



Economic Security and Food Access During the COVID-19 Pandemic: King County

June to July 2020, Research Brief 2 (King County)

About the WAFOOD Survey

The Washington (WA) State Food Security Survey (WAFOOD) funded through the University of Washington (UW) Population Health Initiative (UWPHI) was deployed from June 18th to July 31st, 2020. The goal was to understand the impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on economic security and food access of WA State residents. A total of 2,621 WA residents in 38 of 39 counties responded. Of those, 861 respondents resided in King County.

This brief provides a snapshot of survey participant responses on the status and conditions of employment, income and food assistance, food security, and food shopping patterns among King County (KC) residents.

Key Findings: King County

1. Food insecurity was experienced in 30% of households and of those, 57% had children.
2. Food assistance was sought by 36% of households.
3. Fair or poor diets were reported by 33% and 40% said their diet worsened.
4. Greater consumption of bread, rice, beans, and eggs but less meat and fish.
5. Sporadic food shortages observed.
6. Rising food cost and reduced safety in food shopping were cited as barriers to food access.
7. Unemployment benefits sought by 31% of households 36% of which had issues applying.
8. Stimulus checks received by 78% of households.
9. More time to prepare and enjoy meals was viewed as one benefit.

Critical Disparities in Food Insecurity

- Using the United States Department of Agriculture 6-item validated scale, 30% of KC households were food insecure.
- Of food insecure KC households, 57% had children.
- The prevalence of food insecurity ranged from 4% to as high as 59% by income (Figure 1).

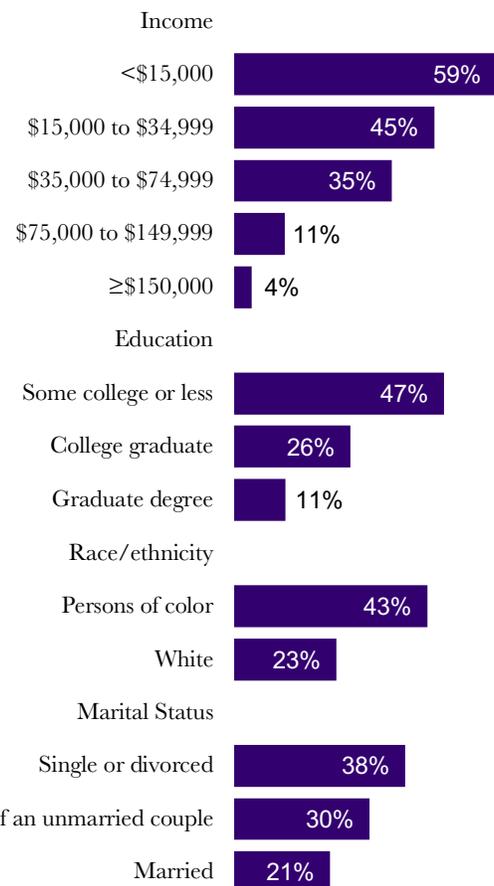


Figure 1. Food insecurity in King County respondents, by socio-demographics

- The prevalence of food insecurity ranged from 11% to 47% depending on education.
- Respondents of color were more than 1.5 times as likely to be food insecure as white respondents.
- Higher food insecurity prevalence was seen in South Seattle and South King County (Figure 2).

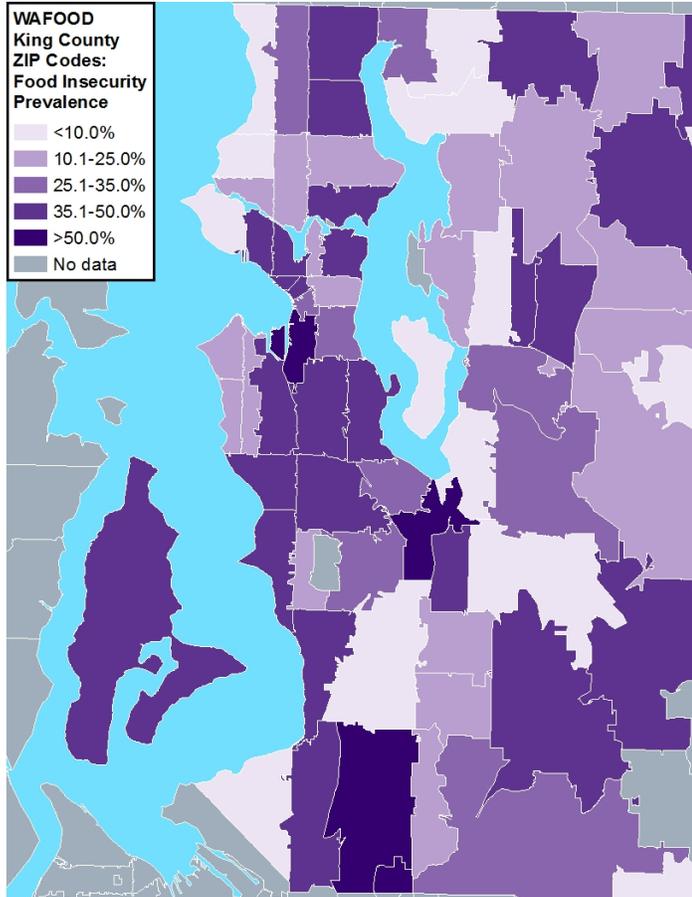


Figure 2. Map of food insecurity in King County respondents

The Vital Role of Food Assistance

- KC respondents overall participation in food assistance programs has remained largely unchanged, increasing from 35% in the 12 months prior to the shutdown to 36% after.
- Receipt of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), School Meals, and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) declined (Figure 3).
- Meals from food banks/pantries, Summer School Meals Programs, city agency grocery voucher or cash cards, and mobile food boxes increased.

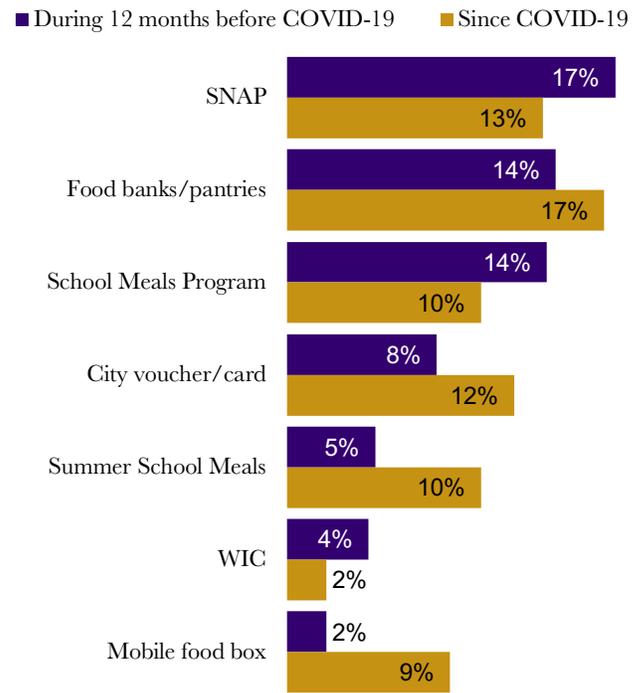


Figure 3. King County respondents' participation in food assistance

Many Worry They Do Not Qualify for Food Assistance

- Of the 312 KC respondents who received food assistance, many (44%) had worried that they would not qualify (Figure 4).
- About a third noted that it was difficult to travel to and from food program offices to recertify.

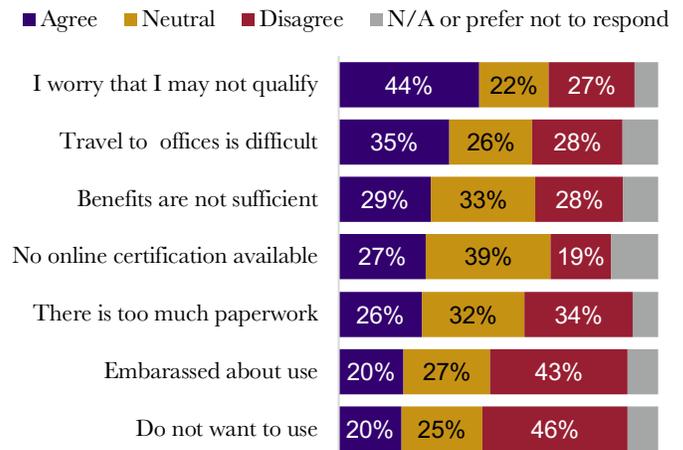


Figure 4. Barriers to food assistance program usage by King County respondents

Eating Habits Notably Changed

- Thirty-three percent of KC respondents reported fair or poor diets and 40% said their diet worsened during the pandemic.
- Higher consumption of eggs, beans, peas, or legumes, breads and rolls, and rice reported by over 25% of KC respondents (Figure 5).
- Lower consumption of meat (chicken, beef, and pork) and fresh fish and shellfish reported by 35% of KC respondents.
- Lower consumption of sugars, sweets, cakes, cookies, and pies reported by about a third.

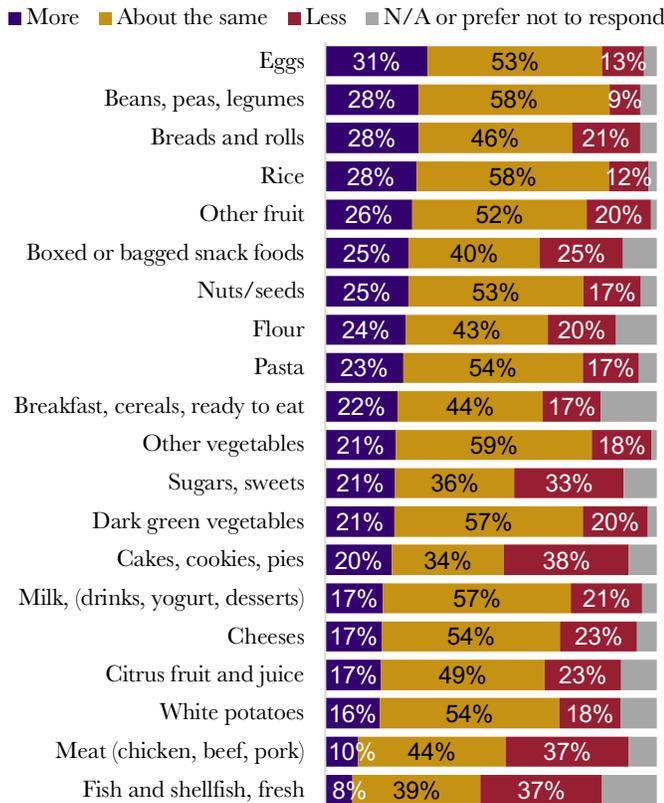


Figure 5. Changes in King County household food consumption

Confidence in Food Access but Higher Costs and Shortages Seen

- Most (70%) KC respondents said they were confident in their household’s ability to access the foods they needed over the next 4 weeks.
- Reduced access to flour and baking supplies reported by 38% of KC respondents (Figure 6a).
- Reduced access to meat (beef or pork) and chicken reported by about a third.

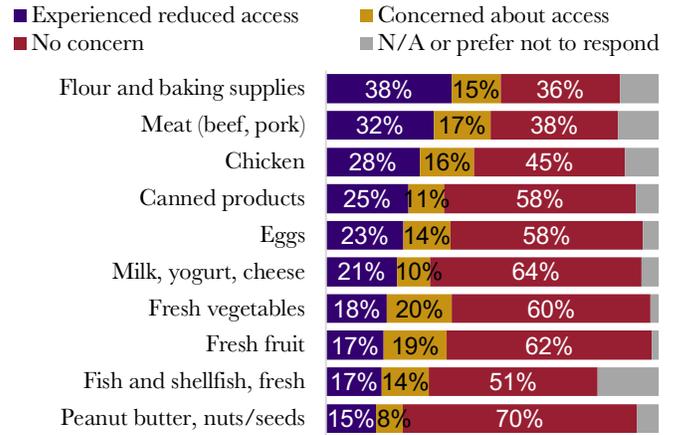


Figure 6a. King County household concerns about food access

- About 17-18% reported concerns about their ability to access fresh vegetables and fruit.
- Few were concerned about access to chocolate, candy, boxed or bagged snack foods, packaged baked goods, and sugary drinks (Figure 6b).

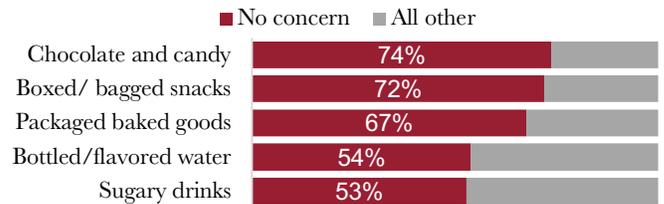


Figure 6b. Household concerns about food access by King County respondents

- Among barriers to food access, KC respondents cited concerns over increased food cost and safety in shopping for food (Figure 7).

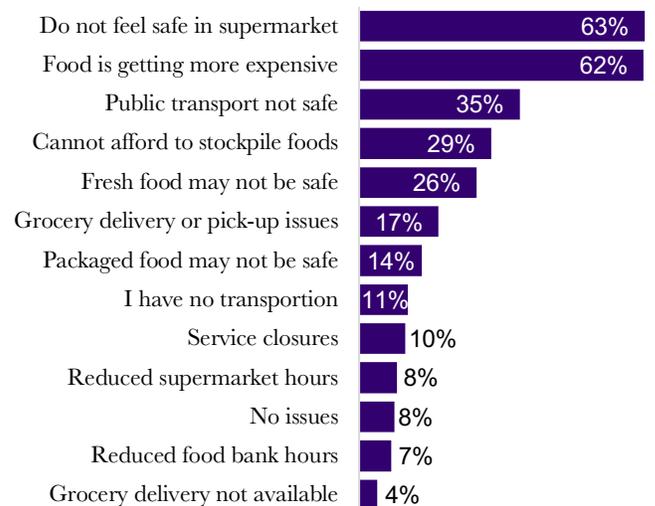


Figure 7. Issues experienced in accessing food by King County respondents

WAFOOD Sample a Mix of Essential and Non-Essential Workers

- Sixty-seven percent of the KC respondents were employed prior to the shutdown.
- About half (47%) of employed KC respondents held a job that was classified as essential, defined as those who report to work despite Washington State's "stay home, stay healthy" orders.
- About a quarter (22%) of employed respondents were members of a union.
- A higher proportion of essential workers were found in community and social services, healthcare, and food services (Figure 8).
- A higher proportion of non-essential workers were found in education, business, finance, or office support (Figure 9).

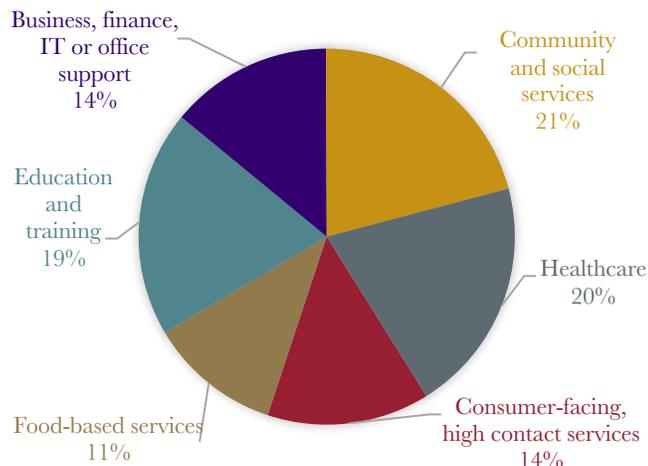


Figure 8. Industry/occupation of essential workers, King County respondents

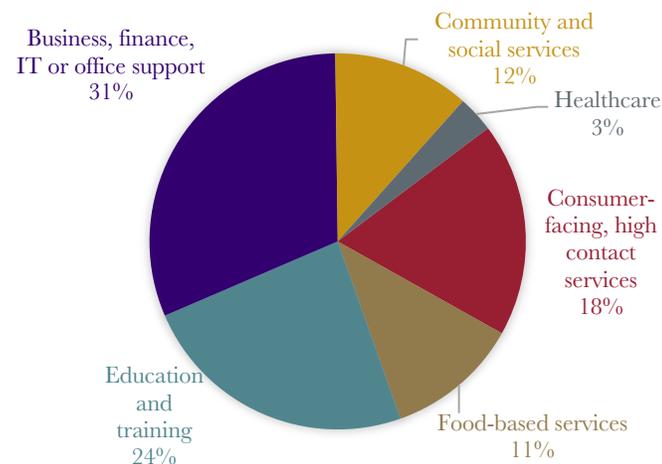


Figure 9. Industry/occupation of non-essential workers, King County respondents

Many Work from Home, Others Experience Lost Jobs or Hours

- When asked about employer adjustments to the shutdown, 37% of KC respondents said that only essential workers needed to report to work with 37% encouraged to work from home (Figure 10).
- Some (27%) reported reduced work hours.
- Other KC respondents also reported temporary firm closures (14%) or permanent closures and layoffs (8%).

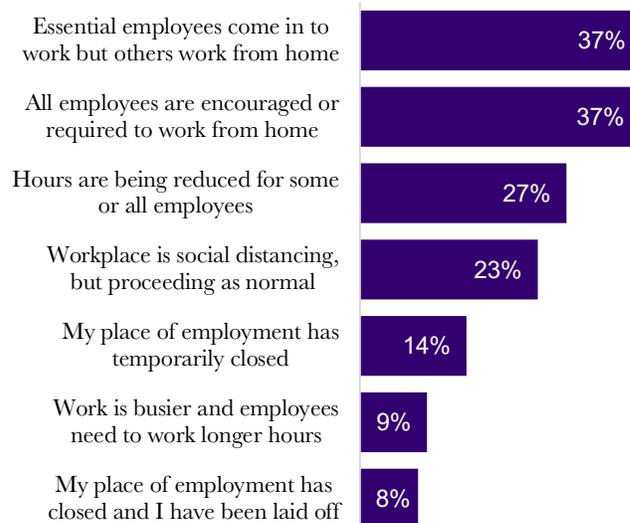


Figure 10. Workplace responses to the shutdown, King County respondents

- When asked what would happen if they got sick, 62% of KC respondents said they could use paid time off while 38% said they could use paid medical leave (Figure 11).

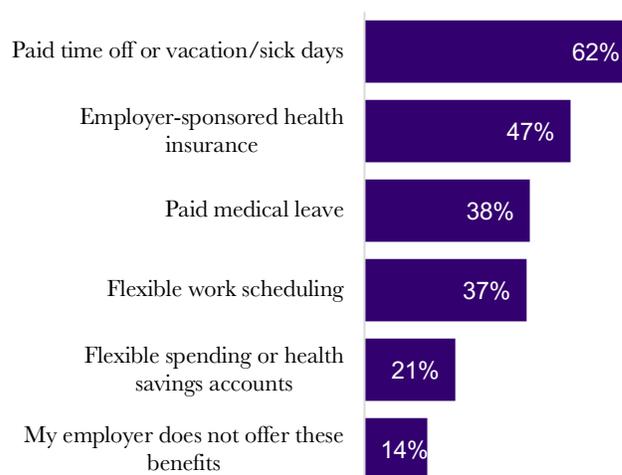


Figure 11. Workplace benefits, King County respondents

Stimulus Checks Received by Most; Unemployment Rising

- Three-fourths (78%) of KC respondents surveyed reported receiving a stimulus check.
- Thirty-one percent of KC respondents reported receiving unemployment; however, of those, 36% reported difficulty in applying.

Positive Outcomes Amid COVID-19: Time to Prepare and Enjoy Meals

- When asked about any positive outcomes amid COVID-19, 52% of KC respondents said that they had more free time to prepare and enjoy meals (Figure 12).
- Forty percent cited members of the community helping each other access food.



Figure 12. Positive outcomes amid COVID-19, King County respondents

WAFOOD Survey Statewide Coverage by County

- The survey received 2,621 complete responses from 38 out of 39 counties in WA.
- The survey was made available in both English and Spanish.
- All respondents were geocoded by ZIP code for analysis of economic disparities by location.
- Greatest representation was from Western WA with 69% of responses coming from King (KC), Pierce, Snohomish and Clark counties (Figure 13).

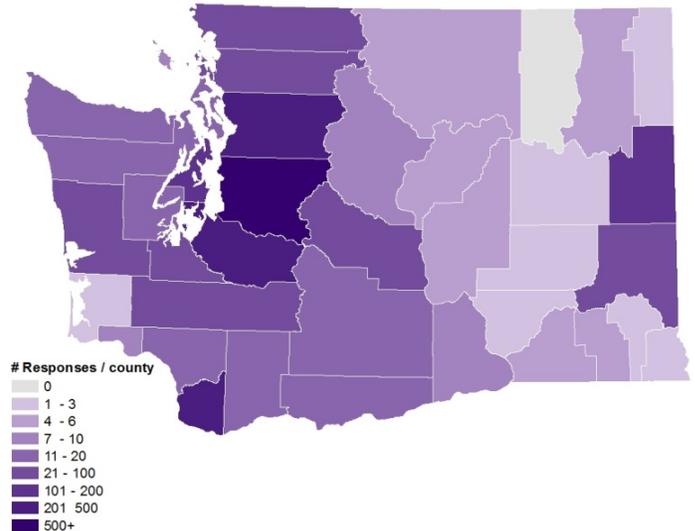


Figure 13. Geographic distribution of WAFOOD

- WAFOOD demographics closely mirrored the racial/ethnic, education, and age distributions of KC and captured those of WA (Figure 14).
- Most KC respondents (77%) were female and partnered or married (54%).
- Forty-three percent had children <18 years.
- Thirty-three percent of KC respondents had household incomes ≤\$35,000.
- One-third (39%) owned their home.

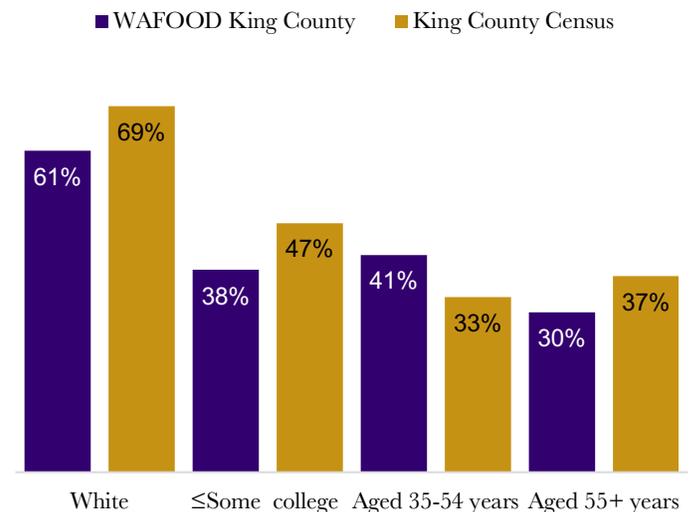


Figure 14. Sample demographic comparison
Source: 2018 ACS data by county

Acknowledgements

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For More Information Please Visit

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About the WAFOOD Team

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