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Authors

Hogg, Jennifer

Ayers, Sam

Lacoe, Johanna

et al.

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Jennifer Hogg, Sam Ayers, Johanna Lacoe, Alan Perez, and Jesse Rothstein

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Many California Community College Students Are Eligible For—but Not Receiving—CalFresh Benefits

Jennifer Hogg, Sam Ayers, Johanna Lacoe, Alan Perez, and Jesse Rothstein

Food insecurity is widespread among college students in the United States. Food benefits delivered through the CalFresh program, California’s version of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), can reduce hunger by helping students pay for groceries but may not reach all eligible students. To date, higher education systems have lacked good estimates of the share of students who are eligible for CalFresh and the share who actually receive benefits. Using a linked database of student-level administrative data on college enrollment, financial aid, and CalFresh participation, in this brief we estimate how many California community college (CCC) students are eligible for CalFresh, how many students are taking up those benefits, and how many are missing out. We estimate that in fall 2019, 22% of CCC students (346,000 students) were likely eligible for CalFresh benefits. However, the majority of these students did not receive benefits—only 26% (88,000) of eligible community college students actually participated in CalFresh.



Qualifying for CalFresh Is More Complicated for College Students

Under SNAP eligibility rules, set largely by federal legislation from the 1970s, college students face additional eligibility criteria that do not apply to the general population. The intent was to prevent SNAP benefits going to students who could instead draw on support from their parents, but the effect has been a system that is more challenging for students to navigate.

Even if they meet the normal SNAP eligibility rules, college students (defined as those aged 18–49 and enrolled at least half-time in school) are ineligible for SNAP unless they qualify for one of a list of exemptions enumerated in Figure 1. Examples of these exemptions include being the parent of a young child, receiving support from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, or being enrolled in state or federal work–study programs.

Figure 1. Student Exemptions for CalFresh (2017–2021)

• Recipient of Cal Grant A or B (TANF-funded) • Working 20 hours per week on average (total of 80 hours per month) • Enrolled in CalWORKS • Eligible¹ or approved for state or federal work–study and anticipate working during term • Is a parent and either: • a student who is exerting parental control for a child under 6 or for a child aged 6–12 and where adequate childcare is not available OR • a student who is a single parent with a child under 12 (who is their dependent)	• Enrolled in a Local Program to Increase Employability (LPIE) approved by California Department of Social Services • Enrolled in one of a set of state or federal programs for foster youth • Enrolled in one of a set of state or federal programs to increase employability • Enrolled in Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) • Does not plan to reenroll for the next school term • Has an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) of \$0 on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)¹
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Note. Figure 1 reflects student exemptions for CalFresh (2017–2021). We incorporate changes in student exemptions over time in our eligibility estimates.

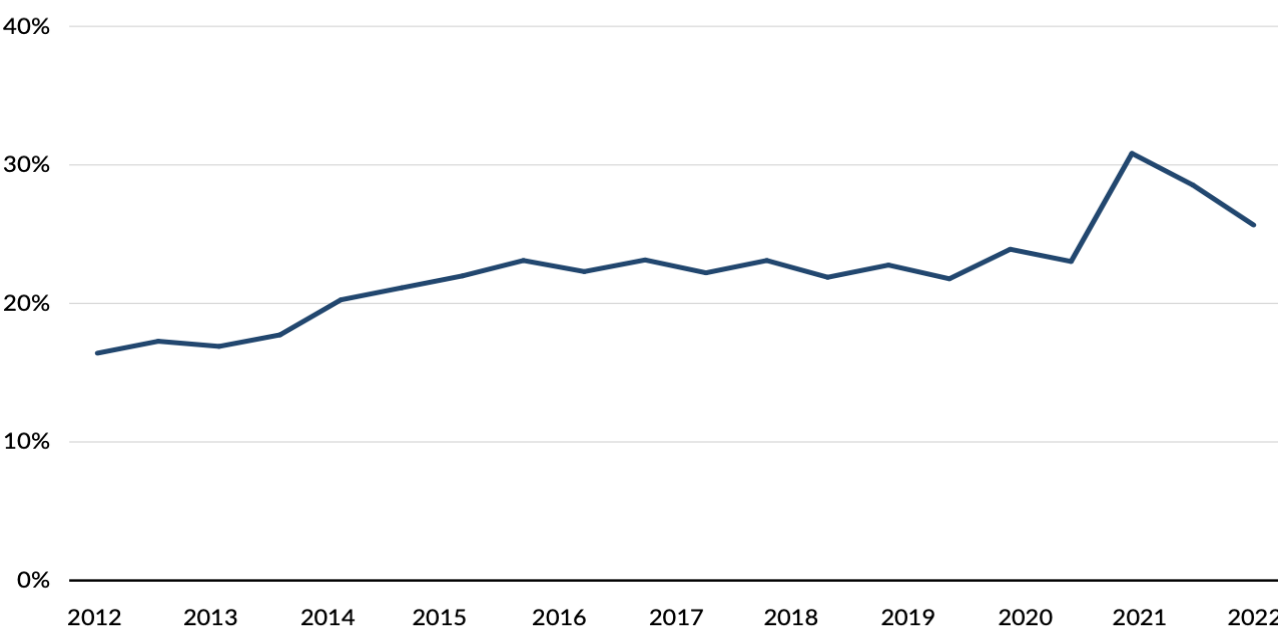
¹ These temporary exemptions were put in place by the Federal Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 and ended in spring 2023.

These exemptions may not be transparent to students who may not know, for example, that on-campus supports or degree programs may qualify as Local Programs to Increase Employability (LPIEs), which is an exemption. The complexity of the eligibility rules for students may mean they are less likely to know they are eligible and thus also less likely to participate (GAO, 2024; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). However, California has prioritized student enrollment in CalFresh in recent years. In 2021, the state allocated \$100 million to establish or expand basic needs centers at community colleges (SB 129), expanded the set of programs that count as exemptions (AB 396), and funded county human services agency liaisons to increase campus and county collaboration (AB 1326).

One in Five CCC Students Are Eligible for CalFresh

Among all students enrolled in community colleges in fall 2019, the last full term before the COVID pandemic, we estimate that 22% were eligible for CalFresh. Figure 2 shows how this rate has evolved over time.³ There is a slight upward trend during the pandemic, particularly in spring 2021.

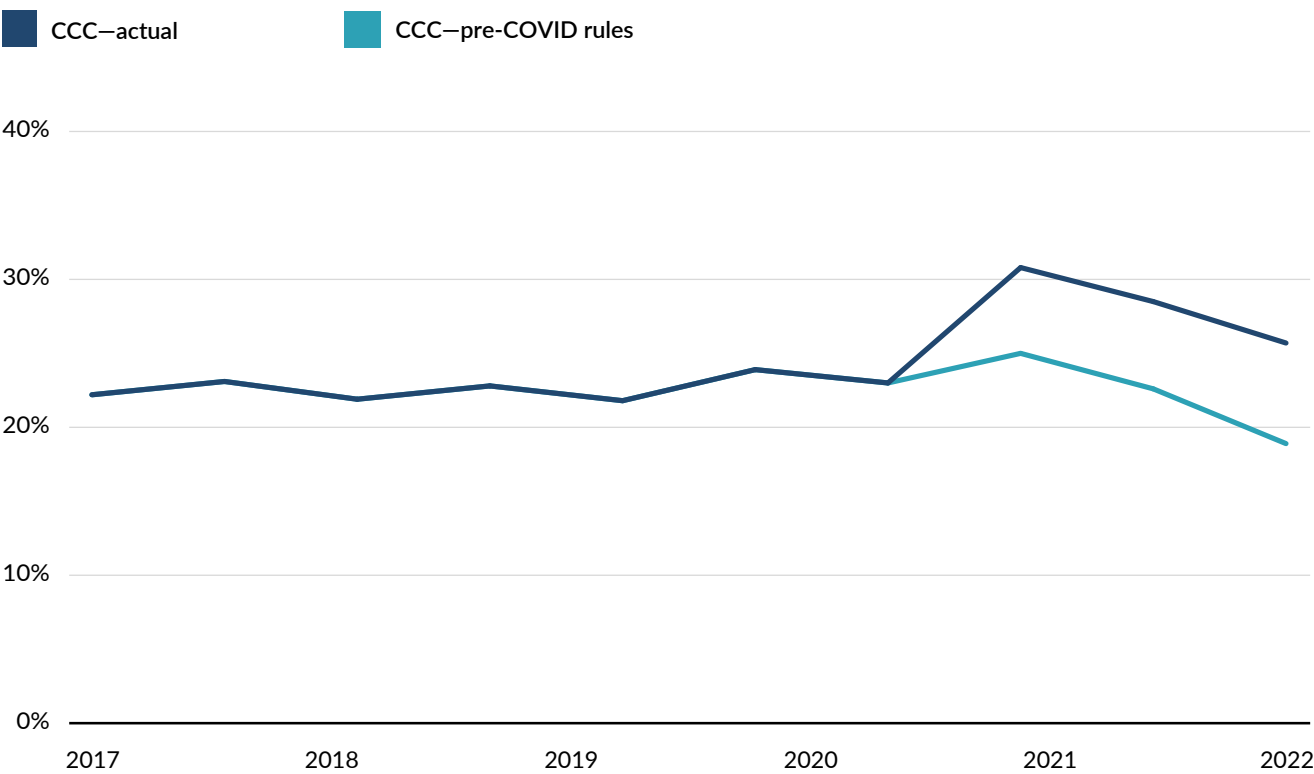
Figure 2. CalFresh Eligibility Rates Among CCC Students (2012–2021)



Temporary COVID-Era Policy Changes Increased the Share of Students Eligible for CalFresh

The increased share of students who were eligible for CalFresh during the height of the pandemic is largely due to COVID-era legislation, which temporarily expanded SNAP eligibility for college students. Students who had an EFC of \$0 or who were eligible for work-study funds were deemed eligible for SNAP benefits even if they had no other exemptions (assuming they met other eligibility criteria). If the eligibility rules had not changed, the share of eligible students would have dropped during this time due to changes in enrollment trends, as shown in Figure 3. In spring 2021, the first semester when the new rules were in effect, the CalFresh eligibility rate for \$0 EFC students at community colleges increased to 75%, from 49% in the fall of 2019.

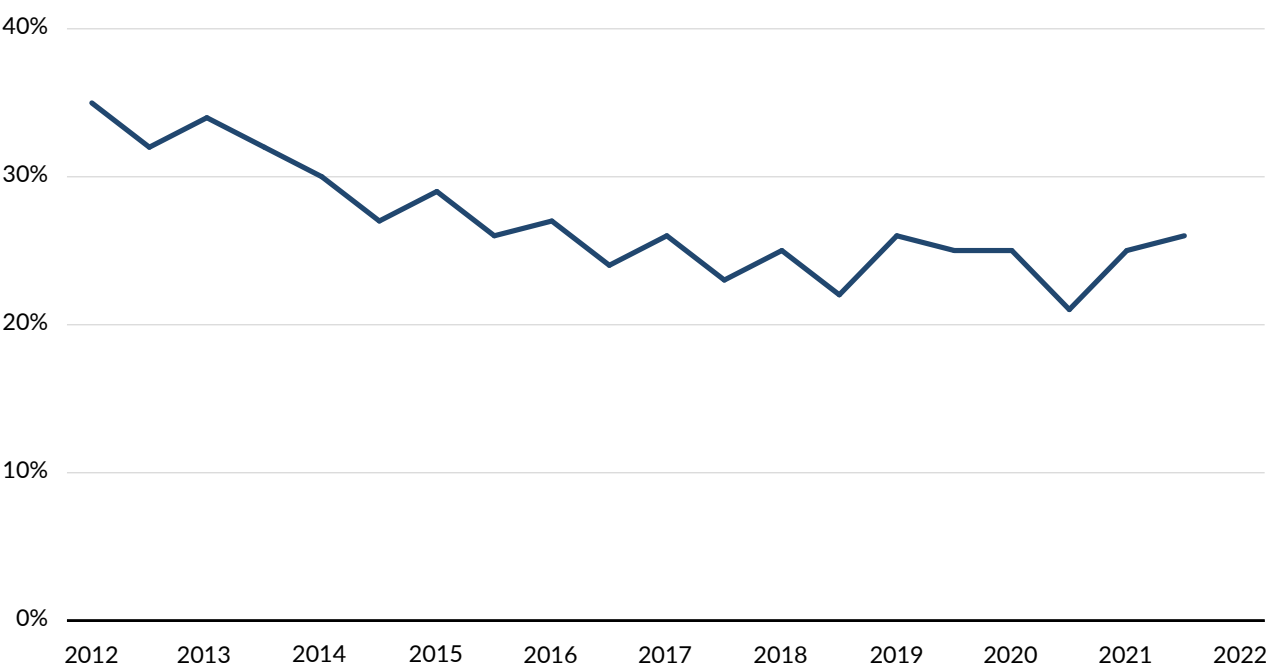
Figure 3. Impact of COVID-Era Eligibility Changes on CalFresh Eligibility Rates Among CCC Students (2017–2021)



Only a Quarter of Eligible Students Participate in CalFresh

At community colleges, the take-up rate (the share of eligible students who received benefits) was 35% in 2012. Since then, it has mostly fallen; the rate in 2021 was 26% (Figure 4). In future analyses, we will investigate whether recent efforts to increase student participation in CalFresh have reversed this trend.

Figure 4. CalFresh Participation Rates Among Eligible CCC Students (2012–2021)

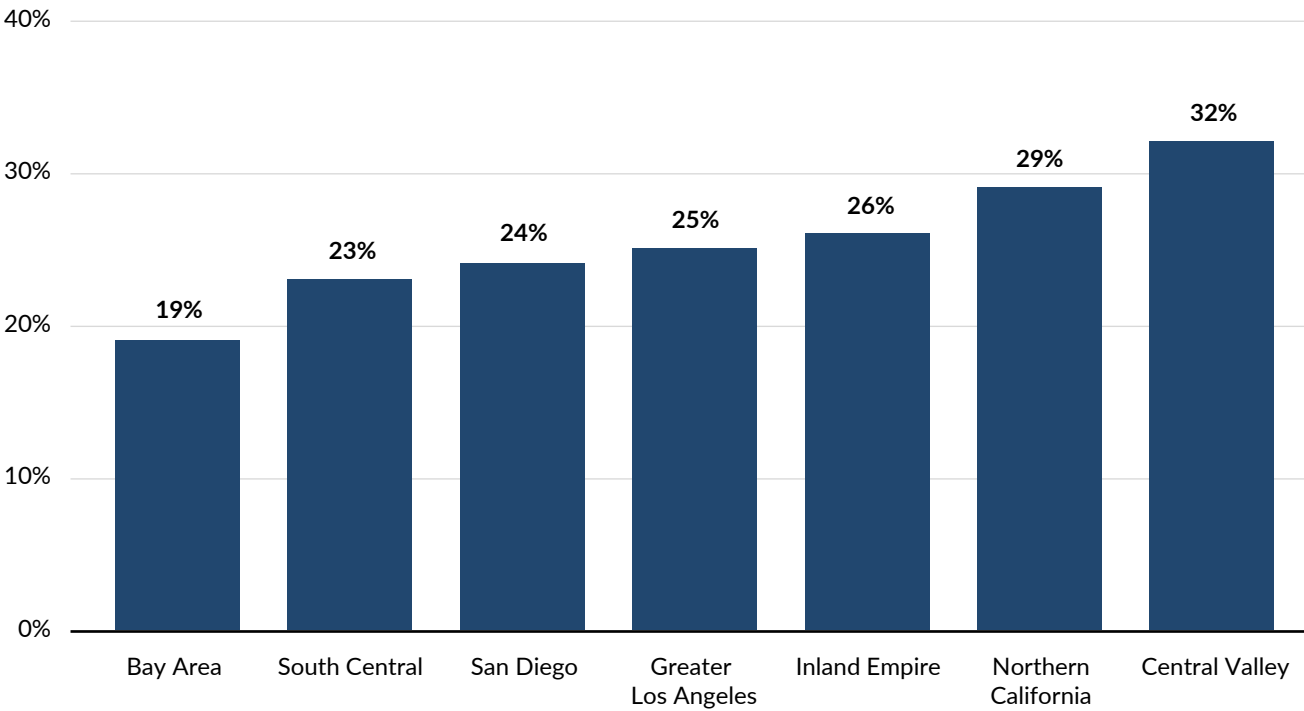


Note. Rates are shown for fall and spring terms only. Academic years are indicated by the calendar year of the fall term. For example, the point for 2012 corresponds to fall 2012; spring 2013 is shown as 2012.5.

The Central Valley Region Has Above-Average Eligibility and Take-Up

Take-up rates vary by community college region, from 19% of eligible students participating in CalFresh in the Bay Area to 29% and 32% in Northern California and the Central Valley, respectively (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Take-Up Rates by CCC Region (Fall 2019)



There is also substantial variation within regions, and the campuses with high eligibility and take-up are not particularly concentrated in the Central Valley despite its overall high rates (Table 1). Across CCC campuses, take-up is notably high at San Diego College of Continuing Education (69%) and Cuyamaca College (53%) (San Diego region); Los Angeles Southwest College (47%), Glendale Community College (46%), and Compton College (43%) (Los Angeles region); Porterville College (46%) (Central Valley region); and Copper Mountain College (42%) (Inland Empire region). Colleges with the highest eligibility rates include Barstow (53%), Copper Mountain (36%), San Bernardino Valley (35%), and Victor Valley (35%) (Inland Empire region); Porterville (39%) (Central Valley region); and Imperial Valley (36%) (San Diego region).

Table 1. Eligibility and Take-Up Rates by CCC Campus (Fall 2019)

Region	School	Eligible Students	Eligible, Participating Students	Take-Up Rate
Bay Area		16%	3%	19%
	Berkeley City College	17%	4%	23%
	Cabrillo College	25%	6%	23%
	Cañada College	19%	2%	12%
	Chabot College	18%	4%	22%
	City College of San Francisco	14%	3%	22%
	College of Alameda	24%	7%	28%
	College of Marin – Kentfield	14%	3%	22%
	College of San Mateo	16%	2%	11%
	Contra Costa College	26%	6%	23%
	De Anza College	12%	1%	11%
	Diablo Valley College	14%	2%	14%
	Evergreen Valley College	19%	4%	19%
	Foothill College	14%	1%	10%
	Gavilan College	19%	5%	27%
	Hartnell College	18%	4%	20%
	Laney College	23%	7%	31%
	Las Positas College	12%	2%	15%
	Los Medanos College	22%	5%	23%
	Merritt College	22%	7%	33%
	Mission College	14%	2%	16%
	Monterey Peninsula College	22%	4%	17%
	Napa Valley College	15%	3%	17%
	Ohlone College	10%	1%	12%
	San José City College	20%	4%	21%
	Santa Rosa Junior College	15%	3%	18%
	Skyline College	17%	2%	13%
	Solano Community College	22%	5%	23%
	West Valley College	13%	2%	13%

Table 1 (continued). Eligibility and Take-Up Rates by CCC Campus (Fall 2019)

Region	School	Eligible Students	Eligible, Participating Students	Take-Up Rate
Central Valley		31%	10%	32%
	Bakersfield College	32%	10%	31%
	Cerro Coso Community College	30%	8%	27%
	Clovis Community College	21%	6%	26%
	College of the Sequoias	32%	12%	36%
	Columbia College	32%	7%	23%
	Fresno City College	34%	13%	38%
	Merced College	30%	10%	33%
	Modesto Junior College	29%	8%	28%
	Porterville College	39%	18%	46%
	Reedley College	33%	11%	32%
	San Joaquin Delta College	29%	8%	28%
	Taft College	26%	7%	26%
	West Hills College – Coalinga	34%	10%	28%
	West Hills College – Lemoore	29%	10%	33%
Greater Los Angeles		20%	5%	25%
	Cerritos College	25%	6%	24%
	Citrus College	26%	5%	20%
	Coastline Community College	19%	2%	12%
	Compton College	34%	14%	43%
	Cypress College	25%	4%	18%
	East Los Angeles College	17%	5%	29%
	El Camino College	25%	6%	24%
	Fullerton College	23%	4%	18%
	Glendale Community College	25%	12%	46%
	Golden West College	12%	2%	19%
	Irvine Valley College	14%	2%	15%
	Long Beach City College	26%	7%	28%

Table 1 (continued). Eligibility and Take-Up Rates by CCC Campus (Fall 2019)

Region	School	Eligible Students	Eligible, Participating Students	Take-Up Rate
	Los Angeles City College	26%	9%	35%
	Los Angeles Harbor College	25%	7%	28%
	Los Angeles Mission College	24%	7%	30%
	Los Angeles Pierce College	21%	5%	24%
	Los Angeles Southwest College	31%	15%	47%
	Los Angeles Trade–Technical College	28%	12%	42%
	Los Angeles Valley College	27%	9%	32%
	Mt. San Antonio College	21%	4%	19%
	North Orange Continuing Education	1%	–	–
	Orange Coast College	11%	2%	16%
	Pasadena City College	21%	4%	18%
	Rio Hondo College	23%	5%	20%
	Saddleback College	12%	2%	14%
	Santa Ana College	13%	3%	20%
	Santa Monica College	20%	5%	22%
	Santiago Canyon College	9%	1%	16%
	West Los Angeles College	28%	9%	33%
Inland Empire		29%	8%	26%
	Barstow Community College	53%	21%	39%
	Chaffey College	26%	6%	22%
	College of the Desert	27%	6%	22%
	Copper Mountain College	36%	15%	42%
	Crafton Hills College	25%	6%	22%
	Moreno Valley College	28%	7%	24%
	Mt. San Jacinto College	24%	7%	27%
	Norco College	23%	4%	17%
	Palo Verde College	32%	3%	9%

Table 1 (continued). Eligibility and Take-Up Rates by CCC Campus (Fall 2019)

Region	School	Eligible Students	Eligible, Participating Students	Take-Up Rate
	Riverside City College	27%	6%	22%
	San Bernardino Valley College	35%	11%	32%
	Victor Valley College	35%	13%	38%
Northern California		25%	7%	29%
	American River College	21%	8%	36%
	Butte College	24%	8%	32%
	College of the Redwoods	30%	10%	34%
	College of the Siskiyous	19%	6%	30%
	Cosumnes River College	24%	7%	27%
	Feather River College	37%	8%	21%
	Folsom Lake College	20%	4%	22%
	Lake Tahoe Community College	24%	–	–
	Lassen Community College	52%	5%	9%
	Mendocino College	30%	9%	29%
	Sacramento City College	26%	8%	30%
	Shasta College	31%	10%	33%
	Sierra College	23%	5%	21%
	Woodland Community College	28%	8%	30%
	Yuba College	33%	10%	31%
San Diego		20%	5%	24%
	Cuyamaca College	28%	15%	53%
	Grossmont College	23%	8%	34%
	Imperial Valley College	36%	12%	33%
	MiraCosta College	17%	3%	16%
	Palomar College	17%	3%	14%
	San Diego City College	30%	8%	27%
	San Diego College of Continuing Education	2%	1%	69%
	San Diego Mesa College	20%	3%	17%

Table 1 (continued). Eligibility and Take-Up Rates by CCC Campus (Fall 2019)

Region	School	Eligible Students	Eligible, Participating Students	Take-Up Rate
	San Diego Miramar College	16%	2%	14%
	Southwestern College	28%	5%	19%
South Central		24%	6%	23%
	Allan Hancock College	30%	6%	20%
	Antelope Valley College	37%	14%	38%
	College of the Canyons	18%	3%	17%
	Cuesta College	22%	4%	18%
	Moorpark College	18%	2%	14%
	Oxnard College	28%	8%	27%
	Santa Barbara City College	18%	3%	18%
	Ventura College	26%	6%	21%

Note. Cells with a hyphen indicate no reporting due to small cell sizes (< 100 students) to protect student privacy. The take-up rate is the number of eligible, participating students divided by the number of eligible students. Calbright College, an all-online school that was founded in 2018 and is free to California residents, is omitted from this table due to data limitations.

Eligibility and Take-Up Vary by Student Characteristics

Black students are more likely than other students to be eligible and, if eligible, to successfully access benefits (Table 2). Students receiving financial aid are more likely to be eligible than non-aid students and have higher participation rates when eligible.

Table 2. Student Demographics and CalFresh Eligibility and Participation Among CCC Students (Fall 2019)

	Share of Student Population	Eligibility Rate	Take-Up Rate Among Eligible Students
Overall	100%	22%	26%
Race/Ethnicity			
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	31%	36%
Asian American/Asian/Pac. Isl.	14%	17%	16%

Table 2 (continued). Student Demographics and CalFresh Eligibility and Participation Among CCC Students (Fall 2019)

	Share of Student Population	Eligibility Rate	Take-Up Rate Among Eligible Students
Black/African American	5%	36%	43%
Hispanic/Latino/Chicano	47%	24%	23%
White	23%	18%	28%
Two or more races	4%	24%	30%
Unknown	6%	13%	30%
Financial aid status			
Not receiving aid	53%	9%	16%
Receiving aid	47%	36%	28%
Pell Grant	22%	42%	34%
Cal Grant	0%	75%	18%
\$0 EFC	24%	51%	36%
Student type			
First-year	26%	20%	30%
Continuing	74%	23%	25%
CalFresh-defined student^a			
No	48%	26%	22%
Yes	52%	18%	30%
Dependent status			
Independent	67%	19%	32%
Dependent	33%	27%	16%
Age group			
Under 22	45%	21%	20%
22–23	9%	27%	15%
Over 23	45%	22%	34%

Note. We use race/ethnicity information from California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) records. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole percentage point. Cells with 0% have been rounded down but include enough individuals to not be suppressed.

^a Defined as being enrolled at least half-time and between the ages of 18 and 49.

If Food Insecurity Is High, Why Aren't More Students Eligible?

Nearly half of CCC students are food insecure, according to research using survey data to measure students' basic needs (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). However, we estimate that only a fifth are likely eligible for CalFresh.

Our analysis suggests that the main reason many low-income CCC students are ineligible for CalFresh is that they live with their parents. Eligibility is based on the total incomes of people living and preparing meals together, so including more incomes decreases the likelihood of being income eligible. Additionally, students under 22 who live with their parents are assumed to prepare meals together and are therefore required to apply together. Only 36% of CCC students are income eligible; many more would be considered income eligible if they lived on their own.

Of the CCC students who are income eligible, two fifths do not qualify for CalFresh because they do not have a student exemption. A factor contributing to this is that one of the major student exemptions used by UC students—the TANF-funded Cal Grant scholarship—is not awarded to two-year college students.

Opportunities to Reach More Food-Insecure Students

The large take-up gaps among eligible students warrant additional attention. Closing these gaps will require more targeted outreach and the addressing of barriers college students face when attempting to enroll (and stay enrolled) in CalFresh (Chavarin-Rivas, 2021; Unrath, 2021). Funding for basic needs centers tied to CA AB 1326 will also help expand CCCs' capacity to connect more eligible students to CalFresh.

These results also point to policy opportunities at both the state and federal levels. The important role of housing status (and the fact that CCC students are more likely to live at home) suggests that it may be valuable to adjust the calculation of SNAP income to better reflect this reality. There may also be room to adjust state practices to enable more low-income students to qualify for exemptions. For example, students attending two-year colleges generally cannot receive TANF-funded Cal Grants that qualify for exemptions; the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) could explore whether TANF dollars could fund Cal Grants for which CCC students are eligible. Another way to expand access would be to ensure that all eligible campus-based programs are registered LPIEs; through AB 396, this is

underway at the campus and state levels. At the federal level, the Enhance Access to SNAP (EATS) Act of 2023 would remove the need for student exemptions altogether. Our research shows that substantially more low-income college students would be eligible for CalFresh were it not for the student exemption requirement.

We will continue to update these estimates with additional years of data. These updates will be especially relevant considering the recent policy changes impacting student eligibility. In particular, they will shed light on how the reduction in average monthly CalFresh amounts and the removal of pandemic-era student exemptions in 2023 have impacted student take-up and how state- and campus-level efforts to expand eligibility and outreach mitigate these changes.

Finally, we are working to develop and test outreach strategies that can use the newly linked data created for this project to help identify groups of students most likely to respond. In 2021, we partnered with CSAC and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to test strategies for reaching out to students newly eligible for CalFresh under the temporary pandemic rules. The findings show that repeated outreach, multiple methods (emails and postcards), and simplified messaging increased applications and enrollment in CalFresh (Castellanos et al., 2022; Lasky-Fink et al., 2022).

Endnotes

1. To see these estimates for University of California students, and for more information on our data, methodology, and limitations, refer to the full report: [Filling the Gap: CalFresh Eligibility Among University of California and California Community College Students](#)
2. This eligibility estimate differs slightly from what was reported in the full report linked above (22% versus our earlier estimate of 20%). For this brief, we have refined our methodology, incorporating [Promise Grant](#) application data as a source of student income information for students who did not fill out a FAFSA. This slightly expands the number of students we are able to identify as eligible.
3. Our calculations here account for changes in the eligibility rules, such as the expansions of student exemptions in 2021. They are based on simulation of eligibility rules using data in the CCCCCO data systems linked to data from FAFSAs submitted to CSAC. See [Filling the Gap: CalFresh Eligibility Among University of California and California Community College Students](#) for details.

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For more information about the ARCC Network, visit ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/arccnetwork/

For more information on the Student Supports project, visit capolicylab.org/topics/education/student-supports-the-role-of-social-safety-net-programs-in-college-student-success

Jennifer Hogg, Sam Ayers, Johanna Lacoe, and Jesse Rothstein are researchers at CPL, and Alan Perez was formerly a researcher at CPL.