Economic Security and Food Access During the COVID-19 Pandemic: King County

June to July 2020, Research Brief 2 (King County)

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 18th to July 31st, 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. Of those, 861 respondents resided in King County.

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 among King County (KC) residents.

Critical Disparities in Food Insecurity

- Using the United States Department of Agriculture 6-item validated scale, 30% of KC households were food insecure.
- Of food insecure KC households, 57% had children.
- The prevalence of food insecurity ranged from 4% to as high as 59% by income (Figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;$15,000</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000 to $34,999</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35,000 to $74,999</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000 to $149,999</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥$150,000</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some college or less</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persons of color</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single or divorced</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of an unmarried couple</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Food insecurity in King County respondents, by socio-demographics

Key Findings: King County

1. Food insecurity was experienced in 30% of households and of those, 57% had children.
2. Food assistance was sought by 36% of households.
3. Fair or poor diets were reported by 33% and 40% said their diet worsened.
4. Greater consumption of bread, rice, beans, and eggs but less meat and fish.
5. Sporadic food shortages observed.
6. Rising food cost and reduced safety in food shopping were cited as barriers to food access.
7. Unemployment benefits sought by 31% of households 36% of which had issues applying.
8. Stimulus checks received by 78% of households.
9. More time to prepare and enjoy meals was viewed as one benefit.
The prevalence of food insecurity ranged from 11% to 47% depending on education.

Respondents of color were more than 1.5 times as likely to be food insecure as white respondents.

Higher food insecurity prevalence was seen in South Seattle and South King County (Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Map of food insecurity in King County respondents](image)

Many Worry They Do Not Qualify for Food Assistance

- Of the 312 KC respondents who received food assistance, many (44%) had worried that they would not qualify (Figure 4).
- About a third noted that it was difficult to travel to and from food program offices to recertify.

![Figure 3. King County respondents’ participation in food assistance](image)

The Vital Role of Food Assistance

- KC respondents overall participation in food assistance programs has remained largely unchanged, increasing from 35% in the 12 months prior to the shutdown to 36% after.
- Receipt of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), School Meals, and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) declined (Figure 3).
- Meals from food banks/pantries, Summer School Meals Programs, city agency grocery voucher or cash cards, and mobile food boxes increased.

![Figure 4. Barriers to food assistance program usage by King County respondents](image)
Eating Habits Notably Changed

- Thirty-three percent of KC respondents reported fair or poor diets and 40% said their diet worsened during the pandemic.
- Higher consumption of eggs, beans, peas, or legumes, breads and rolls, and rice reported by over 25% of KC respondents (Figure 5).
- Lower consumption of meat (chicken, beef, and pork) and fresh fish and shellfish reported by 35% of KC respondents.
- Lower consumption of sugars, sweets, cakes, cookies, and pies reported by about a third.

Confidence in Food Access but Higher Costs and Shortages Seen

- Most (70%) KC respondents said 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 38% of KC respondents (Figure 6a).
- Reduced access to meat (beef or pork) and chicken reported by about a third.

- About 17-18% 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 6b).
- Among barriers to food access, KC respondents cited concerns over increased food cost and safety in shopping for food (Figure 7).

Flour and baking supplies 38% 15% 36%
Meat (beef, pork) 32% 17% 38%
Chicken 28% 16% 45%
Canned products 25% 11% 58%
Eggs 23% 14% 58%
Milk, yogurt, cheese 21% 10% 64%
Fresh vegetables 18% 20% 60%
Fresh fruit 17% 19% 62%
Fish and shellfish, fresh 17% 14% 51%
Peanut butter, nuts/seeds 15% 8% 70%

Eggs
- More - About the same - Less - N/A or prefer not to respond
Eggs 31% 53% 13%
Beans, peas, legumes 28% 58% 9%
Breads and rolls 28% 46% 21%
Rice 28% 58% 12%
Other fruit 26% 52% 20%
Boxed or bagged snack foods 25% 40% 25%
Nuts/seeds 25% 53% 25%
Flour 24% 43% 20%
Pasta 23% 54% 17%
Breakfast, cereals, ready to eat 22% 44% 17%
Other vegetables 21% 59% 18%
Sugars, sweets 21% 36% 33%
Dark green vegetables 21% 57% 20%
Cakes, cookies, pies 20% 34% 38%
Milk, (drinks, yogurt, desserts) 17% 57% 21%
Cheeses 17% 54% 23%
Citrus fruit and juice 17% 49% 23%
White potatoes 16% 54% 18%
Meat (chicken, beef, pork) 10% 44% 37%
Fish and shellfish, fresh 8% 39% 37%

More - About the same - Less - N/A or prefer not to respond

Flour and baking supplies 38% 15% 36%
Meat (beef, pork) 32% 17% 38%
Chicken 28% 16% 45%
Canned products 25% 11% 58%
Eggs 23% 14% 58%
Milk, yogurt, cheese 21% 10% 64%
Fresh vegetables 18% 20% 60%
Fresh fruit 17% 19% 62%
Fish and shellfish, fresh 17% 14% 51%
Peanut butter, nuts/seeds 15% 8% 70%

Figure 6a. King County household concerns about food access

Figure 6b. Household concerns about food access by King County respondents

- Do not feel safe in supermarket 63%
- Food is getting more expensive 62%
- Public transport not safe 35%
- Cannot afford to stockpile foods 29%
- Fresh food may not be safe 26%
- Grocery delivery or pick-up issues 17%
- Packaged food may not be safe 14%
- I have no transportion 11%
- Service closures 10%
- Reduced supermarket hours 8%
- No issues 8%
- Reduced food bank hours 7%
- Grocery delivery not available 4%

Figure 7. Issues experienced in accessing food by King County respondents
WAFOOD Sample a Mix of Essential and Non-Essential Workers

- Sixty-seven percent of the KC respondents were employed prior to the shutdown.
- About half (47%) of employed KC 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 (22%) 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 8).
- A higher proportion of non-essential workers were found in education, business, finance, or office support (Figure 9).

Many Work from Home, Others Experience Lost Jobs or Hours

- When asked about employer adjustments to the shutdown, 37% of KC respondents said that only essential workers needed to report to work with 37% encouraged to work from home (Figure 10).
- Some (27%) reported reduced work hours.
- Other KC respondents also reported temporary firm closures (14%) or permanent closures and layoffs (8%).

![Figure 8. Industry/occupation of essential workers, King County respondents](image)

![Figure 9. Industry/occupation of non-essential workers, King County respondents](image)

![Figure 10. Workplace responses to the shutdown, King County respondents](image)

![Figure 11. Workplace benefits, King County respondents](image)
Stimulus Checks Received by Most; Unemployment Rising

- Three-fourths (78%) of KC respondents surveyed reported receiving a stimulus check.
- Thirty-one percent of KC respondents reported receiving unemployment; however, of those, 36% reported difficulty in applying.

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

- When asked about any positive outcomes amid COVID-19, 52% of KC respondents said that they had more free time to prepare and enjoy meals (Figure 12).
- Forty percent cited members of the community helping each other access food.

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 69% of responses coming from King (KC), Pierce, Snohomish and Clark counties (Figure 13).
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.

We are grateful to the Nutrition and Obesity Policy Research and Evaluation Network (NOPREN) for their support of the ad-hoc COVID-19 Food Security Surveys subgroup that shared 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). 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.

Contact Us

phisurvey@uw.edu

Suggested Citation

Drewnowski, Adam; Otten Jennifer J.; Lewis Laura R.; Collier Sarah M.; Sivaramakrishnan Brinda; Rose Chelsea M.; Ismach Alan, Nguyen Esther, Buszkiewicz James, “Economic security and food access during the COVID-19 pandemic: King County, June to July 2020, Research Brief 2 (King County)” (October 2020). Washington State Food Security Survey.
https://nutr.uw.edu/cphn/wafood/brief-2