

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS IN PENNSYLVANIA

INTRODUCTION

At a time when a college degree boosts workers' [earnings by 75%](#), [new data](#) shows pervasive hunger among college students in Pennsylvania. Twenty-three percent of college students overall, or about 95,000 students, are estimated to be food insecure in the state. Students who are hungry are [more likely to drop out of college](#) without getting a degree, which negatively impacts their ability to find a well-paying job that provides a family-sustaining wage.

Greater access to food assistance for college students would make it possible for more students to earn their college degree and find a job that generates higher earnings for individuals and families, increase the state and regional tax bases, and reduce state expenditures on safety net programs. In short, expanding SNAP benefits provides college students temporary support that can promote long-term economic stability for families.

This report is the first of its kind to provide estimated food insecurity rates for students at each college and university across Pennsylvania. To further increase access to SNAP and address college student food insecurity comprehensively, this report includes policy recommendations for streamlining access to SNAP at the federal, state, and institutional level.

BACKGROUND:

SNAP RULES CREATE BARRIERS FOR ELIGIBLE STUDENTS

Research shows that food insecurity impacts college persistence and completion yet federal rules make it difficult for college students in need to access food assistance. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, is an efficient way to deliver food assistance. According to [research](#) published by the American Educational Research Association in 2020, students enrolled in SNAP were more likely to persist in college than those of similar income levels who were not enrolled.

However, according to a 2019 [report](#) by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), less than half of the 3.3 million college students *who are eligible for SNAP* received the benefit due to complicated rules. SNAP prohibits students enrolled in college more than half time from receiving SNAP benefits unless they meet one of the following criteria:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are under age 18 or are age 50 or older • Are unable to work due to a physical or mental condition • Work at least 20 hours a week in paid employment • Participate in a state or federally financed work-study program (no minimum hours of work required) • Participate in an on-the-job training program • Care for a dependent child household member under the age of six • Care for a dependent child household member aged six to 11 years and lack the necessary child care enabling you to attend school and work 20 hours a week or participate in work-study | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are a single parent enrolled full-time in college and taking care of a dependent child under 12 years old • Receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits • Are assigned to, placed in, or self-placed in a college or other institution of higher education through programs under SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T), Title I of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA), or Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA). Certain other employment and training programs for low-income households, which are operated by a state or local government and have an equivalent component to SNAP E&T also meet the criteria. |
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Unfortunately, this criteria does not align with the information collected on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), so it is difficult for financial aid administrators, who would be well positioned to reach out to students, to identify students who might be eligible for SNAP and let them know. As a result, many students *who are eligible* for SNAP slip through the cracks. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, or USDA, [82% of individuals in the general population](#) who are eligible for SNAP receive these benefits, but according to the GAO only [31% of college students do](#).

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Pennsylvania institutions of higher education enroll 417,000 students annually. [New data](#) from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey reveals that more than 1 in 5 college students are food insecure. Among students enrolled in community college, this number nears a quarter, while those enrolled at B.A-granting institutions experience food insecurity at a rate lower than the national average. Roughly one-third of students at for-profit colleges experience high food insecurity—the largest proportion of students across all institutional sectors.

METHODOLOGY: ESTIMATING FOOD INSECURITY RATES

The following tables provide the enrollment data and estimates of the number of students who were food insecure at each Pennsylvania college and university during the 2020-21 school year. These estimates were constructed using institutional enrollment data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS,) and data on students experiencing food insecurity from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), released in the summer of 2023. Although the food insecurity rates used in this report to extrapolate the Pennsylvania figures are national estimates, NPSAS reports similar rates at the state level in Pennsylvania. We used national data to estimate the number of students experiencing food insecurity at Pennsylvania colleges because NPSAS state-specific data does not include a breakdown of food insecurity rates by institutional category. By using the national rates of food insecurity reported in NPSAS, we were able to better estimate the rates of food insecurity at different types of Pennsylvania schools. In the tables below, the “high food insecurity” category includes students reporting multiple instances of “disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake,” as well as those reporting “reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet.” Those experiencing “marginal food insecurity” report “anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house,” though “little or no change in diet or food intake.”¹

“I was under a lot of stress and pressure during my undergraduate years that didn’t include that of academia. I was forced to reckon with the fact that half of the time I didn’t know where I was going to sleep and how I was going to eat. This wasn’t just a concern for me but something that impacted my whole family. This is all while we were all working and sometimes coming home to work 80 hours a week just to try and help. I felt alone because regardless there didn’t seem like anything anyone could do or related to especially up at school. I tried to apply for SNAP benefits and was denied; we all were. Securing food had to be done strategically and with consideration for how, as we would say, “stretch it for the week.”

TABLE 1. Student Enrollment and Food Insecurity Rates at Pennsylvania Community Colleges

INSTITUTION NAME	ENROLLMENT	# EXPERIENCING HIGH FOOD INSECURITY (23.4%)	# EXPERIENCING MARGINAL FOOD INSECURITY (11.4%)
ASPIRA City College	8	2	1
Bucks County Community College	2,716	636	310
Butler County Community College	1,220	285	139
Central Pennsylvania Institute of Science and Technology	171	40	19
Commonwealth Technical Institute	215	50	25
Community College of Allegheny County	5,085	1,190	580
Community College of Beaver County	715	167	82
Community College of Philadelphia	4,669	1,093	532
Delaware County Community College	3,363	787	383
Harcum College	829	194	95
Harrisburg Area Community College	4,839	1,132	552
Johnson College	463	108	53
Lancaster County Career and Technology Center	285	67	32
Lehigh Carbon Community College	2,723	637	310
Luzerne County Community College	1,811	424	206
Montgomery County Community College	3,959	926	451
Northampton County Area Community College	4,020	941	458
Northern Pennsylvania Regional College	28	7	3
Pennsylvania Highlands Community College	875	205	100
Pittsburgh Institute of Aeronautics	1,318	308	150
Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science Inc	124	29	14
Reading Area Community College	1,224	286	140
Rosedale Technical College	535	125	61
Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology	1,275	298	145
University of Pittsburgh-Titusville	23	5	3
Valley Forge Military College	89	21	10
Westmoreland County Community College	1,655	387	189
Williamson College of the Trades	254	59	29

TABLE 2.
Student Enrollment and Food Insecurity Rates at Public, BA-granting Colleges in Pennsylvania

INSTITUTION NAME	ENROLLMENT	# EXPERIENCING HIGH FOOD INSECURITY (20.9%)	# EXPERIENCING MARGINAL FOOD INSECURITY (12.7%)
Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania	7,145	1,493	907
California University of Pennsylvania	4,173	872	530
Cheyney University of Pennsylvania	576	120	73
Clarion University of Pennsylvania	2,980	623	378
East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania	4,688	980	595
Edinboro University of Pennsylvania	2,861	598	363
Indiana University of Pennsylvania-Main Campus	7,310	1,528	928
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania	6,488	1,356	824
Lincoln University	1,743	364	221
Lock Haven University	2,392	500	304
Mansfield University of Pennsylvania	1,554	325	197
Millersville University of Pennsylvania	5,288	1,105	672
Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania	4,906	1,025	623
Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania	7,085	1,481	900
Temple University	25,831	5,399	3,281
The Pennsylvania State University	67,296	14,065	8,547
University of Pittsburgh-Bradford	1,376	288	175
University of Pittsburgh-Greensburg	1,383	289	176
University of Pittsburgh-Johnstown	2,350	491	298
University of Pittsburgh-Pittsburgh Campus	18,927	3,956	2,404
West Chester University of Pennsylvania	13,542	2,830	1,720

TABLE 3.
Enrollment and Food Insecurity Rates at Private, Not-for-profit, BA-granting Colleges in Pennsylvania

INSTITUTION NAME	ENROLLMENT	# EXPERIENCING HIGH FOOD INSECURITY (18.8%)	# EXPERIENCING MARGINAL FOOD INSECURITY (11.7%)
Albright College	1,501	282	176
Allegheny College	1,620	305	190
Alvernia University	1,949	366	228
Arcadia University	1,827	343	214
Bryn Athyn College of the New Church	262	49	31
Bryn Mawr College	1,332	250	156
Bucknell University	3,725	700	436
Cabrini University	1,410	265	165
Cairn University-Langhorne	872	164	102
Carlow University	1,062	200	124
Carnegie Mellon University	6,441	1,211	754
Cedar Crest College	887	167	104
Chatham University	1,108	208	130
Chestnut Hill College	1,272	239	149
Clarks Summit University	312	59	37
Curtis Institute of Music	114	21	13
Delaware Valley University	1,662	312	194
DeSales University	2,073	390	243
Dickinson College	1,969	370	230
Drexel University	13,946	2,622	1,632
Duquesne University	5,470	1,028	640
Eastern University	1,382	260	162
Elizabethtown College	1,544	290	181
Franklin and Marshall College	2,349	442	275
Gannon University	2,793	525	327
Geneva College	1,036	195	121
Gettysburg College	2,569	483	301

Continued Table 3.

INSTITUTION NAME	ENROLLMENT	# EXPERIENCING HIGH FOOD INSECURITY (18.8%)	# EXPERIENCING MARGINAL FOOD INSECURITY (11.7%)
Gratz College	127	24	15
Grove City College	2,154	405	252
Gwynedd Mercy University	1,651	310	193
Harrisburg University of Science and Technology	689	130	81
Haverford College	1,342	252	157
Holy Family University	1,984	373	232
Immaculata University	962	181	113
Juniata College	1,283	241	150
Keystone College	1,260	237	147
King's College	2,016	379	236
La Roche University	1,067	201	125
La Salle University	2,879	541	337
Lafayette College	2,550	479	298
Lancaster Bible College	809	152	95
Lebanon Valley College	1,695	319	198
Lehigh University	5,076	954	594
Lycoming College	1,092	205	128
Marywood University	1,736	326	203
Mercyhurst University	2,431	457	284
Messiah University	2,469	464	289
Misericordia University	1,491	280	174
Moore College of Art and Design	355	67	42
Moravian University	1,820	342	213
Mount Aloysius College	1,028	193	120
Muhlenberg College	2,114	397	247
Neumann University	1,467	276	172
Peirce College	273	51	32
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts	127	24	15

Continued Table 3.

INSTITUTION NAME	ENROLLMENT	# EXPERIENCING HIGH FOOD INSECURITY (18.8%)	# EXPERIENCING MARGINAL FOOD INSECURITY (11.7%)
Pennsylvania College of Art and Design	246	46	29
Point Park University	2,487	468	291
Robert Morris University	3,823	719	447
Rosemont College	365	69	43
Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary-Overbrook	43	8	5
Saint Francis University	1,479	278	173
Saint Joseph's University	4,005	753	469
Saint Vincent College	1,375	259	161
Seton Hill University	1,562	294	183
Susquehanna University	2,232	420	261
Swarthmore College	1,533	288	179
Talmudical Yeshiva of Philadelphia	140	26	16
The University of the Arts	1,442	271	169
Thiel College	790	149	92
Thomas Jefferson University	3,501	658	410
University of Pennsylvania	10,213	1,920	1,195
University of Scranton	3,354	631	392
University of the Sciences	1,392	262	163
University of Valley Forge	412	77	48
Ursinus College	1,517	285	177
Villanova University	7,044	1,324	824
Washington & Jefferson College	1,166	219	136
Waynesburg University	1,232	232	144
Westminster College	1,118	210	131
Widener University	2,734	514	320
Wilkes University	2,088	393	244
Wilson College	653	123	76
Yeshivath Beth Moshe	45	8	5
York College of Pennsylvania	3,573	672	418

TABLE 4. Enrollment and Food Insecurity Rates at For-profit Colleges in Pennsylvania

INSTITUTION NAME	ENROLLMENT	# EXPERIENCING HIGH FOOD INSECURITY (32.9%)	# EXPERIENCING MARGINAL FOOD INSECURITY (11.5%)
All-State Career School	1,578	519	181
Central Penn College	333	110	38
DeVry University-Pennsylvania	70	23	8
Douglas Education Center	361	119	42
Erie Institute of Technology Inc	423	139	49
Fortis Institute-Forty Fort	310	102	36
Fortis Institute-Scranton	404	133	46
Great Lakes Institute of Technology	464	153	53
Hussian College-Philadelphia	104	34	12
Institute of Medical Careers	887	292	102
Jna Institute of Culinary Arts	28	9	3
Lansdale School of Business	129	42	15
Laurel Business Institute	407	134	47
Laurel Technical Institute	344	113	40
Lincoln Technical Institute-Allentown	864	284	99
Lincoln Technical Institute-Philadelphia	367	121	42
Miller-Motte College-Berks Technical Institute	656	216	75
Miller-Motte College-McCann-Allentown	485	160	56
Miller-Motte College-McCann-Lewisburg	314	103	36
New Castle School of Trades	922	303	106
Penn Commercial Business/ Technical School	511	168	59
Pennco Tech-Bristol	595	196	68
PITC Institute	338	111	39
Pittsburgh Career Institute	151	50	17
South Hills School of Business & Technology	419	138	48
Strayer University-Pennsylvania	151	50	17

Continued Table 4.

INSTITUTION NAME	ENROLLMENT	# EXPERIENCING HIGH FOOD INSECURITY (32.9%)	# EXPERIENCING MARGINAL FOOD INSECURITY (11.5%)
Triangle Tech Inc-Bethlehem	236	78	27
Triangle Tech Inc-Dubois	225	74	26
Triangle Tech Inc-Greensburg	246	81	28
Triangle Tech Inc-Pittsburgh	226	74	26
Triangle Tech Inc-Sunbury	128	42	15
Triangle Tech-Chambersburg	59	19	7
Vet Tech Institute	389	128	45
West Virginia Junior College-United Career Institute	216	71	25
YTI Career Institute-Altoona	149	49	17
YTI Career Institute-York	1,226	403	141

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Changes are needed at the federal, state and institutional level to make it address food insecurity among college students. Congress should streamline the SNAP college student exemptions, making it possible for students who come from low-income families to apply for this aid.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL POLICY:

- Congress should simplify the SNAP college student exemptions by adding the following exemptions for students *who also meet income requirements of the SNAP program*:
 - Students with an **Expected Family Contribution of \$0** as determined by the FAFSA. This provision was [put in place](#) on January 16, 2021, and continued throughout the public health emergency. It allowed students with the highest level of financial need, approximately \$30,000 in household income, to apply for SNAP. This should be made permanent.
 - Students with **any dependents under the age of 18**. This change would align the parenting exemption for students with that of other SNAP recipients and eliminate the confusing [three-tiered parenting rule](#) in place now.
 - Students who are enrolled in another **means-tested benefit** or who have an immediate family member enrolled in another means-tested benefit. NCAN [research](#) shows that students from the lowest-income households are less likely to complete the FAFSA than their peers. This approach provides a mechanism to capture eligible students who do not fill out the form.
 - **Undergraduate students who are considered independent** for the purposes of federal student aid, including veterans, active-duty military personnel, students with a history in the foster care system, and older students. This category would simplify the recertification process for students and align it with federal financial aid eligibility.
- The U.S. Department of Education should **allow students to give consent on the FAFSA for their data to be used for outreach about SNAP**. The new FAFSA form, which will launch in December, asks applicants for their consent to retrieve certain verified tax information from the IRS. Students could also be asked to indicate whether they give consent for their FAFSA data to be shared with the state SNAP agency for the purpose of identifying and conducting outreach to students who may be eligible for SNAP. Once students consent, college administrators, state and county officials should use the information to conduct proactive outreach to students who are eligible to apply for SNAP because they meet the student eligibility criteria.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE POLICY:

- **Eliminate the interview requirement for recertification for students**, so long as an individual's identity is verified and all other mandatory verifications, such as residence and income, are provided. The interview presents a logistical hurdle for many students who are balancing school, work, and personal responsibilities. Extending the pandemic interview requirement waiver for students who have complete applications would streamline the process and address unique logistical challenges for students to complete this requirement.
- **Extend the recertification period to 12 months.** States have the option to recertify SNAP eligibility on an annual basis instead of every 6 months. Doing so would make it possible for students to receive and retain eligibility throughout the academic year so they can focus on their studies.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION:

- **Provide dedicated funding to support outreach and application assistance on college campuses.** Understanding the complex eligibility requirements for students is one of the biggest barriers to students receiving SNAP. College administrators need to work closely with state and/or county officials to understand the requirements, conduct targeted outreach to students who are most likely to qualify, and make it easier for students who are participating to use their benefits on college campuses. Dedicated, expert personnel can help identify students who are likely eligible for the program and support them through the application process.
- **Use pre-verified data to identify students who may be eligible.** By using pre-verified data, such as FAFSA information, to identify students who may be eligible, colleges can increase the number of potentially eligible students who are able to receive this benefit.

CONCLUSION

With an estimated 95,000 college students in Pennsylvania experiencing food insecurity, policymakers must act to increase college students' access to SNAP. Providing students with simple pathways to access SNAP can help increase college students' chances of ultimately achieving a degree or other credential at a time when postsecondary education is needed more than ever to succeed in the labor market.



Endnotes

1. These categorizations follow the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) food security scale [definitions](#), though this report uses the “high food insecurity” label to describe those in the USDA “low food security” and “very low food security” categories. Similarly this report uses “marginal food insecurity” to identify the “marginal food security” category, as defined by USDA.