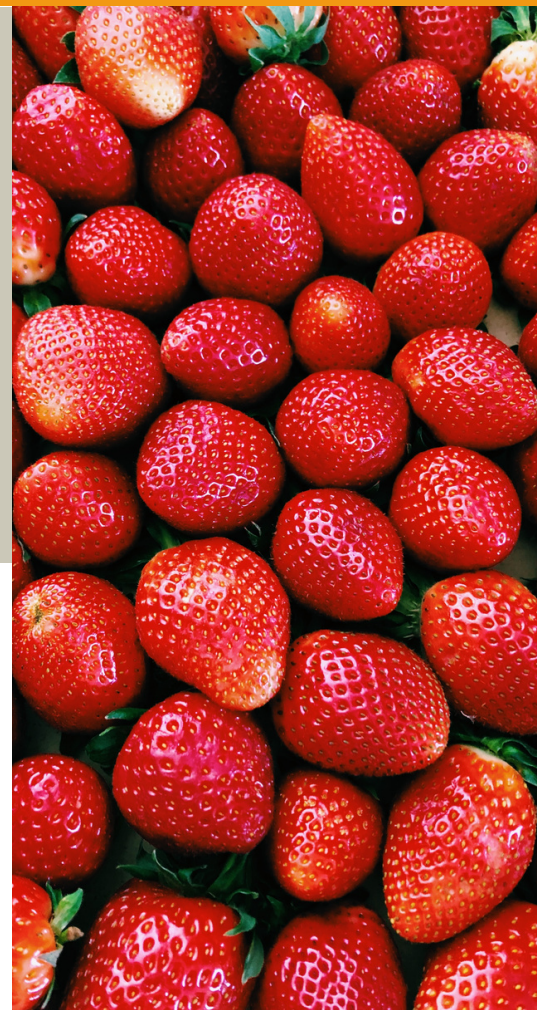




# The Blum Center & Second Harvest Food Bank Partner to Address Food Insecurity in Santa Cruz County



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## What is Food Insecurity?

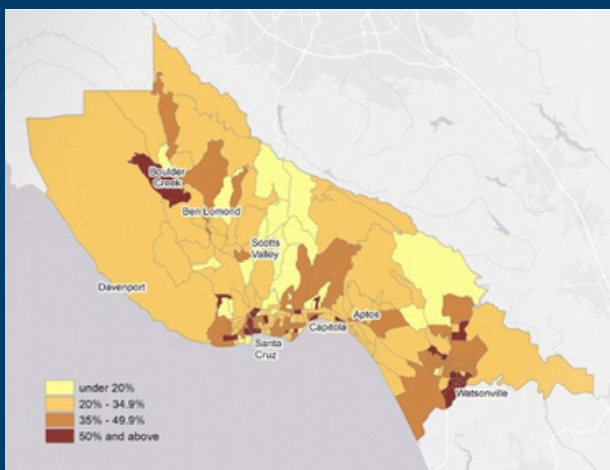
The Blum Center, directed by Professor of Psychology Heather Bullock, conducts community-engaged research on poverty alleviation – with a specific focus on food and housing insecurity, fiscal equity, and women and families– to advance economic justice. Since 2018, the Center has collaborated with their long-standing partner Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County, the first food bank to be established in California and the second oldest in the nation, to provide better estimates of food insecurity. Food insecurity refers to limited or uncertain access to nutritious safe food necessary to lead a healthy and active life. Common indicators of food insecurity include inability to access sufficient food for balanced, nutritious meals, running out of food due to financial constraints, skipping meals, cutting down on portions, and hunger experienced as a result of insufficient access to food.

## A Better Estimate of Food Insecurity

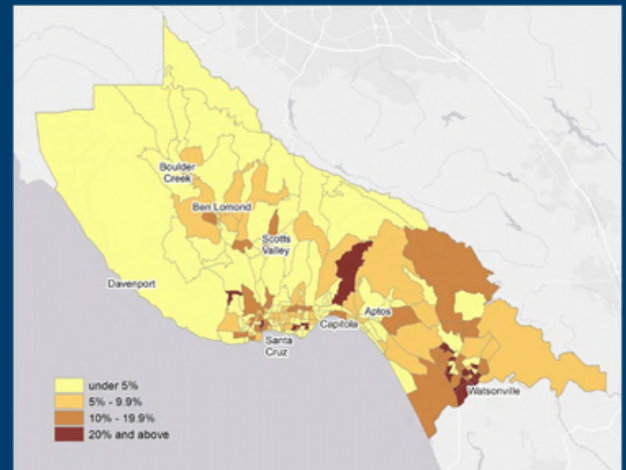
Second Harvest former CEO Willy Elliot-McCrea contacted the Blum Center about calculating a food insecurity index for Santa Cruz County that would provide a more fine-grained assessment of regional food insecurity than that offered by national estimates. Elliot-McCrea was interested in testing an index that would incorporate existing efforts to address food insecurity and allow the food bank and its network of partners throughout the County to assess the extent to which food needs are being met. The team met regularly to develop their model and fine-tune its calculation.

### Maps from the 2019 Report:

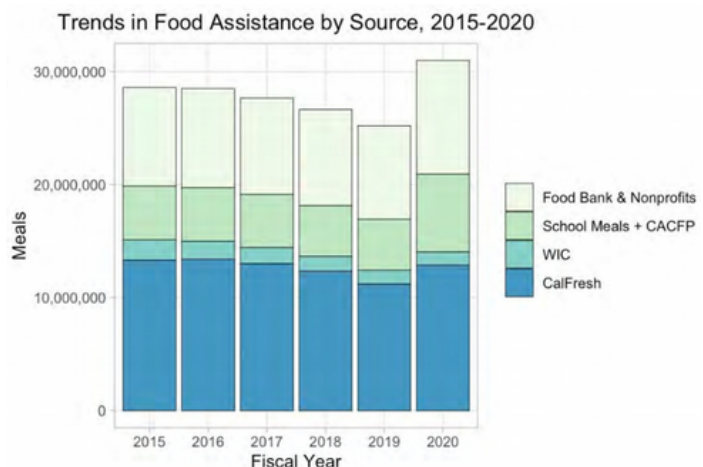
The percent of households with an annual income under \$50,000.



The percent of households reporting participation in SNAP.



David Amaral, a doctoral candidate in politics at UC Santa Cruz, was a crucial participant in these conversations. In consultation with Michael Enos, a Second Harvest partner who had conducted similar modeling for Santa Clara County, he built an index that provides a metric for estimating the extent of food insecurity experienced by county residents, food assistance provided by governmental and nonprofit sources, and tracks both over time. Unlike national indices, the index Amaral developed uses detailed information about food assistance provided by food banks, nongovernmental organizations, and nonprofits. Based on these data, Amaral has also generated “SNAP-Gap” maps for the region, which display the difference between the percent of the population qualifying for SNAP and the percent reporting participation in the program.





Their first findings were in the report, [Tracking the Meal Gap in Santa Cruz County: An Index of Food Insecurity, 2014-2018](#), which was shared at a gathering of nonprofit, government, and community stakeholders in the fall of 2019. Prior to that, a food insecurity index of this kind had not been calculated for Santa Cruz County. The event also marked one of the first large gatherings of County food and nutrition providers, nonprofit leaders, community members, and other stakeholders to discuss strategies for tackling food insecurity. The Blum Center is committed to providing findings that are useful to their partners and can be utilized to inform economic justice initiatives. Since 2019, the Blum Center and Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County have continued to release reports examining regional food insecurity, with updates to the index as the Blum Center refines how food insecurity is measured in the County.

## Connecting Food Insecurity to Housing Affordability

The Blum Center and Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County have collaborated on another project to better understand the lived experiences of people facing food insecurity. This project focuses on the experiences of different groups of County residents, the challenges they face, the accessibility of resources, and their suggestions for strengthening programs and policies. This information can help organizations such as Second Harvest strengthen their outreach and services. Additionally, while housing costs are a known driver of food insecurity, the food insecurity index does not assess how housing and food insecurity interact. This qualitative study will allow the team to better capture this relationship.

Emily Hentschke, a doctoral student in social psychology at UC Santa Cruz, assisted with recruiting and training ten community facilitators, some of whom are Second Harvest staff, on how to conduct listening circles with community members across the county. These facilitators have conducted ten focus groups with over 100 Santa Cruz County residents including people who are older, people experiencing homelessness, farmworkers, low-income parents and people living in affordable housing.

As with the development of the index, this project is equally collaborative. Working closely with Second Harvest staff, listening circles were conducted in partnership with seven additional local organizations to involve as many stakeholders as possible.

## Future Directions

Engaging community members in the research process has fostered impactful conversations and community-driven recommendations for strengthening food security in Santa Cruz County. Data analysis is still ongoing. The findings will highlight the specific experiences of different groups that are at heightened risk of experiencing food insecurity as well as policy recommendations for reducing food insecurity and promoting the well-being of individuals and families in Santa Cruz County. The Blum Center recently released its [third food insecurity index](#), which examines food insecurity in Santa Cruz during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Key findings from the March 2022 report

- In the 2019-20 fiscal year, 41,000 households were at risk of food insecurity in Santa Cruz county. This “at risk” population represents 1 in every 3 county residents.
- Despite food assistance efforts, there remains an estimated 9 million+ “missed meals” in Santa Cruz county over the course of the year. If these missed meals were distributed equally across the entire at-risk population, each individual would have missed about 2 meals each week of the year.
- Over the course of the 2019-20 year, it is estimated that 23% of the need for assistance went unmet. This is the lowest level of unmet need of any year included in the Blum Center’s analysis and is the result of significant increases in federally-funded food assistance during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Cumulatively, 5 million more food assistance meals were provided in fiscal year 2019-20 than in 2018-19.



# Questions? Contact us.

**Blum Center on Poverty, Social Enterprise, and Participatory Governance**

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"Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County is an incredible partner that uses research to understand and respond to community needs, and amplify perspectives that are often excluded from mainstream discussions of food insecurity."

- *Emily Hentschke*

## For Further Reading

To read the March 2022 report on food insecurity in Santa Cruz, [please click here](#).

McNulty, Jennifer. "Santa Cruz County faces significant gap in food security, study finds." UC Santa Cruz News Center, November 18, 2019.

Available at: <https://news.ucsc.edu/2019/11/blum-foodinsecurity.html>