

# Exploring Food Insecurity for Postsecondary Students in Washington

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## Executive Summary

This report set out to examine food insecurity among postsecondary students in Washington. Findings presented in the report use several data sources, including administrative data and survey data to help explore the issue. Despite some evidence of declining food insecurity and public benefit receipt, data indicate that food insecurity is still a pressing issue for postsecondary students in Washington. Existing data may also not be comprehensive enough to identify all postsecondary students who are experiencing food insecurity. It is also likely that the COVID-19 crisis has added further challenges for students to access basic needs. Additional research should continue to assess the extent of food insecurity among postsecondary students in Washington and seek solutions to help students meet their basic needs so they can be successful in higher education.

Many students struggle to pay for the costs of living while they are in postsecondary education, and some even face food insecurity. Food insecurity may be detrimental to students' academic performance, ability to persist and complete postsecondary programs, and their overall health and wellbeing. Addressing food insecurity may be an important aspect of improving Washington's educational attainment and making postsecondary education more accessible and supportive for students of all social and economic backgrounds.

### Evidence in Washington shows that food insecurity is a persistent issue and is also impacting postsecondary students:

- Nearly 9 percent of Washington households surveyed between 2018 and 2020 indicated that they were food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021).<sup>1</sup>
- Surveys conducted during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 showed an increase in food insecurity in Washington. In one study, 27 percent of households indicated that they were food insecure. Food insecurity was more prevalent for people of color and households with children (Otten et al., 2021).
- Among postsecondary students in Washington, food insecurity was even higher. A pre-pandemic survey of community college students in Washington in 2019 found that 41 percent had experienced food insecurity in the last month, slightly higher than national rate of 39 percent of community college students (*The Hope Center*, 2020).

#### Defining Food Insecurity

The U.S. Department of Agriculture assesses food security using survey questions that measure households' ability to obtain enough food to meet its needs. Households with **low food security** are those that reported reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. However, there is little or no indication of reduced food intake. Households were considered to have **very low food security** if they reported multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns or reduced food intake.

<sup>1</sup> Food insecurity is defined consistently across surveys and use the USDA definition described in the box.

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There are well-established food assistance programs available to help individuals and families who are experiencing food insecurity, including the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). SNAP benefits could provide many postsecondary students with additional support to access food. However, confusing restrictions around SNAP eligibility for students may be a barrier to receiving SNAP. As many as 2 million students nationwide who may be eligible for SNAP were not receiving benefits (GAO, 2018). Clarifying student eligibility rules through sharing enhanced information with institutions and students could improve access to SNAP.

**Data reveals widespread SNAP receipt in Washington:**

- There were approximately 500,000 households who received SNAP in Washington in 2020. This is significantly higher than 2019, prior to the pandemic.
- The proportion of Washington residents who received SNAP has declined over the past decade. However, women and people of color had consistently higher rates of SNAP receipt over time.
- Among postsecondary students in Washington, approximately 24,000 students who were enrolled in postsecondary education at least half-time received SNAP in 2020.
- There were fewer postsecondary students who received SNAP in Washington in recent years. This decline is consistent with the trend of postsecondary enrollment decline over time.

Although SNAP receipt for postsecondary students in Washington has declined in recent years, recent changes to SNAP—including laws to increase awareness of benefits and temporary expansion of eligibility criteria for students—may help students who are experiencing food insecurity. Other programs at the state and institution levels can also help support students access food. Beyond existing policies, additional state policy changes and proposals can play an important role in reducing food insecurity by maximizing flexibility in benefits, improving information, and supporting campus-based programs to help students. Addressing food insecurity may ultimately improve educational outcomes for all students in Washington.

## Introduction

Higher education has significant benefits for individuals and the state. Those with higher education tend to fare better in the labor market, including higher average earnings and a lower risk of unemployment. And, as our state's economy advances, there is a growing need for workers with postsecondary credentials. Because of these benefits, the state has set a goal to increase the proportion of young adults (ages 25 to 44) with a postsecondary credential to 70 percent. However, the state currently falls short of its goal. There are also persistent disparities in educational attainment, including for those with lower incomes and some communities of color. Reducing barriers to educational attainment to improve outcomes for these subgroups is both an equity issue and an economic imperative for our state.

Increasing access to higher education has been a priority for Washington, and the state has implemented policies to increase participation, especially for students from lower-income backgrounds. A major component of this policy agenda has been need-based state financial aid. The Washington College Grant is the most extensive state financial assistance program, covering up to full tuition at any public institution for students whose household incomes fall below 55 percent of the state median level. Students with slightly higher incomes, up to 100 percent of the state median level, are eligible for partial awards. The Washington College Grant is a boon for lower- and middle-income students and can make college more affordable and reduce the financial burden of college attendance. However, tuition is not the only cost of college, and evidence suggests that many students have remaining financial needs.

The financial costs of postsecondary education go well beyond tuition alone. For instance, institutions include books, housing, food, transportation, and personal expenses, in addition to tuition, when calculating the cost of attendance. And despite financial aid to help with tuition, many students may struggle to pay for the other costs while in school or even face basic needs insecurity. Basic needs insecurity may be detrimental to students' academic performance, ability to persist and complete postsecondary programs, and their overall health and wellbeing. Addressing basic needs insecurity may be an important aspect of improving our state's educational attainment and ensuring that postsecondary education is more accessible and supportive for students of all economic backgrounds (see Box 1).

### Box 1. Defining basic needs insecurity

Basic needs are foundational to humans' everyday lives. The Hope Center for College, Community and Justice, a national leader in examining basic needs for college students, asserts that basic needs security is central to academic success in higher education. Students cannot truly learn unless their basic needs are met. They define basic needs as equitable access to:

- Nutritious and sufficient food
- Safe, secure, and adequate housing (to sleep, study, cook, and shower)
- Healthcare to promote sustained mental and physical well-being
- Affordable transportation
- Affordable technology
- Resources for personal hygiene care
- Childcare and related needs

Basic needs insecurity occurs when students lack any of the above.

Source: The Hope Center

While basic needs encompass several different factors, this report will focus on food insecurity. Evidence suggests that many postsecondary students face food insecurity that may impact success in higher education. Food insecurity needs could lead to a lower likelihood of persistence, completion, and credential attainment and could continue to perpetuate existing inequities in our state’s educational attainment outcomes. Fortunately, there are well-established programs available to help individuals and families who are experiencing food insecurity. Among these programs is the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (see Box 2).

This report will examine the research around the prevalence and consequences of food insecurity for postsecondary students. Next, we will offer descriptive evidence around SNAP participation among postsecondary students in Washington and how participation rates vary by subgroup and compare the rates to the state population overall. We will then explore potential barriers that students may face to SNAP participation. We will look at recent policy changes and initiatives at the federal and state levels and briefly touch on updates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we will explore some emerging policy strategies to address food insecurity among postsecondary students.

### **Box 2. A brief background of SNAP**

SNAP is a federal program housed under the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administered by states that provides nutrition benefits to supplement low-income individuals’ and families’ food budgets. Benefit packages are based on family size and income. SNAP benefits are accepted at authorized food stores and retailers and can be used for food for the household (excluding hot prepared food).

In Washington, the SNAP program is also called “Basic Food”. Basic Food is administered by the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS).

Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Service

## What do we know about food insecurity?

More than one in ten households in the U.S. were food insecure in 2020. At some point during the year, these 13.8 million households had difficulty providing enough food for all members due to a lack of money or other resources (see Box 3). Most of these households had low food security, and they did not experience substantial changes to food intake but had to reduce variation in their diets. However, a smaller number of households had very low food security, meaning they had to reduce their food intake because they could not afford enough to eat (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021).

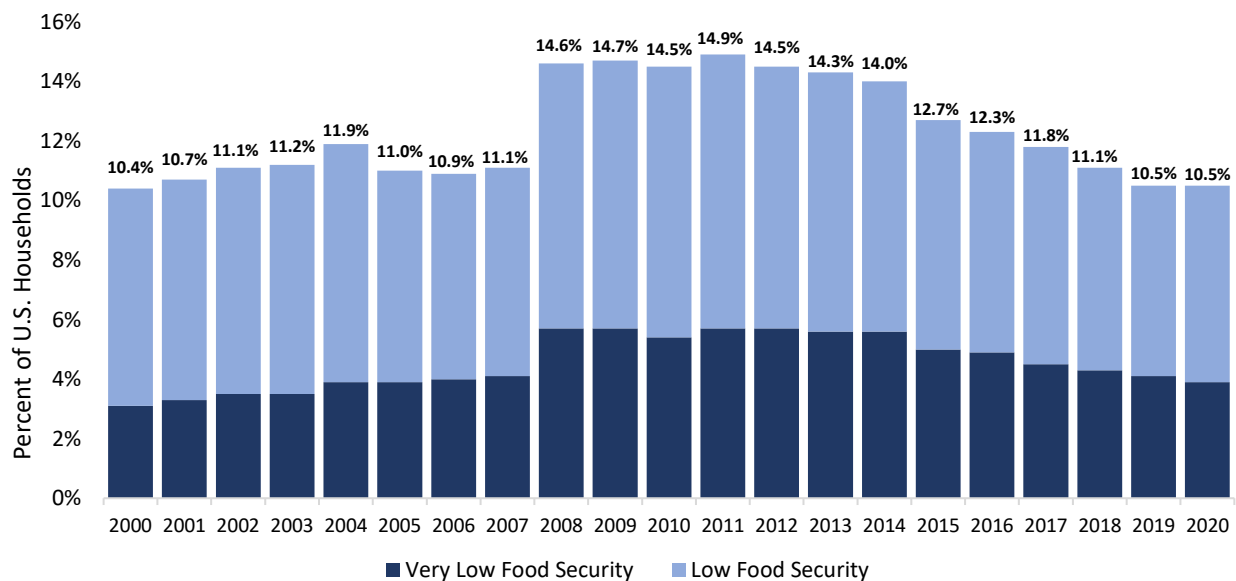
Food insecurity among households in the U.S. has fluctuated over the past two decades. The most significant increase in food insecurity occurred during the Great Recession when the proportion of households who were food insecurity increased by four percentage points in a year—from 11 percent in 2007 to nearly 15 percent in 2008. In the past decade, food insecurity has declined steadily over time (Figure 1).

### Box 3. What is food insecurity?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture assesses food security using survey questions that measure households’ ability to obtain enough food to meet its needs. Food insecure households are those that had insufficient money and other resources for food. A smaller portion of households were considered to have very low food security, meaning that they were food insecure to the extent that eating patterns were disrupted and food intake was reduced because they could not afford enough food.

Source: Coleman-Jensen et al. (2021)

**Figure 1. Food insecurity in the U.S. has declined steadily over the past decade**



Source: Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021

Although the COVID-19 pandemic impacted public health, the economy, and families’ financial stability, the data shows no significant increase in the proportion of U.S. households experiencing food insecurity from 2019 to 2020. One plausible reason could be the changes to existing and new food security programs to help those facing increased hardship during the pandemic. However, evidence from



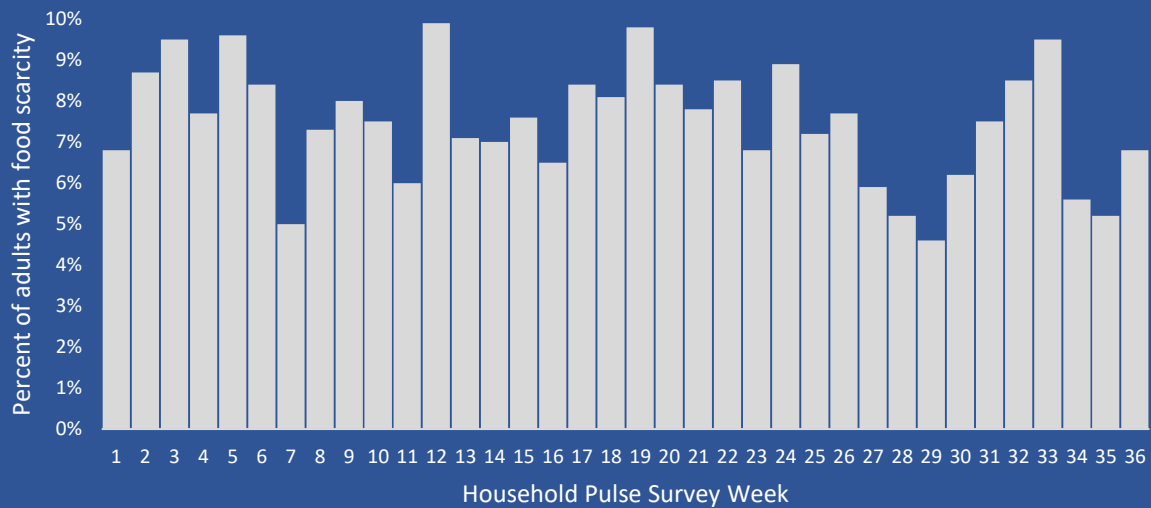
Washington suggests that a significant number of households experienced food insecurity during the pandemic (see Box 4).

**Box 4. Washington Data Spotlight: Food Insecurity Survey During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Between 2018 and 2020, 8.8 percent of households in Washington experienced food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021). In addition, survey research conducted by the University of Washington and Washington State University examined food insecurity among Washington households during the COVID-19 pandemic and found a much higher prevalence of food insecurity during the pandemic—27 percent of respondent households were food insecure. This includes 12 percent of households with low food security and 15 percent of households with very low food security. The surveys were conducted in June through July 2020 and December through January 2021. Food insecurity in Washington was more widespread for people of color, households with children, and those with lower educational attainment (Otten et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey of Washington households during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the percentage of adults in the state who responded that there was either sometimes or often not enough food to eat during the prior week. This measure, called food scarcity, may indicate a more extreme type of food insecurity. The results for Washington indicate that food scarcity has fluctuated, ranging from a low of approximately 5 percent to a high of almost 10 percent of adults who experienced food scarcity during the pandemic (Figure 2). See appendix B for survey weeks and corresponding dates. All of these findings suggest food insecurity issues in Washington.

**Figure 2. Food scarcity in Washington has fluctuated during the pandemic**



Source: U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey

## What does the research say about food insecurity and postsecondary outcomes?

National research suggests that many college students, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds, struggle with food insecurity. Numerous reasons and external factors may be contributing to higher rates of food insecurity among postsecondary students. More postsecondary students than ever before are from lower-income backgrounds, are financially independent of their parents, work part- or full-time, or care for dependents of their own. The costs to attend postsecondary education, including tuition and other costs like housing, food, and transportation, have increased dramatically, making affordability a significant concern for many students. And large financial aid programs like the Federal Pell Grant have not kept pace with the rising costs of attendance. Finally, minimum wage jobs may no longer be sufficient to help students afford the cost of living, and many students must work more hours or even multiple jobs while in school to make ends meet (Freudenberg et al., 2019). These factors may have contributed to a significant number of postsecondary students experiencing food insecurity.

A national survey conducted by The Hope Center between September and November 2020 looked at the prevalence of food insecurity among postsecondary students. The survey found that food insecurity impacted 39 percent of 2-year college students and 29 percent of 4-year college students (The Hope Center *#RealCollege*, 2021). Box 5 presents data from a similar survey conducted in Washington.

### Box 5. Washington Data Spotlight: Quantifying Food Insecurity among Postsecondary Students

A survey conducted by the Hope Center in Fall 2019 gathered data from 28 of the 34 public community and technical colleges in Washington. Among students surveyed, 41 percent had experienced food insecurity in the last 30 days. This result is consistent with national findings among 2-year college students and suggests that many students in Washington may need additional support to overcome food insecurity. Since the survey was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, the picture has likely worsened for students in Washington.

Source: The Hope Center, *Washington State Community and Technical Colleges #RealCollege Survey (2020)*

The relatively high prevalence of food insecurity among postsecondary students can interfere with their academic success. Several studies have examined the relationship between food insecurity and students' academic outcomes and found that food insecurity is correlated with negative outcomes. For instance, a study of community college students in California found that food insecurity was associated with lower grade point averages, both directly and indirectly through poorer mental health (Martinez et al., 2020). A study conducted at a rural university in Oregon also found that students experiencing food insecurity were less likely to exhibit good academic performance than their peers (Patton-Lopez et al., 2014). A study at community colleges in Maryland showed that students who lived alone, were single parents, or identified as Black or multi-racial were at higher risk of food insecurity. Those experiencing food insecurity tended to report lower grade point averages (Maroto et al., 2015). These studies provide evidence that food insecurity may directly impact students' academic performance and possibly their ability to persist and complete postsecondary programs.

Having a lower income is a significant risk factor for food insecurity. During the 2019-2020 academic year, approximately 100,000 postsecondary students in Washington received a Federal Pell Grant available to undergraduate students with exceptional financial needs.<sup>2</sup> This data offers evidence that a substantial number of students in Washington with financial needs may be at a higher risk of food insecurity.

Evidence suggests that food insecurity is a prevalent issue for postsecondary students, and it may impact their academic performance. In turn, this could lead to problems with persistence and completion, disproportionately impacting students with lower incomes. Helping these students access supports and services that can provide them with food should be a critical priority in improving equitable student outcomes in our state. Food access programs like SNAP can be an essential support for individuals experiencing food insecurity.

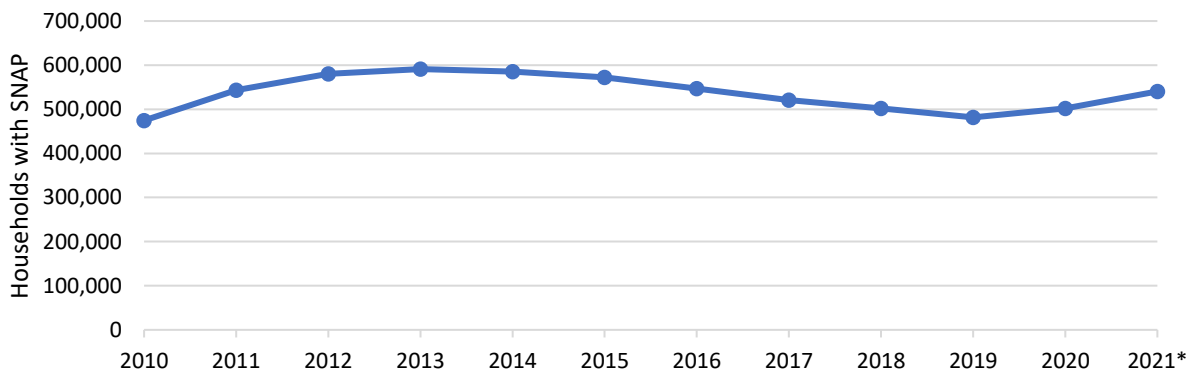
### What does SNAP participation look like in Washington?

Administrative data from the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides the total number of households that received SNAP benefits in Washington (see Box 6). The average number of Washington households who received SNAP each month declined from approximately 590,000 in 2013 to about 480,000 in 2019. However, the number increased significantly in 2020, corresponding with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 3).

#### Box 6. What is the Food and Nutrition Service?

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), a part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is the federal agency that administers several food assistance programs, including SNAP, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and school meals. FNS administrative data provides program participation information at the national and state levels for federal fiscal years that begin in October and end in September.

**Figure 3. Administrative data show changes in Washington SNAP recipient households over time**



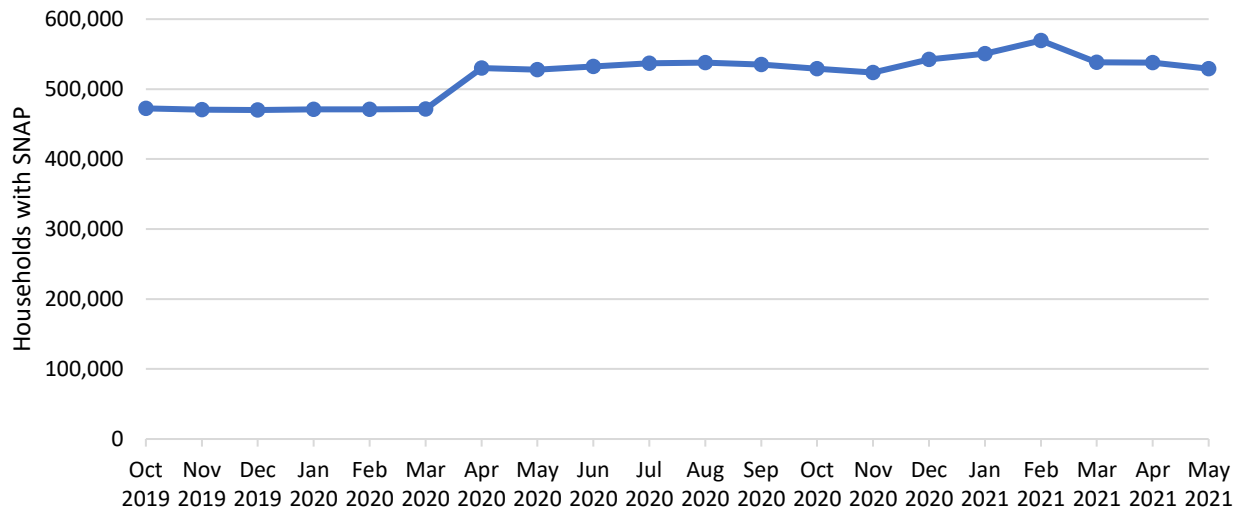
Source: USDA FNS data, Washington SNAP recipients

Note: The federal fiscal year runs October through September. \*2021 data is preliminary and only includes case data for October 2020 through May 2021.

<sup>2</sup> There were 99,797 Pell recipients in 2019-2020 according to WSAC financial aid data.

Administrative data from FNS can also provide a more granular look at SNAP recipients by month in Washington during the pandemic. Monthly case counts show a significant increase in SNAP recipient households at the beginning of the pandemic—an additional 60,000 households received SNAP benefits in Washington in April 2020 compared to March 2020. SNAP case counts have remained higher than pre-pandemic levels, reaching a peak of nearly 570,000 households in February 2021 (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. The number of households who received SNAP benefits in Washington has increased during the pandemic**



Source: USDA FNS data, Washington SNAP recipients

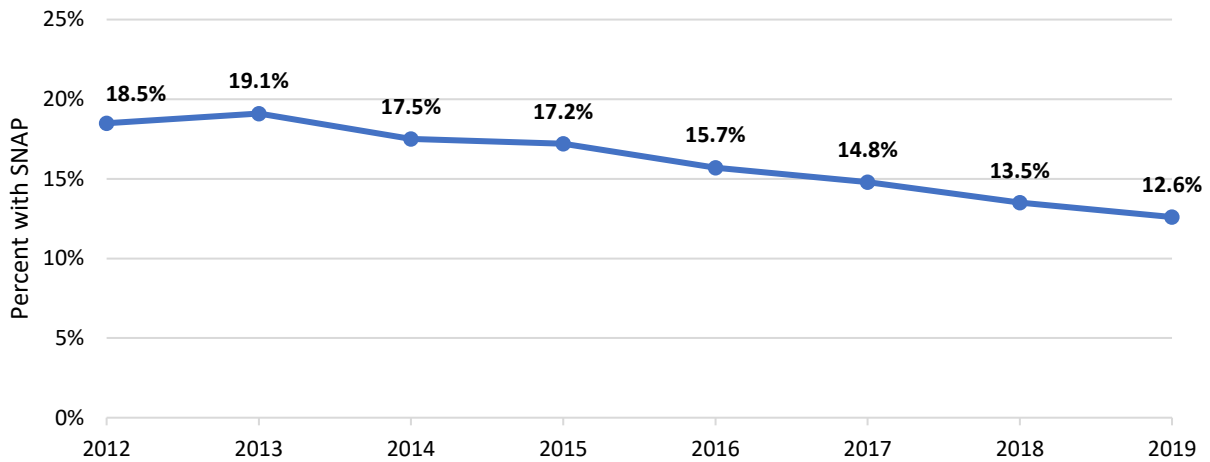
In addition to the administrative data, examining survey data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey (ACS) can bring additional context to understand the prevalence of SNAP participation in Washington (see Box 7). Data from the ACS indicate that almost 13 percent of Washington residents received SNAP benefits in 2019. This data finding represents a significant proportion of the state population. However, the rate of Washington residents who received SNAP has declined markedly from almost 19 percent in 2012 (Figure 5).

**Box 7. What is the American Community Survey?**

The U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) is an ongoing survey that provides information about social, economic, housing, and demographic data. ACS data includes state and local geographic breakdowns. Unlike FNS data which is administrative, the ACS is a survey and responses are self-reported.

Source: U.S. Census American Community Survey

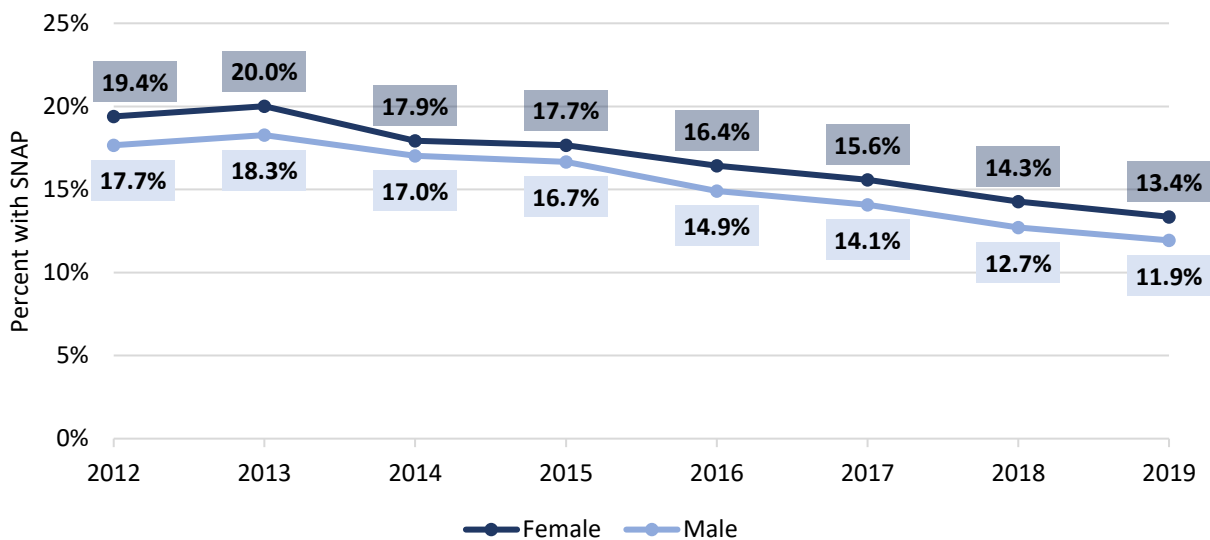
**Figure 5. The proportion of Washington residents who indicated they received SNAP in the American Community Survey has declined since 2012.**



Source: American Community Survey, 1-year PUMS data, 2012-2019

SNAP participation looked slightly different among different subgroups in Washington. For instance, females were slightly more likely to receive SNAP than males, a pattern that was consistent from 2012 to 2019 (Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Both genders saw a decline in SNAP receipt over time, but females consistently had slightly higher rates of participation.**



Source: American Community Survey, 1-year PUMS data, 2012-2019

Across time, Washington residents who were American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black, and Hispanic had higher rates of SNAP participation than White, Asian, and multi-racial Washingtonians. In 2019, there was an equity gap score of more than 3, indicating that the racial group with the highest SNAP participation rate was more than three times as high as the racial group with the lowest SNAP participation rate (see a complete description of equity gap scores in Box 8). The group with the highest SNAP participation in 2019 in Washington was American Indian/Alaskan Native residents (31 percent), followed by Black residents (24 percent) and Hispanic residents (21 percent). SNAP receipt rates were substantially higher for these groups than for White (10 percent) and Asian (9 percent) residents in the state (Figure 7).

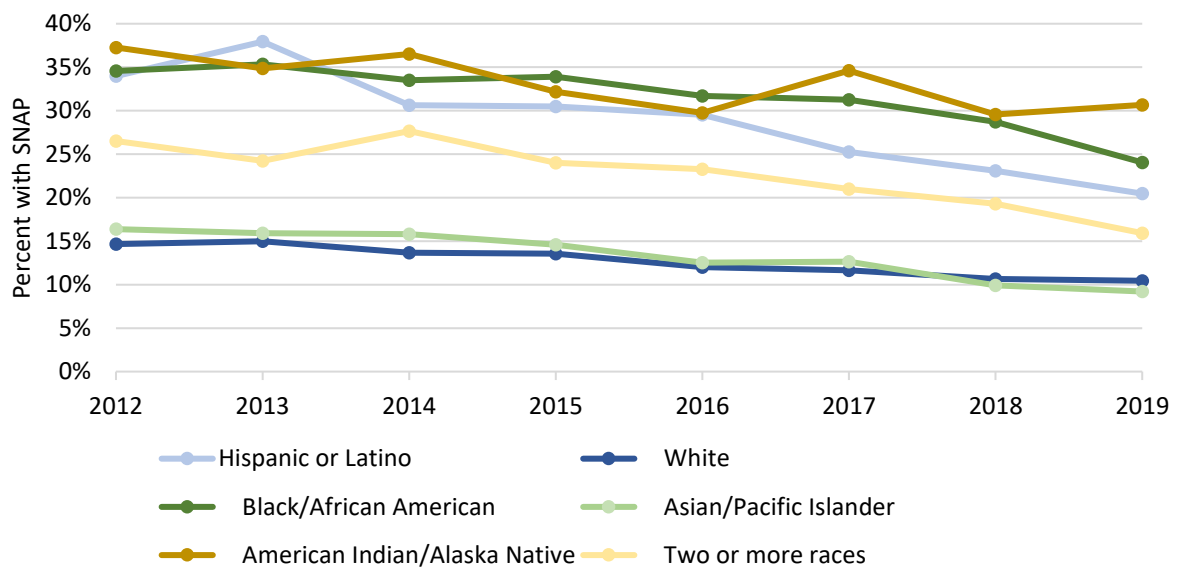
**Box 8. What are Equity Gap Scores?**



The equity gap score provides an assessment of the scale of disparities between subgroups—such as racial groups. The statistic measures the ratio between the highest and lowest rates for a given indicator. A score of 1.0 implies that there is little to no disparity evident in the data, while a score above 1.0 indicates an increasing level of inequity as the score rises. Equity gap scores are a simple but powerful indicator that offers additional context to averages.

Source: *We All Count* (Kraus, 2019)

**Figure 7. SNAP participation has consistently been higher among American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black, and Hispanic Washington residents than White, Asian, and multi-racial residents.**



Source: American Community Survey, 1-year PUMS data, 2012-2019

## What does SNAP participation for postsecondary students look like in Washington?

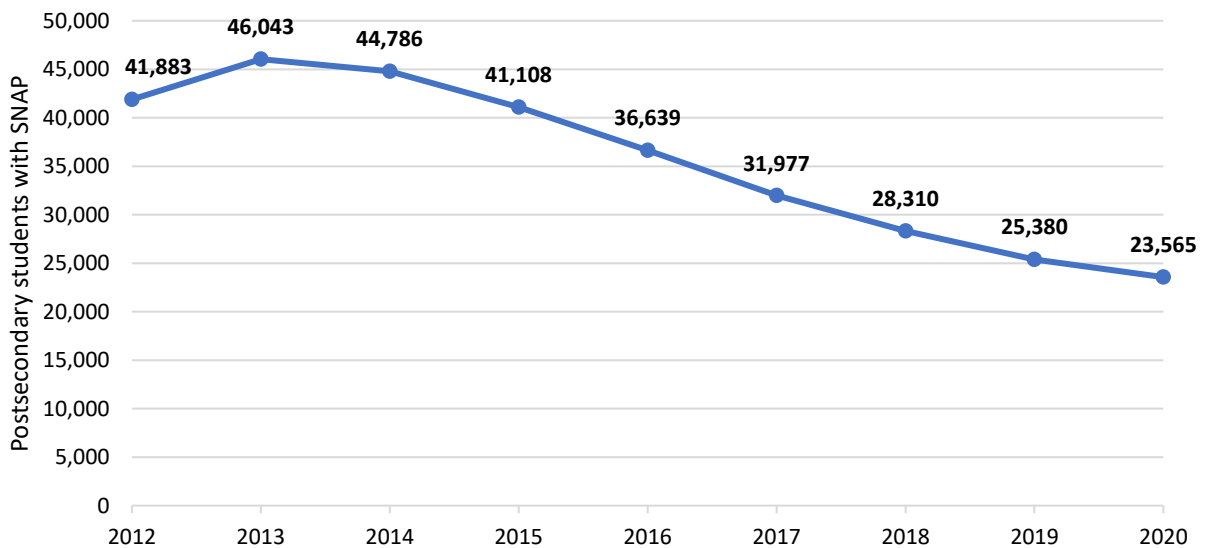
Administrative data from the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services shows how many SNAP recipients were enrolled at least half-time in postsecondary programs (see Box 9). In 2020, approximately 24,000 SNAP recipients in Washington were postsecondary students. The number of SNAP recipients who were postsecondary students has declined steadily from more than 46,000 in 2013 (Figure 8). This decline is consistent with the trend of postsecondary enrollment decline over time.

### Box 9. What is the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services?

The Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) is the state agency that administers SNAP in partnership with FNS. In Washington, SNAP is also called Basic Food. DSHS administrative data in this report presents SNAP participants who attend postsecondary institutions at least half-time (usually considered six credits or more per term).

Source: Washington State Department of Social and Health Services

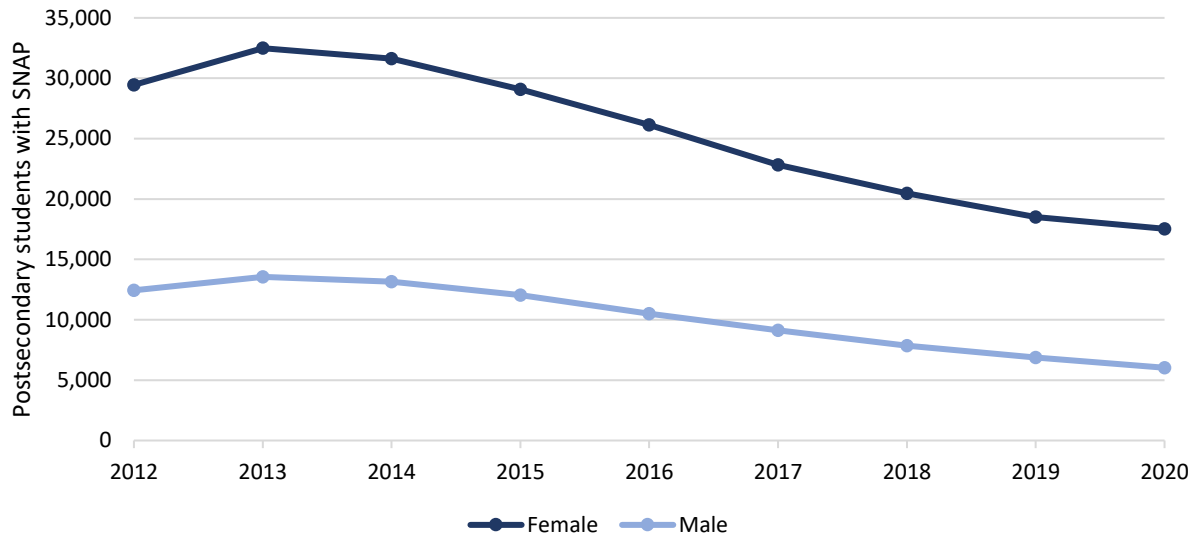
**Figure 8. The number of SNAP recipients who were postsecondary students in Washington has declined since 2013, consistent with the decline in postsecondary enrollment trends over time**



Source: DSHS data, SNAP participants who are at least half-time postsecondary students

Like the statewide context overall, the number of female postsecondary students who received SNAP in Washington has consistently been higher than that of males. Both genders have seen a decline in SNAP participants since 2012, but the decrease has been more significant for female students (Figure 9 and Table A1).

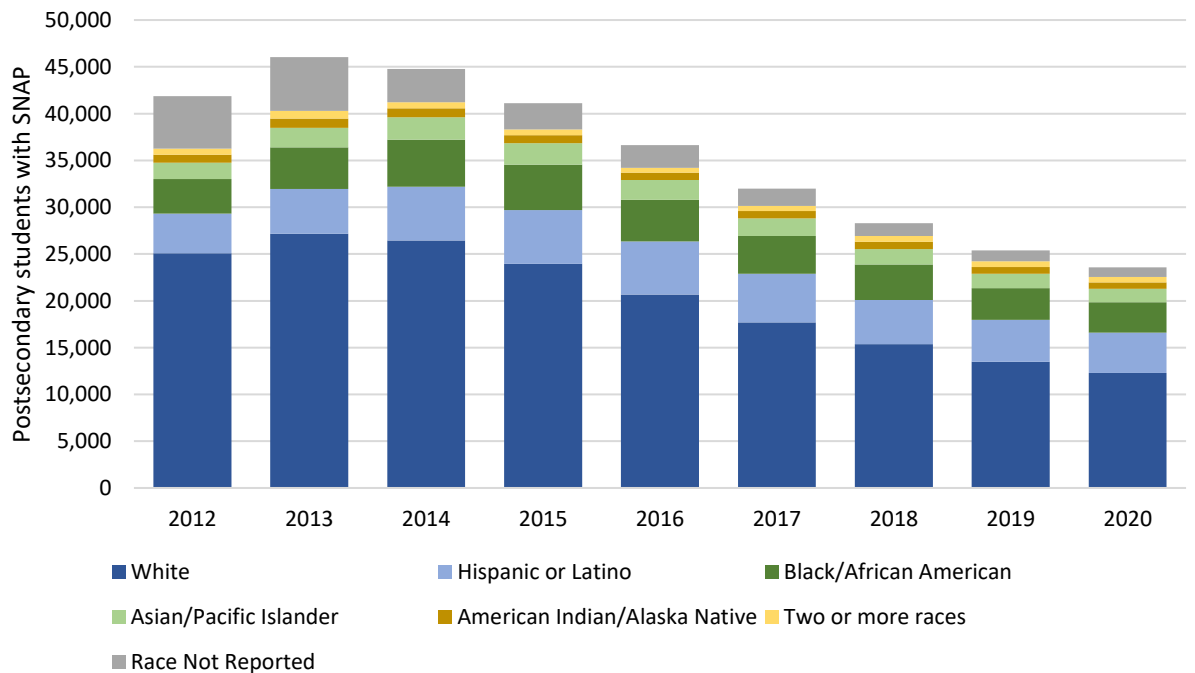
**Figure 9. The number of female postsecondary students who received SNAP has declined more significantly but remains higher than males.**



Source: DSHS data, SNAP participants who are at least half-time postsecondary students

The bulk of postsecondary students who received SNAP in Washington were White. The number of White students who received SNAP declined significantly since 2012, but the number of students of other racial groups who received SNAP remained fairly level (Figure 10 and Table A2).

**Figure 10. The number of White postsecondary students who received SNAP has declined, while numbers have remained fairly level for other racial groups.**



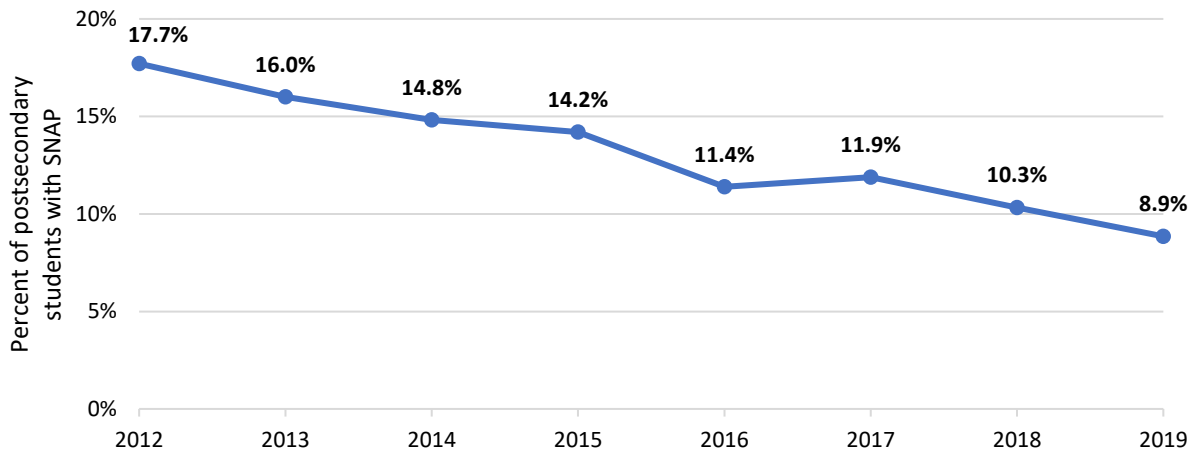
Source: DSHS data, SNAP participants who are at least half-time postsecondary students



Additional data breakdowns indicate that most postsecondary students who received SNAP were never married, and the largest proportion were aged 25-34. See Appendix A for detailed tables of SNAP participants who were at least half-time postsecondary students.

Data from the ACS can provide additional context around SNAP participation for postsecondary students in Washington. Like trends in the administrative data from DSHS, data from the ACS show that SNAP participation among postsecondary students in Washington declined gradually between 2012 and 2019. In 2012, nearly 18 percent of all postsecondary students in Washington received SNAP. However, by 2019, that rate halved to approximately 9 percent of the overall postsecondary population (Figure 11). The consistent patterns emerging from the different data sources reveal a decline in SNAP receipt among postsecondary students in Washington. This decline may be due to various reasons, including a change in the overall postsecondary population and challenges accessing SNAP or understanding SNAP eligibility criteria.

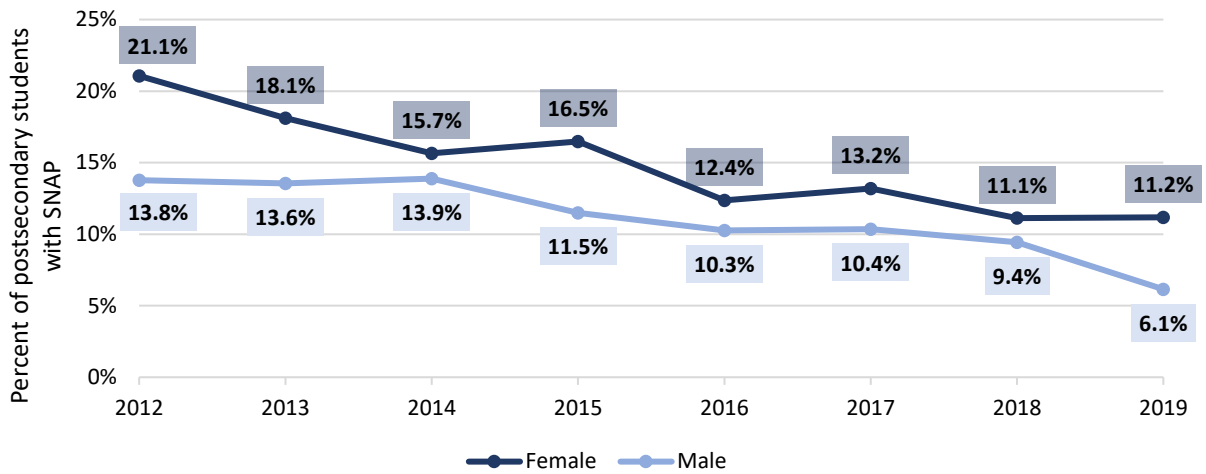
**Figure 11. The percent of postsecondary students in Washington who received SNAP fell significantly between 2012 and 2019.**



Source: American Community Survey, 1-year PUMS data, 2012-2019

The differences in SNAP participation by subgroup for postsecondary students were pronounced. Female students consistently had higher SNAP participation rates than male students over time, although the difference has fluctuated from year to year. In 2019, more than 11 percent of female postsecondary students received SNAP, compared to 6 percent of male students in Washington (Figure 12).

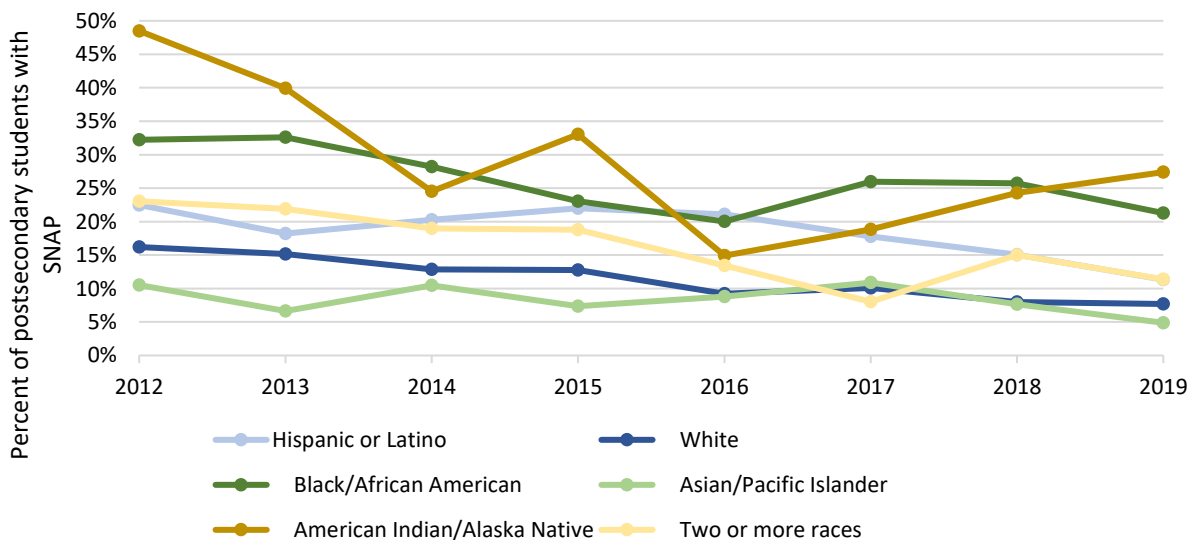
**Figure 12. Female postsecondary students consistently had higher rates of SNAP participation than male students, although the difference has varied over time.**



Source: American Community Survey, 1-year PUMS data, 2012-2019

SNAP participation for postsecondary students in Washington also varied by racial group. American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black, Hispanic, and multi-racial students generally had higher rates of SNAP participation over time than Asian and White students. In 2019, an equity gap score of 5.6 indicated that the group with the highest SNAP participation rate was nearly six times higher than the group with the lowest SNAP participation rate (Figure 13).

**Figure 13. There was significant variation in SNAP participation among postsecondary students of different races over time.**



Source: American Community Survey, 1-year PUMS data, 2012-2019

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## What barriers do postsecondary students face in receiving SNAP?

Despite evidence of widespread food insecurity and potential eligibility for SNAP, many postsecondary students do not receive SNAP benefits. A national study conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) examined the participation in SNAP for potentially eligible postsecondary students across the country. The study found that among potentially SNAP-eligible low-income students who also had an additional risk factor for food insecurity, about 57 percent did not report participating in SNAP in 2016 (GAO, 2018). This proportion equates to approximately 2 million students nationwide who are potentially eligible but did not receive SNAP benefits.

*“Generally, students attending an institution of higher education more than half-time are **not** eligible for SNAP unless they meet an exemption.”*

- USDA Food and Nutrition Service Website

One significant barrier students may face in receiving SNAP is that specialized rules govern SNAP eligibility for postsecondary students. According to the federal SNAP website, full-time students are generally not eligible for SNAP unless they meet an exemption. Students must meet the standard SNAP eligibility requirements and meet one of the special exemptions to qualify to receive SNAP. Box 10 lists postsecondary student exemptions for SNAP.

### Box 10. Understanding SNAP Eligibility for Postsecondary Students

Students enrolled in postsecondary education at least half-time are not eligible to receive SNAP benefits unless they meet specific exemptions. Students who meet one exemption in addition to all other SNAP eligibility criteria may qualify for benefits.

Student exemptions to receive SNAP:

- Are under age 18 or over age 50
- Have a physical or mental disability
- Work at least 20 hours a week in paid employment
- Participate in a state or federally financed work study program
- Participate in an on-the-job training program
- Care for a child under the age of 6
- Care for a child age 6 to 11 and lack the necessary childcare enabling you to attend school and work 20 hours a week or participate in work study
- Are a single parent enrolled full-time in college and taking care of a child under 12
- Receive Temporary Assistance for needy Families (TANF) assistance
- Are enrolled in a TANF Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program
- Are assigned to, place in, or self-place in a college or other institution of higher education through:
  - A SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) program
  - Certain other Employment & Training programs for low-income households, which are operated by a state or local government and have an equivalent component to SNAP E&T
  - A program under Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA)
  - A Trade Adjustment Assistance Program under Section 236 of the Trade Act of 1974
- \*Meet one of the new, temporary exemptions listed under COVID-19 Temporary Updates, including students who:
  - Are *eligible* to participate in state or federally financed work study during the regular school year
  - Have an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) of 0 in the current academic year

Source: Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Service

The GAO report concluded that clarifying student eligibility rules through sharing enhanced information with institutions and students could improve access to SNAP. About one-third of state SNAP agencies surveyed by the GAO reported taking action to help postsecondary students access SNAP benefits. Agencies reported several types of assistance, including developing training for state and college officials on eligibility rules for students, conducting outreach at postsecondary institutions, and providing options for students to qualify for an exemption through student employment or training programs (GAO, 2018). See Box 11 for examples of other state’s policies and Box 12 for relevant policy in Washington.

### Box 11. How are other states improving postsecondary students' access to SNAP?

#### *Clarifying student rules and conducting trainings about student eligibility*



**California's** state SNAP agency provided letters to county offices that clarify postsecondary student eligibility rules and list eligible programs that qualify for an exemption for employment and training programs.



**Minnesota's** state SNAP agency provided technical assistance training on postsecondary student eligibility for caseworkers twice per year.



**Missouri's** state SNAP agency partnered with the state community college association to promote awareness of SNAP eligibility for students.



**Rhode Island's** SNAP agency held regular "office hours" on community college campuses to answer questions, help students complete applications, and screen students for SNAP eligibility.

#### *Providing additional employment and training options for students*



**Massachusetts'** state SNAP agency streamlined the application process by providing SNAP application support to students in state-designated employment and training programs.

Source: U.S. Government Accountability Office (2018)

### Box 12. Washington Program Spotlight: Basic Food Employment and Training Program



The Basic Food Employment and Training (BFET) program provides access and services to SNAP recipients at each of Washington's public community and technical colleges. The BFET program is a partnership between the Washington State Department of Social and Human Services, community and technical colleges, and community-based organizations. Students who are eligible for or receiving food assistance may qualify. Services vary depending on the campus but may include:

- Job search and job training
- Education and skills training
- Support services

See [www.SBCTC.edu](http://www.SBCTC.edu) for more information.

Source: Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges

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## What recent changes have been implemented around SNAP for postsecondary students in Washington?

Several changes have been implemented in recent years to improve postsecondary students' access to SNAP. These changes are a positive step to expand access to food on campus for postsecondary students. For example, a new law passed in Washington's 2019-2020 legislative session aimed to increase awareness of SNAP eligibility for financial aid recipients. The law required institutions to include language about eligibility for SNAP and instructions for applying for benefits to all students who received the State Need Grant (now the Washington College Grant) or the State Work Study program (2SHB 1893, Chapter 407, Laws of 2019). This requirement is especially prudent given that many students who receive financial aid have lower incomes and are more likely to be eligible for SNAP benefits.

Another section of the new 2019-2020 law in Washington intended to increase access to food options for students who receive SNAP benefits by allowing students to use their SNAP benefits at food retail establishments on campus. Before the new law, on-campus establishments where many students eat, such as cafeterias, bookstores, and cafes, did not qualify as retail food stores. Many students had to travel off-campus to use their SNAP benefits to purchase food. This barrier put an additional strain on students who utilized SNAP by incurring extra travel costs, reducing study time, and causing unnecessary stress (*HB 1893*, 2019). Under the new law, postsecondary institutions can receive a waiver to accept SNAP benefits at on-campus retailers. This new law may provide more options for student SNAP users and improve their access to affordable food on campus.

Additional changes to SNAP rules for postsecondary students have been instated during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. These changes are meant to address the likely increase in food insecurity as more students face financial hardships during the pandemic. One significant change is the temporary expansion of eligibility for SNAP for postsecondary students under the Consolidated Appropriations Act 2021. Beginning in January 2021, students who attend postsecondary institutions more than half-time and are eligible for state or federal work study programs or have an Expected Family Contribution of 0 (determined during the financial aid application process) in the current academic year are also exempt from the student restriction for SNAP. These additional temporary exemptions are set to continue during the nationwide COVID-19 public health emergency (*FNS*, n.d.). Box 13 describes additional changes to SNAP during the pandemic.

### **Box 13. How has COVID-19 impacted SNAP rules?**

Temporary rules during the COVID-19 crisis have expanded benefits for SNAP recipients across the country. Some key flexibilities that FNS has allowed states to implement during the pandemic include:

- Emergency allotments for states to issue increased benefits to households that normally receive less than the maximum benefit
- Pandemic EBT allows states to provide benefits to children who typically receive free or reduced priced meals at school
- SNAP online purchasing for SNAP recipients to use their benefits at online food retailers to support social distancing

Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Service

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## What programs and initiatives have emerged in Washington to address food insecurity for postsecondary students?

In addition to policy changes to SNAP, there have been attempts to address food insecurity for postsecondary students in Washington in other ways as well. A common response to support students who are food insecure is to provide them with free food. Many institutions and community partners have established food pantries to help address students' immediate needs. The College and University Food Bank Alliance, for instance, partners with more than 700 institutions across the country to help connect students with immediate food access (*CUFBA*, n.d.). These resources are vital for filling an immediate need, but they generally do not address the root causes or facilitate long-term solutions to food insecurity. The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC), along with DSHS, partners at institutions across the state, and nonprofit organizations, are developing and testing additional strategies to address food insecurity for students.

One example is Washington's Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness Pilot program that was enacted in 2019 legislation. The pilot program is administered by WSAC and is working to build support systems for postsecondary students experiencing homelessness. One significant component of the program is providing food assistance services to students experiencing food insecurity. A survey of students on campuses participating in the pilot found that food insecurity affected between 33 and 48 percent of the campus population. Among pilot program participants, 83 percent reported being food insecure. The high prevalence of food insecurity demonstrates the need for food assistance services to support vulnerable students. Services in the pilot program included:

- assisting students in accessing SNAP benefits,
- providing referrals to community food resources and campus food pantries, and
- providing students with pre-paid grocery cards to purchase food.

These services were especially vital given the disruption to campus operations during the COVID-19 pandemic (*WSAC*, 2020).

Another program working to address food insecurity for postsecondary students in Washington is United Way of King County's Bridge to Finish program. The Bridge to Finish program offers one-stop Benefits Hubs on ten community and technical college campuses in King County. Each location provides proactive outreach to students and services to support students who need help with basic needs, including emergency grants, food pantries, referrals to public benefits programs, and more. Since the summer of 2019, Bridge to Finish has provided almost 7,000 students with nearly 20,000 connections to resources and supports. The program also aims to build campus infrastructure to support lower-income students to persist and complete postsecondary programs. Early evidence from the program indicates that persistence rates at participating institutions have increased by 12 percent for students of color and 9 percent for students overall (*UWKC*, n.d.).

In addition to statewide and regional programs, many campuses in the state offer services to help students access food at a local level. These services range from food pantries to emergency grants and may help offset some of the food insecurity challenges for students while in postsecondary education. A description of some examples of services on Washington campuses can be found in Box 14.

#### Box 14. **Washington Program Spotlight: Examples of food access services on campuses**

**Cascadia College Kodiak Cave:** The Kodiak Cave is a food resource center that provides a “choice pantry” where students who need help with food can choose groceries for free pick up that meet their needs. Students may “shop” for a complete set of groceries up to three times per quarter (*Cascadia College, n.d.*).

**Clark College Penguin Pantry:** The Penguin Pantry provides monthly food boxes to students who need help with food access. The program partners with the national College and University Food Bank Alliance (*Clark College, n.d.*).

**Eastern Washington University Food Cabinets and Food Pantry:** There are seven food cabinets located in different buildings across campus stocked with non-perishable food and hygiene items. In addition, the campus food pantry provides perishable and non-perishable food. Visitors may take what they need after completing a short intake form (*Eastern Washington University, n.d.*).

**University of Washington Food Security Grant:** This grant provides emergency assistance to help meet students’ immediate needs by providing \$100 on their student card for food on campus. The grant is available to students who have exhausted other funding options (such as other financial aid and loans) and have completed the FAFSA or WASFA. Students are also connected to a counselor to help them address food insecurity in the longer term (*University of Washington, n.d.*).

### **How can state policymakers support students who are experiencing food insecurity?**

National research is highlighting that state policy can play a role in reducing food insecurity for postsecondary students. Several policy strategies that could support students are outlined below. Box 15 outlines some emerging policy strategies in Washington.

**Maximizing flexibility in benefits** can increase access for students. For example, states can increase the income limit for SNAP receipt and designate additional postsecondary courses as Education and Training programs (The Hope Center *#RealCollege, 2021*).

**Improving information about public benefits** for students could help them know if they are eligible. States can bring students and other users of public benefits together to learn what information may be unclear or inaccessible and make adjustments to clarify the language used. Targeted outreach to students who may be eligible could also improve SNAP receipt (The Hope Center *#RealCollege, 2021*).

**Supporting campus-based food insecurity efforts**, like food pantries and emergency grants, can help fill in gaps within public benefits programs. These immediate relief programs provide food options for students who may not be eligible for public programs like SNAP or have not yet enrolled or received their benefits (The Hope Center *#RealCollege, 2021*).



### Box 15. Washington Policy Spotlight: Emerging policy proposals to support students

The Washington Student Achievement Council is working to identify strategies to support students experiencing food and basic needs insecurity. At their August 23, 2021 meeting, the Council outlined two policy proposals to help students access basic needs supports..

**Expand existing pilot to support more students who are experiencing homelessness.** This proposed expansion of the Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness pilot program would provide funding to all public 4-year institutions in Washington. While the program is specifically geared towards students experiencing homelessness, previous data has shown that the majority of students served are also experiencing food insecurity. Services include food pantries, emergency grants, and referrals to public benefits programs, including SNAP. All pilot sites evaluate the impact of interventions on student persistence and completion rates, which could help deepen existing knowledge of the efficacy of these programs for students in Washington.

**Implement a recurring statewide survey to determine the prevalence of postsecondary students' unmet basic needs.** Data on basic needs insecurity for postsecondary students in Washington is currently limited. This survey could help more accurately quantify unmet basic needs for postsecondary students in the state. It could also provide data to help policymakers and institutional leaders target investments to have a meaningful impact on students. Survey questions would be developed by institutions, researchers, students, community leaders, and others, and carried out on an annual or biennial basis.

Source: Washington Student Achievement Council (2021)

## Conclusion

This report set out to examine food insecurity among postsecondary students in Washington. Findings presented in the report use several data sources, including administrative data and survey data to help explore the issue. Despite some evidence of declining food insecurity and public benefit receipt, data indicate that food insecurity is still a pressing issue for postsecondary students in Washington. Not having adequate food access can be detrimental to student outcomes and may impact their ability to succeed academically and complete a postsecondary program. Food insecurity also tends to affect lower-income students who already face significant barriers to higher education and may further contribute to inequities in postsecondary attainment. It is also likely that the COVID-19 crisis has added further challenges for students to access basic needs. Some evidence suggests that the pandemic has increased challenges for students, including increased risk of food insecurity and difficulty accessing supports.

There are programs in place that can help food insecure postsecondary students access food. The most prominent program is SNAP, however extensive restrictions for students who attend postsecondary education more than half-time may be deterring many eligible students from utilizing the program. Other options, like community and campus-based food pantries and emergency grants, can help

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students with food access in the immediate term. However, these programs generally do not provide a long-term solution to the food insecurity issue.

Postsecondary credentials have become increasingly important in our state's labor market. However, the rising costs of postsecondary education have posed challenges for students, especially those from lower-income backgrounds. While financial aid, like the Washington College Grant and the Federal Pell Grant, can help offset these rising costs, many students still struggle to afford basic needs while they are in school. Improving access to SNAP and ensuring that campuses are equipped to support students experiencing food insecurity may help lower-income students succeed in higher education. Additional research should continue to assess the extent of food insecurity among postsecondary students in Washington and seek solutions to help students meet their basic needs so they can be successful in higher education. Addressing food insecurity for postsecondary students will not only benefit individuals but is critical for our state's economic and social wellbeing in the future as well.

## Appendix A.

**Table A1. Count of SNAP recipients in Washington who were at least half-time postsecondary students, by gender**

	Female	Male	Unknown	Total
<b>2012</b>	29,449	12,430	4	<i>41,883</i>
<b>2013</b>	32,490	13,551	2	<i>46,043</i>
<b>2014</b>	31,633	13,153	0	<i>44,786</i>
<b>2015</b>	29,074	12,032	2	<i>41,108</i>
<b>2016</b>	26,128	10,510	1	<i>36,639</i>
<b>2017</b>	22,838	9,138	1	<i>31,977</i>
<b>2018</b>	20,462	7,847	1	<i>28,310</i>
<b>2019</b>	18,513	6,865	2	<i>25,380</i>
<b>2020</b>	17,536	6,028	1	<i>23,565</i>

Source: DSHS data, SNAP participants who are at least half-time postsecondary students

**Table A2. Count of SNAP recipients in Washington who were at least half-time postsecondary students, by race**

	Hispanic or Latino	White	Black/African American	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaska Native	Two or more races	Race Not Reported	Total
<b>2012</b>	4,222	25,088	3,700	1,736	880	620	5,637	<i>41,883</i>
<b>2013</b>	4,784	27,158	4,459	2,098	979	812	5,753	<i>46,043</i>
<b>2014</b>	5,768	26,439	5,022	2,365	980	650	3,562	<i>44,786</i>
<b>2015</b>	5,759	23,944	4,847	2,282	878	606	2,792	<i>41,108</i>
<b>2016</b>	5,651	20,685	4,465	2,092	810	516	2,420	<i>36,639</i>
<b>2017</b>	5,186	17,699	4,041	1,882	801	543	1,825	<i>31,977</i>
<b>2018</b>	4,700	15,383	3,794	1,641	791	605	1,396	<i>28,310</i>
<b>2019</b>	4,476	13,480	3,412	1,528	707	616	1,161	<i>25,380</i>
<b>2020</b>	4,313	12,290	3,230	1,454	676	600	1,002	<i>23,565</i>

Source: DSHS data, SNAP participants who are at least half-time postsecondary students

**Table A3. Count of SNAP recipients in Washington who were at least half-time postsecondary students, by homelessness status**

	Homeless	Not Homeless	Total
<b>2012</b>	1,648	40,235	<i>41,883</i>
<b>2013</b>	2,065	43,978	<i>46,043</i>
<b>2014</b>	2,196	42,590	<i>44,786</i>
<b>2015</b>	2,044	39,064	<i>41,108</i>
<b>2016</b>	1,845	34,794	<i>36,639</i>
<b>2017</b>	1,628	30,349	<i>31,977</i>
<b>2018</b>	1,528	26,782	<i>28,310</i>
<b>2019</b>	1,604	23,776	<i>25,380</i>
<b>2020</b>	1,358	22,207	<i>23,565</i>

Source: DSHS data, SNAP participants who are at least half-time postsecondary students

Note: Homeless is defined (based on the self-reported living arrangement code in ACES) as: homeless without housing, homeless with housing (staying temporarily with family or friends—commonly referred to as "couch surfing"), emergency shelter, or domestic violence shelter.

**Table A4. Count of SNAP recipients in Washington who were at least half-time postsecondary students, by age group**

	16 - 24 Years Old	25 - 34 Years Old	35 - 44 Years Old	45 - 54 Years Old	55 - 64 Years Old	65+ Years Old	Total
<b>2012</b>	14,878	16,812	6,747	2,562	840	44	<i>41,883</i>
<b>2013</b>	15,552	18,700	7,755	2,956	1,021	59	<i>46,043</i>
<b>2014</b>	14,475	18,358	7,846	2,929	1,108	70	<i>44,786</i>
<b>2015</b>	12,699	17,005	7,313	2,876	1,145	70	<i>41,108</i>
<b>2016</b>	10,827	15,282	6,808	2,600	1,033	89	<i>36,639</i>
<b>2017</b>	8,994	13,479	6,132	2,281	965	126	<i>31,977</i>
<b>2018</b>	7,620	12,021	5,580	1,994	927	168	<i>28,310</i>
<b>2019</b>	6,609	10,703	5,177	1,818	891	182	<i>25,380</i>
<b>2020</b>	6,015	9,851	5,105	1,647	779	168	<i>23,565</i>

Source: DSHS data, SNAP participants who are at least half-time postsecondary students

**Table A5. Count of SNAP recipients in Washington who were at least half-time postsecondary students, by marital status**

	<b>Separated</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Never Married</b>	<b>Divorced</b>	<b>Widowed</b>	<b>Not Reported/ Unidentifiable</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2012</b>	3,090	9,367	23,249	4,764	196	1,217	41,883
<b>2013</b>	3,207	10,259	25,308	5,292	199	1,778	46,043
<b>2014</b>	3,107	9,699	25,260	5,172	239	1,309	44,786
<b>2015</b>	2,724	8,608	23,624	4,954	223	975	41,108
<b>2016</b>	2,366	7,630	21,280	4,500	193	670	36,639
<b>2017</b>	1,911	6,792	18,464	4,201	179	430	31,977
<b>2018</b>	1,696	5,954	16,201	4,062	196	201	28,310
<b>2019</b>	1,547	5,226	14,563	3,750	203	91	25,380
<b>2020</b>	1,316	4,977	13,400	3,451	186	235	23,565

Source: DSHS data, SNAP participants who are at least half-time postsecondary students

## Appendix B.

**Table B1. U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey Weeks and Corresponding Time Period**

<b>Week Number</b>	<b>Time period</b>
1	April 23-May 5, 2020
2	May 7-12, 2020
3	May 14-19, 2020
4	May 21-26, 2020
5	May 28-June 2, 2020
6	June 4-9, 2020
7	June 11-16, 2020
8	June 18-23, 2020
9	June 25-30, 2020
10	July 2-7, 2020
11	July 9-14, 2020
12	July 16-21, 2020
13	August 19-31, 2020
14	September 2-14, 2020
15	September 16-28, 2020
16	September 30-October 12, 2020
17	October 14-26, 2020
18	October 28-November 9, 2020
19	November 11-23, 2020
20	November 25-December 7, 2020
21	December 9-21, 2020
22	January 6-18, 2021
23	January 20-February 1, 2021
24	February 3-15, 2021
25	February 17-March 1, 2021
26	March 3-15, 2021
27	March 17-29, 2021
28	April 14-26, 2021
29	April 28-May 10, 2021
30	May 12-24, 2021
31	May 26-June 7, 2021
32	June 9-21, 2021
33	June 23-July 5, 2021
34	July 21-August 2, 2021
35	August 4-16, 2021
36	August 18-30, 2021

Source: U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey

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