



For College, Community, and Justice

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Washington State Community and Technical Colleges #RealCollege Survey

February 2020

Executive Summary

Now in its fifth year, the #RealCollege survey is the nation's largest, longest-running annual assessment of basic needs security among college students. In the absence of any federal data on the subject, the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice created the survey to evaluate access to affordable food and housing among college students.

This report describes the results of the #RealCollege survey administered in the fall of 2019 at 28 out of the 34 Washington State community and technical colleges, a subset of the 227 two- and four-year institutions surveyed across the United States.

In 2019, approximately 13,550 students from 28 Washington State community and technical colleges responded to the #RealCollege survey. The results indicate:

- 41% of respondents were food insecure in the prior 30 days
- 51% of respondents were housing insecure in the previous year
- 19% of respondents were homeless in the previous year

There is wide variation—more than 20 percentage points—in rates of basic needs insecurity across Washington State community and technical colleges. Students often marginalized in higher education are at greater risk of basic needs insecurity while attending Washington State community and technical colleges. These groups include American Indian or Alaskan Native students, Black or Indigenous students, students who identify as nonbinary or transgender, and students who are former foster youth or returning citizens.

Washington State community and technical colleges are taking steps to advance access to public benefits for their students. While this report shows room for continued improvement, rates of public benefits utilization in Washington are a bit higher than the averages we observe for community colleges nationwide. Our findings highlight the need for continued evolution of programmatic work to advance cultural shifts on college campuses, increased engagement with community organizations and the private sector, more robust emergency aid programs, and a basic needs-centered approach to government policy at all levels.

The Hope Center thanks the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges for making this report possible.

Introduction

Most colleges and universities are striving to build enrollment and increase college completion rates. Their efforts include changes to the structure of academic programs and teaching, advising, and strategically using scholarships. But until recently, few institutions identified basic needs insecurity as a significant challenge keeping students from obtaining credentials. In 2018, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report on food insecurity among college students stating that “increasing evidence indicates that some college students are experiencing food insecurity, which can negatively impact their academic success.” The GAO concluded that the “substantial federal investment in higher education is at risk if college students drop out because they cannot afford basic necessities like food.”¹

The #RealCollege survey is one of 31 studies the GAO reviewed for its report. It assists college administrators, trustees, staff, faculty, and students, along with community partners, policymakers, and advocates, in understanding the prevalence and correlates of food and housing insecurity on college campuses across the nation. The report provides the most up-to-date evidence, and this year’s report includes other key factors affecting basic needs insecurity, including transportation and childcare. The data provide ample reason to center efforts to address students’ basic needs as institutions seek to become “student-ready” colleges where degree completion is common.²

Supporting students’ basic needs has many benefits for colleges and universities, especially in today’s difficult economic climate. Here are five key reasons for addressing #RealCollege issues:

1. Boost academic performance, helping the institution and its students retain federal financial aid. It also promotes retention and degree completion, helping the institution generate more tuition dollars and improving outcomes about which legislators care.
2. Reduce the barriers that returning adults face, boosting enrollment.
3. Make the jobs of faculty and staff easier, as students are more able to focus on learning.
4. Create bridges between the institution and community organizations, bringing new relationships and resources to bear. It also creates a productive opportunity for the private sector to engage with the institution to help create the graduates that everyone wants to hire.
5. Generate new philanthropic giving and create opportunities to engage alumni who do not have much but will happily contribute to emergency aid.

There are many paths to implementing programs and policies to support students’ basic needs, several of which are listed at the conclusion of this report. The Hope Center strongly recommends focusing on prevention, rather than only responding to emergencies, and finds that systemic reforms are far more effective than one-time solutions.

Washington State has been making strides when it comes to addressing community college students' basic needs, including passing several pieces of recent legislation. For example, [2SHB 5800](#) supports the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) to engage four college districts in a pilot program to assist students experiencing homelessness and students who were in the foster care system when they graduated high school (program-eligible students). [2SHB 1893](#) created the Emergency Assistance Grant program, and the Workforce Education Investment Act provides full-tuition scholarships to any public college or university in Washington for families making under around \$50,000 per year, with partial scholarships up to the state's median family income (around \$88,000 per year). Students can use these scholarships for community college or any college or apprenticeship eligible for state financial aid. The SBCTC was a participant in Achieving the Dream's [Working Students Success Network](#) and has worked closely with the Center for Law and Social Policy to also advance other income and work supports. Partners like the [United Way](#) are helping colleges expand on-campus access to benefits and other supports.

Later this year, the federal government will—for the first time—begin assessing food and housing insecurity among students with the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey, a step the Hope Center has long advocated. In addition, numerous other organizations have begun including similar assessments in their surveys, including the [Trellis Financial Wellness Survey](#), the [Community College Survey of Student Engagement](#) (survey questions now in the pilot stage), the [ACHA-National College Health Assessment](#), and the [CIRP Freshman Survey](#). In addition, some colleges and universities are integrating basic needs insecurity assessments into their early warning systems and institutional surveys. The Hope Center is heartened by this response and continues to provide technical support in several ways, including the publication of a [guide](#) for assessment tools.



2019 Findings Overview

This report presents findings from the 2019 #RealCollege survey on basic needs of students in Washington State community and technical colleges. Section 1 presents the overall rates of basic needs insecurity across all survey respondents. Section 2 shows disparate rates of basic needs insecurity by specific groups of students. Section 3 describes the work and academic experiences of students with basic needs insecurity. Section 4 describes students' utilization of public assistance and on-campus supports. Section 5 contains concluding remarks and recommendations.

For more information on 2019 survey participants and methodologies used for this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).

THE DATA

The data elements in this report were gathered using an online survey fielded to all enrolled students at participating colleges and universities. Colleges distributed the online survey to more than 143,750 enrolled students, yielding an estimated response rate of 9.4%, or approximately 13,550 total student participants. For more information on how the survey was fielded and a discussion of how representative the results are, refer to the [web appendices](#).

The following Washington State community and technical colleges participated in the fall 2019 survey:

- Bellevue College
- Centralia College
- Clark College
- Clover Park Technical College
- Columbia Basin College
- Edmonds Community College
- Everett Community College
- Green River College
- Highline College
- Lake Washington Institute of Technology
- Lower Columbia College
- North Seattle College
- Olympic College
- Pierce College-Fort Steilacoom
- Pierce College-Puyallup
- Renton Technical College
- Seattle Central College
- Shoreline Community College
- Skagit Valley College
- South Puget Sound Community College
- South Seattle College
- Spokane Community College
- Spokane Falls Community College
- Tacoma Community College
- Walla Walla Community College
- Wenatchee Valley College
- Whatcom Community College
- Yakima Valley College

SECTION 1:

Prevalence of Basic Needs Insecurity

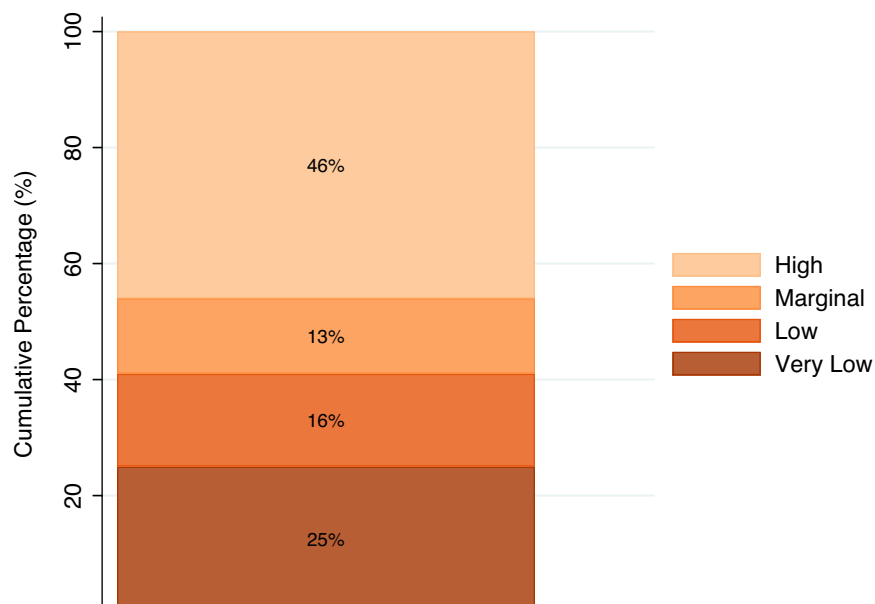
What fraction of students are affected by basic needs insecurity? This section examines the prevalence of food insecurity during the month prior to the survey, and the prevalence of housing insecurity and homelessness during the previous year.

FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire such food in a socially acceptable manner. The most extreme form is often accompanied by physiological sensations of hunger. The survey assesses food security among students using the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) 18-item set of questions.³

During the 30 days preceding the survey, approximately 41% of survey respondents from Washington State community and technical colleges experienced food insecurity, with 16% assessed at the low level and 25% at the very low level of food security (Figure 1). More than one in three respondents ran short on food, and more than one in four said that they went hungry (Figure 2).

FIGURE 1. Food Security Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: According to the USDA, students at either low or very low food security are termed “food insecure.” For more details on the food security module used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#). Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

FIGURE 2. Food Security Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents

I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.	44%
I worried whether my food would run out before I got money to buy more.	43%
The food that I bought did not last and I did not have the money to buy more.	35%
I cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food.	34%
I ate less than I felt I should because there was not enough money for food.	33%
I was hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money for food.	27%
I cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food (3 or more times).	25%
I lost weight because there was not enough money for food.	17%
I did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.	10%
I did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food (3 or more times).	6%

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: For more details on the food security module used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).



HOUSING INSECURITY AND HOMELESSNESS

Housing insecurity includes a broad set of housing challenges that prevent someone from having a safe, affordable, and consistent place to live. Housing insecurity among students was assessed with a nine-item set of questions the Hope Center developed, which looks at factors such as the ability to pay rent or utilities and the need to move frequently. The data show that students are more likely to suffer some form of housing insecurity than to have all their needs met during college.

Fifty-one percent of survey respondents from Washington State community and technical colleges experienced housing insecurity in the past 12 months (Figure 3). The most commonly reported challenge (25% of students) is experiencing a rent or mortgage increase that made it difficult to pay. Eight percent of survey respondents left their household because they felt unsafe.

FIGURE 3. Housing Insecurity Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents

Any item	51%
Had a rent or mortgage increase that made it difficult to pay	25%
Did not pay full amount of rent or mortgage	21%
Did not pay full amount of utilities	20%
Had an account default or go into collections	16%
Moved in with people due to financial problems	19%
Lived with others beyond the expected capacity of the housing	13%
Left household because felt unsafe	8%
Moved three or more times	4%
Received a summons to appear in housing court	1%

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

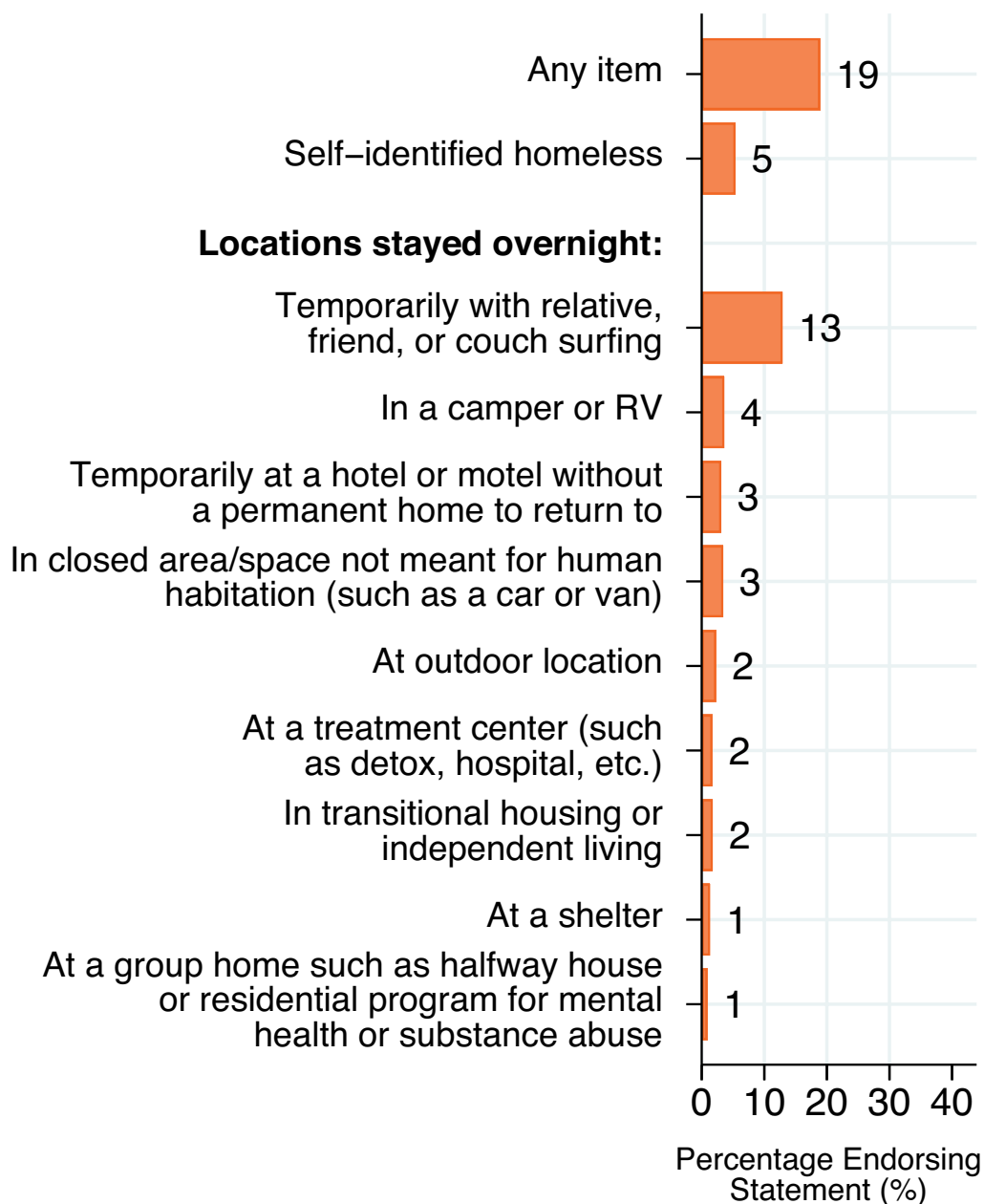
Notes: For more details on the housing insecurity module used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).

Homelessness means that a person does not have a fixed, regular, and adequate place to live. Students were identified as homeless if they responded affirmatively to a question asking if they had been homeless or they identified living conditions that are considered signs of homelessness. California State University researchers developed the tool used in this report to assess homelessness. Using an inclusive definition of homelessness that lets respondents self-identify both their status and living condition allows more students to receive the support they need, as well as aligning with the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act.⁴ A recent Brookings Institution study of K-12 students found that “academic outcomes for doubled-up homeless students and other homeless students are almost indistinguishable from one another.”⁵

Homelessness affected 19% of survey respondents at Washington State community and technical colleges (Figure 4). Five percent of respondents self-identified as homeless; 14% experienced homelessness but did not self-identify as homeless. More than two-thirds of students who experienced homelessness temporarily stayed with a relative or friend, or couch surfed.



FIGURE 4. Homelessness Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

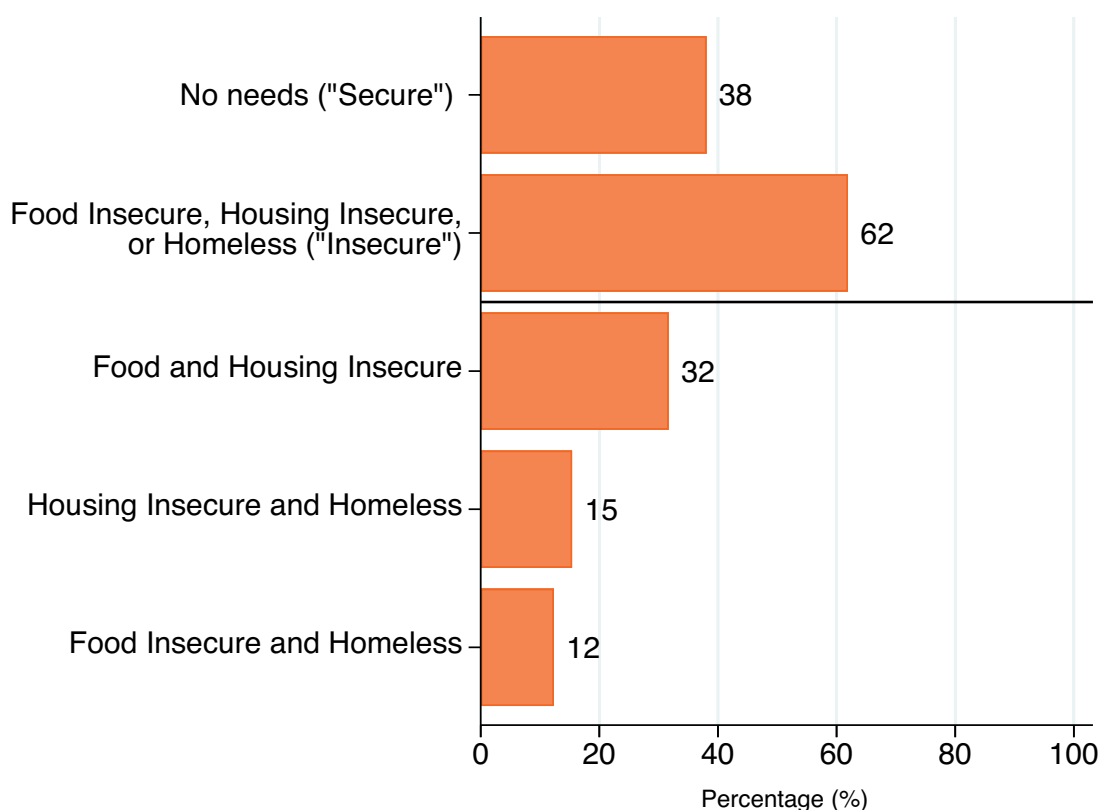
Notes: For more details on the homelessness module used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).

OVERLAPPING CHALLENGES

Students often experience basic needs insecurity in one or more forms, either simultaneously or over time. Students' overlapping challenges in the data demonstrate that basic needs insecurities are fluid and interconnected.

Six in ten Washington State community and technical college students responding to the survey experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness during the previous year (Figure 5). One third of respondents were both food and housing insecure in the past year.

FIGURE 5. Intersections of Food Insecurity, Housing Insecurity, and Homelessness Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents



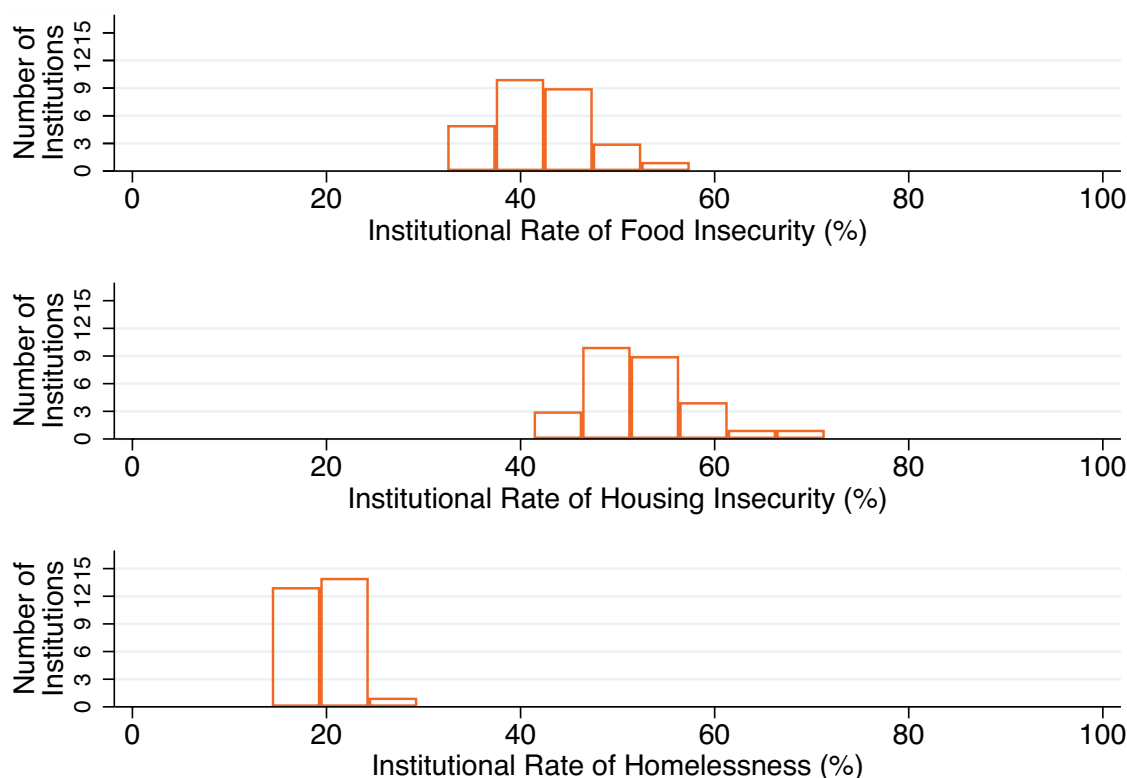
Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

VARIATION BY INSTITUTION

Rates of basic needs insecurity vary not only in type and severity among students, but across institutions as well (Figure 6). There is wide variation in rates of basic needs insecurity across Washington State community and technical colleges. For the most part, institution-level rates of food insecurity range between 37% and 47%. Rates of housing insecurity vary widely across institutions as well, with most participants having from 47% to 59% of students experiencing housing insecurity. Institution-level rates of student homelessness range from 17% to 23%.

FIGURE 6. Variation in Institutional Rates of Food Insecurity, Housing Insecurity, and Homelessness Among Washington State Community and Technical Colleges



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: For more details on institutional rates shown in the figure above, refer to the [web appendices](#).

SECTION 2:

Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurity

The Hope Center’s prior work, as well as that by other researchers, has consistently found that some students are at higher risk of basic needs insecurity than others.⁶ This section highlights disparities in basic needs insecurity by student demographic, academic, or economic characteristics, as well as their life circumstances. Below we highlight several ways in which basic needs insecurity differs.

For more on demographic disparities and additional tables with information on survey participants, refer to the [web appendices](#).

Racial and ethnic disparities are evident. For example, White students have lower rates of food insecurity (39%) as compared to their peers; rates of food insecurity are higher among Hispanic or Latinx (47%), Black (54%), and Indigenous (57%) students (Table 1). Though rates are higher for housing insecurity than food insecurity, the disparities across racial and ethnic groups are similar. Students who identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native or as Indigenous have the highest rates of homelessness, followed closely by Middle Eastern, North African, Arab, or Arab American students, Black students, and Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian students. Hispanic or Latinx, Southeast Asian, and White students have lower rates of homelessness than their peers.



TABLE 1. Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurities by Race and Ethnicity Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents

	Number of Students	Food Insecurity (%)	Housing Insecurity (%)	Homelessness (%)
Racial or Ethnic Background				
American Indian or Alaskan Native	570	55	65	33
Black	850	54	63	24
Hispanic or Latinx	1,936	47	57	17
Indigenous	271	57	69	27
Middle Eastern or North African or Arab or Arab American	187	46	59	26
Other Asian or Asian American	1,056	36	41	20
Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian	365	43	52	24
Southeast Asian	733	38	41	18
White	7,087	39	51	19
Other	407	49	61	23
Prefer not to answer	229	48	54	26

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The Number of Students column indicates the number of survey respondents to our measure of homelessness. The number of survey respondents for our measures of food insecurity and housing insecurity may vary slightly. Classifications of racial and ethnic background are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, see [web appendices](#).



The overall rate of food insecurity for students attending school full-time is 42%, which is approximately three percentage points higher than the overall rate for those attending part-time. Students that have spent more than three years in college are more likely to experience housing insecurity than those in college less than one year (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurities by Enrollment Status Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents

	Number of Students	Food Insecurity (%)	Housing Insecurity (%)	Homelessness (%)
College Enrollment Status				
Full-time (at least 12 credits)	8,111	42	51	20
Part-time (fewer than 12 credits)	3,665	39	52	17
Level of Study				
Undergraduate	7,994	41	52	19
Non-degree	2,007	35	45	17
Years in College				
Less than 1	4,197	39	48	21
1 to 2	4,835	41	52	18
Three or more	2,748	41	55	17

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The Number of Students column indicates the number of survey respondents to our measure of homelessness. The number of survey respondents for our measures of food insecurity and housing insecurity may vary slightly. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, see [web appendices](#).



Students vary in their basic needs insecurity with respect to their gender identity and sexual orientation (Table 3). Food insecurity and housing insecurity are lowest for male students; non-binary and transgender students have the highest rates of basic needs insecurity.

TABLE 3. Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurities by Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents

	Number of Students	Food Insecurity (%)	Housing Insecurity (%)	Homelessness (%)
Gender Identity				
Female	7,172	43	54	18
Male	3,177	36	46	21
Non-binary/Third gender	241	50	61	32
Transgender	216	47	59	23
Self-Describe	113	47	59	34
Sexual Orientation				
Heterosexual	8,021	39	50	18
Gay or Lesbian	419	43	56	19
Bisexual	1,245	49	60	25
Self-describe	392	48	60	27

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The Number of Students column indicates the number of survey respondents to our measure of homelessness. The number of survey respondents for our measures of food insecurity and housing insecurity may vary slightly. Classifications of gender identity are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, see [web appendices](#).



In addition, particular life circumstances are associated with a higher-than-average risk of homelessness. Parenting students, former foster youth, and returning citizens are more likely to experience basic needs insecurity than their peers (Table 4). For example, more than half of parenting students experience food insecurity and 69% experience housing insecurity—rates of insecurity higher than their peers without children (37% and 46%, respectively). Returning citizens and former foster youth experience homelessness at 37% and 36%, respectively, almost double the average rate (19%).

TABLE 4. Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurities by Student Experience Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents

	Number of Students	Food Insecurity (%)	Housing Insecurity (%)	Homelessness (%)
Parenting Student				
Yes	2,488	55	69	20
No	8,982	37	46	19
Student has Been in Foster Care				
Yes	389	67	72	36
No	10,054	40	50	18
Student Served in the Military				
Yes	605	41	56	22
No	9,890	41	51	19
Student is a Returning Citizen				
Yes	571	63	75	37
No	10,328	39	49	17

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The Number of Students column indicates the number of survey respondents to our measure of homelessness. The number of survey respondents for our measures of food insecurity and housing insecurity may vary slightly. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, see [web appendices](#).

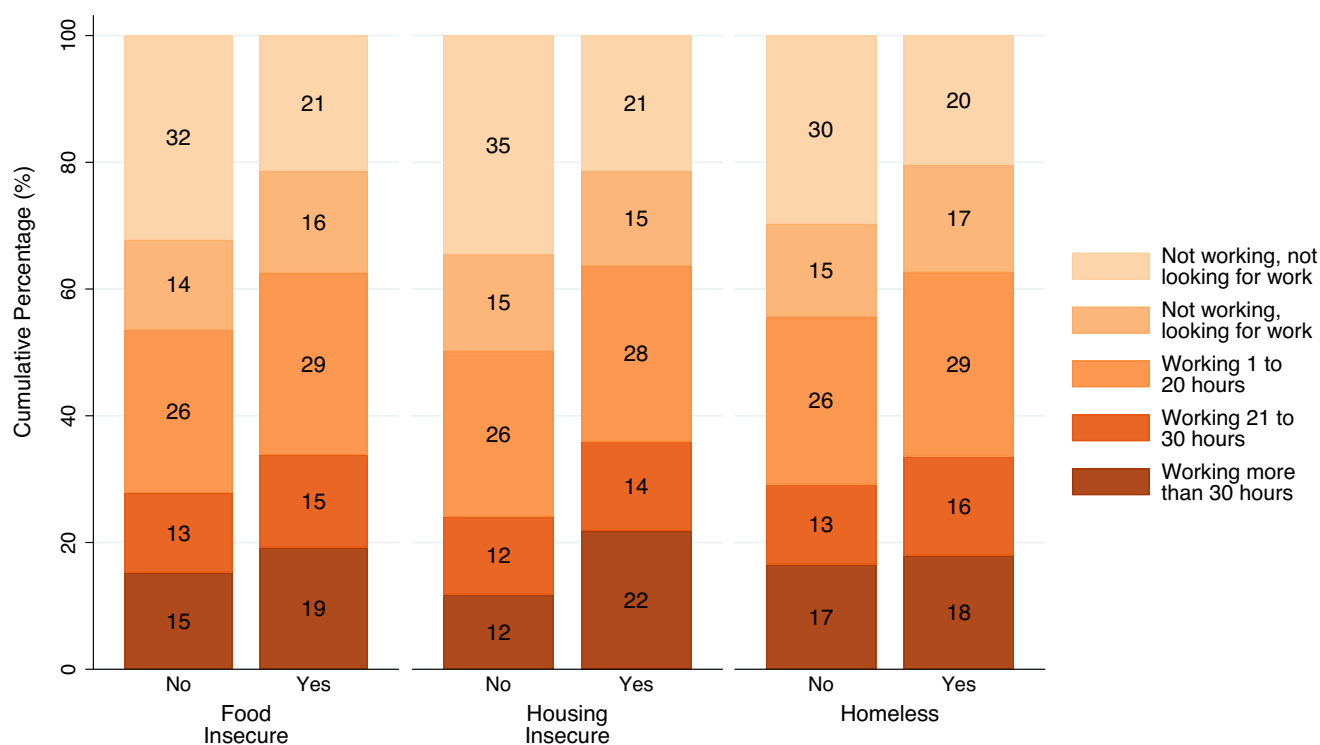


SECTION 3:

Employment and Academic Performance

Students who experience basic needs insecurity are overwhelmingly active participants in the labor force. The majority (63%) of students who experience food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness are employed (Figure 7). Among working students, those who experience basic needs insecurity often work more hours than other students.

FIGURE 7. Employment Behavior by Basic Need Insecurity Status Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents

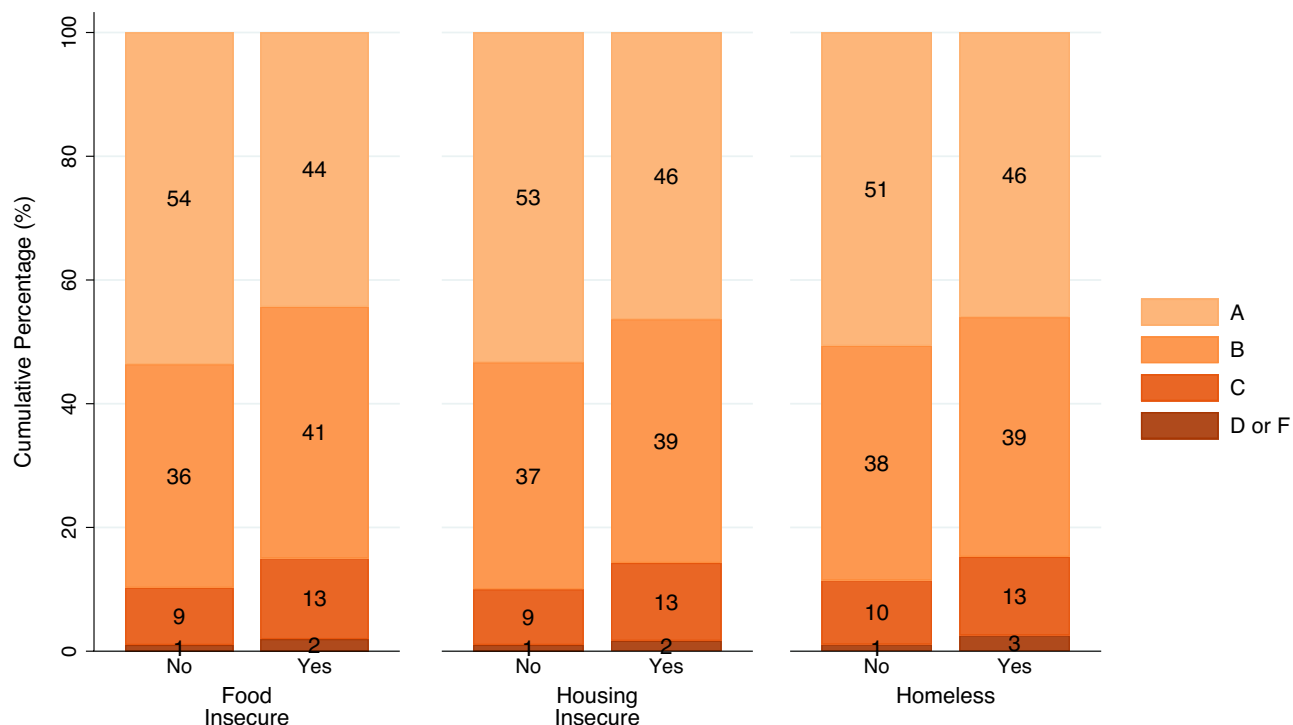


Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey questions about work status and number of hours worked were randomly administered to a subset of respondents. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

While most students report receiving A's and B's, students who experience food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness more often report grades of C or below than students who do not face these challenges (Figure 8).

FIGURE 8. Self-Reported Grades by Basic Need Insecurity Status Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

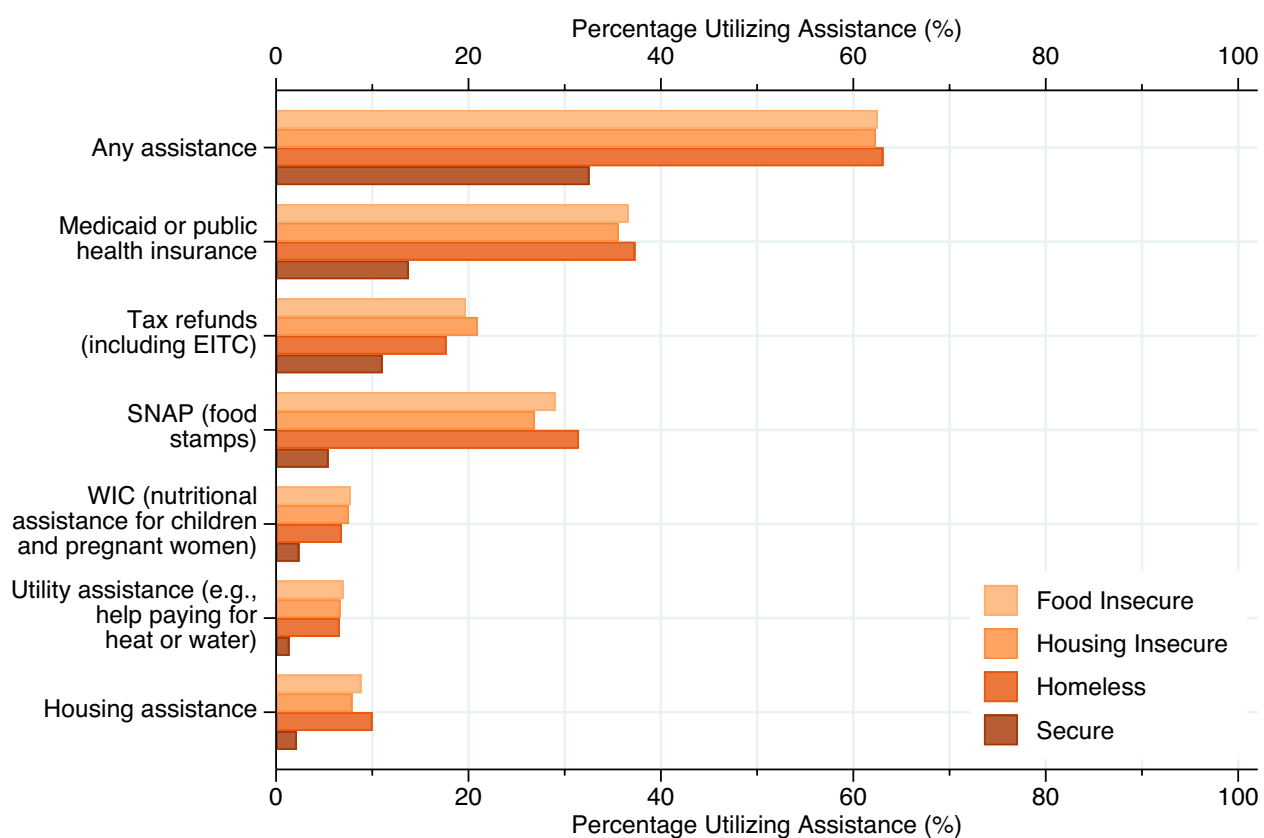


SECTION 4:

Utilization of Supports

While supports for students exist on the federal, state, and college levels, results continue to show that most students who experience basic needs insecurity do not access them (Figure 9).⁷ Medicaid or public health insurance, SNAP, and tax refunds are the benefits used most often, though they remain quite low given the needs of students responding. For example, less than a third of food insecure students receive SNAP benefits. Likewise, only 8% of students who experience housing insecurity receive housing assistance. Thirty-seven percent of students who experience homelessness utilized Medicaid or public health insurance. That said, rates of public benefits utilization in Washington State are a bit higher than the averages we observe for community colleges nationwide. It is also worth noting that students who are secure in their basic needs are still accessing public benefits, albeit at lower rates (33%) than students who are insecure.

FIGURE 9. Use of Public Assistance According to Basic Needs Security Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents

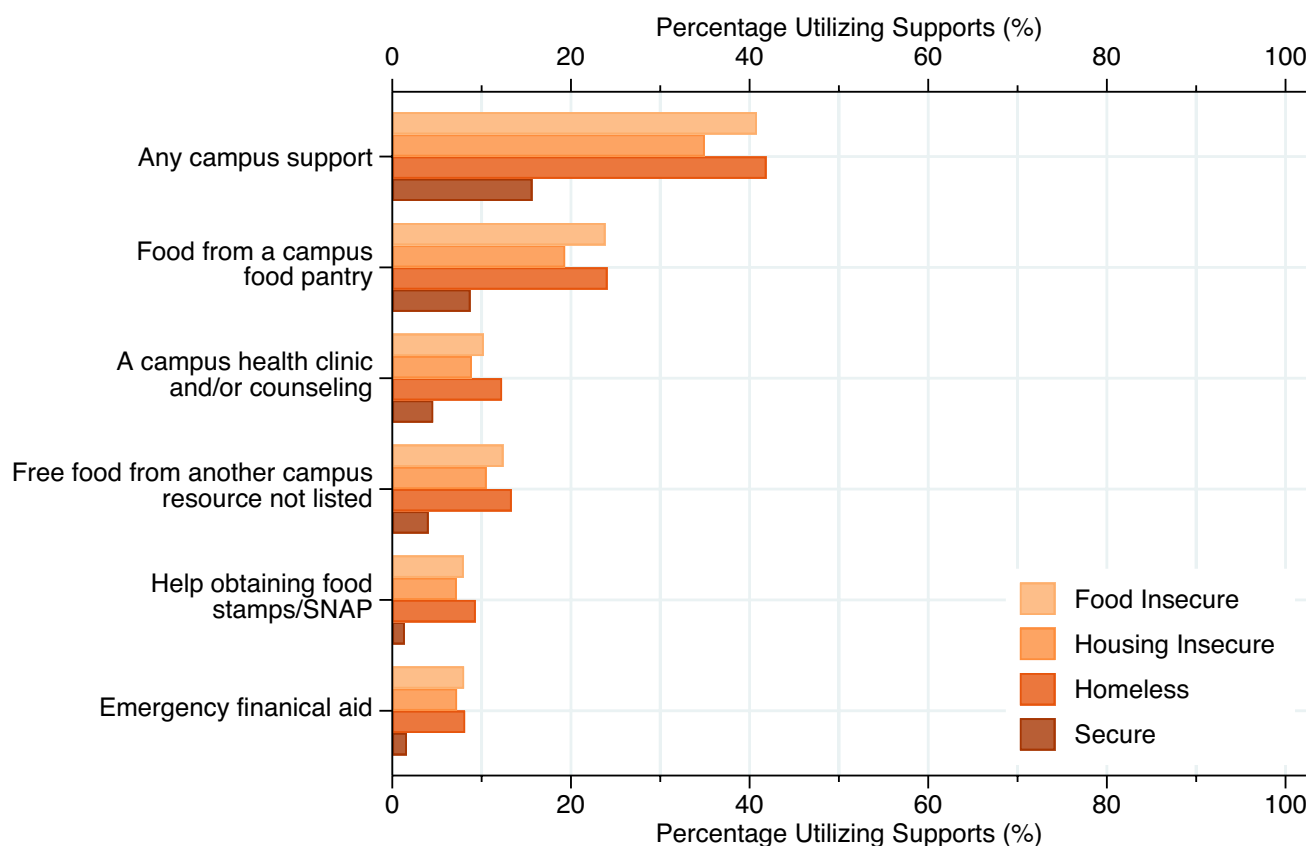


Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Not all types of public assistance are included in the figure above. See [web appendices](#) for more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed and rates of utilization for other types of public assistance.

A growing number of on-campus supports are being offered, but again, few students are accessing them (Figure 10). Of the students surveyed at participating institutions, food from a campus food pantry, campus health clinic and/or counseling, and free food from another campus resource are the most commonly used on-campus supports. For example, just 24% of food insecure students used a campus food pantry.

FIGURE 10. Use of On-Campus Supports According to Basic Needs Security Among Washington State Community and Technical College Survey Respondents



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

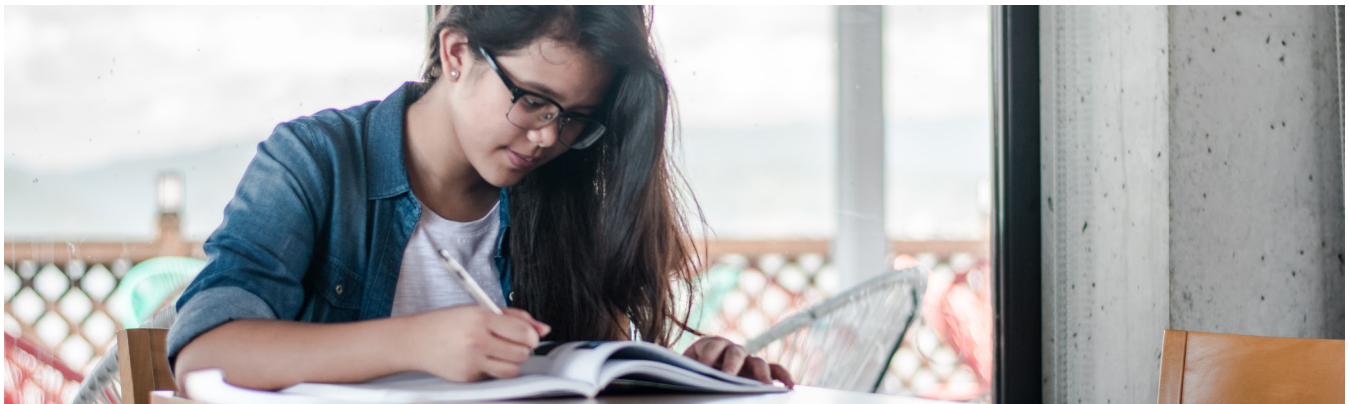
Notes: Not all types on-campus supports are included in the figure above. Survey questions about campus supports were administered to a subset of randomly selected respondents. See [web appendices](#) for more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed and rates of utilization for other types of on-campus supports.

SECTION 5:

Conclusion and Recommendations

Clearly, basic needs insecurity is a substantial problem affecting many students. Providing support will help students and institutions thrive. Here are five ways for Washington State’s Community and Technical Colleges to continue advancing its work in this area.

1. Assess the landscape of existing supports on campus, including food pantries, emergency aid programs, access to public benefits, and case managers. The Hope Center recommends paying close attention to the approaches to outreach, the requirements for eligibility, the data collected on numbers served, and the capacity (dollars, staffing, hours, etc.) of these efforts. Please see the Hope Center’s survey of campus food pantries for an example.⁸
2. Encourage faculty to add a basic needs security statement to their syllabus in order to inform themselves and their students of supports.⁹
3. Continue to expand public benefits access for students. Follow California and New Jersey’s lead and pass Hunger-Free Campus legislation to enhance this work, reducing administrative burden on students wherever possible.¹⁰
4. Create a centralized basic needs website listing available supports, including:
 - How to access public benefits
 - How to reduce the cost of utilities
 - How to secure emergency aid
 - Where to find free food
 - Who to call if more comprehensive support is needed



5. Consider centralizing fundraising for and distribution of emergency aid across institutions, increasing efficiency and effectiveness and relieving campuses of unnecessary burdens. Many institutional emergency aid programs are relatively small and inadequately implemented.

Common problems include:

- A lack of a student-friendly application process that minimizes hassles for both students and their colleges
- Limited staff capacity and resources to do effective outreach, challenges moving from selection of emergency aid to distribution of emergency aid quickly
- Difficulty selecting recipients in an equitable and efficient manner while recognizing the implicit bias compromising interactions with students
- Difficulty navigating the conditions Title IV places on emergency aid
- Struggles maintaining strong positive relationships with students while necessarily having to say no to many requests

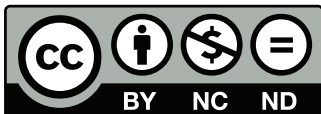


The Hope Center also offers the following additional supports for your efforts:

- An [annual national conference](#) focused on inspiration, education, and action
- An [assessment](#) of your campus supports for basic needs security
- [Guides and Tools](#) including how to assess basic needs on campus, a *Beyond the Food Pantry* series, and a digest of existing research on basic needs insecurity from around the country
- [Evaluations](#) of food and housing support programs

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- ⁹ Goldrick-Rab, S. (2019). [*Beyond the food pantry: Spreading the word- Supporting students’ basic needs with a syllabus statement*](#). The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.
- ¹⁰ S.B. 85, 2017 Reg. Sess. (CA 2017); State of New Jersey. (2019). [*Governor Murphy signs legislation to fight hunger in New Jersey*](#).



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