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How Much Do College Students Get from CalFresh Each Month?

ALAN PEREZ, SAM AYERS, JENNIFER HOGG, JOHANNA LACOE, JESSE ROTHSTEIN

Executive Summary

College students are more likely to be food insecure than the general population.¹ CalFresh (SNAP) food benefits can reduce hunger by helping low-income students pay for their food. This is particularly relevant as the rising cost of food is putting extra strain on students' budgets. Unfortunately, the administrative hurdles and time required to apply for CalFresh can be a deterrent, particularly if it is unclear to students how much support they could receive each month. In conversations with Basic Needs representatives at several campuses, we have heard that some students do not apply for CalFresh because they believe that most college students receive close to the minimum amount, which is currently \$23 in monthly benefits.² If this were accurate, students may understandably decide it's not worth their time to apply.

However, we find that **in Fall 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic began, the average per-person monthly benefit for California community college (CCC) students participating in CalFresh was \$123 per month. For University of California (UC) undergraduate students, it was \$161 per month.** In annual terms, this translates to roughly \$1,500–2,000 a year that participating students can use to pay for food. Since these estimates are from Fall 2019 (the most recent available data prior to the pandemic), the current average benefits are likely higher. During the pandemic, CalFresh payments increased temporarily, nearly doubling the average monthly benefits to \$245 for CCC students and \$303 for UC undergraduate students (Fall 2021).

Household Size Is a Key Determinant of Monthly Benefits

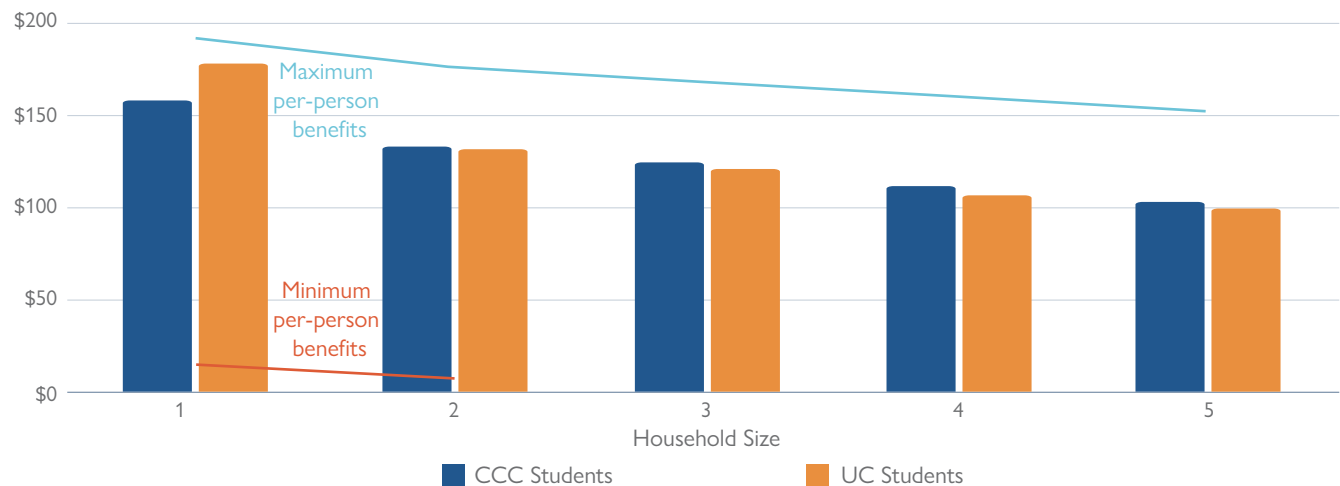
For households³ who meet the CalFresh eligibility requirements, the amount of benefits they receive is determined by how far below the income threshold they fall — the lower the income, the larger the monthly benefits.⁴ Benefits also increase with each additional household member, but at a decreasing rate. As a result, average benefits per person decrease as the household size increases.

Figure 1 demonstrates that, among UC and CCC students receiving CalFresh, single person households receive more benefits per person than do larger households, on average. This is driven by two factors: (1) under the CalFresh benefit formula, maximum per person benefits decrease as household size increases, as described above, and (2) larger

households have more potential income earners, and are therefore more likely to receive lower benefit amounts than the household maximum.

While living at home can help students save on housing costs, it often reduces their likelihood of being eligible for CalFresh (as demonstrated in [an earlier CPL report](#)), or reduces the amount of benefits for those who remain eligible. College students who live and prepare food alone likely have lower per-person household earnings than those who live with income-earning family members.⁵ UC students are much more likely to participate in CalFresh as a household size of one (81% of cases) than CCC students (34% of cases), driving the higher monthly benefit amounts among UC students shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. Average Per Person Monthly CalFresh Benefits by Household Size and Segment, Fall Term 2019



Note: Larger household sizes are hidden due to smaller sample sizes. Only households with one or two members qualify for at least a “minimum benefit.”
Source: Data for Figures 1-4 was provided to CPL by the California Department of Social Services, the University of California Office of the President, and California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

In our [prior research](#), we showed differences in take-up across student groups like age, race/ethnicity, gender, enrollment status, and financial aid status.

However, among those who successfully apply, we do not observe large differences in monthly benefit amounts across subgroups.

Emergency Pandemic Aid Increased Benefits for Students by More Than \$120 a Month per Person, on Average

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, California issued emergency CalFresh benefits so that every household would receive the maximum benefit for their household’s size (called “emergency allotments”).⁶ In January 2021, the Consolidated Appropriations and American Rescue Plan Acts increased all SNAP benefits by 15%. This policy lasted from January through September 2021.⁷ In April 2021, households that had not received at least a \$95 increase in their benefits (these are households who were already receiving close to the maximum amount prior to the pandemic) — began to receive an additional \$95 each month.⁸ The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023 ended all emergency allotments in Feb. 2023. [Table 1](#) shows the change in potential monthly benefits before and after the policies went into effect.

[Figure 2](#) illustrates the large increases in average benefits for CCC and UC undergraduate students from the 2018–2019 academic year through 2021–2022. From Fall 2019 to Fall 2021, **CCC students’ average per person monthly benefits nearly doubled, from \$123 to \$245. For UC undergraduates, average per person monthly benefits increased from \$161 to \$303.** This figure also underscores that UC undergraduate students’ average benefits have been higher than CCC students throughout this period. As noted above, over four-fifths of UC students are on a CalFresh case by themselves, while this is only true for a third of CCC students. This means that during the pandemic, CalFresh benefits could cover nearly half a UC undergraduate student’s monthly food bill (\$675). Without the extra pandemic benefits, CalFresh benefits cover less than a third.⁹

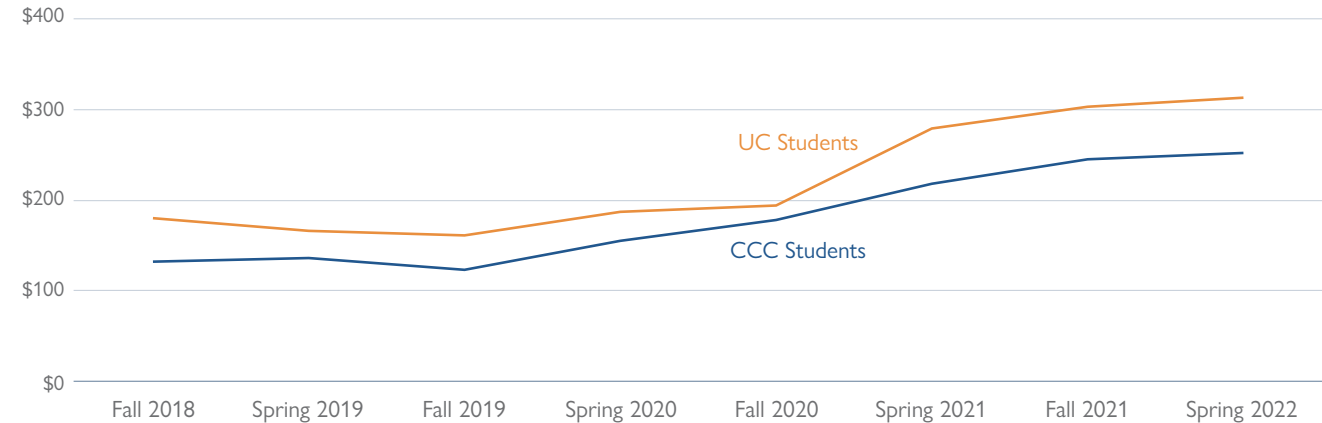
TABLE 1. Maximum monthly benefits by household size before and during COVID-19 pandemic

HOUSEHOLD SIZE	PRE-COVID MAXIMUM MONTHLY BENEFITS (FY 2020)	COVID MAXIMUM MONTHLY BENEFITS (FY 2022)*
1	\$194	\$345
2	\$355	\$554
3	\$509	\$753
4	\$646	\$930
5	\$768	\$1,087
6	\$921	\$1,285
7	\$1,018	\$1,411
8	\$1,164	\$1,599
Each additional member	\$146	\$188

Source: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/allotment/COLA>

* These amounts include the additional \$95 over the reported maximum for which some households were eligible.

FIGURE 2. Average Monthly Per Person CalFresh Benefits for California Community College and University of California Students, Academic Year 2018–2019 to 2021–2022



Over Two-Thirds of Participating College Students Receive \$100 or More Each Month

Eligible students face barriers to accessing CalFresh, including complex eligibility criteria and application processes. Some students report that they hesitate to apply because they expect to receive only the minimum amount. However, our analyses show that this is not the case — only 1% of students who receive benefits receive the minimum monthly allotment. Two-thirds (67%) of participating CCC students and 87% of participating UC students received \$100 or more per person each month in Fall 2019.

While most students (in both segments) receive over \$100 per month per person, UC students are much more likely to receive the maximum benefit than CCC students (Figures 3 and 4).

FIGURE 3. Distribution of Per Person Monthly Benefits, Fall 2019

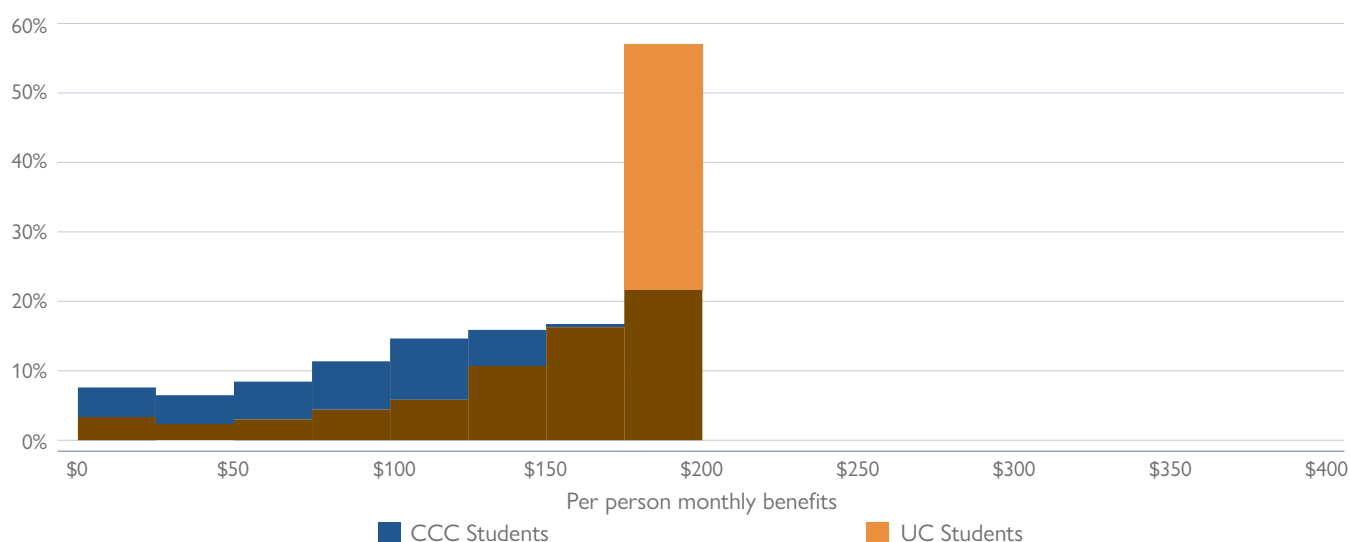
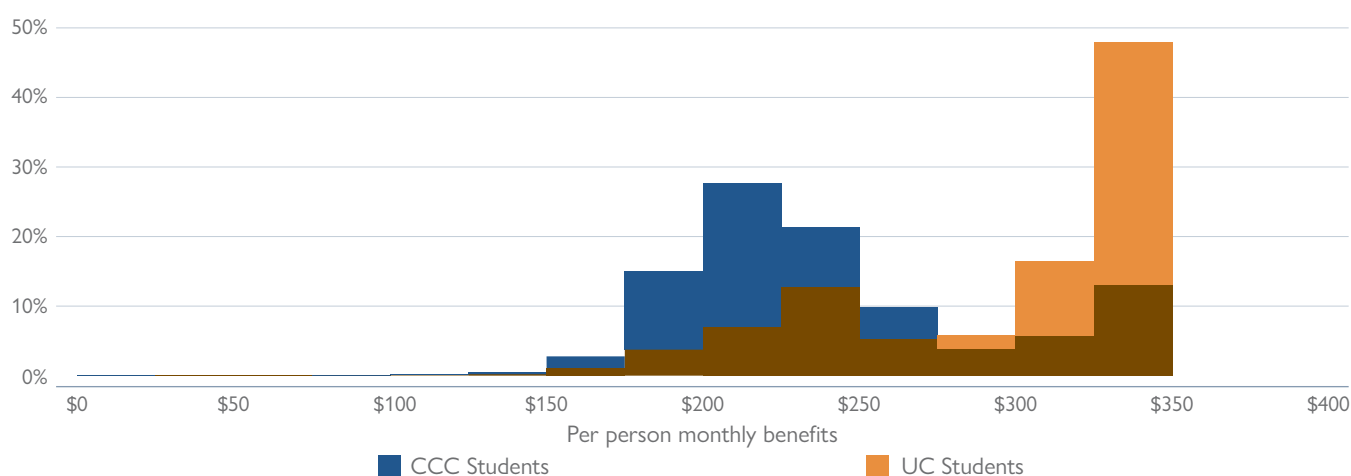


FIGURE 4. Distribution of Per Person Monthly Benefits, Fall 2021



Eligible CCC and UC Students Could Access an Additional \$140 Million Each Term by Enrolling in CalFresh

Our [Eligibility Report](#) estimates that nearly 300,000 California college students are eligible for, but not participating in, CalFresh each year. Using these students' incomes and the formula used to calculate benefits, we estimate that low-income California college students

are missing out on approximately \$140 million worth of benefits for which they are eligible. With inflation and high housing costs, narrowing this take-up gap could support these students while also bringing more federal dollars into California.

Conclusion

These findings show that CalFresh can make a meaningful difference in student's monthly food budgets and their food security. Entities conducting student outreach, including campus basic needs offices, may consider incorporating these figures into information campaigns to ensure college students are equipped with accurate information showing the role that CalFresh could play in supporting their monthly food budget.

It is also worth noting that there are proposals at the federal level, some, like the [EATS Act](#), that would improve access to SNAP benefits, and others that experts predict would dramatically [reduce access to SNAP](#) for already vulnerable individuals — like veterans, seniors, and people experiencing homelessness, while also making across-the-board cuts to benefit amounts.

Acknowledgments

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Our research has shown additional opportunities for policymakers to make CalFresh more accessible than it is today. For example, in another [policy brief](#), we show that two pandemic-era policies to broaden eligibility made it easier for students to qualify for CalFresh while also keeping the program targeted to low-income students who need the support. CPL [research](#) has also shown that once people are enrolled in CalFresh, meeting administrative requirements to stay enrolled can be challenging, and that people are six times more likely to leave CalFresh in the month that they have to recertify their eligibility. Students have also [shared challenges](#) with receiving their recertification reminders, which can lead to students not staying enrolled. Policies to address these administrative burdens could also help more eligible students to enroll and stay enrolled.

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Appendix

Sample and Definitions

The **sample for each academic term** includes any undergraduate student who was enrolled in a CCC or UC school at any point during the academic term and who participated in CalFresh during their college enrollment that term.

Average monthly allotment is the total allotments disbursed to a CalFresh case within a term divided by the number of active months in that term.

Average household size is calculated summing the number of people on an active case across each month of a term, divided by the number of months the case was active in that term.

Average monthly per person allotments are calculated by dividing the average monthly allotment within a term by the average household size on that CalFresh case within a term.

Income Eligibility Standards

Table A-1 displays the maximum monthly income for a household of a given size to qualify for any amount of CalFresh benefits.

TABLE A-1. **Gross Monthly Income Limits**
Modified Categorical Eligibility (200% of Federal Poverty Level)¹⁰ in
Fiscal Years 2020 and 2022

HOUSEHOLD SIZE	FY 2020 LIMIT	FY 2022 LIMIT
1	\$2,083	\$2,148
2	\$2,818	\$2,904
3	\$3,555	\$3,660
4	\$4,292	\$4,418
5	\$5,029	\$5,174
6	\$5,766	\$5,930
7	\$6,503	\$6,688
8	\$7,238	\$7,444
Each additional family member	\$737	\$758



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Endnotes

- 1 Freudenberg, N., Goldrick-Rab, S., & Poppendieck, J. (2019). College Students and SNAP: The New Face of Food Insecurity in the United States. *American journal of public health*, 109(12), 1652–1658. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305332>.
- 2 USDA Minimum and Maximum Allotments, FY 2025.
- 3 For CalFresh purposes, a household is defined as “a person living alone or a group of people living together who buy food and make meals together.” A student may live with roommates, for example, but if they do not buy food and make meals together, they could each be considered a single-person CalFresh household.
- 4 Specifically, benefits are calculated by starting with a specified maximum benefit, which varies by household size, and then deducting 30 percent of the household’s net income. Table 2 shows the maximum allotments both prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and during the pandemic, when household maximums were increased. These increases expired in Spring 2023.
- 5 Students under age 22 who live with their parents are required to apply together under CalFresh rules, even if they do not share meals at home.
- 6 <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/CA-SNAP-COV-EmergencyAllotments-Approval.pdf>
- 7 <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2021/03/22/usda-increases-snap-benefits-15-funding-american-rescue-plan>.
- 8 <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/benefit-changes-2021#:~:text=In%20April%202021%2C%20USDA%20took,expired%20for%20everyone%20on%20Sept>.
- 9 The average one-person household spent about \$675 per month on groceries in 2023, based on the most recent data from the US Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/demo/hhp/hhp63.html>. Food prices increased by 25% between 2019 and 2023, which would make the average monthly grocery bill approximately \$506 in 2019.
- 10 <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/allotment/COLA>.