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Policy to Plate:

Examining CalFresh Efficiency and Food Security

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POL 195: Policy Analysis in California

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Despite providing close to 50% of the nation's produce, approximately 1 in 7 Californians experience some level of food insecurity (California Health Interview Survey, 2021). Defined by households with limited or uncertain access to adequate food, the detrimental health, academic, mental, and economic consequences of food insecurity cannot be understated. California's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly referred to as CalFresh, stands at the forefront of the fight against food insecurity, extending vital food support to an average of 5 million Californians every month (Saucedo, 2023). Data illustrates CalFresh's ability to lift Californians out of poverty and stabilize incomes, thereby significantly improving various social, economic, and health outcomes (Danielson, 2022).

Despite CalFresh's optimal position in alleviating this issue, the program remains highly underutilized due to numerous administrative, personal, and bureaucratic barriers to the program. Thus leaving over 2 million eligible Californians without benefits. California struggles with the highest poverty rate in the nation yet CalFresh participation rates in comparison to other states rank disappointingly low (Botts, 2020). This reveals a significant gap in California's safety net system, the closure of which could enhance the quality of life for millions of low-income individuals. Further examination of CalFresh participation and administrative factors is a key element in the equation of cultivating a food secure population. Synthesizing various data measures to create a CalFresh Efficiency Index, I will ask how better or worse scoring efficiency impacts that county's food insecurity rates.

Significance

CalFresh is one of California's essential and most costly safety nets, aiming to fully cover or significantly alleviate the cost of food, a basic need. Evaluating county-level food insecurity in

congruence with CalFresh administrative efficiency can help highlight opportunities for improvement, reallocation, or expansions that better target and support communities in need. Extensive research links food insecurity to various poor health outcomes, increasing the likelihood and severity of diabetes, mental health disorders, and other diseases (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015). The healthcare costs associated with food insecurity are projected to cost California over \$7 billion annually according to Feeding America. These findings underscore the critical significance and urgency of CalFresh in not only mitigating healthcare costs but also protecting Californians from preventable negative health outcomes

The burdens caused by food insecurity, exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic, are often unequally distributed to marginalized and vulnerable communities. In 2020, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Black households experienced the highest rates of food insecurity at 22% and Hispanic households followed closely behind at 17% compared to White households experiencing the lowest rate at 7% (United States Department of Agriculture). High rates of food insecurities are also reported among American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander households compared to White households (Long et.al). Research examining low CalFresh participation among Asian Americans found Filipino adults with 40% rates of food insecurity and Chinese adults with the lowest rates among Asian origin groups (Vu et al. 2023). This data indicates severe racial and ethnic disparities with further variation within single racial groups. Therefore, food insecurity disproportionately hinders socio-economic mobility and overall well-being, further perpetuating and exacerbating racial inequities. Studies continue to examine the nuanced racial and cultural factors ranging from immigration status, language barriers, and cultural values that impact food insecurity and

CalFresh participation. A nuanced approach considering these racial disparities along with various socio-economic and geographic considerations is necessary for the evaluation and consideration of CalFresh's efficiency in reducing food insecurity. Ensuring Californians have the basic need of food met has enormous potential to reduce disparities and enhance community resilience.

Background

Since the establishment of CalFresh via the Food Stamp Reform Act of 1977, the program has evolved significantly through several policy changes and expansions. Generally, eligible Californians, often measured based on income requirements¹, are allotted an electronic benefit monthly to spend on groceries. Federal funds cover benefits, while the state and counties cover administrative costs. Various changes such as the transition from physical stamps to electronic benefit transfer cards and the establishment of CalFresh Outreach reflect a national and state legislative initiative to destigmatize and increase participation in CalFresh (California Department of Social Services). More recently, in 2019 CalFresh expanded to Social Security Income (SSI) recipients and in 2023, further expanded to include undocumented individuals aged 55 and above (Goldberg). These efforts include targeted expansions to households more vulnerable to food insecurity and have collectively shown an increase in CalFresh participation (Goldberg). The SSI expansion reflects the largest reform to CalFresh in decades, presenting a monumental shift towards a more inclusive and equitable approach to social services in California. While these policy shifts are not without challenges, they signify a fundamental transformation in the state's social services landscape and a movement away from historically exclusionary practices.

¹ Income Requirements: [HERE](#)

On an administrative level, previous research individually analyzes various factors surrounding CalFresh utilization ranging from demographics, participation rates, timeliness, accuracy, and churn rates.² Research highlighting the various barriers to CalFresh found on the administrative level has resulted in the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) implementing various reforms such as eliminating fingerprinting, in-person interviews, lower reporting frequency³ and modernization of applications (Bourbonnais). While there have been major improvements to the application process, participation rates still remain low compared to other states. Churn, which refers to the rate at which individuals enter and exit the CalFresh program, is often cited as a significant challenge in maintaining consistent participation. With semi-annual reporting requirements, data reveals one in five CalFresh applications received is from an individual or household who was on CalFresh within the last 90 days (Alliance to Transform CalFresh). The elimination of churn is often emphasized as a key factor in ensuring “stability and food security”. Further analysis around county-level churn rate disparities is needed to explore the underlying factors contributing to high or low churn rates.

Another factor cited is California’s localized approach in which CalFresh is managed on a county rather than state level. Senate Bill 107, proposed by Senator Scott Weiner in 2024 sought to require state supervision for a CalFresh participation initiative with ambitious goals to decrease barriers and increase participation rates. The bill failed to pass the committee vote due to the drastic administrative shifts required (Botts and Rodriguez-Delgado). Efforts to address California’s low program participation rates are a central focus in CalFresh improvement

² Churn is when an eligible recipient unwillingly loses benefits due to missing reporting documents such as pay stubs, utility bills and personal information forms.

³ CalFresh currently requires semi-annual recertification, meaning recipients need to complete recertification twice a year.

initiatives. Through the Program Reach Index, the CDSS compares estimates of the eligible population to the enrolled population to measure participation rates per county. This index highlights disparities in participation rates on a county level, but research has failed to analyze the index using different administrative factors (churn, timeliness, accuracy, etc.). County comparisons between Fresno with a 90% PRI and Contra Costa with a below 60% PRI illustrate stark differences in county participation. Staffing data revealing the worker-to-eligible population ratio finds Fresno has about 1.6 CalFresh workers per 1,000 people eligible compared to under 1 per 1,000 in Contra Costa (Botts and Rodriguez-Delgado). The analysis reflects potential insight into a strong relationship between program reach and staffing levels.

Policymakers and advocates debate concerns of CalFresh limitations in addressing food deserts and nutritional needs. The USDA defines food deserts as “low-income tracts in which a substantial number or proportion of the population has low access to supermarkets or large grocery stores”. This means CalFresh receiving households may lack adequate means of transportation and proximity to nutrient-dense food that hinders food access. Research reveals the disproportionate impact of food deserts on poor rural and inner-city communities (California Department of Food and Agriculture). Public health advocates additionally highlight the need for CalFresh to expand its scope to consider ensuring nutritional security and promoting healthy eating. Movements to increase CalFresh access to farmers' markets, expand grocery resources to address food deserts, and subsidize the purchase of fresh produce are already underway. The relationship between health outcomes and food/nutrient access consistently show better health outcomes across the board with a nutrient-dense diet (Public Health on Call). The expansion of CalFresh to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients, reflects a broader movement to

ensure California's aging and health-risk vulnerable populations have better access to food. These findings present an opportunity to maximize the positive impacts of SNAP on low-income and vulnerable communities in California. Expansion of food and nutrition access is key to holistically addressing food insecurity. By considering these factors, California is better positioned to optimize CalFresh capacity and policy reforms that address nutrient deficiency and food deserts.

Theory and Argument

The core of my research question is grounded in the understanding that the capacity for food assistance programs to adequately address food insecurity hinges on their administrative efficiency. I theorize that California counties that score higher on the administrative efficiency index (measuring approval rates, error rates, program reach and churn rates) will experience lower levels of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. The logic behind this hypothesis operates on two fronts. First, by streamlining administrative procedures and prioritizing outreach, CalFresh can link eligible individuals to significantly reduced food costs. Secondly, more efficient county operations reduce barriers to participation such as complex & lengthy application processes or high churn, thereby ensuring more reliable and robust access to food.

My hypothesis thus suggests that counties that perform targeted interventions, improve administrative capabilities, and increase accessibility to eligible individuals can effectively expand California's ability to reduce food insecurity state-wide. In this study, the CalFresh Administrative Efficiency Index serves as the independent variable (X) with food insecurity levels as the dependent variable (Y). The two variables share a strong relationship as a county's administrative efficiency directly impacts the accessibility and efficiency of food assistance

through CalFresh. Counties with indicators of better administrative policies are better equipped to handle caseloads promptly with attention and care. A high capacity to process applications, maintain accuracy, implement outreach methods and minimize bureaucratic barriers ensures eligible individuals are receiving and maintaining access to benefits. In turn, counties maintaining a larger proportion of the eligible population provide food insecure individuals with benefits thus reducing overall food insecurity within the county. Counties scoring high on the index through factors such as low churn rates, fast approval times, and high program outreach holistically enhance food security by optimizing access, outreach, and stability.

Despite the significant role of CalFresh, reported food insecurity among non-CalFresh eligible populations remains a limitation to the scope of this research question. CalFresh has strict eligibility requirements leaving subsets of the population that do not qualify for benefits, still food insecure. Due to factors such as undocumented status and incomes slightly above the threshold requirement, measures of CalFresh efficiency fail to capture the entire scope of Californians experiencing limited or uncertain food access.⁴ Therefore, while examinations and improvements to CalFresh efficiency are a crucial variable in assessing the capacity to reduce food insecurity, it does not provide a complete perspective as it excludes the non-eligible food insecure population.

Research Design and Data

To test my hypothesis I conducted a large-n comparative study to investigate the relationship between efficiency and food insecurity in California. With the unit analysis as the county, I measured the efficiency of 58 California counties and compared efficiency scores to

⁴ Individuals convicted of certain drug felonies, some college students and individuals with neither U.S. citizenship nor qualified legal immigrant status are ineligible.

food insecurity rates spanning the years 2014-2021. To determine county efficiency scores, I constructed a CalFresh Efficiency Index measuring a county's performance in four key areas: outreach, timeliness, accuracy, and retention.

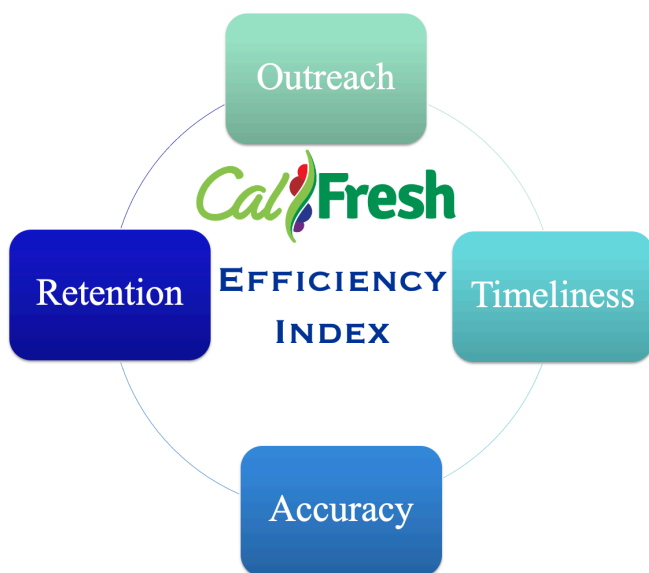


Figure 1. Elements of the CalFresh Efficiency Index

Utilizing data from California's Department of Social Services (CDSS) CalFresh Data Dashboard, these four elements are evaluated across these variables: approval days, churn rates, program reach, and error rates. Program reach is used to determine outreach and measures the extent to which the county reaches its eligible CalFresh population. Program reach rates capture how many eligible individuals and households receive benefits. According to the CDDS, counties with higher populations have more accurate estimates than counties with smaller populations. However, program reach remains the best indicator of county outreach performance. High program reach is a pivotal aspect of the County Efficiency Index as it reflects a county's ability to adequately link food-insecure individuals to assistance. This is particularly significant given California's challenge of low participation rates in comparison to the rest of the nation,

making the program reach a focal point in addressing the complex obstacles associated with food assistance programs.

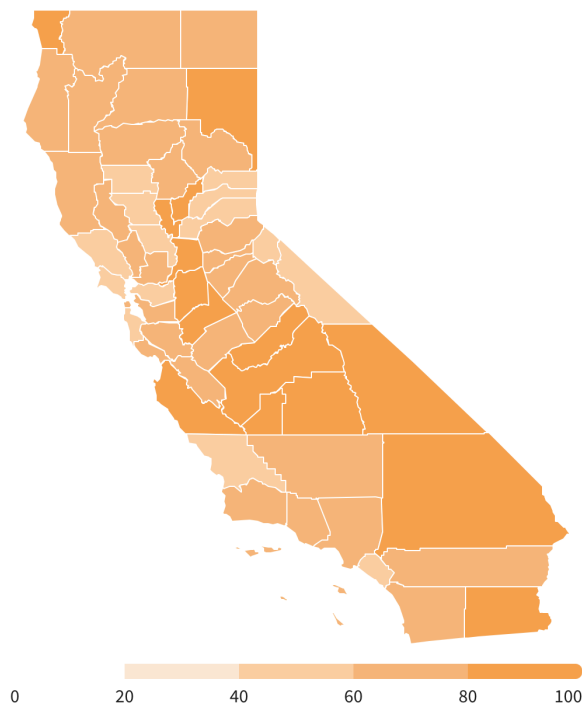


Figure 2. CalFresh Participation Rates in 2017. *Data Source:* [CalMatters](#).

Timeliness is assessed by calculating the average number of days taken for a county to approve a case. A country's ability to process applications promptly is crucial to adequately support food-insecure individuals, thus a shorter number of days results in a higher score on the index. Accuracy is determined by a county's negative error rate, indicating the percentage of cases that receive less than their allotted benefit amount per month. Counties with lower error rates ensure their recipients are receiving the adequate balance necessary to alleviate food costs.

Lastly, the retention score is based on the county's churn rates, which signify the percentage of applicants previously eligible and receiving CalFresh but losing their benefits due to incomplete or tardy document submission. The factors driving high churn vary but often stem

from complex administrative and bureaucratic reporting requirements. Eliminating or reducing administrative-related churn results in more stable access to food assistance and reduces the labor associated with reapplicant caseloads. As lowering churn is a central objective for counties, I employed low churn as a key indicator of retention performance and high efficiency.

Utilizing these four key variables, I constructed an Index to quantify overall county efficiency. Aligning with the study period from 2014 to 2021, I ensured consistency across all variables by standardizing the timelines and values. For instance, timeliness and churn were initially represented quarterly and monthly. I condensed this data by averaging values across quarters and months to represent one year. Using the converted yearly values, I further standardized the data by converting each value to a scale of 0 and 1 to ensure uniformity and comparability across variables. Next, I adjusted directionality as necessary for lower values to indicate higher efficiency.

With the standardized and aligned data set, the four variables were amalgamated into a comprehensive CalFresh Efficiency Index. After careful consideration of prevalent research on CalFresh challenges and areas of optimization, the following weights were assigned: Accuracy (15%), Timeliness (20%), Churn (30%), and Program Reach (35%). The logic behind this weight distribution stems from the significant emphasis on program reach and churn in research analyzing CalFresh and collectively inhabits a larger portion of the value in county performance. The next step involved totaling and normalizing the weighted values to a scale ranging from 0 to 100. Ensuring interoperability, 0 represented the lowest efficiency, while a score of 100 denoted optimal efficiency. The score of 100 is not indicative of complete efficiency but rather the highest efficiency in comparison to the rest of the state. This Index attempts to capture a holistic

picture of each county's efficiency in alleviating food insecurity through the administration of CalFresh benefits. To facilitate comprehension of the Index, I visually represented Index scores through Geographic Information System (GIS) Mapping. Using a color-coded scheme to illustrate geographical variations in county performance, darker hues signified higher scores while light shares represented lower scores.

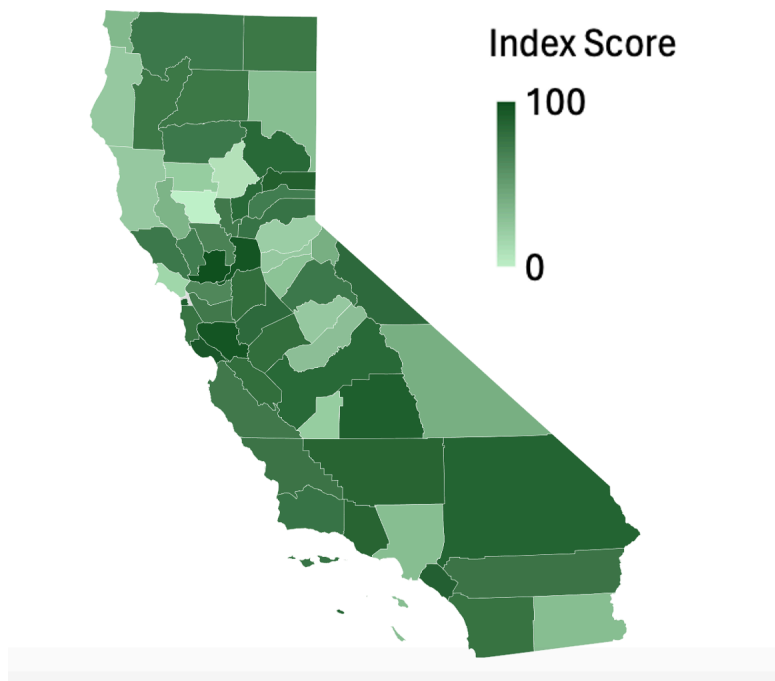


Figure 3. CalFresh Efficiency Index per county. *Data Source: CalFresh Data Dashboard*

To determine a country's food insecurity levels, I sourced data from Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap predictive rates. Using U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics data, Feeding America calculates county-level food insecurity rates based on indicators strongly associated with food insecurity such as poverty, unemployment, homeownership, and disability prevalence. These rates represent the percentage of the county population that faces some level of limited or uncertain access to food. The data provided is presented in decimals which I converted to percentages for a more intuitive display of food insecurity.

I encountered minimal missing data during the data collection process for my Index and food insecurity measurements. The reliability of the data pertaining to CalFresh was particularly high, as it is sourced from official records maintained and reported by relevant government agencies. However, it is important to acknowledge the various caveats to the measures of food insecurity and Index construction that exist. Though Feeding America uses strong indicators, their food insecurity rates are predictive and based on statistical modeling rather than observational reports. This is a limitation faced in my research as observational food insecurity rates are only available at the state level.

In terms of Index construction, various time and resource limitations allowed me only to factor in four variables. Though these variables are informative indicators of efficiency, an index including factors such as dual enrollment rates and negative error rates⁵ could expand the scope of county efficiency. My research question inherently requires a form of program evaluation. Is it important to note that the index exclusively evaluates efficiency and does not assess equity. While an examination of efficiency is crucial to gaining a deepened understanding of CalFresh across the state, it only provides a part of the puzzle. Ideally, an equity index that examines demographic factors in conjunction with the efficiency index would offer further nuance to existing disparities.

Analysis/Results

Upon analysis, several illuminating findings suggest a nuanced relationship between food insecurity and county efficiency. With the exception of minor spikes in 2018 and 2020, I found an overall steady decline in food insecurity between the years 2014 and 2021. This decline in

⁵ Negative error rates refer to the number of cases either terminated in error, denied in error, or suspended in error divided by the number of completed cases. Extracted from the federal SNAPQCS system on a monthly basis.

food insecurity can be attributed to a multi-faceted array of factors related to potential success in CalFresh expansions, governmental policies, and economic growth. However, when grouped into “low” (0-40), “medium” (40-70) and “high” (70-100) efficiency categories, a distinct pattern emerged. From 2014-2021, low-scoring counties consistently exhibited higher rates of food insecurity in comparison to medium and high-scoring counties. The disparity in insecurity rates has remained relatively consistent, with a 2% difference observed between low-scoring and high-medium-scoring counties, except for a notable deviation between 2017 and 2020. During this period, the gap widened to up to 4% between low-scoring and high-medium-scoring counties.

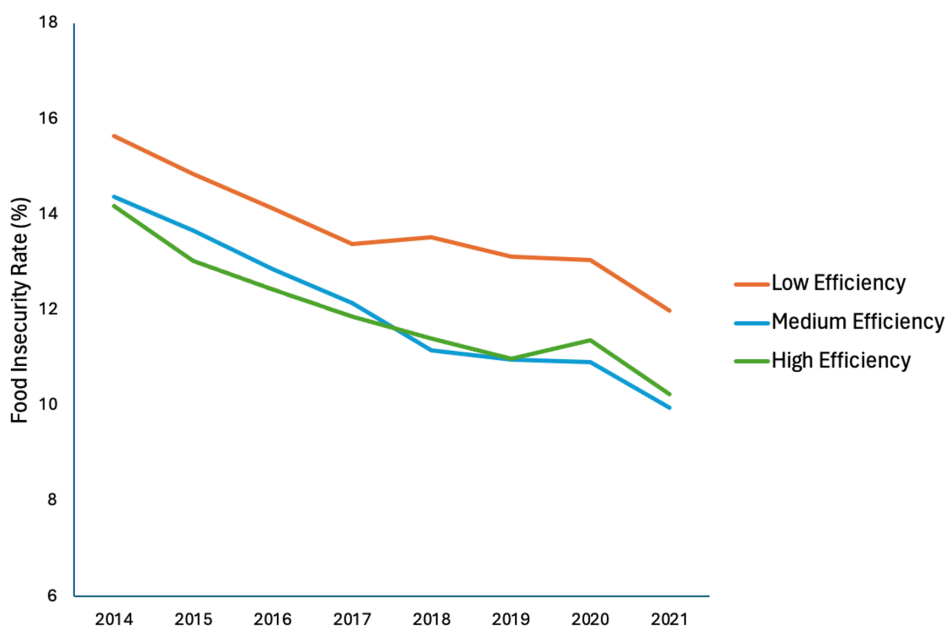


Figure 4. County Efficiency and Food Insecurity Trends (2014-2021). *Data Source: Feeding America and CalFresh Data Dashboard.*

According to the most recent data for the year 2021, low-scoring counties experienced an average of a 13% food insecurity rate while medium and high-scoring counties exhibit a lower

rate of 10%. This indicates a clear relationship between a county scoring low, medium, or high and their subsequent rates of food insecurity.

A correlation analysis between overall food insecurity and index scores revealed a weak negative relationship with an R-value of -0.284. This R-value was determined to not be statistically significant suggesting a complex relationship between these two variables that cannot assume a strong correlation with administrative efficiency alone. While low-scoring counties tend to exhibit higher rates of food insecurity, the lack of statistical significance underscores the need to approach food insecurity with nuance and caution. The graphing of this relationship through a scatter plot further reveals a bimodal distribution of county scores, with a concentration of counties either performing at low or high efficiency.



Figure 5. County Index scores and food insecurity. *Data Source: Feeding America and CalFresh Data Dashboard*

This observed abnormal distribution may be attributed to several factors. The selection and weights of my index variables may suggest disparities or a gap in how counties prioritize and address factors such as churn and program reach. Additionally, this distribution might also be

influenced by inherent disparities or groupings among counties, reflecting variations in resources, demographic compositions, and contextual dynamics.

Further investigation into the distributions of county scores revealed significant geographical disparities. Referencing California's Department of Justice county classifications, 80% of "low" scoring counties are categorized as 'rural' (OAG CA). This reveals a distinct pattern in which rural counties face heightened challenges in CalFresh efficiency. It is also important to note that densely populated urban counties such as Los Angeles were also in the "low" category. Counties with the highest efficiency scores tended to be concentrated in the Sacramento Valley and the Bay Area Regions. Colusa, a rural agriculturally dominated county, scored a zero on the index and Solano, a more urbanized county scored a 100. I cannot definitively accept or reject my hypothesis, as while I observed higher rates of food insecurity in low-scoring counties, the correlation between index scores and food insecurity was weak and statistically insignificant. Nonetheless, this highlights a significant gap in administrative efficiency. Targeted interventions and enhanced outreach efforts could potentially enhance food security outcomes for historically low-scoring counties and disadvantaged rural communities.

Implications and conclusion

In examining the implications of the disparities revealed by this research, it becomes evident that structural and environmental challenges faced by rural communities may play a significant role. Factors such as limited resources, high poverty rates, transportation barriers, and lower food access contribute to higher instances of food insecurity in rural areas, thereby increasing the administrative burden and hindering efficiency at the county level. Additionally, gaps in attitudes and stigma towards food assistance may exacerbate these disparities.

While these theories provide potential explanations, the complex terrain of CalFresh and food insecurity requires further investigation to fully understand the underlying factors driving these dynamics. An exploration of reverse causality may shed light on whether higher levels of food insecurity within a county influence its efficiency scores, rather than the other way around. This calls for comprehensive research to disentangle the complex relationship between efficiency scores and food insecurity.

The findings of this efficiency disparity offer valuable insights into the relationship between CalFresh and food insecurity, offering implications for policy reforms and program adjustments. The opportunity for CalFresh administrative processes to serve as a priority policy consideration in alleviating food insecurity in California is highlighted, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Allocating more resources towards ensuring high efficiency across the state and targeting efforts to enhance CalFresh utilization in counties with geographic disparities can contribute to lowering food insecurity statewide. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the complexity and multi-faceted nature of addressing food insecurity. Administrative efficiency alone may not suffice, especially in disadvantaged communities, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and outreach initiatives.

Further research is necessary to collect county-level observational food insecurity data and delve deeper into administrative factors such as caseload per month and staff levels to inform more targeted initiatives. Additional data regarding recipient experiences during the application process, including call wait times and the duration taken for application and reporting requirements, would contribute further insight into factors driving efficiency and participation. Recommendations for further analysis given this data is readily available would call for a more

developed Index that captures an overall scope of county efficiency. This in congruence with an equity index would enhance interpretability and offer valuable insight into disparities beyond geography.

While this study offers valuable insights, it also illuminates the need for continued research and a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing CalFresh efficiency and food insecurity. By addressing these challenges comprehensively and implementing targeted interventions, policymakers and stakeholders can work towards achieving equitable access to food assistance and reducing food insecurity across California.

In conclusion, food is not merely sustenance, the source of nourishment transcends a basic fulfillment of physical needs, seeping into all aspects of an individual, family, or child's livelihood and future. Despite food being produced and consumed in abundance in California and the country, a significant portion of the population is barred from access. By delving into the root causes and solutions to food insecurity through well-funded programs such as CalFresh, our state can ensure that vital support reaches those in need. Ultimately, the fight against food insecurity transcends mere notions of fairness—it's about fostering resilient and empowered communities. Ensuring universal access to nutritious food is not just about nourishing bodies; it's about nourishing a California in which all individuals are supported. The fight for food justice envisions a future where hunger no longer stands as a barrier to success, but rather as a challenge that has been collectively overcome.

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