

# Learning from CalFresh Pandemic Boosts

September 10, 2024

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# Pandemic policies offer an opportunity to explore and improve CalFresh

- CalFresh is the safety net program that reduces poverty by most
- Expanding during recessions can target assistance to low-income families and local economies
- Federal legislation in March 2020 allowed for boosts: emergency allotments
  - Who saw major changes as a result?
  - How did resources shift for participating households?
  - Did these boosts impact participation, churn, and decisions about work?

# We leveraged administrative records for this study

- Monthly records for CalFresh and other safety net programs
  - CalFresh, CalWORKs, SSI/SSP
    - Participation (MEDS)
  - CalFresh and CalWORKs
    - Benefit amounts (EBT/SARS)
- Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits and UI-covered wages
  - UI payment data (monthly) and EDD Base Wage file (quarterly)

## Emergency allotments were authorized starting in March 2020

- Initial policy gave all enrolled households the max benefit for their household size
- Average CalFresh benefit was 43% higher in March than Feb
- Benefits no longer increased or decreased as income changed (so long as households remain eligible)
- Lawsuits argued that FFCRA allowed for increases beyond the maximum

# Federal government revised design in April 2021

- Enrolled households now guaranteed to receive at least \$95 beyond the benefit they were eligible for
- Average benefits increased 11% between March and April 2021

# Timeline of pandemic changes to CalFresh

2020

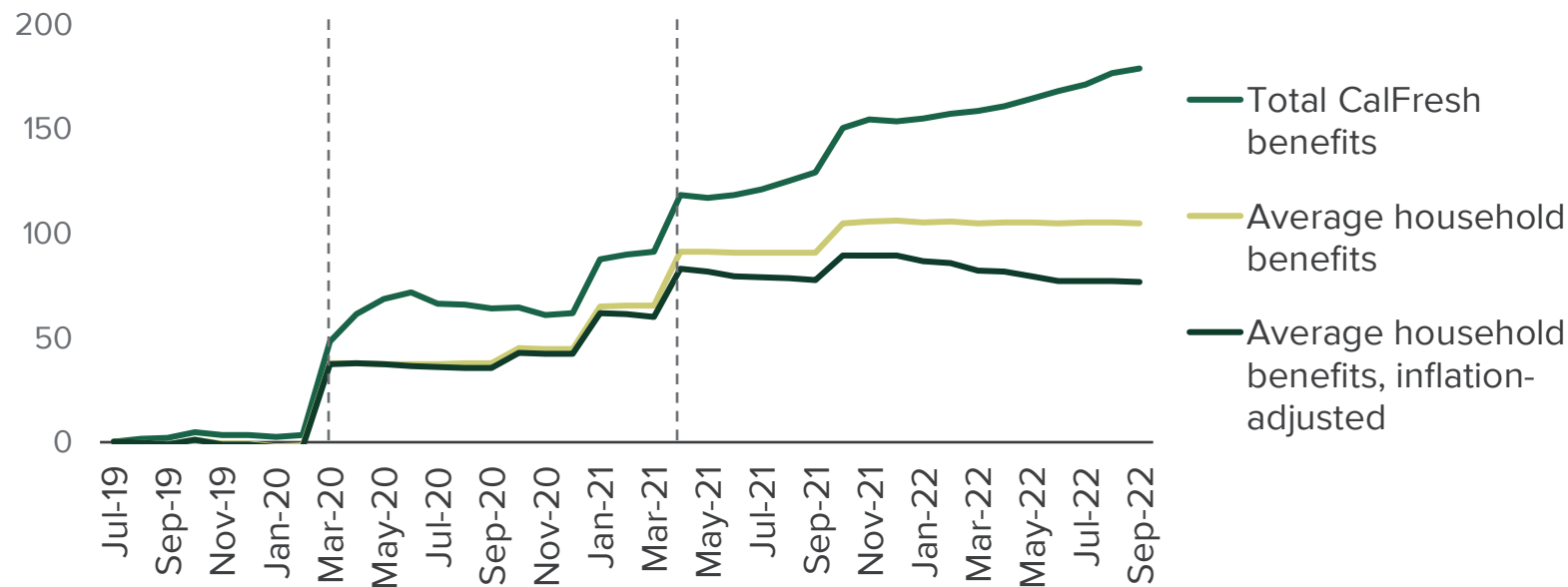
- March: Emergency allotments, eligibility reviews paused
- April: Time limits waived and online grocery purchasing allowed

2021

- January: Benefits increased and college student eligibility changed
- April: Design of emergency allotments revised
- October: Benefits increased to account for changes in food costs – as temporary increase from January ended

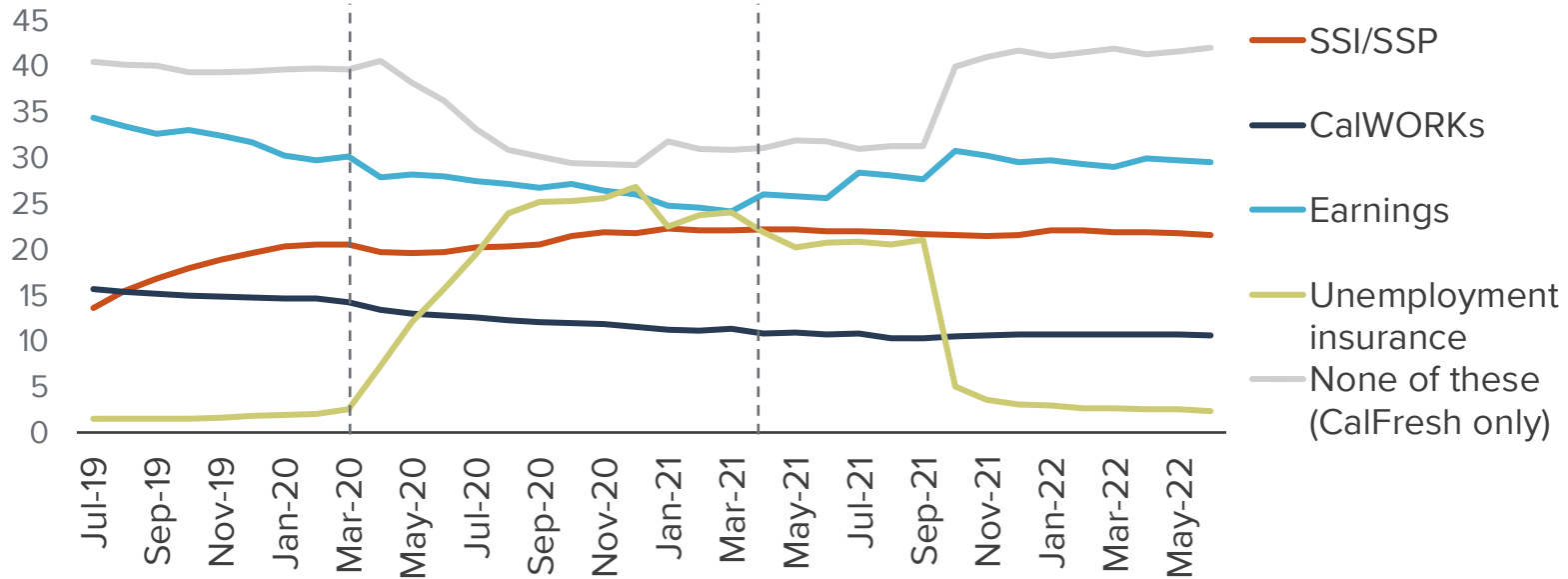
# CalFresh benefits rose through pandemic, inflation offset that growth

Change relative to July 2019 (%)



# UI took on a major role as resources changed

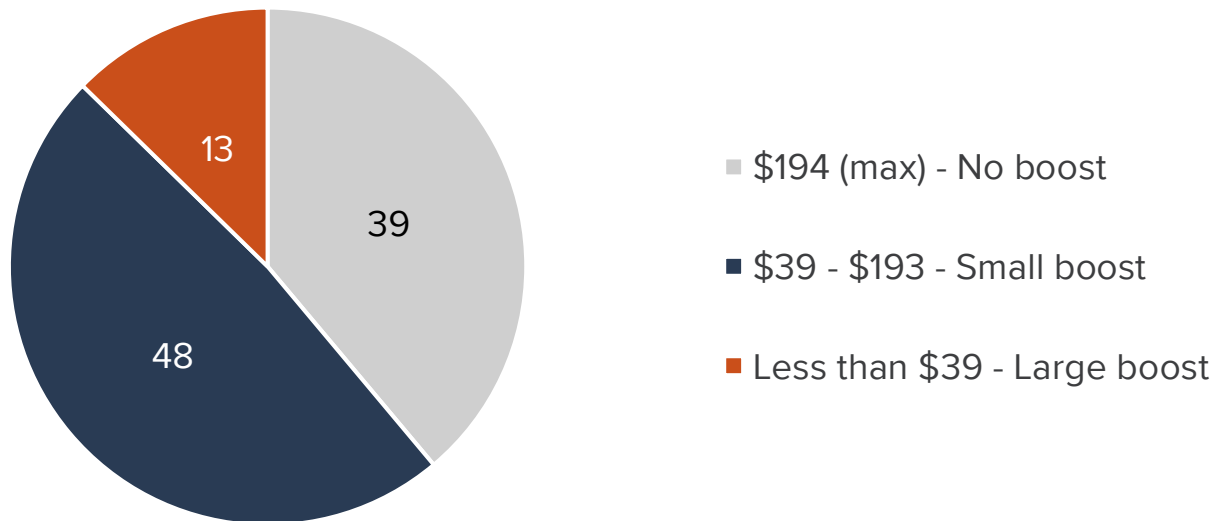
% of CalFresh households with income from source





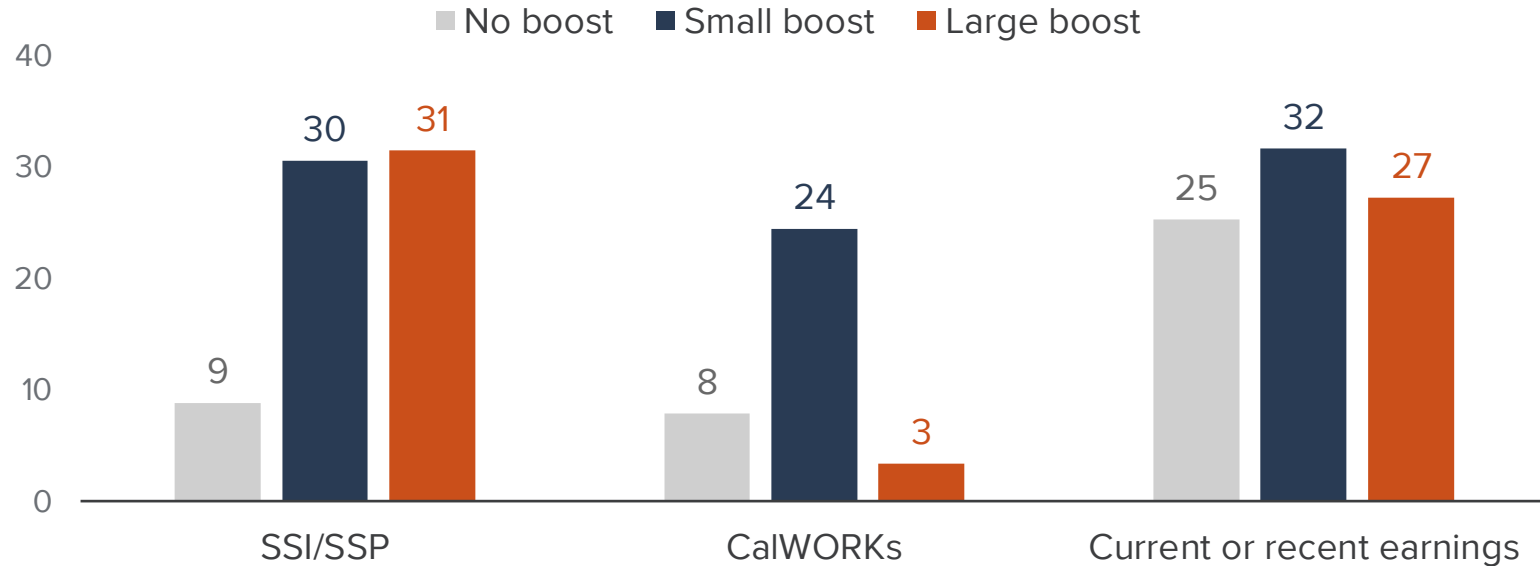
# Only 6 in 10 CalFresh households saw boosts in March 2020

% of households by February 2020 benefit amount (single person)



# March 2020 boost targeted higher earners and those with safety net income

% with income source, spring 2020



## Allotments likely kept eligible households enrolled, but had no impact on work

- March 2020: eligible households stayed enrolled—or returned
  - 8 to 15 months after boost, 14% to 18% higher participation
- April 2021: continued participation did not increase
  - Benefit increase may have been lower incentive for households with fewest resources
- Likely no impact on earnings or employment, consistent with national research on SNAP

# Conclusions and recommendations

- Future responses could be more inclusive and equitable
  - e.g., rolling out boosts to all households at once, focusing increases on lowest-income households
- California can maximize federal dollars for CalFresh—and take targeted actions at the state level
  - e.g., ensuring households deduct all eligible expenses, seeking waivers, or boosting cash benefits

# Notes on the use of these slides

These slides were created to accompany a presentation. They do not include full documentation of sources, data samples, methods, and interpretations. Findings and conclusions are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of the Department of Social Services or the California Health and Human Services Agency.

To avoid misinterpretation, please contact:

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Thank you for your interest in this work.