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

ALAN PEREZ, SARAH HOOVER, JAMILA HENDERSON, JENNIFER HOGG, JOHANNA LACOE, AND JESSE ROTHSTEIN

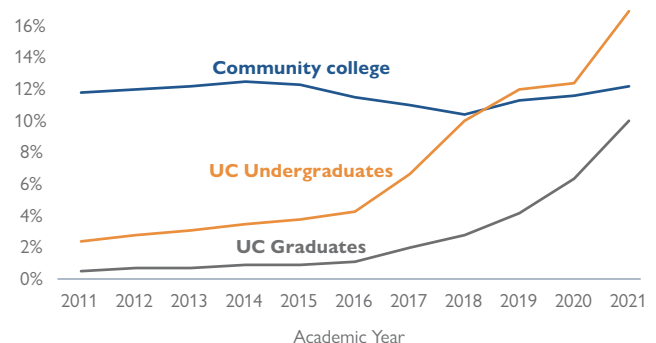
Food insecurity is widespread among college students in the United States. CalFresh food benefits, known federally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, can help students in California pay for food, but may not reach all eligible students. To better measure student participation 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, 12.3% of CCC students, 17.1% of UC undergraduate students, and 10.1% 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 increased slightly (+0.6 percentage points) while participation among UC students increased substantially (+4.6 percentage points for undergraduates and +3.7 percentage points for graduate students ([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 rates increased (from the year before) in most regions except the Inland Empire, which stayed the same. The Central Valley, Northern California and San Diego regions had the highest participation rates.

UC Campuses — CalFresh participation continues to be highest at the San Francisco campus (which only serves graduate students), and UCSF's participation rate increased slightly from the prior year. Most campuses saw increases in their CalFresh participation rate among graduate students, with participation nearly doubling at Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Riverside, and San Diego. The share of undergraduate students participating in CalFresh also increased on all campuses, particularly at Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Riverside, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Santa Cruz.

Student aid — The share of CCC Cal Grant recipients participating in CalFresh dropped by about two 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 increased slightly among all racial and ethnic groups at CCC campuses, with the greatest participation among Black/African American and American Indian/Alaska Native students. Among UC undergraduate students, the CalFresh participation rate increased for all racial and ethnic groups from the year before, with the highest participation among Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino/Chicano, and Vietnamese students.

Age groups — The overall CalFresh participation rate among CCC students increased by slightly less than 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*	1,833,350	225,685	12.3
Region			
Northern California	162,277	22,173	13.7
Bay Area	355,091	30,284	8.5
Central Valley	196,397	34,863	17.8
South Central	139,381	14,054	10.1
Greater Los Angeles	658,331	81,702	12.4
Inland Empire	153,218	20,010	13.1
San Diego	167,144	22,598	13.5
Financial Aid Status			
Filed FAFSA	742,817	138,889	18.7
Did not file FAFSA	1,090,533	86,796	8.0
Cal Grant recipient	145,173	38,743	26.7
Pell Grant recipient	337,035	90,832	27.0
Promise Grant recipient	705,936	142,968	20.3
Any financial aid recipient	839,602	153,752	18.3
No financial aid recipient	993,748	71,933	7.2
Enrollment type			
First-time students	190,971	26,834	14.1
First-time transfer	135,923	13,586	10.0
Continuing	962,442	118,521	12.3
Returning	238,278	29,395	12.3
Special admit	201,642	26,426	13.1
Unknown	104,094	10,923	10.5
Enrolled terms			
Summer only	204,801	15,302	7.5
Fall, winter, and/or spring	1,628,549	210,383	12.9

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	6,048	1,087	18.0
Asian	246,371	20,057	8.1
Black/African American	97,283	25,155	25.9
Hispanic/Latino	858,897	116,486	13.6
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	7,304	825	11.3
White	447,080	44,356	9.9
Two or more races	76,537	10,096	13.2
Unknown	93,830	7,623	8.1
Gender			
Female	1,008,450	148,843	14.8
Male	791,221	73,028	9.2
Non-binary	5,063	887	17.5
Unknown	28,616	2,927	10.2
Other student subgroups			
Educational goal			
ESL/adult education	51,714	4,968	9.6
Short-term career	207,926	24,538	11.8
Degree/transfer seeking	1,028,313	141,545	13.8
Undecided/other	365,269	38,317	10.5
First-generation	420,829	67,689	16.1
Age groups			
19 or less	541,864	65,151	12.0
20–21	270,918	23,517	8.7
22–24	230,539	25,011	10.8
25–29	235,002	35,106	14.9
30–34	160,301	27,076	16.9
35–39	111,209	17,296	15.6
40–49	135,079	17,148	12.7
50 and older	144,897	15,326	10.6

*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	242,051	41,507	17.1
Campus			
Berkeley	33,171	6,014	18.1
Davis	33,470	6,147	18.4
Irvine	30,610	4,339	14.2
Los Angeles	33,670	4,222	12.5
Merced	8,266	1,962	23.7
Riverside	24,054	3,451	14.3
San Diego	35,073	5,845	16.7
Santa Barbara	24,665	6,558	26.6
Santa Cruz	19,072	2,969	15.6
Financial Aid Status			
Filed FAFSA	159,390	40,311	25.3
Did not file FAFSA	82,661	1,196	1.4
Cal Grant recipient	75,569	28,281	37.4
Pell Grant recipient	84,187	31,118	37.0
Any financial aid recipient	143,089	39,888	27.9
No financial aid recipient	98,962	1,619	1.6
UC tenure			
1 year	76,388	9,494	12.4
2 years	65,694	11,445	17.4
3 years	49,738	10,314	20.7
4+ years	50,231	10,254	20.4
Enrollment type			
Transfer students	56,244	10,532	18.7
Community college transfer students	50,795	9,908	19.5

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	186	16.6
Asian American/Asian/Pacific Islander	109,098	13,914	12.8
Chinese	47,811	4,274	8.9
East Indian/Pakistani	16,953	983	5.8
Filipino	11,033	1,852	16.8
Japanese	3,633	321	8.8
Korean	9,397	1,463	15.6
Vietnamese	14,197	3,872	27.3
Other Asian/Pacific Islander	6,074	1,149	18.9
Black/African American	10,916	3,137	28.7
Hispanic/Latino/Chicano	60,802	17,545	28.9
White/Caucasian	52,244	6,070	11.6
Unknown	7,868	655	8.3
Gender			
Female	130,629	26,275	20.1
Male	108,073	14,699	13.6
Non-binary	1,783	383	21.5
Unknown	1,566	150	9.6
Other student subgroups			
Has disability	12,008	3,288	27.4
Foster youth	1,681	708	42.1
First-generation	66,141	23,207	35.1
Not first-generation	120,070	16,923	14.1
Zero expected family contribution (EFC)	48,603	19,029	39.2
UC employment	48,457	13,060	27.0

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	67,605	6,857	10.1
Campus			
Berkeley	14,173	946	6.7
Davis	8,739	1,004	11.5
Irvine	7,612	634	8.3
Los Angeles	14,668	1,841	12.6
Merced	793	<100	-
Riverside	4,153	267	6.4
San Diego	9,016	722	8.0
San Francisco	3,196	1,092	34.2
Santa Barbara	3,138	235	7.5
Santa Cruz	2,117	103	4.9
Financial Aid Status			
Filed FAFSA	23,366	6,048	25.9
Did not file FAFSA	44,239	809	1.8
Cal Grant recipient	152	<100	-
Pell Grant recipient	<100	<100	-
Any financial aid recipient	32,841	5,827	17.7
No financial aid recipient	34,764	1,030	3.0
Race/Ethnicity			
American Indian/Alaska Native	473	<100	-
Asian American/Asian/Pacific Islander	20,259	2,289	11.3
Chinese	8,996	687	7.6
East Indian/Pakistani	3,762	310	8.2
Filipino	1,265	217	17.2
Japanese	1,036	116	11.2
Korean	1,719	207	12.0
Vietnamese	1,678	458	27.3
Other Asian/Pacific Islander	1,803	294	16.3
Black/African American	3,527	791	22.4
Hispanic/Latino/Chicano	8,501	1,489	17.5
White/Caucasian	21,341	1,844	8.6
Unknown	13,504	386	2.9

Table 3 continues on next page

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	32,859	4,378	13.3
Male	33,828	2,370	7.0
Non-Binary	482	<100	-
Unknown	436	<100	-
Other student subgroups			
Has disability	2,348	460	19.6
Foster youth	<100	<100	-
First-generation	9,164	2,273	24.8
Not first-generation	20,953	4,090	19.5
Zero expected family contribution (EFC)	19,139	3,944	20.6
UC employment	34,263	2,353	6.9

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.

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Editor's note: In September 2025, we updated our data linkage methodology, which resulted in a slight uptick in our estimates of CalFresh participation rates for all categories of college students. This publication includes the updated numbers. The interactive graph on our website, "[CalFresh participation among California college students](#)," also reflects these updated numbers. The original version of this data point is available upon request: jennifer@capolicylab.org.

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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.