
MEMORANDUM

TO: KATIE RAINS AND CARL WOLFHAGEN
FROM: JAMES BUSZKIEWICZ, JENNIFER J. OTTEN, AND ADAM DREWNOWSKI
SUBJECT: COMPARATIVE FOOD INSECURITY IN WASHINGTON STATE
DATE: NOVEMBER 12TH, 2020

Measuring Food Insecurity

Several validated tools have been developed to directly measure household food insecurity (Marques, 2015). To understand how to interpret and compare these tools, it is important to understand the questions/items that are included and the time span about which they are asking. In particular, research comparing different approaches to estimating food insecurity has shown that more households report food insecurity when asked to report over longer periods of time compared to those asked to report over shorter periods of time (Schanzenbach & Tomeh, 2020).

- The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) primarily uses the Current Population Survey’s Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS), a validated 10-item scale (18-items for households with children), that measures food insecurity. The CPS-FSS most commonly asks about household experiences in the past year.
- Other surveys, such as the annual National Health Interview Survey, commonly use abbreviated, 6-item scale versions of the longer CPS-FSS screener and ask about time periods of in the past year or in the last 30 days. The 6-item scale has been shown to identify food-insecure households with similar specificity and sensitivity as 10 or 18-item measure (Blumberg, 1999).
- Forecasting an urgent need for information on the burden of food insecurity in response to rising unemployment or underemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the US Census Bureau developed a 1-item screener as part of the Census Household Pulse Survey (CHHPS) to measure “food sufficiency” in the past 7 days, a concept that is related to but distinct from food insecurity.
- Another survey developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was the COVID-19 Impact Survey (Wozniak 2020). This survey has a 2-item screener which gauges food insecurity in the past 30 days.
- The Washington State (WA) Food Security Survey (WAFOOD), fielded from June to July 2020, used the 6-item USDA food security screener found in the NHIS but asked about food insecurity experienced since the COVID-19 shutdown (i.e., March 15th). Thus, WAFOOD essentially captured food insecurity experienced over a 3-4-month period.

Trends in the Burden of Food Insecurity in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The burden of food insecurity both nationally and in Washington State (WA) has risen sharply in response to the economic crisis spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown. Nationally, estimates from the CHHPS and the CPS-FSS,¹ show that the prevalence of food insecurity has nearly tripled, increasing from 8.5% in February 2020 to an average of 23.0% during late April to mid-May 19th, 2020

¹ The estimates presented are based on data from the CHHPS 1-item screener on food insufficiency that have been adjusted to reflect the estimates on food insecurity from the CPS-FSS by Schanzenbach and Tomeh. For more information see their [full report](#) as well as their [interactive tool](#).

(Schanzenbach & Pitts, 2020a). In WA, according to CHHPS and CPS-FSS, food insecurity ranged from 16%-21% during June and July (Schanzenbach & Pitts, 2020a). Comparatively, the WAFOOD survey, which sought to oversample low-income households and thus has a sample population with somewhat lower incomes, on average, than that of the rest of WA, estimated the burden of food insecurity to be 30% across WA, ranging from 20%-43% in select counties (see Table 1).

Unemployment and Food Insecurity

The burden of food insecurity in a given area is strongly tied to area unemployment rates. Schanzenbach and Pitts found that for every 1 percentage point increase in unemployment, the prevalence of food insecurity would be expected to increase 0.8 percentage points (Schanzenbach & Pitts, 2020b). Among WAFOOD respondents, 40% of those who experienced an employer closure or lay off were food insecure. Among WAFOOD respondents claiming unemployment insurance, 38% were food insecure.

Disparities in Food Insecurity by Race/Ethnicity

There were also critical and persistent disparities in the burden of food insecurity by race and ethnicity. The burden of food insecurity ranged from 17%-19% among non-Hispanic White, 18%-21% among Asian, 26%-34% among Hispanic or Latinx, and 29%-33% among Black WA residents based on CHHPS and CPS-FSS estimates (Schanzenbach & Tomeh, 2020). Among WAFOOD survey respondents, during this same period, the burden of food insecurity was 26% among non-Hispanic Whites, 33% among Asians, 47% among Hispanics, 52% among non-Hispanic Blacks, and 40% among all other race/ethnic groups (see Table 2).

Food Insecurity in Households with Children

Particularly alarming is the sharp rise in food insecurity in households with children (Bitler, 2020). Recent work has found that food insecurity has tripled to 30% nationally among households with children (Bitler, 2020). The burden of food insecurity in WAFOOD households with children was also high at 40%, compared to 30% in all households and 22% in households without children (22%).

Reliance on Federal and State Food Assistance Programs in the Face of COVID-19

Recent data published in a report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) shows that the number of participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has increased substantially across many states (CBPP 2020). In WA, the number of SNAP participants increased from 801,000 to 923,000 from February 2020 to May 2020 (CBPP 2020). Data from the WAFOOD survey from June to July 2020 observed steady participation in food assistance programs overall, with 32% of respondents saying that they received any food assistance in the 12 months prior to the COVID-19 shutdown in WA on March 15th compared to 33% after. However, some food assistance programs noted slight declines while other noted an uptick in use. Specifically receipt of SNAP, School Meals, and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) declined slightly while meals from food banks/pantries, Summer School Meals Programs, city agency grocery voucher or cash cards, and mobile food boxes increased (Figure 1). The CBPP estimated that during the pandemic many more individuals would have needed food assistance, such as SNAP, were it not for the swift action by states to ease the process in applying for food assistance and unemployment insurance, and possibly stimulus checks (CBPP 2020).

Table 1. Comparison of food insecurity prevalence (%) during COVID-19 by select WA counties

County	WAFOOD ^a	Northwest Harvest Model ^b				Feeding America ^b
		New ^c	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Starting Point	
Clark	35.0	15.0	21.4	24.7	10.4	11.5
King	30.2	15.2	21.5	24.9	9.5	11.5
Kitsap	25.3	15.0	21.1	24.2	11.2	11.6
Kittitas	21.4	18.0	24.5	28.0	12.5	14.9
Lewis	43.2	16.3	22.0	25.2	14.4	12.2
Pierce	33.6	16.2	22.3	25.5	11.8	13.2
Skagit	20.4	14.1	20.2	23.5	11.8	11.3
Snohomish	27.9	13.7	20.0	23.5	9.3	10.3
Spokane	33.6	17.0	22.9	26.1	13.0	14.1
Thurston	23.7	15.2	20.7	23.6	11.3	12.3
Washington State	30.0	15.1	21.2	24.5	10.7	11.9

Note: Counties with denominators of <30 or numerators of <10 among WAFOOD survey respondents have been excluded. Among WAFOOD respondents, 103 were missing responses to the food insecurity module. These respondents are included in the denominator for food insecurity prevalence calculations. Excluding them had little impact on estimated food insecurity.

^aEstimates are based on survey responses from WA state residents.

^bEstimates are projected based on an array of data and assumptions on county unemployment, poverty, and more.

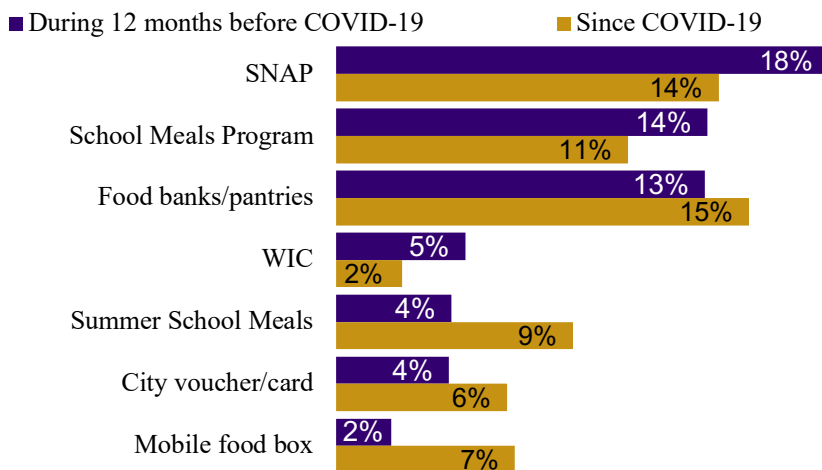
^cThese values reflect the latest estimates developed by Carl Wolfhagen at the WA Office of Financial Management.

Table 2. Prevalence of WA food insecurity during June-July 2020 by race/ethnicity, WAFOOD survey

Race/ethnicity	n	%	Total
non-Hispanic White	499	26.1	1,912
non-Hispanic Black	48	51.6	93
Hispanic	99	46.9	211
Asian	50	32.7	153
Other	55	39.9	138
Washington State	785	30.0	2,621

Note: Among WAFOOD respondents, 114 respondents were missing race/ethnicity and 103 were missing responses to the food insecurity module. These respondents are included in the denominator for food insecurity prevalence calculations. Excluding them from the calculation had little impact on estimated food insecurity.

Figure 1. Food assistance participation before and since COVID-19, WAFOOD survey



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