

The Lives of Californians in 2020

Assets, Challenges, and the Effects of COVID-19

The Approach

In the fall of 2020, Nourish CA engaged Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) to conduct statewide research that would help illustrate the experiences of individuals and families across California, particularly in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This brief highlights key findings from two aspects of that research:



- An online survey of 1,000 Californians with household incomes below \$50,000¹; and
- Six online focus groups among Californians with middle and low incomes, representing select populations of interest, including parents, immigrants, Spanish-speakers, and Cantonese-speakers.

Experiences with Hunger & Accessing Food

More than three in five survey respondents have worried about running out of food in the past 12 months. Black (69%) and Latinx (75%) Californians were more likely experience this concern than respondents of other races/ethnicities. Parents were also more likely to face this concern (74%) than Californians without children (56%).

What We Heard

“Well, I have worried because they laid me off and I wondered how I was going to pay the rent. Then they raised my rent just to make things worse. The landlord didn't understand that I was desperate, and I really worried about how I was going to feed my daughters.”
- Focus Group Participant



More than half of all survey respondents have run out of food without money to get more.

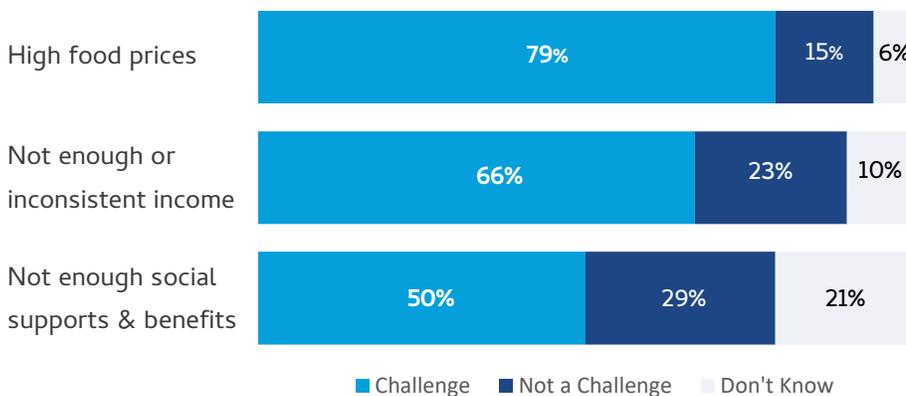
Within the past 12 months the food we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more. Is this statement often true, sometimes true, or never true for your household?

| Respondent Group | Often or Sometimes True |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| All Respondents | 53% |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 42% |
| Black/African American | 66% |
| Latinx | 65% |
| White | 44% |
| Parents | 63% |
| No Children | 48% |

High food prices pose the greatest challenges to accessing food.

When asked to rate several challenges to accessing food, the top three factors were high food prices, not enough or inconsistent income, and “not enough social supports and benefits, including CalFresh, EBT, SNAP, or WIC benefits.”

Ranking Challenges with Accessing Food



What We Heard

“That is when I applied for help because I didn't even have money for the rent and my wife wasn't working. They laid her off too. The children kept asking for food; that they wanted this or that, and they were bored of eating the same thing every day. But there was no other option. But it happened often, and we are still dealing with it. We are coping.”
 - Focus Group Participant



For older adults, concern about the spread of the coronavirus is by far the biggest obstacle to accessing food (78%). Less than half reported other obstacles such as a fixed income, mobility issues, lack of information, and transportation.

What We Heard

“There is a lot of loneliness. There is a lot of isolation where...people who live alone and if they are not able to reach out via the Internet, they are not getting any interaction and there is a lot of depression and loneliness.

- Focus Group Participant (Older Adult)



Free groceries and money to purchase food would be the most helpful forms of food assistance for most families. When asked to rate the most helpful sources of assistance in accessing food, two-thirds said free or discounted groceries would be “extremely” or “very” helpful; 63% pointed to money or vouchers to buy food and groceries; and 55% said more funds via CalFresh/food stamps, EBT, the CA WIC card, or similar benefits card would be helpful.

Experiences with Public Programs

Half (52%) of current CalFresh recipients have received additional CalFresh/EBT benefits during the pandemic. Sixty-five percent of those who received additional benefits said it helped benefits last to the end of the month and 75% said it allowed them to purchase a greater variety of foods.

What We Heard

“I didn't have a problem with the rent because thank God I got up [after having COVID] and was able to return to work. I did have to ask for food stamps because in reality I didn't have enough money to move forward. It wasn't for me but more for my daughters. Right now, thank God, the company is open again and I hope that everything gets better so we can move on and we won't have to depend on that. But sometimes we have to rely on food stamps, or my daughters don't eat.”

- Focus Group Participant



One in five respondents have experienced racial discrimination when applying for public benefits. Nearly one in seven have experienced language barriers when applying for public benefits. As a result, the vast majority of individuals who had either of these experiences (80% and 90%, respectively) are less likely to apply for services in the future.

A majority of parents say meals at their child’s school, preschool or childcare provider continue to be available when school is not in session.

More than three in five say they have used these meals more often since the start of the pandemic than they did before.



Respondents participating in public programs value the services they receive, with 89% or more rating Medi-Cal, disability benefits, CalFresh, social security, and housing assistance as extremely or very important.

What’s Needed

80% of respondents expressed some level of need for additional money to buy food.

74% of respondents noted that a stimulus payment – whether described as coming from the government or in cash – would be the most helpful type of assistance now.

What is the one thing that it would make it easier for you to get the food that you need or want?

“I think easing the restrictions for the qualifications if you will. Just because you earned X amount, doesn’t mean you have X amount of dollars free; we all have our bills.”

“I would say that for me—another Pandemic EBT card would help and another stimulus check that I could use for groceries. Just something would help.”

ⁱ **Survey Methodology:** From October 20–November 13, 2020, FM3 completed online interviews with Californians from opt-in panels, offering the survey in Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese. Due to rounding, not all totals sum to 100%.