

The Impact of the Pandemic on CSUF Students' Basic Needs

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Adequate food and shelter are essential to the well-being, health, and academic achievement of college students.^{1,2} The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting stay-at-home orders resulted in millions of Americans losing their jobs or experiencing pay cuts.³ The pandemic is likely to have significantly affected many students' abilities to meet their basic needs. While there is no agreed-upon definition of basic needs, at a minimum it includes food and shelter.⁴ Many students and their families may be struggling to make their housing payments and to buy food. The aim of this report is to illustrate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment status, job security, housing and food security, transportation and access to resources of California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) students. We surveyed CSUF students (N=8,203) online between June 30 and July 20, 2020, with a 20% stratified random sample representative of the CSUF student body. The sample also included an oversample of Black students in order to more accurately capture racial/ethnic differences. 1,398 students completed the survey. We weighted the data based on students' reported race and ethnicity and present weighted percentages of the final sample. We considered the beginning of the pandemic to be March 2020, when California's stay-at-home order for the pandemic began and CSUF suspended in-person classes. We provide the breakdown by sociodemographic characteristics for groups of students that had at least 30 respondents.

Basic Needs Insecurities

Food insecurity: students and/or their households are concerned about not having sufficient access or do not have access to enough food, in terms of its quality or quantity. Normal eating patterns and intake may be disrupted.

Housing insecurity: Includes various dimensions of unstable housing that vary in terms of severity such as not being able to pay utility bills, not being able to pay rent/mortgage, and being forced to move for non-payment.

Homelessness: Lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence even for one night. This includes couch-surfing; living in a motel due to financial reasons; living in a shelter or transitional place; and living in a place not fit for human habitation such as a car or a park.

From March to July 2020,

57% of CSUF students were insecure in at least one basic need:

31% of all students were food insecure;

8% were homeless; and

50% were housing insecure



21% of car owners

worried they would lose their vehicle because of the pandemic



8% of all students were diagnosed with COVID-19 or lived with someone who had been diagnosed with it.

Changes in job security and income due to the pandemic

Millions of Americans lost their jobs and filed for unemployment since the pandemic began.³ CSUF students were also affected. At the time of the survey, 31% of students reported they were unemployed and looking for paid work. *Figure 1* shows that half of all CSUF students experienced a change in employment since March 2020 when the pandemic began. Thirty-six percent of students reported having their pay or hours cut or being furloughed and 16% lost their job because of the pandemic. As *Figure 1* shows, 44% of students reported experiencing a reduction in their income since March 2020, with 33% of all students experiencing a monthly loss of at least \$500. Despite half of students reporting their employment was affected by the pandemic, only 26% of students reported receiving sick leave, wage replacement or unemployment compensation.

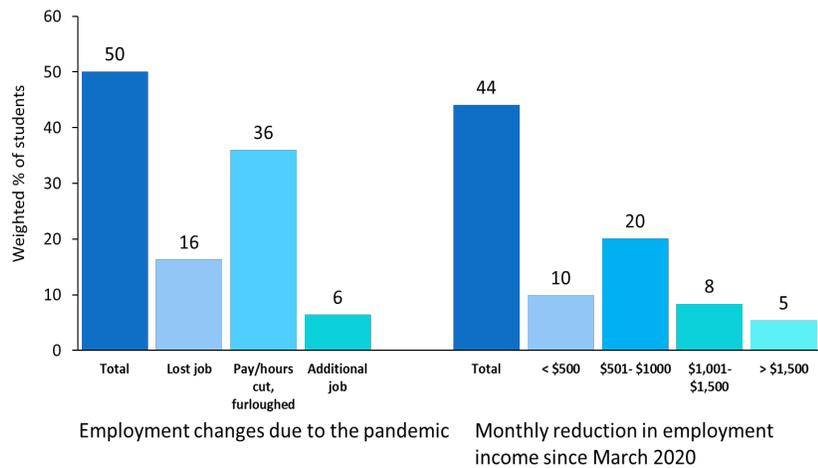


Figure 1. Percent of CSUF students who experienced a change in employment due to the pandemic and a reduction in their income. Students could report multiple employment changes.

Ranges of household food security and insecurity⁵

The 10-item USDA household measure that we used captures difficulty accessing food because of insufficient financial means.

High food security – no difficulty accessing food nor experiencing limitations.

Marginal food security – anxiety over sufficiency or shortage of food but little to no change in diet or amount of food eaten.

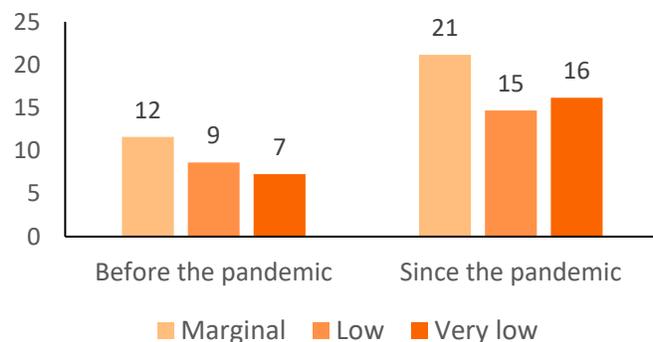
Low food security – Decreased quality, variety or desirability of the diet but little to no change in the amount of food eaten.

Very low food security – Normal eating patterns of at least one household member are disrupted and decreased amount of food eaten.

Changes in household food insecurity since the pandemic

Food insecurity doubled among CSUF students since the pandemic began. Thirty-one percent of students reported that they or the household they lived with were food insecure (*low or very low food security*) since the start of the pandemic in March 2020 compared to 16% of students in the 12 months before the pandemic. Different dimensions of food security exist. What is very concerning is that the prevalence of *very low* food security more than doubled since the pandemic began (*Figure 2*). Nearly twice as many students were *marginally* food secure since the pandemic began, and reported anxiety about having enough to eat.

Figure 2. Percent of CSUF students by food security levels before and since the pandemic



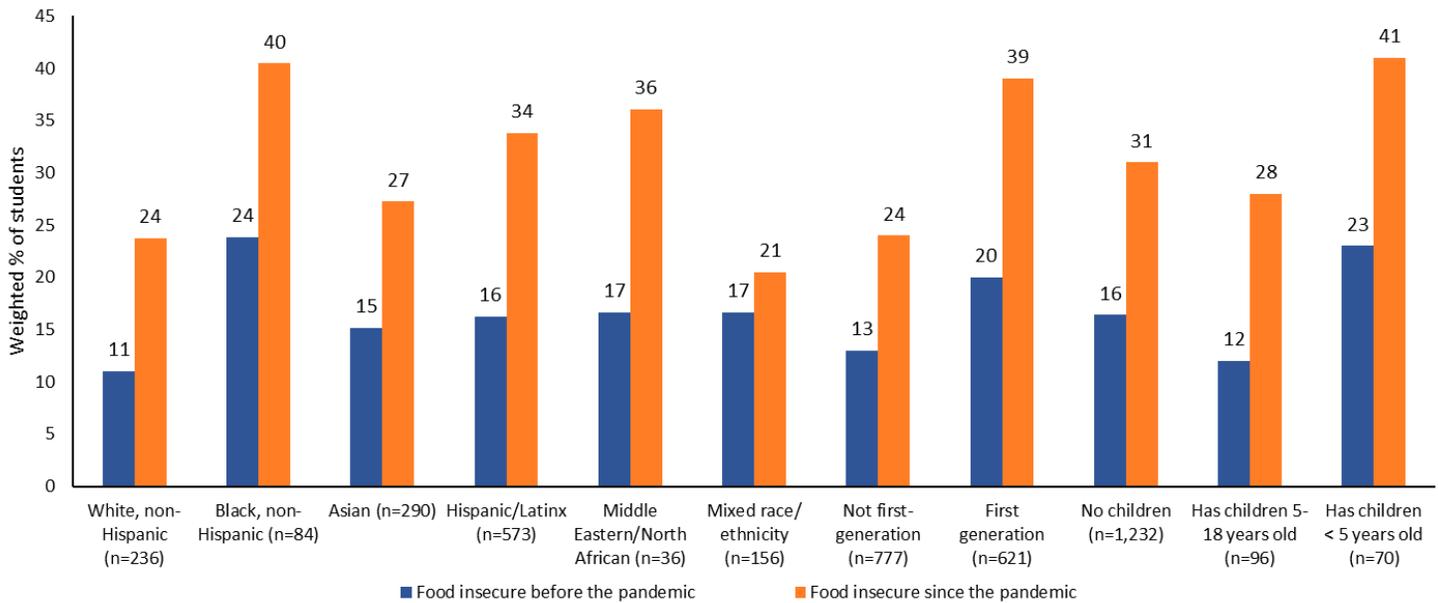


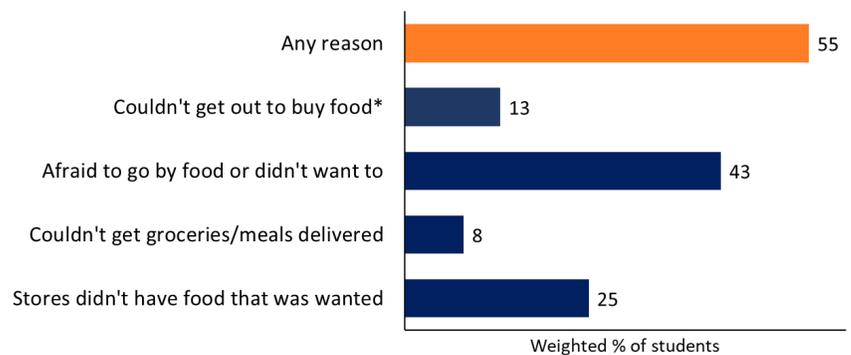
Figure 3. The prevalence of household food insecurity before and since the pandemic by student sociodemographic characteristics

Household food insecurity by student characteristics

Figure 3 shows that for all groups of students, household food insecurity increased since the pandemic. Between March 2020 and July 2020, food insecurity was disproportionately experienced by students who were Black (40%), first-generation (39%) and who had children less than 5 years old (41%). Household food insecurity was also higher among Hispanic/Latinx and Middle Eastern and North African students.

Difficulty accessing food

Figure 4 shows that more than half of students had difficulty accessing food for reasons other than financial. This was primarily because they were afraid to go buy food or did not want to go out to buy food (43%); however, 13% could not get out to buy food because they did not have transportation, or had mobility or health problems that prevented them from getting out. A quarter of students reported that stores just did not have the food they wanted.



*for example, because didn't have transportation, or had mobility or health problems that prevented student from getting out.

Figure 4. The prevalence of CSUF students who had difficulty accessing food since March 2020 for non-financial reasons

Students' Homelessness

We used the California State University Basic Needs Initiative's definition of homelessness⁶ that encompasses the definitions for homelessness used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Education. We considered students to be homeless if they reported, for at least one night, being homeless or if they lived in a shelter, RV, trailer, couch-surfed until finding other housing, temporarily stayed at a hotel/motel without a permanent home to return to, or lived in a treatment center, transitional housing (including group home or independent living program), outdoor location, or area not meant for human habitation (abandoned building, car, truck, van, tent, or unconverted garage or basement). Eight percent of students reported being homeless at least once since the pandemic began in March 2020. This prevalence was not significantly different to the 7% of students who were homeless during the 12 months before the pandemic. This may be because of the COVID-19 eviction moratoriums or because students were able to receive help from family or friends.

Homelessness by student characteristics

Figure 5 shows that the prevalence of homelessness did not change for most groups of students since the pandemic began. However, students who were Black, mixed race/ethnicity and who had children less than 5 years old had some of the highest rates of homelessness since the pandemic began in March 2020. Middle Eastern and North African students, who are generally aggregated with non-Hispanic White students, experienced high rates of homelessness during the 12 months before the pandemic. This finding highlights the importance of disaggregating broad racial categories in order to get a true understanding of the experiences different student populations face.

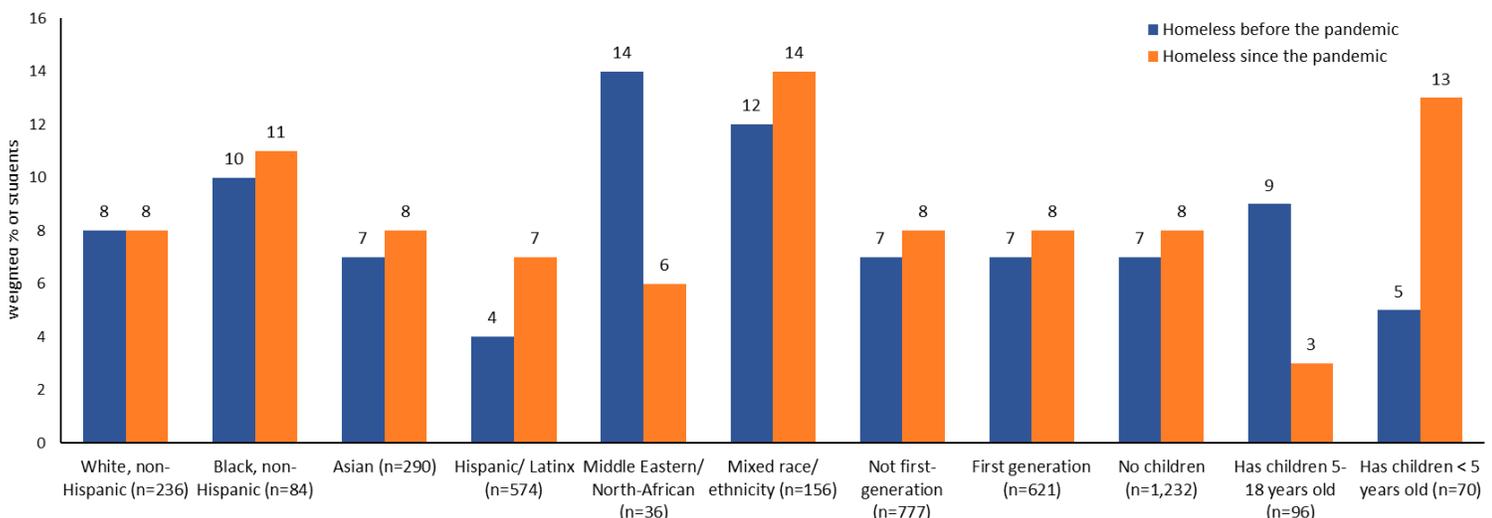
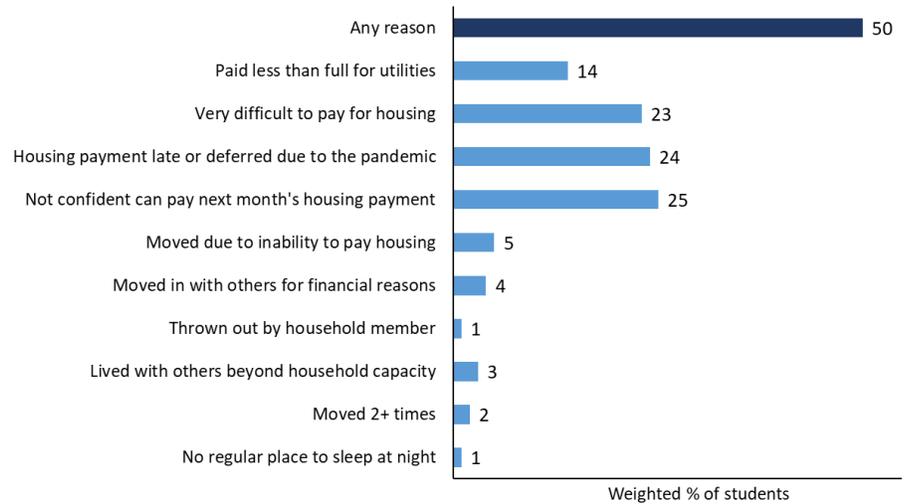


Figure 5. The prevalence of homelessness before and since the pandemic by student sociodemographic characteristics

Housing insecurity

Figure 6 shows that nearly half of students experienced at least one dimension of housing insecurity. Nearly a quarter of students had a very difficult time paying for housing. Because of the pandemic, nearly a quarter of students were unable to make their last housing payment on time. A quarter were not confident they could make next month's housing payment. Five percent of students had to move because they could not pay their housing and 4% moved in with others for financial reasons. Twenty-three percent of students experienced one dimension of housing insecurity, 12% of students experienced 2, and 15% experienced 3 or more.

Figure 6. Dimensions of housing insecurity experienced by students since March 2020



Housing insecurity by student characteristics

Figure 7 shows that students who are Middle Eastern and North African, first generation or who are parents, especially of young children, experienced the highest rates of housing insecurity since March 2020.

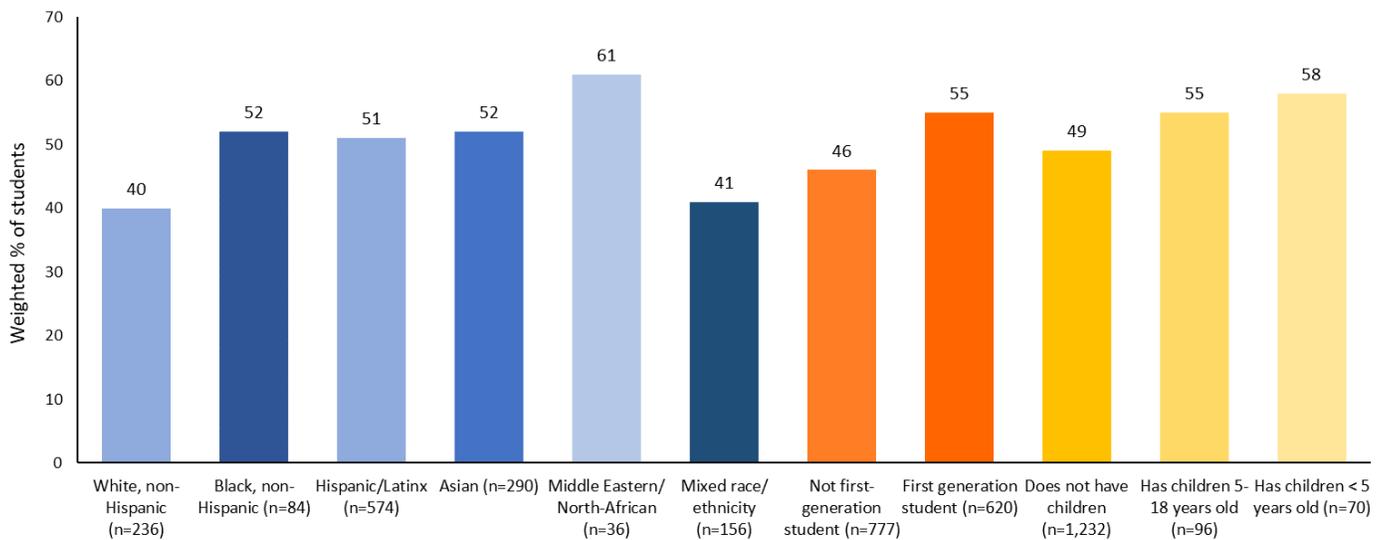


Figure 7. The prevalence of students who were housing insecure since March 2020 by their sociodemographic characteristics

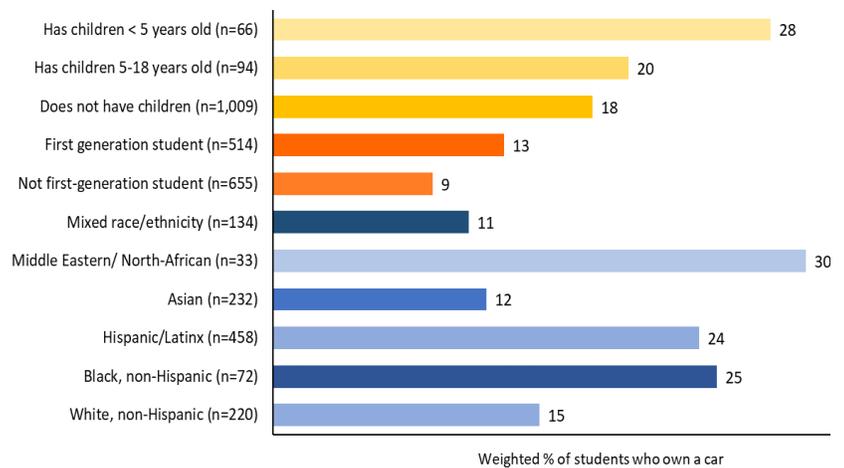
COVID-19 housing eviction protections

Temporary eviction moratoriums have been put in place to prevent evictions due to the inability to pay rent or mortgage because of COVID-19 related reasons.^{7, 8} Of the students who did not pay or deferred last month's rent or had little confidence they would be able to pay next month's rent, 45% notified their landlord or mortgage lender that they could not pay their rent or mortgage because of COVID-19; and only 56% were aware that COVID-19 housing protections exist to prevent eviction. The housing protections seemed to help some students; 39% of students who were aware of them reported that the protections prevented them from being evicted or losing their home.

Transportation

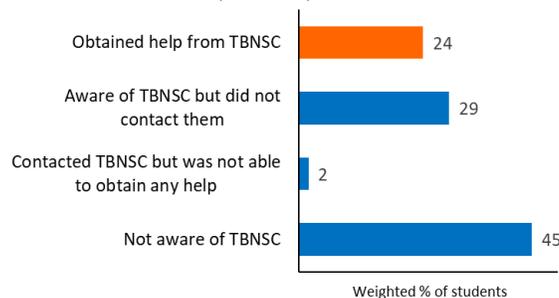
Transportation is critical to ensure access to health care, jobs, and food. Disruptions in transportation during a large-scale emergency, such as a pandemic, can have dire health consequences in marginalized communities, particularly in auto-centric regions such as Southern California. We found that twenty-one percent of students who owned a personal vehicle reported that the pandemic caused them concern for losing it. *Figure 8* shows that among students who owned a car, students who were parents, Middle Eastern or

Figure 8. Percent of students who were concerned that because of the pandemic they would lose their vehicle



North African, Hispanic/Latinx and Black were most likely to be worried that they would lose their car. We also asked students how the pandemic affected their transportation needs and behaviors. Students reported they were scared to go out, to use public transportation and rideshare apps, and to get gas. Students reported saving money on gas since they were driving less; not being able to pay for car insurance and registration; or having to sell their car to help make ends meet.

Figure 9. Access to Tuffy's Basic Needs Services Center (TBNSC)



Tuffy's Basic Needs Services

Coordinated by the CSUF Dean of Students Office, Tuffy's Basic Needs Services Center (TBNSC)⁹ provides help to CSUF students who are undergoing hardship, a crisis or an emergency. TBNSC provides food assistance, emergency short-term housing, hygiene products, clothing and emergency grant funds. *Figure 9* shows that 24% of students reported obtaining help from TBNSC. CSUF has made a concerted effort to increase student awareness of resources and more than half of students reported they were aware of TBNSC. Despite these efforts, 45% of students reported they were not aware of TBNSC.

Students' use of additional resources

Since March 2020, 80% of students relied on various forms of assistance, including 49% who relied on two or more forms of assistance. Forty-five percent of students reported receiving the stimulus payment. Nearly 1 in 5 students reported being enrolled in Medi-Cal (Medicaid) and 8% reported participating in CalFresh (also known as SNAP or EBT and formerly known as food stamps). The federal assistance that students reported using were:

- 45% first Economic Impact (stimulus) Payment
- 18% Medi-Cal (Medicaid)
- 8% CalFresh (SNAP, EBT)
- 6% free/reduced priced school meals
- 6% Pandemic-EBT
- 2% WIC
- 0.6% CalWorks (TANF)

Students also reported receiving support from CSUF. Thirty-nine percent of students reported receiving the CARES Emergency Grant.¹⁰ These grants are funded through the CARES Act Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund¹¹ that provides emergency financial aid grants to students whose lives have been disrupted by the pandemic. The funds are to help cover expenses like food, housing, course materials, technology, health care, and child-care expenses. Financial relief is awarded based on students' Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) on file. Seven percent of students reported receiving financial assistance through the Titan Emergency Fund. (Funds are provided to the student by TBNSC.)

Students relied on family and friends to help make ends meet. Seventeen percent of all students reported receiving financial assistance from family and friends and 15% reported receiving housing and food assistance from them. Ten percent of students reported getting help from a food pantry or similar source like a church.

Difficulties obtaining assistance

Twenty-two percent of students tried to obtain some type of additional assistance but were not able to do so. The most commonly reported types of assistance that students were unable to obtain were CalFresh and emergency financial assistance from CSUF. Students reported not being able to receive assistance for:

- 6% CSUF CARES Emergency Grant
- 6% CSUF Titan's Emergency Fund
- 5% CalFresh (SNAP, EBT)
- 2% Medi-Cal (Medicaid)
- 2% Pandemic-EBT
- 2% CalWorks (TANF)
- 2% financial assistance and 1% food/housing assistance from family and friends
- 1% food pantry or similar place in the community
- 0.3% free/reduced priced school meals
- 0.3% WIC

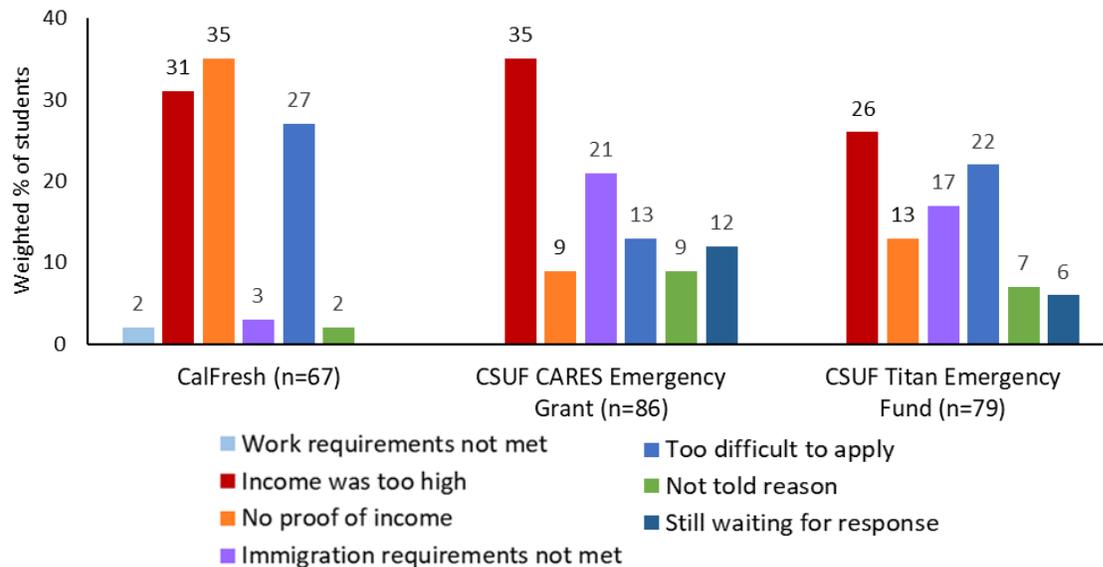
Reasons not able to obtain assistance

We asked students the reasons why they were unable to obtain assistance. *Figure 10* shows that among those who were unable to enroll in CalFresh, students primarily reported that they did not have the requisite proof of income (35%), their or their family's income was too high to qualify (31%), or it was too difficult to apply (27%).

Among the students who were unable to obtain a CSUF CARES Emergency Grant or assistance from the CSUF Titan Emergency Fund, students primarily reported that their or their family's income was too high, they did not meet the immigration status requirements, it was too difficult to apply, or they did not have the requisite proof of income which included not filing the FAFSA form. As of the time of the survey, some students were still waiting for

a response and others had not been told why they did not receive the requested assistance. Some of these may have been perceived barriers because, for example, there is no immigration status requirement for the Titan Emergency Fund.

Figure 10. Reasons students reported they were not able to enroll in CalFresh, obtain a CSUF CARES Emergency Grant or assistance through Titan Emergency Fund



Additional assistance and concerns

We asked students what assistance would be most useful to them to cope with their housing and food situation. Students reported wanting:

- financial assistance in the form of financial aid, tuition reduction, employment opportunities, a second relief check/CARES ACT, and affordable housing/rent;
- grocery assistance (i.e., food pantries, food banks, CalFresh);
- mental health services; and
- information about available resources.

We also asked students if there was anything else they wanted to share regarding the pandemic. Responses included the toll the pandemic was taking on their mental and physical health; their struggle with online classes and maintaining their GPA; the inability to socialize; the difficult transition of moving back home; the worry of when the next meal would come; and the academic, financial, physical and mental struggle for those who got COVID-19.

Recommendations

While there have been many efforts to raise awareness of the resources on campus since we conducted our study in July 2020, the continuation of the pandemic likely means that more students are struggling to meet their basic needs. It is even more important that we continue to increase awareness of the CSUF resources such as:

- Tuffy's Basic Needs Services Center
- ASI Mobile Food Pantry
- Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

We also recommend:

- If a student's request for aid is denied, providing an explanation so that the student can resolve deficiencies when possible;
- Increasing awareness of the need to file a FAFSA form in order to qualify for the emergency grants and funds;
- Increasing awareness that CSUF staff and Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County will assist students to enroll in CalFresh;
- Increasing awareness of COVID-19 eviction moratoriums and utility relief programs such as Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LI HEAP) and California Alternate Rates for Energy (CARE);
- Using more detailed racial/ethnic categories when examining student data in order to correctly identify and provide culturally competent services to vulnerable student populations;
- Ensuring students who are more likely to be vulnerable are aware of available resources, particularly students who are Black, Hispanic, Middle-Eastern/North African, first-generation, and who have young children;
- At the policy level, waiving the CalFresh (SNAP) college student eligibility rules requiring that students enrolled at least half-time be required to work at least 20 hours per week. A number of temporary provisions were made to increase benefits and ease the application process during the pandemic but they do not directly address college students;
- Extending the COVID-19 moratoriums on evictions and utility shut-offs and increasing the amount allocated for rental assistance. This is a dynamic situation and the type of assistance needed by renters may change, particularly when the COVID-19 moratoriums in California expire June 30, 2021; and
- Providing additional direct financial aid, such as stimulus payments.

Acknowledgements

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