



# Issue Brief



## The State of Nutrition Security in San Diego County: Before, during and beyond the COVID-19 Crisis Release Date: October 2021

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## I. Introduction: Hunger Free San Diego

**Hunger Free San Diego is a multi-sector, collaborative initiative to ensure that anyone experiencing nutrition insecurity can readily access adequate, equitable and appropriate food assistance to see them safely through their time of need.** Hunger Free San Diego uses data and technology to create a common framework of understanding regarding hunger in our region, track our progress toward solving it, and identify the most promising opportunities for collaborative action to close the meal gap and end hunger in our region.

The analysis outlined in this issue brief is part of ongoing Hunger Free San Diego research conducted by the San Diego Hunger Coalition (SDHC). This work is guided by and co-developed with the Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board, a collaboration of leaders from 26 local nonprofits, universities, school districts and government agencies representing all aspects of hunger relief in San Diego County. Hunger Free San Diego is facilitated by the San Diego Hunger Coalition and is an active member of the national Hunger Free Communities network facilitated by the Alliance to End Hunger in Washington, D.C.

**This issue brief includes the most up-to-date estimates of our region's nutrition insecurity, the first and only estimates of the total quantity of food assistance currently provided in San Diego County, and the remaining countywide meal gap down to the zip code level. We hope this information will be used to inform program planning, prioritize resource allocations and efforts, and advocate for policies and practices that advance a Hunger Free San Diego.**

### 2020-2021 Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board Organizations

- 2-1-1 San Diego
- Catholic Charities of San Diego
- Child Care Food Program Round Table
- County of San Diego
  - Health & Human Services Agency
    - Aging & Independence Services
    - Community Health Statistics
    - Eligibility Operations / Self-Sufficiency Services
    - Public Health
  - Land Use & Environment Group
  - Office of Emergency Services
- Feeding San Diego
- Heaven's Windows
- Hospital Association of San Diego and Imperial Counties
- Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank
- Jewish Family Service of San Diego
- Kitchens for Good
- Leah's Pantry
- Mama's Kitchen
- Meals on Wheels
- Moxie Foundation
- Price Philanthropies
- Produce Good
- Project New Village
- San Diego Food System Alliance
- San Diego for Every Child
- San Diego Hunger Coalition
- San Diego Unified School District
- San Ysidro Health Center
- Scripps Mercy Hospital, WIC Office
- SDSU Research Foundation, WIC Office
- SDSU School of Exercise and Nutritional Sciences
- The Children's Initiative
- True Care WIC (fka North County Health Services)
- UC San Diego Center for Community Health
- UC San Diego Foundation Relations
- Wild Willow Farm & Educational Center



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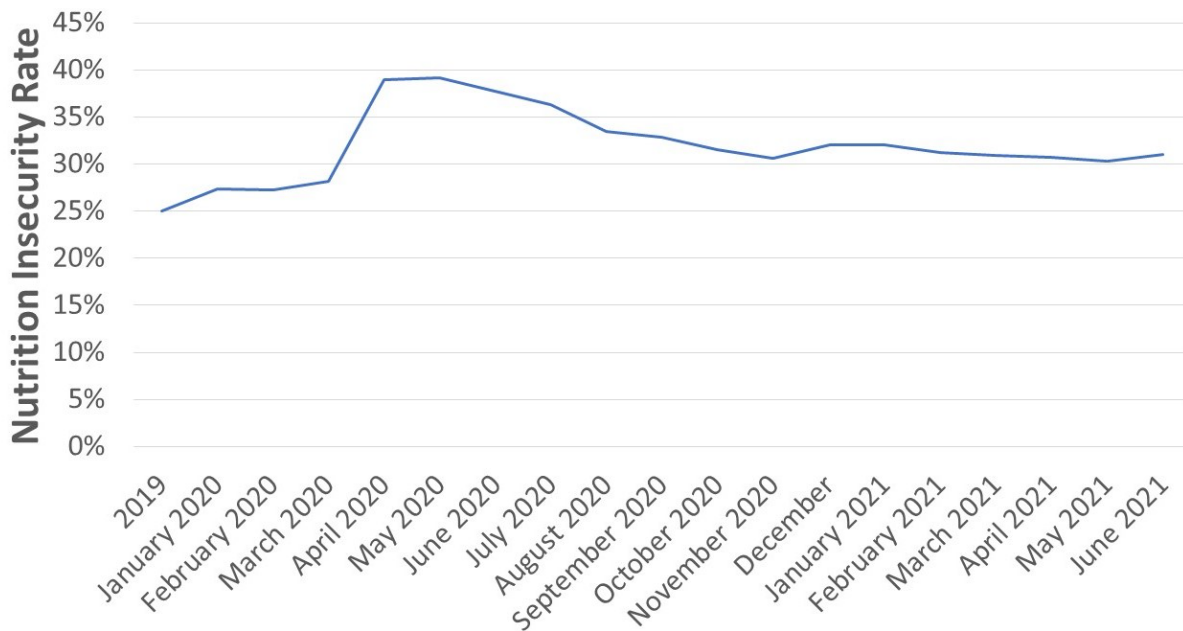
## II. Impact of COVID-19 on Nutrition Insecurity in San Diego County

### *Population Experiencing Nutrition Insecurity*

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis both increased the strain on existing nutrition insecure populations and increased the number of individuals experiencing nutrition insecurity, many of whom experienced nutrition insecurity for the first time and had little knowledge of available resources.

In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 25% of people (741,500) in San Diego County were nutrition insecure.<sup>1</sup> In the years after the Great Recession, from 2009 to 2014, nutrition insecurity hovered around 33% or 1-in-3 people and had just begun to decline over the past five years, reaching what was a decade low of 25% in 2019.

**FIGURE 1: NUTRITION INSECURITY RATE BY MONTH IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY**



Despite 2019's record-low unemployment, **73% of people facing nutrition insecurity as of March 2021 were already nutrition insecure before the pandemic started.** These numbers are supported by the fact that before the COVID-19 pandemic, 32% of San Diegans earned less than \$14.35/hour or \$29,848/year (if full-time with paid vacation).<sup>2</sup>

In 2020, due to the pandemic, the percent of the population experiencing nutrition insecurity in San Diego County increased from 25% in 2019 to a peak of 39% (1,291,000 people) in April 2020, then leveled off to 30% (1,015,000 people) in November 2020. As of June 2021, nutrition insecurity continues to affect nearly one in three people in San Diego County. Nutrition insecurity is even

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau (2019). B17002: Ratio of Income to Poverty Level in the Past 12 Months, 2010-2019 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

<sup>2</sup> UC Berkeley Labor Center analysis of IPUMS American Community Survey, 2016. Retrieved from <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/low-wage-work-in-california/#geography>.

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worse among children. As of March 2021, 284,500 children, or 40% of children in San Diego County were nutrition insecure. Nutrition insecurity is also pervasive among seniors, with 146,000, or 30% of seniors in San Diego County facing nutrition insecurity.

The maps presented in Appendix A provide a visualization of the largest concentrations of people at risk of nutrition insecurity and do not reflect the proportion or rate of individuals at risk of nutrition insecurity in a particular region. For this reason, areas with more dispersed populations, including rural communities are not well-represented in the visualizations. That is not to say that nutrition insecurity is not a serious problem in these communities, especially given the lack of resources and distance to available resources for rural residents. Due to this disparity in population density, additional maps that break down the nutrition insecure population between 0 - 5,000 people into smaller buckets would be beneficial for understanding the populations of this region.

## **Nutrition insecurity highest among BIPOC communities and people with disabilities**

Nutrition insecurity disproportionately impacts Black people, Indigenous people and people of color (BIPOC). The most recent US Census American Community Survey data indicates that, while an estimated 25% of the population in San Diego was nutrition insecure in 2019, 44% of the Black population and 37% of the Indigenous population were nutrition insecure. Similarly, 44% of Hispanic or Latinx people across races were nutrition insecure. Nutrition insecurity also disproportionately impacts people with disabilities. In 2019, 40% of people with disabilities were nutrition insecure. We anticipate these disparities have worsened during the pandemic.

*For more details on the household characteristics of the population in San Diego County experiencing nutrition insecurity, please see Appendix D.*

## ***Meals Provided by Food Assistance***

In San Diego County, a variety of food assistance programs exist for people experiencing nutrition insecurity. This food assistance is provided through programs including, but not limited to: monthly benefits on an EBT card to purchase groceries through CalFresh and WIC; free and reduced-price school meals; community food distributions provided by food banks and pantries; the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDIPR); and congregate and home delivered meals for older adults. Funding for food assistance comes from two primary sources: federal nutrition programs and private charitable resources. See Figure 2 for more details.

While the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying economic downturn dramatically increased the need for food assistance in San Diego County, the hunger relief sector rapidly responded to the need, increasing food assistance by an impressive 59%, from 18.5 million meals in the month of January 2020 to 29.5 million meals in the month of November 2020. **As of March 2021, the increase in monthly meals provided had grown by 74% over pre-pandemic levels of food assistance.** See Figure 3 for the relative contribution of each type of assistance.



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**FIGURE 2: MAJOR CATEGORIES OF FOOD ASSISTANCE IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY**

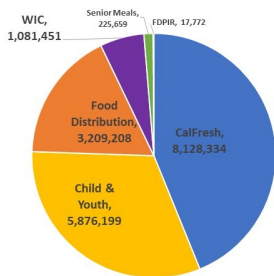
Food Assistance Programs	Description <i>(Please see full methodology for more information*)</i>
<b>CalFresh</b>	California's name for the Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for families and individuals with very low incomes.
<b>School &amp; Youth Meals</b>	Federal child nutrition programs including free & reduced price school meals, after school and summer meals, and meals at preschool and daycare centers, including Head Start.
<b>Food Distribution</b>	Food from Feeding San Diego, San Diego Food Bank, 500+ pantry & food distribution sites, and volunteer gleaning.
<b>WIC</b>	Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) foods for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum parents, and for infants and children up to age five.
<b>Senior Meals</b>	Congregate or home delivered meals funded by Older Americans Act or charitable sources; includes meals for adults in daycare facilities.
<b>FDPIR</b> (too small to see on pie chart)	Federal Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (generally USDA commodities).

\* San Diego Hunger Coalition's full methodology for Hunger Free San Diego, including more information about types of food assistance, can be found at [www.sdhunger.org/sdhc-research-reports](http://www.sdhunger.org/sdhc-research-reports).

**FIGURE 3: TOTAL FOOD ASSISTANCE MEALS PROVIDED BY SOURCE IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY**

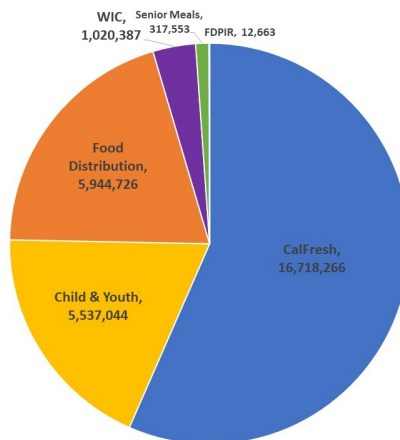
(Pie chart sizes are to scale.)

**January 2020 (Pre-Covid)**



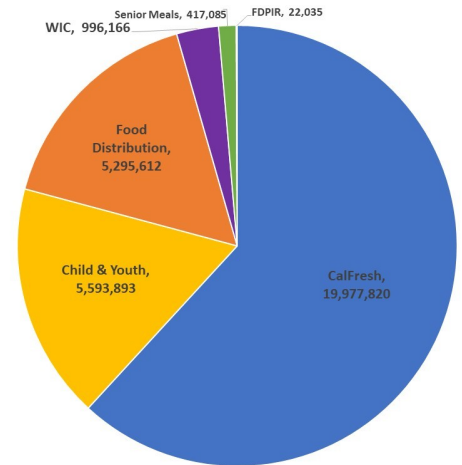
**18.5 million meals**

**November 2020**



**29.5 million meals**

**March 2021**



**32.3 million meals**

■ CalFresh ■ Youth Meals ■ Distribution ■ WIC ■ Senior Meals ■ FDPIR

## **2020-2021 Food Assistance: Challenges & Successes**

In broad strokes, it is thanks to federal and state regulatory flexibilities; unprecedented governmental and philanthropic investments; and the incredible innovation, collaboration and fortitude of nonprofits, individuals and grassroots coalitions that enabled San Diego County's network of food assistance providers to limit the devastating impacts of hunger on our communities. Community-based organizations, school districts, health care providers, resident groups and so many others banded together to re-imagine food assistance programs that supported both new and continued access to more people in ways that were safe and dignified.

**While San Diego County's network of food assistance providers nearly doubled the food available for those in need, a large gap between the need for meals and the total number of meals provided – which existed prior to the pandemic – has persisted.** To follow is a very high-level overview of changes throughout the pandemic in each program area.

**CalFresh:** The largest source of food assistance in San Diego County continues to be the CalFresh (SNAP) program. The total amount of food assistance from the CalFresh program in 2020 increased by an estimated 8 million meals between January and November 2020, as shown in Figure 4. This increase is due to a combination of increased applications, streamlined application processes facilitated by federal waivers, and increased benefit amounts provided in the form of emergency allotments which raised all CalFresh recipients' monthly benefit to the maximum benefit amount for their household size. In 2020, an eligible household of four received \$646/month in CalFresh benefits, which is roughly equivalent to twelve 30-pound boxes of food.

**School and Youth Meals:** The closure of schools and the introduction of remote learning posed many difficult challenges for school meal providers in 2020, as shown by the dip from January to April and continuing through August in Figure 4. After months of depressed school meal participation, school meals have returned to pre-pandemic levels countywide as of November 2020. Much of this increase is due to significant shifts in meal service delivery models such, as grab-and-go and bulk meal kits, that made it easier for parents and caretakers to pick up meals on behalf of their children, as well as districts' ability to offer three meals per day for all students through the CACFP At-Risk Afterschool Supper Program. These changes to service models were made possible by the passage of federal waivers extending flexibilities to meal offerings, times, locations, and circumstances under which families were eligible to access free meals, ultimately allowing schools, daycares, and enrichment programs to provide free meals to all children under 18 until June 2022.

**Food Distribution:** Food distribution through food banks and pantries, which is funded by a mix of charitable and federal dollars, has more than doubled in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as represented in Figure 4. Community-based food distributions offered by Feeding San Diego, the Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank, and over 500 food pantry partners, were supplemented by a new, federally funded "Farmers to Families Food Box" program that provided more than 780,000 boxes of produce, dairy, and meat in six different waves during the pandemic. Major challenges experienced by organizations distributing food included: shortage of volunteers, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), limited storage capacity (especially cold storage), and supply chain problems.

Food banks and food pantries provide a vital service to the community by making food assistance accessible to anyone in need, with the capacity to quickly scale and shift resources during a crisis.





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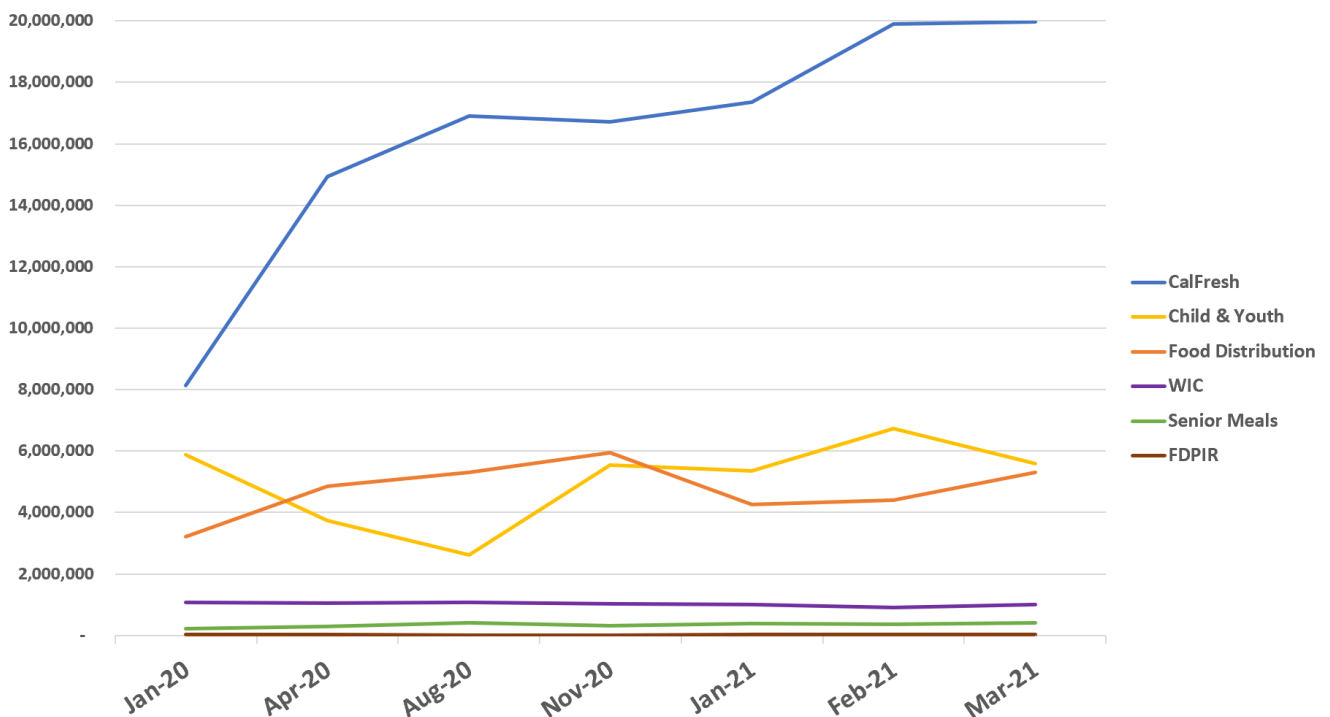


Unlike many federal nutrition programs, food distributions do not require an arduous application process or complicated eligibility requirements that may exclude people in need. Food distributions are an essential (and sometimes the only) source of food assistance for groups like undocumented immigrants, people with incomes a little too high to qualify for federal or state programs, and people for whom their federal and state benefits are too low to meet their nutritional needs. While the proportion of meals provided through food distributions is smaller than the assistance provided through federal nutrition programs, the flexibility, scalability and accessibility of food distributions make them a vital component of achieving a Hunger Free San Diego.

**WIC:** As in other food assistance programs, the USDA implemented several waivers and flexibilities to ease access to WIC during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants could be approved for WIC without being physically present at an office, and all participants were eligible for remote benefit issuances. There was also increased flexibility in food package requirements and additional options for pick-up of food packages. These flexibilities did not appear to result in a significant increase in utilization or financial support.

**Senior Meals:** The pandemic has posed unique challenges for seniors. Senior meal centers closed in March 2020 and remained closed until mid-2021. While many senior meal providers already had home delivery programs in place, providers that had formerly served congregate lunches with funding through the Older Americans Act and private sources could no longer provide meals in person. To bridge this gap, many providers transitioned their congregate meals to home delivery or grab-and-go. Providers also received additional government funding through San Diego Health and Human Services and directly through the CARES Act to support expanded home delivery routes and meal offerings, including weekend meals, resulting in modest increases in total meals distributed.

**FIGURE 4: FOOD ASSISTANCE MEALS BY SOURCE & MONTH IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY**







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coordinated outreach, to expanded on-the-ground infrastructure, San Diego County could make significant additional gains in closing the meal gap by mobilizing resources to increase enrollment in these programs, ultimately bringing hundreds of millions of additional federal food assistance dollars to our community to fight hunger and nutrition insecurity. This would **enable San Diego County's hunger relief sector to be as strategic as possible** in targeting food distributions and other more flexible food assistance programs to fill the gaps left by federal nutrition programs, such as in rural communities, food deserts, and for individuals and families in need who are ineligible for state or federal assistance due to income level or other factors.

We have an opportunity and obligation to do more than return to how things were before COVID-19. Building upon the experiences and lessons of the pandemic, San Diego's nutrition security network is primed to continue advancing the systemic improvements that will create a Hunger Free San Diego.

**Understanding the landscape is the first step in developing data-informed recommendations to guide our region towards a Hunger Free San Diego. To learn more about Hunger Free San Diego, visit [www.sdhunger.org/hunger-free-sd](http://www.sdhunger.org/hunger-free-sd).**

## III. Nutrition Security: Changing the Narrative on Hunger

### **Background**

Hunger, food security and nutrition security are terms that are often used interchangeably to describe interrelated and overlapping crises related to food access and health. This section illustrates the extent to which the dialogue surrounding hunger and health has shifted over the past 50 years.

In 1967, the United States Department of Health conducted a 10-state nutrition survey, which concluded that nearly 20% of those surveyed were malnourished to the extent that they would likely develop health issues as a result.<sup>4</sup> In the face of growing public concern about hunger and malnutrition in the United States, President Richard Nixon convened the first White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health. The recommendations from this conference supported the creation of the Food Stamp Program (now the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, aka SNAP), and Supplemental Feeding Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), which in the span of the next few decades almost ended hunger in the United States until these programs were significantly cut back in the 1980s.<sup>5,6</sup>

In 1996, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations introduced the now widely accepted definition of 'food security' as a person's "physical, social and economic access to

<sup>4</sup> Dusseau, G. (n.d.). The lasting influence of the 1969 White House conference on food, nutrition, and health. Retrieved April 28, 2021, from <https://biocomplexity.virginia.edu/news/lasting-influence-1969-white-house-conference-food-nutrition-and-health>

<sup>5</sup> 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health. (n.d.). Retrieved April 28, 2021, from <https://sites.tufts.edu/foodnutritionandhealth2019/1969-white-house-conference/>.

<sup>6</sup> "A Short History of Snap." USDA, [www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap#1981](http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap#1981).

sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”<sup>7</sup> This marked a shift to a focus on nutrition and food quality as key in discussions of solutions to hunger. In the decades since, healthcare providers, government and the hunger relief sector have increasingly focused on the importance of healthy food as vital to overall health and wellness.

Today, an abundance of evidence shows that food and nutrition play a prominent role in the prevention, management, treatment and, in some cases, reversal of illness.<sup>8</sup> However, the methodologies used to measure the need for food assistance and the output, impact and progress of current efforts toward meeting that need have not kept pace with the expanding values of nutrition expressed by both the hunger relief and healthcare sectors.

## ***Moving from Hunger Relief to Nutrition Security***

The Hunger Free San Diego initiative was launched in 2016 to apply a data-driven, system-based and cross-sector collaborative approach to ending hunger in our region, defined as all children, adults and seniors in San Diego County having consistent access to enough healthy food. This goal required the Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board to agree upon methodologies that would enable the group to:

1. Estimate the need for food assistance in our region;
2. Estimate, aggregate and compare the hunger relief sector’s current output;
3. Estimate the remaining unmet need in the form of a ‘meal gap’ or number of additional meals needed from food assistance; and
4. Set collective goals and track progress for hunger relief across all program types.

The San Diego Hunger Coalition and Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board recognize that food access and nutrition security are multi-faceted issues, impacted by cultural, social, political, economic, environmental, and biological factors. While no single measure can capture every facet of nutrition security, to end hunger using a rigorous and equitable approach requires adopting a standard that can be used to measure the need, as well as the quality and quantity of food assistance provided.

This section outlines the methodology developed by the San Diego Hunger Coalition and Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board over five years. It details how the Hunger Free San Diego methodology differs from other measures of need and food assistance, and advocates for setting nutrition as a standard for our work and the goal for our region.

### **Step 1: Setting a Measurable Standard for Food Assistance**

Many people experiencing nutrition insecurity rely on an array of food assistance programs to help make ends meet, ranging from CalFresh and WIC to food distributions to congregate meals. To quantify the output and impact of different food assistance programs, the Hunger Free San Diego

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<sup>7</sup> Food Security (Issue brief). (n.d.). FAO Agricultural and Development Economics Division. DOI:

[http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/faoitally/documents/pdf/pdf\\_Food\\_Security\\_Cocept\\_Note.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/faoitally/documents/pdf/pdf_Food_Security_Cocept_Note.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Downer, S., Berkowitz, S. A., Harlan, T. S., Olstad, D. L., & Mozaffarian, D. (2020). Food is medicine: Actions to integrate food and nutrition into healthcare. *BMJ*, M2482. doi:10.1136/bmj.m2482



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Advisory Board needed a standardized metric to convert all forms of food assistance to the common unit of *one meal*.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) produces food plans that reflect the USDA's dietary recommendations and food consumption patterns at four distinct price and quantity points: Thrifty, Low, Moderate and Liberal. USDA adjusts the cost of the food plans for inflation each month using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index. Each food plan includes the quantity, cost, and weight of food for a healthy diet by age and gender at each cost level, enabling the calculation of the cost and weight of a healthy meal in any community, when weighted for that community's population.

When weighted for San Diego's population, the USDA's Moderate Cost Food Plan equates a healthy meal to \$3.25 in urban areas or 1.84 pounds of food. Using a conversion adapted from the County of San Diego's Aging and Independence Services (San Diego's Area Agency on Aging) for urban and rural meal reimbursement rates, the Hunger Coalition calculates the rural cost of a meal to be \$4.38.

**FIGURE 5: COMPARISON OF USDA FOOD PLANS**

Official USDA Food Plan	Average Cost per Meal for San Diego County	Average Pounds per Meal for San Diego County
Thrifty Food Plan <sup>9</sup>	\$2.03	1.64 lbs
Low Cost Food Plan	\$2.63	1.71 lbs
<b>Moderate Cost Food Plan</b>	<b>\$3.25</b> (\$4.38 in rural areas) <sup>10</sup>	<b>1.84 lbs</b>
Liberal Cost Food Plan	\$4.00	2.13 lbs

As shown in Figure 1, the cost of a meal in the Moderate Food Plan is higher than that of the Thrifty Food Plan, which the USDA currently uses to calculate SNAP issuances. Advocates and health experts have maintained for decades that the Thrifty Food Plan, originally designed to serve as a stopgap, is insufficient to support a nutritious diet for the millions of people who rely on SNAP as the basis of their daily nutrition.<sup>1</sup> In 2021, the USDA responded and has revisited the average SNAP benefit, excluding additional funds provided as part of pandemic relief. The revised Thrifty Meal Plan has increased by \$36.24 per person per month, or \$1.19 per day. SNAP benefits will increase effective October 1, 2021.

The Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board continues to maintain that the Thrifty Food Plan is insufficient for purchasing three nutrition meals per day. Of note, the standard conversion used by the Feeding America National Organization and food banks across the nation to calculate their impact is 1.2 pounds equals one meal, which is well below the Thrifty Food Plan. We estimate that

<sup>9</sup> Thrifty Food Plan values are based on the August 2021 USDA Market Basket. The USDA has updated the Thrifty Food Plan (effective October 1, 2021) but has not yet released the accompanying cost component for October 2021.

<sup>10</sup> San Diego Hunger Coalition used a conversion adapted from the County of San Diego's Aging and Independence Services (San Diego's Area Agency on Aging) for urban and rural meal reimbursement rates.



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the cost equivalent of 1.2 pounds of food is approximately \$1.51 per meal, based on the USDA's cost calculations of their food plans.

**In 2018, the Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board selected the USDA Moderate Cost Food Plan as the cornerstone of its methodologies, setting 'nutrition security' as its standard for food assistance.**

The Moderate Cost Food Plan aligns with the value that **people of all incomes should have access to a baseline standard of quality, nutritious food**, instead of perpetuating a double-standard that lower-income communities should be able to do more with fewer resources than their middle- and upper-income counterparts. As a standard, the Moderate Cost Food Plan provides a sustainable pathway for households to purchase a diverse set of foods critical for nutrition and long-term health.

In addition, when weighted for San Diego County's population, the USDA's Moderate Cost Food Plan (\$3.25/meal or an average \$292.50/month) tracks most closely to other established measures of the cost of food in San Diego County. The Insight Center for Community Economic Development's Family Needs Calculator<sup>11</sup> (also known as the Self-Sufficiency Standard) estimates the amount of income necessary to afford basic expenses in California (including taxes) without public subsidies. In 2021, the estimated required food expenditures for a single adult in San Diego County is \$301/month or approximately \$3.34/meal. The Moderate Cost Food Plan is the USDA Food plan also aligns most closely with Feeding America's estimate of the cost of a meal in San Diego County, which was \$3.47/meal in 2019.<sup>12</sup>

## **Step 2: Setting a Measurable Standard for Nutrition Security**

### **Limitations of Food Insecurity Surveys**

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Hunger Free San Diego relied on survey data to estimate the need for food assistance in our region. While food insecurity surveys are an invaluable tool for understanding the lived experience of food and nutrition insecurity, this data notoriously underrepresents the population in need and provides a limited view of the true extent of nutrition insecurity in our region.

#### **1. While standardized measures of the components and cost of a nutritious meal exist, these tools are not being applied in survey studies of food insecurity.**

The FAO and US Department of Agriculture (USDA) acknowledge the importance of nutrition, however in practice, nutrition does not play a significant role in assessments of food security. USDA's 18-question Household Food Security assessment asks whether respondents "[Could or]...couldn't afford to eat balanced meals," but these responses are subjective, based on one's perception of a balanced meal rather than a standard measure of the resources and purchasing power required to afford a healthy meal, in accordance with USDA's Food Plans, which are extensive monthly reports on the cost and content of a nutritious diet in the United States by

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<https://insightccd.org/family-needs-calculator/>

<sup>12</sup> Feeding America. *Map the Meal Gap: Food Insecurity in The United States Before COVID-19*. Retrieved October 20, 2021, from <https://map.feedingamerica.org/>.

age and gender.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the two questions food security screener, which is often used in place of the full, 18-question panel, only asks respondents whether or not they worried if food would run out before getting money to buy more, or if food did run out at any point in the past 12 months. Healthcare providers utilizing the two-question screener are encouraged to ask additional questions regarding ability to purchase nutritious food.

## **2. Food insecurity surveys are highly subjective and survey respondents may underreport their food insecurity due to the shame and fear associated with reporting they have insufficient resources to meet basic needs.**

The tendency of survey respondents to tailor their responses consciously or unconsciously to be more socially desirable is common, particularly in surveys of stigmatized issues. As a result, food insecurity often goes unreported. The impacts of underreporting are particularly salient in the most vulnerable communities.

In a local participatory research study conducted by The Global ARC and Supportive Parents Information Network (SPIN) in alliance with the Caring Council of San Diego, 58% of those surveyed reported they were not forthcoming about needing food assistance when asked in the past, even if they were struggling to obtain enough healthy food at the time. Because the surveyors in this project were trained community residents, respondents had a higher than usual level of trust and were more forthcoming about their current nutrition security and their reasons for denying they had or have insufficient resources in other surveys. Of those surveyed, 40% reported that they were afraid to ask for help, and 2/3 of respondents reported that they denied needing assistance out of fear their children would be taken away from them.<sup>14</sup>

## **3. Food insecurity survey data is not timely or precise enough to enable the hunger relief sector to respond quickly and with accuracy, especially during a rapidly changing crisis.**

The severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and its immediate impacts on San Diego's economy accelerated the need for real-time estimates of nutrition insecurity in our region. Before the pandemic, Hunger Free San Diego provided food insecurity estimates that were based on self-reported survey data from the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) conducted by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. The biggest limitations of the CHIS data for estimating real-time need are: 1) the data is not available for one to two years post-survey; and 2) the sample size in San Diego County is too small to estimate food insecurity at the city or zip code level. The United States Census Bureau's Food Security Supplement data is also released one to two years after survey responses are collected and, similarly, does not have a sample size that allows for city or zip code level estimates.

The data from food insecurity surveys is invaluable to our understanding of food and nutrition insecurity. However,, this data is limited in its ability to capture total need.

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module. (n.d.). Retrieved April 28, 2021, from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/survey-tools/>

<sup>14</sup> Hunger & the Safety Net in San Diego County: A Participatory Action Research Project conducted by Supportive Parents Information Network (SPIN). January 2010. <http://www.theglobalarc.org/sites/default/files/documents/Hunger%20%26%20Safety%20Net%20Full%20Report.pdf>

## **Benefits of Using Economic Indicators of Nutrition Insecurity**

An economic definition of nutrition security provides a wider view of the interconnected trade-offs between major household expenses, including housing, healthcare, and healthy food, without the social stigma and bias of self-reporting. Using income level as a proxy centers nutrition insecurity as an economic issue tied to wages and purchasing power. It also creates the opportunity to illuminate the systemic impacts of low wages and income inequality, shifting the narrative away from the idea that food insecurity is an indication of personal failure.

It is important to note that Hunger Free San Diego's methodology to determine nutrition insecurity in San Diego County is an estimation of *total need* and not a measure of *unmet need*. This means there are people included in the estimated nutrition insecure population whose needs for food are being met by food assistance such as CalFresh, food distributions, WIC, etc.

Hunger Free San Diego estimates of unmet need are reflected in our calculation of the meal gap, which is the number of additional meals needed from food assistance – beyond what is already provided – in order for San Diego County's total population to be nutrition secure. To follow are some of the advantages to using economic indicators to estimate nutrition insecurity.

### **1. Income is the strongest determination of an individual's or household's ability to obtain enough nutritious food on a daily basis.**

**The Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board identified the population in San Diego County with income below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) as likely to be nutrition insecure.**

This cutoff was selected because extensive research has indicated that income below 200% FPL – \$53,000 for a family of four – is generally insufficient to meet basic needs, especially in a region like San Diego County with a higher than average cost of living.<sup>15</sup> A 2021 study from United Ways of California estimated that a family of four requires an annual income of \$93,000 to meet their basic needs in San Diego County.<sup>16</sup>

Using 200% FPL as a proxy for nutrition insecurity is further supported by consumer spending data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which indicates that individuals with income below 200% FPL do not have a sufficient food budget to purchase three healthy meals per day using the USDA's Moderate Cost Food Plan to determine the cost of a healthy meal in San Diego County.

While there may be households with income below 200% FPL that are nutrition secure, the impact of this on our estimates is minimal, and further offset but the fact that there are several vulnerable populations who are unlikely to be included in this number such as:

1. Undocumented individuals: Current estimates may underrepresent the need present in undocumented communities, missing those who are not captured in the US Census population estimates, but who access (or would benefit from access to) food assistance resources.

<sup>15</sup> Edelman, P. B. (2013). So rich, so poor: Why it's so hard to end poverty in America. New York: New Press.

<sup>16</sup> <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/hgascon/viz/TheRealCostMeasureinCalifornia2021/RealCostDashboard>



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2. Nutrition Insecure Households over 200% FPL: These estimates do not account for households with incomes above 200% FPL in need of food assistance. The Bureau of Labor statistics data suggests that families with young children above 200% FPL do not always have enough money to purchase all of their own food. In fact, the highest rates of nutrition insecurity since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic have been among households with children aged 12 or younger.
3. Individuals Working in the Informal Economy: These estimates may not fully capture the economic impact and loss of income occurring in the informal economy (i.e. unclaimed income from housekeeping, tips, etc. that would not be reflected in the Census), especially during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a decrease in food purchasing ability that was not captured by unemployment numbers.

## **2. Shifting to an economic indicator of the need for food assistance serves to reframe the narrative around the causes and experience of nutrition insecurity.**

As discussed above, there is significant fear and negative stigma associated with nutrition insecurity, particularly prevalent among historically marginalized communities. Black communities, Indigenous communities, people of color, and people with disabilities have historically faced discrimination and marginalization from service providers and government entities, which are oftentimes the very institutions conducting these surveys. This often leads to underreporting of need in the most vulnerable communities.

Economic data is less ambiguous and more consistent than survey data, as it is not impacted by individuals' reticence to openly share about personal or household struggles with nutrition insecurity. It also reframes nutrition insecurity and a structural and economic issue, rather than one of personal failing. *For more details on the household characteristics of the population experiencing nutrition insecurity, please see Appendix B.*

## **3. Economic indicators give the hunger relief sector real-time and more precise estimates of total need.**

In August 2020, in response to the rapidly worsening impacts of COVID-19 on low-income communities, the Hunger Free San Diego Advisory Board adopted a new measure of nutrition security that uses economic indicators, including unemployment rates and income-to-poverty ratios, to estimate the total population in need of nutrition assistance. Economic data, including poverty indicators and unemployment rates are more readily available and more frequently updated than food security survey data, allowing for more frequent and timely analysis of changing conditions. This enables our sector to be more responsive and targeted in providing services.

Federal poverty data from the US Census is also more robust, with details captured down to the census block level, providing the building blocks for nutrition insecurity measures that can be adjusted and scaled at the county and subregional level, as well as applied across regions.

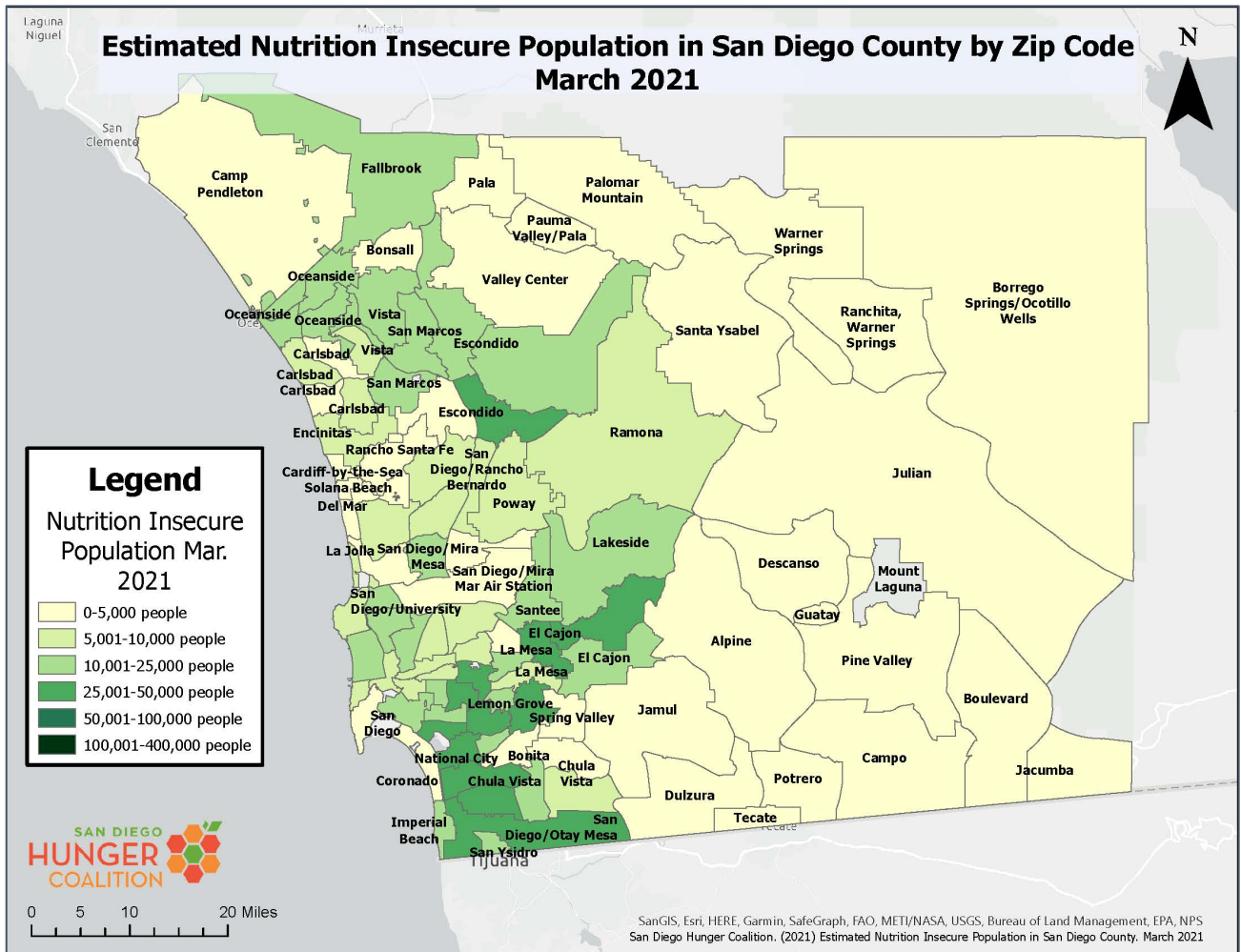
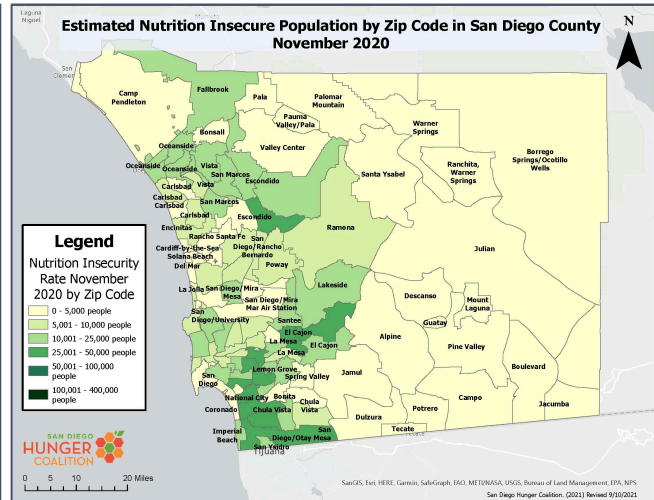
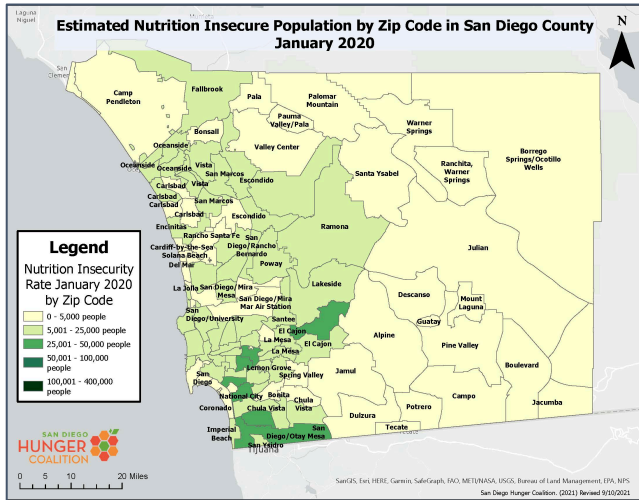




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## Appendix A: Maps of Estimated Nutrition Insecure Population by Zip Code in San Diego County



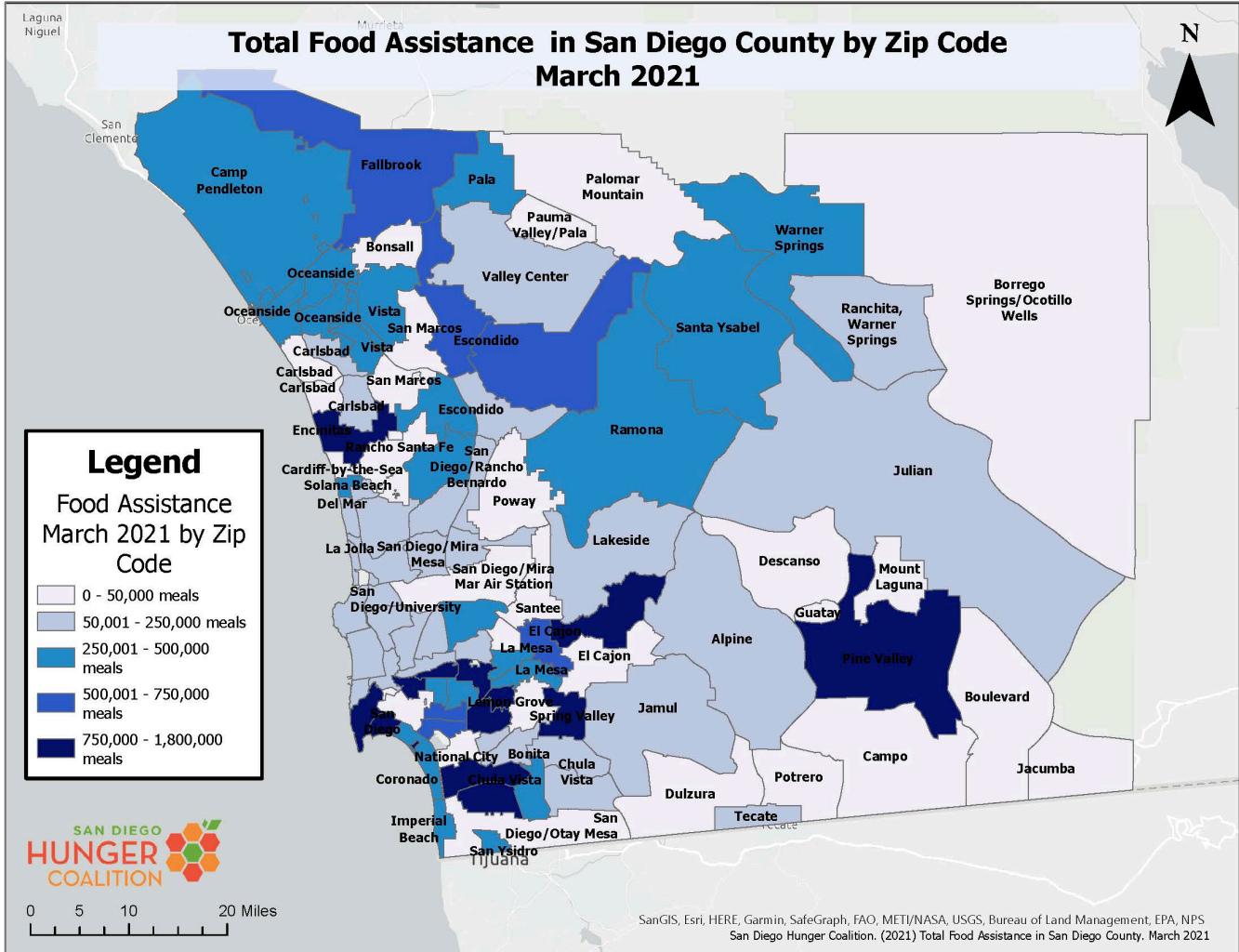
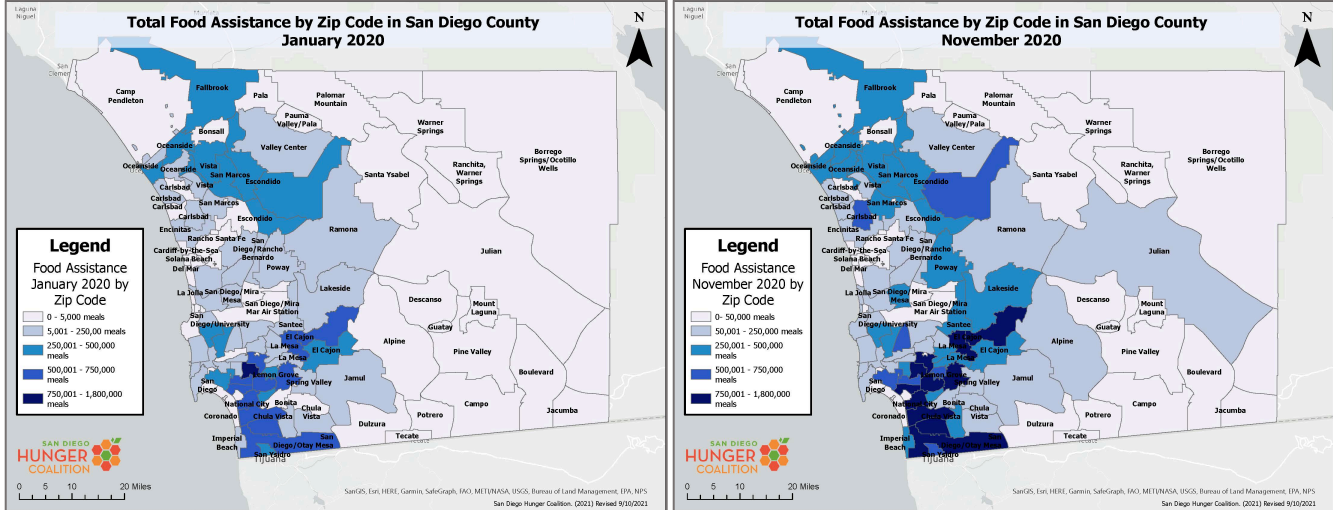
The size of the nutrition insecure population varies across the county, both due to population density and socio-economic factors. To see breakdowns by city, zip code, and region, please visit [sdhunger.org/maps-tables](http://sdhunger.org/maps-tables).



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## Appendix B: Maps of Food Assistance Meals Provided by Zip Code in San Diego County



To see breakdowns by city, zip code, and region, please visit [sdhunger.org/maps-tables](http://sdhunger.org/maps-tables).

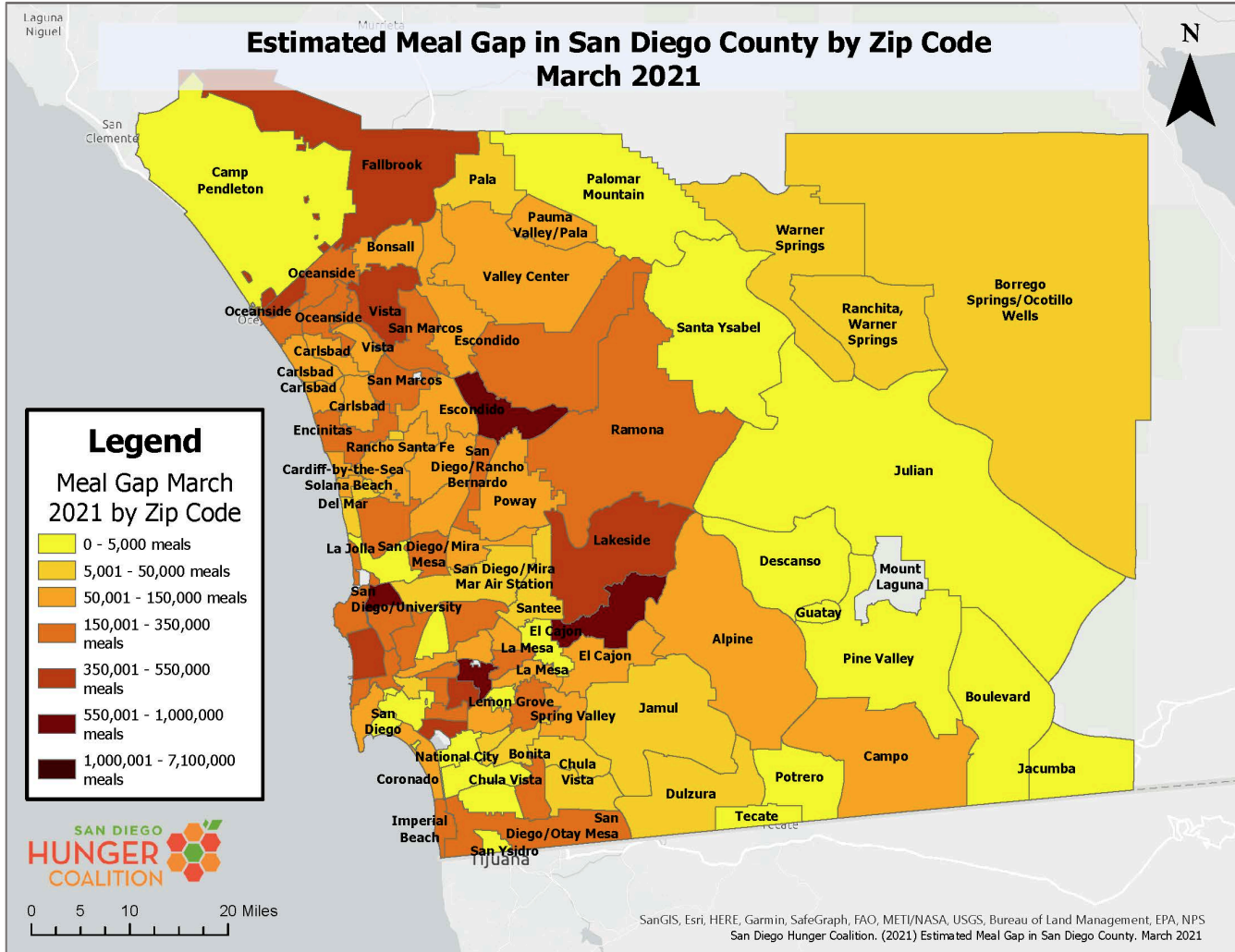
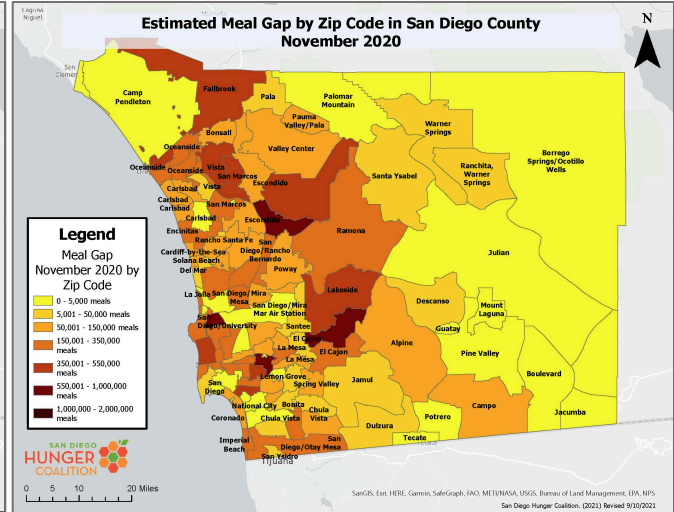
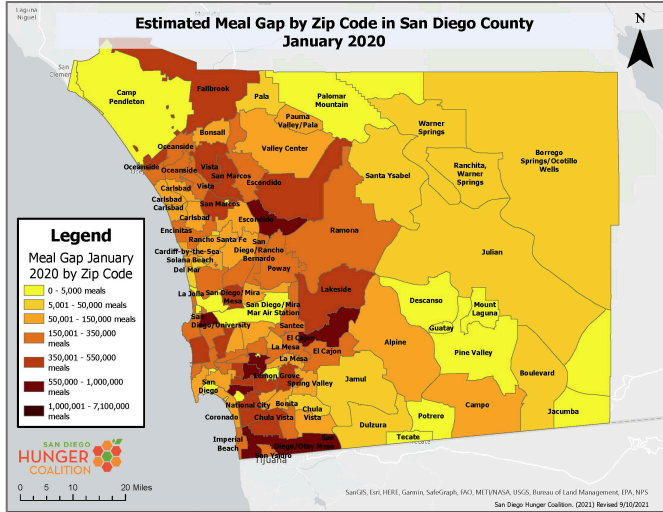




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## Appendix C: Maps of Estimated Meal Gap by Zip Code for San Diego County



To see breakdowns by city, zip code, and region, please visit [sdhunger.org/maps-tables](http://sdhunger.org/maps-tables).

## Appendix D: Additional Data and Household Characteristics of San Diego County's Nutrition Insecure Population

### San Diego County March 2021 Nutrition Insecurity Rates

- **Total nutrition insecure population: 1,035,000**
  - This represents 31% of the total population of San Diego County (3,347,000)
- **Nutrition insecure children: 284,500**
  - This represents 40% of the total child population in San Diego County (717,000)
- **Nutrition insecure seniors: 146,000**
  - This represents 30% of the total senior population in San Diego County (487,000)

### San Diego County Nutrition Insecure Household Characteristics

Note: These statistics represent the total population with income below 200% of Federal Poverty Level (ACS 2019).

- **44%** of the **Black** population have income below 200% FPL
  - Black people make up 7% of the population under 200% and 5% of the total population
- **37%** of the **Native** population have income below 200% FPL
  - Native people make up 1% of the population under 200% and 1% of the total population
- **29%** of the **White** population fall under 200% FPL
  - White people make up 69% of the population under 200% and 71% of the total population
- **29%** of the **Pacific Islander** population have income below 200% FPL
  - Pacific Islanders make up 0.4% of the population under 200% and 0.4% of the total population
- **23%** of the **Asian** population have income below 200% FPL
  - Asian people make up 9% of the population under 200% and 12% of the total population
- **44%** of **other races** have income below 200% FPL
  - Other races make up 9% of the population under 200% and 6% of the total population
- **26%** of the **two or more-race** population have income below 200% FPL
  - Two or more races make up 4% of the population under 200% and 5% of the total population
- **43%** of the **Hispanic/Latinx** population have income below 200% FPL
  - Hispanic/Latinx make up 48% of the population under 200% and 34% of the total population
  - 76% of the Hispanic/Latinx Population are White
- **40%** of **people with disabilities** have income below 200% FPL
  - People with disabilities make up 13% of the population under 200% and 10% of the total population