,260 individuals experiencing homelessness in the San Diego region.<sup>12</sup>

As the cost of living rises and wages don't keep up, families everywhere are pushed to take on additional debt, and with interest rates continuing to rise, families will continue to have a harder time paying off that debt, leading to more strain on families experiencing or at risk of nutrition insecurity. When money is tight, food is one of the first costs that people cut back on, especially in times of economic uncertainty. While other monthly costs are fixed (i.e., rent or a mortgage payment, utilities, and gas), families that are faced with higher monthly bills often save money by cutting back on flexible costs, such as groceries, resulting in people eating less nutritious food.

## Looking Ahead

- **Bracing for a recession.** As nutrition insecure families battle rising prices, more credit card debt, and more expensive housing costs, they could soon also be faced with stagnating wages and unemployment as recession looms over the nation. The Federal Reserve's long-term goal of increasing the interest rates has been stated as "cooling off" the labor market, which would create less favorable conditions for workers and likely result in higher unemployment rates to increase the number of job-seekers and push down wage growth<sup>13</sup>. With another increase to interest rates in July 2023, the Federal Reserve pushed the interest rate to a level not seen for the last 22 years, and they've indicated that they may not be done with these increases in 2023.<sup>14</sup> The interest rate hikes also threaten the well-being of businesses that rely on borrowing for investment, employment, and economic activity. The Federal Reserve announced in June that 37% of all businesses are reporting being in "major trouble," fueling the fire for a potential recession as the Federal Reserve continues to raise rates to battle inflation<sup>15</sup>.
- **The need for a living wage.** All these issues culminate in the fact that the minimum wage remains too low to cover a household's basic needs in San Diego County, forcing families to eat less and take on thousands of dollars of debt just to stay afloat. The minimum wage, \$15.50 hourly in 2023, results in an annual salary of \$32,240 at 40 hours of work per week, and living wage calculators consistently estimate that someone would need to be significantly above this rate to afford basic living expenses in San Diego County. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology estimates that a single adult working full-time in California would need to earn at least \$22.61 hourly (\$47k annually) to be able to support themselves.<sup>16</sup> As of 2022, an estimated 20% of full-time workers in San Diego County were still earning

<sup>12</sup> Homelessness in San Diego County increased by at least 14%, annual count finds. 06/08/2023. Retrieved from <https://www.kpbs.org/news/local/2023/06/08/homelessness-san-diego-county-increased-14-annual-count>.

<sup>13</sup> July Fed meeting preview: Can the Fed hike rate and keep avoiding a recession? 07/21/2023. Retrieved from <https://www.bankrate.com/banking/federal-reserve/fomc-what-to-expect/>.

<sup>14</sup> Federal Reserve raises rates for 11th time to fight inflation but gives no clear sign of next move. 07/26/2023. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/article/federal-reserve-inflation-interest-rates-economy-jobs-47a78ceb285ac50217ef39e2441112ee>.

<sup>15</sup> The Fed thinks catastrophe is coming for US businesses. 06/28/2023. Retrieved from [https://finance.yahoo.com/news/fed-economists-historic-37-us-232154324.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAANYHar6WDQKi2UdnuATK0orbB-VbJWTCn\\_pNspbXZ2yTNMGZJ6G24jhJPEumAFAmU2WvtQJd5\\_CuNtu3s-xkODzdW4bd-vWX3KIGLn9dck2IvmijXDik51A\\_9XPoIcRqaCkG\\_cETvxZzVeNQBHoA4QbM0zNF35Z2yt18C04uAA](https://finance.yahoo.com/news/fed-economists-historic-37-us-232154324.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAANYHar6WDQKi2UdnuATK0orbB-VbJWTCn_pNspbXZ2yTNMGZJ6G24jhJPEumAFAmU2WvtQJd5_CuNtu3s-xkODzdW4bd-vWX3KIGLn9dck2IvmijXDik51A_9XPoIcRqaCkG_cETvxZzVeNQBHoA4QbM0zNF35Z2yt18C04uAA).

<sup>16</sup> Data obtained from calculation tables found at <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/06>.





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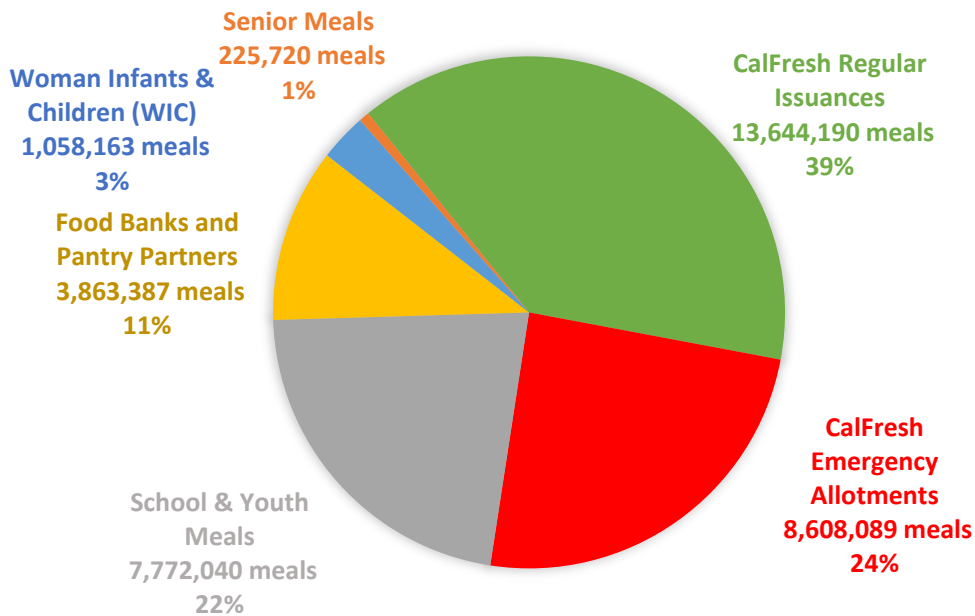
less than \$35,000 per year<sup>17</sup>, well below a living wage for our region. To truly tackle the issue of hunger and nutrition insecurity, we must push for an economy that provides a minimum wage that can comfortably meet worker’s basic needs and allow workers to attain financial stability.

## How much of the need for assistance are we currently meeting?

### Food Assistance Meals Provided in March 2023

To measure the number of missing meals in the county in the form of a meal gap, it’s first necessary to accurately assess how many meals are currently provided by the food assistance sector. Food assistance in San Diego County comes from government programs, such as CalFresh/SNAP, WIC, school meals, and from charitable food distributions provided by food banks and pantries. Figure 5 illustrates how much assistance came from each of the major types of food assistance in March, with CalFresh/SNAP continuing to be the largest source with over 60% of all assistance. All food assistance combined provided 35.1 million meals to San Diegans. Unfortunately, 8.6M meals provided in March came from the now-expired CalFresh/SNAP Emergency Allotments, meaning that there has since been a huge decrease in the number of meals going to families each month. **Looking ahead to our June 2023, estimated total meals provided will decrease by at least the 8.6M that came from pandemic CalFresh benefits in March.**

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



A map of where food assistance meals were provided in March 2022 across San Diego County can be found in [Appendix B](#).

<sup>17</sup> Determined from using data from the American Census Survey’s 1-year Estimates Table S2001: EARNINGS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>.



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Thanks to the temporary assistance provided by the CalFresh Emergency Allotments, there was **no estimated meal gap in March 2023** for San Diego County. As mentioned above, however, these meals have since been lost. Consequently, the county has not achieved a true Hunger Free San Diego. Without the Emergency Allotments in March, **the meal gap would have been over 6.2M meals**, foreshadowing what the meal gap may look like in the months following March. It's clear that much work still needs to be done to achieve a Hunger Free San Diego.

Despite there being no meal gap in March 2023 for San Diego County as a whole, **certain areas with historically marginalized communities, such as City Heights, Escondido, and Fallbrook still had substantial meal gaps.**

*Maps of the March 2023 meal gap in San Diego County by zip code both with and without emergency allotments can be found in [Appendix C](#).*

## The State of the Nutrition Security/Hunger Relief Sector

Understanding the hunger relief sector in San Diego County is crucial to ensuring that anyone experiencing nutrition insecurity can readily access adequate, equitable, and appropriate food assistance to see them safely through their time of need.

To assess the opportunities and future potential of the food assistance sector, below we provide an overview of each of the major food assistance types from the pie chart in Figure 5. Each of these programs provides essential services to those seeking help, and this in-depth analysis helps to understand which programs might be able to increase capacity to provide more meals to families in need and achieve a Hunger Free San Diego.

### CalFresh/SNAP

CalFresh is the foundation of hunger relief, and it consistently accounts for more than 50% of all food assistance in San Diego County. With the addition of the CalFresh Emergency Allotments over the past three years, the program has increased capacity by about 60%, jumping from 13M meals provided per month in 2019 to over 21M meals per month between 2020 - 2023. Temporary federal programs like Emergency Allotments and P-EBT showcased that the federal government can increase funding for CalFresh/SNAP to make great strides toward ending hunger.

As these temporary programs expired in 2023, though, millions of monthly meals have been lost, and the food assistance sector has faced increased demand in the wake of these losses. In addition to providing the most meals, CalFresh also has the greatest potential for closing the meal gap by enrolling eligible families. In March 2023, the Hunger Coalition estimates that **only 63% of people eligible for CalFresh are enrolled, meaning there are still more than 230,000 people in the county who could be enrolled.** Enrolling even a fraction of this population would mean securing families with stable access to food every month. If the CalFresh Participation Rate were increased to 70%, for example, that would mean enrolling 24,500 families and would bring in over 1.6M meals per month to close the meal gap. This would still leave more than 185,000 people who could still be enrolled. Enrolling all 230,000 eligible families would bring in more than 9.2M monthly meals to the food assistance sector and would likely close the meal gap entirely.



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CalFresh is therefore the most effective way to decrease the meal gap, and it should be seen as the best option to lift families out of nutrition insecurity.

*Maps of the March 2023 CalFresh Participation Rate by zip code and Potential Enrollees by zip code can be found in [Appendix D](#).*

## **School and Youth Meals**

School, afterschool, and summer meals regularly make up the second most monthly food assistance. Of note, however, the number of meals provided decreases sharply when school is not in session. Hunger Coalition data show that months such as June, July, August, and December consistently show substantial decreases in the number of school meals by as much as 2M - 3M meals in each month. To fill these gaps when school is not in session, community-based organizations and school districts can be fully reimbursed for the cost of serving free, healthy meals in low-income communities during school breaks.

California school districts have also faced new struggles with the implementation of Universal Free Meals in 2022. School district nutrition services departments have been stretched thin and overworked since the pandemic began in 2020, and many continue to face understaffing from resignations and retirements of key personnel over the past few years. While Universal Free Meals has been an overwhelmingly positive program that ensures more children get fed in school, it was a sudden shift for school districts that had limited capacity.

An opportunity that remains underutilized is the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) At-Risk Afterschool Supper program, however, we recognize that many schools are operating at or over capacity. A promising practice that could help schools increase capacity is to apply for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) which could increase funding for nutrition services departments, especially as the [USDA's new eligibility requirements](#) will make that many more districts and schools will be eligible. Hunger Coalition's focus right now is to do this through our CalFresh in Schools initiative, which is focused on getting eligible students and their families enrolled in CalFresh with the hope of getting schools more funding through CEP.

## **Free Food Distributions: Food Banks and Pantries**

As the third largest source of food assistance in March, food banks and pantries face unique challenges. Food banks are heavily relied upon as the most immediate source of food, and they are necessary to fill the gaps left by federal nutrition programs. Since the end of the pandemic Emergency Allotments, our county's food banks and pantries have seen increased demand as families try to make up the meals that they lost from CalFresh.

In recent months, San Diego Food Bank and Feeding San Diego have reported increased difficulty in meeting the need for food assistance while also balancing a decrease in available funding. Increasing capacity is incredibly difficult for providers that are already stretched thin. With the increased need for food assistance, food providers need more funding opportunities, especially for staffing and infrastructure, which many funders do not cover. Additionally, the government's continued reliance and expectation on food banks to continue to increase capacity for new social programs threatens the financial stability of food banks and other organizations that distribute charitable food agencies. These agencies need additional



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resources to receive and safely distribute additional food to people in need, and if they cannot comfortably meet their financial needs or pay their existing workers a livable wage, especially amid the surge in the cost of living, then providers worry that they are creating more need for food assistance even among their workers.

Much of the increased demand being felt by food providers since the end of the Emergency Allotments has been among providers of senior meals (ages 60+) as older adults struggle to find meals to replace the pandemic benefits. One senior food distribution was even threatened to be shut down in the summer of 2023 as the line wrapped around the neighborhood streets and caused residents to complain.

Transportation is another crucial issue for food banks and pantries right now. Gas prices have increased by 43% in San Diego over the past 3 years<sup>18</sup>, making it especially difficult to deliver or obtain food for rural East County residents who don't have services near them. In addition to gas, providers are also now reporting supply chain difficulty with ordering new vehicles. New trucks or vehicles that are essential to getting food to people every day are taking more than a year to be delivered, creating a new operational issue that makes it harder for these essential services to reach people in need. **More general operating funding for food banks and pantries is needed so these agencies can meet the needs of people facing hunger in San Diego County.**

## **Senior Meals (home-delivered and congregate meal providers)**

Funded by the Older Americans Act and philanthropy, senior meal providers experience many of the same barriers as agencies distributing food, including the increased demand and transportation issues. With the onset of the pandemic, home-delivered meals are now more important than ever. Home-delivered meal participants report that just knowing that they will receive regular visits by the volunteers or drivers has made them feel safer at home, and the Meals on Wheels America More Than a Meal® pilot study showed that among people living alone, those receiving daily delivered meals were 87% more likely to show improvement in feelings of social isolation over 15 weeks.<sup>19</sup>

These providers are hit the hardest by the increase in fuel costs, especially when they must drive long distances to feed seniors who can't regularly visit a food distribution and must rely on delivery to eat. This population is also more vulnerable to nutrition insecurity, and they're the most likely to suffer from the decreased capacity of providers due to high demand and logistical issues. **More general operating funding for senior meal providers is needed so these agencies can meet the needs of older adults facing hunger in San Diego County.**

## **The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)**

Providing more than 1M meals per month to mothers and their children, the WIC program is another crucial federally funded program that has the potential to increase capacity. Pregnant women, new mothers, infants, and children up to the age of 5 with an income below 185% FPL (\$55,000 of yearly

<sup>18</sup> Data obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index. Series ID: CUURS49ESETB01.

<sup>19</sup> Information and data provided by Brent Wakefield, CEO of Meals on Wheels San Diego and Meals on Wheels September 2023 Issue Brief. Available at [https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/docs/default-source/research/the-case-for-meals-on-wheels/research-brief\\_the-case-for-meals-on-wheels\\_9-8-23.pdf](https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/docs/default-source/research/the-case-for-meals-on-wheels/research-brief_the-case-for-meals-on-wheels_9-8-23.pdf).



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income for a family of four) are eligible for WIC, and San Diego County WIC agencies are reporting that many more families in San Diego County could be enrolled in WIC. If San Diego County enrolled an additional 15,000 families, this would result in an additional 250,000 monthly meals that would go towards closing the meal gap.

## Conclusion: Progress Toward a Hunger Free San Diego

**A Hunger Free San Diego is possible.** To achieve it, understanding both the current and potential output of the major sources of food assistance can help to identify where capacity can be increased and where it cannot.

Federally funded nutrition programs, such as CalFresh/SNAP, school meals, and WIC have the potential to bring in millions of additional meals to San Diego County by improving access and increasing participation in these programs. At the same time, food banks, pantries, and senior-serving organizations are providing essential services to meet the nutritional needs of the three-quarters of a million people experiencing nutrition insecurity in our region – but they need help in the form of unrestricted funding that will enable them to innovate and pivot as needed in response to economic fluctuations.

Instead of expecting an infinite increase in growth for providers that are already stretched thin, increasing participation in federal nutrition programs can help close the meal gap and alleviate some of the current demand.

**To truly end hunger, the economic conditions that result in nutrition insecurity will have to be addressed.** The United States needs a higher minimum wage that can afford a person’s most basic human needs. The current minimum wage in California will increase to \$16.00 an hour as of January 1, 2024, however, a livable wage for San Diego County is estimated to be \$22.00 to \$23.00 an hour<sup>20</sup>. Once a living wage is established, it must also be responsive to changes in the local economy, regularly adjusting for inflation and increases in the cost of living.

San Diego Hunger Coalition and our Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board are committed to making access to nutritious food assistance easy and equitable, while we collectively advocate for systemic change to eradicate the social conditions that create and perpetuate nutrition insecurity. With this approach toward equitable access to food assistance and adequate wages for all, San Diego County can solve the problem of hunger.

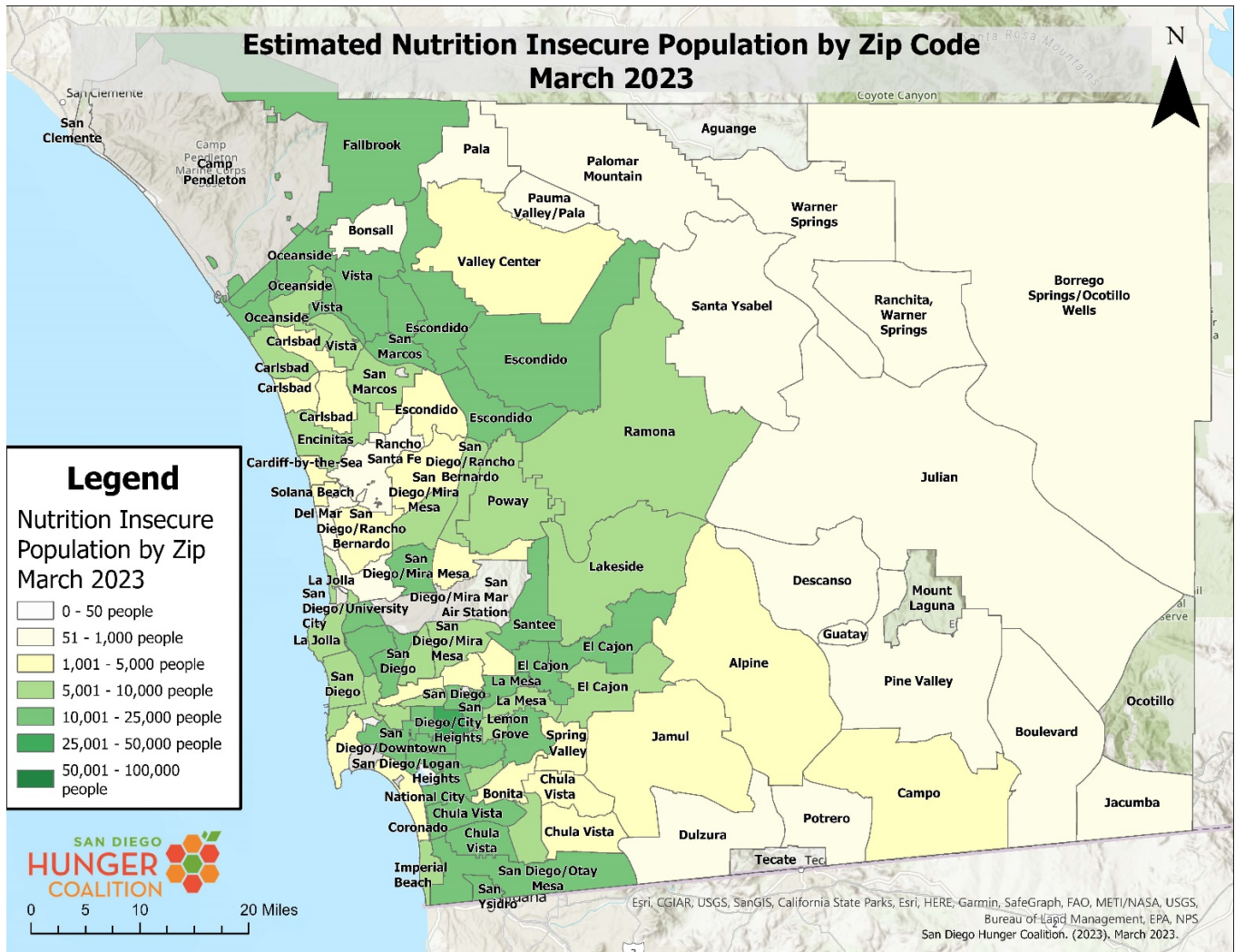
**Understanding the landscape is the first step in developing data-informed recommendations to guide our region toward a Hunger Free San Diego. To learn more about Hunger Free San Diego, please visit [www.sdhunger.org/hunger-free-sd](http://www.sdhunger.org/hunger-free-sd).**

<sup>20</sup> Data obtained from calculation tables found at <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/06>.



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## Appendix A: Map of the Nutrition Insecure Population by Zip Code

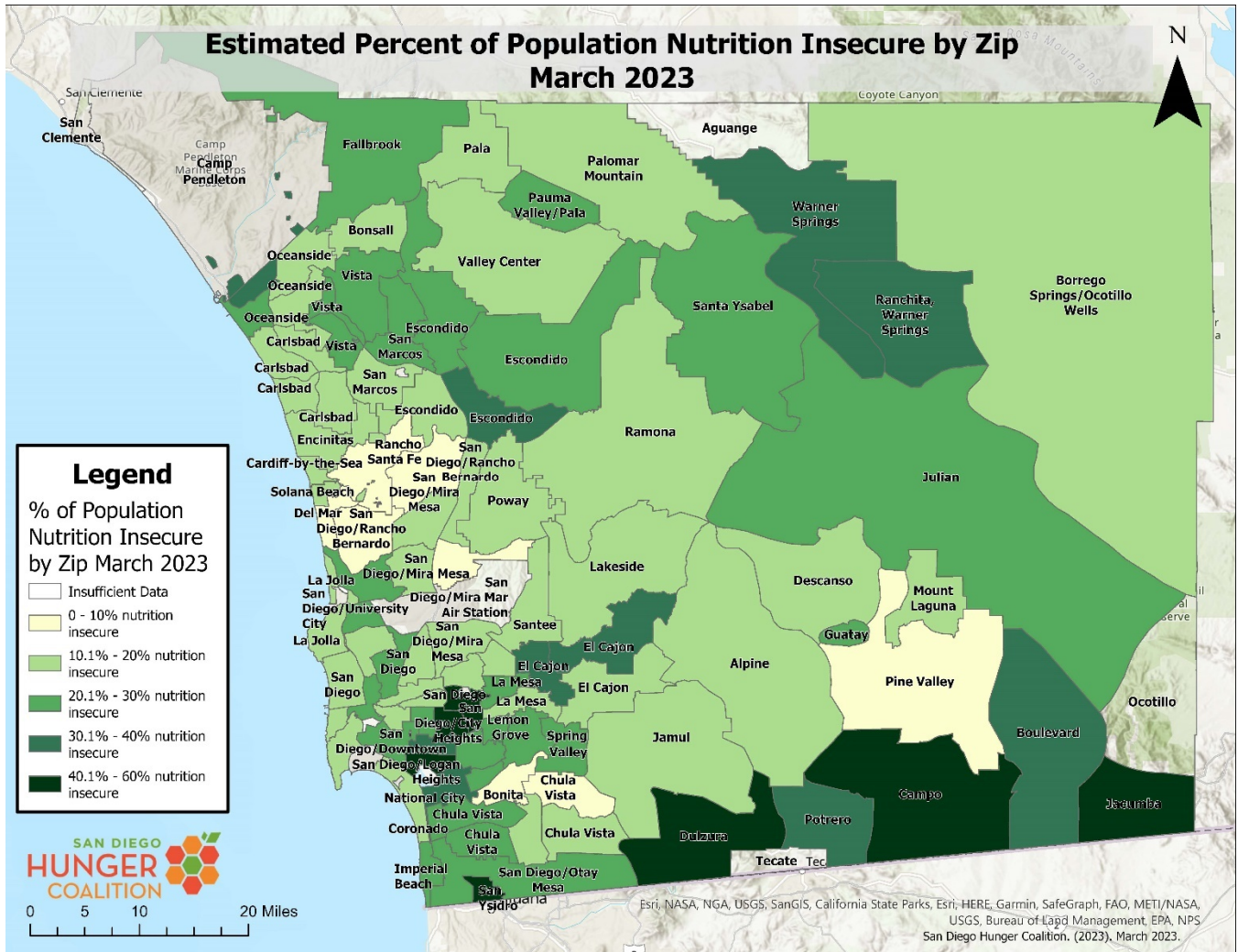


To download this map, a map of the nutrition insecure population by city, or the data tables used to create them, please visit [www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables](http://www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables).



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## Map of Nutrition Insecurity Rates in San Diego County by Zip Code

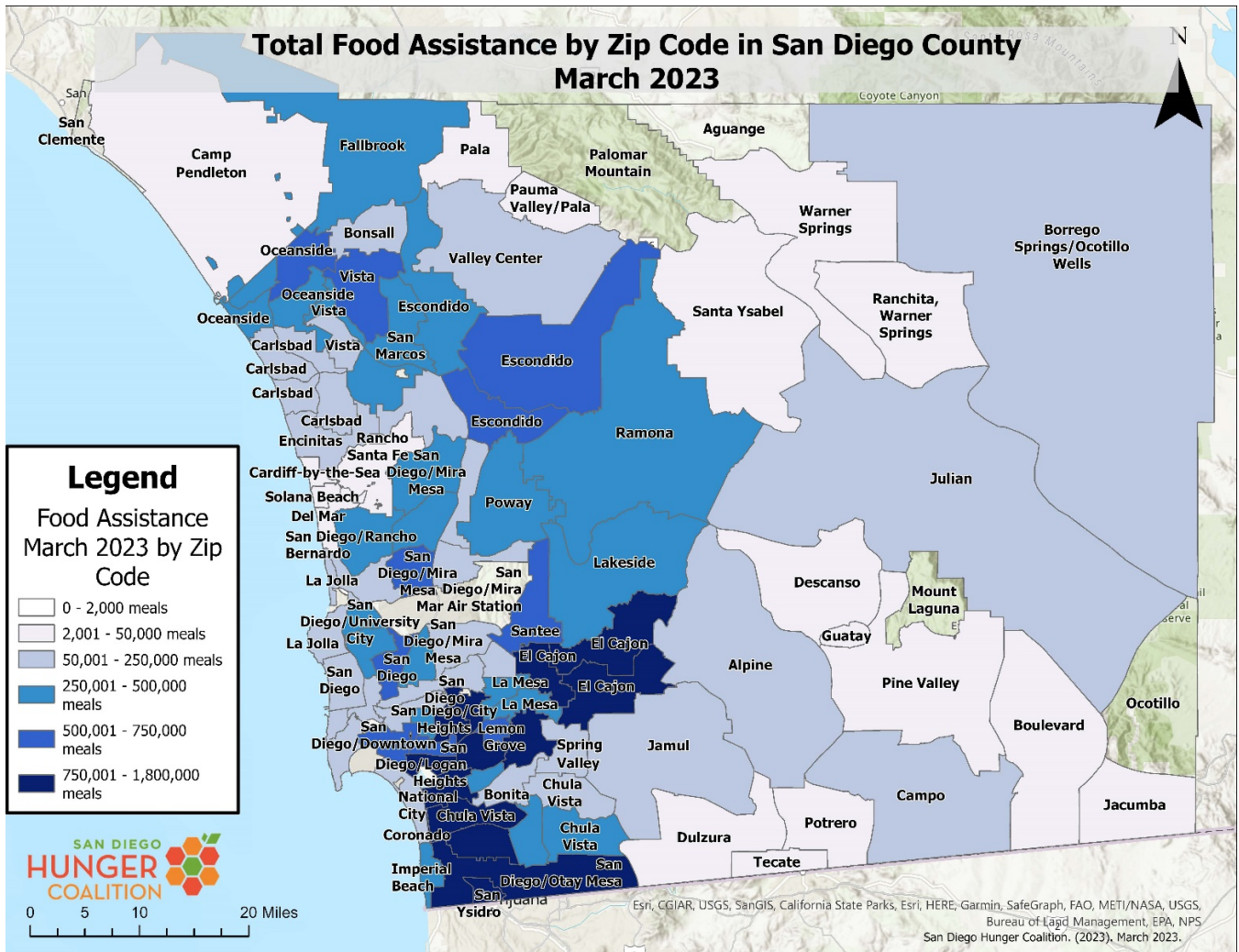


To download this map or the data table used to create it, please visit [www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables](http://www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables).



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## Appendix B: Total Food Assistance Meals Provided in San Diego County by Zip



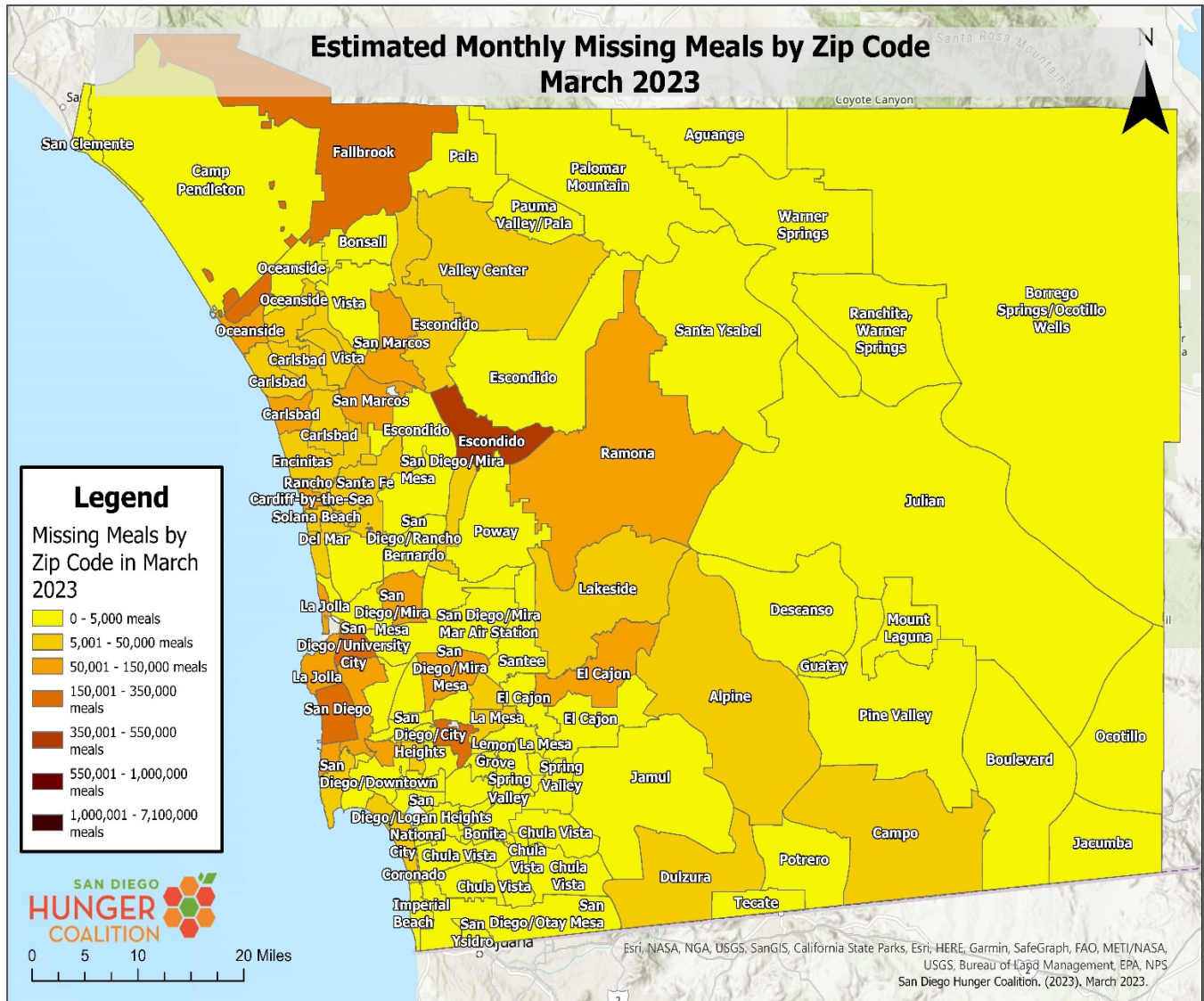
To download this map, or the data table used to create it, please visit [www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables](http://www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables).





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## Appendix C: Meal Gap/Missing Meals in San Diego by Zip with Emergency Allotments

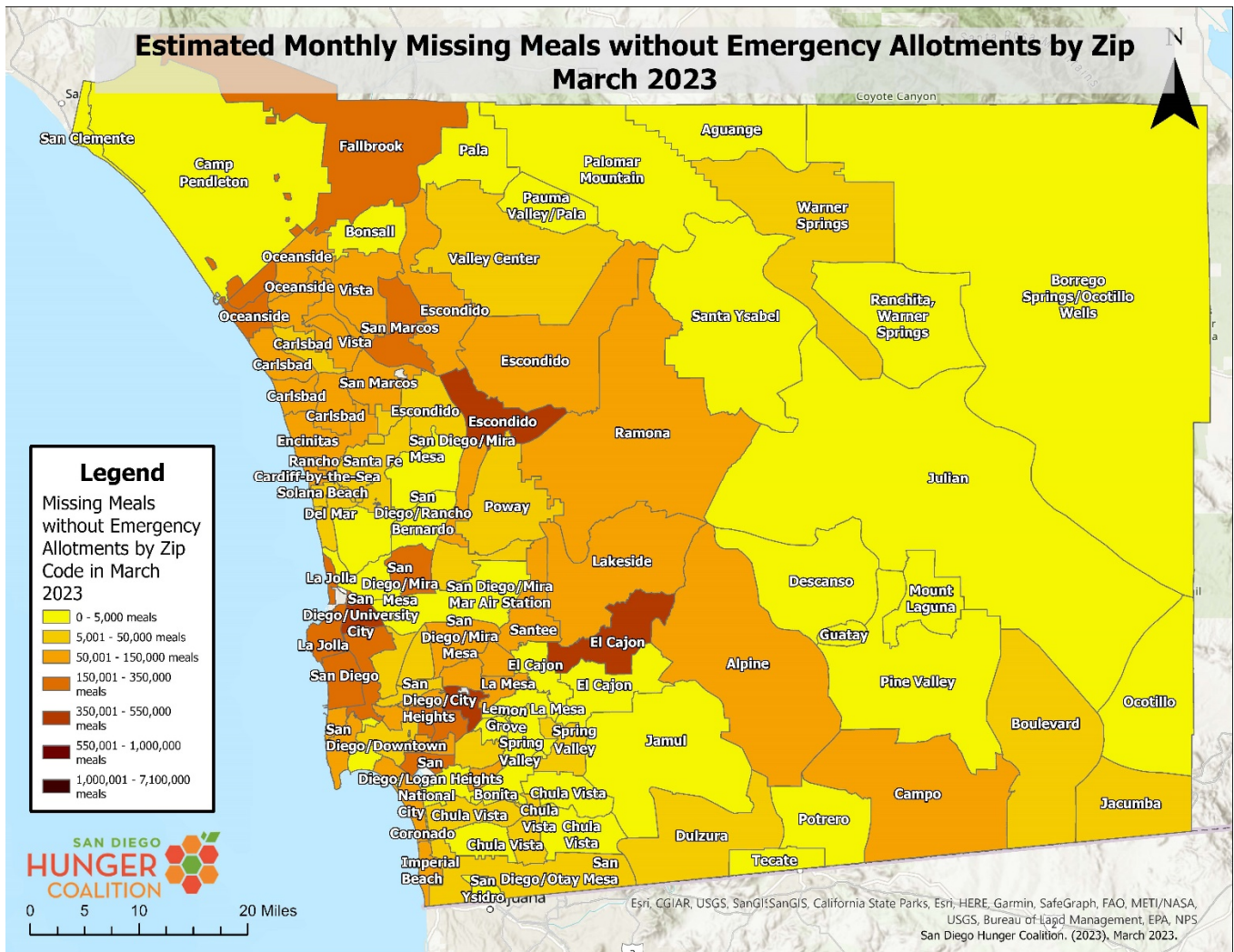


To download this map, or the data table used to create it, please visit [www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables](http://www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables).



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## Meal Gap/Missing Meals in San Diego by Zip without Emergency Allotments

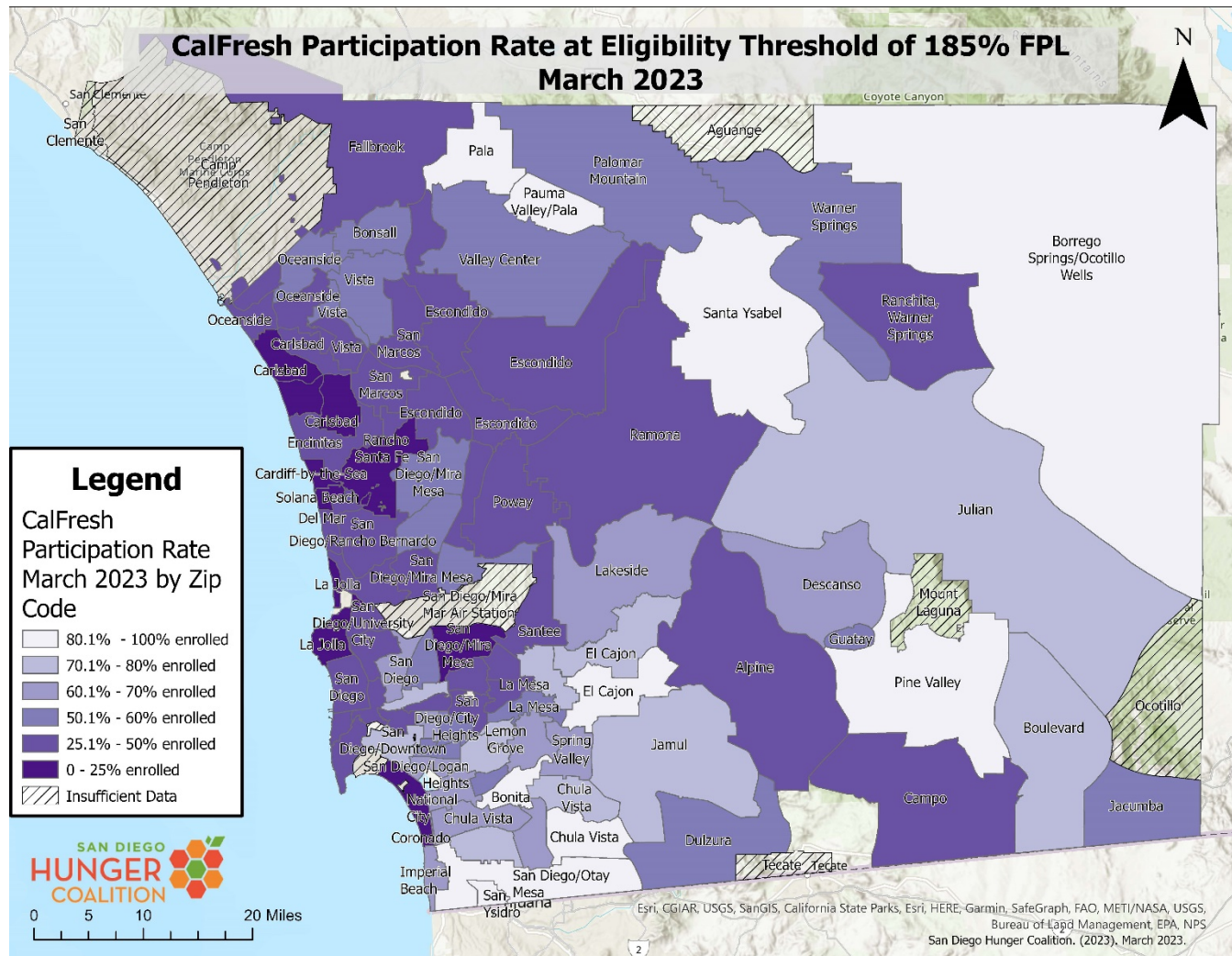


To download this map, a map of the meal gap by city, or the data tables used to create them, please visit [www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables](http://www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables).



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## Appendix D: The CalFresh Participation Rate by Zip in San Diego County, March 2023

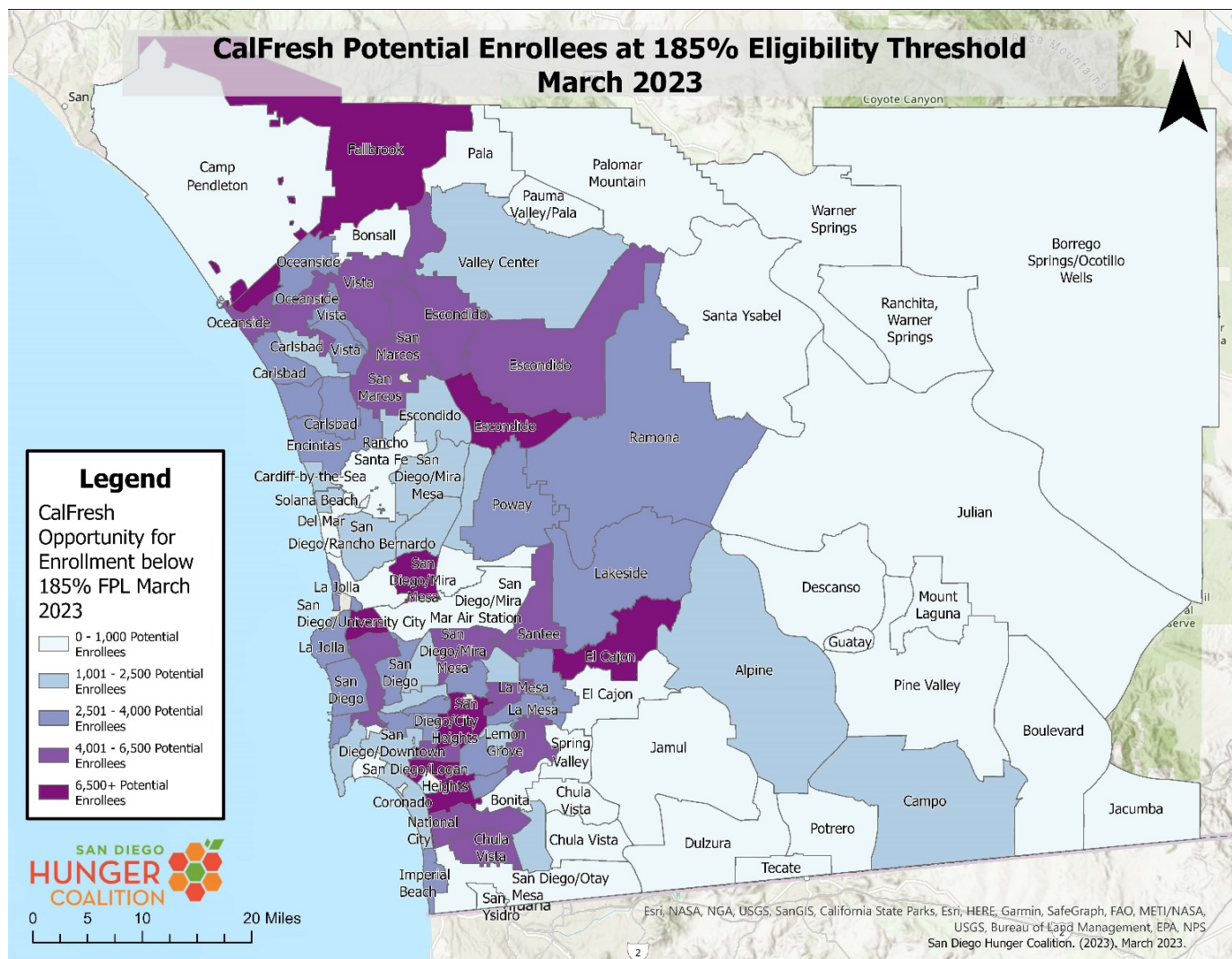


To download this map or the data table used to create it, please visit [www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables](http://www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables).



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## CalFresh Potential Enrollees by Zip in San Diego County, March 2023



To download this map or the data table used to create it, please visit [www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables](http://www.sdhunger.org/maps-tables).



## Appendix E: Hunger Free San Diego Methodology to Estimate Nutrition Insecurity

In 2020, the HFSD Advisory Board adopted a new, timelier, and reliable measure of the need for food assistance in our region. Instead of using food insecurity survey data, which notoriously underrepresents the population in need, the methodology now analyzes economic conditions to assess the needs of the people of San Diego County. An economic definition of nutrition security provides a wider view of the interconnected trade-offs between major household expenses, including housing, healthcare, and healthy food, without the social stigma and bias of self-reporting. While food insecurity surveys are an invaluable tool for understanding the lived experiences of people facing food and nutrition insecurity, using economic indicators such as income level center nutrition insecurity as an economic issue tied to wages and purchasing power.

**Read more about the importance of changing the narrative on hunger by moving away from the goal of *hunger relief* toward the goal of *nutrition security* in the Hunger Coalition's October 2021 issue brief: [The State of Nutrition Security in San Diego County: Before, during and beyond the COVID-19 Crisis](#).**

The Hunger Coalition uses over a decade of Census data to calculate nutrition insecurity rates. The nutrition insecure population includes people with incomes less than 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). In 2023, the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) for a family of four is an annual income of \$30,000, meaning a household of four earning less than that amount would be considered in poverty. 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is double that amount, which is an annual income of \$60,000 or below<sup>21</sup>.

Using the most recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED), Hunger Coalition uses the size of the San Diego County labor force as well as the average weekly wage in San Diego to predict how many people in San Diego County fall below the 200% FPL in any given month, allowing us to accurately predict the number of people under 200% FPL before the Census releases data for that year. Hunger Coalition recognizes that many families above the 200% poverty line are also facing issues with nutrition security, which means the estimates in this report are still on the conservative side.

**For additional information about the methodologies used in this report, please visit [www.sdhunger.org/sdhc-research-reports](http://www.sdhunger.org/sdhc-research-reports).**

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<sup>21</sup> Obtained from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/4b515876c4674466423975826ac57583/Guidelines-2022.pdf>.