

Left: Families carry boxes of fresh produce during a food bank event at El Verano Elementary in Riverside.  
PHOTO BY ANNE WERNIKOFF FOR CALMATTERS

Californian receiving food stamps got \$179 a month.

The extra benefits maintained the number of food insecure Californians at 20 percent during the pandemic. However, that number is expected to rapidly rise this year.

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March and April were among the busiest

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months ever for the Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services. Before the pandemic, the food bank served around 150,000 people per month. Since March, it has averaged more than 270,000 people each month.

The statewide food banks association is warning of a “catastrophic hunger crisis” this year, and it appears to be coming true.

## How far does food aid go in California?

State government’s primary way to help low-income families afford food is CalFresh. Qualifying recipients get money each month on an Electronic Benefits Transfer card, which is similar to a debit card, and can spend it on food items at grocery stores and some farmers markets.

How much each family gets depends on their household size and their income. Benefit amounts are set each year by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and are based on nationwide cost-of-living measures. That can result in benefits that don’t always account for the way food prices rise locally.

The federal government has boosted benefits during emergencies, such as the Great Recession and the pandemic. In October 2021, it also overhauled its formula for calculating benefits, resulting in a significant hike during record inflation.

## California enrolls fewer in aid

A little more than 70 percent of those who qualify for food benefits are actually receiving them. That participation rate has frustrated advocates because it leaves valuable federal funds on the table that could feed more Californians and boost the state’s economy.

The reasons are complex and varied: Geographic and ethnic diversity makes some poor Californians difficult to reach. Many immigrants fear signing up could hurt their citizenship chances. It can be hard to apply for seniors or those who don’t speak English. And college students face a byzantine set of special eligibility rules.

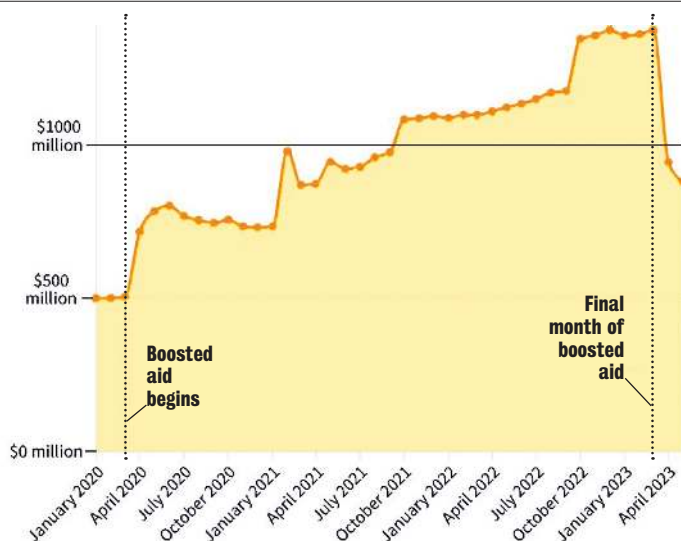
Another major challenge is that California’s 58 counties administer food benefits, rather than the state government, creating a variety of application processes statewide.

NEWSLINES CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

## Food aid distributed in California

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a massive influx of federal food aid to California. When the boosted benefits ended in April 2023, food aid to California dropped by nearly \$500 million a month.

SOURCE: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES



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