



# 2021 Sacramento Region Food System Action Plan

*Issue Brief: Spotlight on Food Insecurity  
in the Sacramento Region*

*An analysis by Valley Vision*

November 2021

**2021 Sacramento Region  
Food System Action Plan**

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Food Insecurity in the Sacramento Region*

Prepared by Valley Vision  
In Partnership with the Sacramento Region Community Foundation

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# The Sacramento Region Food System

The 2021 Sacramento Region Food System Action Plan (Regional Action Plan) identifies challenges, opportunities, best practices, priorities, and recommendations to strengthen the resiliency, accessibility, prosperity and health of the food system for the communities of El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento and Yolo Counties. It covers six intersecting Strategic Focus Areas, including food security and healthy food access, and health and nutrition. Summary data related to the state of food insecurity in the region are provided in the Regional Action Plan which can be found on [Valley Vision's](#) website. This issue brief contains more detailed information on food insecurity trends by county; the work of the emergency system to address food insecurity; and the status of the U.S. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known as CalFresh in California, including enrollment levels by county and potential economic impact.

This data helped inform the development of Regional Action Plan recommendations and is intended as an additional resource to help highlight and address the systemic challenge of food insecurity, which has worsened during the pandemic. It also highlights the important work of the emergency food system, especially the region's food banks and network of partners; county departments of social services responsible for CalFresh enrollment and other food security programs; and dedicated nonprofits striving to reduce hunger and ensure equitable access to healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food.

## The Region's Food and Agriculture Economy

As America's Farm to Fork Capital, the region's food and agriculture economy is a major economic driver. Pre-pandemic, this industry cluster generated more than \$12 billion in economic impact, with more than 55,000 workers across the value chain from production, to processing, distribution, packaging and support services.<sup>1</sup> This impact was spurred by 6,700 farms and ranches in the region that supply regional, state, national, and global markets with a wide range of high value, high-quality crops and products<sup>2</sup> In addition to direct impact of the food and agriculture sector, the retail, hospitality and tourism industry generated more than \$17 billion in economy activity, with 118,000 jobs pre-pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Food and ag also have great influence on the research and innovation assets of the Sacramento region's educational institutions, including UC Davis as one of the world's leading agricultural institutions.

Despite the region's great agricultural abundance, food insecurity has been a persistent, pervasive challenge to the region's social, moral and economic fabric. Due to an improving economy and concerted efforts by foodbanks and other nonprofits to strengthen the emergency food system, levels of

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<sup>1</sup> California's Working Landscapes, prepared by the California Community Colleges Center of Excellence for the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources, November 2019.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2017, for number of farms/ranches; farmgate value from 2019 County Agricultural Commissioner Crop Reports for the 6-county region: El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento, Sutter, Yolo, and Yuba counties.

<sup>3</sup> Hospitality, Leisure, and Tourism Economic and Workforce Performance and Needs Assessment, Greater Sacramento Region, prepared by the North/Far North Center of Excellence, California Community Colleges et al., April 2019.

food security saw consistent improvement from 2015 until the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic led to massive disruption of the region's economy and health status, resulting in skyrocketing levels of food insecurity, with thousands of residents who had never before experienced food insecurity suddenly needing support in addition to those already suffering from food insecurity and hunger. Reaching those in need was further complicated by disruption in supply chains, loss of volunteers so vital to the emergency food system, loss of food distribution partners and sites, lack of facilities to handle the rapid scale up of food volume, increasing costs to obtain food products, health and safety of workers, and the need to pivot rapidly on all fronts.

## Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is one of the major measures used to assess the state of a food system and health of a community, and is often considered a proxy for poverty. There are different ways to measure food insecurity and different data sources and methodologies. Data was obtained from Feeding America, which provides census tract level data for 2019 and projected estimates for 2020 and 2021, enabling us to have as updated a perspective as possible, and to see patterns and trends below the county level. The Feeding America methodology looks at the relationship between food insecurity and closely linked indicators – poverty, unemployment, homeownership, disability prevalence and so forth, as well as other metrics.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1 shows overall food insecurity rates in 2019 and estimated rates in 2021 for each county and the region.<sup>5</sup> Almost 263,000 residents were food insecure in 2019, for an overall regional rate of 11.3%. The national rate was 10.9%. Rates of food insecurity in 2019 ranged from 8.6% in Placer County, the region's most affluent county, to 12.4% in Sacramento County. Food insecurity rates are higher for certain populations, including children, seniors, people with disabilities, and Black and Hispanic headed households.<sup>6</sup> One often overlooked population is higher education students. A UC Davis student survey in 2018 conducted for the Chancellor's Task Force on Student Food Security found that 44% of students experienced low or very low food security.<sup>7</sup> Other educational institutions including Sacramento State University and Los Rios Community College have identified student food insecurity as a major challenge. This challenge is not limited to the region. A 2019 basic needs survey of almost 40,000 community college students conducted for the California Community College system found that 50% of respondents were food insecure in the prior thirty days.<sup>8</sup> **According to Feeding America data on *Map the Gap*, an**

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<sup>4</sup> For a further analysis, please see "Food Security and Poverty: Definitions, Measures, and Data for David and Yolo County," by Robb Davis, Yolo Food Bank, July 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Gundersen, C., Strayer, M., Dewey, A., Hake, M., and Engelhard, E. (2021). *Map the Meal Gap 2021: An Analysis of County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Costs in the United States in 2019*. Feeding America.

<sup>6</sup> "Health Impact Assessment for the Sacramento Region Food System Action Plan," Authors Olutola Akande et al, University of California, David, June, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Promoting Food Security for UC Davis Students, by Francine Steinberg, Chancellor's Task Force on Food Security, July, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> California Community Colleges#RealCollege Survey, prepared by the Hope Center for the California Community Colleges, March, 2019.

**additional \$141 million dollars would be needed to close this food security gap in 2019**  
(<https://map.feedingamerica.org>).

**Table 1. Estimated Overall Food Insecurity Rates by County, 2019-2021**

County	Overall Rate 2019	# of Food Insecure Residents	Projected Overall Rate 2021	# of Projected Food Insecure Residents 2021
El Dorado	9.8%	18,550	11.7%	20,170
Placer	8.6%	32,980	9.8%	37,710
Sacramento	12.4%	187,630	13.4%	204,460
Yolo	10.7%	23,357	12.1%	26,300
<b>Total</b>	<b>11.3%</b>	<b>262,417</b>	<b>12.4%</b>	<b>286,640</b>

Source: *Map the Meal Gap, 2021*, Feeding America; analysis by Valley Vision

Overall food insecurity rates rose in 2021 in all counties. **Feeding America projected the number of food insecure individuals in the four counties to be almost 287,000, an increase of nine percent from 2019.**

The rates were even higher in 2020, with food insecure individuals reaching almost 314,000 (a 15.5 percent rate). The U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse survey data from August 2020 through May 2021 on material hardship showed at least a temporary positive change, with food insufficiency falling sharply from December 2020 levels. This decline appears to reflect the positive impacts of the federal CARES Act funding, including the Economic Impact Payments (EIPS) and expanded unemployment insurance, which provided financial support directly and quickly to individuals and families.<sup>9</sup>

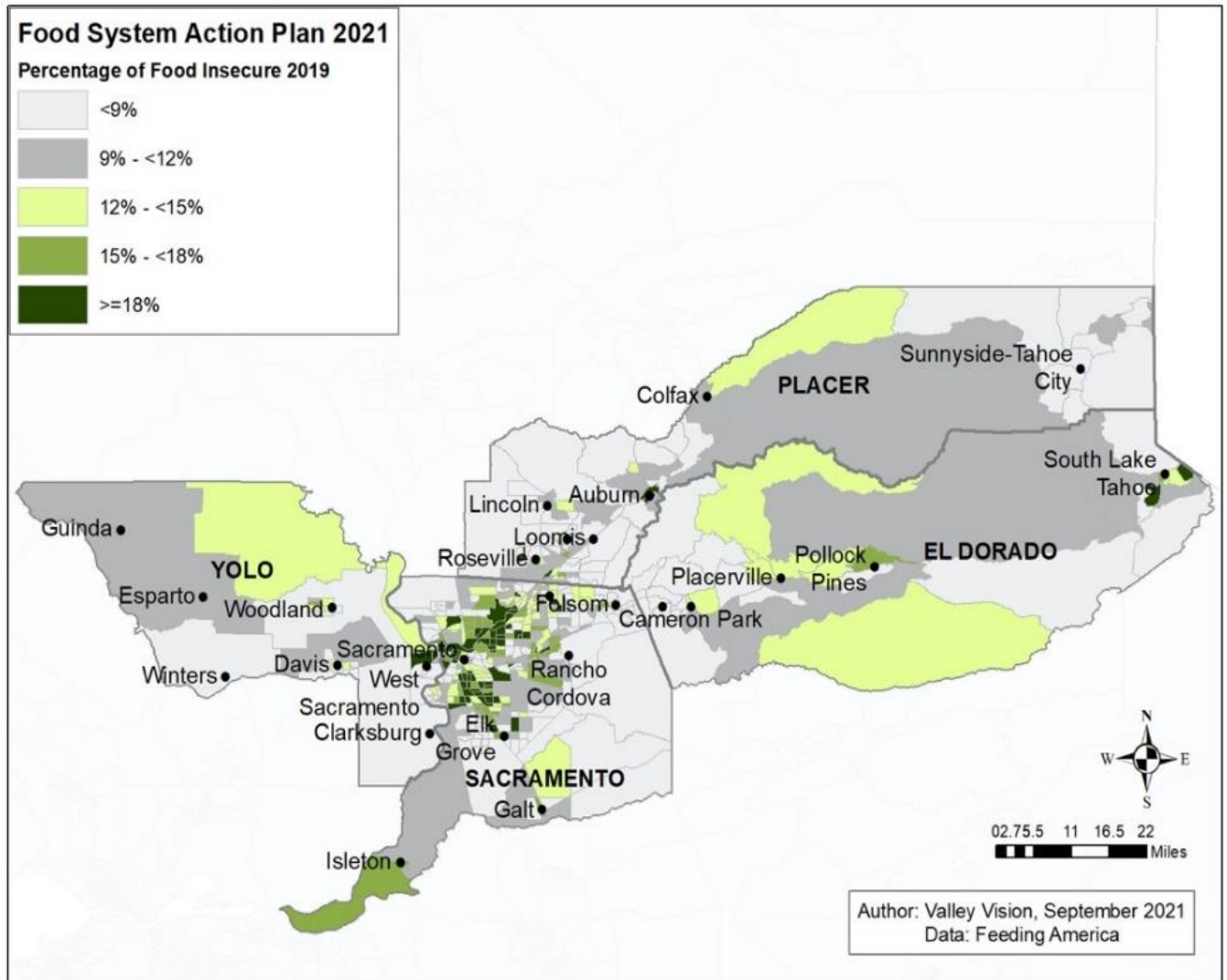
As these income and other supports including the rent moratoria come to an end, great uncertainty remains about the implications for the emergency food system due to the unknown path of the pandemic and long-term economic and health impacts on families and individuals related to food security and other socio-economic conditions. Data indicates that there are many more residents who will be vulnerable to hunger and food insecurity, given uncertain job status, economic conditions, and high housing costs, among other factors. These include the working poor who struggle to make ends meet every month. As later sections in this report will show, there will also be impacts on health status related to hunger and nutrition insecurity.

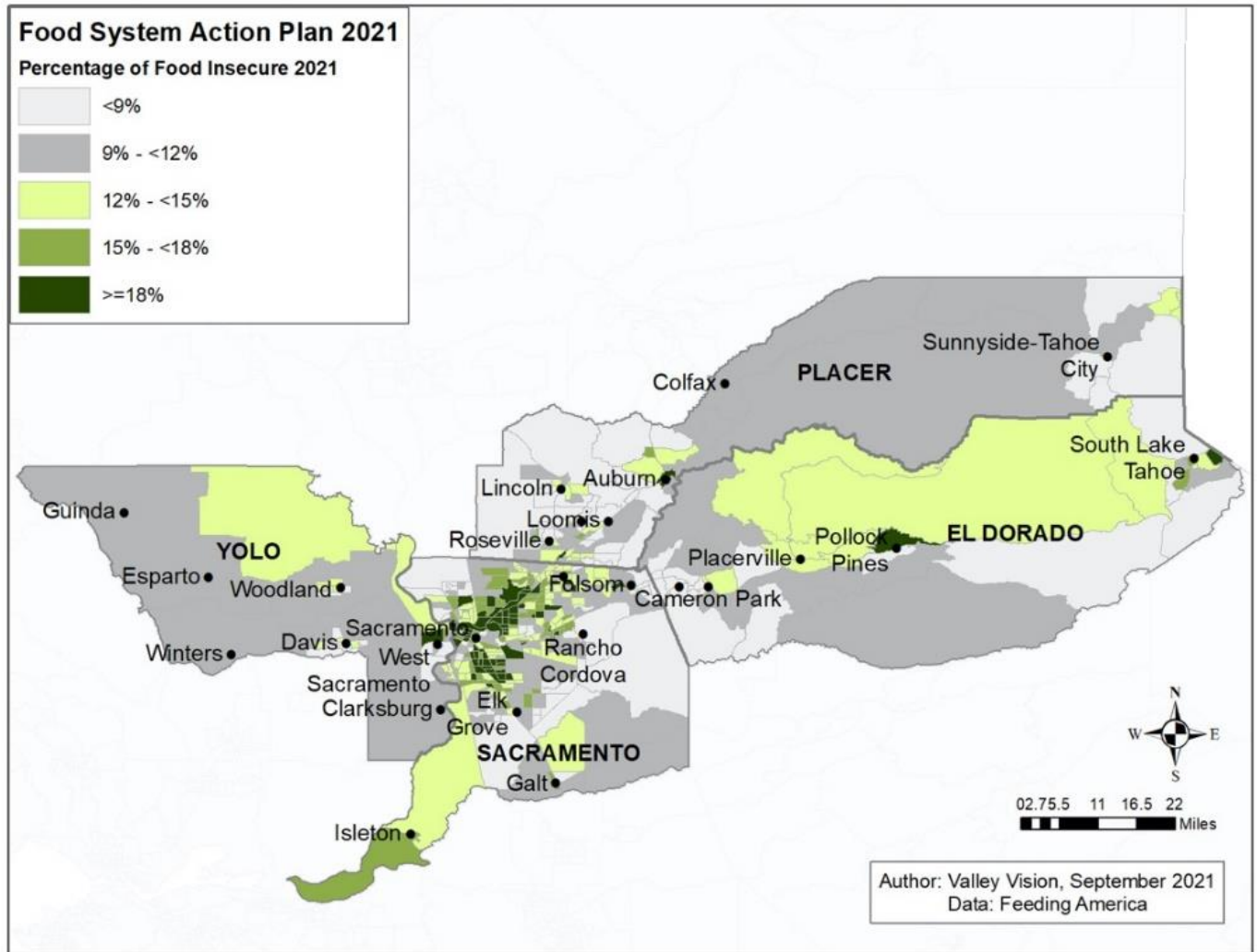
There are notable disparities in food insecurity within and across the counties. Valley Vision mapped the Feed America data; maps 1 and 2 illustrate the levels of food insecurity by census tract within each county for 2019 and 2021, providing a visual illustration of a decline in food security over the two years in almost all census tracts.

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<sup>9</sup> "Material Hardship and Mental Health Following the COVID-19 Relief Bill and American Rescue Plan Act," by Patrick Cooney and H. Luke Shaefer, M Poverty Solutions, University of Michigan, May 2021, p. 3.

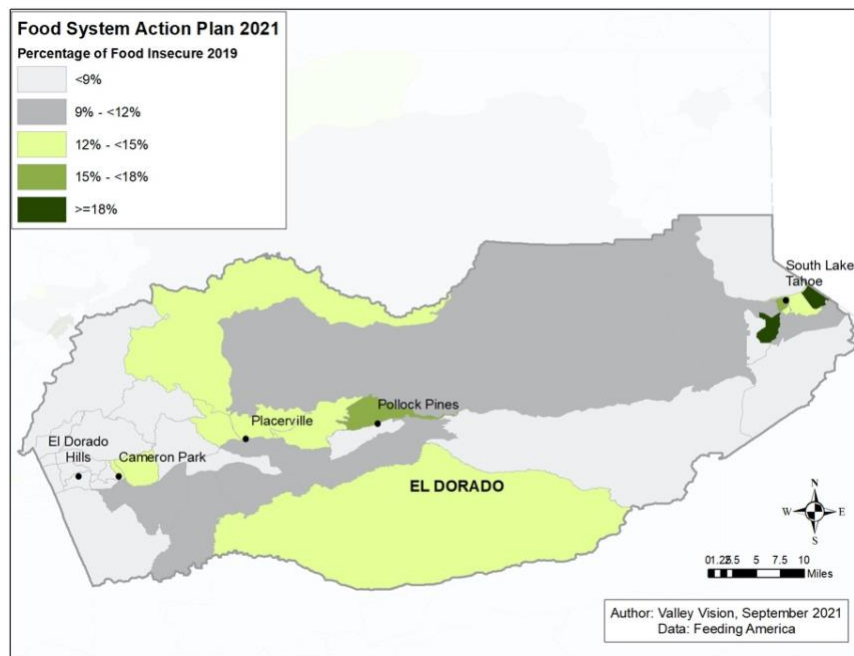
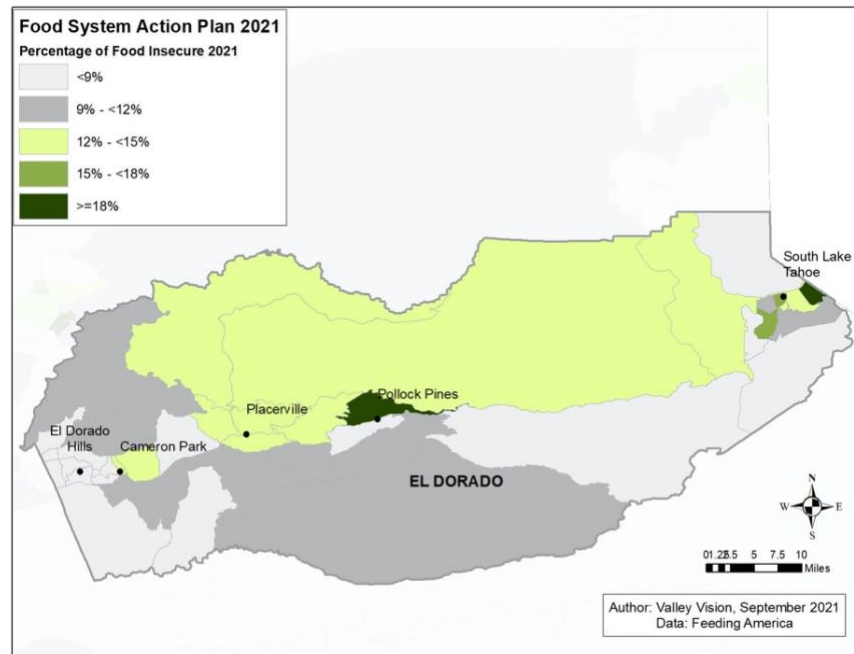
**Maps 1 and 2. Percentage of Food Insecure Residents by Census Tract by County, 2019 and 2021**





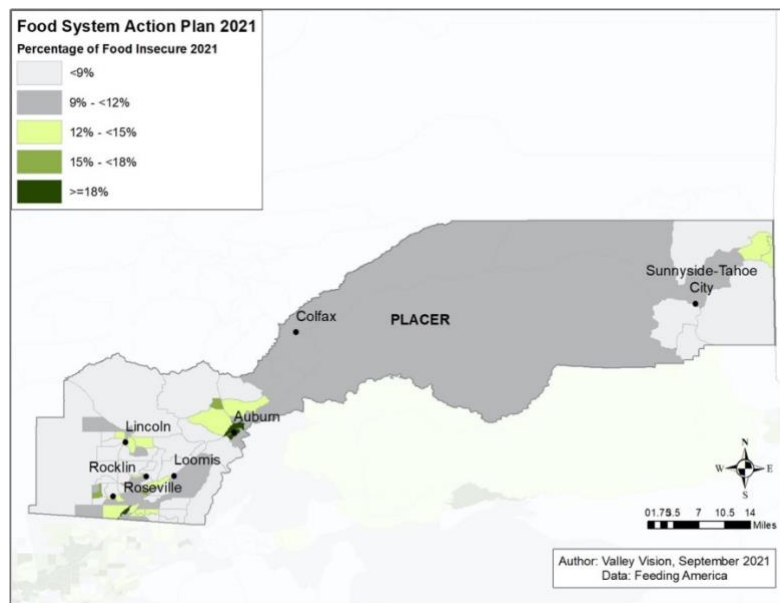
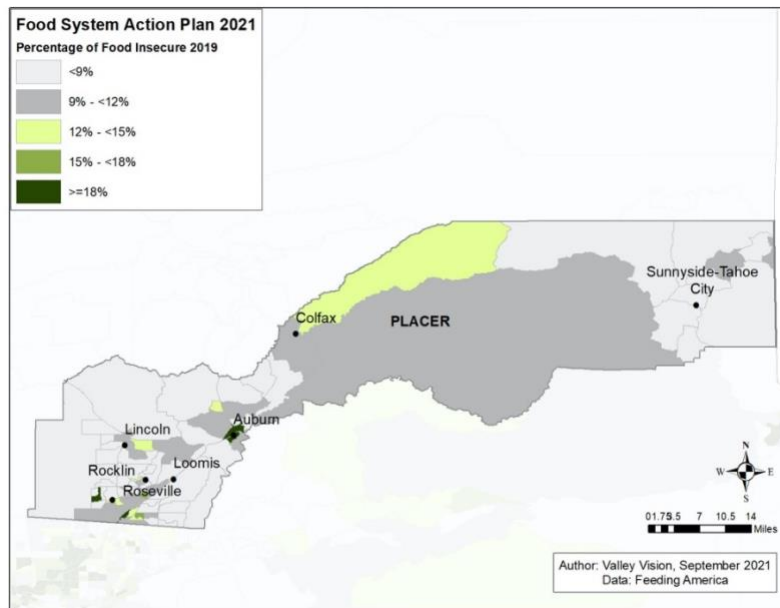
Snapshots of individual counties with maps showing food insecurity levels for 2019 and 2021 are shown on the following pages.

## Maps 3 and 4. Percentage of Food Insecure Residents by Census Tract, El Dorado County, 2019 and 2021



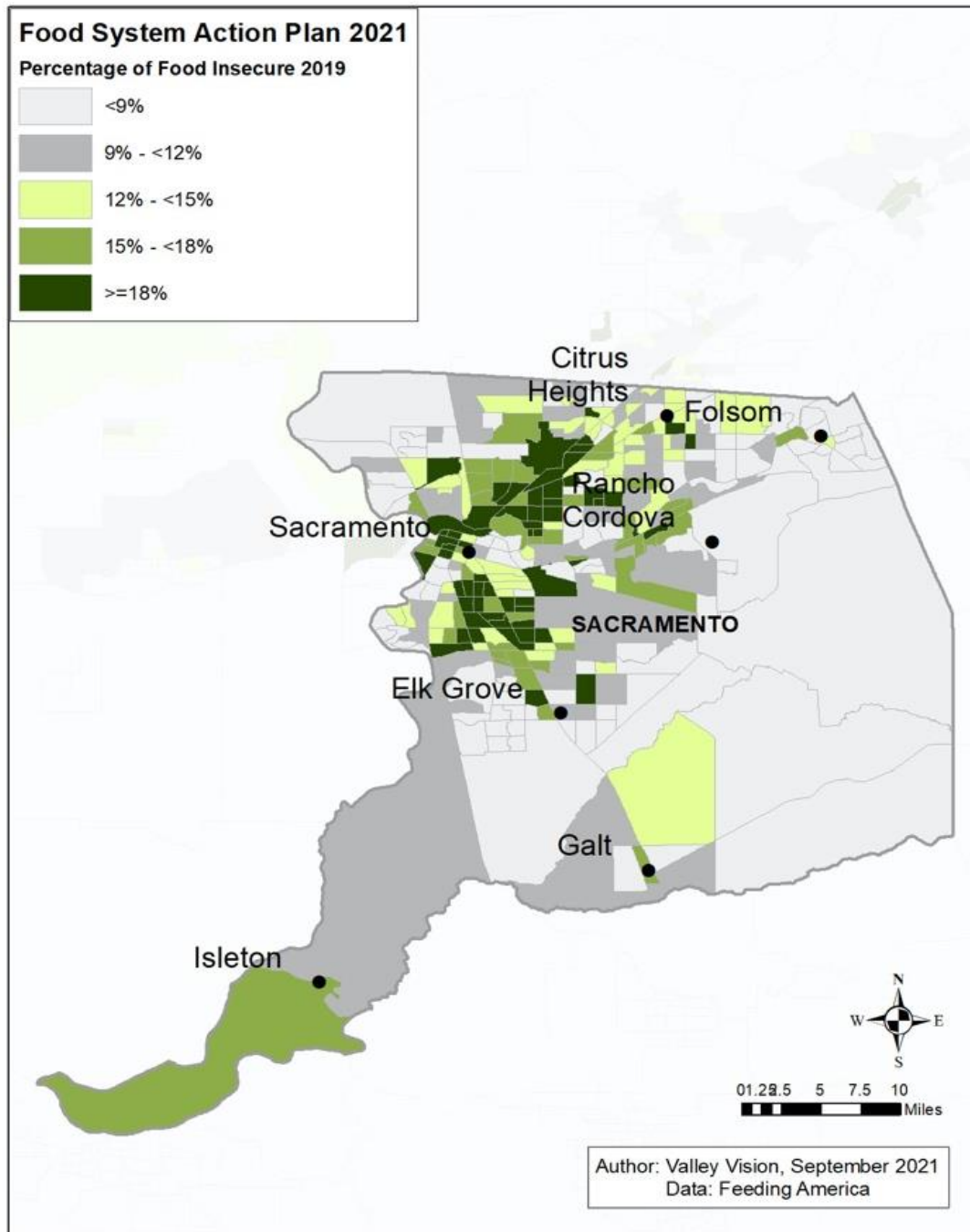
**El Dorado County:** While food insecurity showed improvement in the southernmost section of the county from 2019 to 2021, food insecurity levels increased across most of the other areas. *Of particular concern are Pollock Pines and South Lake Tahoe City, which both have food insecurity rates over 18%.*

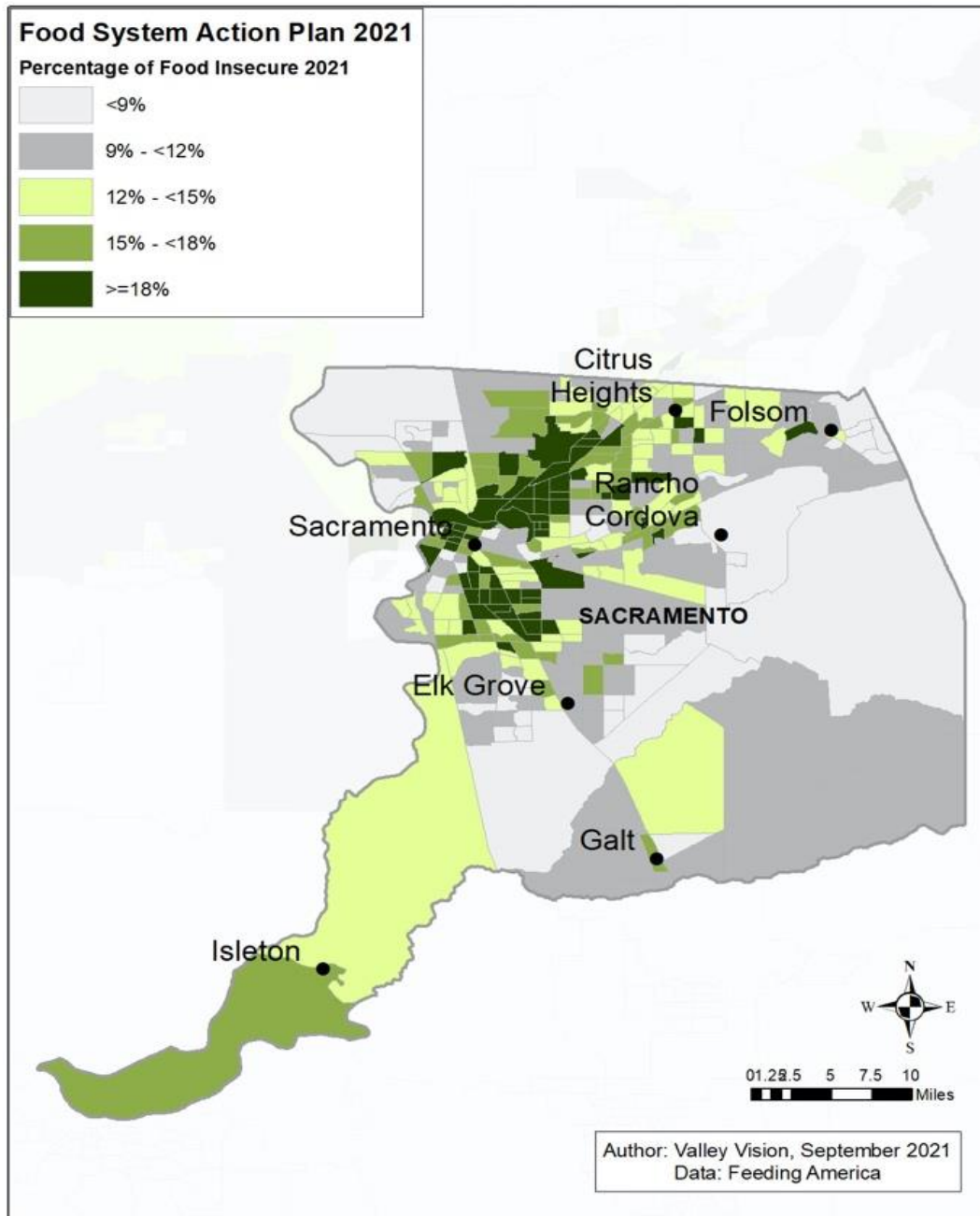
## Maps 5 and 6. Percentage of Food Insecure Residents by Census Tract, Placer County, 2019 and 2021



**Placer County.** Placer County experienced perhaps the most intra-county divergence, with a handful of census tracts showing improvement, but many others taking the opposite trajectory. Placer County had only a few pockets of food insecurity over 18% in 2021, around Auburn and Roseville, specifically, but several census tracts saw an increase in food insecurity over the two-year period, from less than 9% to between 9% and 15%, including around Sunnyside-Tahoe City in the Tahoe Basin. *The overall number of food insecure increased by 14%, the highest percentage among the four counties.*

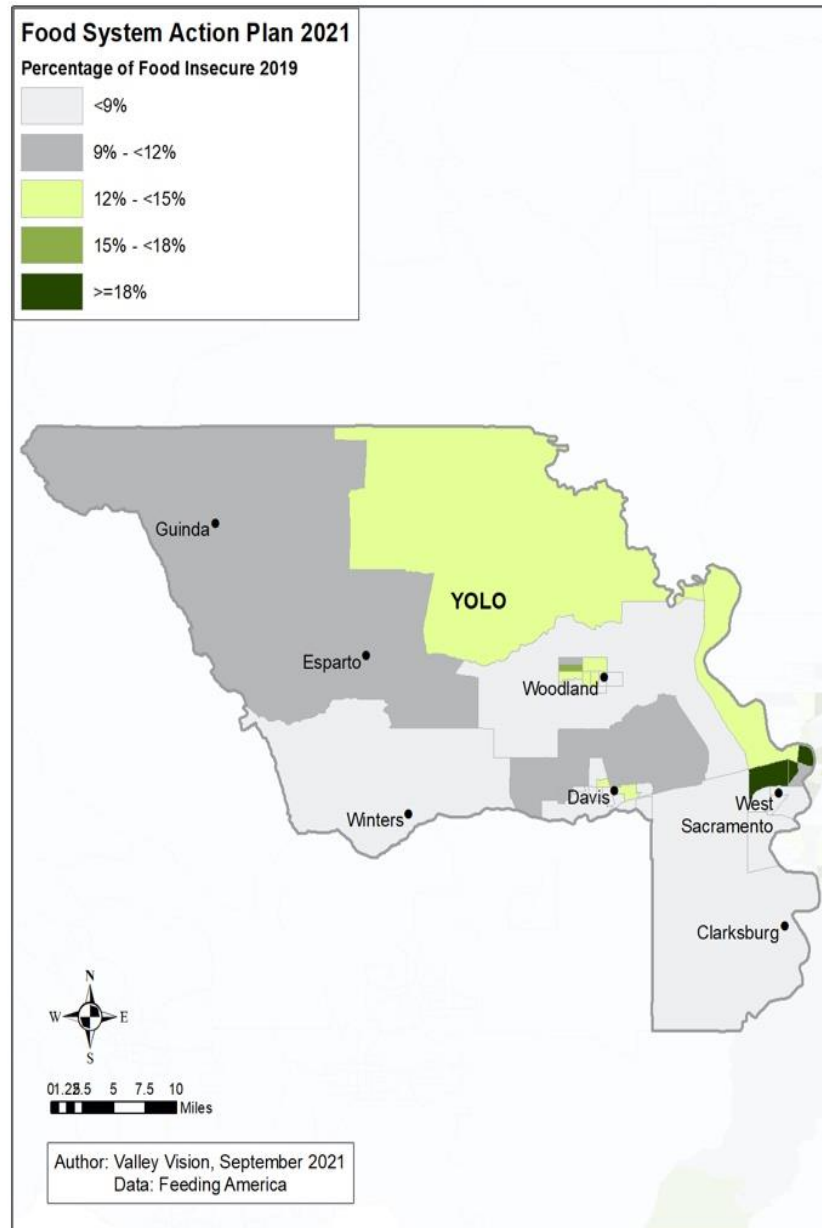
**Maps 7 and 8. Percentage of Food Insecure Residents by Census Tract,  
Sacramento County, 2019 and 2021**

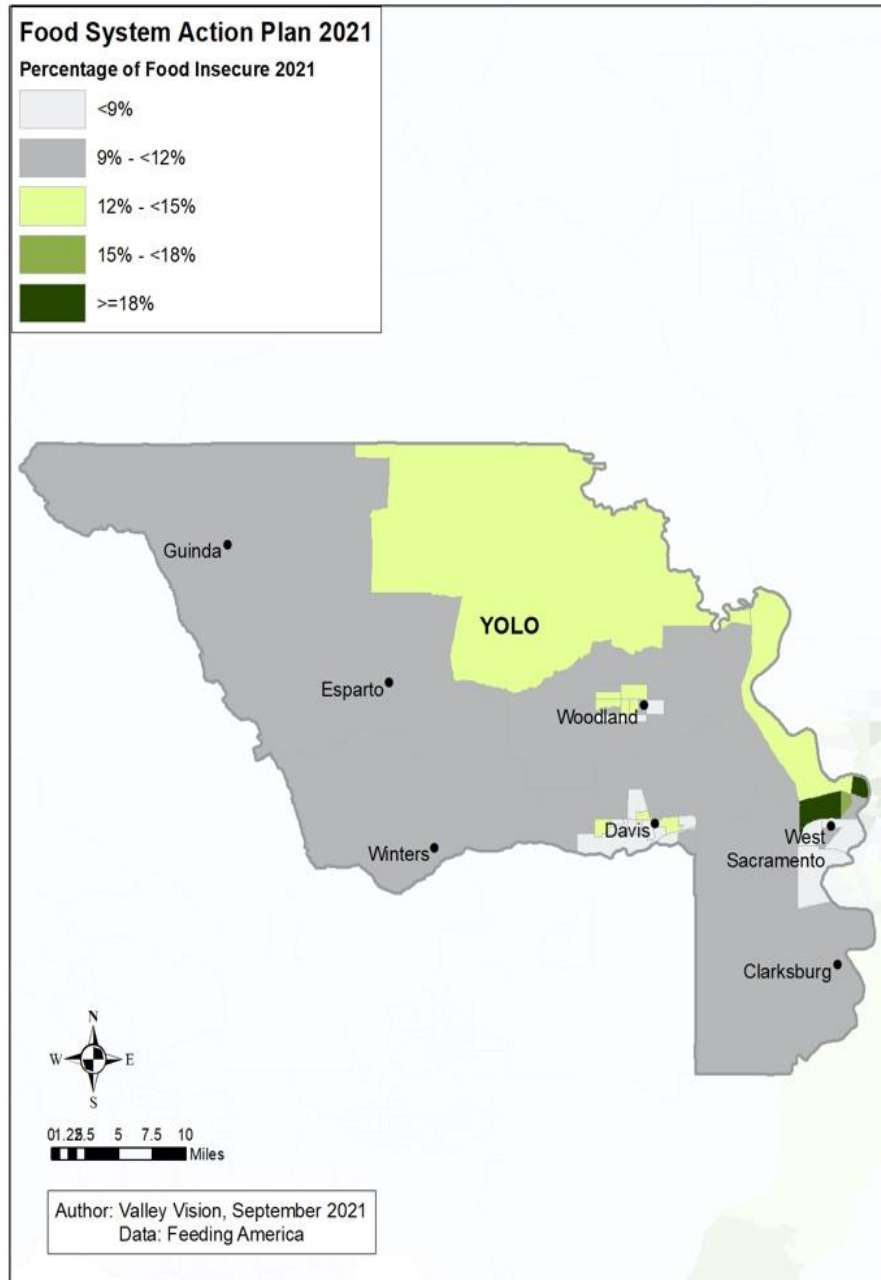




**Sacramento County:** Several census tracts in Sacramento County had among the highest rates of food insecurity in the region, especially in the urban core and along the Highway 80 corridor, with a rate of over 18% and in some cases over 24%. An area north of downtown had a rate of more than 32% in 2021. Food insecurity rates became worse throughout the county over the time period, including in and around most of the cities, but also in the rural areas, including the north county, the southeast part of the county, and in the Delta. *Overall, Sacramento County comprised 71% of all food insecure residents in the region.*

## Maps 9 and 10. Percentage of Food Insecure Residents by Census Tract, Yolo County, 2019 and 2021





**Yolo County:** In Yolo County, food insecurity increased from 2019 to 2021 across the center part of the county, from the Winters area across to the Woodland area and down to the Delta, with some increase in the city of Davis.<sup>10</sup> *The highest food insecurity rate was in West Sacramento, with significant areas experiencing food insecurity of more than 18%.*

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that there is some census tract information is missing for parts of Yolo County, possibly due to the high percentage of UC Davis student population, so food insecurity might be underreported in the mapping.

## Navigating Through Crisis: The Region's Emergency Food System

The region's food banks are the backbone of the emergency food system, managing a large network of several hundred food bank partners, including food pantries/closets, churches, other nonprofits, as well as food delivery providers, growers, volunteers, and a sophisticated logistics system in gathering, storing, packaging and distributing millions of pounds of food to hundreds of thousands of food insecure residents. Primary food and funding sources include donations from Feeding America; food retailers, growers/producers, and manufacturers (including through food recovery programs); USDA (federal commodities); philanthropy; and individual and corporate donations and community food drives.<sup>11</sup> There is comparatively little local and state government investment in the emergency food system.

There has been great progress since the 2015 Food System Action Plan. Food banks have invested millions of dollars in the physical infrastructure, trucking and staff and institutional capacity needed to reach the food insecure, reduce hunger and assist clients in the path to health and economic self-sufficiency.

As a result of the 2015 Sacramento Region Food System Action Plan, the Sacramento Region Community Foundation funded the Sacramento Food Bank and Family Services to improve the emergency food system in Sacramento County. This included growing the partner agency food distribution network to reach a greater number of food insecure; building staff and facilities capacity for partners to handle and distribute more fresh produce; upgrading equipment and facilities; expanding CalFresh outreach and educational activities; and overall, striving to achieve operational efficiencies. One outcome was the creation of several NFANS (Neighborhood Food Access Networks/hubs). The Placer and Yolo Food Banks also had major infrastructure and capacity investments over this time, including for cold storage, mobile distribution, and support for their network of food distribution partners/sites.

The food banks and the entire emergency food system had to pivot quickly when the pandemic led to shelter in place orders and unemployment levels increased almost overnight, with community needs skyrocketing. The food banks had to shift distribution models and adjust to changing food sources, products and supply chains; loss of volunteers; change in distribution sites and partners; and new emergency food program guidelines.

Table 2 shows the increase in demand on the emergency food system and the response in terms of number of pounds of food distributed and individuals served. For the region's three major food banks, the amount of food distributed pre-COVID and currently (Fall 2021) has increased by more than 43%, with monthly peaks and ongoing uncertainty. The number of individuals served increased over this same time period between 48%-57%. Note that Placer Food Bank includes El Dorado, Placer and Nevada counties

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<sup>11</sup> Feeding America is a national network of 200 foodbanks and 60,000 food pantries and other meal programs, and is the nation's largest hunger relief program.

**Table 2. Sacramento Region Food Bank Service Levels, Pre-Covid and 2021**

Food Bank	Lbs. of Food Distributed		# of Individuals Served/mo.	
	Pre-COVID	COVID-19	Pre-COVID	COVID-19
Placer Food Bank	6.5M	8.2M+	92,000	105,800 – 110,400
Sacramento Food Bank and Family Services	28.0M	38.0M	150,000	260,000 - 280,000
Yolo Food Bank	6.0M	12.0M	45,000	60,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>40.5M</b>	<b>58.2M+</b>	<b>287,000</b>	<b>425,800 – 450,400</b>

*Note: Placer Food Bank serves, Placer, El Dorado and Nevada counties*

Source: Food Bank annual reports, websites and interviews

### **Pandemic Impacts and Upcoming Food Bank Plans**

#### **Placer Food Bank:**

COVID impacts resulted in a 15-20% increase in demand for Placer Food Bank food distribution and services to food insecure individuals. One in five children in the community are food insecure and 30% of seniors report food insecurity. The Food Bank pivoted to an online food donation platform, with funds used to purchase and distribute food items to families. Monthly farmers markets transitioned to Free Drive-Thru Food Distributions, expanding from three to nine locations. The Food Bank also operated a School Backpack Program which served more than 4,000 students monthly, and the school pantry program. Emergency food needs increased greatly in El Dorado County, as well, with the fires of the summer of 2021 greatly amplifying needs.

The Placer Community Foundation provided significant funding to the Food Bank during the pandemic, investing to fund improvements to and scaling of infrastructure for managing food supplies and distribution to 60 partner agencies throughout the region, and to support the mobile farmers markets. The Food Bank will need substantial additional funding to develop a new facility to meet the greatly increased demand and need for consistency of services, with capability to provide for greater efficiency and alignment. With the expansion of mobile food delivery, the Food Bank is challenged by a shortage of experienced and qualified truck drivers to serve its very large geographic service area, with dispersed rural communities and diverse and sometimes difficult geographic conditions. The El Dorado Community Foundation works with the Placer Food Bank and other nonprofits to provide ongoing support to strengthen the food system in El Dorado County, including supporting the Feed El Dorado effort through COVID-relief funding and now, the fire-impacted communities.

#### **Sacramento Food Bank and Family Services (SFBFS)**

SFBFS anticipates distribution of 40 million pounds of food in 2021, with some months seeing an increase of almost 100% in number of people served. During the pandemic, the number of distribution points dropped from 220 to 138, with an increased emphasis on large scale distribution sites. New partnerships and innovations occurred during the pandemic which will carry into the future operations. They include shared distribution sites with Sacramento City Unified School District and participation in

programs with restaurants and others such as ParaTransit through the Great Plates program to reach at risk groups including seniors. SFBFS will be examining partnerships with larger institutions such as the school districts and hospitals to increase capacity for food access and distribution.

To continue serving at such high volumes, the emergency food network comprised of mostly small pantries and congregate meal operations will continue to need investments in cold storage, equipment and facility expansion. A training center for existing and future food distributors also is being considered. SFBFS will be conducting a post-COVID assessment of its partners to capture further understanding of provider needs. SFBFS is also examining adding more wrap around supports to mobile operations. Partner organizations such as the River City Food Bank and community partners are mobilizing to address the special needs of refugees, most recently those displaced from Afghanistan.

SFBFS is ready and willing to work with non-traditional food pantry entities to expand food access throughout Sacramento County. SFBFS is beginning a new strategic plan that will focus on both internal and external capacity strengthening and new program structure.

#### Yolo Food Bank

Yolo Food Bank mobilized quickly to meet a three-fold increase in the demand for food assistance. With many of its nonprofit partners closing, the Food Bank took over direct staffing of an even greater number of its 130 monthly distributions. Additionally, farmers' market-style distributions at school sites transitioned to a drive-through model, and grocery home delivery for seniors and homebound residents was initiated. Yolo Food Bank also launched a food delivery program to individuals sheltered in Project Roomkey. COVID testing and vaccination clinics have been hosted at food distributions. The Food Bank is making plans to safely resume its "Kids Farmers Markets" with weekly on-campus free, fresh production selection and education for families in need, after going curbside last fall.

Yolo Food Bank has more than tripled its surplus edible food recovery program over the past two years, from 2 million pounds to nearly 7 million pounds, getting food to people instead of waste. YFB also operates an impactful Yolo Grown program encouraging local farmers to grow and donate crops to benefit Yolo Food Bank clients.

Like most food banks, Yolo Food Bank is currently grappling with a dramatic reduction in pandemic financial and food procurement assistance from federal, state and local government. The absence of governmental support in the second year of the pandemic is threatening the continuity of charitable food assistance to the region's most vulnerable residents.

While data collection is ongoing, preliminary results of surveys among Yolo Food Bank participants indicate that 63% of respondents access more than half of their household's weekly nutrition from Yolo Food Bank distributions, with nearly a quarter indicating that they receive nearly all or all of the food for their households from these distributions. About 27% of respondents state that they, or someone in their household, receives CalFresh (SNAP) benefits. The Yolo Community Foundation provided COVID-19 Relief grants to nonprofits including the Yolo Food Bank, Yolo Meals on Wheels and Mercy Coalition to ensure food supplies to impacted communities, including seniors and children.

## **Going Forward**

Food Bank leaders emphasized the continuing uncertainties the emergency food system will face. In addition to the economic and health factors cited above, they emphasized the disruptions displayed just this summer with the fires, and the economic impacts of a continuing drought, as examples of the ongoing challenges they face and will face. There is no going back, there is only the “new normal,” dealing with the long-term impacts yet to be known. As the food banks prepare for this future, they have demonstrated their continued commitment to investment, innovation and partnerships to meet these challenges.

## **Capturing the Benefits of CalFresh**

CalFresh, which is the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in California, is the nation’s most important anti-hunger program. In 2019, more than 66% of SNAP participants in California were in families with children, and almost 19% were in families with members who were elderly or had disabilities.<sup>12</sup> Yet, analysis by Nourish California shows that a large number of eligible Californians are not receiving benefits, depriving those in need of nutrition assistance and resulting in major dollars lost to the economy.

According to the California Department of Social Services CalFresh Dashboard, CalFresh enrollment rates vary widely by county. See Table 3 for trends from 2015 through 2019. Sacramento County trended up over the past several years, El Dorado County dropped significantly in 2019 after being above 60% for several years, and Placer and El Dorado counties declined from 2015 to 2019. Enrollment for Yolo County is complicated by federal eligibility requirements which create barriers for enrolling food insecure higher education students, which affects UC Davis students.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 3. Program Reach Index, CalFresh, 2015-2019**

**Rate of Enrollment of Eligible Participants By County**

<b>County</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2019</b>
El Dorado	65%	50%
Placer	47%	43%
Sacramento	83%	93%
Yolo	51%	40%

Source: CalFresh Dashboard, CA. Dept. of Social Services, Sept. 2021

There are many other variables that impact enrollment levels. Even before the pandemic, county social services departments responsible for enrolling eligible residents were chronically underfunded by the State, leading to significant staffing and resource shortages. The pandemic greatly limited the ability of staff and nonprofit partners to conduct outreach and enrollment activities, which is further complicated

<sup>12</sup> California, CalFresh Fact Sheet, Center of Budget and Policy Priorities, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021

<sup>13</sup> Per interview with Nolan Sullivan, Yolo County Dept. of Social Services, August, 2021.

by many challenging administrative and system requirements. Complicated eligibility requirements affect groups such as seniors and mixed immigration status families across the region. Other complications include lack of information on the part of eligible residents, privacy concerns, and attitudes toward the program. Planned system improvements hopefully will enable increased enrollment levels.

In addition to residents missing out on important food security resources, the region misses out on funding that would generate a large amount of economic activity and benefit. Table 4 below shows the additional federal dollars that would be available to the region if CalFresh reached all eligible individuals, the economic activity that would result from these additional benefits, and the food retailers and farmers markets that would benefit from additional business. USDA has shown that every dollar in federal SNAP/CalFresh expenditures generates \$1.79 in economic activity.<sup>14</sup> With 100% enrollment in CalFresh, almost \$150 million additional dollars would be available for nutrition assistance, with an estimated economic impact of \$225 million.

**Table 4: Estimated Benefits of Increased CalFresh Enrollment, June 2020**

<b>County</b>	<b>Additional Federal Dollars if CalFresh Reached All Eligible Individuals</b>	<b>Economic Activity Resulting From Additional Federal Benefits</b>	<b>Food Retailers and Farmers Markets that Would Benefit from Additional Business</b>
El Dorado	\$ 8,800,000	\$13,600,000	112
Placer	\$27,300,000	\$42,100,000	219
Sacramento	\$58,800,000	\$90,500,000	1,011
Yolo	\$51,200,000	\$78,800,000	145
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$146,100,000</b>	<b>\$225,000,000</b>	<b>1,297</b>

Source: Nourish California, Lost Dollars, Empty Plates, County Estimates, June 2020

## Summary

The issue brief provides a snapshot of the Sacramento region's status related to food insecurity and the dedicated emergency food system of food banks and their large network of nonprofits, anchor institutions, and public and private sector partners, including funders such as the health systems, philanthropy, restaurants, farmers, grocery stores and food distributors, corporate sponsors, and individuals. While the emergency food system and partners mobilized quickly and nimbly to address the food and hunger needs of those among us, hunger and food insecurity have been a persistent and pervasive challenge that requires a systemic response, including expanded public and other investment. The Regional Action Plan contains recommendations on how to strengthen this and other aspects of the regional food system, including improved healthy food access and nutrition security – for a food system that works for all.

<sup>14</sup> *Lost Dollars, Empty Plates*, Jared Call, California Food Policy Advocates (Nourish California), 2019, p. 2.