

CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

Why Southern California's most vulnerable youths face hunger during school holidays



Already-vulnerable youths who face food uncertainty are at risk of being coerced into labor and sex work, a human rights organization warns.
(Christopher Furlong / Getty Images)



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- Orange County nonprofits that work with unhoused youths say about 20% lack reliable meals and that intensifies when schools

go on break.

- When their food situation worsens, youths can be more vulnerable to exploitation by human traffickers.

The holidays are a time when people gather with loved ones and celebrate abundance, but when California's most vulnerable young people aren't going to school because they are on break, it means even more uncertainty over where to find food. And that leads to even greater risk.

That's the finding of a coalition of Orange County nonprofits that is tracking 500 at-risk youths to better understand what they need to live more stable lives and steer clear of abusive situations.

The collaboration uses a new tool for digital case management, research and prevention, developed by EverFree, which supports human trafficking survivors, in partnership with UC Irvine. It allows the nonprofits to collect information from young people, ranging from those in elementary or middle school to 24-year-olds.

Almost half the students tracked with the digital tool, who were referred by social-work case managers, said they aren't living a healthy lifestyle, the nonprofits said. One in 5 said they often don't know how they'll eat and one-third said they struggle with mental and emotional well-being.

All of the participants come from families that are either unhoused, living in temporary housing such as motels or sharing crowded dwellings with multiple, unrelated families, said Shelby Feliciano-Sabala, a social worker who is chief partnership officer at Project Hope Alliance, a nonprofit that helps children experiencing homeless. The organization is working on the project with EverFree and Stand Up for Kids Orange County.

School can be much more than a place to learn, Feliciano-Sabala said.

“Youth experiencing homelessness get a sense of belonging, safety and routine when they’re at school,” she said. “When you don’t have that routine, and you don’t have access to that food, that disrupts your regular life.”

When already-vulnerable youths undergo even more uncertainty about getting food, there is often someone waiting to exploit that situation by luring them into coerced labor and sex work or subjecting them to gender-based violence, said Kelsey Morgan, co-founder and chief executive officer of EverFree.

“We’ve heard stories from many of our other partners of youth who run away and are approached by a trafficker who simply offers a McDonald’s cheeseburger,” Morgan said.

Feliciano-Sabala said she’s heard of traffickers winning over young people with a gift as meager as a bag of Takis rolled tortilla chips.

“Food insecurity is actually resulting in runaway situations where kids are so desperate that any person willing to offer them something small is winning their trust,” she said.

Feliciano-Sabala said private nonprofits represent “critical infrastructure” all year round, but particularly during the holidays, when the need tends to spike.

For families living in their cars, for instance, her nonprofit distributes gift cards to restaurants where they can eat in more comfort and safety, she said. Families staying in hotels with nowhere to cook can receive prepared food such as turkeys and tamales. Her nonprofit also distributes food from its small pantry or buys groceries for families in need.

Inadequate food is an [ongoing problem](#) for young people and families across California and the U.S., and it’s not only school-age children who are at risk.

One in 4 college students nationwide has an unreliable food situation, according to an analysis by the nonpartisan U.S. Government Accountability Office, which provides fact-based information to Congress. However, most of those who are potentially eligible are not enrolled in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — or SNAP — the GAO found.

Congress passed a law in 2024 designed to raise enrollment in federal food-aid among students by giving the U.S. Department of Education the authority to share student data with both federal and state SNAP agencies to determine their eligibility. But in a report this year, the GAO said that the department still had not made a plan to share this data, or given states guidance about the benefits of the law.

Self-assessments completed by young people ages 18-24 in Orange County as part of the nonprofits' data collection mirror the food-access concerns that young adults across the country report. The research shows about half go to an institution of higher learning full-time, a third go to school and work part-time and the rest work full-time. So even though they have income, many are worrying about food, Morgan said.

In fact, getting enough to eat ranked higher than adequate clothing and safe, stable housing among college-age students who shared their top priorities ahead of the holiday season in 2024, she said. The nonprofits plan to release more insights about youths they're tracking in 2026.

“When you look to the data of what these youth are asking for, it sheds a lot of light on what those core vulnerabilities are,” Morgan said. “These are individuals who want, desperately, dignified employment. They're prioritizing things like savings, household income, money management, skills for employment and healthy lifestyles.”

Feliciano-Sabala said the digital tool was developed in response to the desire among case workers to offer help that is more tailored to those in their care.

The nonprofits hope to share their findings with service providers and policymakers to better address what young people say about their lives and dreams.

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