

Special Research Brief: Food Security and Barriers to Food Assistance Use in Washington State Households, 2020-2021

Research Brief 11

About the WAFOOD Surveys

The first Washington (WA) State Food Security Survey (WAFOOD) ran from June to July 2020. A follow-up survey ran from December 2020 to January 2021. In this special research brief, we combine 5,330^a WAFOOD 1 and 2 responses from all 39 WA counties to provide a detailed look at disparities in food security and barriers to food assistance use in WA State households during COVID-19.

Very Low Food Security Found in 15% of WAFOOD Households

- The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a food secure household as one in which all members always have access to enough food for an active, healthy life.
- Using the USDA 6-item food security scale, WAFOOD households were identified as being: food secure^{b,c} (65%) or as having low (12%) or very low food security (15%) (Figure 1).

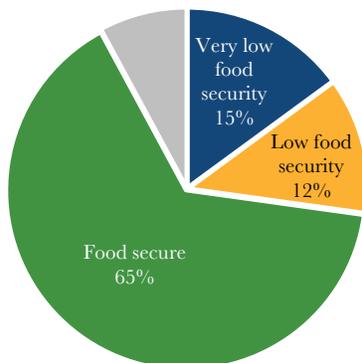


Figure 1. USDA food security scale categories during COVID-19 among WAFOOD households^d

Very Low Food Security Varied Across WA State Counties

- Very low food security ranged from 9%-24% by county and was highest in Lewis (Figure 2).
- Low food security ranged from 7%-21% by county and was highest in Grays Harbor.

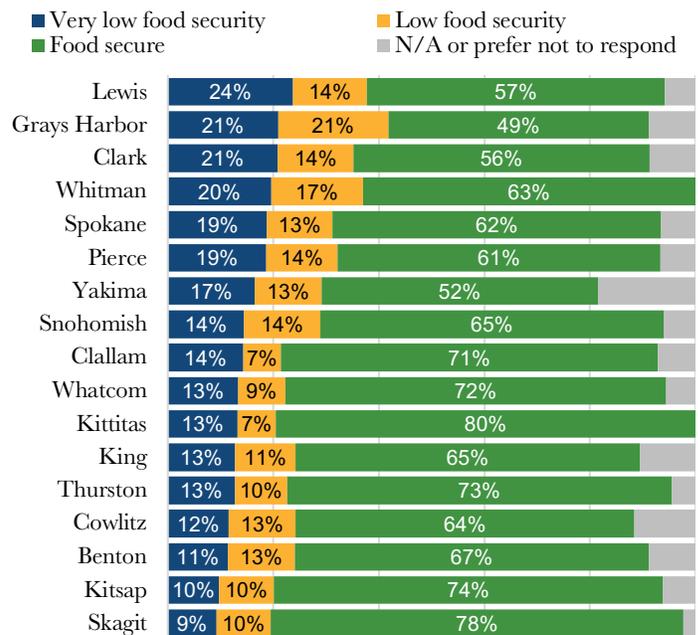


Figure 2. Household food security during COVID-19 by county^e

Key Findings

1. Food security lowest in vulnerable communities.
2. Food assistance use was highest in households with children and among BIPOC respondents.
3. Food quality and delivery/pick-up times were among key reported barriers to food assistance.

Low Food Security in Households with Children and Black, Indigenous and Respondents of Color

- Very low food security was highest in 18-24 and 35-44-years-olds (Figure 3).
- Very low food security was highest in those identifying as transgender, non-binary, or other.
- Very low food security was highest among respondents identifying as non-Hispanic (NH) Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) and Native Hawai’ian/Other Pacific Islanders (NH/OPI), and others.
- One-third of households with children had low (15%) or very low (20%) food security.
- Food security was similar in respondent households located in urban^f versus rural areas.

Low Food Security High in Low-Income Households and Among Unemployed Respondents

- Low (16%) and very low (22%) food security was highest among respondents with some college education or less (Figure 4).
- Low (16%) and very low (30%) food security was highest in unemployed respondents.
- Low and very low food security was lower among high-income households and was highest in respondent households with annual incomes ≤\$15,000.
- There was no difference in food security by essential worker status and union membership.
- Consumer-facing high contact servicesⁱ and food-based services had the lowest food security.

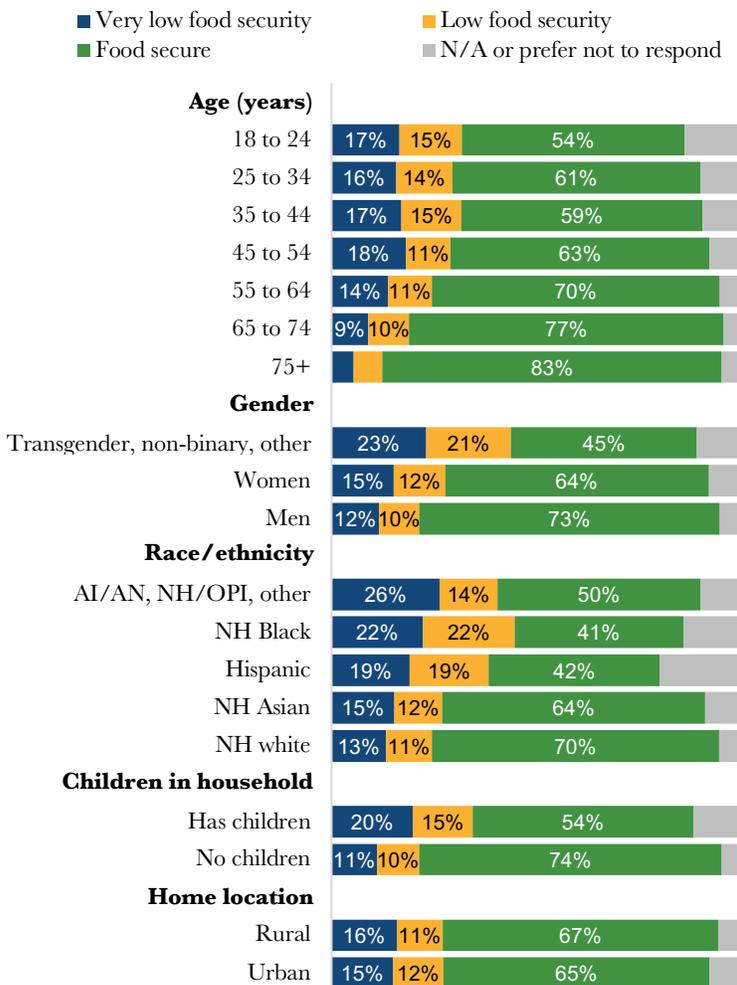


Figure 3. Household food security during COVID-19 by respondent demographic characteristics^{f,g,h}

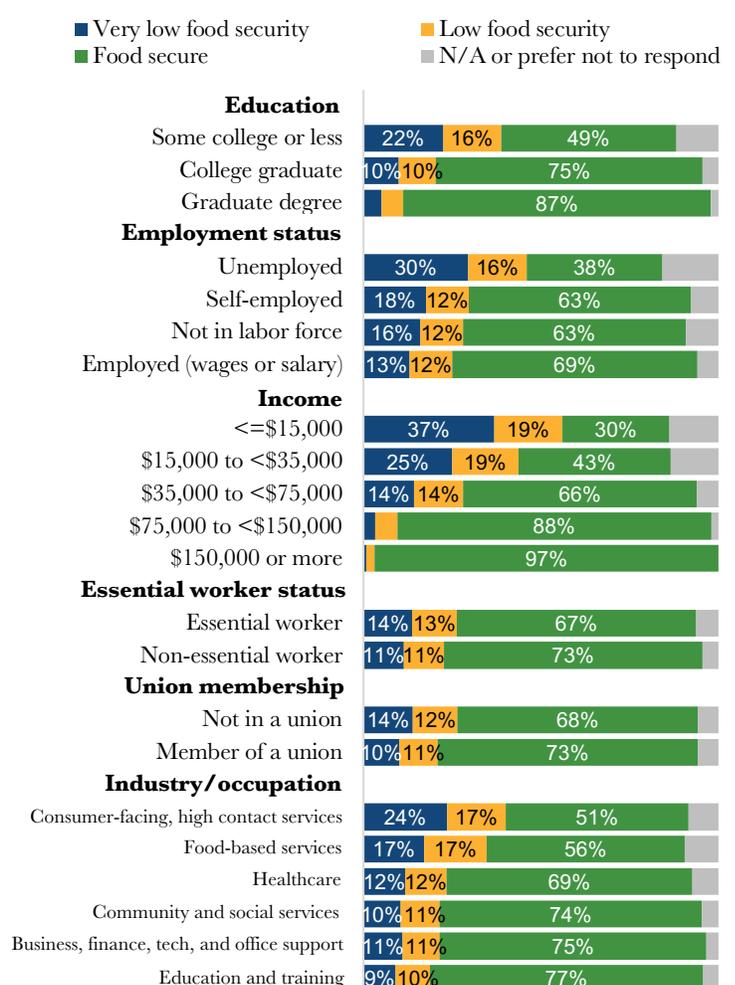


Figure 4. Household food security during COVID-19 by respondent socioeconomic factors^{h,i,j}

Reliance on Food Assistance Has Risen Across Washington State

- Among WAFOOD households, 37% relied on food assistance during the pandemic, up from the pre-COVID-19 usage of 30% (Figure 5).
- Among food insecure^k households, defined as those with low or very low food security, 66% used food assistance during COVID-19.
- Food assistance use ranged from 19%-42% by county before COVID-19 and was highest in Clark.
- During COVID-19, food assistance use ranged from 24%-52% by county and was highest in Cowlitz and Grays Harbor.

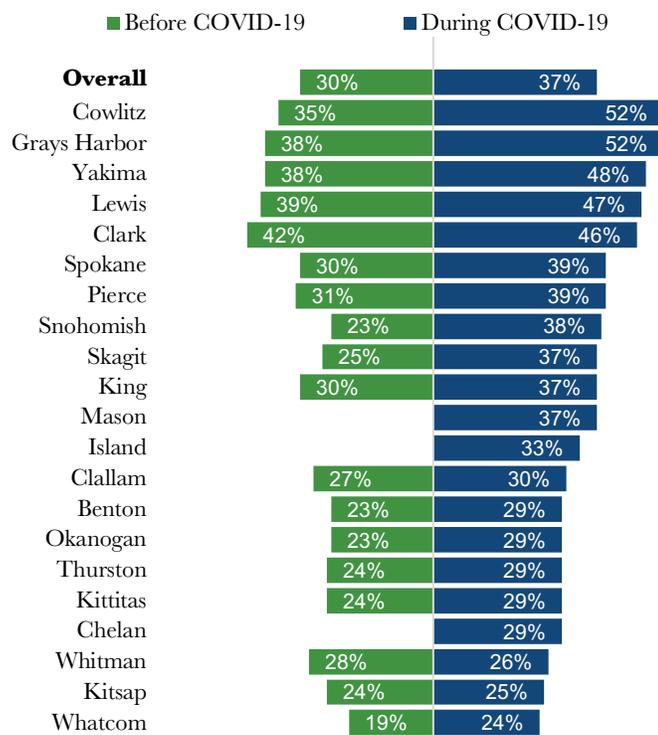


Figure 5. Household receipt of any food assistance before and during the COVID-19 pandemic^e

Demographic Differences in Food Assistance Use Continue

- Reliance on food assistance before and during COVID-19 was highest among 25-34 and 35-44-year-olds (Figure 6).
- Food assistance use before and during COVID-19 was highest among those identifying as transgender, non-binary, or other.

- Food assistance usage before and during COVID-19 was highest among individuals identifying as NH Black, Hispanic, AI/AN, and NH/OPI.
- About half of households with children relied on food assistance before and during COVID-19.
- Food security was similar in respondent households located in urban versus rural areas.

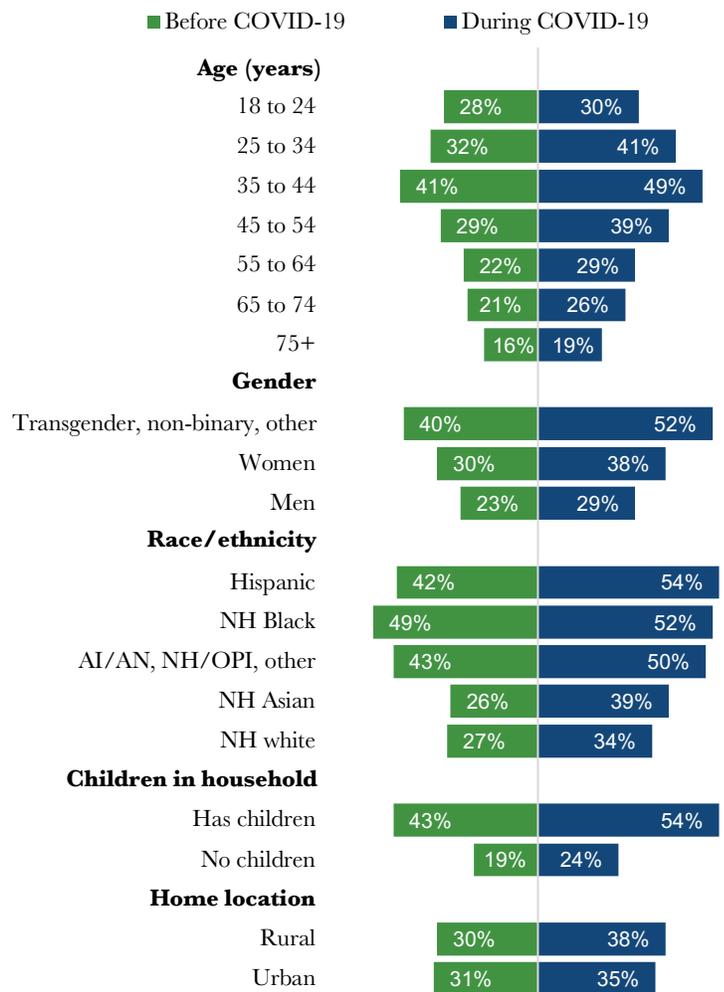


Figure 6. Household food assistance use before and during COVID-19 by respondent demographic characteristics^{f,g}

Socioeconomic Disparities in Food Assistance Use Observed Before and During COVID-19

- Food assistance use before (42%) and during COVID-19 (50%) was highest among respondents with some college education or less (Figure 7).
- Half of unemployed respondents used food assistance before and during COVID-19.

- Use of any food assistance before and during COVID-19 was lower among high-income households, with the greatest use observed in those with annual household incomes ≤\$15,000.
- Food assistance was highest in consumer-facing high contact and food-based services.

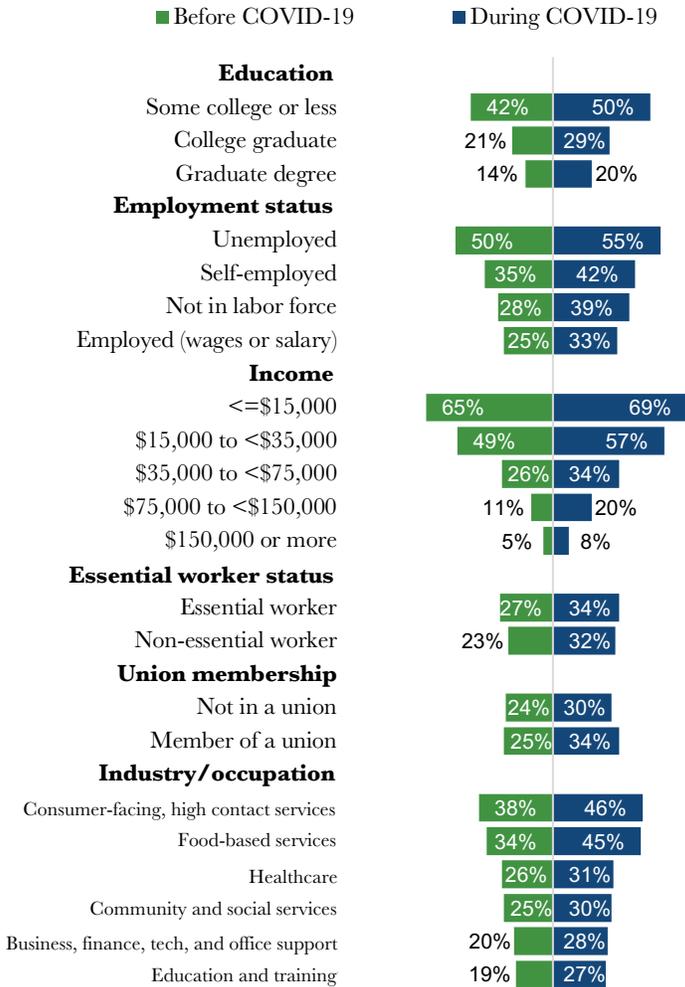


Figure 7. Food assistance use before and during COVID-19 by respondent socioeconomic factors^{i,j}

Food Assistance Program Use Varied Before and During COVID-19

- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the School Meals Program were the most frequently reported food assistance programs used before and during COVID-19 (Figure 8).
- Use of mobile food boxes increased from 3% before COVID-19 to 7% during COVID-19.
- Use of Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) was unchanged.

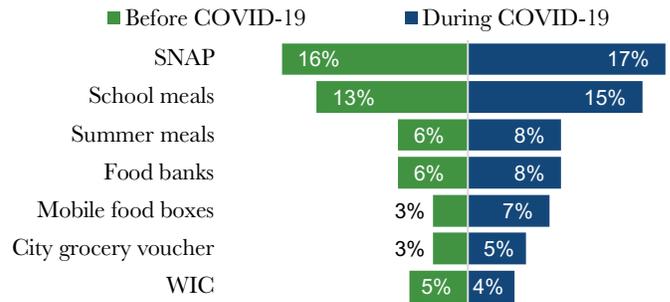


Figure 8. Overall use of specific food assistance programs before and during COVID-19

Food Banks Are the Top Program for Food Insecure Households

- Food banks were the most used food assistance program before and during COVID-19 in food insecure households followed by SNAP (Figure 9).
- Receipt of mobile food boxes increased from 4% before to 13% during COVID-19, in the food insecure households.
- Receipt of summer meals and WIC remained steady in food secure and insecure households.

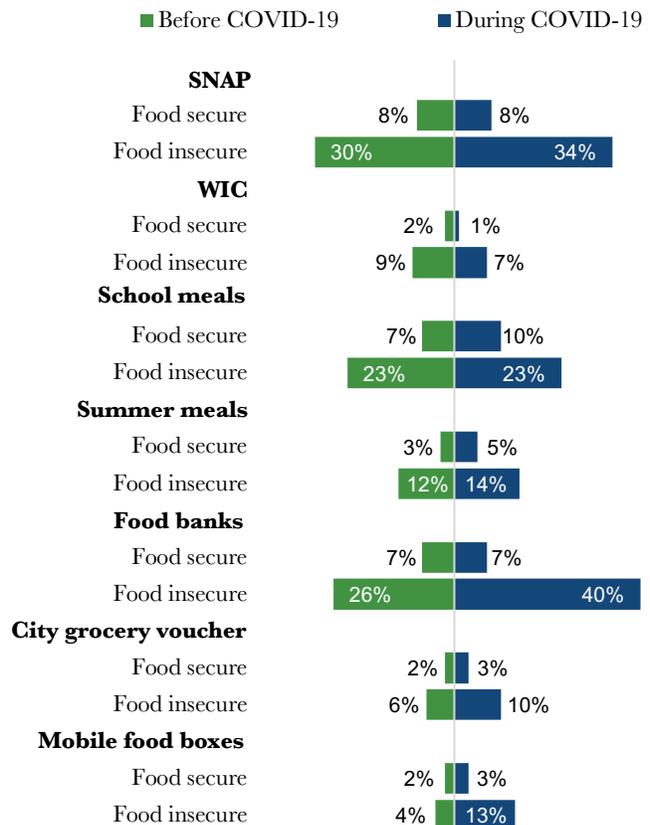


Figure 9. Use of specific food assistance programs before and during COVID-19 by household food security^{c,k}

SNAP, Food Banks, and School Meals Most Used Programs Among BIPOC Respondents

- SNAP, school meals, and food banks were the most used programs before and during COVID-19 among BIPOC respondents (Figure 10).
- Use of WIC was similar before and during COVID-19 for NH white and BIPOC respondents.
- Receipt of mobile food boxes increased for both NH white (2% to 4%) and BIPOC respondents (4% to 10%).

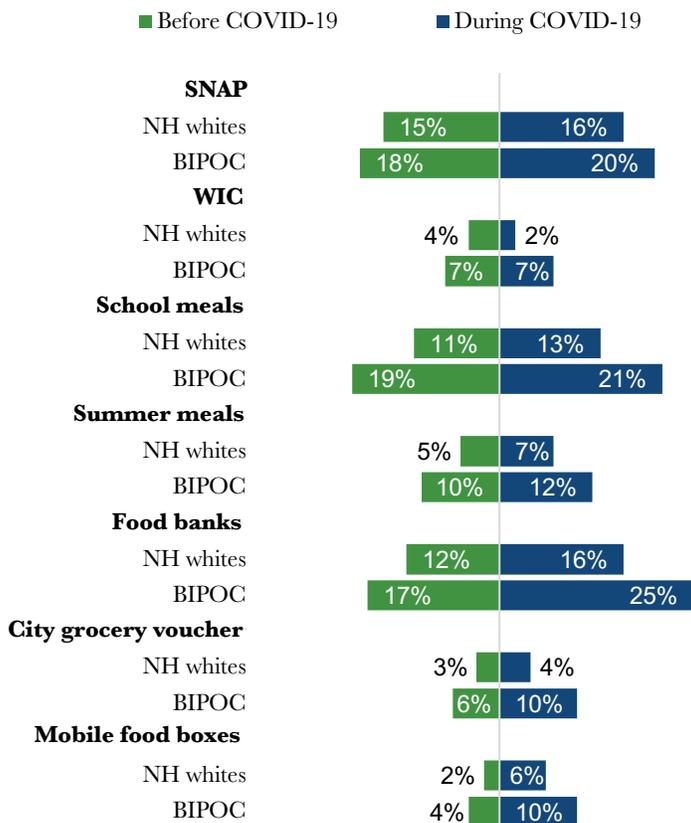


Figure 10. Use of specific food assistance programs before and during COVID-19 in NH white and BIPOC respondents¹

Most SNAP Users Fully Used Their Benefits

- Among the 914 WAFOOD respondents who reported using SNAP during COVID-19, most (81%) respondents on SNAP reported that they fully use their monthly benefits (Figure 11).

- A little more than half (58%) said they had not used their SNAP benefit for online purchases.
- Fewer food secure households (70%) reported fully using their monthly SNAP benefits compared to food insecure households (87%).
- Reported full use of monthly benefits was slightly higher among NH whites (83%) than in BIPOC respondents (77%).
- Usage of SNAP benefits online did not differ by household food insecurity or race/ethnicity.

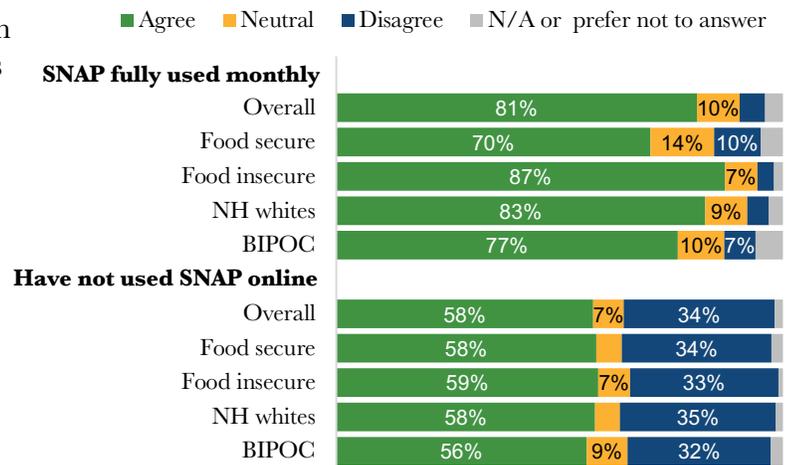


Figure 11. SNAP program barriers overall, by household food insecurity, and by race/ethnicity^{c,k,h,l}

Most WIC Users Want to Use Their Benefits Online

- Among the 189 respondents who reported using WIC during COVID-19, most (67%) said that they wanted to use their WIC benefits online (Figure 12).
- About half (49%) of respondents using WIC reported that they fully use their monthly benefit.
- Most (70%) said that limited WIC food choice was a barrier.
- Fewer BIPOC respondents (56%) wished to use their WIC benefits online compared to NH white respondents.
- More food insecure households (55%) and respondents of color (55%) reported fully using their monthly WIC benefit.
- Fewer (55%) food secure households reported limited WIC food choice as a barrier.

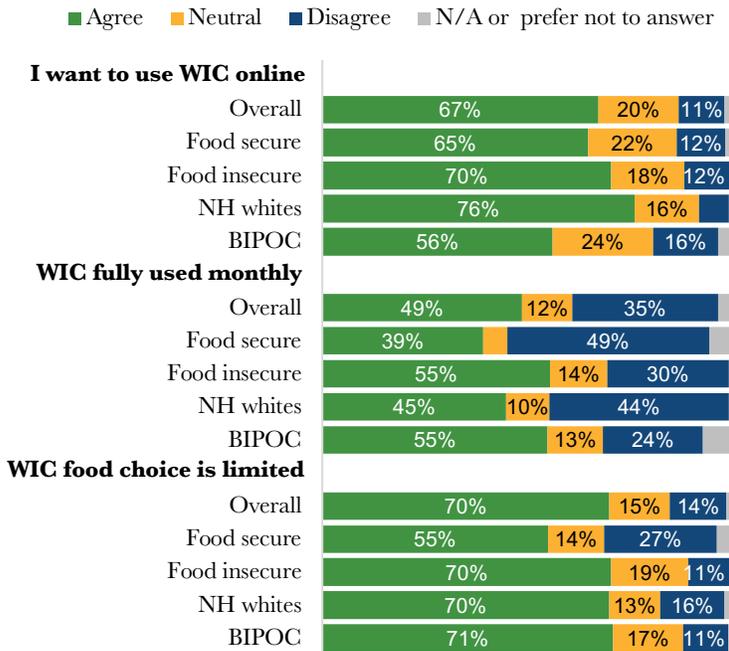


Figure 12. WIC program barriers overall, by household food insecurity, and by race/ethnicity^{c,k,h,l}

School Meal Delivery Available, Pick-Up Times Convenient

- Among the 790 respondents who reported using the school meals program during COVID-19, 42% said delivery was available (Figure 13).
- Meal pick-up times were convenient for 52%.
- More food secure households reported that delivery was available (49%) and that pick-up times were convenient (66%) than food insecure households (40% and 42%, respectively).

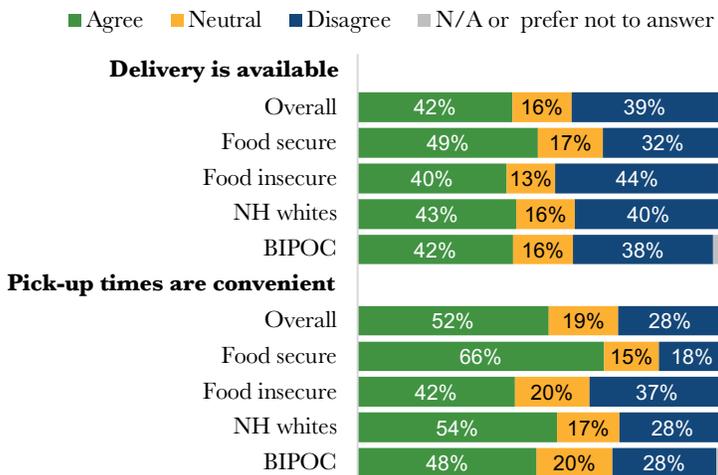


Figure 13. School meal program barriers overall, by household food insecurity, and by race/ethnicity^{c,k,l}

Lack of Food Delivery and High-Quality Foods for Food Banks

- Among the 1,216 respondents who reported using food banks during COVID-19, 21% said delivery was available (Figure 14).
- A quarter (25%) of respondents said their food bank had high quality foods.
- There was little difference in the reporting of food delivery and food quality as barriers to food bank use by household food security or race/ethnicity.

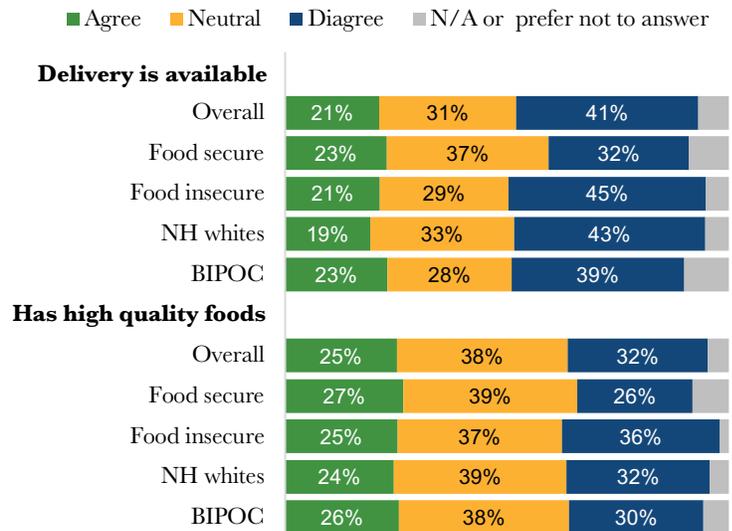


Figure 14. Food bank barriers overall, by household food insecurity, and by race/ethnicity^{c,k,l}

Some Still Worried They Would Not Qualify for Food Assistance

- Among the 1,985 respondents who reported using food assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, 36% worried they would not qualify (Figure 15).
- A quarter (27%) of respondents reported that their benefits were not sufficient for their needs.
- A quarter (23%) of respondents said that embarrassment was a barrier to using food assistance programs.
- Respondents in food insecure households were more likely to report concerns about qualifying, paperwork, insufficient benefits, and embarrassment about use than food secure households.
- Reported food assistance barriers were similar by race/ethnicity.

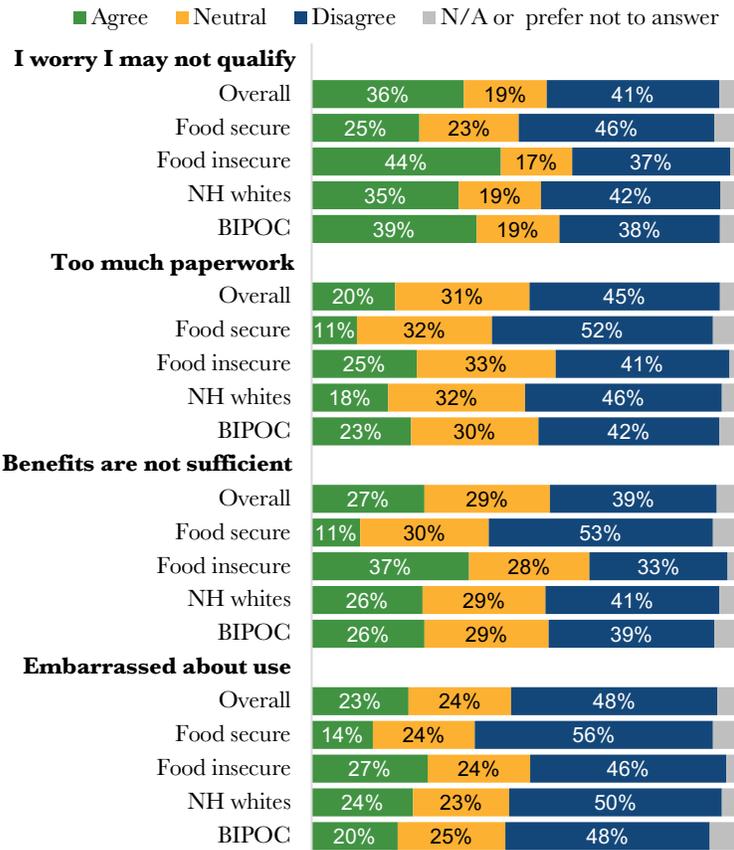


Figure 15. General barriers to food assistance program use overall, by household food insecurity and race/ethnicity^{c,k,l}

- Over half (56%) of survey responses were from King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Spokane counties.
- The combined WAFOOD 1 and 2 sample had more 35-54-year-olds, women, NH whites, college graduates, and households with annual incomes <\$35,000 than WA State (Table 1).

Table 1. Combined WAFOOD 1 and 2 survey sample demographics compared to WA State

	WAFOOD 1 and 2	WA State ^a
Age (years)		
18 to 34	22%	31%
35 to 54	44%	33%
55 and older	34%	36%
Gender identity		
Women	84%	50%
Men	14%	50%
Transgender, nonbinary, other	3%	–
Race/ethnicity		
NH white	77%	67%
NH Black	3%	4%
Hispanic or Latinx	8%	13%
NH Asian	5%	9%
AI/AN, NH/OPI, other	6%	11%
Education		
Some college or less	48%	53%
College graduate	30%	23%
Graduate degree	22%	14%
Annual household income		
<= \$15,000	14%	7%
\$15,000 to <\$35,000	20%	13%
\$35,000 to <\$75,000	31%	27%
\$75,000 or more	35%	52%

^aUnited States Census Bureau 2019 American Community Survey 1-year estimates

WAFOOD 1 and 2 State Coverage

- The combined sample of WAFOOD 1 and 2 survey encompassed 5,330 unique respondents from all counties in WA State (Figure 16).

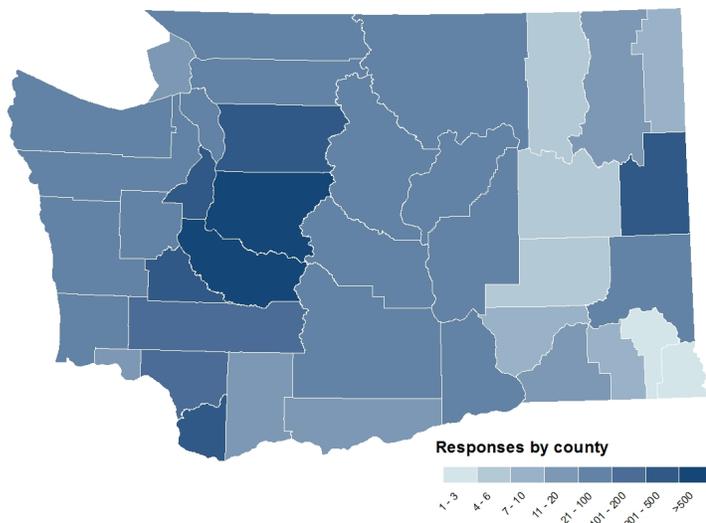


Figure 16. WAFOOD 1 and 2 responses by county

Abbreviations

WA = Washington
 WAFOOD = Washington Food Security Survey
 USDA = United States Department of Agriculture
 N/A = Not applicable
 NH = Non-Hispanic
 AI/AN = American Indian/Alaskan Native
 NH/OPI = Native Hawai'ian/Other Pacific Islander
 SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
 WIC = Women, Infants, and Children
 BIPOC = Black, Indigenous, and people of color

Technical Notes

- a. The sample size of 5,330 respondents combines responses from 1,821 WAFOOD 1 only participants, 2,714 WAFOOD 2 only participants, and 795 returning participants, using their most recent WAFOOD 2 responses.
- b. In WAFOOD 1, food security was measured from March 15th to June/July 2020 in. In WAFOOD 2, food security was measured in the past 30 days.
- c. Food secure households are defined as those with *high food security* or *marginal food security* based on the USDA food security scale categories:
 - *High food security*: no reported indications of food-access problems or limitations.
 - *Marginal food security*: one or two reported indications—typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house. Little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake.
- d. Unlabeled gray pie chart slices or bar chart segments indicate “not applicable or prefer not to respond” unless otherwise specified.
- e. Counties and subpopulations with fewer than 30 survey responses or with fewer than 10 food insecure households were omitted to maintain respondent confidentiality.
- f. Urban versus rural definitions were based on respondents ZIP codes and area population density using definitions developed by the USDA Economic Research Service.
- g. “Other” gender includes self-described gender identities.
- h. Some responses with small percentage values ($\leq 8\%$) were removed for display purposes.
- i. “Food-based services” includes: 1) farming agriculture, fishing, and livestock, 2) transportation and food delivery, 3) food sales (wholesale or retail), and 4) food preparation and services. “Consumer-facing, high contact services” includes: 1) hospitality, hotels, real estate, and rental, 2) installation, repair, and construction, 3) personal care and services, 4) retail sales and related occupations, and 5) arts, design, entertainment, and sports.
- j. “Not in labor force” includes homemakers, students, retirees, and respondents who are unable to work
- k. Food insecure households are defined as those with *low food security* or *very low food security* based on the USDA food security scale categories:
 - *Low food security*: reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake.

- *Very low food security*: reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.
1. BIPOC includes non-Hispanic Blacks, Hispanics, American Indian/Alaska Natives, and Native Hawai'ian/Other Pacific Islanders.

Acknowledgements

The WAFOOD team wishes to thank the Population Health Initiative, the School of Public Health, the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, and other private philanthropy for their generous support. We also thank community partners and stakeholders who helped shape this project. Among those are: WA Department of Health, WA Department of Agriculture, WA Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition, WA SNAP-Ed, KC Local Food Initiative, Northwest Harvest, WA State University (WSU) Extension, United Way of WA, and numerous food banks, food pantries, charitable organizations community organizations, county health departments, and local health jurisdictions. The Nutrition and Obesity Policy Research and Evaluation Network (NOPREN) and the ad-hoc COVID-19 Food Security Surveys subgroup shared valuable insights and surveys relevant to this project.

For More Information, Please Visit

<https://nutr.uw.edu/cphn/>
<https://www.nfactresearch.org/washingtonstate>

About the WAFOOD Team

The WAFOOD survey was a joint effort between the UW and WSU with collaboration from Tacoma Community College (TCC). The team comprises Adam Drewnowski, Director, Center for Public Health Nutrition and Professor, Epidemiology at UWSPH; Jennifer J. Otten, Food Systems Director and Associate Professor, Nutritional Sciences and Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences (DEOHS) at UWSPH; Laura R. Lewis, Director, Food Systems Program and an Associate Professor, Community and Economic Development at WSU; Sarah M. Collier, Assistant Professor, Nutritional Sciences and DEOHS at UWSPH; Brinda Sivaramakrishnan, Professor, Community Health at TCC; Chelsea M. Rose, Research Scientist, Epidemiology at UWSPH; Alan Ismach, Research Coordinator, Health Services at UWSPH; Esther Nguyen, Research Assistant at UWSPH; and James Buszkiewicz, Research Scientist, Epidemiology at UWSPH.

Contact Us

phisurvey@uw.edu

Suggested Citation

Otten, Jennifer J., Drewnowski, Adam, Lewis, Laura R., Collier, Sarah M., Sivaramakrishnan, Brinda, Rose, Chelsea M., Ismach, Alan, Nguyen, Esther, Buszkiewicz, James. “Special Research Brief: Food Security and barriers to Food Assistance Use in Washington State Households, 2020-2021, Research Brief 11” (July 2021). Washington State Food Security Survey.
<https://nutr.uw.edu/cphn/wafood/brief-11>