



CalFresh Participation Among California’s College Students: A 2021–22 School Year Update

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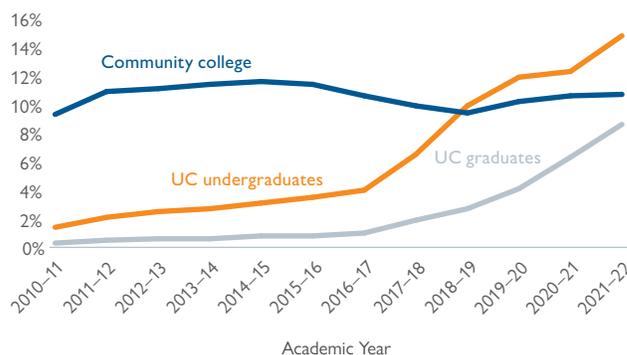
Food insecurity is widespread among college students in the United States. CalFresh food benefits, known federally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, can help students in California pay for food, but may not reach all eligible students. To better measure student participation in CalFresh, the California Policy Lab (CPL) partners with the California Community College system (CCC), the University of California Office of the President (UCOP), the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), and the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC). Through this partnership, CPL has created a [linked database](#) of student-level administrative data on college enrollment, financial aid, and CalFresh participation that makes this analysis possible.

This data point provides estimates of CalFresh participation rates among community college and University of California (UC) students in California. **In the academic year 2021–22 (June 2021–May 2022), the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, 10.7% of CCC students, 14.8% of UC undergraduate students, and 8.6% of UC graduate students participated in CalFresh.**

The overall CCC student population continued to decline in 2021-22, while the overall UC undergraduate and graduate populations increased. The share of CCC students participating in CalFresh remained largely the same while participation among UC students continued to trend upward (Figure 1).

This data point does not estimate the share of eligible students who participate (or not) in CalFresh. Eligibility is based on multiple factors including income, household composition, school enrollment status, and financial aid status. In future reports, we will use this linked dataset to show how many likely eligible college students are participating in CalFresh.

FIGURE 1. CalFresh participation rates among college students, 2010–11 to 2021–22



Rate of CalFresh participation among college students

Tables 1, 2, and 3 show estimates for CalFresh participation during the 2021–22 academic year among community college students, UC undergraduate students, and UC graduate students, respectively. In addition to differences across higher education segments, rates of CalFresh participation differed across community college regions, UC campuses, and by student subgroups (see Appendix for subgroup definitions).

Specifically:

California community college regions — The CalFresh participation rate in the Inland Empire dropped by a half percentage point, while participation in other regions rose slightly. The Central Valley, Northern California and Inland Empire regions continue to have the highest participation rates.

UC Campuses — CalFresh participation continues to be highest at the San Francisco campus (which only serves graduate students), though UCSF's participation rate declined slightly from the prior year. The overall increase in the CalFresh participation rate among graduate students was driven by increases at other campuses, particularly at the Davis and Los Angeles campuses. The share of undergraduate students participating in CalFresh also increased on all campuses, particularly at Berkeley, Irvine and Santa Barbara.

Student aid — The share of CCC Cal Grant recipients participating in CalFresh dropped by nearly four percentage points from last year, though this was driven by an increase in the number of Cal Grants awards. At the UC campuses, undergraduate students who applied for or received financial aid were more likely to participate in CalFresh than in previous years. In both higher education segments, students who received Cal Grants, Pell Grants, or Promise Grants were more likely to participate in CalFresh than non-grant recipients.

Racial and ethnic groups — The participation rate of students from specific racial and ethnic groups at CCC campuses changed little, with the greatest participation among Black/African American and American Indian/Alaska Native students. Among UC undergraduate students, an increase in the CalFresh participation rate for all groups was largely driven by increases among Hispanic/Latino/Chicano and Asian American/Asian/Pacific Islander students.

Age groups — The overall CalFresh participation rate among CCC students increased by 1% though some age groups saw larger changes. While the number of enrolled CCC students aged 35 or older increased 5.6% from the previous year (20,932 more students), the CalFresh participation rate among these students dropped by 4.0%. In contrast, there was a 6.5% decrease in the number of CCC students aged 35 or under (100,800 fewer students), while the CalFresh participation rate among this group increased by 1.8% (author's calculations).

TABLE 1. CalFresh participation among California Community College students, 2021–2022 academic year

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN CALFRESH	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH
All Students*	1,858,915	198,089	10.7
Region			
Northern California	164,266	19,913	12.1
Bay Area	361,279	26,566	7.4
Central Valley	198,103	32,108	16.2
South Central	140,649	12,276	8.7
Greater Los Angeles	669,745	69,321	10.4
Inland Empire	154,493	18,304	11.8
San Diego	168,866	19,601	11.6
Financial Aid Status			
Filed FAFSA	732,394	130,710	17.8
Did not file FAFSA	1,126,521	67,379	6.0
Cal Grant recipient	139,743	36,554	26.2
Pell Grant recipient	338,059	87,128	25.8
Promise Grant recipient	710,507	136,068	19.2
Any financial aid recipient	845,034	144,935	17.2
No financial aid recipient	1,013,881	53,154	5.2
Enrollment type			
First-time students	194,192	24,629	12.7
First-time transfer	138,362	12,412	9.0
Continuing	973,596	109,881	11.3
Returning	240,546	27,325	11.4
Special admit	206,241	17,177	8.3
Unknown	105,978	6,665	6.3
Enrolled terms			
Summer only	210,177	13,240	6.3
Fall, winter, and/or spring	1,648,738	184,849	11.2

Table 1 continues on next page

TABLE 1. CalFresh participation among California Community College students, 2021–2022 academic year (continued)

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN CALFRESH	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH
Race/Ethnicity			
American Indian/Alaska Native	6,084	972	16.0
Asian	251,695	16,945	6.7
Black/African American	98,224	23,245	23.7
Hispanic/Latino	868,367	101,245	11.7
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	7,354	724	9.8
White	450,655	40,001	8.9
Two or more races	77,106	9,315	12.1
Unknown	99,430	5,642	5.7
Gender			
Female	1,021,498	132,786	13.0
Male	803,118	62,156	7.7
Non-binary	5,108	754	14.8
Unknown	29,191	2,393	8.2
Other student subgroups			
Educational goal			
ESL/adult education	52,270	3,396	6.5
Short-term career	210,075	21,835	10.4
Degree/transfer seeking	1,040,727	130,144	12.5
Undecided/other	371,563	29,823	8.0
First-generation	425,652	61,586	14.5
Age groups			
19 or less	551,608	51,615	9.4
20–21	275,365	21,510	7.8
22–24	233,319	22,579	9.7
25–29	237,267	32,166	13.6
30–34	162,003	25,113	15.5
35–39	112,572	15,959	14.2
40–49	136,755	15,724	11.5
50 and older	146,415	13,389	9.1

*Because we rely on valid social security numbers (SSNs) to accurately link records across data sources, we are not able to estimate CalFresh participation among the approximately 14% of community college students without valid SSNs. Student records may lack a valid SSN for a number of reasons, including incomplete data and data entry errors. Among the 86% of community college students with valid SSNs, the total CalFresh participation rate is 12.4%.

TABLE 2. CalFresh participation among UC undergraduate students, 2021–2022 academic year

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN CALFRESH	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH
All Students	242,467	35,806	14.8
Campus			
Berkeley	33,210	5,251	15.8
Davis	33,509	5,356	16.0
Irvine	30,646	3,737	12.2
Los Angeles	33,776	3,585	10.6
Merced	8,276	1,811	21.9
Riverside	24,122	3,031	12.6
San Diego	35,103	5,097	14.5
Santa Barbara	24,729	5,461	22.1
Santa Cruz	19,096	2,477	13.0
Financial Aid Status			
Filed FAFSA	158,781	34,922	22.0
Did not file FAFSA	83,686	884	1.1
Cal Grant recipient	73,288	24,544	33.5
Pell Grant recipient	84,354	28,106	33.3
Any financial aid recipient	143,266	34,731	24.2
No financial aid recipient	99,201	1,075	1.1
UC tenure			
1 year	76,768	7,755	10.1
2 years	65,849	9,534	14.5
3 years	49,718	9,045	18.2
4+ years	50,132	9,472	18.9
Enrollment type			
Transfer students	56,431	8,916	15.8
Community college transfer students	50,843	8,395	16.5

Table 2 continues on next page

TABLE 2. CalFresh participation among UC undergraduate students, 2021–2022 academic year (continued)

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN CALFRESH	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH
Race/Ethnicity			
American Indian/Alaska Native	1,123	168	15.0
Asian American/Asian/Pacific Islander	109,252	11,675	10.7
Chinese	47,902	3,516	7.3
East Indian/Pakistani	16,965	770	4.5
Filipino	11,040	1,523	13.8
Japanese	3,637	236	6.5
Korean	9,405	1,211	12.9
Vietnamese	14,227	3,395	23.9
Other Asian/Pacific Islander	5,442	929	17.1
Black/African American	10,930	2,769	25.3
Hispanic/Latino/Chicano	60,855	15,618	25.7
White/Caucasian	52,304	5,025	9.6
Unknown	8,003	551	6.9
Gender			
Female	130,848	22,843	17.5
Male	108,256	12,501	11.5
Non-binary	1,786	338	18.9
Unknown	1,577	124	7.9
Other student subgroups			
Has disability	12,043	2,940	24.4
Foster youth	1,684	679	40.3
First-generation	64,965	20,780	32.0
Not first-generation	117,633	13,442	11.4
Zero expected family contribution (EFC)	48,665	17,622	36.2
UC employment	48,519	11,381	23.5

Note: First-generation students refers to those who did not have a parent who attended college (see [Appendix](#) for more detail).

TABLE 3. CalFresh participation among UC graduate students, 2021–2022 academic year

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN CALFRESH	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH
All Students	67,649	5,832	8.6
Campus			
Berkeley	14,177	748	5.3
Davis	8,740	837	9.6
Irvine	7,613	511	6.7
Los Angeles	14,672	1,541	10.5
Merced	794	<100	-
Riverside	4,153	231	5.6
San Diego	9,019	627	7.0
San Francisco	3,215	1,032	32.1
Santa Barbara	3,146	199	6.3
Santa Cruz	2,120	<100	-
Financial Aid Status			
Filed FAFSA	23,285	5,243	22.5
Did not file FAFSA	44,364	589	1.3
Cal Grant recipient	152	<100	-
Pell Grant recipient	<100	<100	-
Any financial aid recipient	32,866	5,041	15.3
No financial aid recipient	34,783	791	2.3
Race/Ethnicity			
American Indian/Alaska Native	473	<100	-
Asian American/Asian/Pacific Islander	20,271	1,991	9.8
Chinese	8,998	611	6.8
East Indian/Pakistani	3,767	250	6.6
Filipino	1,265	194	15.3
Japanese	1,037	103	9.9
Korean	1,721	176	10.2
Vietnamese	1,680	414	24.6
Other Asian/Pacific Islander	1,557	208	13.4
Black/African American	3,530	695	19.7
Hispanic/Latino/Chicano	8,509	1,299	15.3
White/Caucasian	21,348	1,462	6.8
Unknown	13,518	336	2.5

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TABLE 3. CalFresh participation among UC graduate students, 2020–2021 academic year (continued)

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN CALFRESH	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH
Gender			
Female	32,882	3,725	11.3
Male	33,842	2,009	5.9
Non-Binary	482	<100	-
Unknown	443	<100	-
Other student subgroups			
Has disability	2,348	400	17.0
Foster youth	<100	<100	-
First-generation	8,843	2,033	23.0
Not first-generation	19,877	3,384	17.0
Zero expected family contribution (EFC)	19,159	3,524	18.4
UC employment	34,281	1,912	5.6

Note: Cell sizes less than 100 are censored to protect student privacy.

First-generation students refers to those who did not have a parent who attended college (see [Appendix](#) for more detail).

The Student Supports linked database

The California Policy Lab has produced a cross-institution dataset consisting of records from students at the California Community Colleges and University of California, linked to information from Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) applications and safety-net program participation. CPL matches encrypted data records from each agency without ever receiving Personally Identifiable Information (PII), allowing for accurate data linkage while guaranteeing the protection of private information (see [Appendix A — Data and linkage](#) for more detail). This data resource, known as the Student Supports database, is the first of its kind in California, and will enable CPL and our research partners to:

- observe California college students as they begin, progress through, and complete their education
- directly estimate student receipt and take-up of safety-net benefits;
- evaluate strategies to increase take-up; and
- examine the relationship between receiving safety-net benefits and student success, including persistence in college, progress toward a certificate or degree, and credential completion.

Eligibility for CalFresh among college students

CalFresh [eligibility rules](#) for students are complex and generally require them to meet additional criteria relative to non-students. Students must first meet the citizenship requirements and household income limits that apply to CalFresh applicants generally; once these requirements are met, students must also qualify for one of a [number of exemptions](#) to be eligible to participate in the program. Examples of exemptions include receiving a Cal Grant A or B, working twenty or more hours a week, having a child under the age of twelve, participating in a campus program to increase employability, receiving CalWORKs, or planning to not enroll in school the following term.

Acknowledgments

We are especially grateful to the California Community College system (CCC), the University of California Office of the President (UCOP), the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), and the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) for their partnership in making this research possible. This research is supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305A220451 to The Regents of the University of California — Berkeley. This project is also part of the [Accelerating Recovery in Community Colleges \(ARCC\) Network](#). The findings reported herein were performed with the permission of the California Department of Social Services. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the authors and should not be considered as representing the policy of the collaborating department, agency, or any department or agency of the California government.

CPL is also grateful to the University of California Office of the President Multicampus Research Programs and Initiatives, M21PR3278, The James Irvine Foundation, and the Woven Foundation for their generous support. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders. All errors should be attributed to the authors. Jamila Henderson was a Senior Research Associate at the California Policy Lab. She is now the Lead Program Evaluator at AMEND, UCSF.

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This research publication reflects the views of the authors and not necessarily the views of our funders, our staff, our advisory board, the California Community College system, the University of California Office of the President, the California Department of Social Services, the California Student Aid Commission, or the Regents of the University of California.

Appendix A — Data and linkage

Data preparation

We include the full universe of enrolled CCC and UC students in the merge process that links student records to data from CDSS and CSAC. For data from the community colleges, student records are de-duplicated based on college-level unique student identifiers, along with encrypted versions of personally identifiable information (PII), specifically social security numbers, name, and birthday (see below for more information on our privacy-preserving encryption process). For the UCs, student records are de-duplicated based on the full set of encrypted PII elements, along with UC-assigned system-wide student ID numbers. For observations without a social security number, the student ID is used to de-duplicate records.

Description of data

CPL linked and analyzed the following de-identified, individual-level datasets for this analysis:

CCC Chancellor's Office records for students enrolled in a California community college from academic year (AY) 2010–11 through spring 2021 (AY 2021–22), including information on student demographics, enrollment details, certificate or degree attainment, financial aid awards, and other characteristics pertaining to CalFresh eligibility (such as CalWORKs, foster youth or parent status, or disability). Our sample includes all students regardless of whether they were enrolled in credit or noncredit courses, so long as they were enrolled in a term within the academic year being analyzed.

UCOP records for all UC students enrolled from AY 2010–11 through AY 2021–22, including student demographics, enrollment, degree attainment, financial aid awards, and other characteristics pertaining to CalFresh eligibility (such as foster youth status and disability). Student attributes in each year correspond to data from the latest term in which they were enrolled. For example, if a student was enrolled in UC Berkeley in the fall and UC Davis in the spring, we only include them in the UC Davis counts for that year.

CDSS records of monthly participation in CalFresh between 2010 to 2022. These data include demographic information, dates of CalFresh participation, benefit amount, and quarterly earnings data. To analyze student CalFresh participation rates, CalFresh monthly participation data was aggregated to the academic term level. Students are considered to be CalFresh participants if they received CalFresh benefits (at any point) during a term in which they were also enrolled in college.

CSAC records on Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms submitted from 2010–11 to 2021–22. This includes demographic characteristics, income, household composition, employment, FAFSA submission status and date, GPA verification, expected family contribution, whether the student was offered a Cal Grant, and information about where and when the grant was used.

Privacy-preserving record linkage

CPL has implemented a process to link individual-level data from multiple agencies without receiving PII. Rather than sharing raw PII, such as full names and social security numbers (SSNs), each agency applies a one-way encryption to PII before transferring any data to CPL. This encryption turns strings and substrings of PII into indecipherable strings of letters and numbers. As an additional measure to make the encryption process irreversible, all agencies append a unique string of characters to the original PII values prior to the encryption process. This appended string of characters is agreed on between the agencies, but never shared with CPL, so that the encryption process cannot be reversed when CPL is using data for record linkage. Further information on this process can be found [here](#).

Once the encrypted data is transferred, we use five rounds of 'rules' to identify exact and 'fuzzy' matches in order to link people across datasets. Fuzzy matches consider PII substrings (for example, the first few letters of the last name), each of which were hashed separately. All rounds require a perfect match on SSN, and they vary in the types of discrepancies allowed in the other PII fields.

Variable definitions

Received CalFresh: Students are identified as participating in CalFresh if they received CalFresh benefits during a term (quarter or semester, depending on the school) in which they were also enrolled in college.

Filed a FAFSA: Students who matched to a submitted FAFSA record in the California Student Aid Commission dataset were identified as having filed a FAFSA. All other students in the population were identified as not having filed a FAFSA.

Any financial aid recipient: Among community college students, this group represents all students who received any type of [community college financial aid](#), including aid awarded by the federal or state government, and aid awarded by the CCC. Among UC students, this group represents all students who received aid through any of the following: the Blue and Gold Opportunity plan, Cal Grants, Pell Grants, Federal SEOG grants, UC grants, other gift aid or financial assistance from UC, veterans' specific assistance, work study, Chaffee grant, or either a federal or other type of loan.

First-generation student: For community college students, first-generation students are defined as those who reported having no parent or guardian who attended college or earned an Associate degree, in accordance with California Community Colleges' [technical definition](#). This data began being collected by the CCC Chancellor's Office in 2017. For UC students, we define first-generation students as those who reported on any FAFSA from 2018-19 SY to 2020-21 SY that neither parent attended college. Approximately 68% of UC students submitted a FAFSA (75% of undergraduates and 42% of graduates). UC students who did not submit a FAFSA for these school years are not included in either the "first-generation" or the "not first-generation" subgroups. Given the different data sources used to define this subgroup, we recommend that readers avoid making comparisons regarding student counts or CalFresh participation rates across the higher education segments.

Enrollment types:

For community college students, **first-time students** are those who are enrolled for credit in higher education for the first time after high school. **First-time transfer students** are those enrolled in the reporting college and who transferred from another institution of higher education. **Continuing students** are those who are enrolled in the current session and were enrolled in the previous regular session. **Returning students** are those enrolled in the reporting college after an absence of one or more terms. **Special admit students** are those currently enrolled in K–12. **Unknown** are those students whose enrollment status is not known. These categories are all mutually exclusive.

Summer only students are defined as those who are enrolled only in the summer term for a given academic year. **Fall, winter, and/or spring** students are those who are enrolled in at least one non-summer term in a given academic year.

Race/ethnicity: For both community college and UC students, we rely on the racial and ethnic subgroups that are reported in each segment's administrative data, which are based on student self-report.

Zero expected family contribution (EFC): The expected family contribution is a measure of how much the student and their family is expected to contribute to the cost of the student's education, based on information reported on their FAFSA. Individuals with zero EFC are not expected to contribute financially to the cost of education. For UC students, this subgroup is defined based on students' reported EFC on their FAFSA. This variable is included in administrative data from the UCs, who source it from CSAC.

Has disability: For both community college and UC students, this subgroup is based on an indicator for having a disability in college administrative data, and may not be inclusive of all students who identify as having a disability.