

## **Increases in Food Needs in King County, WA Spring-Summer 2020**

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **Food insecurity is increasing after implementation of strategies to slow the spread of COVID-19**

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of strategies to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the community that have led to business and school closures, food insecurity has increased in King County, Washington (WA). Even before COVID-19, 12% of King County adults experienced food insecurity, with higher food insecurity experienced by adults between the ages of 25-44, adults in households with children, Hispanic adults, low income adults (<\$35,000 annual household income), and adults living in South King County (BRFSS, 2010-2013 data combined). Strategies to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the community may exacerbate food insecurity.

In King County, WA, restrictions on large gatherings and closures of non-essential businesses began in March of 2020. Business closures have led to significant losses in employment, which can impact the ability to purchase adequate food. Previous research has estimated that for every 1 percentage-point increase in the unemployment rate, there is 0.52 percentage-point increase in the food insecurity rate.<sup>1</sup> Between March 1 and July 25 of this year, over 358,900 King County residents (about 1 in 4 workers) filed claims for unemployment benefits, and the unemployment rate tripled from 2.7% in January 2020 to 9.2% in June 2020.<sup>2</sup> Nationally and locally, increased needs for food assistance have been seen throughout spring and summer 2020.<sup>3</sup> Examining patterns from after the 2008 recession indicates that the increased need for food may extend over a prolonged recovery period, long after the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2008, the number of people visiting King County food banks increased by over 72,000 people, a 30% increase compared to 2007; the number of people visiting food banks continued to increase through 2009 and 2010 before starting to trend downward in 2011.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately after strategies were put in place to slow the spread of COVID-19, the number of calls from King County residents seeking assistance through the 2-1-1 call line doubled; however, the number of calls seeking assistance with accessing food increased 7-fold between the beginning of February to the end of March. Food was the second most common social service need requested between April 1 to May 19, 2020, after housing needs, with over 1,800 calls to 2-1-1. By mid-

### **KEY POINTS**

**Food insufficiency has almost doubled after implementation of strategies to slow the spread of COVID-19:** About 9% of adults in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties combined reported in June 2020 that their households did not have enough food in the last week, compared to about 5% experiencing this before March. For households with children, food insufficiency peaked in early June at 13%. The most common reasons for not having enough to eat were that they couldn't afford to buy more; that stores didn't have the food they wanted; and that they were afraid to or didn't want to go out to buy food.

**Food needs were the second most common reason for King County resident to call seeking assistance with social services in Spring 2020.** The number of calls for food needs remain steady in June-July, becoming the fifth most common reason for calls. Latinx, Black, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander populations are disproportionately represented among callers seeking food assistance.

**Enrollment in Basic Food assistance program increased by 18% among King County households from January to June 2020, an increase of 17,300 households.**

**Policies have enabled new resources or expanded existing resources, but some are set to expire.** Barriers to accessing food such as transportation or documentation status still exist.

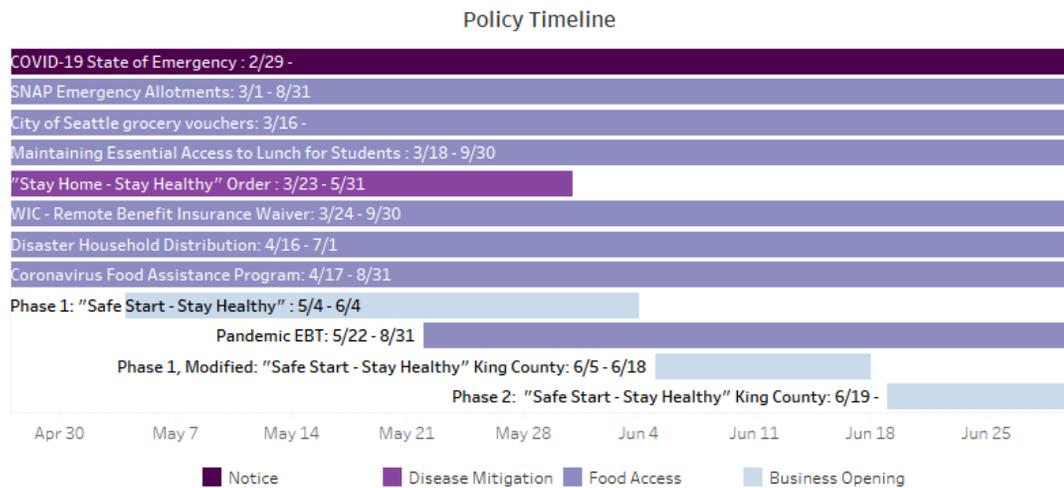
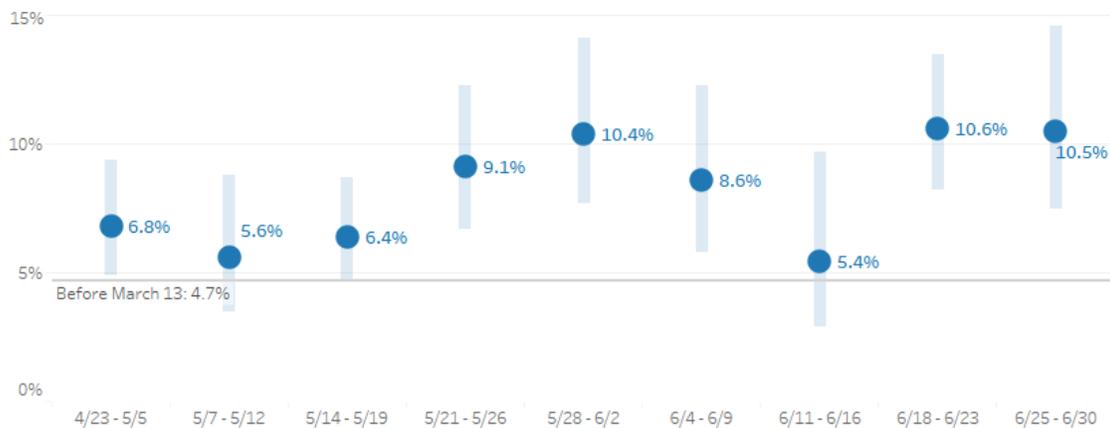
### What is Food Insecurity?

Food insecurity occurs when individuals or households lack reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.

Food insufficiency occurs when there is sometimes or often not enough to eat in the household.

July, food needs became the fifth most commonly requested social service need, with the number of calls staying steady (average of 181.4 calls per week) and increasing numbers of calls for other social service needs. Latinx, Black, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander populations are disproportionately represented in calls seeking food assistance. 31% of callers seeking assistance with food identified as Black and 21% of callers identified as Latinx, when 7% of the overall King County population identify as Black and 10% identify as Latinx.

**Figure 1.** Percent of adults in King/Pierce/Snohomish counties who sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat, April 23-June 30, 2020.

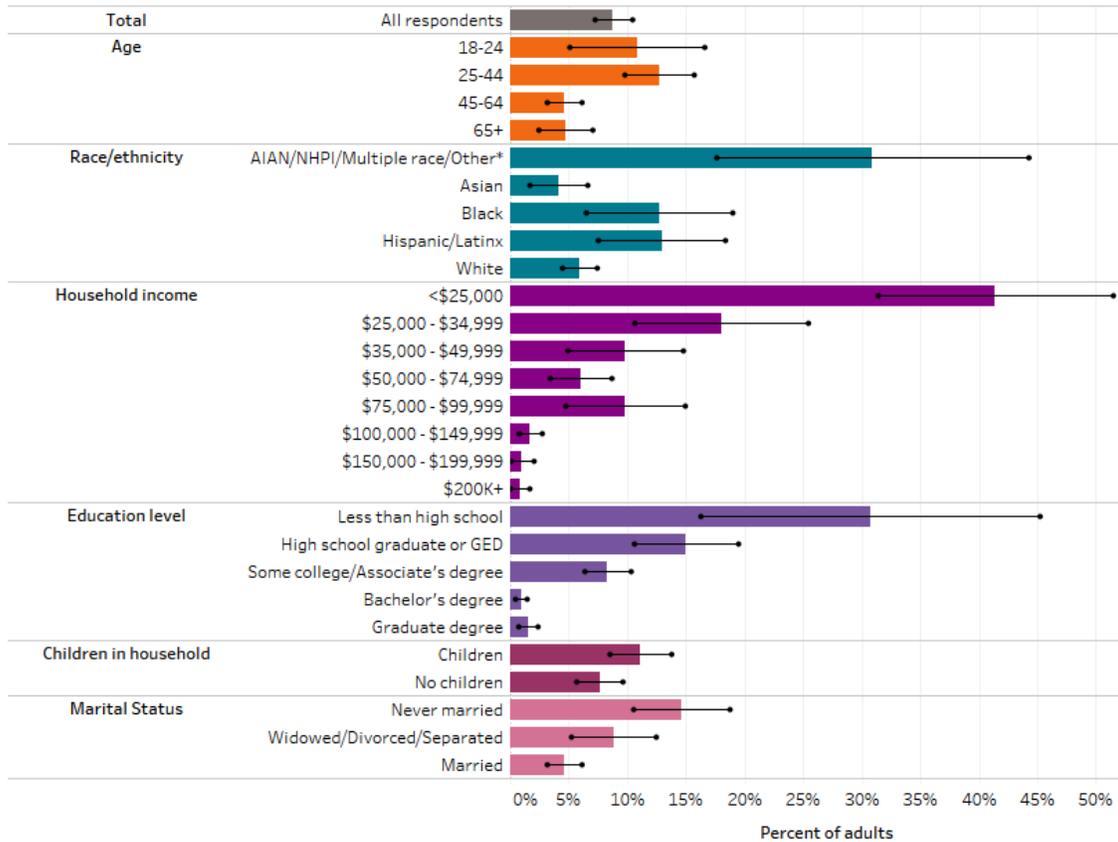


**Food insufficiency doubles in Spring-Summer 2020:** The number of King County residents experiencing food insufficiency is changing rapidly due to the current health and associated economic crisis. Weekly data on food needs between April and July are available for the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), which combines King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties (Figure 1). While about 4.7% of adults in the tri-county area reported lacking sufficient food before March 13 (i.e. before the

COVID-19 pandemic), about 8.7% of adults reported in June that their households did not have enough food during the last 7 days (responses between June 4-30).<sup>5</sup> This represents about 268,000 adults in the tri-county area.

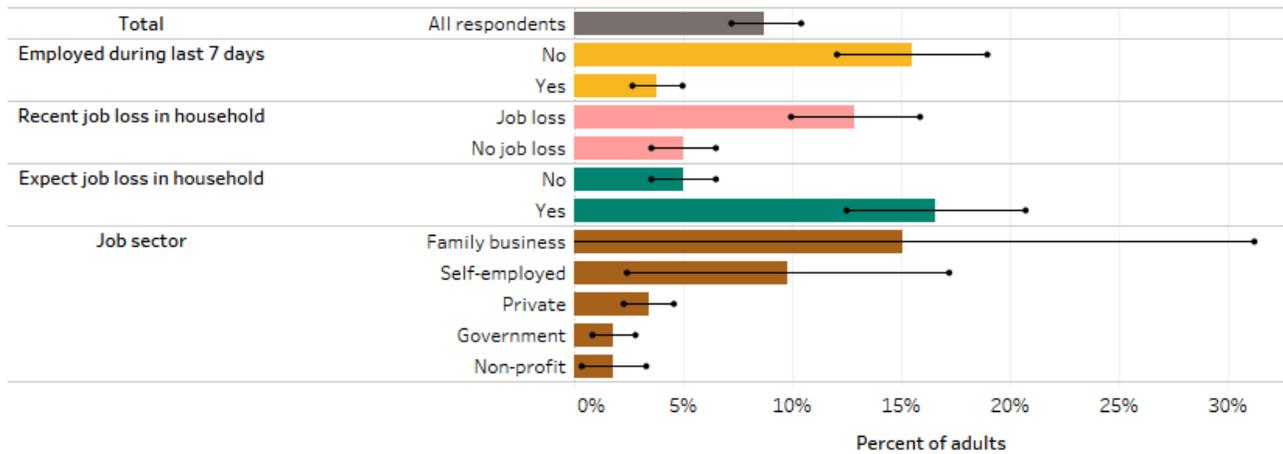
Younger adults (ages 18-44), low-income adults (<\$25,000/year), adults with less than a high school education, and adults who had never been married were more likely to lack sufficient food (Figure 2). Also, adults who were unemployed, had a recent job loss, or were expecting a job loss were also more likely to lack sufficient food (Figure 3). The survey did not release information by detailed race/ethnicity information and so American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, people of multiple races, and people identifying with another race are reported together and are unable to be disaggregated. This group was the most likely to not have enough food (31%), followed by Black and Hispanic/Latinx respondents (both 13%).

**Figure 2.** Demographic characteristics of adults in King/Pierce/Snohomish counties who sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat, May 14-June 9, 2020.



\* The Household Pulse Survey public use data files report results for the following race categories: Asian only (non-Hispanic), Black only (non-Hispanic), Hispanic, White only (non-Hispanic), multiple race or other. Therefore we are unable to report results separately for adults who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, multiracial or with other race group.  
 Data source: Census Household Pulse Survey

**Figure 3.** Differences by employment and job characteristics of adults in King/Pierce/Snohomish counties who sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat, May 14-June 9, 2020.



**Reasons for not having enough to eat:** Among respondents who didn't have enough food, the most common reasons for not having enough to eat were that they couldn't afford to buy more; that stores didn't have the food they wanted; and that they were afraid to or didn't want to go out to buy food. The percent of respondents who lacked sufficient food because they couldn't afford to buy more increased between the end of April (the start of the survey) to June, from 36% to 52%; whereas the percent who said the stores didn't have the food they wanted decreased from 50% to 33%. Notably, between a quarter and a third of respondents who lacked sufficient food cited being afraid to or not wanting to go out to buy food (range: 19% to 36%). Patterns for Washington State were similar.

**Sources of free food:** The percent of respondents who reported that they or someone in their household received free groceries or meals in the past 7 days increased from around 6% to 9% between April and June. Among these respondents who did receive free food, the most common sources of free food were a school or other program for children (the percent varied by week, ranging between 28%-67% of adults reporting that their household received free food); a community organization (ranged from 13%-45%); friends, family or neighbors (ranged between 18%-36%); and a food bank or food pantry (ranged between 11%-33%). Respondents could identify more than one location at which they received food.

**Food insufficiency increasing among families with children; children in household not eating enough:** Since strategies to slow the spread of COVID-19 were implemented, families with children are particularly at risk of food insecurity.<sup>6</sup> The percent of adults in households with children under 18 in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties combined who report not having sufficient food during the last 7 days was 11% during June 4-30, compared with 5.8% reporting not having sufficient food before the impacts of COVID-19 (i.e., prior to March 13; Figure 4). Among households who lacked sufficient food in the last 7 days, about 30% also said that the children in the household were not eating enough because they couldn't afford food. This is of concern as it denotes a deepening level of food insecurity – children tend to be the most protected from hunger with parents missing meals so their children can eat.<sup>7</sup> Food insufficiency among household with children are similar for Washington State.

This need for food assistance is already reflected in increased enrollment in programs that can address food security for children. For example, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) has already seen 7% more pregnant/postpartum women, infants, and young children (under age 5) enrolled in Public Health – Seattle & King County’s (PHSKC) WIC supplemental nutrition program in April 2020 as compared with January 2020. In addition, among clients who were newly approved for Basic Food assistance from March 16-April 30, 2020, 39% were under age 18, compared to 32% of clients who were enrolled before March 16.

**Figure 4.** Percent of adults in households with children in King/Pierce/Snohomish counties who sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat, April 23-June 30, 2020.



**18% increase in King County households enrolled in Basic Food by June 2020:** There are concerns that specific populations may be especially vulnerable to food insecurity during the pandemic and need additional supports to meet their needs: low-income populations, older adults, people with disabilities, people who are undocumented, and children.<sup>8,9</sup> Some existing food resources focus on needs of some of these populations, particularly older adults or children (see policies below). By June 2020, 18% more households in King County received Basic Food benefits compared to January 2020, representing an additional 17,300 households. Among individuals who were newly approved for Basic Food benefits between March 16 and April 30, 2020, 18% had never received Basic Food benefits before, suggesting that **many are experiencing food insecurity for the first time.**

Basic Food beneficiaries who were newly approved in March and April 2020 were more likely to identify as Hispanic/Latinx, Black, or multiple races than those who enrolled before March 2020. These new clients were also more likely than existing clients to be children under age 18 or adults between ages 18-44; less likely to report a disability or to be homeless; and more likely to never have been married.

**NEW OR EXPANDED FOOD POLICY RESOURCES IN RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS**

Resources related to food were among the first to emerge after strategies to slow the spread of COVID-19 were implemented in March 2020. This encompasses policies at the federal, state, and local levels. On March 18, 2020, the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) was enacted, and this

led to an expansion of a variety of food assistance and nutrition programs. Existing programs were expanded by adding additional resources and/or allowing for previous regulations to be waived in order to reach more people during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, while new or expanded food programs may support the needs of some King County households, there remain concerns that not all people who are experiencing food insecurity are receiving the supports they need due to barriers such as transportation, documentation status, housing status, or organizational inability to meet demands.<sup>8</sup>

**Basic Food Supplement:** Beginning in March 2020, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) granted Washington State a waiver allowing for the issuance of emergency allotments (supplements) increasing monthly Basic Food benefits up to the maximum monthly allotment for a household of that size. For example, a household of four can receive \$646 a month in Basic Food benefits. This waiver has been extended through August 2020.

**Child Nutrition (School and Summer Meals):** The federal Maintaining Essential Access to Lunch for Students (MEALS) Act was enacted as part of FFCRA and expanded food access by allowing the Secretary of Agriculture to waive eligibility conditions that states are typically required to meet in order to receive financial support for federal nutrition programs. This allows states to continue providing free or subsidized meals to students while schools are closed (both during the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year as well as the summer of 2020) due to COVID-19.

Washington's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction requested a waiver of the restrictions on site eligibility requirements in the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Seamless Summer Option (SSO). This waiver was granted and allows non-area eligible school food authorities to serve meals to students through SFSP and SSO during the emergency school closures associated with COVID-19.

**Pandemic EBT Emergency School Meals Program:** Due to COVID-19 school closures, some families were eligible to get help with food benefits through the Pandemic EBT Emergency School Meals Program (P-EBT). Any family with a child in grades K-12 who is eligible for free or reduced-price school meals is eligible for P-EBT. This included any children who attend a school where meals are free for all students (community eligibility). Eligible families who were already enrolled in SNAP automatically received the benefits in their EBT accounts on June 27<sup>th</sup>, and eligible families who were not enrolled in SNAP could apply starting June 29<sup>th</sup> through August 31<sup>st</sup>. P-EBT is available to all students regardless of citizenship or immigration status.

**WIC Waiver of Physical Presence:** FFCRA provided the USDA statutory and regulatory waiver authorities necessary in a public health emergency such as COVID-19 to encourage social distancing and reduce in-person visits to WIC clinics. This waiver of physical presence removes the requirement for employees, pregnant women and children participating in the program, and applicants to physically come into a WIC clinic. At this time, Washington State WIC clinics and services will be provided remotely through September 30, 2020. In King County, WIC services are available by phone.

**Disaster Household Distribution:** The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA), which administers The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), requested that USDA approve the use of USDA foods from TEFAP for disaster household distribution. Through WSDA's existing network of food banks, the disaster household distribution food package is provided to impacted households most in

need of food assistance. WSDA increased eligibility for TEFAP to households with income up to 400% of the federal poverty level, based on findings from the Healthy Food Availability Report.<sup>9</sup>

**Coronavirus Food Assistance Program:** Under FFCRA, the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is partnering with national, regional and local distributors to purchase up to \$3 billion in fresh produce, dairy and meat products from American producers to distribute to those in need. The program supplies boxes of fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy products, and/or meat products. In King County, agricultural product distributors package these products into family-sized boxes, then transport the boxes to Food Lifeline, Northwest Harvest and directly to food banks, community and faith-based organizations, and other non-profits.

**Seattle-area Emergency Food Resource Map:** With food insecurity on the rise, food banks and meal programs are an essential part of the emergency food system. PHSKC and the City of Seattle maintain a map of free emergency food resources, including food banks, meal programs and student to-go meals, in Seattle and King County that are available during COVID-19. As of early August, the map of free emergency food resources lists 224 different locations and has been accessed over 20,000 times since it was made available on March 25<sup>th</sup>.

**Local Investments in Food Security Assistance:** In July 2020, King County enacted Ordinance 19120, appropriating \$4.8 million to support a food security assistance program in response to the increased demand for food assistance due to COVID-19. Grants will be awarded through a competitive process, focusing on promoting access to culturally appropriate foods and prioritizing historically disadvantaged communities that have been disproportionately impacted by inequities and discrimination.

In March 2020, the City of Seattle announced provision of grocery vouchers to help families impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, the program has provided over \$8.5 million in grocery benefits to households impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As of July, there are 8,690 households signed up to receive the grocery vouchers. The Seattle City Council approved a proposal to extend the grocery voucher program through October 2020 with funding from the Coronavirus Relief Fund established by the CARES Act.

In addition to the governmental and policy changes above, there have been grassroots food distribution programs and philanthropic efforts to help supply food to people in need. These numerous efforts are led by community-based organizations, faith-based and cultural communities, or neighborhood mutual aid groups, and complement the other policies and programs described above.

#### Resources

- Map of Free Food Resources: <https://www.communitiescount.org/blog/2020/6/9/king-countys-map-of-free-food-resources-to-help-address-evolving-food-needs-of-individuals-amidst-covid-19>
- Many food assistance programs have income eligibility requirements. For the 2020-2021 school year, a family of 4 can make no more than \$48,470 annually to receive reduced price meals and no more than \$34,060 to receive free meals. [https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/childnutrition/programs/nslbp/pubdocs/IncomeGuidelines\\_20-21.pdf](https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/childnutrition/programs/nslbp/pubdocs/IncomeGuidelines_20-21.pdf)
- Basic Food Assistance (application and eligibility requirements): <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/community-services-offices/basic-food> and <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility>
- Public Health-Seattle & King County WIC locations and services: <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/health/child-teen-health/women-infants-children.aspx>
- Examples of grassroots efforts include: <https://www.kuow.org/stories/another-solution-to-covid-food-rent-money-and-racial-equity>), Urban Impact: <https://www.communitiescount.org/community-needs-during-covid19>, United Way: <https://www.unitedway.org/food>
- For more details on policy changes: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/covid-19/washington#snap>

## References

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## Data Sources, Technical Notes & Limitations

- Calls for social service needs: 2-1-1 Crisis Connections. [www.kingcounty.gov/covid/impacts/211](http://www.kingcounty.gov/covid/impacts/211). Demographics information are based on demographics of callers in April-May 2020.
- Food insufficiency data: Household Pulse Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, 2020. Survey was conducted weekly between April 23-July 21, 2020. Percentages represent percent of adults reporting food insufficiency. <https://www.census.gov/householdpulsedata>
  - Food insufficiency prior to March 13, 2020: people who responded “sometimes not enough to eat” or “often not enough to eat” to the question: “Getting enough food can also be a problem for some people. Which of these statements best describes the food eaten in your household before March 13, 2020?”
  - Food insufficiency in last 7 days: people who responded “sometimes not enough to eat” or “often not enough to eat” to the question: “In the last 7 days, which of these statements best describes the food eaten in your household?”
  - Demographic data includes weeks 3-6 of the pulse survey combined. The Census Household Pulse survey asked respondents to select from among 14 race categories as well as Hispanic identity. The sample size for the Seattle/Tacoma/Bellevue MSA and WA State was insufficient to report reliable results for each race/ethnic group. Therefore, the Census Bureau reports results for respondents who identified as Asian alone; Black alone; Hispanic (of any race); white alone; and any other race or multiple races.
  - Please note margins of error as there may be high variation in estimates from week to week.
- Basic Food: The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), is called Basic Food in Washington State. Data shown combine SNAP and Food Assistance Program for Legal Immigrants (FAP) enrollment data. Data from WA State Department of Social and Human Services. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility> In the analysis of those using Basic Food for the first time, the period examined is July 1997 through February 2020. It is possible that some clients received Basic Food assistance prior to July 1997.
- Food insecurity data prior to COVID-19: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), 2010-2013 data. Percentages represent households reporting, over the past 12 months, food sometimes or often didn’t last and didn’t have money to buy more. <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health/data/community-health-indicators/behavioral-risk-factor-surveillance-system.aspx?shortname=Food%20insecurity>

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**For more information and updated data, see [www.kingcounty.gov/covid/impacts](http://www.kingcounty.gov/covid/impacts)**