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## California's state of hunger

Voices from the frontlines of the battle against food scarcity in California

By [Sasha Abramsky](#)

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A decade ago, Tammy Jaime lost everything to drugs. She her husband spent through their savings, lost their home and car, and ended up in the mountainous, rural far north of California, begging for food for their children.

But that's not why Jaime struggles to feed her kids today. These days, Jaime, 39, is sober, enrolled in college, and working part-time for



Cisco Headstart where she earns \$12 an hour. It's the most money she has ever made, far above the minimum wage. But routinely, as the month draws to a close, she and her husband run out of funds, not least because when somebody in the family falls sick, they end up with high medical bills.

"We live from paycheck to paycheck," said Jaime. "Once in a while we see a movie. We don't eat out very much. We don't have TV. ... Yes, next week is payday. But then, you know what, my check is gone the next day, because it's all lined up for bills."

For Billye and George McPherson, an octogenarian couple with 14 great-grandkids, who have long run the Siskiyou County food pantry that Jaime used to frequent, hunger is now a permanent companion for many friends and neighbors.

"When we were younger," explained George McPherson, "and we had moved up here from the Bay Area, we had some really hard times raising our family. ... So we understand what it is to be hungry."

These days, the families who come to the McPherson's pantry number about 350 out of a total local population of a couple thousand.

"One of the things that I'll never forget is this [50-year-old] lady came in. ... She needed food," said McPherson. "When we gave her her box, she looked in it, and she saw toilet paper. And she said, 'Oh, toilet paper,' and she broke into tears. That just shows you how grateful these people are for everything you can do for them."

Many of these men and women have jobs, but the jobs pay low wages—many far lower than the hourly rate paid to Jaime—and competition for them is fierce in the current economic climate. For these Californians, said Billye McPherson sadly, all too often "the month is longer than the money." A week or two out from the next paycheck, they turn up on pantry lines, looking for boxes of food

George (left) and Billye McPherson, who once struggled to feed their own family, now run a food pantry in the far rural north of California. Says Billye: The month is longer than the money."

PHOTO BY SASHA ABRAMSKY

This story was funded by a grant from the Sierra Health Foundation to do independent reporting on the topic of food access in California, and by the Open Society Foundation. [Read more stories from the food access project.](#)

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to tide them over until they have money in their bank accounts once more.

## Hunger's numbers

Four-plus years into the worst financial, housing and unemployment crisis to hit the country since the Great Depression, America's hunger numbers continue to climb. Forty-six million people are enrolled in food-stamp programs; they receive benefits that average \$133.80 per month per individual, and \$283.65 for a household. Millions more, based on their income numbers, ought to be so enrolled, but for many reasons aren't. Additional millions don't qualify for food stamps, but the part-time, low-wage work that they can find in practice doesn't pay enough to cover all their bills. Like Tammy Jaime, they juggle expenses, and, in the process, frequently end up with insufficient money to buy enough food for themselves and their children.

While California doesn't have the highest rate of poverty or hunger in the country, its raw hunger and food insecurity numbers are stunning simply by virtue of its size. Yes, the state with the largest population in the country has the second highest number of food-stamp enrollees (Texas holds the dubious distinction of having the highest), with more than 3.8 million residents on its CalFresh program. Of these, 1.39 million are children.



Maribel Diaz has been a CalFresh recipient since she lost her job at the beginning of the recession. She now works part time for Hunger Action Los Angeles as an advocate for food-stamp recipients eating healthier foods.

PHOTO BY SASHA ABRAMSKY

California would, however, have far more food-stamp recipients if it did even a remotely decent job at reaching out to those poor enough to qualify for the federally funded program. As it is, while some states successfully enroll upwards of 90 percent of food-insecure households, more than half of all Californians who should be covered by food stamps remain outside of that part of the safety net. That translates to nearly 4 million hungry Californians going without basic food assistance from the government. To survive, these men, women and children are reliant either on the largesse of local charities, churches and food pantries, or they are simply missing meals to stretch their meager food dollars as long as possible.

unclaimed benefits was a staggering \$8.68 billion.

Last year, hunger advocates from around the state convened in Sacramento to highlight the urgency of the problem. Members of Hunger Action Los Angeles showed up at the Capitol carrying cardboard cut-out figures, on each of which

"California's about the bottom of the barrel," said California Food Policy Advocates executive director Ken Hecht, of the low food-stamp-enrollment rate. Hecht's organization published a report in 2010, titled *Lost Dollars, Empty Plates*, which concluded that approximately 3.6 million Californians who qualify for food stamps are nevertheless not enrolled—thus sacrificing federally funded benefits worth a total of more than \$4.8 billion annually. Since food-stamp expenditures circulate rapidly through the economy, the CFPA researchers calculated that the total cost to the California economy of these

was glued a paper plate on which was printed out hunger data, generated by the California Health Interview Survey, from individual counties. Whichever part of the state one chose to focus on, the numbers were dismal.

In Los Angeles County, there were nearly 1.13 million "food insecure" adults in 2009, the most recent year for which such CHIS data exists, most of them insecure because they were not enrolled in the food stamp program. In Riverside County, the number was close to 250,000. San Diego had 210,000, Sacramento 126,000, Santa Clara 96,000. In Alameda, there were 169,000 adults in this category. Even in eminently middle-class counties, the numbers were high: Sonoma came in with 51,000 food-insecure adults; Yolo with 16,000.

Cumulatively, the survey found that statewide, even after the expansion in food-stamp usage since the start of the recession, 3.7 million Californian adults were struggling to put food on the table in 2009, up from 2.8 million just two years previously.

## California, meet your hungry

Hunger in 21st-century America transcends stereotypes: It might be portrayed by a food line snaking through a dirt-poor neighborhood in a dilapidated inner city, an image redolent of Great Depression-era photographs by chroniclers such as Dorothea Lange. But at this point, it's just as likely to be embodied by somebody like Marcy Glickman, who for most of her life was upper-middle class, a denizen of L.A.'s fashionable west side, but who has recently been brought low by medical bills following her husband's illness and death, and her own disability.

"I've had [a Mercedes-Benz car], we could travel, we could buy nice things, jewelry. ... We lived a great life. Great medical coverage. Children in private schools. Then, all of a sudden, it changed, because of illness. ... My husband had cancer. Those bills are horrendous. It's the nightmare that you'd never, never want. One day, you're high on the hill. The next day ... you're a part of those that don't have."

Hunger is also the face and voice of Graciela R., who lives in the hardscrabble L.A. suburb of Silmar. The 50-year-old mother of two used to scrape by with jobs in laundromats, but she has been unemployed since the start of the recession. Where she and her husband once brought in nearly \$2,000 a month, today they squeak by on the \$700 a month that her husband earns repairing windows in cars. How much money does she have? "The \$3 in my purse," she answered in Spanish. And laughed, as if to say, "What can you do?"

For food, the family of four lives on the food stamps that one of her two children is eligible for, and food boxes given out by the community group Meet Each Need With Dignity, in the nearby town of Pacoima, as well as neighborhood churches. She and her husband sometimes miss meals to make sure that their children have enough to eat.

Hunger is also the face of Matthew Joseph, a middle-aged steel worker and church deacon, brought to the edge of destitution by Stockton's collapsed housing market combined with a long spell of unemployment in the first years of the recession. "You realize that everything you've worked for can be gone, completely gone," said Joseph, as he recounts his struggle to keep his home and to put food on the table for his wife and himself. "I had to start looking for things in my lifestyle where I could say, 'We can't do this any longer.' I was always looking to say, 'What can I get out of this meal? What can I make that

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will last me not just a meal but two meals?" I need to be able to thin everything; thin what we're doing in life, what we're doing for our house. Where do I come up with money for food, PG&E, garbage and everything else?"

At his church, Joseph was struck "by the amount of people at Christmas or Thanksgiving not looking for presents, but just looking for food. I hear these stories at the cathedral day in and day out."

This changing face of hunger became particularly noticeable in 2008, recalls Blake Young, executive director of the Sacramento Food Bank, as he details demographic shifts in his clientele in recent years. Throughout 2009 and most of 2010 the total numbers of food bank clients—men, women and children who can be seen lining city blocks on mornings that the banks and pantries distribute free food—continued to grow. And even after the total numbers stabilized, the number of "ex-middle-income, first-time visitors has gone through the roof," Young noted. "And it's growing every day."

## There must be food

Yet, for all of the "food insecurity" in California, actual hunger would be far more extensive without government programs in place to tackle the problem; or were those programs replaced by block grants, as an increasing number of Republican politicians are advocating.

Food stamps are the one part of the social safety net that, for those enrolled, still works really well. The program keeps users from hunger, being available to all legal residents who are at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line—though individual states can

determine what value of assets, such as cars, applicants are allowed to hang on to. It is counter-cyclical—the availability and usage of food-stamp benefits increasing during recessions, with the federal government currently bankrolling the program to the tune of approximately \$65 billion per year—and can help to keep local economies afloat during downtimes, and it is flexible enough to deal with the needs of individuals and families in a multitude of ways. The benefits are given to clients via the EBT card, which means that once the messiness of enrolment is over, the delivery of services is actually pretty efficient. And, unlike the old paper vouchers, modern EBT benefits are hard to sell, thus eliminating, or at least much reducing, black markets around their usage, and making sure the benefits get spent properly on food—especially food for children.

That's one reason that the GOP attacks against food stamps in recent months, by Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum on the presidential campaign trail, and by Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.)—who proposed replacing food stamps with capped block grants to the states—haven't resonated all that well.

People in America don't like welfare programs in the abstract, but when it comes to specifics, food stamps and other nutritional programs actually enjoy



A decade ago, Tammy Jaime lost everything to drugs. Today she's sober, enrolled in college and working part time. But she routinely runs out of money to feed her kids by the end of the month. "Yes, next week is payday. But then my check is gone the next day."

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pretty high levels of support. Polling data quoted by the Food Research and Action Center shows that nearly 90 percent of Americans believe that "those who are unable to earn enough money for food should be helped by others"; in 2003, the Alliance to End Hunger found that seven in 10 voters say they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who proposed cuts to the school-lunch program and found that 63 percent of voters would be less likely to vote for a politician who proposed cutting food stamps.

But while there are many success stories associated with the country's federally funded anti-hunger programs, the states responsible for administering these benefits vary tremendously in how they enroll people and how they access the federal dollars. And on this front, the Golden State does very badly. Despite years of efforts, only about half of eligible Californians receive the benefits. In many counties, that number is actually far less than 50 percent.

In the six counties of the Sacramento region alone, more than 110,000 residents eligible for food stamps go without. The benefits lost by these people equal more than a quarter of a billion dollars per year.

Analysts blame the low-enrollment percentage on an array of factors: first among these was that, until a recent reform, Assembly Bill 6, kicked in January 1, California was one of only three states to fingerprint food-stamp applicants, placing both a stigma and a fear of law enforcement and immigration authorities in the way of access to the program.

That requirement was changed, in a rare display of legislative bipartisanship in Sacramento, after years of prodding by President Barack Obama's United States Department of Agriculture officials responsible for administering food stamps. Both in D.C. and at the department's regional offices in Oakland, USDA personnel held numerous meetings with state officials, sent out letters to key legislators, and otherwise made it clear that they wanted to see reform.

At the same time, A.B. 6 also set in place a timeline for ending, over the next two years, several other bureaucratic obstacles to easy enrollment. Currently, California mandates that recipients apply for re-enrollment four times a year, subjecting them to a cumbersome means test that frequently deters applicants; A.B. 6 reduces the returning applications to twice a year. Also, the state insists that applicants apply, in person, at food-stamp offices, which produces a strong disincentive for the working poor to apply: after all, if applying means turning up during work hours and thus losing hourly wages, or even forfeiting a job, why bother to apply? A.B. 6 allows for telephone interviews and online applications.

At the same time, the federal Affordable Care Act gives the newly created state health insurance exchanges boards the option of setting up systems that would automatically enroll into the food-stamp program applicants who successfully enroll in Medicaid. California's board is likely to go for this option. The rationale, here, is that a dollar spent on helping people eat well saves many dollars in health costs down the road.

Finally, following passage of Jim Beall's Assembly Bill 69, California will also soon allow low-income elderly residents to access food stamps more easily when they enroll in Social Security, in an attempt to end a pattern of extraordinarily low

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Marcy Glickman was upper-middle class for most of her life, a denizen of Los Angeles' fashionable west side. But she was brought low because of medical bills following her husband's illness and death.

"I know what it's like to have, and then to have a need."

PHOTO BY SASHA ABRAMSKY

CalFresh participation among this portion of the population.

Hunger advocates hope that the effect of this series of changes will be dramatically increased enrollment levels in CalFresh over the next few years, and a corresponding decrease in levels of food insecurity in California.

### The public-health ingredient

In addition to the state changing the ways in which residents can access food stamps, many localities are also

getting creative on the nutrition front. Programs such as The Veggie Voucher Program, funded by local food networks and foundations, are pushing recipients to eat healthier foods, leveraging their federal food stamps with matching funds for clients to spend specifically on fruits and vegetables in select farmers markets around the state.

"If you are consuming your fruits and vegetables on a daily basis, it'll prevent you from getting sick," explained Maribel Diaz, a CalFresh recipient since she lost her job, and currently a part-time worker with Hunger Action Los Angeles. "It's very important to have access to fruits and vegetables."

More broadly on the public-health front, many of the state's large food banks are moving away from a reliance on USDA surplus and grocery-store contributions—mainly carbohydrates and canned goods—and toward privately donated and bought fruits and vegetables. Some, like the Sacramento Food Bank, are also inaugurating large demonstration farms from which their clients can harvest produce.

This is, nutritional specialists have long argued, a critical public-health ingredient in the food equations of the moment, given the challenges of low-income obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes; and given, also, the large number of regions (including in south Sacramento, Del Paso Heights and north Sacramento) that have significant shortages in the numbers of stores offering fresh produce at affordable prices. "Access to fresh food via either grocery store or farmers market—a large portion of the low-income population don't have access," explained Blake Young.

In addition to The Veggie Voucher Program, that piggybacks off of CalFresh, local school districts such as Compton Unified, with endemic poverty rates, are experimenting with Classroom Breakfast, seeking to raise breakfast-enrollment levels to the same levels as those of free-lunch programs. Again, the assumption is that hungry kids—who might not be able to get to school early enough to access breakfast in the cafeteria before classes begin—can't learn to their full potential, whereas well-fed kids are better able to concentrate on their

academic responsibilities, thus allowing them to use education to break cycles of poverty.

The family of 18-year-old high-school senior Uriel R., who attends a school in the East Los Angeles suburb of Pomona, was recently evicted from its home. As a result, the large family—siblings, parents and grandparents—was split up; his sisters now live elsewhere. Uriel lives in a small apartment with his mother, who finds occasional work cleaning homes, and who routinely struggles to feed her family. The student said, "My mom only cooks on Monday, so I expect a hot meal on Mondays. Sometimes it's just eggs and cheese. From Tuesdays all the way to Sunday we don't have hot meals; we just eat whatever's left in the fridge."

A smart student, with ambitions to attend college, Uriel has slid into depression as his family's economic situation has worsened. He sits outside a lot. He often cries. The American Dream, he declaims angrily, means nothing to him anymore. "The weekends," he said, "I just eat soup or quesadillas. I don't eat breakfast in the mornings."

When Compton moved its breakfast program into the classroom to try to tackle the kind of hunger that Uriel describes, the number of children accessing meals increased by 250 percent—from 98,353 in September 2010, to 238,716 a year later.

### **Scale of emergency**

For all the good work being done on the hunger front in California, the scale of the crisis remains daunting.

Despite her access to Veggie Vouchers and CalFresh, for Maribel Diaz and her three sons, the sense of dislocation following the family's slide into poverty remains acute. "I'm hoping that there is a way out of this, that everything starts getting better. But right now, I feel like I'm stuck, there's no way to go, right or left. ... Poverty to me means not having access to a normal life. Not having access to go to a movie. Not having access when my kids need shoes or clothing. If it wasn't for the CalFresh program, we would have no access to food. If it wasn't for those programs out there helping us, I'd basically be a homeless person."

For Marcy Glickman, that sense of dislocation has been just as profound. These days, with her income having been reduced from \$10,000 a month to \$1,000. Glickman has lost her house to foreclosure, her car to the repo man. She now lives in a small apartment, relying on monthly disability checks and on a network of food charities to put enough food on her table. "I started collecting coupons for groceries. ... We ended up having to get food stamps. At first, I felt embarrassed, but after a while, I realized, 'At least we're eating.'"

These stories are unfortunately all too common these days, said Jessica Jones of the Los Angeles Food Bank. "We get stories like that almost all the time," she explained. "The people who did everything right and had the rug pulled out from under them. And the people who were already struggling are struggling even more. When I first started [working at the food bank] in December 2008, we served 39 million pounds of food. In 2010, we did 62 million pounds of food. The number of people we serve has gone up by 73 percent since the recession started."

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