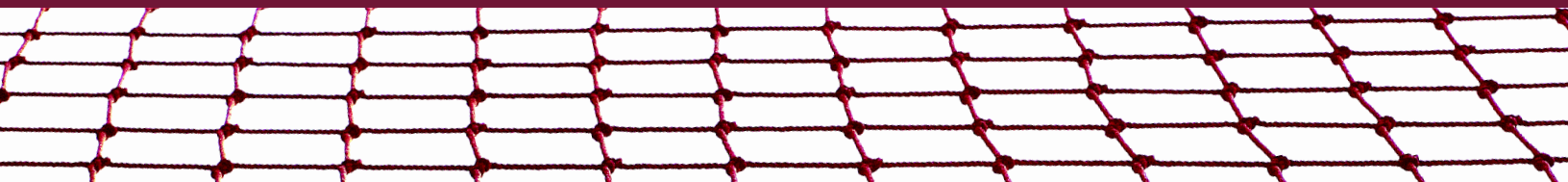


# Food Security

Issue Brief No. 1



## Overview of the Food Security Safety Net

Each year, as many as one in six individuals in the United States faces hunger or food insecurity, meaning lack of access to sufficient food for an active, healthy life. Those most frequently affected by food insecurity include extremely low-income and homeless individuals, single-parent families, children, and low-income seniors, while during economic downturns, increasing numbers of working poor and under-employed individuals find themselves in need of food. Nationally and in California, Hispanic and African American households are disproportionately affected by food insecurity.

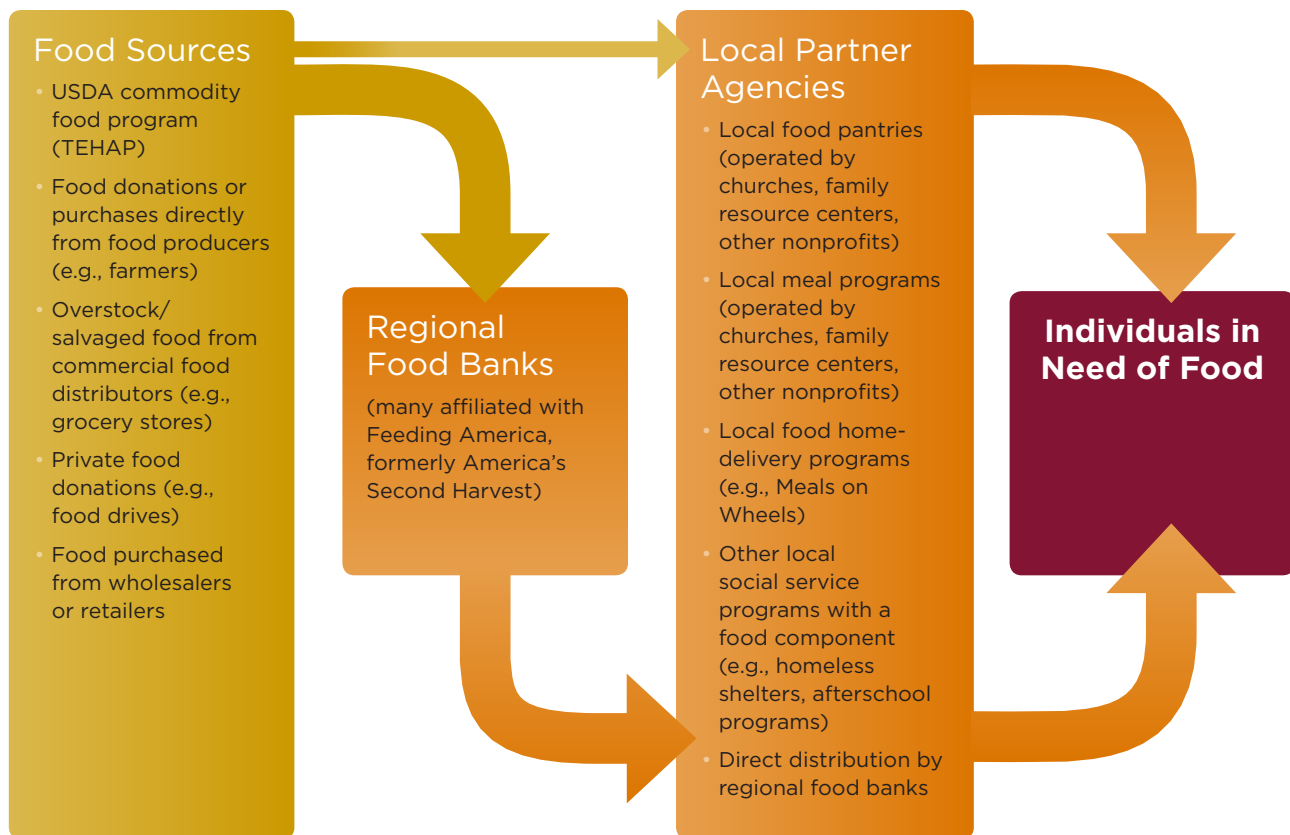
The food security safety net is largely based on a system of food banks, or regional intermediary organizations that secure donated and purchased food, and then transport that food to local partner agencies such as food pantries, meal programs, and homeless shelters, which in turn distribute the food to individuals and families in need. This system of food banking emerged in the 1960s and 70s. Many regional food banks are affiliated with the national organization Feeding America (formerly America's Second Harvest). Both food banks and local food distribution programs utilize volunteers extensively; many local programs are entirely volunteer-run.

Food distributed through regional food banks and local food programs originates from a number of sources:

- *The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)*, a federal program, administered at the state level, that makes commodity food products, particularly basic staples, available at no cost to emergency food organizations. Almost half of all food received by food banks affiliated with Feeding America comes from TEFAP.
- *Food donations and food purchases directly from food producers*, such as programs that enable food banks to purchase produce directly from farmers at reduced costs.
- *Salvaged food from commercial food distributors*, such as major grocery stores. Due to changes in operations at these companies (such as the use of "club cards"), less overstock food is now available from this source than in the past.
- *Private donations of food from individuals, corporate employees, and community groups, e.g., through holiday food drives*. Compared to more direct methods of securing food, food drives are much less efficient, requiring significantly more staff and volunteer time, with less assurance of food quality. However, food drives are valued by food security agencies as important opportunities to engage community members and to focus attention on the issue of hunger.
- *Food purchased from wholesalers and retailers*, typically to complement the food available through commodity and direct-from-producer programs. Food purchasing by food security agencies has increased in recent years, as supplies of donated salvaged food have declined and as priorities have shifted to emphasize provision of fresh and nutritious food.

Major sources of financial support for emergency food security organizations include storage and distribution grants through TEFAP, Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) grants through FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency), and private donations from corporations, foundations, and individuals. During the recent recession, significant funding was also provided through federal economic stimulus spending via the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

## The Food Security Safety Net



In the past, the goal of food security programs was to meet the calorie needs of hungry individuals, but in recent years, the philosophy has shifted to a focus on providing the right food to enable individuals to thrive. Following this shift, food banks have increased distribution of fresh produce, often coupled with nutrition education, and policy advocates have pushed for corresponding changes in other food security programs, such as increasing fresh produce and whole grains in the food available through the federal WIC program (Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children).

Food banks and local food distribution programs are designed to meet emergency food needs of individuals and families affected by economic crisis. For longer-term food security needs, several mainstream federal programs are critical resources. The most important of these are Food Stamps (now known as SNAP, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), and Child Nutrition programs such as the National School Lunch program.

## Direct Services: Emerging Needs & Promising Practices

**Importance of local anchor institutions:** At the local level of food distribution, there is a need for at least one multi-service anchor agency in each service area that has capacity to provide multiple services beyond just food, offer expanded food distribution hours, and provide home-delivery of food. Such agencies are particularly important for first-time food bank clients, who require more time from service providers, have multiple needs besides food, and are unfamiliar with systems for accessing food and other supports.

**Expanded food distribution access:** Many local food pantries distribute food during normal weekday business hours. However, evening and weekend service hours are a promising practice to improve access for working poor and underemployed food bank clients, and to create opportunities for food distribution agencies to engage new types of volunteers (e.g., younger employed adults). Home-delivery of food is also vital to meet the needs of homebound seniors and people with disabilities, but many of these programs are under-resourced. Ensuring accessibility of food distribution in rural areas is another challenge.

**Schools as food distribution points:** Food distribution through school sites is an emerging best practice, particularly as a strategy to reach new clients and working families who may be unable or uncomfortable accessing traditional food pantry locations.

**Replacing food distribution trucks in California:** Within the next ten years, all trucks used by California food banks to distribute food will have to be replaced to comply with recently adopted state air quality regulations.

**Building administrative capacity of food security agencies:** Food banks and local food distribution agencies rely heavily on volunteers, with an aging volunteer base dominated by retirees. In addition, requirements for safe food handling have increased as food banks have increased distribution of perishable foods, creating challenges for training and supervising volunteers. Many food security agencies could benefit from capacity building related to volunteer recruitment and management. Food banks also typically have a traditional, older donor base, and may need to reach out to younger donors, employing new social media strategies, to achieve sustainable long-term fundraising success.

**Funding for food purchase by food banks:** As overstock donations from grocery stores and other food distributors has declined, food banks increasingly need to purchase food to ensure sufficient quantity and diversity of food for distribution.

**Importance of core operating support:** Unrestricted support for basic operations of food banks and local food distribution agencies is critical to ensure stability of safety net services.

## Policy and Systems Change: Issues & Opportunities

**Increasing enrollment in Food Stamps:** While food banks address emergency food needs, Food Stamps (now formally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP) are the primary mainstream resource to meet longer-term food security needs. Increasing enrollment in Food Stamps is a key strategy to systematically address food insecurity. Increased Food Stamps participation would relieve pressure on the emergency food system by enabling individuals to acquire food at grocery stores and other mainstream food sources, thus reducing demand at food banks, and would also enable local communities to capture federal benefits that are currently untapped. Because Food Stamps create a strong local economic stimulus, they have strong potential for bipartisan support as an economic intervention.

- *At the national level*, food security advocates are promoting federal policies to facilitate state-level modernization of Food Stamps enrollment (e.g., outlawing state-level fingerprint imaging requirements, which are incompatible with online benefits enrollment).
- *Within California*, SNAP enrollment is extremely low. Only 48% of eligible individuals participated in fiscal year 2007, the lowest state participation rate in the country. California also has extremely high administrative costs for SNAP, due to state-specific enrollment requirements and because the program is administered at the county level rather than centralized at the state level. Advocates support streamlining and modernization of benefits enrollment processes (e.g., through online enrollment systems), aligning the diverse systems used by different counties for benefits enrollment and administration without losing local responsiveness, and eliminating the state-imposed requirement that all applicants submit fingerprint images.
- *At the local level*, individuals require not just outreach about Food Stamps eligibility but also hands-on assistance with enrollment. Providing enrollment at locations outside of county social services offices improves accessibility, especially for first-time applicants. Linguistic and cultural competence are also important to facilitate enrollment of new applicants.

**Expanding the reach of school-based food programs:** A variety of federal Child Nutrition programs, such as the free and reduced-price National School Lunch Program, serve as an important source of food for low-income children.

- Food security advocates are pressing for increased participation in the *Summer Food Service Program*, which provides free lunches to low-income children during the school summer vacation. Within California, investment in statewide program coordination is needed, e.g., to develop a centralized website and hotline for referrals and to conduct outreach to encourage participation.
- At the national level, *expanding eligibility* for Summer Food Service Program sites, as well as for afterschool and family childcare food programs, is a priority. Currently, programs are eligible to participate if at least 50% of the children they serve are low-income, meaning that they qualify for free or reduced-price school lunch. Advocates seek to lower the eligibility threshold to sites where 40% of students meet the low-income criteria.
- *Other national policy priorities* include streamlining eligibility determination for school breakfast and lunch programs ( e.g., replacing individual applications with use of Census statistics); supporting provision of free meals (rather than just snacks) in extended afterschool programs; and increasing participation in the School Breakfast program, through strategies such as offering universal free breakfast at low-income schools and providing breakfast in the classroom.

## Information Resources

**Feeding America (formerly America's Second Harvest):** National umbrella organization for more than 200 food banks nationwide, including 20 in California. "Faces of Hunger" section of website includes hunger data based on information collected about clients served by Feeding America affiliates and data from the USDA. Website also includes information about federal policy issues and an online food bank locator that lists all member food banks. <http://feedingamerica.org>

**Food Research and Action Center (FRAC):** Leading national food policy advocacy organization. Website includes description of federal food programs, including national and state-level participation data, as well as research reports developed by FRAC and federal policy advocacy priorities. <http://www.frac.org>

**California Association of Food Banks (CAFB):** Membership organization for food banks in California, with more than 40 members. Includes list and online locator of member food banks by county, and information about statewide programs and state and national advocacy activities. <http://www.cafoodbanks.org>

**California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA):** Statewide public policy and advocacy organization focused on increasing access to nutritious, affordable food for low-income Californians. Website includes state- and county-level data on food insecurity and obesity, as well as detailed information about current state and federal policy priorities. <http://www.cfpa.net>

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The Safety Net Funders Network was launched in September 2009 in response to the "Great Recession" and its impact on the region's social safety net. The Network aims to inform current safety net grantmaking priorities, identify longer-term systems change goals, and share knowledge gained about needs and emerging best practices in safety net grantmaking. This series of issue briefs describes specific opportunities and strategies for philanthropic investment in targeted safety net areas, and follows a report on the scope of safety net grantmaking in the Bay Area. <http://www.sff.org/about/whats-new/report-reveals-bay-area-funders-response-in-economic-downturn/>

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