Project Overview

Food insecurity occurs when individuals and/or households lack reliable access to sufficient nutritious food to support a healthy lifestyle. In 2020, it is estimated that 10.5% of U.S. households experienced food insecurity, with families with children (14.8%), and African American (21.7%), and Latinx or Hispanic\(^1\) (17.2%) households experiencing even higher rates of food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021).

Accurately estimating rates of food insecurity is extraordinarily difficult. Large, survey based measures of food insecurity, such as those employed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), rarely incorporate “hard-to-reach” populations. As a consequence, undocumented residents and people experiencing homelessness are rarely included in these estimates (Haider, 2005). A further concern is that national and state level surveys do not capture geographical variation in food prices and living costs, which have been found to be associated with increased prevalence of food insecurity (Bartfeld & Dunifon, 2006; Basu et al., 2016).

In 2019, the Blum Center on Poverty, Social Enterprise, and Participatory Governance at the University of California, Santa Cruz refined a food insecurity index, a methodology for measuring and tracking county-level food insecurity rates. It incorporates data from multiple sources to estimate both yearly need for assistance as well as total food assistance provided through both government programs such as CalFresh or the School Nutrition Program and by county food banks and nonprofit organizations. The food insecurity index also takes into account county-level food costs to provide a more accurate assessment of local need and assistance efforts. In doing so, the food insecurity index is more attuned to the nuances of local context.

In this report, we provide an analysis of food insecurity in San Benito County - located in the coastal Central California region and home to approximately 64,000 residents - from fiscal year 2016-17 through 2019-20. The first section of the report presents findings for the 2019-20 fiscal year (the most recent year for which data is available). Our analysis shows that despite substantial assistance efforts in the county, about 17% of the need for food assistance went unmet, leaving 1.2 million “missing meals” in San Benito County. Next, we report trends in both need and assistance for the four years included in the analysis. Our findings indicate that food insecurity in San Benito County reached its lowest level in the 2019-20 year, largely as a result of the roughly 30% increase in food assistance from the food bank and nonprofit organizations, and the dramatic expansion of free meals provided through the School Nutrition and Summer Meals Programs. Drawing on findings from the food insecurity index and interviews with county food providers, the report concludes with recommendations for increasing food security in San Benito County.

Despite extensive and expanding efforts to reduce food insecurity in San Benito County, considerable need for assistance remains unmet. We hope this report will inform and encourage increased, collaborative efforts to ensure that all San Benito County residents have reliable access to healthy food in the years to come.

\(^1\) “Hispanic” is the category used by the USDA and can include members of any racial group.
Food Insecurity in Fiscal Year 2019-2020: Need and Assistance in the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Based on household income, we estimate that approximately 7,300 households (consisting of a total of approximately 17,200 individuals) were at risk of food insecurity in San Benito County during the fiscal year spanning July 2019 to June 2020. This “at risk” population - defined as all households earning under $75,000 annually - represents approximately one in four county residents. Based on data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), we estimate that this population purchased approximately 61% of the food needed to ensure that each household member received three healthy meals a day, each day of the year.

Food assistance efforts in the county - including financial assistance from state programs such as CalFresh, meals provided through school nutrition programs, and food distributed by the county food bank and nonprofit organizations - filled a sizeable portion of the gap between the number of meals the population at risk could afford and the number of meals required. Cumulatively, about 6.2 million meals - roughly 33% of meals needed by the population at risk - were provided through assistance programs. Programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education to provide free and reduced cost meals at schools and childcare facilities (through the Child and Adult Care Facility Program, the School Nutrition Program, and the Summer Meals Program) were the largest single category of food assistance, distributing more than 41% of all food assistance meals over the course of the fiscal year. Approximately 32% of all food assistance came through the CalFresh program, while the county food bank and nonprofit organizations distributed about 22% of all food assistance meals.

![Food Assistance Meals by Source, Fiscal Year 2019-20](image-url)
Despite this significant food assistance, there remained 1.2 million missed meals in the county. If distributed equally among the population at risk, each person in this group would miss about 1.3 meals per week over the course of the year. It is far more likely, however, that need was unevenly distributed among those at risk, and that some households may have accessed sufficient food, while others were forced to miss more than one or two meals each week. Moreover, given the episodic nature of food insecurity, some county households likely went portions of the year with reliable access to enough food while later finding themselves with uncertain or insufficient food to eat.

Ultimately, we estimate that over the course of the entire year, 17% of the need for assistance went unmet. Though this represented the smallest meal gap across the four years (2017-2020) included in our analysis, additional food assistance beyond the levels distributed in the 2019-20 fiscal year was still needed to ensure all county residents had reliable access to enough food.
We also assessed four years of data stretching from fiscal year 2016-17 to fiscal year 2019-20. By examining multiple years, we are able to examine changes in food insecurity over time, notably trends in total need and the proportion of it met through cumulative assistance efforts. Across this time period, the total population at risk of food insecurity declined. In fiscal year 2016-17, approximately 8,200 households earning under $75,000 resided in the county. Based on U.S. Census Bureau income data, we estimate that the number had declined to 7,300 households in 2019-20. It is unclear whether this shift is due to changes in household income levels or to out-migration of low-income families. With this decline, the proportion of needed food its members were able to purchase remained relatively stable. As a result, the total need for assistance declined by about 12% over the years analyzed, even when we include the additional need brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in the final three months of fiscal year 2019-20.\(^2\)

\(^2\) We estimate that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an increased need for assistance of about 136,000 meals above our estimates based on population demographic data. See “Notes on Methodology” for further details.
Over the first three of the four years analyzed, the total food assistance also declined in line with the declining population at risk, shrinking approximately 12% between the 2016-17 and 2018-19 fiscal years. However, in the 2019-20 year, the trend of declining assistance provision was reversed. **Available food assistance expanded dramatically in the 2019-20 fiscal year, cumulatively distributing 35% more assistance meals than the previous year.** Because of this heightened level of assistance, the level of unmet need reached the lowest level observed across all years analyzed. Nearly 36% of the need for assistance went unmet in the 2018-19 fiscal year, compared to 17% in the 2019-20 fiscal year. Had cumulative food assistance remained the same as in the previous year, there would have been more than twice as many missed meals in the county, leading to more than 2.8 million missed meals instead of the estimated 1.2 million missed meals observed.

The expanded food assistance provisions came from several sources. The number of meals cumulatively distributed by the county food bank and nonprofit organizations in the county increased by 33% over levels in the previous year. The largest expansion of food assistance came from growth in ongoing school-based programs administered by the California Department of Education and made possible through federal funding. School meals distributed in the county in the 2019-20 fiscal year nearly doubled compared to the previous year, due in large part to significant increases in the meals provided through the School Nutrition Program and the dramatic increase in assistance provided by the Summer Meals program. Assistance provided through CalFresh, on the other hand, remained largely unchanged compared to the previous year.
Recommendations

Closing the meal gap in San Benito County requires a network of food assistance providers and policy support at the local, state, and federal levels. Based on our index findings as well as interviews with county food providers, we offer five considerations and recommendations to build on existing efforts to strengthen food security in the county.

1. Food assistance providers require increased financial and volunteer support to meet ongoing heightened need due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased awareness of the pervasiveness of food insecurity in the United States (see Arango and Kenneally, 2020). In California, pandemic-related economic and employment disruptions have further exacerbated high living costs and financial strain.

In response to heightened need in San Benito County, food assistance providers quickly doubled or tripled levels of food assistance output. For example, one organization in the county previously served an average of 6,000 individuals a month; the pandemic increased their clientele to 19,000 individuals. Unfortunately, attention to increased food insecurity and subsequent support has waned over the past year, while need has remained high. As one provider observed, “Recovery here is going to be a while; our numbers haven't dropped but our funding has.” Food providers are also experiencing unprecedented demands on their time, energy, and creativity as they work to respond to pandemic needs with limited staffing and volunteer support. Staff and volunteers are going above and beyond, ramping up operations to adhere to distancing and cleaning protocols, providing home deliveries to families who are quarantined, offering emotional support to isolated individuals, running vaccine clinics, providing rental assistance, and helping fill in the gaps left by other organizations that closed during the pandemic. One food provider noted the long hours and emotional toll they took: “I was in the office until one in the morning to be ready the next morning by six to start my day… it was overwhelming.”

Despite tireless work and increased assistance, substantial but not insurmountable need remains. Economic recovery from the pandemic is uneven, with low-income households and households of color experiencing heightened risk of food insecurity and economic hardship (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021). Targeted outreach and other efforts are needed to ensure that these households are served. The rapid expansion of food assistance during the first year of the pandemic indicates that with increased investment and coordination, food insecurity in the county can be further reduced.

2. Government assistance programs (e.g., School Nutrition Program, Summer Meals Program, the Child Tax Credit, and CalFresh) are essential and should be expanded and sustained.
Households with children are significantly more likely to experience food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021), so the sizable increase in free meals provided in San Benito County via the School Nutrition Program and the Summer Meals Program is an especially important recent development. Recent news coverage has highlighted the commitment of local school administrators to expanding access to food assistance programs in order to support student health and learning opportunities (Bonner, 2020; Kosmicki, 2019). Given recent legislative action at the state level creating “the largest free student lunch program in the country,” it is likely that school meals programs will play an increasingly prominent role in addressing food insecurity in the years to come (Associated Press, 2021).

Increasing enrollment of county residents eligible for the CalFresh program offers one important option for further reducing food insecurity. Unlike neighboring Santa Cruz County where rates of participation and disbursement rose quickly in the early months of the pandemic, in San Benito County the program played a far smaller role in addressing the early, pandemic-sparked need. Expanding community education and outreach efforts - especially those facilitated by community-based assistance providers - may be one tactic for further reducing county levels of need. Analysis by California Food Policy Advocates in 2016 indicated that enrolling all county residents eligible for CalFresh would bring an additional $2.2 million food assistance dollars into the county (Nourish California, n.d.).

### 3. Stigma is a barrier to accessing resources.

Negative stereotypes about public assistance programs and participants deter participation (Bullock et al., 2019; Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004). Erroneous beliefs that food assistance programs are utilized by people who are “lazy” or “abuse the system,” discourage resource use and support for these programs. Contrary to these stereotypes, one San Benito food assistance provider pointed out that “the people (who utilize the resource) are extremely respectful, they don’t want to abuse, they don’t want to look a gift horse in the mouth because this is helping them get by.”

Disruptions caused by the pandemic led many people to rely on food resources for the first time, resulting in embarrassment and shame (Fisher et al., 2020). One food assistance provider described serving a local business owner who was fearful that people would know his business was struggling if he accessed food resources. Experiences such as this highlight the importance of confidential, dignified distribution processes. As one food assistance provider summarized, “There is enough stigma standing in line for food.” Many assistance providers have recently expressed hope that the increased participation in community-based food assistance programs - including by many new participants - may help normalize need and reduce stigma.
4. A collaborative network of nonprofit organizations is necessary to ensure food security.

Government assistance programs (e.g., School Nutrition Program, Summer Meals Program, and CalFresh) are essential, but they alone cannot end food insecurity in San Benito County. Substantial barriers such as income thresholds and citizenship/immigration status requirements constrain the reach and accessibility of government assistance programs. Research indicates that “a non-trivial portion of households with incomes above the poverty line are food insecure” (Gundersen et al., 2011, p. 287; see also Nord & Brent, 2002). High living costs across California make it even more likely that households not traditionally defined as “poor” or “in need” (even by their own definitions) remain at risk of food insecurity. Local food service providers are also able to reach certain groups in the county who may not qualify or may be justifiably reluctant to pursue government based assistance, including migrant workers, undocumented residents, or immigrants pursuing permanent residence (Kanno-Youngs, 2020). Additionally, these resources can provide food assistance more immediately when households experience sudden increases in need.

Food assistance providers partner with schools, churches, senior living centers, women’s centers, homeless shelters, migrant housing centers, and more to distribute groceries and meals county-wide. One population that food assistance providers agreed could be better served are people experiencing homelessness in San Benito County. While hard working and deeply compassionate organizations are working with county residents lacking reliable shelter, these efforts could be bolstered by increased funding, resources, and cross-organizational collaboration.

The network of organizations in San Benito County is a community strength, making it possible for residents to be reached and served in different and intersectional ways. Increased opportunities for organizations to collaborate and communicate can strengthen this network. Unfortunately, limited funding resources in the county can strain both the capacity of individual organizations and the strength and resilience of organizational networks.

5. City and county legislators can strengthen partnerships with local organizations to apply and advocate for funding.

Food assistance providers in San Benito County obtain financial and in-kind donations from farms, grocery stores, food banks, companies, and private donors. While they reported that in-kind donations from local businesses and farms are increasing, much of their financial support comes from outside of the county. City and county legislators are important partners who could further leverage their positions to support organizations in accessing and applying for larger state and federal grants. This goal was acknowledged by several food assistance providers: “These people are our neighbors... we need to take care of them, we need our government to see that and advocate for that. There is federal and state money that flows through the pipeline that can go to these topics but they are only going to find their way there if the politicians and the staff realize the importance.”

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3 It is worth noting that according to analysis by Feeding America and analytics firm NielsenIQ, San Benito County has among the most expensive average meal costs in the entire country. (Gundersen, C. et al., 2021).
Continued commitment and collaboration across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors is required to meet the needs of the diverse population at risk of food insecurity in San Benito County. The burden of expanding the quantity of food assistance resources falls most heavily on the food bank and large, nonprofit providers in the county (along with those charged with administering governmental funding programs). At the same time, smaller, more grass-roots based efforts play the vital part of building trusting relationships with diverse communities and identifying areas of unmet need. The cultivation of a broad and supportive coalition of food assistance partners can reduce the psychological and administrative barriers to meeting need for food assistance. Coalition effectiveness will rely upon communication, coordination, and collaboration with the full spectrum of assistance providers who all contribute valuable perspective and resources to reduce food insecurity in San Benito County.

**Conclusion**

In 2019-20, the level of food assistance distributed in San Benito County expanded significantly, meeting more need for assistance than was the case in the previous three years, even as many families and individuals faced unprecedented challenges. Expanded food and meals provided through school meals programs and by the county food bank and nonprofit organizations were largely responsible for this increase in food assistance. Despite these efforts, more than a million “missed meals” remained, indicating that considerable need existed in the county in the fiscal year during which the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Since then, conversations with local assistance providers indicate that need for assistance has remained at higher levels compared to pre-pandemic times.

Meeting this heightened and fluctuating need will require increased investment and resources to ensure healthy food is available and accessible for households struggling to purchase it for themselves. But it will also require a continued commitment among stakeholders to collaborate and coordinate their assorted efforts to meet the diverse needs of communities in San Benito County today and into the future. While substantial need remains unmet, the expansion in food assistance distributed in the most recent year analyzed (2020) - a particularly challenging year - should encourage all involved that the goal of further alleviating local food insecurity is within reach.

**Notes on Methodology**

The food insecurity index tool used in this analysis was constructed by the Blum Center on Poverty, Social Enterprise, and Participatory Governance in collaboration with Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County. For complete details on the methodology, please see Amaral and Bullock (2021).

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4 We are indebted to Michael Enos for his initial development of the food insecurity index, and his ongoing guidance and support.
Calculating the *index* begins by estimating the population at risk of food insecurity in a particular county. Our population at risk includes all county households earning under $75,000 per year. Then, using data collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics on spending patterns by income group, we estimate the number of meals these households are likely able to purchase for themselves. We do so using the specific cost of a meal for San Benito County (see below). Finally, we determine how much of the gap between the meals these households need and the meals they can afford is closed by food assistance provided by governmental programs (CalFresh, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the School Nutrition Program, School Meals Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)), and from the county food bank and select nonprofit assistance organizations. As a result, we are able to estimate the percentage of need that goes unmet through assistance efforts, and the number of meals missed in the county as a result.

To further refine our measurements, the following three modifications to our methodology were adopted this year.

**Meal Cost**

Small modifications to the “average cost of a meal” incorporated into the analysis yield substantial shifts in the estimates the *food insecurity index* ultimately produces. Food costs vary considerably by geographic region, so care is required in determining the meal cost for a particular county. For this report, we use the following three different meal cost estimates: (1) the cost of a meal according to the USDA’s low-cost meal plan for a family of four, multiplied by the regional price parity for San Jose - Sunnyvale - Santa Clara metropolitan statistical area provided by the Bureau of Economic Analysis, (2) the average meal cost for California according to Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap project, and (3) the average meal cost for San Benito County according to Feeding America’s *Map the Meal Gap* project. The *index* analysis uses the average of these three meal costs, an approach we view as achieving a balance between accuracy and conservative estimates. Using this process for the 2019-20 year, the average meal cost is $3.55.

The next figure displays the full range of potential missing meal estimates between the 2017-18 and 2019-20 fiscal years according to the various meal costs. The bold line shows the trend of missing meals according to the average meal costs used in our calculations of the index. The dark band shows estimates stretching between Feeding America’s estimated average meal cost for California (bottom of the band) and the organization’s estimate for average meal costs in San Benito County (top of band). The bottom of the light band indicates missing meal estimates based on the USDA low cost meal plan multiplied by the regional price parity, a price ($2.95 in the most recent year) we view as considerably below actual cost.

5 Households in this group spend, on average, less on food than is needed for each household member to access three nutritious meals each day, based on our meal cost estimates for San Benito County. Households of all sizes are included in this population.
COVID-19 Related Increased Need

The index calculates levels of need for assistance based on annual estimates (from the U.S. Census’s American Community Survey) of the number of households in income brackets below $75,000. However, in the 2019-20 year, we expect that the need for assistance fluctuated considerably in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To account for the likely increases in need toward the end of the fiscal year, we draw on data from the U.S. Census’s Community Pulse Survey, conducted weekly beginning in late April 2020. The survey, designed to track “the social and economic effects of coronavirus on American households,” (US Census Bureau, 2021b) included a number of questions regarding recent household experiences of food insufficiency. We use data from the first nine weekly surveys (April 23 - June 25) to track changes in reported levels of food insufficiency by respondents in California. Using USDA reported food insecurity rates we then use these trends to modify the number of weekly assistance meals needed in the county. Again, we view this approach as generating a more accurate yet still-conservative estimate of need for food assistance during the pandemic.
Population Estimates

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted nearly all aspects of social and economic life, including efforts to gather survey data about the country’s population. In July of 2021, the U.S. Census Bureau announced it would not be releasing American Community Survey (ACS) data for 2020 (US Census Bureau, 2021a). This is the data we have historically relied upon to establish estimates for the population at risk of food insecurity and, in turn, total need for assistance. Lacking ACS data, we have estimated the number of households in the county earning less than $75,000 using trends calculated from the five previous years of ACS records for each individual income group. The next figure illustrates both the trend lines used and our inferred population estimates (the blue dots) used in the analysis. Given the data limitations, we see this approach as the best available option for calculating the index for the 2019-20 year and for generating timely data to inform community efforts to reduce food insecurity in these difficult times.
References


Notes
Notes
SAN BENITO COUNTY
FOOD ASSISTANCE AGENCIES

Community Foodbank of San Benito County
info@communityfoodbankofsbc.org
831-637-0340

Community Homeless Solutions
info@communityhomelesssolutions.org
831-256-1852

First 5 San Benito County
receptionist@first5sb.org
831-634-2046

Fishes and Loaves
info@catholichollister.org
831-637-9212

Jovenes de Antano
(Senior Assistance/ Meals on Wheels)
jantano@aol.com
831-637-9275

Martha's Kitchen
volunteers@marthas-kitchen.org
408-293-6111

My Father's House
hco@garlic.com
831-801-7775

Salvation Army
maria.romero@usw.salvationarmy.org
831-636-9832

Cal Fresh
San Benito Health and Human Services
831-636-4180

Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Agency
San Benito Health Foundation
831-637-6871
OUR MISSION

The Community Foundation for San Benito County is the steward of a collection of over 160 funds, overseen by a volunteer board of community leaders and administered by a professional staff. Together, we invest and manage these charitable assets, guided by rigorous national standards and auditing principles.

Since our formation in 1992, we have granted over a total of $35 million to nonprofit and service organizations supporting San Benito County, providing a variety of services spanning the arts, religion, health, human services, conservation, sports, and animal care.

Our dedication is toward building a stronger community and enhancing the quality of life in San Benito County through the support of philanthropic activities.

We’ve recently opened a brand new building, the Community Foundation Epicenter, as a way to house nonprofit organizations and meeting space open to nonprofit and service organizations to foster and encourage growth and collaboration between the many organizations serving our diverse community.
Eight Ways to Leave a Legacy

Make a Difference in the Lives that Follow

Most people require some kind of assistance in their lifetime, a meal during hard times, a scholarship for college, or compassionate care during an illness. Charitable organizations in the community always need financial aid to continue this type of assistance, and what better way to thank those that have had a positive impact on your life than to make a contribution from your estate, leaving a legacy for the lives that follow. Whether large or small, all charitable gifts are important. Here are eight ways to make giving easy:

1. Prepare a will.
2. Leave a gift in your will to Community Foundation for San Benito County.
3. Leave a specific dollar amount or a percentage of the assets in your will to a nonprofit of your choice.
4. Consider using assets for your charitable gift. These include but are not limited to: stock, bonds, CDs, real estate, vehicles, art, and jewelry. Such gifts may even provide tax savings.
5. Name a nonprofit of your choice as the beneficiary of your pension plan or IRA.
6. Purchase a new life insurance policy naming your favorite nonprofit as the beneficiary.
7. Name your favorite nonprofit as the beneficiary of an existing life insurance policy.
8. Remember loved ones with memorial gifts.
This report was produced during the COVID-19 pandemic and some of the years analyzed occurred during the pandemic. Our findings highlight the importance of strong, inclusive food security systems before, during, and following the pandemic.

Acknowledgements

This report would not be possible without the support and data sharing of a committed network of nutrition assistance providers across San Benito County. We are thankful for our partnership with the Community Foundation for San Benito County and for the assistance and work of the County’s nutrition assistance programs. We remain grateful to Michael Enos for sharing his expertise and experience calculating food insecurity indices. We thank Lisa Nishioka for her assistance preparing this report.