

Universal School Meals: A Powerful Strategy to Combat Food Insecurity

Food Insecurity in California

Nearly 1 in 6 CA households with children—over 660,000 households—are food insecure, with limited or uncertain access to adequate food.¹⁻³



Food insecurity in childhood is associated with:



Poor overall health, both as children and into adulthood⁴⁻⁶



Lower academic achievement, developmental delays⁷⁻⁸

School Meals Help

- Since 2022, California has offered two nutritious meals every school day to all of its 6 million TK-12 students, regardless of their family income
- School meals are the overall healthiest source of food in U.S. children's diets⁹
- Cuts and restrictions to SNAP (CalFresh) in U.S. H.R.1 of 2025 make School Meals for All more important than ever in addressing food insecurity¹⁰⁻¹¹

NPI Studied Food Insecurity and School Meals

2023 survey of 3,377 parents/caregivers in 4 states with School Meals for All (CA, ME, MA, VT) and 4 states with the traditional means-tested approach (AZ, TX, IL, NH).¹³

Key Findings from Across 8 States

12% less food insecurity among families with children in states with School Meals for All compared to states with means-tested school meals.

Greatest reduction in food insecurity among:

- Lowest income households (19% lower)
- Households just above reduced-price meal eligibility threshold (18% lower)

The most extreme form of food insecurity—where families need to skip meals—**was 17% lower in states with School Meals for All**



Conclusion

School Meals for All programs are associated with lower food insecurity, especially among the most vulnerable families.

Means-tested approaches to school meals leave hungry kids unserved. School Meals for All programs ensure no child falls through the cracks.



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Federal Means Testing and School Meals

A federal means test determines eligibility to receive school meals at free or reduced price — no charge for students with family income at or below 130% of Federal Poverty Level (FPL); reduced price for those between 130 and 185%; and full price for those above 185%.¹² Federal income thresholds for eligibility do not take into account California's high cost of living. Notably, 44% of California's food insecure families had incomes above 185% of FPL in 2022.² California's program aims to maximize federal reimbursement of school meals and provide every student with free school meals regardless of family income level.

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