



Expanding Food Assistance for Californians with AB 311

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Approximately **one in every four** people in the U.S. participated in mean-tested benefits programs such as Medicaid, SNAP, and unemployment benefits in 2022. Establishing one's eligibility for these programs, however, is difficult. A household must live at or near a poverty line based on principles established in the 1960s, and people must navigate complicated rules and paperwork to prove and maintain eligibility for services.

In addition, applicants must fall within specific immigration categories to qualify for assistance. A recent immigrant to the United States must wait five years to apply for federal public benefits, and **undocumented populations are not eligible for many programs that would otherwise help them survive.**

Policies that exclude eligibility based on immigration status affect:

- **11 million undocumented individuals in the nation**
- **2.7 million individuals in California**
- **9% of California's workforce**

Food Assistance for Undocumented Populations

Drawing on eighty-five interviews with low-income, Latinx immigrants in Northern California, my research explores if and how immigrants contend with this exclusionary safety net. In my conversations, many respondents mentioned food assistance as an important public benefit.

For context, **in 2020, one in every five Californians described themselves as food-insecure, that is, they did not know where their next meal was coming from.** Controlling for other factors, food insecurity is more common among Black and Latinx populations than among Whites, and **food insecurity affects 45% of undocumented immigrants in California, including 64% of children.**

While some individuals are able to find forms of food assistance through private non-profits, the terrain for non-profit support is uneven. Many non-profits are based in cities where the cost of living is steadily increasing. **For undocumented individuals living in the suburbs, non-profits that offer services like food assistance are harder to come by than in cities, and even if they are available, they are difficult to access without a car.**

Even if individuals are eligible for food assistance, like SNAP, they can be afraid to apply if a member of their household is undocumented. This was the case for Ximena, a thirty-nine-year-old mother of three. Because her youngest daughter was a U.S. citizen, she could apply for the state's SNAP program, CalFresh on her daughter's behalf. However, despite facing food insecurity, Ximena was hesitant about applying for this assistance. **In 2022, one in four mixed status households avoided public benefits because of fears of how it would impact their immigration status in the future.**

"There are [food] stamps, but I have the fear that in the future when my daughter wants to work, [the government] will take away that money...if there is amnesty, or there is a way to fix [papers], it would harm us."

~ Ximena, 39-year-old, mother of three

The Case for Assembly Bill 311

California is a national leader in passing policies towards a more inclusive safety net. In 2020, it became one of the first states to expand Earned Income Tax Credit eligibility to those who file their taxes with an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number, or ITIN. **In January 2024, it became the first state to offer access to MediCal to anyone who is eligible for it.**

Assembly Bill 311 would give access to the California Food Assistance Program (CFAP) to eligible individuals regardless of their immigration status. This will expand access for up to 840,000 Californians.

Making food assistance accessible to all undocumented populations in California is a vital step forward. While there is still much work to be done in addressing the psychological and social barriers that impact Californians' access to the safety net, **expanding eligibility for food assistance is imperative to reduce food insecurity, which currently affects 1 in 5 people in the state.**