

# Homelessness & Food Deserts in Los Angeles

 [povertyusa.org/stories/homelessness-food-deserts-los-angeles](https://povertyusa.org/stories/homelessness-food-deserts-los-angeles)

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Homelessness and food accessibility have been a problem in many American communities for years, but they're especially prevalent in Los Angeles. This year, LA's homelessness report stated that within city limits, over 41,000 people live in streets, cars, and shelters -- a 14% increase over last year. Even more unsettling is that Black people only make up around 8% of LA County's total population, but account for 34% of its homeless population. Poverty does not strike all demographics equally. Nearly all of the roots of systemic poverty such as lack of access to food, affordable housing, and quality education disproportionately affect communities of color.

For 50 years now, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has worked to address the root causes of poverty in order to reduce inequality and empower communities that are disproportionately affected by poverty to lead healthy, dignified lives. A fair portion of our work has focused on addressing food inequality and homelessness in Los Angeles. Studies have concluded that:

"full inclusion of all residents in the economic, social, and political life of the [LA] region, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, or neighborhood of residence—is essential for regional prosperity. Ensuring that people of all races and ethnicities can participate and reach their full potential has become more than just the right thing to do—it is an absolute economic imperative."

Our work to address social and economic disparities is vitally important in striving for a society where all can thrive. A myriad of other issues arise when such a large percentage of the population is homeless-- lack of healthcare, crowded or limited affordable housing, limited access to transportation, and a newer phenomenon commonly known as "food deserts".

## What is a Food Desert?

Fact: Around 1 in 8 Americans are food insecure.

Food deserts are geographical areas in which residents lack access to affordable, healthy foods. For urban areas, a food desert means that the majority of the population lives over 1 mile away from an affordable grocery store; in rural areas, the distance is 10 miles. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that 2.3 million Americans live more than 1 mile away from a grocery store and do not own a car.

Sometimes in urban areas, public transportation helps, but a grocery trip may take several bus or train rides -- and many who live in marginalized communities also lack access to public transportation. The term "food desert" also takes into account the affordability of local grocery stores. Oftentimes, grocery stores are present in a low-income community, but unemployment, low-wage jobs, and other factors create conditions that make those stores unaffordable to the surrounding community. "Building a new store does not mean people will shop there; the store has to offer the products, prices, and other characteristics that shoppers value," according to the USDA.

Due to the lack of access to nutritious foods, people who live in food deserts often rely on fast food and convenience stores for sustenance, putting them at higher risk of diet-related health issues including diabetes, heart disease, obesity, hypertension, and more. These compounding health issues plus a lack of access to affordable healthcare in many of these communities adds even further economic strain on families and perpetuates the cycle of poverty we so diligently work to break.

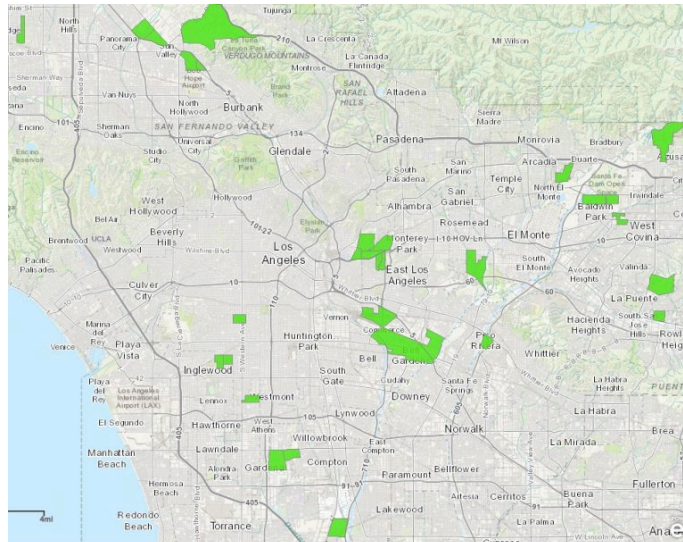
The USDA identifies the following community characteristics as those most likely to become a food desert:

- A large or sparse population
- Low-income residents

- High unemployment rates
- Inadequate access to transportation
- Fewer food retailers that sell fresh produce at affordable prices

## Food Deserts in Los Angeles

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Map of food deserts in Los Angeles, courtesy of Food Forward & USDA

Los Angeles, a beacon of hope for some to follow their dreams, is also home to extreme poverty and homelessness. Its communities range from some of the wealthiest in the country to some of the poorest; in fact, many neighborhoods do not even have a single grocery store. This means that many people rely on convenience stores and fast food for the majority of meals, which causes and exacerbates many of the population's health issues.

## Homelessness Statistics in Los Angeles

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In 2017, more than 1.4 million children aged 6-18 were homeless in the United States. Meanwhile, any household with children is twice as likely to experience food insecurity. As you can imagine, research shows there is a major overlap between the lack of access to healthy foods and homelessness in Los Angeles. According to the city's most recent homelessness report:

- In 2020, 66,433 homeless people and counting live in LA County, a 12% increase from last year.
- The city of Los Angeles saw a 14% increase in homelessness from 2019, rising to over 44,000 people.
- Around 58,913 homeless lived in Los Angeles County in 2019, a 12% increase from 2018, showing a troubling trend.
- The majority of homeless people in LA County have lived in the area for 10+ years. Around 75% of homeless people in the area say they have lived in southern California before becoming homeless.
- Black people are 4x more likely to experience homelessness than in the County population overall.
- In 2019, LA's rehousing system helped 22,769 people move into permanent housing.
- This year, 18,395 people experiencing homelessness in L.A. County were sheltered, up from 14,722 in 2019.

## The Link Between Homelessness and Food Instability

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Research has been done that analyzed the health and eating habits of people experiencing homelessness in Minnesotan food deserts. After conducting surveys at homeless shelters and evaluating the price and availability of healthy foods in a variety of neighborhoods, the study showed that "80% of the sample was overweight or obese, with women consuming less than the recommended level for the fruits, vegetables, and milk food groups and excess for the fats/oils/sweets food group." While this study was conducted in Minnesota, the findings can be applied more widely; food deserts and food quality both outside of and within homeless shelters has been an issue in other areas of the country as well.

They also found that people experiencing homelessness in the area are more likely to live in a food desert because, despite the efforts of local food banks, "neighboring stores [have] limited food choice and food stamps did not adequately cover food costs. Results from the food store survey found the majority of food prices exceeded Midwest or national market-based prices (MBP)."

The cycle of poverty has many factors that intertwine and exacerbate each other. When someone becomes homeless, they are more likely to experience inadequate access to healthy food, whether due to location, economic situation, or both. When someone lacks access to healthy foods, they are more likely to experience health issues. They are also more likely to lack access to healthcare, which sends them further into poverty.

The organizations we support work to address the root causes of poverty and to end this vicious cycle in the U.S.

With the COVID-19 pandemic in full swing, the country has seen more than 20 million people lose their job, with an estimated 40 million who are losing their homes due to evictions and foreclosures. Coronavirus is having numerous consequences in both public health and economic stability for millions of families, which is further exacerbating both homeless and food inequality issues. More than ever, the work of CCHD-supported organizations is central to addressing these economic and social inequalities.

## Organizations That Address the Causes of Poverty in LA

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The Catholic Campaign for Human Development supports organizations throughout the United States that work toward economic justice, including those who empower local communities to address homelessness and food deserts in Los Angeles. Here are some examples of the great work that's been done over the years:

- **POWER:** People Organized for Westside Renewal or POWER, is a community organization in LA that creates change through developing leaders in low-income communities to empower their residents to improve aspects such as the right to housing, clean air and water, and healthy/stable neighborhoods. Lately, they have been organizing low-income tenants and focusing on improving housing policies in LA and LA County. They do outreach to homeless families and provide support for low-income Black and Latino residents.
- **TRUST South LA:** TRUST focuses on affordable housing and providing access to parks, healthy foods, and more to low-income families in south LA. Many of these families who have lived in south LA for years have been pushed out due to skyrocketing property values and rent prices. Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, they created a helpful resource page that overviews some city initiatives such as reductions to gas bills, financial assistance, as well as rent assistance. TRUST has also been running free meal distributions every Monday and Thursday from 12PM-2PM during the pandemic.
- **One LA IAF:** One LA is a "broad-based organization, made up of member congregations, schools, and nonprofits who shape the organization's agenda and teach their constituents how to be effective public people." Some of the issues they tackle include criminal justice reform, housing security, education reform, and equity, as well as access to affordable healthcare for all.