



# Economic Security and Food Access in Washington State During the COVID-19 Pandemic

June to July 2020, Research Brief 1

## About the WAFOOD Survey

The Washington (WA) State Food Security Survey (WAFOOD) funded through the University of Washington (UW) Population Health Initiative (UWPHI) was deployed from June 18<sup>th</sup> to July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020. The goal was to understand the impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on economic security and food access of WA State residents. A total of 2,621 WA residents in 38 of 39 counties responded. This brief provides a snapshot of survey participant responses on the status and conditions of employment, income and food assistance, food security, and food shopping patterns. We also examine barriers to accessing both federal and state programs before and since the pandemic.

### Key Findings

1. Food insecurity was experienced in 30% of households and of those, 59% had children.
2. Food assistance was sought by 33% of households.
3. Most were satisfied with food assistance but some cited issues with food access and variety.
4. Fair or poor diets were reported by 33% and 40% said their diet worsened.
5. Greater consumption of rice, beans and eggs but less meat and fish.
6. Sporadic food shortages observed.
7. Rising food cost and reduced safety in food shopping were cited as barriers to food access.
8. Unemployment benefits sought by 28% of households 40% of which had issues applying.
9. Stimulus checks received by 77% of households.
10. More time to prepare and enjoy meals was viewed as one benefit.

## Critical Disparities in Food Insecurity

- Using the United States Department of Agriculture 6-item validated scale, 30% of households were food insecure.
- Of food insecure households, 59% had children.
- The prevalence of food insecurity ranged from 3% to as high as 58% by income (Figure 1).

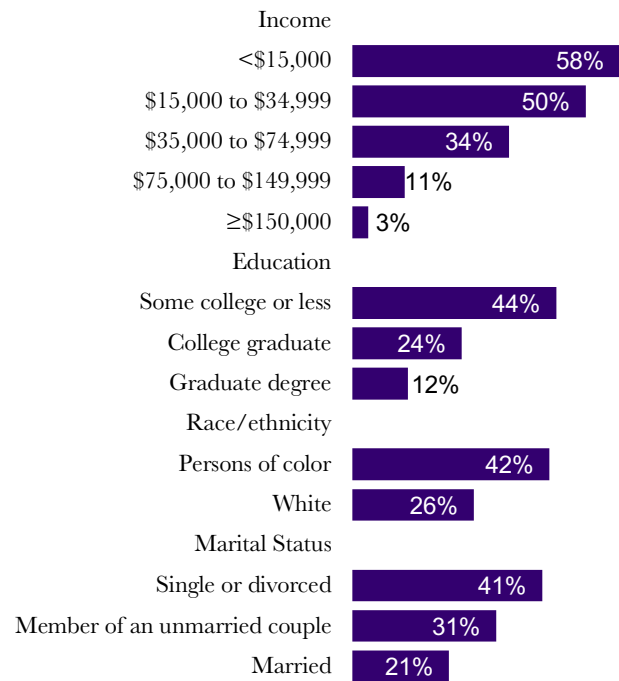


Figure 1. Food insecurity by socio-demographics

- The prevalence of food insecurity ranged from 12% to 44% depending on education.
- Respondents of color were more than 1.5 times as likely to be food insecure as white respondents
- The prevalence of food insecurity was higher among single or divorced adults.

## The Vital Role of Food Assistance

- Overall participation in food assistance programs has remained largely unchanged, increasing from 32% in the 12 months prior to the shutdown to 33% after.
- Receipt of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), School Meals, and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) declined slightly (Figure 2).
- Meals from food banks/pantries, Summer School Meals Programs, city agency grocery voucher or cash cards, and mobile food boxes increased.

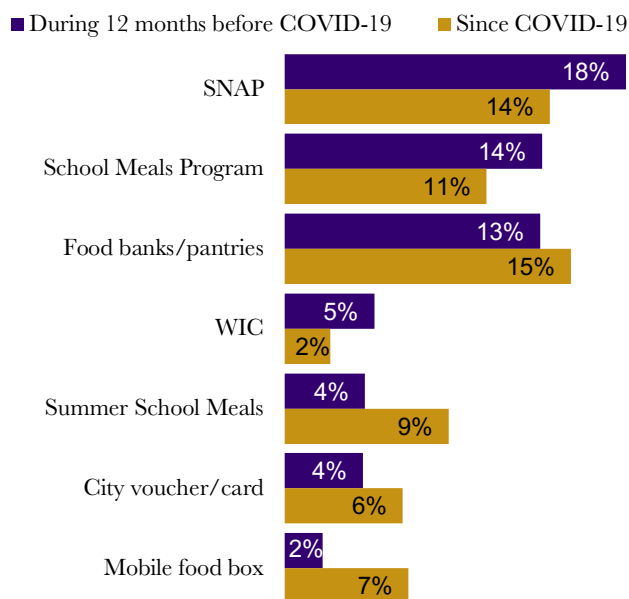


Figure 2. Participation in food assistance

## SNAP Benefits Not Yet Used Online

- Of the 364 respondents using SNAP during the shutdown, 58% were satisfied with benefits.
- Nearly all made full use of SNAP (Figure 3).
- Half (46%) were unaware of this expanded online option or had yet to used it (54%).
- Many (34%) report that they are unable to use their SNAP benefits online.

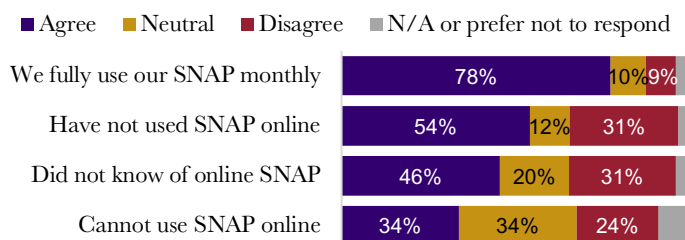


Figure 3. Experience with SNAP during shutdown

## WIC Recipients Cite Limited Online Use and Food Choice as Barriers

- Of the 63 respondents using WIC during the shutdown, 62% were satisfied with benefits.
- Half (57%) said food choice was limited (Figure 4).
- The inability to use WIC benefits online was another frequently cited (41%) barrier.

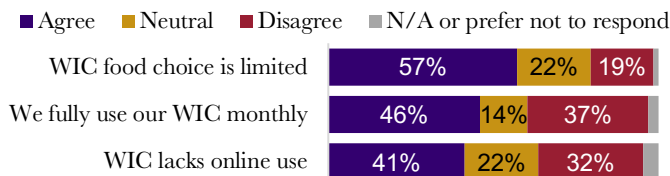


Figure 4. Experience with WIC during shutdown

## School Meals Meet Needs but Access and Delivery a Problem

- Of the 277 respondents using the School Meals Program during COVID-19, half (49%) were satisfied with their experience.
- Delivery was unavailable to most (39%) (Figure 5).
- Most felt that meal pick-ups met their needs and they could prepare/store the foods they received.

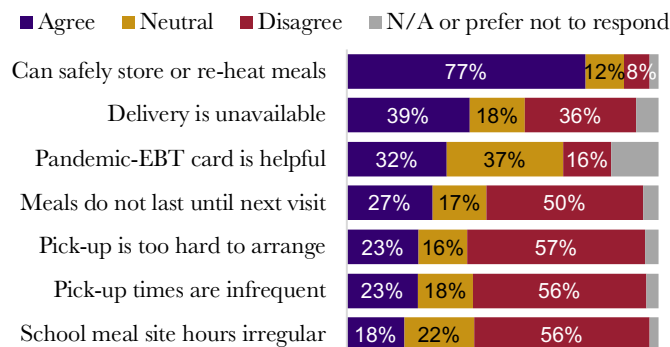


Figure 5. Experience with School Meals during shutdown

## Proximity to Food Banks a Plus but Food Variety Lacking

- Of the 524 respondents who used food banks, half (52%) said they were satisfied.
- Half (45%) said a food bank was close (Figure 6).
- Half (45%) said there were limits on how often they could visit food banks.
- There were some concerns about food availability (43%) and the quality of available food (37%).

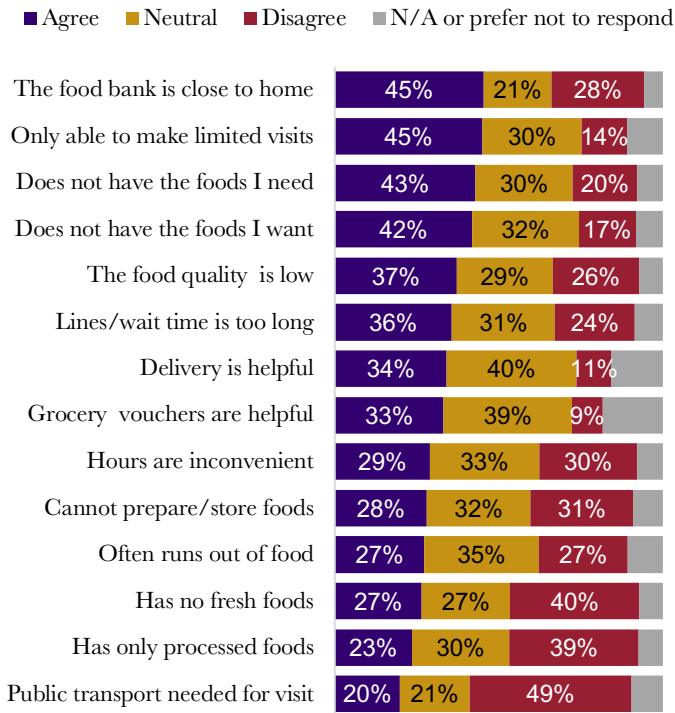


Figure 6. Food pantry/bank experience amid COVID-19

## Many Worry They Do Not Qualify for Food Assistance

- Of the 857 respondents who received food assistance, many (43%) had worried that they would not qualify (Figure 7).
- About a third noted that it was difficult to travel to and from food program offices to recertify.

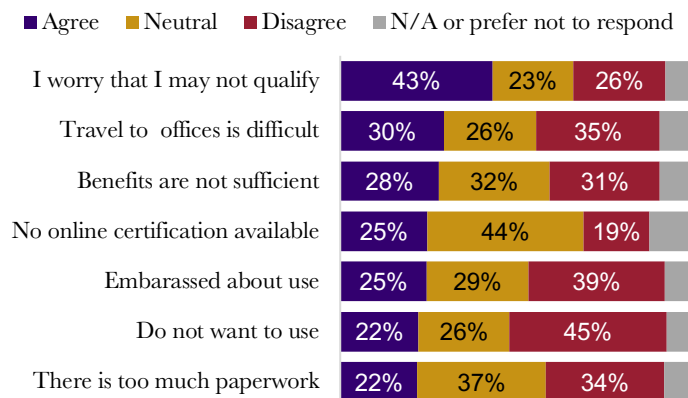


Figure 7. Barriers to food assistance program usage

## Eating Habits Notably Changed

- Thirty-three percent of respondents reported fair or poor diets and 40% said their diet worsened during the pandemic.

- Higher consumption of eggs, rice, and beans, peas, or legumes reported by over 25% (Figure 8).
- Lower consumption of meat (chicken, beef, and pork) and fresh fish and shellfish reported by 35%.
- Lower consumption of sugars, sweets, cakes, cookies, and pies reported by a third.

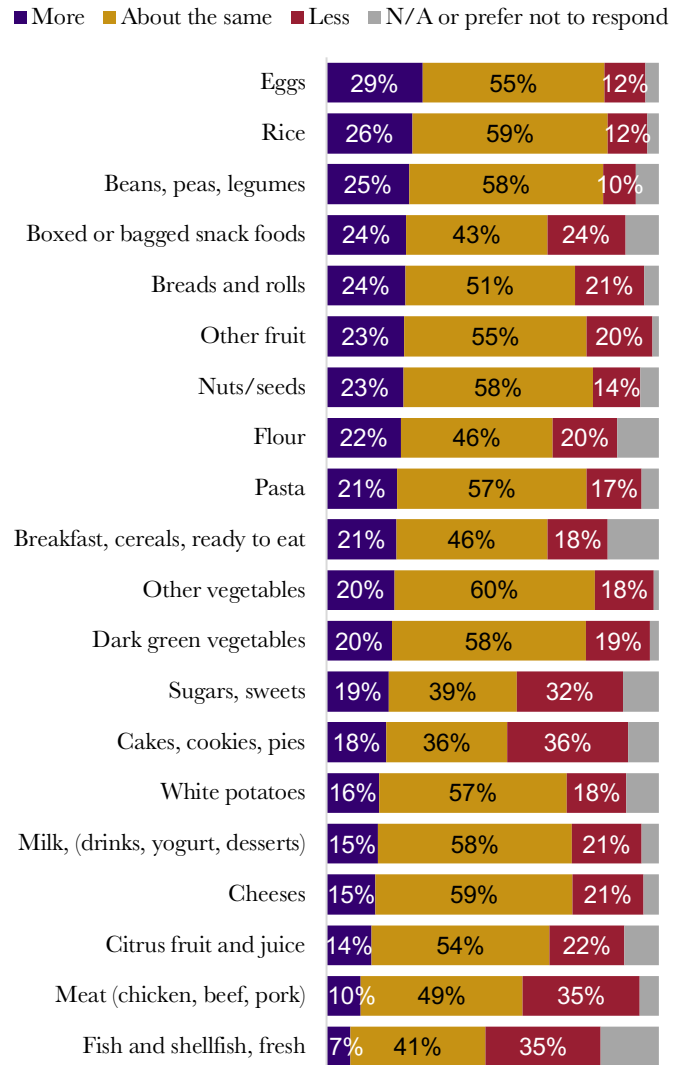


Figure 8. Changes in household food consumption

## Confidence in Food Access but Higher Costs and Shortages Seen

- Most (74%) respondents said that they were confident in their household’s ability to access the foods they needed over the next 4 weeks.
- Reduced access to flour and baking supplies reported by 41% (Figure 9a).
- Reduced access to meat (beef or pork) and chicken reported by a third.

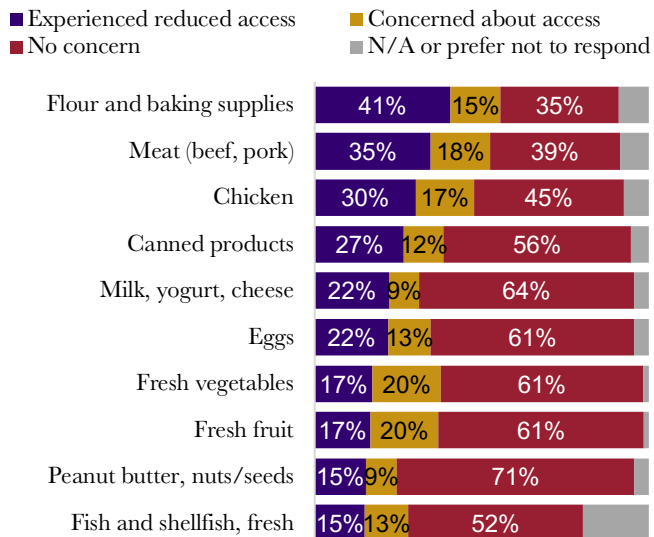


Figure 9a. Household concerns about food access

- Twenty percent reported concerns about their ability to access fresh vegetables and fruit.
- Few were concerned about access to chocolate, candy, boxed or bagged snack foods, packaged baked goods, and sugary drinks (Figure 9b).

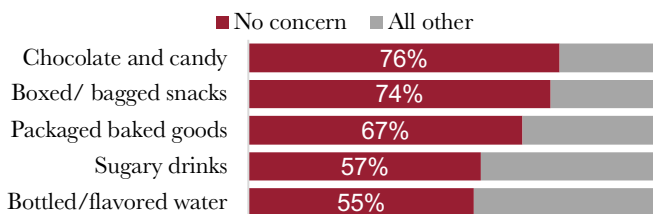


Figure 9b. Household concerns about food access

- Among barriers to food access, respondents cited concerns over increased food cost and safety in shopping for food (Figure 10).

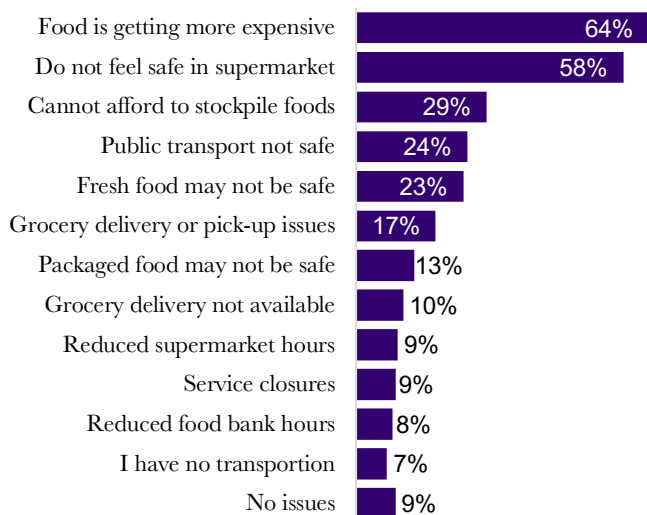


Figure 10. Issues experienced in accessing food

## WAFOOD Sample a Mix of Essential and Non-Essential Workers

- Sixty-seven percent of the WAFOOD respondents were employed prior to the shutdown.
- Over half (54%) of employed respondents held a job that was classified as essential, defined as those who report to work despite Washington State's "stay home, stay healthy" orders.
- About a quarter (23%) of employed respondents were members of a union.
- A higher proportion of essential workers were found in community and social services, healthcare, and food services (Figure 11).
- A higher proportion of non-essential workers were found in education, business, finance, or office support (Figure 12).

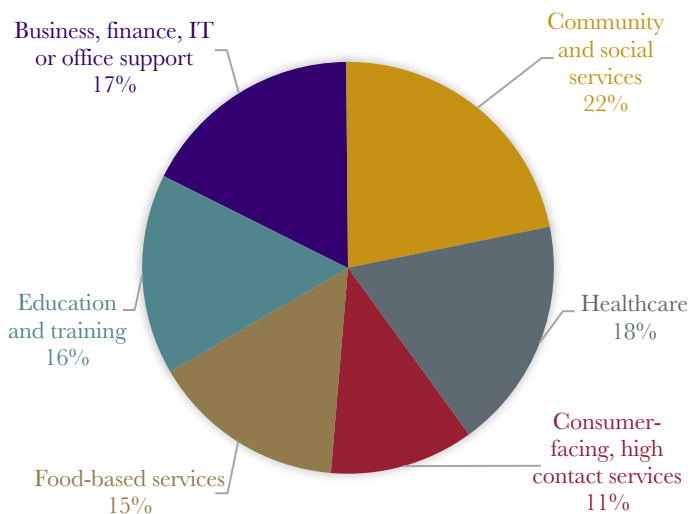


Figure 11. Industry/occupation of essential workers

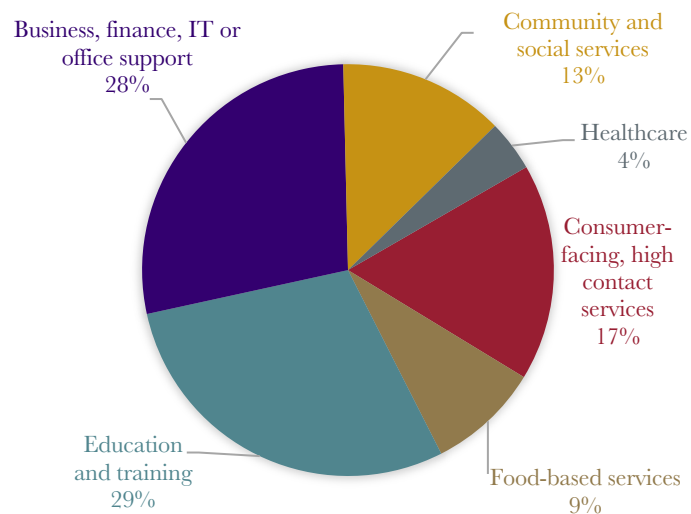


Figure 12. Industry/occupation of non-essential workers

## Many Work from Home, Others Experience Lost Jobs or Hours

- Asked about employer adjustments to the shutdown, 36% of respondents said only essential workers needed to report to work (Figure 13).
- Another 36% said all employees were encouraged to work from home.
- Some (24%) reported reduced work hours.
- Others also reported temporary firm closures (11%) or permanent closures and layoffs (7%).

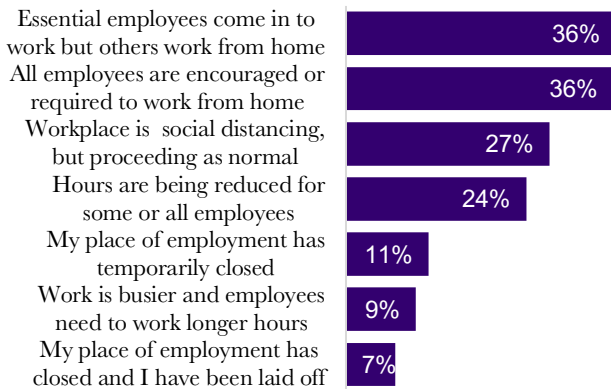


Figure 13. Workplace responses to the shutdown

- Asked what would happen if they got sick, 62% said they could use paid time off while some (38%) said they could use paid medical leave (Figure 14).

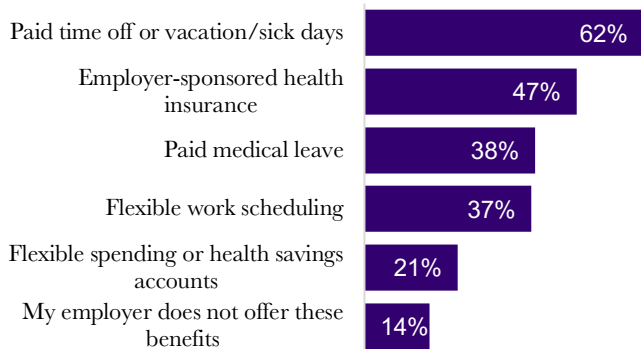


Figure 14. Workplace benefits

## Stimulus Checks Received by Most; Unemployment Rising

- Three-fourths (77%) of WA residents surveyed reported receiving a stimulus check.
- Twenty-eight percent of respondents reported receiving unemployment; however, of those, 40% reported difficulty in applying.

## Positive Outcomes Amid COVID-19: Time to Prepare and Enjoy Meals

- When asked about any positive outcomes amid COVID-19, 48% said that they had more free time to prepare and enjoy meals (Figure 15).
- Forty-two percent cited members of the community helping each other access food.



Figure 15. Positive outcomes amid COVID-19

## WAFOOD Survey Statewide Coverage by County

- The survey received 2,621 complete responses from 38 out of 39 counties in WA.
- The survey was made available in both English and Spanish.
- All respondents were geocoded by ZIP code for analysis of economic disparities by location.
- Greatest representation was from Western WA with 59% of responses coming from King (KC), Pierce, and Snohomish counties (Figure 16).

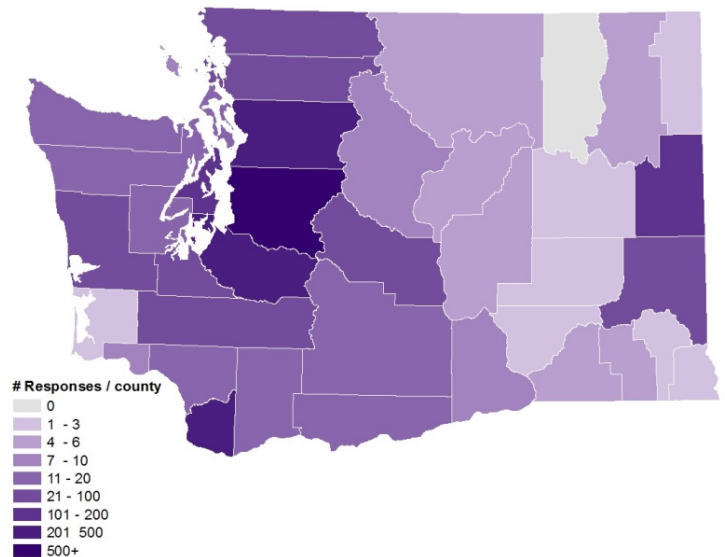


Figure 16. Geographic distribution of WAFOOD

- WAFOOD demographics closely mirrored the racial/ethnic, education, and age distributions of KC and captured those of WA (Figure 17).
- Most respondents (81%) were female and partnered or married (60%).
- Forty-four percent had children <18 years.
- Thirty percent had household incomes ≤\$35,000.
- Over half (53%) owned their home.

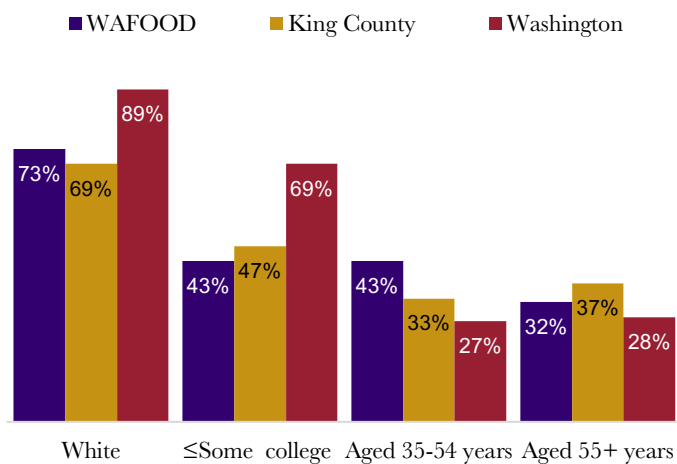


Figure 17. Sample demographic comparison  
Source: 2018 ACS data by county

## Acknowledgements

The WAFOOD survey team wishes to thank the UWPHI, the UW School of Public Health (UWSPH), and the Department of Epidemiology for their support. We also wish to thank numerous 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, Washington 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.

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## 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). Adam Drewnowski is the Director of the Center for Public Health Nutrition and a Professor in Epidemiology at UWSPH. Jennifer J. Otten is the Food Systems Director and an Associate Professor in Nutritional Sciences and Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences (DEOHS) at UWSPH. Laura R. Lewis is the Director of the Food Systems Program and an Associate Professor in Community and Economic Development at WSU. Sarah M. Collier is an Assistant Professor in Nutritional Sciences and DEOHS at UWSPH. Brinda Sivaramakrishnan is a Professor of Community Health at TCC. Chelsea M. Rose is a Research Coordinator in Epidemiology at UWSPH. Alan Ismach is a Research Coordinator in Health Services at UWSPH. Esther Nguyen is a Research Assistant at UWSPH. James Buszkiewicz is a Research Scientist in Epidemiology at UWSPH.

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