



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

June to July 2020, Research Brief 3 (Pierce County)

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, 431 respondents resided in Pierce 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 Pierce County (PC) residents.

Key Findings: Pierce County

1. Food insecurity was experienced in 34% of households and of those, 60% had children.
2. Food assistance was sought by 33% of households.
3. Fair or poor diets were reported by 35% and 44% 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 47% of which had issues applying.
8. Stimulus checks received by 83% 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, 34% of PC households were food insecure.
- Of food insecure PC households, 60% had children.
- The prevalence of food insecurity ranged from 0% to as high as 65% by income (Figure 1).

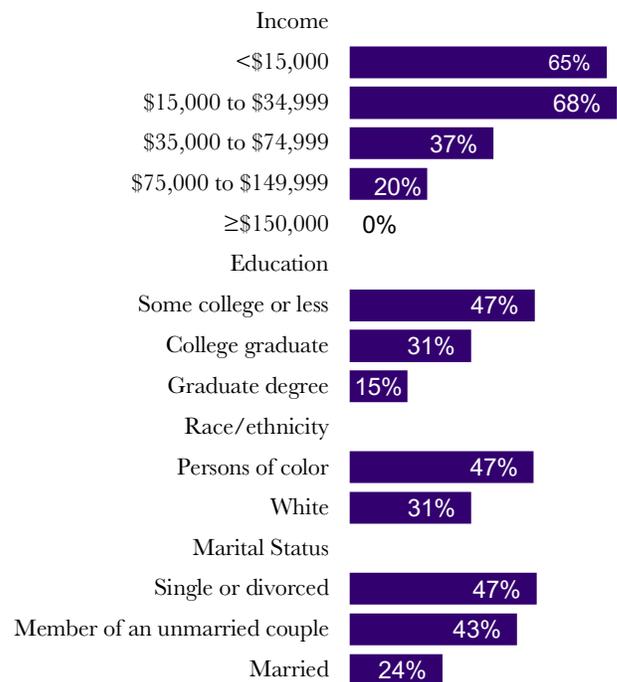


Figure 1. Food insecurity in Pierce County respondents, by socio-demographics

- The prevalence of food insecurity ranged from 15% to 47% depending on education.
- Respondents of color were more than 1.5 times as likely to be food insecure as white respondents

The Vital Role of Food Assistance

- PC respondents, overall participation in food assistance programs has remained largely unchanged, increasing from 29% in the 12 months prior to the shutdown to 33% after.
- Receipt of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), School Meals, and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) declined (Figure 2).
- Meals from food banks/pantries, Summer School Meals Programs, city agency grocery voucher or cash cards, and mobile food boxes increased.

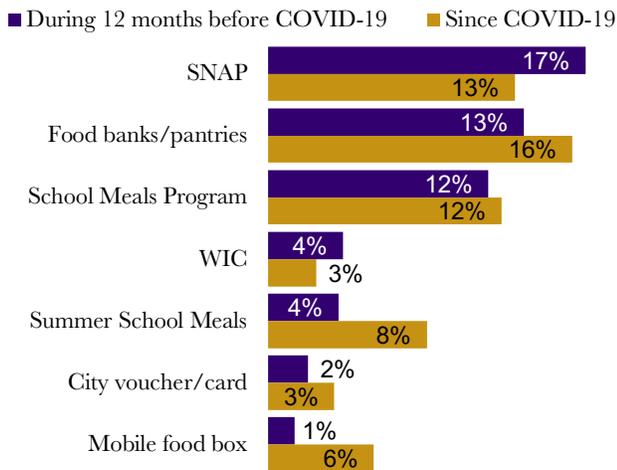


Figure 2. Pierce County respondents' participation in food assistance

Many Worry They Do Not Qualify for Food Assistance

- Of the 143 respondents who received food assistance, half (52%) had worried that they would not qualify (Figure 3).
- About a third noted that it was difficult to travel to and from food program offices to recertify.

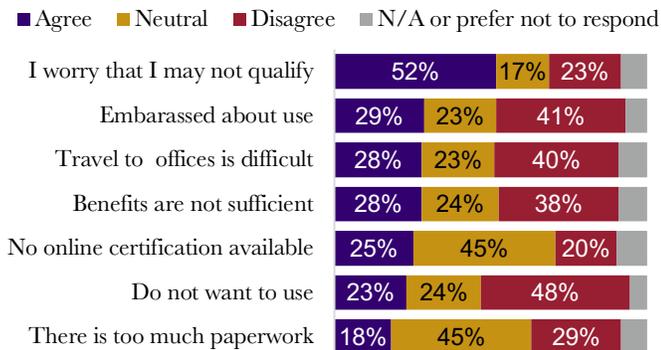


Figure 3. Barriers to food assistance program usage by Pierce County

Eating Habits Notably Changed

- Thirty-five percent of PC respondents reported fair or poor diets and 44% 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 PC respondents (Figure 4).
- Lower consumption of meat (chicken, beef, and pork) and fresh fish and shellfish reported by a third.
- Lower consumption of sugars, sweets, cakes, cookies, and pies reported by about a third.

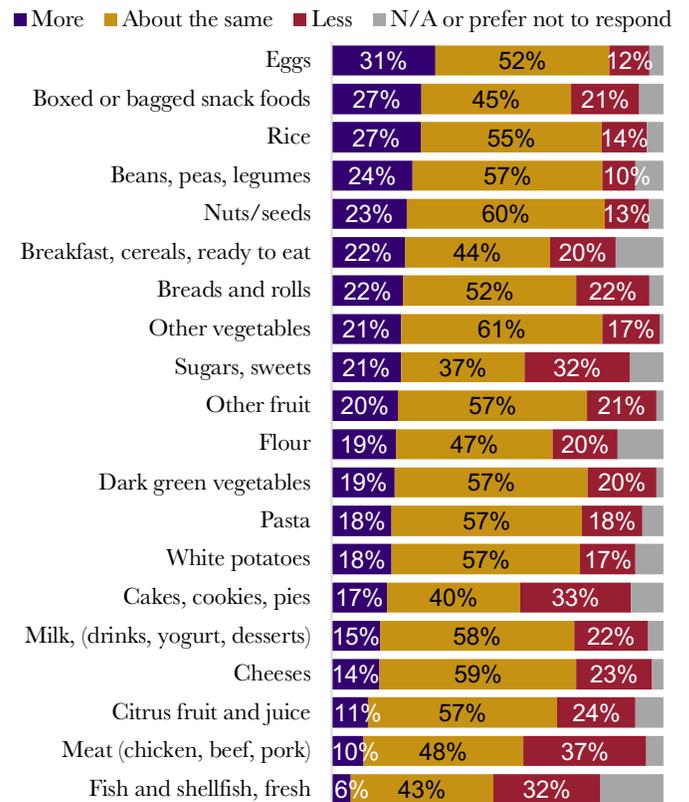


Figure 4. Changes in Pierce County household food consumption

Confidence in Food Access but Higher Costs and Shortages Seen

- Most (73%) PC respondents said that 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 44% of PC respondents (Figure 5a).
- Reduced access to meat (beef or pork) and chicken reported by about a third.

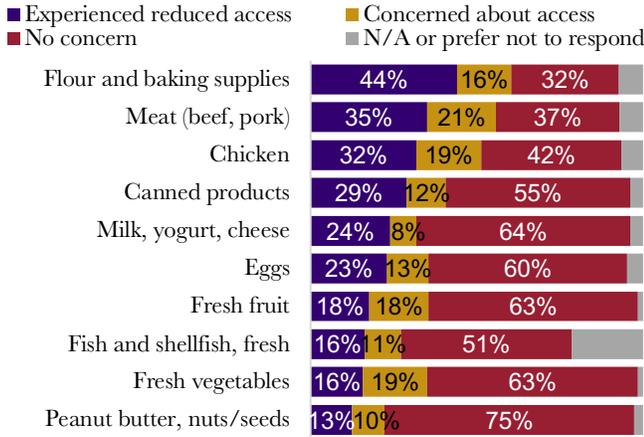


Figure 5a. Pierce County household concerns about food access

- About 18-19% 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 5b).

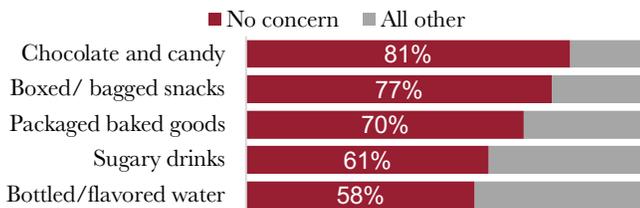


Figure 5b. Household concerns about food access by Pierce County residents

- Among barriers to food access, respondents cited concerns over increased food cost and safety in shopping for food (Figure 6).

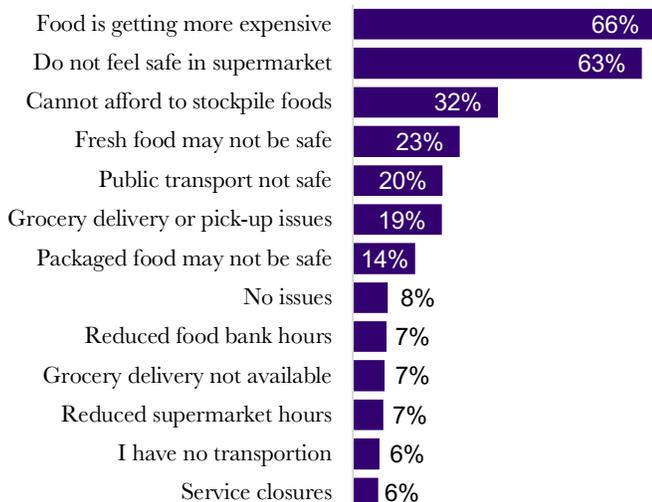


Figure 10. Issues experienced in accessing food by Pierce County respondents

WAFOOD Sample a Mix of Essential and Non-Essential Workers

- Seventy-four percent of the PC respondents were employed prior to the shutdown.
- Fifty-eight of employed 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.
- Of the employed, 27% were in a union.
- A higher proportion of essential workers were found in community and social services, healthcare, and food-based services (Figure 7).
- A higher proportion of non-essential workers were found in consumer-facing, high contact services, education and training, and business, finance, IT or office support (Figure 8).

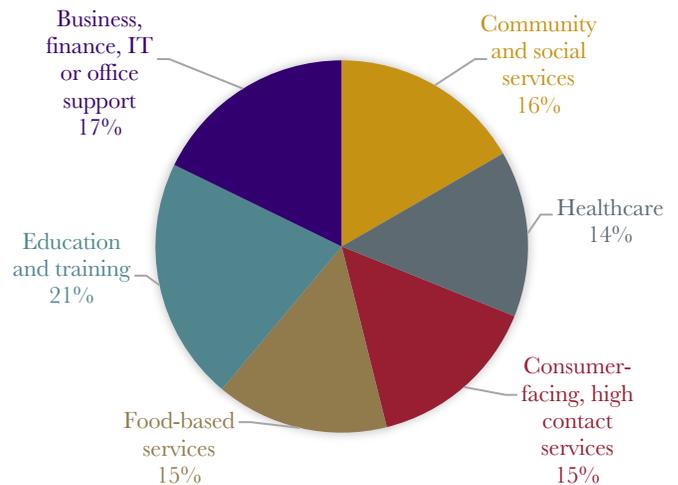


Figure 7. Industry/occupation of essential workers, Pierce County respondents

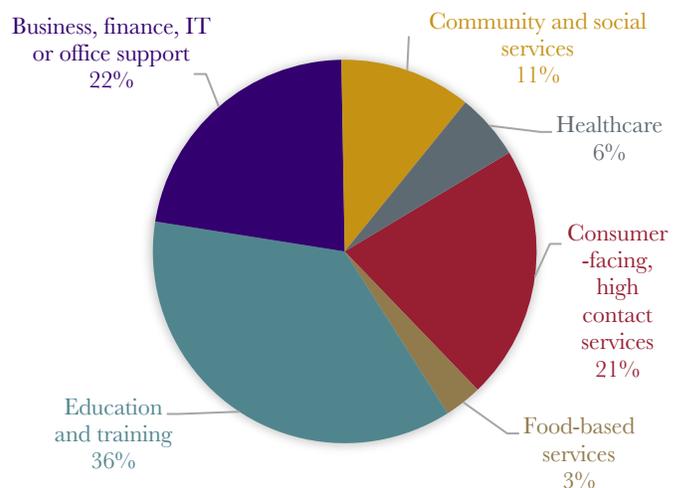


Figure 8. Industry/occupation of non-essential workers, Pierce County respondents

Many Work from Home, Others Experience Lost Jobs or Hours

- When asked about employer adjustments to the shutdown, 40% of PC respondents said only essential workers needed to report to work with 31% encouraged to work from home (Figure 9).
- Some (25%) reported reduced work hours.
- Others PC respondents also reported temporary firm closures (11%) or permanent closures and layoffs (7%).

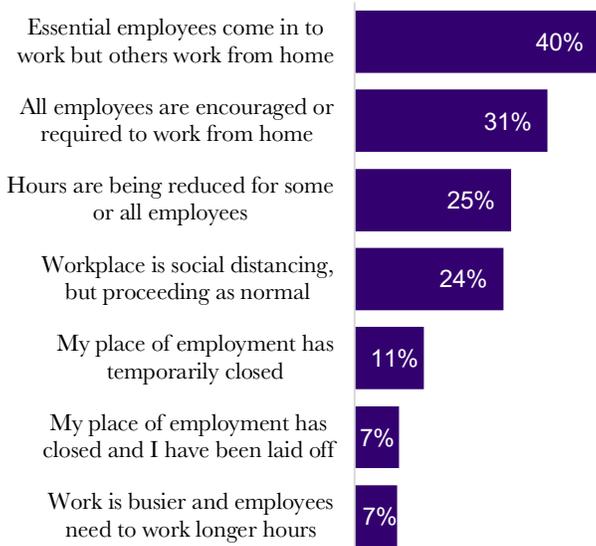


Figure 9. Workplace responses to the shutdown, Pierce County respondents

- When asked what would happen if they got sick, 64% of PC respondents said they could use paid time off while 37% said they could use paid medical leave (Figure 10).

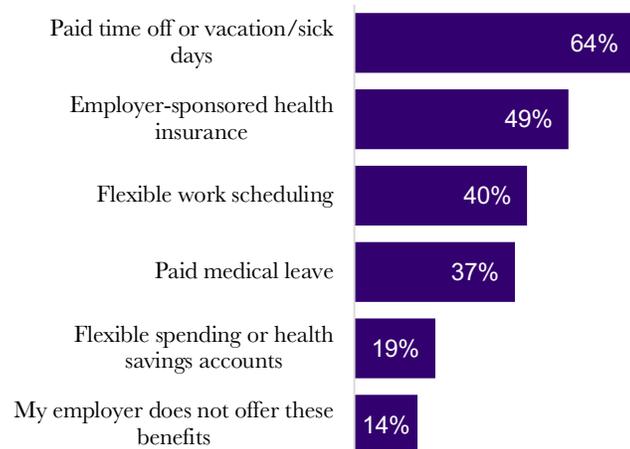


Figure 10. Workplace benefits, Pierce County respondents

Stimulus Checks Received by Most; Unemployment Rising

- Most (83%) of PC respondents surveyed reported receiving a stimulus check.
- Thirty-one percent of respondents reported receiving unemployment; however, of those, 47% reported difficulty in applying.

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

- When asked about any positive outcomes amid COVID-19, 54% of PC respondents said that they had more free time to prepare and enjoy meals (Figure 11).
- Forty-seven percent cited members of the community helping each other access food.

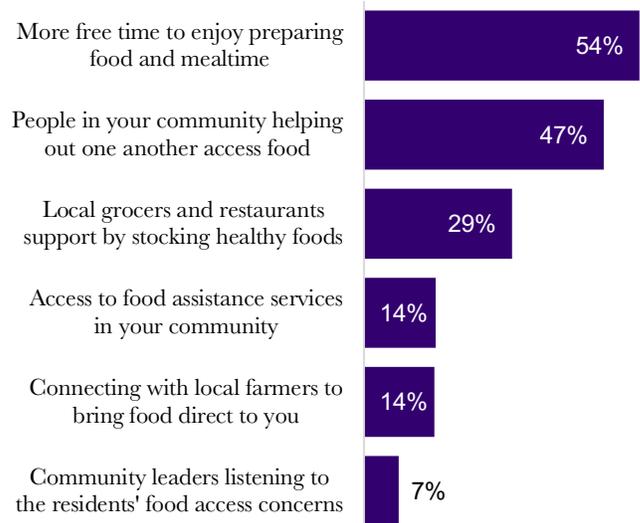


Figure 11. Positive outcomes amid COVID-19, Pierce County respondents

WAFOD 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, Pierce, Snohomish and Clark counties (Figure 12).

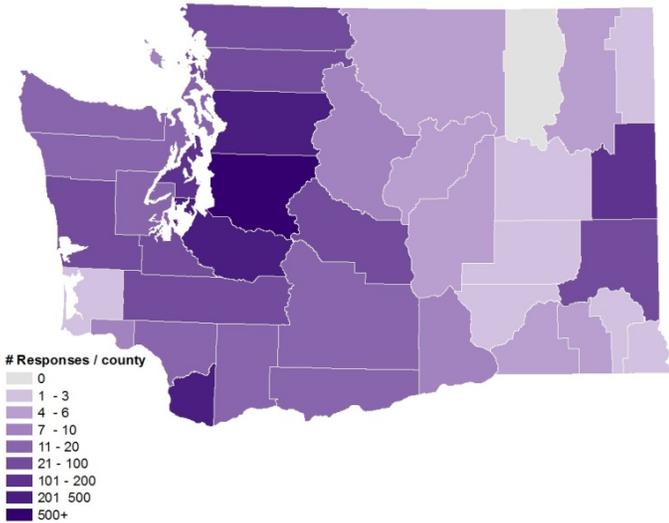


Figure 12. Geographic distribution of WAFOOD

- WAFOOD demographics closely mirrored the racial/ethnic, education, and age distributions of PC and captured those of WA (Figure 13).
- Most PC respondents (77%) were female and partnered or married (54%).
- Forty-three percent had children <18 years.
- Thirty-three percent of PC respondents had household incomes ≤\$35,000.
- On-third (39%) owned their home.

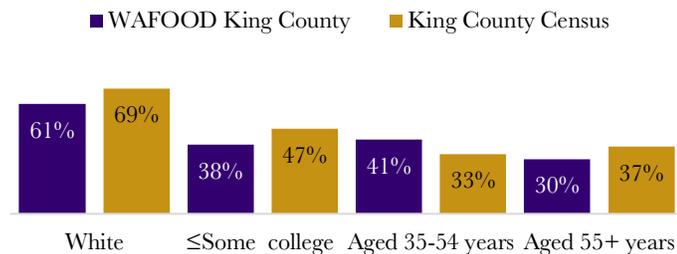


Figure 13. Sample demographic comparison
Source: 2018 ACS data by county

Acknowledgements

The WAFOOD survey team wishes to thank the UWPHI, the UW School of Public Health (UWSPH), and the Department of Epidemiology for their support. We also wish to thank numerous community partners and stakeholders who helped shape this project. Among those are: WA Department of Health, WA Department of Agriculture, WA Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition, WA SNAP-Ed, KC Local Food Initiative, Northwest Harvest, Washington State University (WSU) Extension, United Way of WA, and numerous food banks, food pantries, charitable

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For More Information Please Visit

- <https://nutr.uw.edu/cphn/>
- <https://www.nfactresearch.org/washingtonstate>

About the WAFOOD Team

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