

2020

## **#RealCollege During the Pandemic: New Evidence on Basic Needs Insecurity and Student Well-Being**

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# #REALCOLLEGE DURING THE PANDEMIC

## NEW EVIDENCE ON BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AND STUDENT WELL-BEING



### AUTHORS

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THE **hope** CENTER

For College, Community, and Justice

[HOPE4COLLEGE.COM](https://HOPE4COLLEGE.COM)



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic struck American higher education. Colleges closed campuses, students lost jobs, and emergency resources failed to meet the demands caused by the crisis. This report examines the pandemic's impact on students, from their basic needs security to their well-being, as indicated by employment status, academic engagement, and mental health.

The data come from an electronic survey completed by 38,602 students attending 54 colleges and universities in 26 states, including 39 two-year colleges and 15 four-year colleges and universities. While the survey response rate was 6.7%, it nevertheless represents an uncommonly large multi-institutional student sample; perhaps the largest thus far during the pandemic.

The timing of the survey—fielded from April 20 to May 15, during the uncertain early days of the pandemic—likely contributed to the response rate. Participating in the survey also required internet access and provided limited incentives to students. Consequently, those students at greatest risk of basic needs insecurity were possibly the least likely to answer the questions, potentially producing conservative estimates.

The survey assessed food insecurity over the prior 30 days, and housing insecurity and homelessness at the time the survey was completed.

## 38K+ STUDENTS TOLD US THAT...

2

NEARLY  
**3 IN 5**  
were experiencing  
basic needs insecurity

THE  
**BLACK/WHITE GAP**  
IN BASIC NEEDS  
INSECURITY WAS  
**19** percentage  
points

FOOD INSECURITY  
AFFECTED  
**44%** at two-year  
institutions  
**38%** at four-year  
institutions

**15%** & **11%**  
AT FOUR-YEAR  
INSTITUTIONS & AT TWO-YEAR  
INSTITUTIONS  
were experiencing  
**HOMELESSNESS**  
due to the pandemic

We also learned:

- Two in three students who were employed before the pandemic experienced job insecurity, with one-third losing a job due to the pandemic. Basic needs insecurity was higher among students who experienced job loss and/or cuts to pay or hours.
- Half of respondents exhibited at least moderate anxiety.
- Half of respondents at two-year colleges and 63% of respondents at four-year colleges said that they could not concentrate on schooling during the pandemic.
- Twenty-one percent of respondents dealing with basic needs insecurity applied for unemployment insurance, 15% applied for SNAP, and 15% applied for emergency aid. But many students did not apply for supports because they did not know they were eligible to do so.

With epidemiologists advising that the novel coronavirus, which causes COVID-19, will likely be around for years, these new challenges are not temporary. The nation's economic recovery depends, in part, on higher education's recovery. Those efforts must begin by addressing students' basic needs, since learning (online or offline) requires it.

# INTRODUCTION

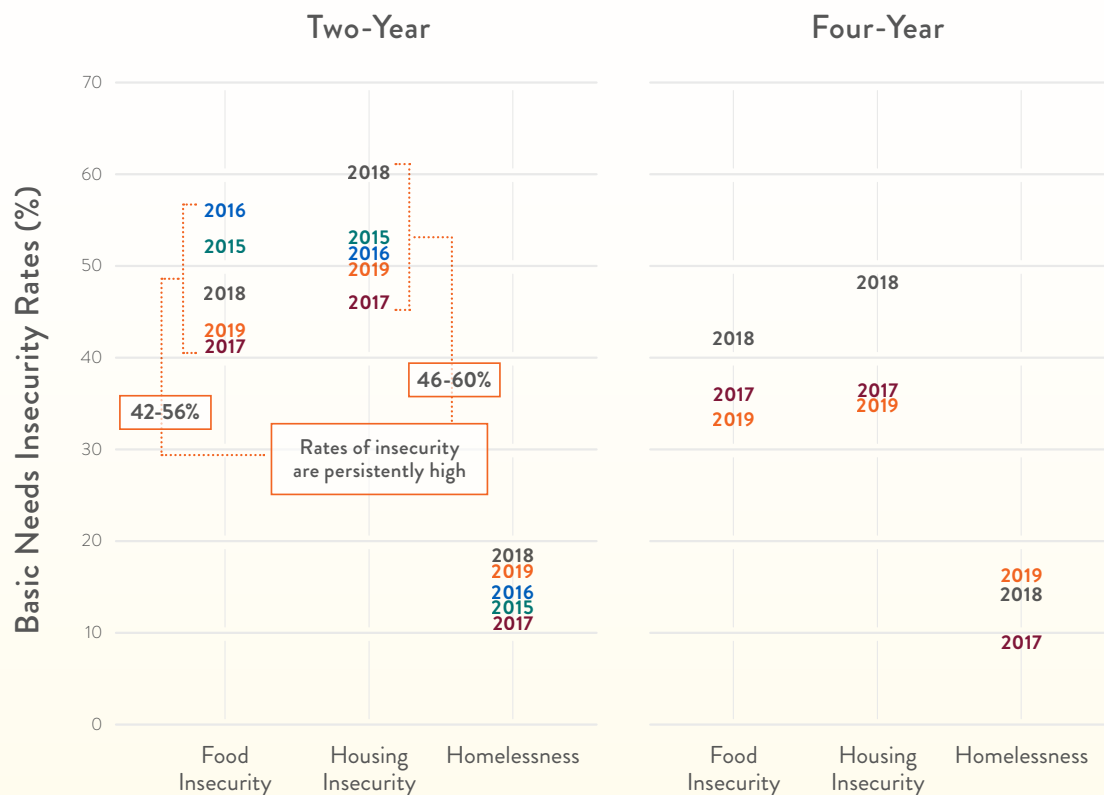
The new economics of college have reshaped American higher education, exacerbating some challenges and creating new ones.<sup>1</sup> Twenty years ago, food and housing insecurity were not among the top concerns of college and university leaders, though at least some students experienced them. Recognition of these problems has improved in the past several years, but the coronavirus pandemic has exposed how shaky this progress was, and how much work remains to be done.

In early March 2020, before the pandemic caused a nationwide wave of campus closures, a survey led by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions

Officers found that 86% of the 469 responding institutions identified food and housing insecurity as drivers of student non-completion.<sup>2</sup> More than four in five institutions said that there was at least a moderate amount of discussion about students' basic needs insecurity on their campus, and 62% had undertaken a survey to assess the problem.

Their attention was warranted. A month before that survey was fielded, the Hope Center released its fifth report on basic needs insecurity, summarizing data from more than 330,000 students attending more than 400 colleges and universities from coast to coast (Figure 1):

**FIGURE 1 | BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY RATES, 2015–2019**



SOURCE | 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019 #RealCollege surveys

NOTES | The number of participating institutions and student respondents vary over time. Survey response rates range from 4.5% to 9% over five years (2015–2019).



- Rates of food insecurity among students ranged from 42% to 56% at two-year institutions and from 33% to 42% at four-year institutions.<sup>3</sup>
- Rates of housing insecurity among students ranged from 46% to 60% at two-year institutions and from 35% to 48% at four-year institutions.
- Rates of homelessness among students ranged from 12% to 18% at two-year institutions and from 9% to 16% at four-year institutions.

These rates were assessed over the prior 30 days (for food insecurity) and the past 12 months (for housing insecurity and homelessness), so that at the time of the survey the condition was not necessarily ongoing. But whether the problem was current or in the recent past, at least six million students were delayed or deterred on their path to a degree because they did not have enough nutritious food to eat or a safe and stable place to live. Indeed, even before the pandemic, students faced high—and rising—college costs, worked jobs that did not pay enough, and confronted higher education and social policies that offered them insufficient support.

With the emergence of COVID-19, the lives of students throughout higher education were substantially disrupted, practically overnight. Between March 6 and March 13, nearly 300 universities moved classes online.<sup>4</sup> Campus closures occurred against a backdrop of job losses affecting both students and their families.<sup>5</sup> Many students lost access to food and housing provided on campus, along with key support services, including on-campus food pantries and case managers who assist with

public benefits access. Emergency aid funds were rapidly deployed by philanthropists and colleges, but just as rapidly depleted.<sup>6</sup> Many students struggled to secure the technology and internet access necessary to pivot to online instruction. The federal government initiated stimulus payments that began arriving in mid-April, when this survey began, but many college students were excluded.<sup>7</sup> And while the CARES Act authorized \$6.2 billion in emergency aid for college students on March 27, clunky implementation and onerous guidelines imposed by the U.S. Department of Education meant that as of May 15, when this survey was completed, relatively few students had received that support.<sup>8</sup>

In March, our team at the Hope Center watched as students already saddled with basic needs insecurity appeared to be further forgotten by some institutions and policymakers. Many universities simply told students to “go home,” without proactively offering viable and specific alternatives for those without homes.<sup>9</sup> We fielded calls from frantic food pantry directors, wondering how they could continue to support students while still complying with orders to shut their doors. While we did hear from state and federal policymakers trying to estimate how many students would require additional support to stabilize their situations, and we issued guidance, clearly more evidence was needed.<sup>10</sup> Thus, we turned again to our #RealCollege survey, revising the instrument to be quick and easy for students to complete during an especially stressful time.<sup>11</sup>



# FIELDING THE #REALCOLLEGE SURVEY DURING THE PANDEMIC

The Hope Center invited colleges and universities to participate in the survey via social media, in our newsletter, and with the help of partner organizations across the country. A total of 66 colleges and universities initially signed on, and of those, 54 institutions\* (39 two-year colleges and 15 four-year institutions) followed through, fielding the survey to all undergraduate students starting on April 20. Please note that community colleges in California were not included in this survey, as we are conducting a separate survey of their students in partnership with the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office and the Research and Planning Group.

The colleges and universities that enrolled in the survey wanted to know how many of their students were affected by basic needs insecurity during the pandemic. While we suspect this means they view basic needs insecurity as a barrier to graduation, it does not imply that their students were facing those challenges at higher rates before the pandemic.

FIGURE 2 | NUMBER OF SURVEY RESPONSES, BY COLLEGE TYPE



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey

In total, 38,602 students—including 30,721 students attending two-year institutions (80% of the sample), and 7,881 students attending four-year institutions—completed the survey (Figure 2). Almost 97% of respondents said that they were still taking classes at the time they completed the survey.

To recruit survey participants, institutions sent students an email provided by the Hope Center. In order to prevent bias, the email did not mention food or housing insecurity, or offer substantial support. The email read:



“Let’s get real. You’re the expert when it comes to what’s happening in college. So we need your help to make [institution name] the best it can be for you and your friends. Share your real talk in the “#RealCollege during COVID-19” Survey, which we are administering in collaboration with the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University. We chose you simply because you attend [institution name]. In appreciation, you can win \$100 for completing the survey.”

\*The full list of participating institutions can be found at the end of this report on page 22.

## FIELDING THE #REALCOLLEGE SURVEY (CONT.)

Response rates for #RealCollege surveys are typically around 10%; the fall 2019 survey response rate was a bit lower at 8.4%. The response rate for this survey was 6.7%. As we have previously explained, given the mode of distribution and sensitivity of questions involved, we strongly suspect that non-respondents are more likely to experience basic needs insecurity, and thus our estimates are probably conservative.<sup>12</sup>

For background on how we typically measure basic needs insecurity, please see the 2019 #RealCollege survey report.<sup>13</sup> In order to capture students' experiences during and due to the coronavirus pandemic, as well as reduce the time needed to complete the survey, we made three adjustments to the survey:

1. We employed the six-item validated assessment of food insecurity, instead of the 18-item assessment, from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.<sup>14</sup> We maintained a 30-day reference period, since the pandemic had begun at least one month prior. Since students most at risk of food insecurity have lower fall-to-spring persistence rates, we would expect rates in spring to be lower than those assessed in fall.<sup>15</sup> That is why our standard #RealCollege survey is administered every fall.
2. We assessed housing insecurity using four questions adjusted for the current circumstances, and asked students to report on their living conditions at the time of the survey. The four items were:

- a. "The place where I am living is only temporary, even if I wanted to stay."
- b. "I feel confident about my ability to pay for this place so I can stay here next month."
- c. "I am safe where I am living."
- d. "I can study and engage in classes where I am living."

If they agreed or strongly agreed with the first statement, or disagreed or strongly disagreed with any of the latter three statements, we coded them housing insecure. Since both this measure and the reference period are different than those we used in prior surveys, the figures cannot be directly compared.

3. We assessed homelessness using our standard instrument, but rather than ask students to report on their experiences over the last 12 months, we asked only about their current situation due to the pandemic.

Given these key differences from our prior surveys of basic needs insecurity, along with the different sample of institutions and students employed, we discourage comparisons to our prior reports. To the extent that a comparison is warranted, it is with regard to food insecurity since the measure and reference period are similar.





# BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

Among the more than 38,000 students responding to the survey in the midst of the pandemic, 58% were experiencing basic needs insecurity. That rate did not differ between two-year and four-year institutions. This is a distinct contrast to our prior surveys of basic needs insecurity, which consistently find higher rates at two-year colleges (Figure 3).<sup>16</sup>

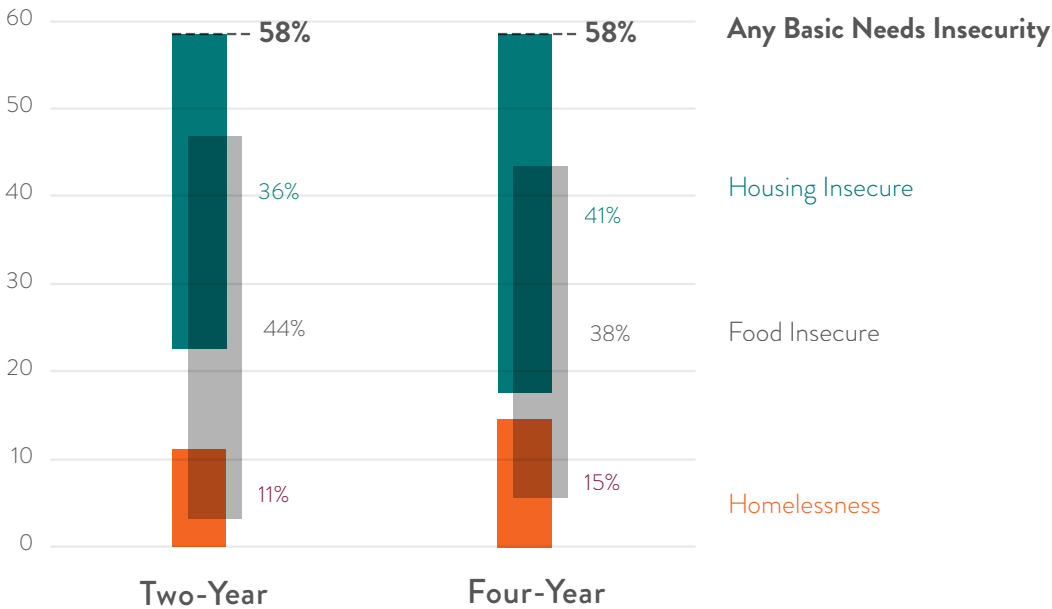
Forty-four percent of students at two-year colleges and 38% of students at four-year institutions experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days. These rates are somewhat higher than those assessed in fall 2019, when the corresponding rates were 42% and 33%. Given within-year attrition among food insecure students, we would expect rates in spring term to generally be lower than those in the fall.<sup>17</sup>



**5.8 out of every 10 students** experienced basic needs insecurity due to the pandemic

We found higher rates of housing insecurity and homelessness due to the pandemic among students at four-year institutions compared to two-year institutions. Thirty-six percent of students at two-year institutions and 41% of students at four-year institutions were experiencing housing insecurity when they

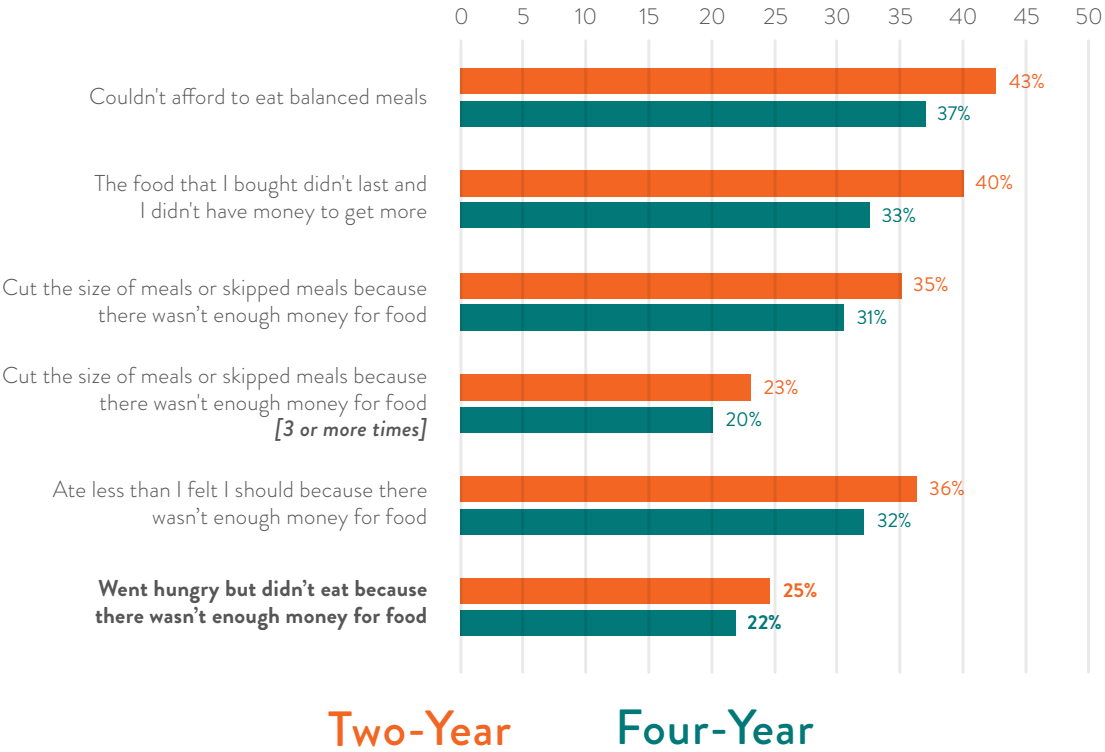
**FIGURE 3 | BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY RATES, BY COLLEGE TYPE**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey  
 NOTES | For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

## BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY (CONT.)

FIGURE 4 | FOOD INSECURITY ITEMS, BY COLLEGE TYPE



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey

NOTES | For more detail on how food insecurity was constructed refer to the [web appendices](#).

were surveyed. Moreover, 11% of students at two-year institutions and almost 15% of those at four-year institutions were homeless when surveyed. While we do not know if these results generalize beyond the current sample, we do know that more than 4,000 students completed the survey while homeless and attending college in the midst of the pandemic.

To better understand these challenges, we next examine the specific items used to assess food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness. These details are useful for understanding the types of food and housing challenges students face, and where they are living while homeless.

The USDA food security scale ranges from items about nutrition (“I could not afford to eat balanced meals”) to items about hunger (“I went hungry but didn’t eat because there wasn’t enough money for food”). The most striking result is that nearly one in four students at two-year institutions and more than one in five at four-year institutions experienced hunger at least once in the prior 30 days, and/or cut the size of their meals or skipped meals at least three times during that period (Figure 4). Forty percent of students at community colleges and one-third of students at four-year institutions ran out of food and did not have the funds to buy more. To cope, they tended to

## BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY (CONT.)

reduce the size of meals or skip them entirely, or to eat less than they felt they should. The prevalence of these challenges is similar to what we observed in fall 2019 for community college students, but somewhat higher than previously assessed for four-year students.

The most common housing insecurity challenge students faced during the pandemic appears to be difficulty affording housing, even in the short-term (Figure 5). About 18% of students (regardless of institutional type) said that they “do not feel confident about my ability to pay for this place so I can stay here next month.” In addition, 13% of two-year college students and 17% of four-year students said they were in temporary accommodations, and a slightly larger percentage said that they could not “study and engage in classes where I am living.”

Of greatest concern, 6% of the students surveyed (around 2,000 students) said “I am not safe where I am living.”

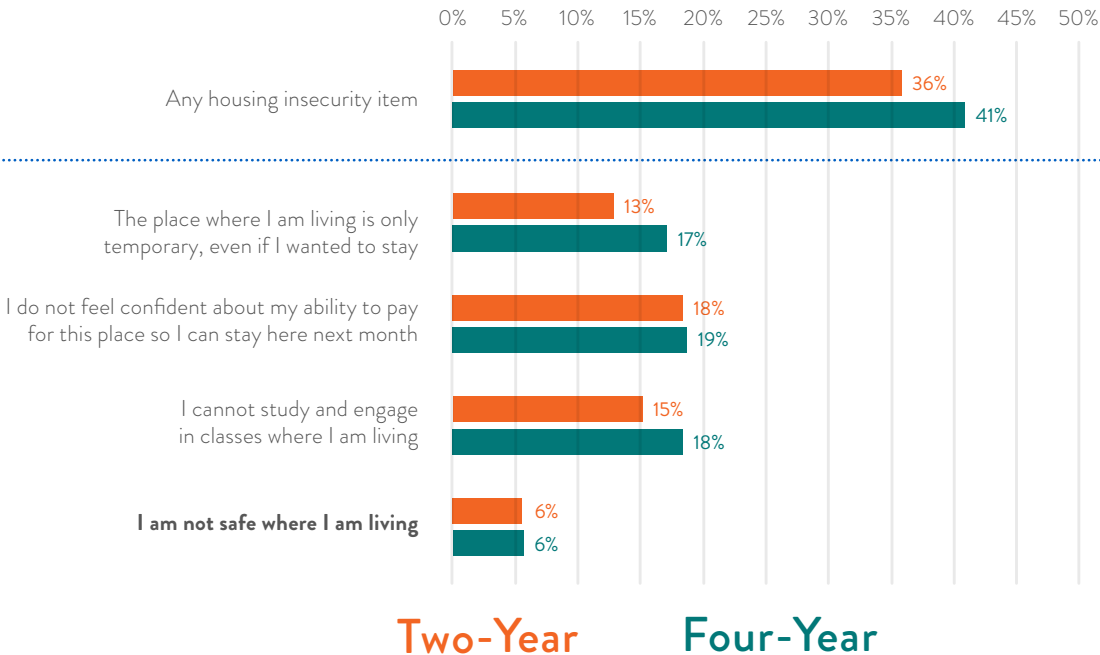
When it comes to homelessness due to the coronavirus pandemic, the locations where students were staying are very similar to those assessed in prior surveys. The vast majority of homeless students were couch-surfing or staying in other temporary accommodations (Figure 6).<sup>18</sup> Around 4% of students were staying in hotels or



**6% of students** reported they were **NOT SAFE** WHERE THEY ARE LIVING



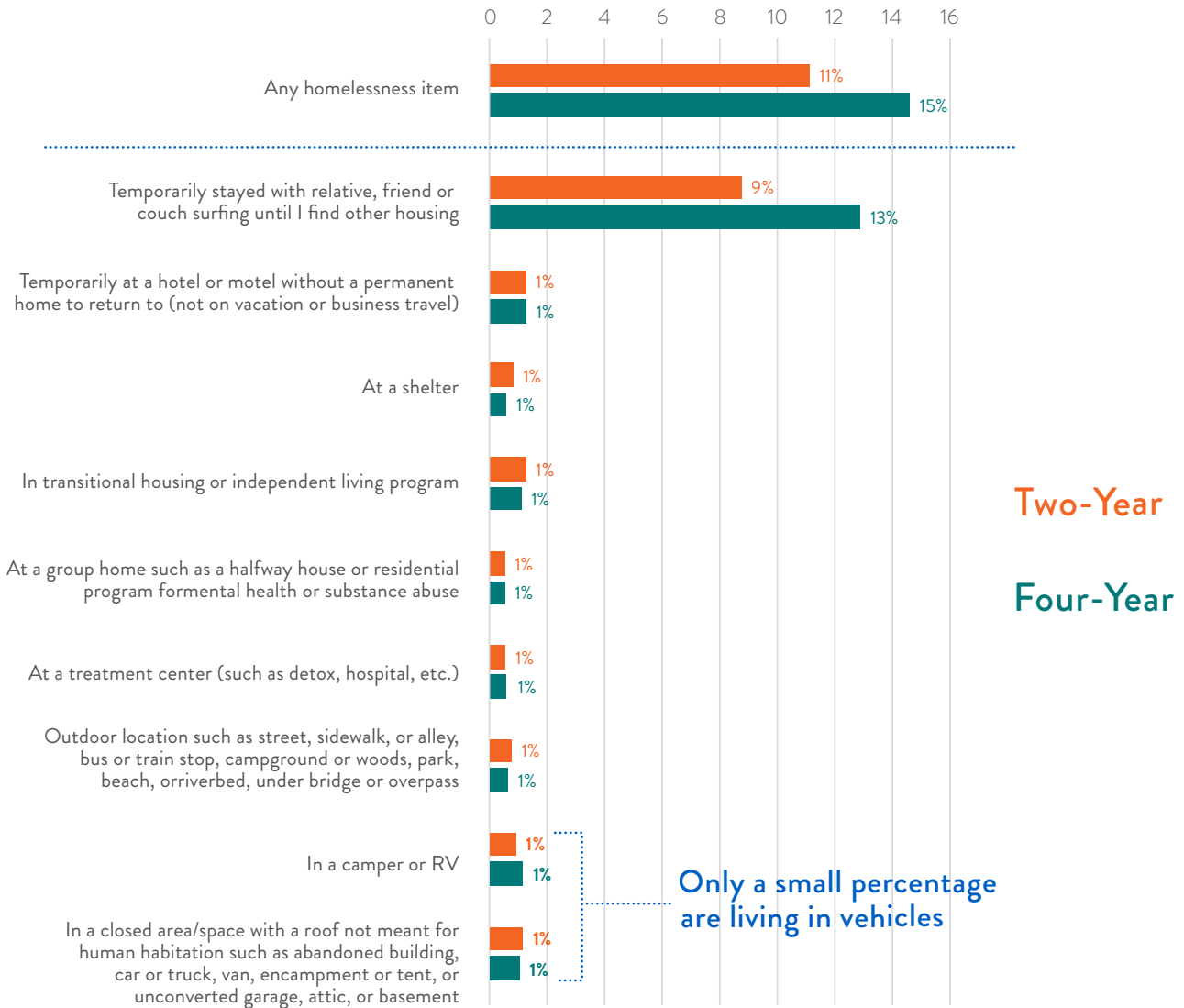
**FIGURE 5 | HOUSING INSECURITY ITEMS, BY COLLEGE TYPE**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey  
 NOTES | For more detail on how housing insecurity was constructed refer to the [web appendices](#).

# BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY (CONT.)

FIGURE 6 | HOMELESSNESS ITEMS, BY COLLEGE TYPE



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey

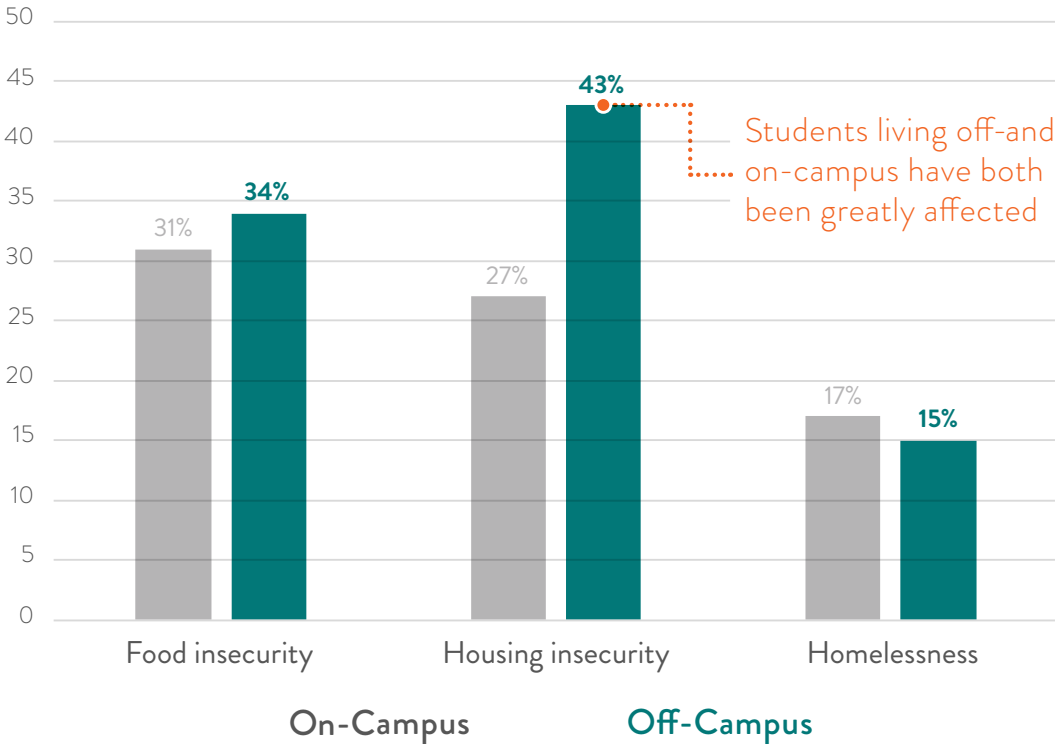
NOTES | For more detail on how homelessness was constructed, as well as additional breakdowns, refer to the [web appendices](#).

motels; sleeping in cars or abandoned buildings; or staying in shelters, transitional housing, or independent living. The high prevalence of sheltered homelessness compared to unsheltered homelessness is typical for college students (and young adults ages 18–25, in general), and is a key reason why the problem remains largely invisible to the public.<sup>19</sup>

When campus closures began, media stories focused on students living in on-campus residence halls.<sup>20</sup> These are overwhelmingly located at four-year institutions. Students living on campus tend to be more reliant on meal plans. Figure 7 therefore examines basic needs insecurity among students at four-year institutions based on whether they lived on

## BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY (CONT.)

FIGURE 7 | BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AMONG STUDENTS AT 4-YEAR COLLEGES, BY PRE-PANDEMIC RESIDENCY



SOURCE | 2019 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#) for #RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Basic Needs Insecurity.

or off campus before the pandemic. We find students living off campus were substantially more likely to be affected by housing insecurity, compared to students living on campus (43% vs. 27%). However, on-campus students and off-campus students experienced similar rates of food insecurity (34% vs. 31%) and homelessness during the pandemic (17% vs. 15%).

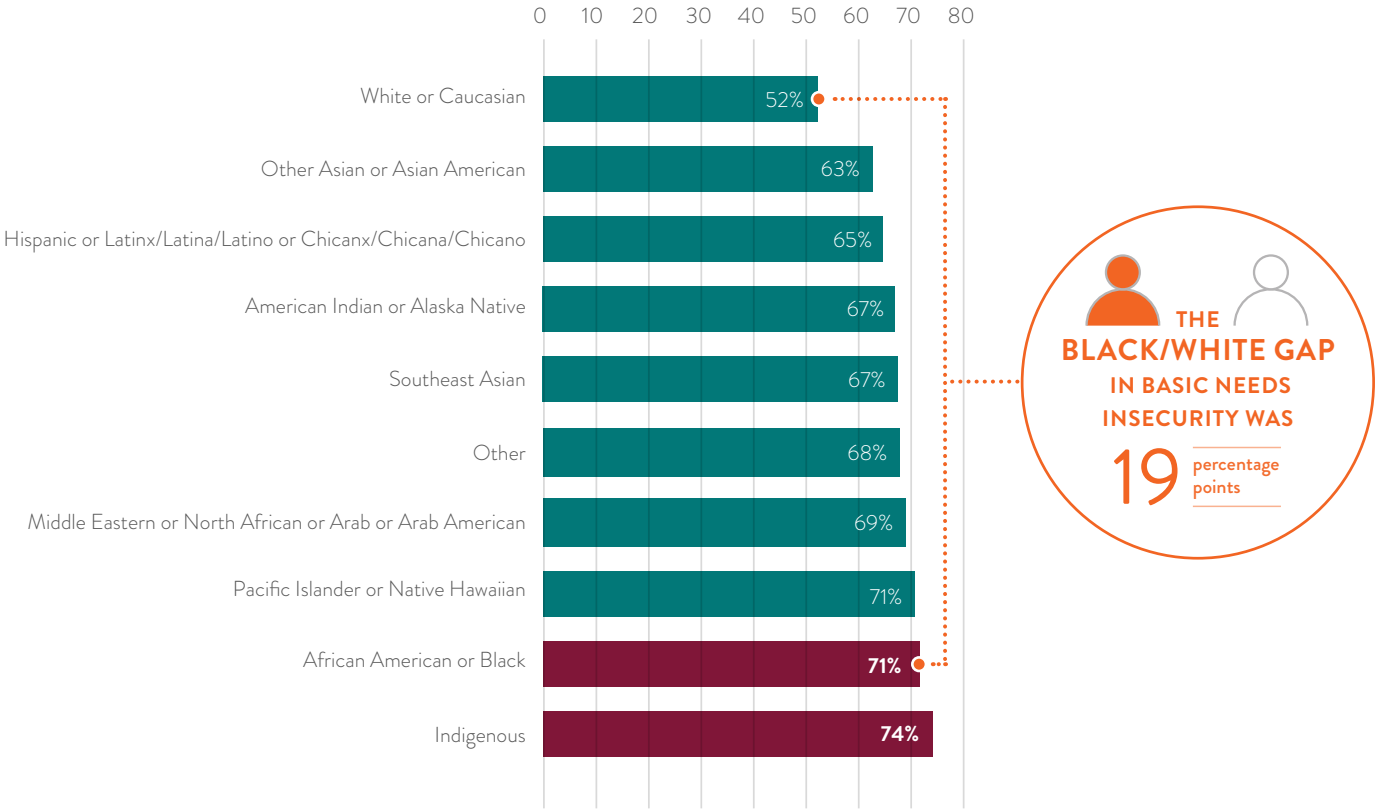
COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, is disproportionately affecting African Americans in the United States, and we next consider whether there are racial/

ethnic disparities in the pandemic's impact on the security of college students' basic needs.<sup>21</sup> The evidence is overwhelming: whereas about half of White students experienced basic needs insecurity during the pandemic, those challenges affected 71% of African American students and 65% of Hispanic or Latinx students (Figure 8). Other groups, including Indigenous, American Indians, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander, and Southeast Asian students, all experienced much higher rates of basic needs insecurity—between 15 and 22 percentage points—compared to White students.



# BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY (CONT.)

FIGURE 8 | BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY RACE/ETHNICITY



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey

NOTES | Classifications of racial/ethnic background are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

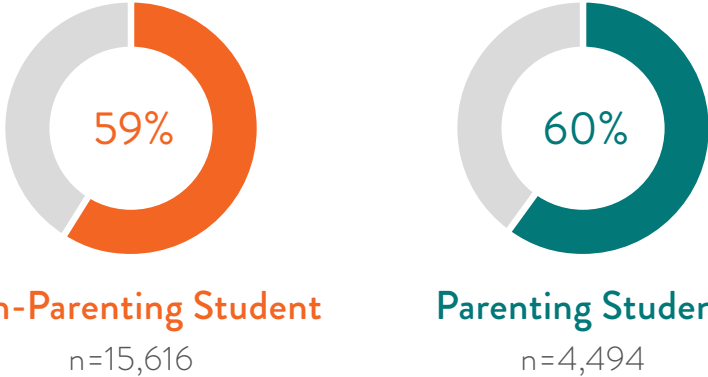
To the extent that food insecurity has been discussed in relation to education during the pandemic, most of the attention has focused on children.<sup>22</sup> Many programs have been established to get students food at their homes, and some include support for families as well.<sup>23</sup> For example, the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 provides the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) to families of school-aged children who, if it were not for school closures, would

have received free or reduced-priced meals. The majority of states have faced significant challenges rolling out the P-EBT program due to administrative barriers involved with identifying eligible families. At the end of May, only Michigan and Rhode Island had successfully disbursed all of their P-EBT funds.<sup>24</sup> Despite the challenges rolling out the new benefits, P-EBT is a critical support that can help families that relied on school lunches to meet their children’s nutritional needs.

## BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY (CONT.)

More than one in five students is parenting while in college, and our recent report revealed high rates of basic needs insecurity for that group.<sup>25</sup> However, these new results indicate that during the pandemic, students experienced high rates of basic needs insecurity that did not differ based on whether or not they have children (Figure 9). This lack of a disparity may signal some success of K-12 feeding programs supporting the whole family.

FIGURE 9 | BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY PARENTING STATUS



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey

NOTES | A parenting student is defined as the parent or guardian to any biological, adopted, step, or foster children who live in your household. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).



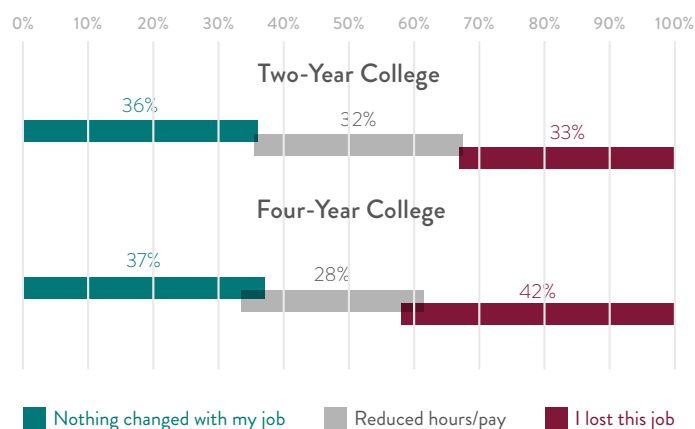
## JOB INSECURITY AND BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in April 2020 the unemployment rate increased by 10.3 percentage points to 14.7%.<sup>26</sup> Increases were substantial for all groups of workers. We therefore asked students who were employed before the coronavirus pandemic (74% of the sample) about their employment status at the time of the survey (Figure 10). Losing a job or experiencing a reduction in hours or in pay is considered being job insecure. We find that 33% of two-year college students and 42% of four-year college students lost at least one job, while 32% of two-year college students and 28% of four-year college students experienced a reduction in hours and/or pay. Just 36% of students with jobs before the pandemic did not experience negative changes to their employment as a result of the ensuing crisis.

As expected, employment changes are associated with higher rates of basic needs insecurity. Nearly 70% of students who lost a job experienced basic needs insecurity, as did 63% of students whose pay or hours were cut (Figure 11). That said, nearly half of working students who experienced no change in their employment also experienced basic needs insecurity. This suggests that the causes of basic needs insecurity go beyond a temporary loss of income.



**FIGURE 10 | IMPACTS ON JOB SECURITY AMONG STUDENTS EMPLOYED PRE-PANDEMIC, BY COLLEGE TYPE**

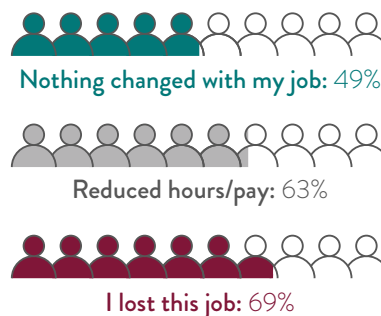


SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey

NOTES | Students were asked whether they held a work study, on-campus, or off-campus job. An employment status change—lost job or had pay or hours reduced—in at least one of these jobs post-pandemic is considered a change in overall employment status. There was no difference in employment status between two- and four-year college students.

**FIGURE 11 | BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AMONG STUDENTS EMPLOYED PRE-PANDEMIC, BY IMPACTS ON JOB SECURITY**

### Rate of basic needs insecurity



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey

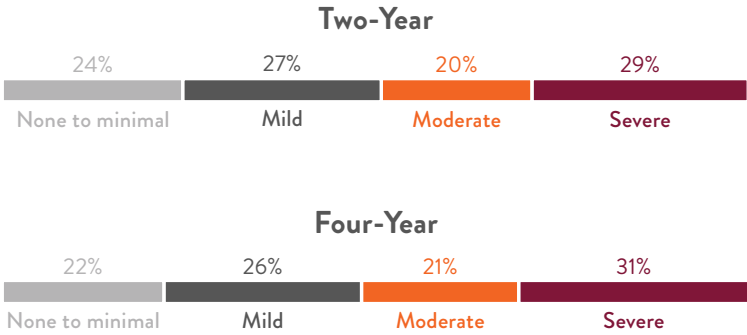
NOTES | Students were asked whether they held a work study, on-campus, or off-campus job. An employment status change—lost job or had pay or hours reduced—in at least one of these jobs post-pandemic is considered a change in overall employment status. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

# MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE PANDEMIC

Previous surveys of college students during the pandemic found substantial rates of mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety, which are echoed in the general population.<sup>27</sup> For this survey, we assessed students' level of anxiety using a validated seven-item instrument called the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale.<sup>28</sup> For example, we asked if, in the last week, students were "feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge," "so restless that it's hard to sit still," or "afraid as if something awful might happen." The frequencies of feeling bothered by any of the items determine students' anxiety levels. Those who indicated that they felt bothered at least some of the days were considered moderately anxious.

We find that half of the respondents were experiencing at least moderate anxiety at the time they were surveyed, and around 30% were experiencing severe anxiety (Figure 12). The anxiety level among students in our sample was between 10 and 13 percentage points higher than that of 18- to 29-year-olds recently surveyed by the Census Bureau.<sup>29</sup> While the surveys used similar measures, the difference in findings may be due to respondents' age, enrollment and employment status, parental responsibilities, and state of residence. In our survey, prevalence rates did not differ by institution type.

**FIGURE 12 | LEVEL OF ANXIETY AMONG SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY COLLEGE TYPE**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey  
NOTES | The Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) was used to measure anxiety. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. For more detail on how anxiety was constructed, as well as additional breakdowns, refer to the [web appendices](#).



## OTHER ACADEMIC CHALLENGES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Learning environments were radically altered as in-person college classes pivoted online, K-12 schools and childcare centers closed, and houses became ever more crowded.<sup>30</sup> Half of the respondents at two-year colleges and 63% of respondents at four-year colleges said that they could not concentrate on their schooling during the pandemic (Figure 13). One potential explanation lies in the increased need to care for family members while also going to school; 41% of students at two-year colleges and 36% at four-year institutions said they were experiencing this problem.

In the weeks immediately following campus closures, institutions of higher education focused much of their attention and emergency resources on helping students acquire laptops and internet access. When this survey was fielded, around one in five students said that they lacked a functional laptop or did not have reliable internet access. The former problem was less common at four-year institutions than at two-year institutions, while the latter affected both groups at similar rates.

“

I’m working in a hospital on a COVID floor, taking care of my parents and daughter from afar. My granddaughter and other daughter have already had COVID-19.”

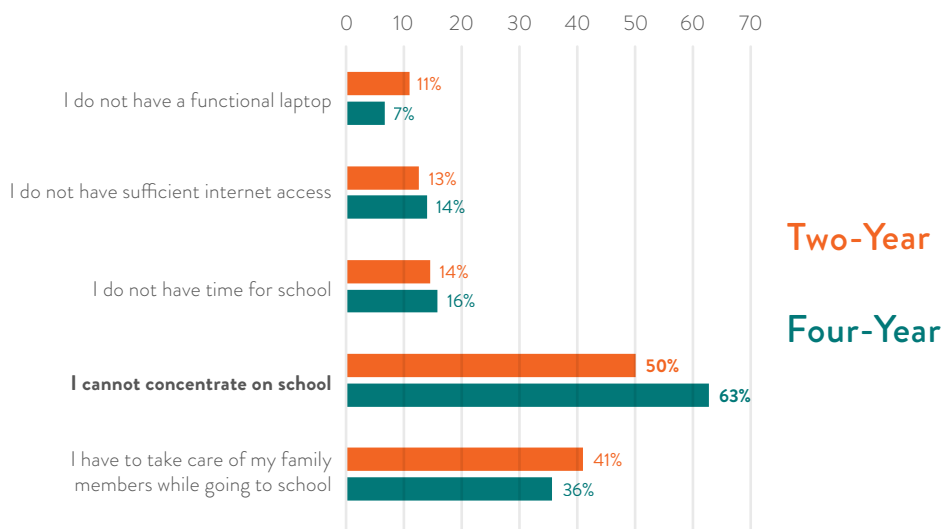
“

As a volunteer fireman, I’m busier than usual and around COVID cases.”

“

I’m working extra hard being an essential worker. That makes it hard to study, as I’m so exhausted from work because of the current situation.”

FIGURE 13 | ACADEMIC CHALLENGES, BY COLLEGE TYPE



“

We are in the country, so the internet is lagging. I have the best-available for our area. Zoom sometimes freezes or disconnects due to our service. I would like to be able to connect in person with people. When I am struggling it helps to see and ask questions the moment I have an issue.”

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey

NOTES | Examples of academic challenges due to COVID-19 are not mutually exclusive. Additional breakdowns are available in the [web appendices](#).



## USE OF BASIC NEEDS SUPPORTS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Campus-based resources and government supports for students experiencing basic needs insecurity are increasing, and at the onset of the pandemic, there were some targeted resources deployed. We therefore next turn to usage rates of resources among students among students experiencing basic needs insecurity because of the pandemic. Because our prior surveys have found that utilization rates are low, we also explore why students reported that they did not receive support.

Figure 10 shows that more than a third of students in this sample lost a job during the pandemic. The CARES Act gave states the option of extending unemployment compensation to independent contractors and other workers who are typically ineligible. Even so, just 21% of students experiencing

basic needs insecurity said that they applied for unemployment insurance (Figure 14). Sixty percent said that they were ineligible for various reasons, including the fact that, while they may have had their hours cut, they did not lose their job. Ten percent said that they did not know any support existed, while 9% said that they did not know how to apply.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a critical resource for food, but access for college students is curtailed by work requirements and many other rules. In March, 29 states plus the District of Columbia asked the USDA's Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) to waive certain eligibility requirements for SNAP to better support college students during the pandemic. The FNS denied all of those requests on April 10.<sup>31</sup>

**FIGURE 14 | TYPE AND STATUS OF FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE SOUGHT AMONG STUDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY**

Financial Assistance Sought	Unemployment	SNAP	Emergency Aid on Campus
<b>NO</b> , this option is unavailable to me or I am ineligible	60	60	32
<b>NO</b> , I didn't know about it	10	13	33
<b>NO</b> , I don't know how to apply	9	12	19
<b>YES</b> , applied	21	15	15

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey

NOTES | Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Additional breakdowns are available in the [web appendices](#).

## USE OF BASIC NEEDS SUPPORTS (CONT.)

In 2018, the Government Accountability Office documented extensive challenges with the distribution of information to students about SNAP.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that only 15% of students experiencing basic needs insecurity applied for SNAP benefits during the pandemic. Thirteen percent said that they did not know the program existed, and 12% said they did not know how to apply. The remaining 60% said they did not think that SNAP was available to them or that they were eligible. The GAO suggests that many of these students are incorrect; their eligibility could be established if they applied.

Emergency aid was the most common institutional support given to students during the pandemic. From mid-April through mid-May, the CARES Act funding for emergency

aid was not yet available. Institutions had to support students with foundation balances, through fundraising activities, or by reallocating other resources. Our prior surveys find that only around 2% of basic needs insecure students receive emergency aid.<sup>33</sup> During the pandemic, 15% said that they applied for emergency aid. (We do not know what fraction received it.) One third of students did not know that emergency aid might be available at their institution. This may reflect insufficient advertising and/or difficulty conveying information to students during a period of great turmoil. In addition, 19% of students said that they did not know how to apply for emergency aid. In comparison to unemployment insurance and SNAP, far fewer students (33%) felt that they were ineligible for emergency aid or that it was unavailable to them.



# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This survey confirms what students have been telling their institutions, the media, and anyone who would listen over the past several months: their health and well-being have been adversely impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.

With nearly three in five students experiencing basic needs insecurity during the pandemic, it is understandable that at least half of them also said they are having difficulty concentrating on schoolwork. Basic needs insecurity among college students was already widespread before the pandemic, and this report indicates that the rates are likely worse now. Moreover, there are stark racial/ethnic disparities that, if not remedied, will further drive inequities in college attainment.

Over the last five years, many colleges and universities have experimented with different approaches to addressing students' basic needs, and lessons from their efforts should inform the ongoing response to the pandemic. Since the pandemic began, the Hope Center has drawn on these lessons, summarizing them in five guides:

- ▶ [\*\*Supporting Students During COVID-19: The #RealCollege Guide\*\*](#) is a comprehensive overview of ways to communicate care and support across the institution.
- ▶ [\*\*Guide to Emergency Grant Aid Distribution\*\*](#) is useful for institutions that must allocate scarce resources, specifically philanthropic dollars, to achieve equitable impact.
- ▶ [\*\*Maximizing the Impact of CARES Emergency Aid Funds for Students\*\*](#) distills best practices using the most up-to-date Department of Education guidance.
- ▶ [\*\*Supporting #RealCollege Students with Caring Enrollment Management and Financial Aid Practices During COVID-19\*\*](#) is intended for administrators and staff in those critical offices.
- ▶ [\*\*COVID-19 Response for Students Who are Homeless or With Experience in Foster Care\*\*](#) helps staff who work with these key vulnerable populations.

In addition, we offer [\*\*Surviving COVID-19: A #RealCollege Guide for Students\*\*](#), which has been eagerly received by undergraduates across the country. We also recommend students utilize two other key resources:

- ▶ [\*\*Swift Student\*\*](#) is a platform that assists students, free-of-charge, with financial aid appeals.
- ▶ [\*\*COVIDCollegeSupport.com\*\*](#) provides a wealth of resources.

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS (CONT.)

Finally, since we recognize that addressing students' basic needs requires a great deal of financial support, we offer this [guide for philanthropists](#), and five policy recommendations to inform near-term advocacy.

- 1 /** Federal and state policymakers should continue to invest in student emergency aid. Emergency aid is a critical college retention tool for supporting students who face economic shortfalls that might disrupt their education. In contrast to other efforts to address students' basic needs, such as meal vouchers and gas cards, the dollars distributed by emergency grant programs can be used flexibly to meet students' most pressing needs and achieve their goals. The CARES Act and recent state-level emergency aid legislation in Minnesota, Washington State, and California were a start, but much more is needed. Funds ought to follow student need; there are demonstrably high rates of basic needs insecurity among the nation's community colleges and they must receive more support if they are to respond to growing demand.<sup>34</sup> Students with children should receive more financial support, and all students should qualify to receive hardship funds, whether or not they file FAFSA.<sup>35</sup> Most importantly, no student should have to perform their poverty in order to obtain support; an objective assessment of their current conditions should suffice.<sup>36</sup>
- 2 /** Formulas for institutional appropriations at both the state and federal levels should be revised to ensure that part-time students are treated as full-time human beings.<sup>37</sup> A reliance on full-time equivalents results in a shortage of resources for part-time students, who are disproportionately parenting, working, and/or the first in their family to attend college.
- 3 /** Halt federal requirements tied to work in public benefits programs, and make postsecondary education a highest priority.<sup>38</sup> The current rules, including those for SNAP, favor (or even mandate) low-wage, low-growth work over education. It will be very difficult for individuals, families, and communities to recover from the pandemic without education beyond high school.
- 4 /** The Department of Education should connect students with demonstrable financial need to public benefits access, and ensure that students receiving public benefits get the maximum financial aid allowable. This includes (a) proactively notifying all Pell-eligible students of their potential eligibility for public benefits; (b) automatically routing students receiving public benefits to the simplified needs test or setting their expected family contribution to zero; (c) ensuring that public benefits do not count as income for aid eligibility purposes; and (d) explicitly allowing financial aid offices to share information about student eligibility for public benefits with colleges' student support offices.
- 5 /** Reduce the substantial administrative burden on higher education institutions, which is compromising their ability to address students' basic needs. The Department of Education should ensure that all emergency aid dollars (not just CARES) distributed during the pandemic do not affect estimated financial aid (EFA) and are not classified as income for tax purposes.<sup>39</sup> The department should also issue guidance clarifying that material supports for basic needs (food from pantries, clothing, laptops, etc.) do not count towards EFA and need not be tracked.



The Hope Center recognizes the magnitude of the ongoing crisis and will continue to collect data to examine the impact on students and institutions, while also providing direct support in the form of technical assistance. Colleges and universities that wish to obtain up-to-date information on how their students are affected by the pandemic may [register for the fall 2020 #RealCollege survey online until July 17](#). Policymakers and institutions can [connect with our team for technical assistance](#).



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## PARTICIPATING COLLEGES

### Two-Year Colleges

Amarillo College (TX)  
Bellevue College (WA)  
Blue Mountain Community College (OR)  
Broward College (FL)  
Clatsop Community College (OR)  
Columbia Gorge Community College (OR)  
Community College of Baltimore County (MD)  
County College of Morris (NJ)  
Dallas County Community College District (TX)  
Essex County College (NJ)  
Forsyth Technical Community College (NC)  
Grand Rapids Community College (MI)  
Greenville Technical College (SC)  
Hennepin Technical College (MN)  
Hudson County Community College (NJ)  
Ivy Tech Community College (IN)  
Lake-Sumter State College (FL)  
Lane Community College (OR)  
Lorain County Community College (OH)  
Malcolm X College (IL)  
Middlesex Community College (MA)  
Milwaukee Area Technical College (WI)  
Minnesota West Community and Technical College (MN)  
Monroe Community College (NY)  
Montgomery College (MD)  
Mountain Empire Community College (VA)  
Mt. Hood Community College (OR)  
North Central Texas College (TX)

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (WI)  
Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas (AR)  
Raritan Valley Community College (NJ)  
Roane State Community College (TN)  
Rochester Community and Technical College (MN)  
Seward County Community College (KS)  
Southern Maine Community College (ME)  
Sussex County Community College (NJ)  
UA-Pulaski Technical College (AR)  
Wake Technical Community College (NC)  
Walla Walla Community College (WA)

### Four-Year Colleges and Universities

Blackburn College (IL)  
Clarke University (IA)  
Dalton State College (GA)  
Eastern Michigan University (MI)  
George Fox University (OR)  
La Salle University (PA)  
LIM College (NY)  
Missouri Valley College (MO)  
National Louis University (IL)  
Northeastern Illinois University (IL)  
Paul Quinn College (TX)  
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