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CalFresh Participation Among California's College Students: A 2022–23 School Year Update

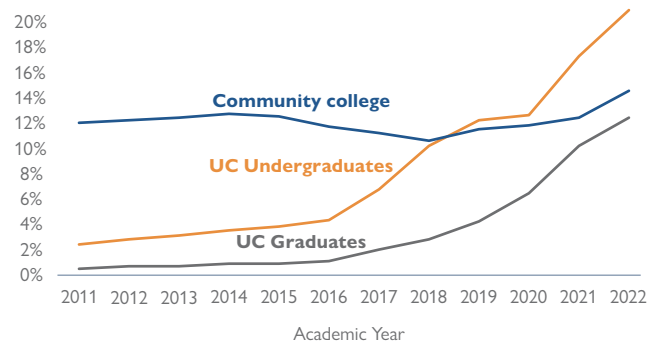
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Food insecurity is widespread among college students in the United States. CalFresh food benefits, known federally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, can help students in California pay for food, but may not reach all eligible students. This data point provides estimates of CalFresh participation rates among community college and University of California (UC) students in California. It updates numbers from our last [data point](#), which focused on CalFresh enrollment during the 2021–22 school year.¹ **In the academic year 2022–23, 14.4% of California community college students, 20.7% of UC undergraduate students, and 12.3% of UC graduate students participated in CalFresh at some point during the school year.**

Among community college students, CalFresh participation rose by about two percentage points from 2021–22, with about 276,000 students receiving benefits — an increase of roughly 51,000 students. CalFresh participation rates and counts also increased for UC undergraduate and graduate students, with approximately 50,000 undergraduates and 8,400 graduate students participating in CalFresh. This represents a 3.6 and 2.2 percentage point increase from the prior year for undergraduates and graduate students, respectively.

Academic Year (AY) 2022–23 is the final year of federal COVID-19 emergency policies that expanded CalFresh eligibility and benefits for college students. UC participation rose sharply during the pandemic, following steady increases since 2016–17. CCC participation has grown modestly but consistently since AY 2018–19. Due to the size of the CCC system, even small percentage increases translate into large numbers: the 51,000 additional CCC participants in 2022–23 slightly outnumber total UC undergraduate participants that same year.

FIGURE 1. CalFresh participation rates among college students, 2010–11 to 2022–23



AY 2022–23 is also the first school year that several state laws affecting college student participation in CalFresh went into effect, including AB 132, which provided funding for basic needs centers at every CCC; AB 396, which expanded CalFresh eligibility for college students enrolled in certain programs of study (called "Local Programs to Increase Employability"); and AB 1326, which required county human service agencies to designate a higher education liaison.

This data point presents CalFresh participation rates, but it does not estimate what share of eligible students participate (or not) in CalFresh. Eligibility is based on multiple factors including income, household composition, school enrollment status, and financial aid status. A previous [report](#) shows how many likely eligible college students are participating in CalFresh; while one in three UC undergraduate students and one in five CCC students are eligible for CalFresh, only about a quarter of eligible students are receiving it.²

Rate of CalFresh participation among college students

Tables 1–3 show estimates for CalFresh participation during the 2022–23 academic year among community college students, UC undergraduate students, and UC graduate students, respectively. Participation rates varied across higher education segments, community college regions, UC campuses, and student subgroups (see Appendix for subgroup definitions). Key patterns include:

- **California community college regions** — CalFresh participation rates increased in every CCC region. The Central Valley continued to have the highest participation rate (21.6%) and the largest increase from the prior school year (+3.8 percentage points). The Bay Area continues to have the lowest participation rate (9.7%) and had a more modest increase (+1.2 percentage points).
- **UC campuses** — CalFresh participation rates increased at every UC campus for both undergraduates and graduate students relative to 2021–22 levels. UC Santa Barbara and UC Merced continue to have the highest undergraduate participation rates, with over a quarter of students participating (29.5% and 25.2%, respectively), while UC San Francisco continues to have the highest graduate participation rates (34.9%, more than twice that of the next highest campus). UC Irvine had the largest increase in undergraduate participation (+5.2 percentage points).
- **Student aid** — Participation increased the most among students who receive financial aid, particularly those who receive Pell Grants and Cal Grants. About 31% of CCC students and about 44% of UC undergraduates who receive a Pell Grant, a CalGrant, or both also received CalFresh.
- **Racial and ethnic groups** — Participation increased across all reported racial and ethnic groups in both segments. At the CCC campuses, participation increased the most among Black/African American students, the group with the highest participation rate. Among UC undergraduates, participation increased the most among Hispanic/Latino/Chicano and Black/African American students, which had the highest baseline participation. Among UC graduates, participation increased the most among Filipino, Korean, and Black/African American students.
- **Age groups and tenure** — Participation rates increased fairly evenly across age groups and college tenure. Among CCC students, rates were highest for those aged 30 to 34 years old (19.4%). Among UC undergraduates, participation rates increase with tenure, with seniors (and others with more than 4 years being enrolled) having the highest CalFresh participation rate (24.7%) and freshman having the lowest (15.1%).

To see how CalFresh participation rates have changed over time by subgroup, please refer to the interactive graph on the [CPL Student Supports webpage](#), “CalFresh Participation Among California College Students.”

TABLE 1. CalFresh Participation Among California Community College Students, 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 Academic Years

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2022–23)	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2021–22)	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE FROM AY 2021–22 TO 2022–23
All Students*	1,921,282	14.4	12.3	2.1
Region				
Bay Area	361,957	9.7	8.5	1.2
Central Valley	205,712	21.6	17.8	3.8
Greater Los Angeles	687,742	14.6	12.4	2.2
Inland Empire	169,124	15.7	13.1	2.6
Northern California	170,731	15.5	13.7	1.8
San Diego	176,939	15.1	13.5	1.6
South Central	146,600	11.6	10.1	1.5
Financial aid status				
Cal Grant recipient	146,140	31.0	26.7	4.3
Pell Grant recipient	358,050	31.6	27.0	4.6
Promise Grant recipient	718,164	24.0	20.3	3.7
Filed FAFSA	756,862	21.9	18.7	3.2
Did not file FAFSA	1,164,420	9.5	8.0	1.5
Any financial aid recipient	801,217	22.5	18.3	4.2
No financial aid recipient	1,120,065	8.6	7.2	1.4
Enrollment type				
First-time students	179,018	17.8	14.1	3.7
First-time transfer	153,010	11.8	10.0	1.8
Continuing	986,685	14.5	12.3	2.2
Returning	244,863	14.4	12.3	2.1
Special admit	230,695	14.5	13.1	1.4
Unknown	127,011	11.2	10.5	0.7

Table 1 continues on next page

TABLE 1. CalFresh Participation Among California Community College Students, 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 Academic Years
(continued)

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2022–23)	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2021–22)	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE FROM AY 2021–22 TO 2022–23
Enrolled terms				
Summer Only	199,278	9.2	7.5	1.7
Fall, winter, and/or spring	1,722,004	15.0%	12.9	2.1
Race/Ethnicity				
American Indian/Alaska Native	6,602	21.2	18.0	3.2
Asian	250,368	9.3	8.1	1.2
Black/African American	103,962	30.5	25.9	4.6
Hispanic/Latino	923,352	15.8	13.6	2.2
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	7,246	14.3	11.3	3.0
White	448,183	11.4	9.9	1.5
Two or more races	79,182	15.4	13.2	2.2
Unknown	102,387	9.7	8.1	1.6
Gender				
Female	1,030,242	17.1	14.8	2.3
Male	844,865	11.2	9.2	2.0
Non-binary	9,991	17.6	17.5	0.1
Unknown	36,184	11.9	10.2	1.7
Other student subgroups				
Educational goal				
ESL/adult education	68,398	10.4	9.6	0.8
Short-term career	218,408	13.4	11.8	1.6
Degree/transfer-seeking	1,020,042	16.6	13.8	2.8
Undecided/other	405,101	12.1	10.5	1.6
First-generation	447,903	18.7	16.1	2.6

Table 1 continues on next page

TABLE 1. CalFresh Participation Among California Community College Students, 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 Academic Years (continued)

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2022–23)	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2021–22)	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE FROM AY 2021–22 TO 2022–23
Age groups				
19 or less	603,491	14.0	12.0	2.0
20–21	269,868	11.0	8.7	2.3
22–24	227,825	13.4	10.9	2.5
25–29	228,261	17.3	14.9	2.4
30–34	162,962	19.4	16.9	2.5
35–39	116,505	17.8	15.6	2.2
40–49	147,858	14.1	12.7	1.4
50 and older	161,274	11.7	10.6	1.1

* Because we rely on social security numbers (SSNs) to accurately link records across data sources, we are not able to estimate CalFresh participation for approximately 17% of community college students with blank SSNs or those with typos. If we focus solely on the 83% of community college students whose data we are able to link, then the CalFresh participation rate increases slightly to 13.2%.

TABLE 2. CalFresh Participation Among UC Undergraduate Students, 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 Academic Years

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2022–23)	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2021–22)	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE FROM AY 2021–22 TO 2022–23
All Students	241,141	20.8	17.2	3.6
Campus				
Berkeley	33,795	22.0	18.1	3.9
Davis	33,009	20.7	18.4	2.3
Irvine	29,729	19.4	14.2	5.2
Los Angeles	34,008	16.5	12.5	4.0
Merced	8,296	25.2	23.7	1.5
Riverside	24,108	17.7	14.4	3.3
San Diego	34,729	20.3	16.7	3.6
Santa Barbara	24,677	29.5	26.6	2.9
Santa Cruz	18,790	19.7	15.6	4.1
Financial aid status				
Cal Grant recipient	75,126	43.6	37.4	6.2
Pell Grant recipient	81,976	43.7	37.0	6.7
Filed FAFSA	158,895	30.2	25.3	4.9
Did not file FAFSA	82,246	2.4	1.5	0.9
Any financial aid recipient	131,089	35.3	27.9	7.4
No financial aid recipient	110,052	3.4	1.6	1.8
UC tenure				
1 year	71,181	15.1	12.4	2.7
2 years	69,908	21.7	17.4	4.3
3 years	50,859	23.6	20.7	2.9
4+ years	49,193	24.7	20.4	4.3
Enrollment type				
Transfer students	55,009	23.3	18.7	4.6
Community college transfer students	49,235	24.4	19.5	4.9

Table 2 continues on next page

TABLE 2. CalFresh Participation Among UC Undergraduate Students, 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 Academic Years (continued)

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2022–23)	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2021–22)	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE FROM AY 2021–22 TO 2022–23
Race/Ethnicity				
American Indian/Alaska Native	1,241	17.9	16.6	1.3
Asian American/Asian/ Pacific Islander	108,758	15.6	12.8	2.8
Chinese	45,471	11.4	8.9	2.5
East Indian/Pakistani	18,418	7.4	5.8	1.6
Filipino	11,182	20.8	16.8	4.0
Japanese	3,651	11.3	8.8	2.5
Korean	9,620	18.9	15.6	3.3
Vietnamese	14,220	31.2	27.3	3.9
Other Asian/Pacific Islander	6,196	23.0	18.9	4.1
Black/African American	11,085	34.0	28.7	5.3
Hispanic/Latino/Chicano	61,209	34.3	28.9	5.4
White/Caucasian	51,556	14.4	11.6	2.8
Unknown	7,292	9.4	8.3	1.1
Gender				
Female	130,459	23.9	20.1	3.8
Male	106,010	16.9	13.6	3.3
Non-binary	2,790	24.4	21.5	2.9
Unknown	1,882	11.7	9.6	2.1
Other student subgroups				
Has disability	13,846	29.4	27.4	2.0
Foster youth	1,504	48.8	42.1	6.7
First-generation	63,621	41.0	35.1	5.9
Not first-generation	121,856	17.9	14.1	3.8
Zero expected family contribution (EFC)	43,747	46.8	39.2	7.6
UC employment	52,697	31.0	27.0	4.0

Note: Cell sizes less than 100 are suppressed to protect student privacy and are marked with a “—”. “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 and 2022–2023 Academic Years

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2022–23)	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2021–22)	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE FROM AY 2021–22 TO 2022–23
All Students	67,754	12.3	10.1	2.2
Campus				
Berkeley	13,903	8.9	6.7	2.2
Davis	8,501	14.7	11.5	3.2
Irvine	7,856	11.0	8.3	2.7
Los Angeles	14,675	15.7	12.6	3.1
Merced	787	—	—	—
Riverside	4,123	7.6	6.4	1.2
San Diego	9,372	8.8	8.0	0.8
San Francisco	3,241	34.9	34.2	0.7
Santa Barbara	3,192	8.6	7.5	1.1
Santa Cruz	2,104	6.3	4.9	1.4
Financial aid status				
Cal Grant recipient	122	—	—	—
Pell Grant recipient	—	—	—	—
Filed FAFSA	22,358	32.1	25.9	6.2
Did not file FAFSA	45,396	2.6	1.8	0.8
Any financial aid recipient	15,959	21.5	17.7	3.8
No financial aid recipient	51,795	9.5	3.0	6.5
Race/Ethnicity				
American Indian/Alaska Native	446	—	—	—
Asian American/Asian/ Pacific Islander	21,349	13.3	11.3	2.0
Chinese	9,293	8.9	7.6	1.3
East Indian/Pakistani	4,321	9.0	8.2	0.8
Filipino	1,290	22.0	17.2	4.8

Table 3 continues on next page

TABLE 3. CalFresh Participation Among UC Graduate Students, 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 Academic Years (continued)

	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2022–23)	% OF STUDENT BODY ENROLLED IN CALFRESH (AY 2021–22)	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE FROM AY 2021–22 TO 2022–23
Japanese	1,006	13.5	11.2	2.3
Korean	1,761	16.4	12.0	4.4
Vietnamese	1,701	31.0	27.3	3.7
Other Asian/Pacific Islander	1,977	19.9	16.3	3.6
Black/African American	3,705	26.4	22.4	4.0
Hispanic/Latino/Chicano	8,741	21.4	17.5	3.9
White/Caucasian	19,927	11.8	8.6	3.2
Unknown	13,586	1.8	2.9	-1.1
Gender				
Female	33,010	16.3	13.3	3.0
Male	33,535	8.4	7.0	1.4
Non-Binary	696	19.8	—	—
Unknown	513	—	—	—
Other student subgroups				
Has disability	2,688	25.0	19.6	5.4
Foster youth	—	—	—	—
First-generation	8,891	30.1	24.8	5.3
Not first-generation	19,791	24.6	19.5	5.1
Zero expected family contribution (EFC)	15,357	26.4	20.6	5.8
UC employment	33,019	8.3	6.9	1.4

Note: Cell sizes less than 100 are suppressed to protect student privacy and are marked with a “—”. “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

To better measure student participation in CalFresh, the California Policy Lab (CPL) partners with the California Community Colleges (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 created a linked database of student-level administrative data on college enrollment, financial aid, and CalFresh participation that makes this analysis possible.

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.³ This data resource, known as the Student Supports database, is the first of its kind in California, and is enabling CPL and our research partners to:

- a. observe California college students as they begin, progress through, and complete their education;
- b. directly estimate student eligibility and take-up of safety-net benefits;
- c. pilot and evaluate strategies to increase take-up; and
- d. examine the relationship between receiving safety-net benefits and student success.

With this brief, we introduce an updated, more accurate crosswalk among the different datasets that more accurately links student information across sources. The results in the brief and on our [CalFresh participation dashboard](#) reflect the updated crosswalk, even for earlier years, and thus differ slightly from those released previously.

Endnotes

- 1 With this brief we introduce an improved methodology that more accurately links student information across sources. The results presented here for 2021–22 differ slightly from those previously reported.
- 2 This report includes take-up estimates through 2021–22. We plan to update these eligibility and take-up estimates through 2022–23 in a future publication.
- 3 See Appendix C of our [CalFresh Eligibility Report](#) for more information on our linkage methodology.

This research is conducted through the new [California College Data and Policy Project](#) (CCDPP). The Project is a joint initiative of the California Policy Lab and the Center for Studies in Higher Education. The CCDPP will generate new insights and research on what works to better support California students and their families as they transition through the education system.

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Appendix

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 California Community Colleges. 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 CCCCO in 2017. For UC students, we define first-generation students as those who reported on the FAFSA that neither parent attended college. Approximately 59% of UC students submitted a FAFSA (66% of undergraduates and 33% of graduates). UC students who did not submit FAFSAs 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. Students with certain types of disability are not subject to the CalFresh ["student rule"](#) and therefore do not need to meet a student exemption to be eligible for CalFresh, so long as they meet the citizenship and income requirements.