Defining food security can be difficult, with no strictly agreed upon criteria. One of about 200 definitions used is: the state of having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. In today’s food justice community, there are several “pickpockets” or economic factors that result in people having to prioritize spending money on something other than food. The major pickpockets in Los Angeles County are:

- Low wages and similar labor issues such as lack of paid sick days or less than full-time employment;
- Cost of housing for low income families, especially in LA;
- Homelessness with accompanying inability to store or cook food;
- Health insurance gap, also known as the “food vs. medicine” choice: out of pocket payments or insufficient insurance cause many persons, especially seniors, to make dire choices;
- Indebtedness to credit cards and payday lenders (itself necessitated by low wages or high rent); and
- Costs of fuel, car repairs, or other expenses necessary to get to work.

The Major Issues, Vulnerable Populations, What's Being Done, and What More Can be Done

There are constant threats to CalFresh, also known as food stamps or SNAP nationally, and there is also insufficient enrollment in the program. To maximize CalFresh, advocates should support state legislation to improve the program, including proposals to add flexibility to benefits for immigrants, maintain access for single adults, combat time limiting or block granting, adopt proposals to simplify application and reporting for seniors and people with disabilities, and oppose the threat to charge retailers for participating in the program.

Hunger among immigrant populations: The “Social Determinants of Health” study showed higher rates of food insecurity among undocumented individuals – none of whom can receive CalFresh. The anti-immigrant tenor prevalent in our current political climate might discourage people from applying for benefits. Although “Public Charge” applies to relatively few people who would be able to receive CalFresh anyway, the “chilling effect” of Public Charge expansion proposals by the Trump administration may lead to declining enrollment even among eligible immigrants. To counteract this, advocates should support the efforts by legal services and immigrant coalitions in Los Angeles, together with the County of LA, to encourage qualified immigrants to apply for needed benefits; legalize street vending and other avenues for revenue among undocumented persons; and protect immigrant workers from exploitation and wage theft.

Seniors, people with disabilities, and SSI recipients: Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients, all either seniors, blind, or disabled, are under 90% of the poverty level and there are 400,000 of them in LA County. SSI recipients finally became eligible for CalFresh in June 2019, and while there have been impressive enrollment figures reported, advocates need to maintain intense outreach to help thousands more receive essential food benefits. For perspective, LA County has an estimated 400,000 SSI recipients, and over 100,000 were reported to have applied for and begun receiving benefits by October.
Low income families: We should also protect CalWORKs (the cash assistance for low income families) and WIC from cuts, as well as school meals. We should ensure that domestic violence victims are protected and meet all eligible exemptions from CalWORKs rules, and support all efforts to reduce domestic violence. For school meals, advocates should continue to work with the schools in LA Unified and other districts in the country to improve the quality of meals, use locally sourced ingredients, and provide nutrition education to children, especially incorporating school gardens to increase enthusiasm for fruits and vegetables. Legislation to simplify school meal applications should be supported as well.

College students: A study by the Cal State University system estimated that 20% of students had difficulty getting enough food. A flurry of legislation at the state level in recent years has clarified which programs qualify as work-study, necessary to enable full-time students to be eligible for CalFresh, and has required campuses to have places where students can use CalFresh, as well as requiring the student aid office to help students get together documentation needed to qualify them for CalFresh. The anti-hunger community should be aware of, and publicize, these new regulations.

Homeless individuals: The Supreme Court in late 2019 upheld rulings that make it unconstitutional for cities to criminalize homelessness. While the City and County of Los Angeles have spent millions of dollars and made laudable efforts, tens of thousands remain homeless in our area. There is a danger from the state law passed in 2018 that requires people feeding hungry people in public to register with their local County health department, with that law already being cited by city officials in Lancaster in their move to ban feeding of the homeless in local parks. The negative side effects of this law, which is intimidating to volunteer-operated informal groups particularly, need to be counteracted and advocates need to be vigilant about abuse of this law, while working with the state to modify it.

Farmers Markets: Farmers markets in recent years have become excellent venues to facilitate healthy eating for low income persons, particularly through their ability to accept CalFresh benefits and incentives such as the Market Match program. However, the WIC program’s change from paper coupons to EBT will cause many farmers markets to cease accepting WIC Fruit and Vegetable benefits, and the USDA Food and Nutrition Service also recently threatened to revoke the ability to accept EBT from markets that had not processed transactions within a given period. Advocates should fight these kinds of stumbling blocks that are harming the great potential of farmers markets to be vehicles for food security.

Food insecurity connects to housing insecurity, job insecurity, land insecurity, healthcare security, and a host of other issues impacting poor families. The solutions for addressing food insecurity in Los Angeles must be comprehensive and multi-scalar in scope to truly bring about the transformative impacts we hope to achieve. We must act together, in solidarity with other anti-poverty and social justice initiatives, to make Good Food affordable and accessible for all.