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# Securing the Basic Needs of College Students in Greater Philadelphia During a Pandemic: A #RealCollegePHL Report

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Philadelphia-area colleges and universities were reeling from the coronavirus pandemic as they entered fall 2020. Mirroring national trends, enrollment was down, particularly among those students most at risk of basic needs insecurity; fewer students completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA); and college retention rates dropped.<sup>1</sup> Students and faculty were stressed and anxious.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the term, local hospitals spent weeks caring for almost a thousand Philadelphians suffering with and often dying from COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.<sup>3</sup>

This report examines how Philadelphia-area students and institutions fared during that exceptionally challenging time. The data come from our sixth-annual #RealCollege Survey, which assessed students' experiences of food and housing insecurity, homelessness, employment, mental health, and academic engagement. While past work by The Hope Center indicates that more than half of area two-year students and about one-third of area four-year students experience food and/or housing insecurity, and more than one in 10 experience homelessness, this report sheds light on the unique challenges faced in 2020 during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> The report is part of our [#RealCollegePHL project](#), which aims to document basic needs insecurity among area college students and to bolster institutional and community efforts to address those needs.

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In the Philadelphia region, the survey was distributed to more than 82,700 students attending 13 colleges and universities, and taken by 8,953 students, yielding an estimated response rate of 11%.

## PHILADELPHIA-AREA STUDENTS TOLD US ABOUT THEIR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE DURING A PANDEMIC:

5%  
were sick with  
COVID-19

12% LOST A LOVED ONE TO COVID-19

38%  
had a close friend or  
family member who was  
sick with COVID-19



37% of students  
exhibited at least  
moderate anxiety



Among students  
with a job,  
37% lost that job

## IN ADDITION TO TRYING TO SURVIVE IN A PANDEMIC, MANY EXPERIENCED BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY:

Food insecurity affected

42% at two-year  
institutions

23% at four-year  
institutions

Housing insecurity affected

55% at two-year  
institutions

39% at four-year  
institutions

12%  
experienced  
homelessness



More than 1 in 2  
experienced  
basic needs insecurity



Moreover, many students did not receive support. Among students experiencing food insecurity, only 16% accessed Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Approximately seven in 10 did not know they were eligible for support. There were also disparities in who experienced basic needs insecurity and had access to support. The rate of basic needs insecurity among American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous students was 21 percentage points higher than the rate among White students, and the largest gap between need and use of supports was among Latino male students.

By expanding existing scholarship and anti-poverty programs, investing in benefits hubs, and creating a citywide emergency aid fund, local leaders can ensure students obtain needed supports. Area colleges and universities can raise students' awareness of existing supports and allocate federal relief funds (beyond what is required) to emergency aid. Distributing supports efficiently and equitably is also critical. Similarly, community-based organizations should make their supports student-friendly. Finally, Pennsylvania can do its part by expanding access to existing public benefits—at virtually no cost—and establishing “hunger-free campus” programs. Taking these steps is vital to increasing the Philadelphia area’s college completion rate and ensuring the region’s long-term health and prosperity.



# INTRODUCTION

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Basic needs security is a key factor in determining a student’s likelihood of finishing college.<sup>5</sup> If a student isn’t eating regular, healthy meals; doesn’t have a safe, stable place to live; or can’t find affordable, reliable childcare; they will struggle in the classroom.<sup>6</sup> Studies indicate that students facing food or housing insecurity have lower grade point averages, poorer health, and higher rates of depression and anxiety than those who do not face these challenges.<sup>7</sup>

Recognizing students’ need, institutions throughout Philadelphia have stepped up to secure students’ basic needs. In March 2020, the City of Philadelphia founded the Octavius Catto Scholarship, a “last dollar” scholarship to help local students with expenses like food, books, and transportation.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in April 2020, La Salle University opened Single Stop, a resource hub that connects students to free social services and financial resources.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, fall 2020 was a term unlike any other. Students were faring no better than in recent years, and in some cases, they were worse off. By August 2020, nearly three out of five Philadelphians knew someone who had tested positive for COVID-19; one in four knew someone who died from it.<sup>10</sup> There were economic challenges too. A quarter of Philadelphians were struggling to pay their rent or mortgage, and more than a quarter were having trouble paying for food.<sup>11</sup> Nationally, half of all jobs lost in April had not returned by September.<sup>12</sup> A survey of Philadelphia renters (a quarter of whom were college students) by [Community Legal Services of Philadelphia](#) in November and December 2020 found that 17% had fallen behind in their rent payments, compared with 7% the year before.<sup>13</sup> Declines in enrollment in fall 2020 also suggest that the students most likely to experience basic needs insecurity did not enroll.<sup>14</sup>

While area colleges, community organizations, and advocates worked to adapt to the pandemic—implementing new strategies, adjusting existing supports, and distributing millions in emergency aid—they faced an uphill battle. Emergency aid grants from the CARES Act had not reached all students in need.<sup>15</sup> Guidance from the federal government on who was eligible for funds was unclear.<sup>16</sup> Students who were claimed as dependents were ineligible for stimulus checks, even if they earned income and filed a tax return.<sup>17</sup> It also took months for the federal government to expand SNAP eligibility to college students; eligibility was finally expanded in December 2020, after students had finished the fall term.<sup>18</sup>

This report offers insight on Philadelphia-area college students’ basic needs during the ongoing pandemic. We present findings from our #RealCollege Survey, while also highlighting Philadelphia-area community organizations and college leaders taking action to meet students’ basic needs. To shed light on what it is like to go to college during a pandemic, we also include quotes from local college students. Finally, we offer a preview of a forthcoming report about barriers to college attainment among Philadelphians ages 20 to 45 seeking college credentials.



We hope this report spurs the region to deeper collective action. Together, we can help striving students achieve their dreams and strengthen the Philadelphia-area economy and community. As we emerge from the pandemic, we must learn why some policies and practices worked better than others—and focus on securing Philadelphia-area students’ basic needs.

## WHAT IS THE #REALCOLLEGE SURVEY?

The #RealCollege Survey is the nation’s largest annual assessment of students’ basic needs. Since 2015, the survey has been fielded at more than 530 colleges and universities and taken by more than 550,000 students.<sup>19</sup> Prior to fall 2020, six Philadelphia-based and eight Philadelphia-area colleges and universities fielded the #RealCollege Survey.

The #RealCollege Survey measures food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness, as well as challenges affording childcare and other living expenses. It also documents students’ use of on- and off-campus supports to address these challenges. Each participating college receives an institution-specific report, and many use those results to secure philanthropic dollars, advocate for students, and direct scarce resources more equitably and efficiently. #RealCollege Survey reports help institutions answer questions such as:

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- How many of our students could benefit from additional resources like campus food pantries, emergency aid, or housing assistance?
  - Which students ought to be identified for additional outreach by early alert systems?
  - To what extent should helping our students meet their basic needs be a college leadership priority?

The Hope Center also leverages #RealCollege Survey results to advocate for policy and systemic changes that improve students’ basic needs security and college completion rates.<sup>20</sup> Two prior Hope Center reports, summarizing Philadelphia results from the [2016–17](#) and [2019](#) #RealCollege surveys were critical to advocating for local action.

## WHAT IS #REALCOLLEGEPHL?

[#RealCollegePHL](#) brings together Philadelphia-area colleges, universities, and community organizations, to better understand and tackle basic needs insecurity among students. We envision a Philadelphia region where every student who wants to pursue education beyond high school is free from the anxieties and barriers of inadequate food, unaffordable housing, or costly childcare. We envision all Philadelphia-area colleges and universities being student-ready and fully able to serve students.

Through regular gatherings, networking, technical assistance, research, and information dissemination, the #RealCollegePHL effort aims to:

1. Expand institutional knowledge about how to address food and housing insecurity among college students
2. Improve coordination among colleges and community partners to address campus food and housing insecurity
3. Diversify services to address food and housing insecurity among college students
4. Increase utilization of both campus-based services and public benefits to reduce basic needs insecurity

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Visit [hope4college.com/realcollegephl/](https://hope4college.com/realcollegephl/) for more information. #RealCollegePHL is made possible thanks to financial support from the Lenfest Foundation.

## THE FALL 2020 DATA

In 2020, 13 Philadelphia-area institutions fielded the #RealCollege Survey. The sample includes three two-year colleges and 10 four-year institutions—three public and seven private.

Two-Year Colleges	Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities	Private Four-Year Colleges and Universities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Camden County College</li> <li>• Community College of Philadelphia</li> <li>• Orleans Technical College</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kutztown University</li> <li>• Temple University</li> <li>• West Chester University of Pennsylvania</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alvernia University</li> <li>• Chestnut Hill College</li> <li>• La Salle University</li> <li>• Moore College of Art &amp; Design</li> <li>• Peirce College</li> <li>• University of Pennsylvania (Graduate School of Education)<sup>21</sup></li> <li>• University of the Arts</li> </ul>



Participating institutions emailed the survey to all enrolled students between September and November 2020.<sup>22</sup> In total, the survey was sent to nearly 83,000 Philadelphia-area students and completed by 8,953 of them, yielding an estimated response rate of 11%. (See [web appendices](#) for more information on fielding.)

Throughout the report, we explore both region-wide rates and group data by college type. Because our Philadelphia-area sample is considerably larger than in past years—in 2019, five area colleges fielded the survey, we do not compare data across time.<sup>23</sup> For more information about the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, read our national report, [#RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic](#). For more information about challenges facing Philadelphia-area students prior to the pandemic, read our 2020 report, [Food and Housing Insecurity Among Philadelphia College Students: A #RealCollegePHL Report](#).

## WHAT ARE STUDENTS' BASIC NEEDS?

The Hope Center defines **student basic needs** as access to the following: nutritious and sufficient food; safe, secure, and adequate housing (to sleep, study, cook, and shower); healthcare to promote sustained mental and physical well-being; affordable technology and transportation; resources for personal hygiene care; and childcare and related needs.<sup>24</sup>

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**Basic needs security** means that there is an ecosystem in place to ensure that students' basic needs are met. **Basic needs insecurity** refers to the experience of not having access to the necessities listed above. Basic needs insecurity is considered a structural problem, not an individual flaw; it means that there is not an ecosystem in place to ensure that students' basic needs are being met.

The 2020 #RealCollege Survey focused primarily on three types of basic needs insecurity:

- **Food insecurity** is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire such food in a socially acceptable manner.<sup>25</sup> The most extreme form is often accompanied by physiological sensations of hunger. The 2020 #RealCollege Survey assessed food security among students using the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 18-item set of questions.<sup>26</sup>
- **Housing insecurity** encompasses a broad set of challenges that prevent someone from having a safe, affordable, and consistent place to live.<sup>27</sup> Housing insecurity among students is assessed with a nine-item set of questions, developed by The Hope Center, which looks at factors such as the ability to pay rent or utilities and the need to move frequently.
- **Homelessness** means that a person does not have a fixed, regular, and adequate place to live. In alignment with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, students are considered homeless if they identified experiencing homelessness or identified living in conditions that are signs of homelessness (for instance, in a shelter, temporarily with a relative, or in a space not meant for human habitation).<sup>28</sup> Using this more inclusive definition of homelessness is critical to supporting students, as students in both groups experience comparable challenges.<sup>29</sup>

Rates of “any basic needs insecurity” presented below mean the student was experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity, and/or homelessness. Additionally, while the measures presented here look at basic needs during distinct periods—the prior month for food insecurity, and the prior year for housing insecurity and homelessness—basic needs insecurity is fluid, and students’ experiences with basic needs may change over time.<sup>30</sup>

## WHO IS MISSING FROM THE DATA?

The data in this report come from students who were attending one of the 13 Philadelphia-area institutions that opted in to the survey. We are unable to report on students who never enrolled in college, stopped out of college, attended colleges that did not field the survey, or simply did not respond to the survey, despite being invited to do so. As a result, the estimates presented in this report may overstate or understate the true rates of basic needs insecurity in higher education.<sup>31</sup>

In 2020, we are particularly concerned that our estimates are too low. Compared to prior years, students at the greatest risk of basic needs insecurity were much less likely to enroll in college. College enrollment across Pennsylvania dropped 3.1% from fall 2019 to fall 2020, with sharper declines among undergraduates compared to graduate students.<sup>32</sup> Among two-year students in the state, enrollment declined 11.6%.<sup>33</sup> Nationally, enrollment declines were particularly pronounced among first-year students and students at greatest risk of basic needs insecurity, namely students at two-year institutions as well as Black and Native American students.<sup>34</sup>

Despite these risks, there is ample evidence that the #RealCollege Survey is reliable. Several other major surveys of basic needs yield similar rates via different methods, and across six years and hundreds of colleges, #RealCollege Survey results remain fairly consistent.<sup>35</sup>





## ATTENDING COLLEGE DURING A PANDEMIC

While the coronavirus pandemic challenged students in new ways, the new economics of college had already been reshaping American higher education for decades. Our national student body is not what many think it is, and it hasn't been for some time. Seventy-one percent of college students have at least one “nontraditional” characteristic—they are older than 25, served in the military, parent a young child, or live independently from parents.<sup>36</sup> About half are non-White, economically disadvantaged, and/or financially independent.<sup>37</sup> The number of students who receive the need-based federal Pell Grant has doubled in the past 25 years, while the value of those grants has dropped significantly, from originally covering the full cost of community college to now covering only about 60% of those costs.<sup>38</sup>

This section looks at how the pandemic has impacted students and colleges in five areas: health, enrollment, employment, families, and institution budgets.



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Only as I look back on the semester and see all that I have learned and accomplished do I really see the value in the tragedy and the reward in the triumph. We have faced it together and made it out the other side. Now and only now can I say it was truly worth it. This semester means ultimate success for the rest of my college education because if I can make it through this, I can truly make it through anything. These are some of the hardest circumstances that I have ever faced and seeing that I have come out in one piece gives me great pride and hopefulness for what I can do in the rest of my college career.”

– Christina Holley, Philadelphia-area undergraduate

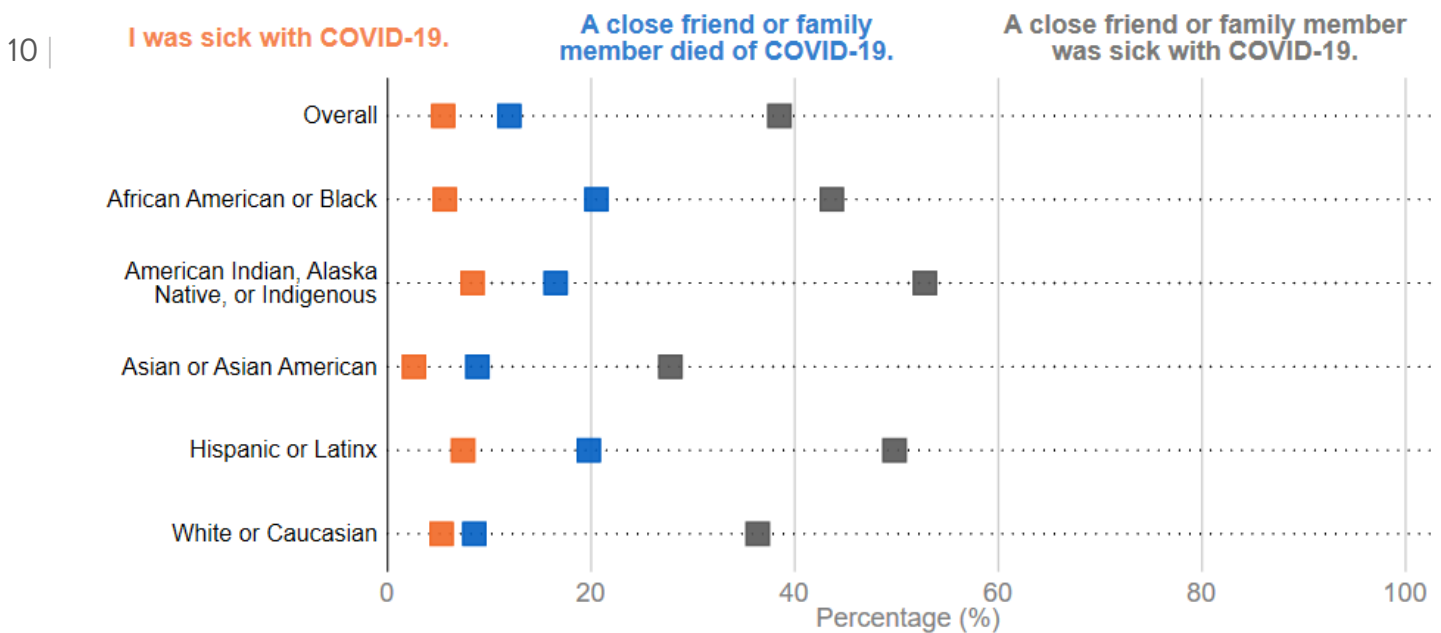


## MULTIPLE CRISES: CORONAVIRUS, MENTAL HEALTH, AND RACIAL INJUSTICE

Within weeks of beginning fall classes, Pennsylvania colleges and universities had at least 250 COVID-19 cases, causing many to suspend all in-person instruction.<sup>39</sup> As of August, more than 30,000 Philadelphians had tested positive for COVID-19, and nearly 1,700 city residents had died.<sup>40</sup> Black and Hispanic Philadelphians were especially impacted. About a third of Hispanic and Black Philadelphians had lost a loved one to the disease—compared to just 12% of White residents.<sup>41</sup>

Among Philadelphia-area students who took the #RealCollege Survey, 5% were sick with COVID-19, and 38% had a close friend or family member who was sick with the disease (Figure 1). More than one in 10 lost a loved one to COVID-19. Paralleling patterns in the city as a whole, the burden of the pandemic was not evenly shared. Compared to White students, Black and Latinx students were more likely to know someone who got sick with COVID-19 and more than twice as likely to know someone who died from it.

**FIGURE 1 | PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH COVID-19 AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Respondents could self-identify with multiple racial or ethnic classifications. Results for additional racial and ethnic classifications can be found in the [web appendices](#). Personal experiences with COVID-19 are not mutually exclusive.





The pandemic also took a toll on students’ mental health. Early in the pandemic, a national survey by [Active Minds](#) found that the mental health of four in five students was negatively affected by the pandemic, and one in five said their mental health had “significantly worsened” since the pandemic began.<sup>42</sup> Across Philadelphia, half of all residents surveyed by the Pew Charitable Trust’s Philadelphia Research and Policy Initiative reported serious depression or anxiety.<sup>43</sup>

Compounding these anxieties were rampant displays of racial injustice. By the summer, many community, faith, and mental health leaders pointed out that Philadelphians were living amid a “double pandemic” of both the coronavirus and racial trauma. Police killings of Black men and women—including Walter Wallace, Jr., who suffered from mental illness, in West Philadelphia—compounded the mental health challenges of many area students.<sup>44</sup> Some of the mass uprisings in response to police killings were met with further violence, including the use of tear gas on peaceful protesters, many of whom were local college students.<sup>45</sup> In the fall, Philadelphia was also at the epicenter of the presidential election, with the state’s electoral votes giving President Joseph R. Biden the win and causing numerous sensational challenges to the results.<sup>46</sup>

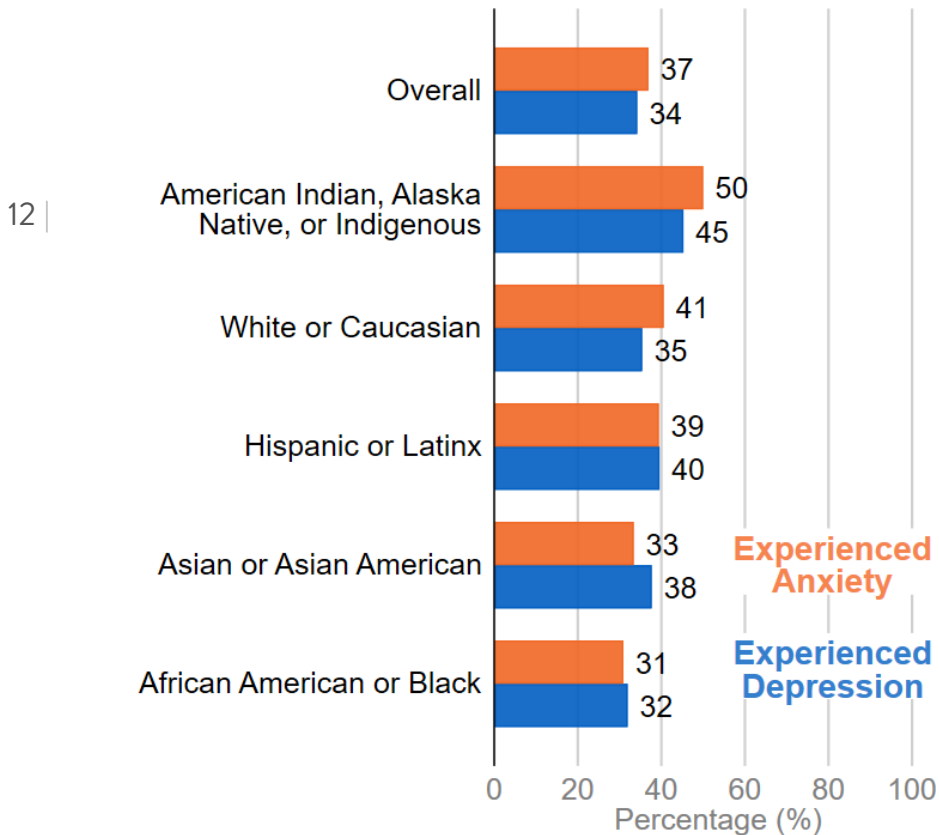
It is not surprising, then, that nearly two in five Philadelphia-area students were experiencing at least moderate anxiety in fall 2020, nor that more than a third were experiencing depression (Figure 2). Students who identify as American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous were more likely to experience anxiety and depression than all other racial and ethnic groups.



“The pandemic has taken a huge toll on my mental health. I have gained a lot of anxiety from this pandemic, especially when it comes to work and school. I work at [a grocery store] which...forces me to work with the public. I have no other choice but to work as I have to feed myself and attempt to make [enough to] pay for school and school-related bills.

– Jahliyah, Philadelphia-area undergraduate

**FIGURE 2 | PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

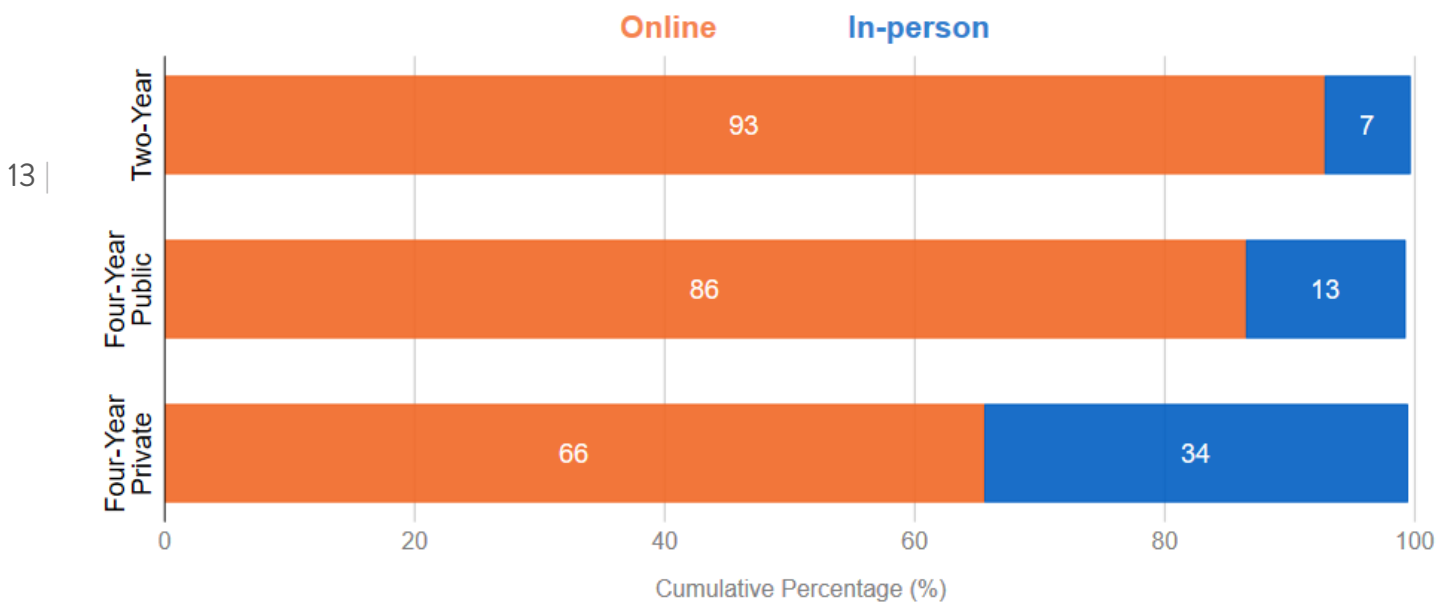
NOTES | Respondents could self-identify with multiple racial or ethnic classifications. Students “experienced anxiety” if they experienced moderate to severe levels of anxiety in the prior two weeks; while students “experienced depression” if they experienced moderate, moderately severe, or severe levels of depression in the prior two weeks. For more details on measures of anxiety and depression used in this report, and results for additional racial and ethnic classifications, refer to the [web appendices](#).

## REMOTE LEARNING

The closure of campuses and the move to remote learning was a major disruption for students. Nationally, 75% of surveyed students were enrolled in online-only classes in fall 2020.<sup>47</sup> Nearly three-quarters struggled to concentrate on classes, and two in five either took care of family members while attending class or dealt with internet or computer-access problems.<sup>48</sup>

In the Philadelphia area, campus closures and online classes were also widespread. The vast majority of surveyed Philadelphia-area students were taking their classes virtually in fall 2020. Across college types, two-year students were especially impacted. Almost all two-year college students took their courses entirely online, compared to 66% of students at area private four-year colleges (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3 | ONLINE VERSUS IN-PERSON CLASSES IN THE PHILADELPHIA AREA, BY SECTOR**



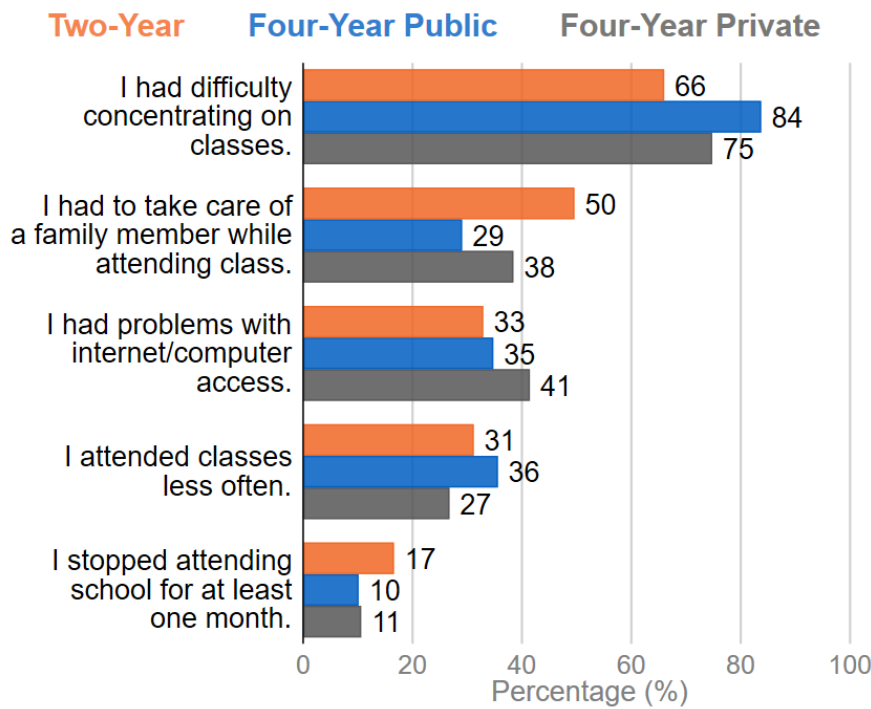
SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Rates in the figure do not include students who did not know how they would be taking classes in the fall as institutions navigated the realities of on-campus study during the second wave of the pandemic. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.



A sizable portion of students struggled with the transition to online coursework. Specifically, between a third and two-thirds of students experienced at least one of these barriers in spring 2020: unreliable internet or computer access; attending class less often; needing to take care of family while trying to attend college remotely; or difficulty concentrating on classes (Figure 4).<sup>49</sup> Half of two-year students had family caretaking obligations during the fall semester, compared to 29% of public four-year and 38% of private four-year students.

**FIGURE 4 | OTHER STUDENT CHALLENGES IN SPRING 2020 AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY SECTOR**



When [my] university transitioned to online classes I thought that this would be a swing in the park, that everything would be extremely easy. Well, news flash, it turned out to be the worst mental battle of my life. I have never been the type to struggle with mental health, but virtual learning took a huge toll on me in a way that I was not prepared to handle.”

– Diamond Juggins, Philadelphia-area undergraduate

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

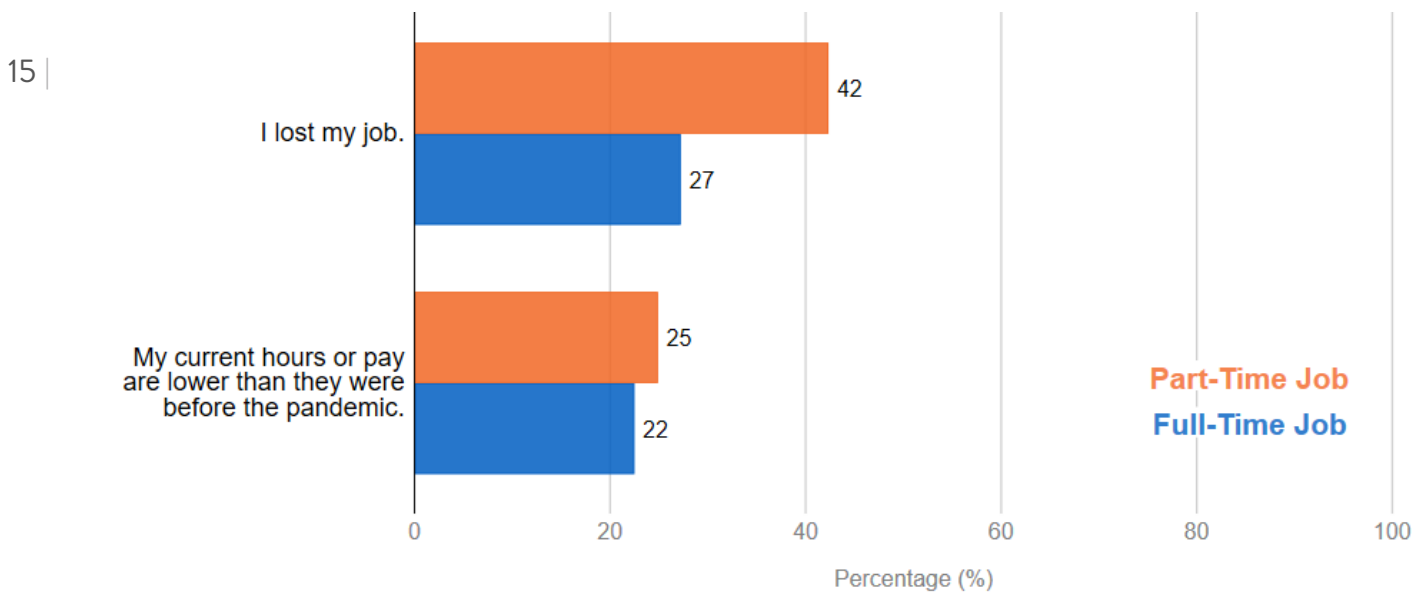
NOTES | Results are among students who were enrolled in college in spring 2020. Some students may have experienced more than one of the challenges listed in the figure.

## MAKING ENDS MEET

In fall 2020, Philadelphia-area students were trying to stay enrolled and support themselves in the context of a crumbling national and local economy. By August, two in five Philadelphians who were employed in March had lost their job, taken a pay cut, and/or had their hours reduced.<sup>50</sup> By the end of the pandemic, the poverty rate in Philadelphia—already the highest among the nation’s 10 largest cities—could rise from 25% to 28.3%.<sup>51</sup> This would mean an additional 40,411 Philadelphians, many of them likely students or their family members, will have fallen below the poverty line.<sup>52</sup>

Area college students were hit even harder economically than the general population. Among local students with a part-time job prior to the pandemic, over two in five lost that job (Figure 5). In addition to students who lost their job, approximately one in four students experienced a reduction in pay or hours at their primary job.

**FIGURE 5 | JOB LOSS OR REDUCTION IN PAY OR HOURS AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY PRE-PANDEMIC JOB STATUS**



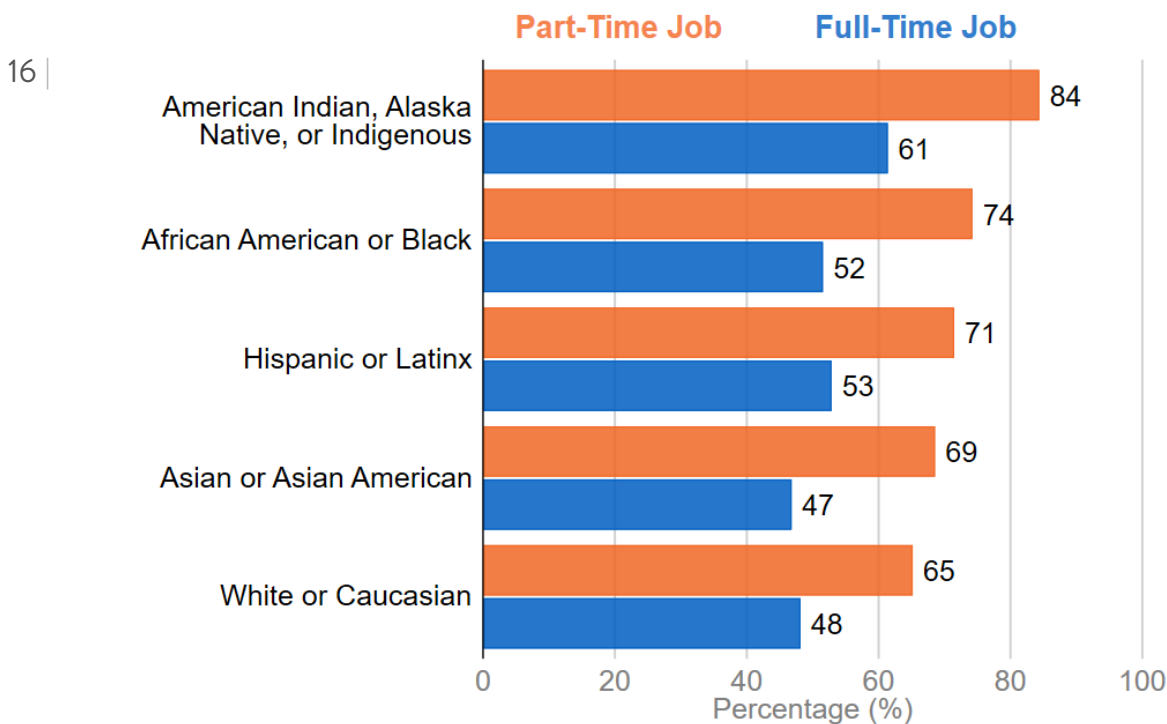
SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results are among students who had at least one job before the pandemic. Those with a full-time job worked 35 or more hours a week, whereas those with a part-time job worked less than 35 hours a week.

Nationally, there were also disparities in job loss according to race, ethnicity, and gender. As of November, Black workers were four percentage points more likely to be unemployed than White workers.<sup>53</sup> In Pennsylvania and its neighboring states of New Jersey and Delaware, the employment rate among Hispanic women with some college experience dropped 13 percentage points (from 73% to 60%) between 2019 and 2020.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, for White men with the same level of education, employment only dropped five percentage points (from 85% to 80%).<sup>55</sup>

Similar patterns were observed in our survey sample. While students across all racial and ethnic groups experienced job losses, pay cuts, and reduced hours, American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous, Black, and Latinx students were more likely to face these setbacks than White students (Figure 6). American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous students who were employed prior to the pandemic were 19 percentage points more likely than their White peers to lose part-time work, hours, or pay, and 13 percentage points more likely to lose full-time work, hours, or pay.

**FIGURE 6 | JOB LOSS OR REDUCTION IN PAY OR HOURS AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY AND PRE-PANDEMIC JOB STATUS**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results above are limited to students who had at least one job before the pandemic. Those with a full-time job worked 35 or more hours a week, whereas those with a part-time job worked less than 35 hours a week. Respondents could self-identify with multiple racial or ethnic classifications. Results for additional racial and ethnic classifications can be found in the [web appendices](#).



## PARENTING AND GOING TO COLLEGE DURING A PANDEMIC

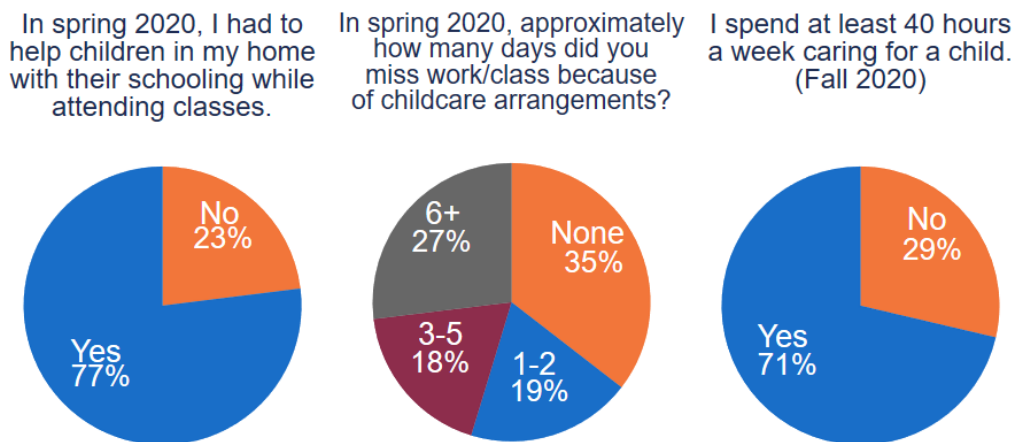
Nationally, more than one in five college students is parenting a child while working toward their degree.<sup>56</sup> Even in so-called normal times, these parenting students experience unique difficulties while in school; many institutions of higher education don't fully understand or adequately respond to their particular needs.<sup>57</sup>

During the pandemic, parenting students' struggles multiplied. As most K-12 schools were closed for in-person instruction at some point during the pandemic, parenting students had no choice but to take on some level of "homeschooling" for their children, in addition to tending to their own education. For instance, the School District of Philadelphia, which serves more than 200,000 mostly economically disadvantaged Black and Hispanic/Latinx students, was entirely virtual from mid-March 2020 through the end of the school year.<sup>58</sup> This decision put tremendous stress on parents, especially those who could not work remotely, those with young children, and women.<sup>59</sup>

Of the more than 950 Philadelphia-area parenting students who responded to the #RealCollege Survey, seven in 10 spent at least 40 hours per week caring for a child in fall 2020 (Figure 7). When we asked parenting students about their experiences in spring 2020, more than three-quarters needed to help their children with school while trying to attend college classes. Further, more than one-quarter of parenting students missed work or class six or more times during the spring term because of childcare arrangements.

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**FIGURE 7 | CHALLENGES FACED BY PHILADELPHIA-AREA PARENTING STUDENTS DURING THE PANDEMIC**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | All results in this figure are among parenting students, and results for questions about the spring 2020 term are limited to students who were enrolled in that term. Results for the question about missing work or class are among parenting students who need, use, or plan to use childcare. A parenting student is a parent, primary caregiver, or guardian (legal or informal) of any children in or outside their household. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

## INSTITUTION BUDGETS

Prior to the pandemic, many colleges were strapped for funds. As of 2019, per-student funding nationally for higher education was still nearly nine percentage points below pre-Great Recession levels, despite increasing for seven straight years.<sup>60</sup> In Pennsylvania, per-student state funding for higher education declined 33.8% between 2008 and 2018.<sup>61</sup>

Higher education faces further economic losses because of the pandemic. Nationally, higher education institutions could suffer a total loss of \$183 billion.<sup>62</sup> Pennsylvania’s largest universities face a collective shortfall of \$800 million.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, Governor Tom Wolf’s 2021–22 budget includes no additional funding for public colleges and universities—despite the state’s higher education system requesting an additional \$35 million.<sup>64</sup> Declining college enrollment could also impact college budgets for several years. In February 2021, Pennsylvania student filings of the FAFSA—an indicator of coming enrollment—were 7.2% lower than the prior year.<sup>65</sup>

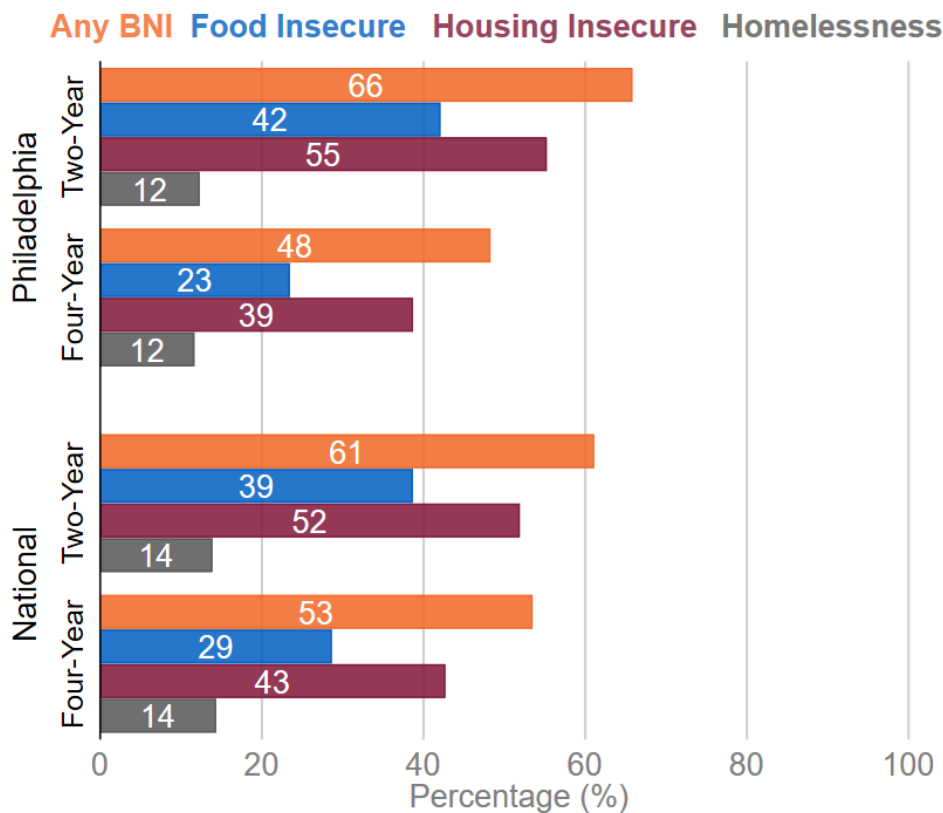


# BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA STUDENTS

Keeping in mind the pandemic-related challenges discussed thus far, we turn to focus on specific basic needs insecurities. While student basic needs encompass a broad set of necessities, our primary emphasis is on food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness.

Our survey found that 66% of two-year students and 48% of four-year students experienced at least one form of basic needs insecurity in fall 2020 (Figure 8). Rates of basic needs insecurity among Philadelphia-area students are similar to those observed around the country, though it is important to note that the percentage of local two-year college students experiencing *any* basic needs insecurity is five points higher than their peers nationwide.<sup>66</sup>

**FIGURE 8 | BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA AND NATIONAL RESPONDENTS, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

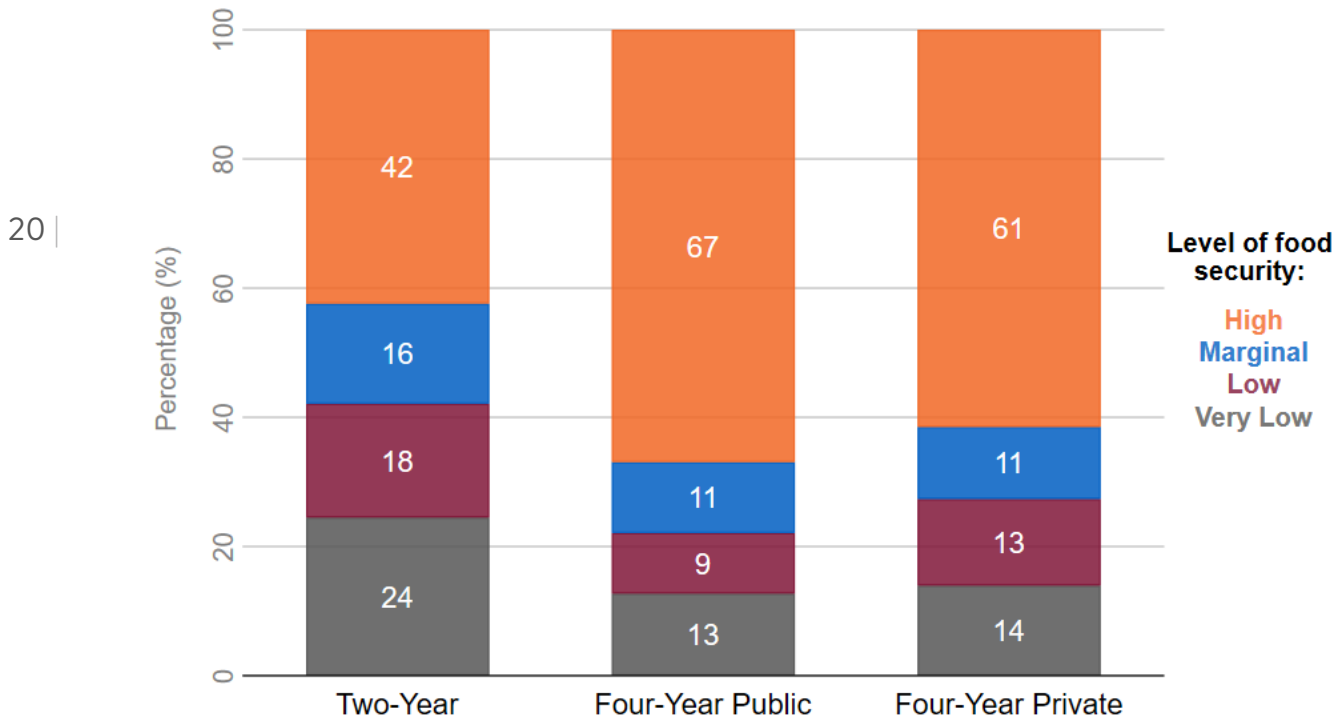
NOTES | Students experiencing “Any BNI” includes students who experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the past year. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was created, refer to the [web appendices](#). Responses from students attending public and private four-year institutions were combined for this figure in order to make a direct comparison to national data, which overwhelmingly includes public institutions.



## EXPERIENCES WITH FOOD INSECURITY

The #RealCollege Survey measures four levels of food security, from very low to high. Respondents experiencing very low or low food security are considered “food insecure.” By this measure, nearly three in 10 Philadelphia-area college students experienced food insecurity in fall 2020 (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). But as with almost every other measure of basic needs insecurity, students at two-year institutions struggled more than their peers at four-year colleges (Figure 9). Food insecurity among two-year students was 15 to 20 percentage points higher than the rate among four-year students.

**FIGURE 9 | LEVEL OF FOOD SECURITY AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY SECTOR**



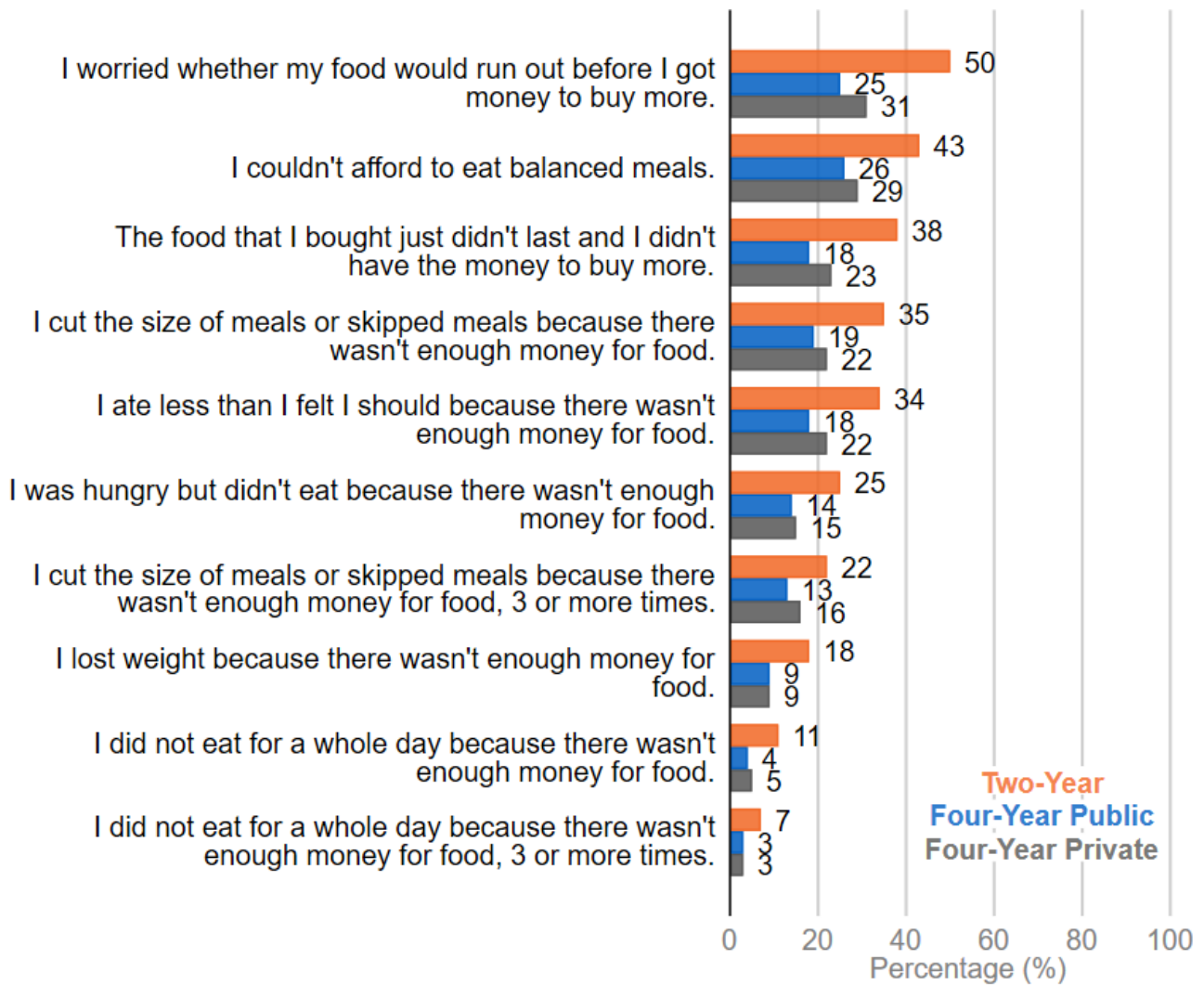
SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | According to the USDA, students at either low or very low levels of food security are termed “food insecure.” Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. For more details on how we measure food security, refer to the [web appendices](#).

When asked specific questions about their food situations, we also saw large disparities between two- and four-year college students (Figure 10). For example, when compared to four-year students, nearly twice as many two-year students—or half of all two-year respondents—worried about running out of food before they had money to buy more. Similarly, in the month prior to the survey, more than one in five two-year students cut the size of meals or skipped meals three or more times because they didn't have enough money for food. Among public four-year and private four-year students, this rate was 13% and 16%, respectively.

**FIGURE 10 | FOOD SECURITY QUESTIONS AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY SECTOR**

21 |



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have experienced more than one of the circumstances listed.



My biggest challenge is finding food . . . my on-campus job finished [and] my internship was postponed indefinitely. I have no job, no idea when or if the internship will start, and no support from family. I've had to rely on the [campus food cupboard] and a [local food bank] while searching for any job that is still hiring.”

– Philadelphia-area undergraduate

## TAKING ACTION

[Sharing Excess](#) is a student-run nonprofit that connects colleges and communities to reduce food waste and hunger. After starting as a meal swipe donation program at Drexel University in 2018, the group has developed partnerships with local grocery stores, restaurants, and retailers to distribute surplus food to students and communities across the city. Sharing Excess is also leading SNAP outreach efforts on college campuses. With chapters at Drexel, Temple, Saint Joseph’s University, and the University of Pennsylvania, the organization’s expanding network can support student food security both on and off campus. To date, Sharing Excess has distributed more than 1.2 million pounds of free food and plans to scale its food sharing model to cities both regionally and nationally.

22 |





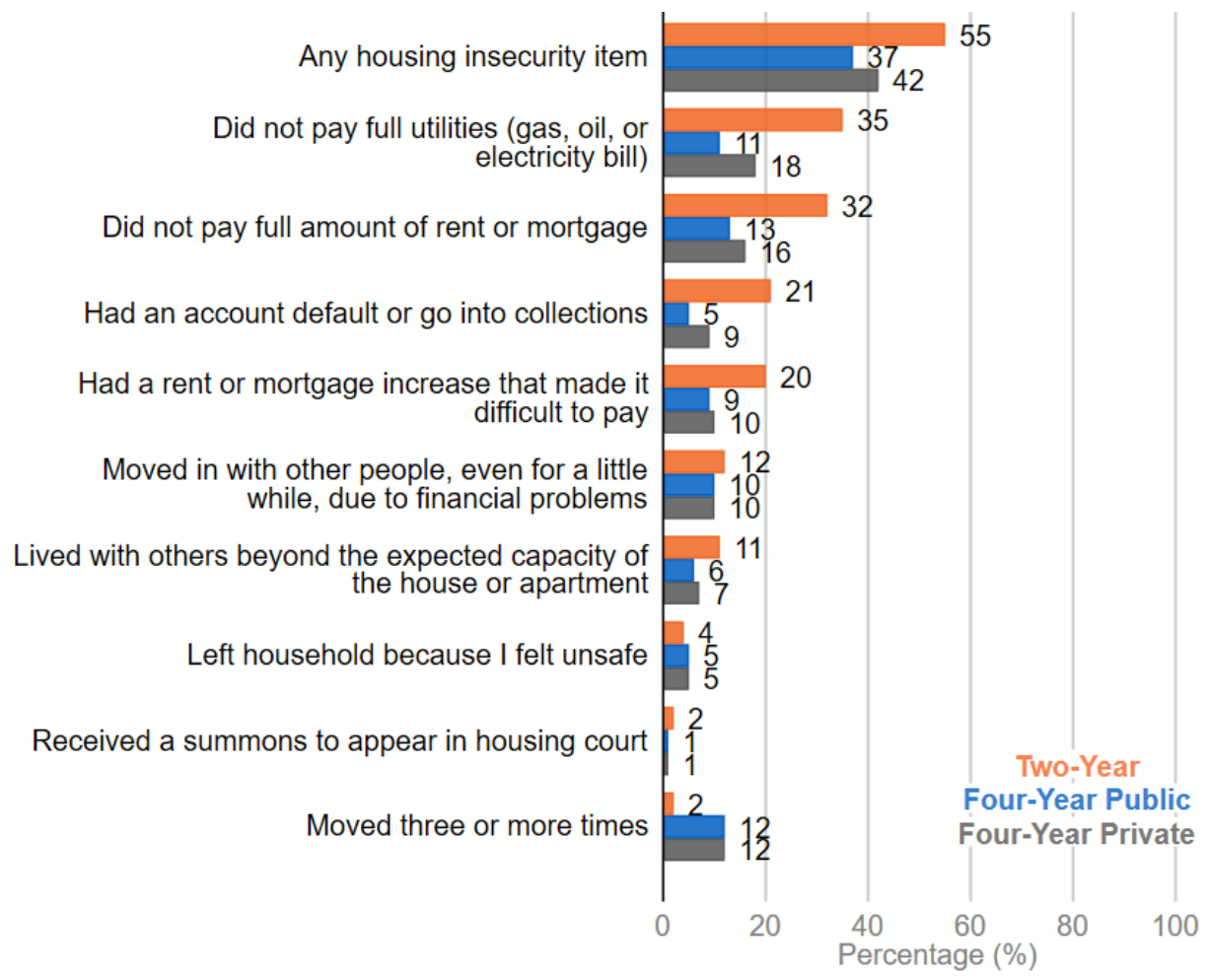


## EXPERIENCES WITH HOUSING INSECURITY

The Hope Center uses a nine-item set of questions to assess housing insecurity among students. The instrument looks at factors such as the ability to pay rent or utilities and the need to move frequently. According to this measure, 55% of two-year students, 37% of public four-year students, and 42% of private four-year students experienced housing insecurity in the 12 months preceding the survey (Figure 11). Eighteen percent of students could not make a full rent or mortgage payment during this period (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

At two-year colleges, students were two to four times more likely than four-year students to default on an account, to experience a rent or mortgage increase that was difficult to afford, or to not pay full rent, mortgage and/or utility bills. Conversely, compared to two-year students, far more four-year students moved three or more times in the 12 months before the survey. Since four-year colleges are typically more residential than two-year colleges, this could reflect campuses closing and reopening (and in some cases, re-closing), resulting in students scrambling to find a place to stay. We also saw this pattern in our national data.<sup>67</sup>

**FIGURE 11 | HOUSING INSECURITY AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY SECTOR**



24 |

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have experienced more than one of the circumstances listed above. For more details on how we measure housing insecurity, refer to the [web appendices](#).



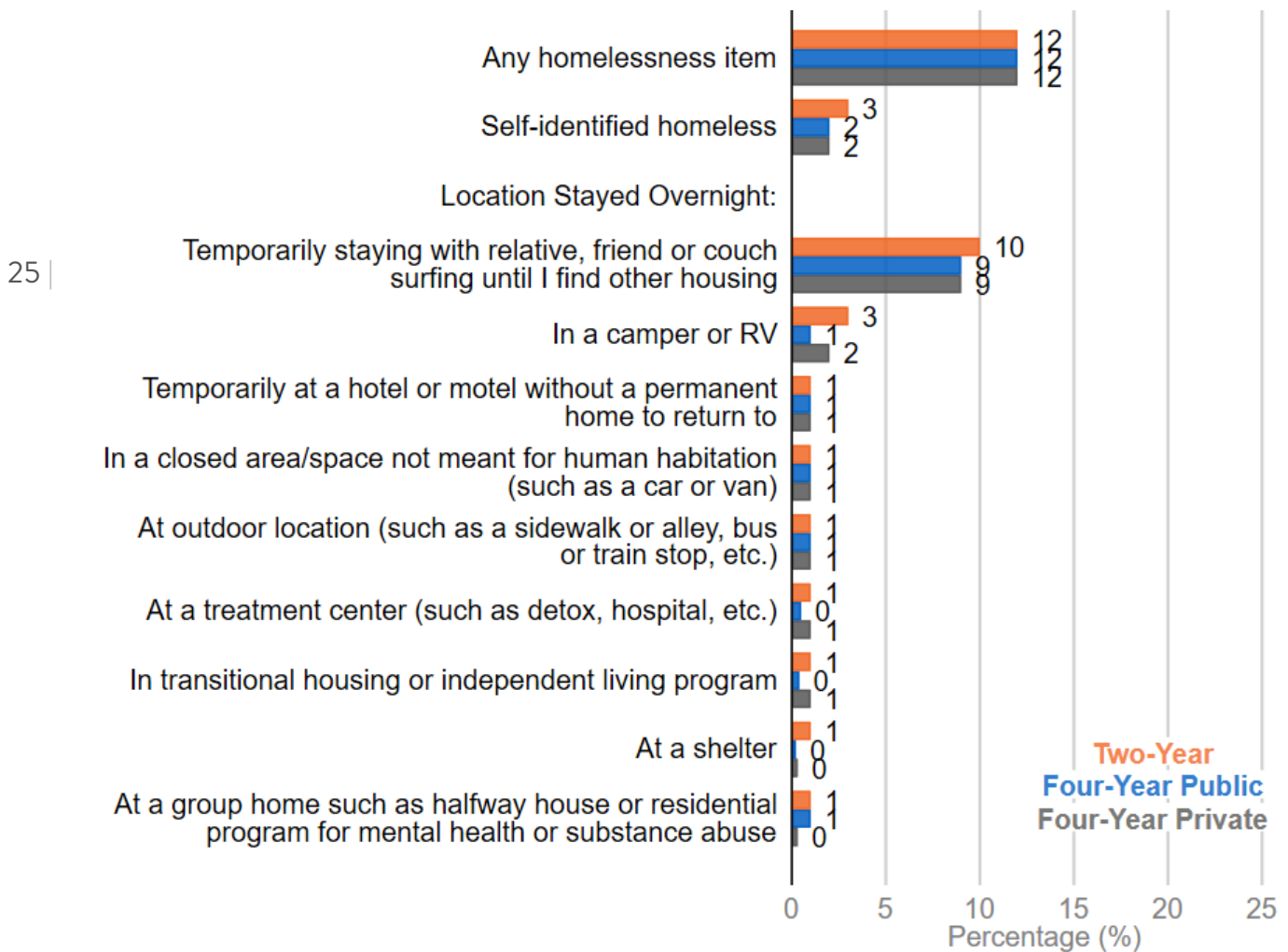
I still have to pay rent on my off-campus apartment, but I have no income to do so. I can't afford food. The state government recently passed a bill to allow 'to-go' cocktails. Aren't we more important than that?"

– Philadelphia-area undergraduate

## EXPERIENCES WITH HOMELESSNESS

The Hope Center surveyed students about their experiences with homelessness using criteria from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.<sup>68</sup> Using this definition, 12% of surveyed Philadelphia-area college students experienced homelessness in the 12 months preceding the survey (Figure 12). In contrast to rates of food insecurity and housing insecurity, rates of homelessness were the same across college types. The most cited experience of homelessness was couch surfing or temporarily staying with a relative or friend.

**FIGURE 12 | EXPERIENCES WITH HOMELESSNESS AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have experienced more than one of the circumstances listed above. For more details on how we measure homelessness, refer to the [web appendices](#). Numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number; bars labeled as 0 represent percentages between 0.0 and 0.5.





I am a disabled parent of two children—a 12-year-old and a 22-month-old. In entering my second semester . . . the coronavirus pandemic shut down the state and classes were moved online. Spring [2020] semester was the one of the most challenging academic experiences I had—I was living in a toxic environment and I could no longer utilize campus space or coffee shops as a safe space to learn. I had to support my then-elementary school student as they transitioned to online schooling. Eventually, towards the end of the semester, I faced housing insecurity and needed to find a safe home for my family and myself.”

– Suja, Philadelphia-area undergraduate

## TAKING ACTION

26 |

St. Joseph’s House provides transitional housing for Philadelphia college students experiencing homelessness or housing instability. Opened in 2019 by DePaulUSA, it was among the first of its kind in the region. The newly renovated building has 24 furnished single room occupancy units with a shared kitchen, bathrooms, and common spaces. Residents have access to meals, service coordination, healthcare, and employment opportunities—with the goal of increasing residents’ chances of graduation. Initial indicators of the success of this program have led DePaulUSA to plan a similar project in another part of the city.



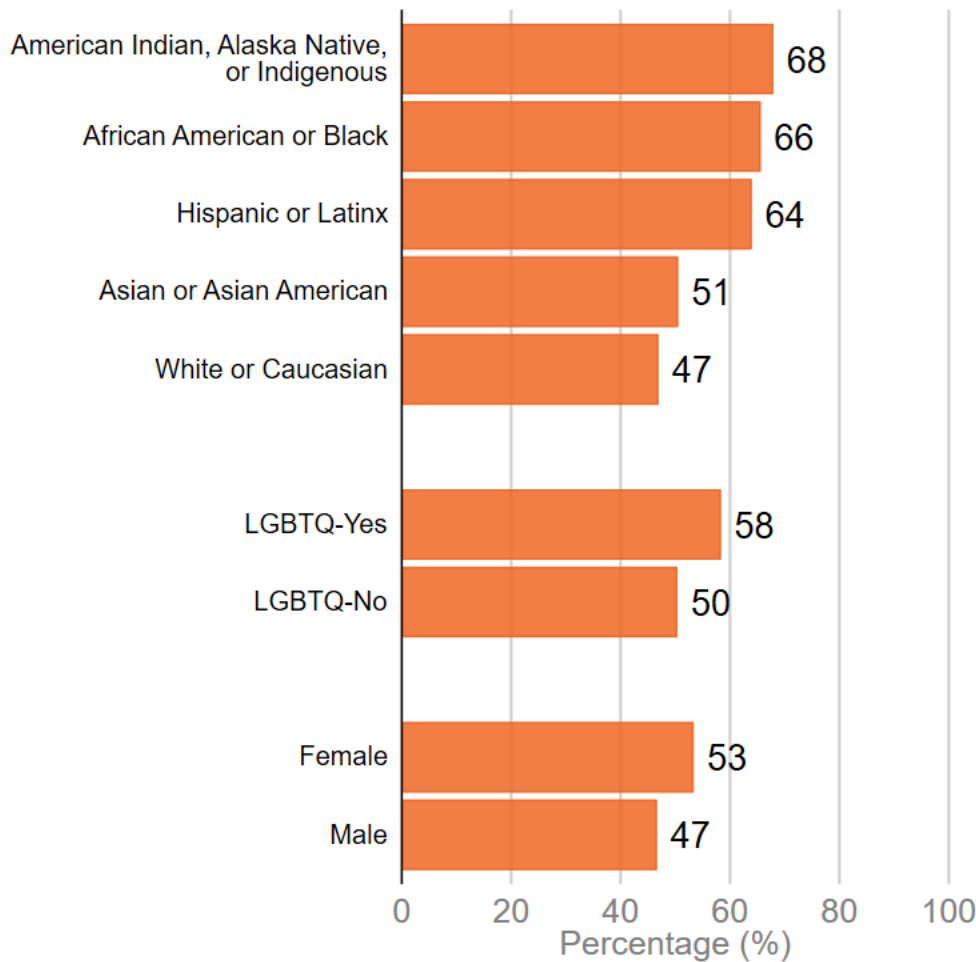


## DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

In addition to disparities between two- and four-year college students, there are disparities in basic needs insecurity across race and ethnicity, LGBTQ status, and gender. Strikingly, American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous students were 21 percentage points more likely than their White peers to experience basic needs insecurity (Figure 13). Black students’ rate of basic needs insecurity outpaced White students’ rate of need by 19 percentage points. We also observe an eight-percentage point gap in LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students’ basic needs, and a six-percentage point gap between female and male students’ needs.

**FIGURE 13 | DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACIAL/ETHNIC IDENTITY, LGBTQ STATUS, AND GENDER IDENTITY**

27 |



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

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

## TAKING ACTION

[UESF](#) (formerly the Utility Emergency Services Fund) has a long history of helping Philadelphia-area families and individuals, including college students achieve financial stability. Through their College Savings Account program, UESF matches \$3 for every \$1 saved for college. UESF also helps local residents secure emergency grants for gas, electric, and water bills, and has resources to help students overcome food insecurity, healthcare issues, and more. For more information visit [uesfacts.org/](https://uesfacts.org/).



28 |

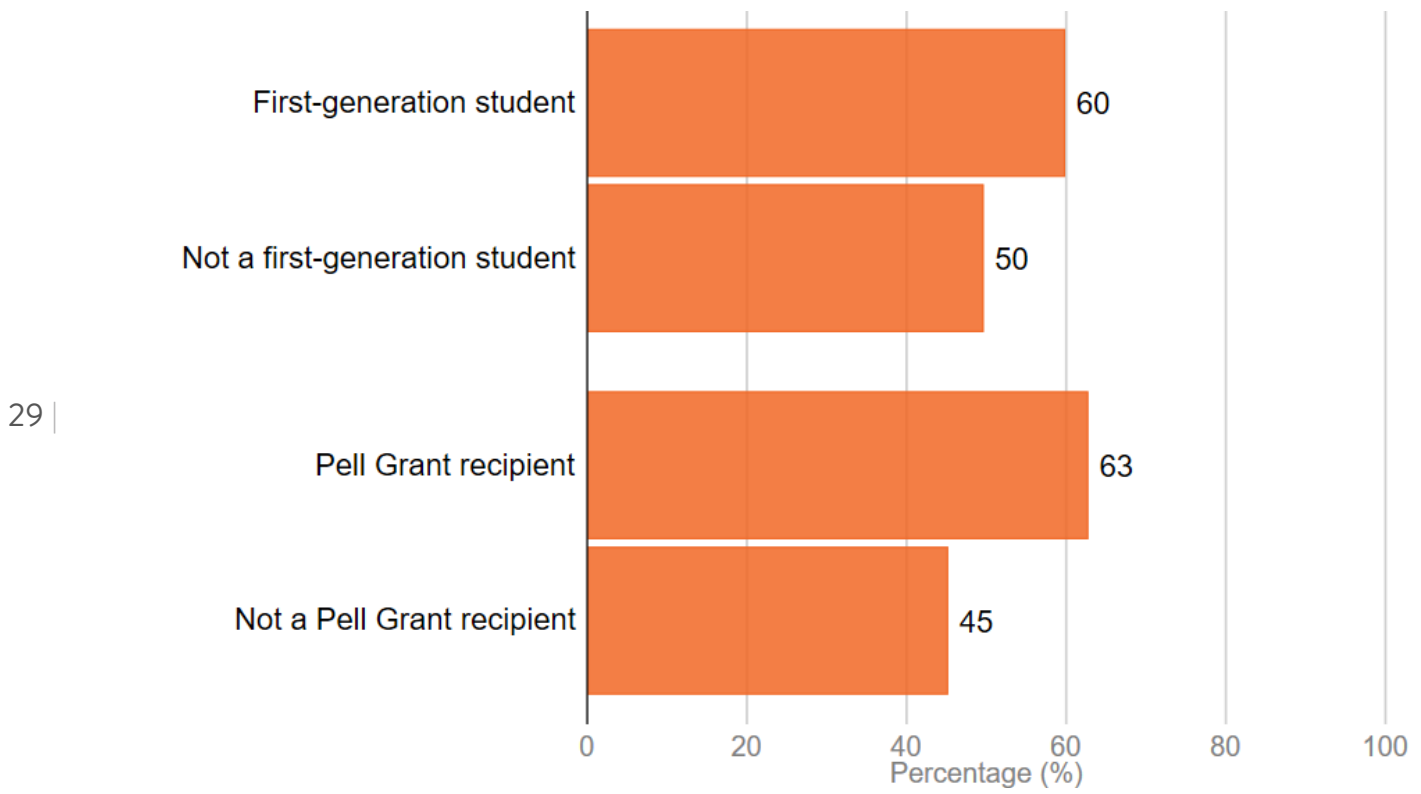


Basic needs are everything at this point. Students are struggling to find balance in their lives on top of struggling to find food, shelter, and security.”

– Philadelphia-area undergraduate

First-generation students and Pell Grant recipients in the Philadelphia area also experienced higher rates of basic needs insecurity compared to their peers (Figure 14). Students who are the first in their family to attend college were 10 percentage points more likely than other students to experience basic needs insecurity. The rate of basic needs insecurity among Pell Grant recipients was 18 percentage points higher than the rate among non-Pell Grant recipients.

**FIGURE 14 | DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY FIRST-GENERATION STATUS AND PELL GRANT STATUS**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | First-generation status is determined by whether a student’s parents’ highest level of education completed is a high school diploma or GED. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#)

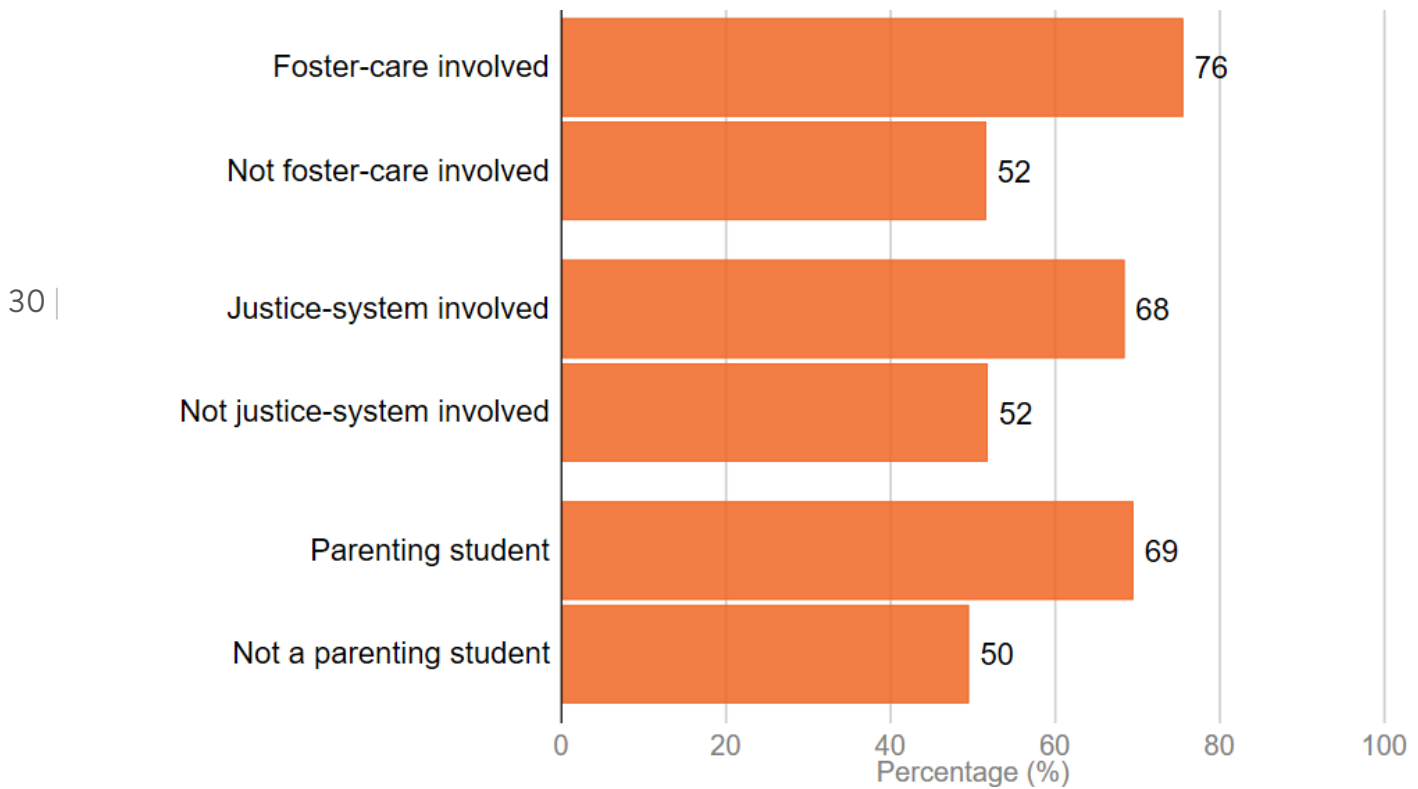


It is really hard to keep up with homework when I have to work to pay for my own rent and I am really tired all the time and don’t eat healthy foods or exercise.”

– Philadelphia-area undergraduate

Students with specific life experiences were also more likely to experience basic needs insecurity than others. For example, more than three-quarters of students with experience in the foster care system experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, and/or homelessness (Figure 15). Among students with experience in the justice system, more than two in three experienced basic needs insecurity. Similarly, parenting students were 19 percentage points more likely than non-parenting students to experience basic needs insecurity. These findings are consistent with our national survey results.<sup>69</sup>

**FIGURE 15 | DISPARITIES IN GAPS BETWEEN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AND USE OF SUPPORTS AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY FOSTER-CARE INVOLVED, JUSTICE-SYSTEM INVOLVED, AND PARENTING STATUS**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Students who have been convicted of a crime are considered justice-system involved. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).



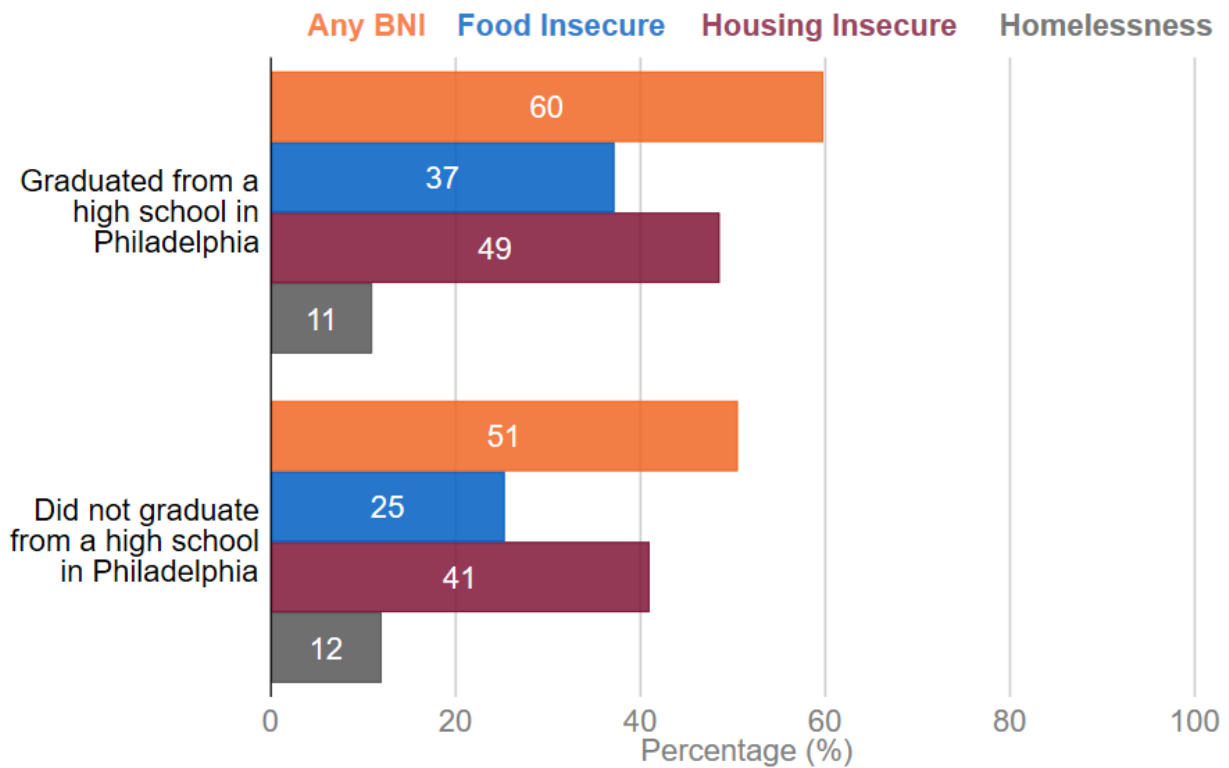
## TAKING ACTION

The [Single Stop at Community College of Philadelphia](#) was established in 2013 to help students overcome the barriers that stand in the way of academic success and economic mobility. Full-time, dedicated Single Stop staff assess students' needs, and then connect them to essential supports like health insurance, food, tax preparation services, legal aid, financial education, childcare, public benefits, emergency funds, and mental health resources. [Research suggests](#) that Single Stop services improve students' grade point averages, course completion rates, and college persistence rates.<sup>70</sup> During the pandemic, Single Stop has assisted students experiencing financial crises. Their Basic Needs Fund helps students pay for in-home Wi-Fi services, food, and housing, thereby allowing students to have peace of mind and focus on their studies.



Students who graduated from Philadelphia high schools were also more likely than other students to experience basic needs insecurity (Figure 16). Specifically, Philadelphia high school graduates were 12 percentage points more likely than non-Philadelphia graduates to experience food insecurity, and eight percentage points more likely to experience housing insecurity.

**FIGURE 16 | BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY RATES AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY HIGH SCHOOL ATTENDED**



32 |

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | High schools in Philadelphia may have included public, charter, or private schools. Students experiencing “Any BNI” includes students who experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was created, refer to the [web appendices](#).

## BASIC NEEDS AND COLLEGE DREAMS

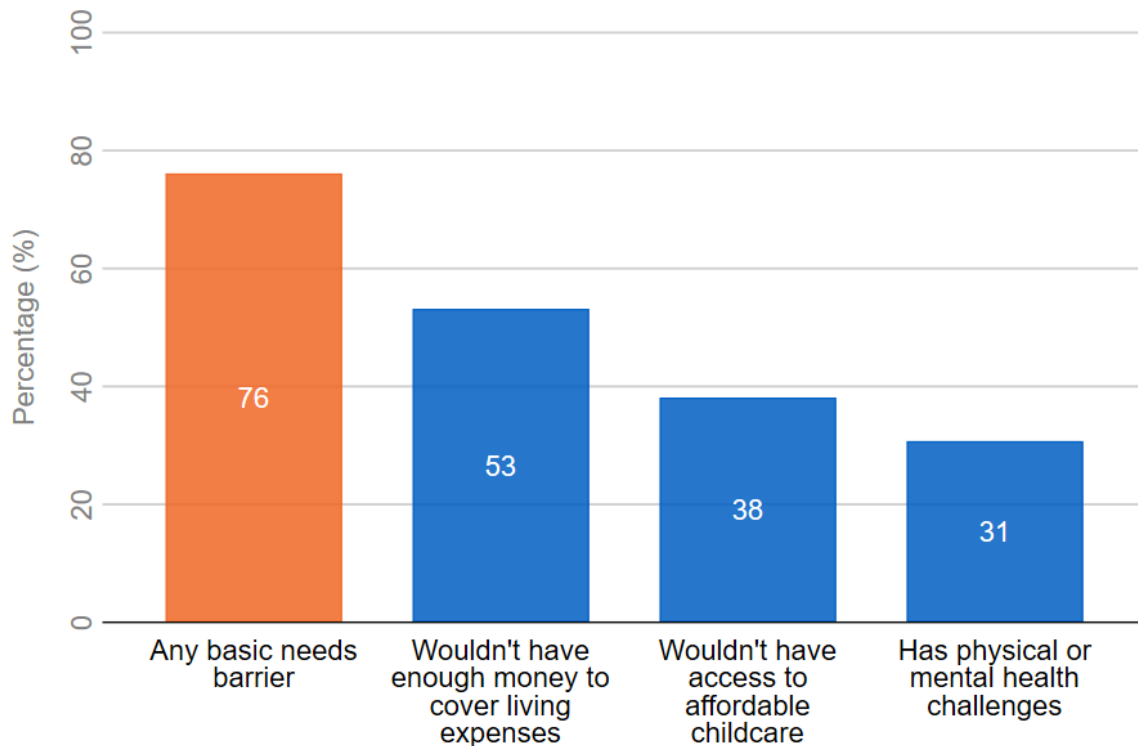
Basic needs insecurity can impede the dream of a college degree not only for current students, but also for those Philadelphians who want to attend college for the first time or re-enroll after stopping out. There are approximately 176,000 Philadelphians who began but did not finish their college degrees, and they are disproportionately Black and female, a disparity that highlights systemic structural inequities in our city.<sup>71</sup> In total, nearly two thirds of Philadelphians age 25 and over have either not yet attended college, or previously attended college but did not complete a degree or certificate.<sup>72</sup>

Since Philadelphians who are not currently enrolled in college are missed by the #RealCollege Survey, we used another approach to understand their experiences. In fall 2020, we partnered with Temple University's [Institute for Survey Research](#) to ask approximately 900 Philadelphians between the ages of 20 and 45 about their experiences with postsecondary education.<sup>73</sup> Among respondents who have not yet started or completed college, one-third aspire to complete some form of postsecondary education.



Basic needs insecurity, including challenges affording living expenses, childcare, and health needs, is a major barrier to those aspirations. It affects more than three in four Philadelphians seeking to complete college (Figure 17).

**FIGURE 17 | BASIC NEEDS BARRIERS TO COLLEGE ATTAINMENT AMONG PHILADELPHIANS (AGES 20 TO 45) WHO ASPIRE TO ENROLL IN COLLEGE**



34 |

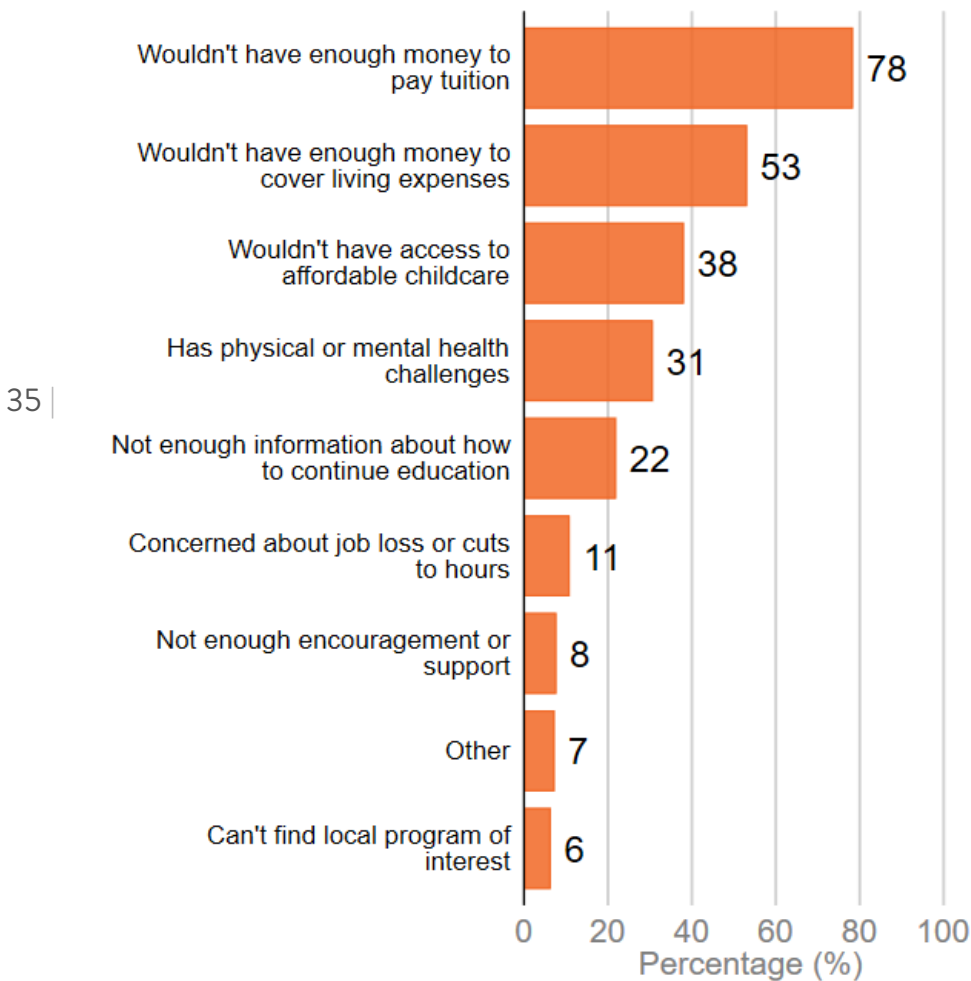
SOURCE | College Experiences and Aspirations in Philadelphia Survey

NOTES | Results are among respondents who had either 1) not yet attended college or 2) previously attended college without completing a degree or certificate, and aspire to complete some form of postsecondary credential. Respondents who are currently enrolled in college are excluded. “Any basic needs barrier” includes respondents who reported that challenges affording living expenses, childcare, and/or health needs presented a barrier to them achieving their educational ambitions. Percentages are based on weighted sample. See [web appendices](#) for information about weighting.



When asked about other barriers to completing a college credential, a majority of Philadelphians seeking a college degree said that living expenses while attending school would pose a challenge for them, second only to concerns about tuition costs (Figure 18). Philadelphians are far more likely to be concerned about these financial challenges than they are about insufficient information, fears of job loss, or a lack of encouragement.

**FIGURE 18 | REPORTED BARRIERS TO COLLEGE ATTAINMENT AMONG PHILADELPHIANS (AGES 20 TO 45) WHO ASPIRE TO ENROLL IN COLLEGE**



SOURCE | College Experiences and Aspirations in Philadelphia Survey

NOTES | Results are among respondents who had either 1) not yet attended college or 2) previously attended college without completing a degree or certificate, and aspire to complete some form of postsecondary credential. Respondents who are currently enrolled in college are excluded. Percentages are based on weighted sample. See [web appendices](#) for information about weighting.

Basic needs insecurity affects college attainment in Philadelphia even more broadly than the #RealCollege Survey results reveal. In a forthcoming report, we will delve deeper into the obstacles that prospective college students and those seeking to return to college face. In the meantime, area colleges and universities have the opportunity to use federal stimulus funds to reach out to Philadelphians who left college during the pandemic. Distributing emergency aid to those individuals and their families can support their basic needs and help them fulfill their college dreams.

## GETTING HELP: ACCESSING SUPPORTS TO MEET BASIC NEEDS

Growing evidence suggests that students who have access to public benefits and campus supports are more likely to graduate. An evaluation in California concluded that students who receive emergency aid are twice as likely to earn a college credential as those who do not receive such aid.<sup>74</sup> A study conducted at a Texas community college showed that receiving emergency aid and case management services was associated with higher graduation rates.<sup>75</sup> Another study conducted at a public university in California showed that enrolling in SNAP was associated with a significant boost in retention rates among students experiencing basic needs insecurity.<sup>76</sup>

In 2020, colleges and universities had some additional resources to help students. The CARES Act, passed in March 2020, provided \$14 billion in financial relief to colleges, with \$6 billion reserved for emergency grants to students.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, the bill had shortfalls. For example, funding formulas in the CARES Act meant that community colleges received significantly less support than four-year colleges, and students who were claimed as dependents were ineligible for CARES Act stimulus checks, even if they earned income and filed a tax return.<sup>78</sup> It is likely that many more students needed these supports in 2020 than were able to access them.<sup>79</sup>

36 | Additionally, many college students continued to be ineligible for existing public supports like SNAP because of their full-time student status.<sup>80</sup> This thankfully changed somewhat in December 2020 (after the #RealCollege Survey was fielded). The Consolidated Appropriations Act temporarily expanded SNAP eligibility for college students, while also providing \$23 billion in financial relief to students and institutions of higher education.<sup>81</sup> The American Rescue Plan Act, passed in March 2021, provided another \$40 billion in financial support for institutions of higher education and their students.<sup>82</sup>

This section examines supports available to Philadelphia-area students experiencing basic needs insecurity in fall 2020.





## TAKING ACTION

[Believe in Students](#) (BIS) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit focused on supporting college students' basic needs. BIS created the FAST Fund, an emergency aid program managed by faculty teams at Temple University and Community College of Philadelphia, and in 2020, distributed more than \$900,000 in emergency aid to thousands of students. In response to the pandemic, BIS also co-developed (along with The Hope Center and Edquity) a [COVID-19 Student Support Guide](#) for Philadelphia students and piloted [Gather Food Hall](#), an outdoor food hall that provided free and low-cost meals to college students.





## EMERGENCY AID

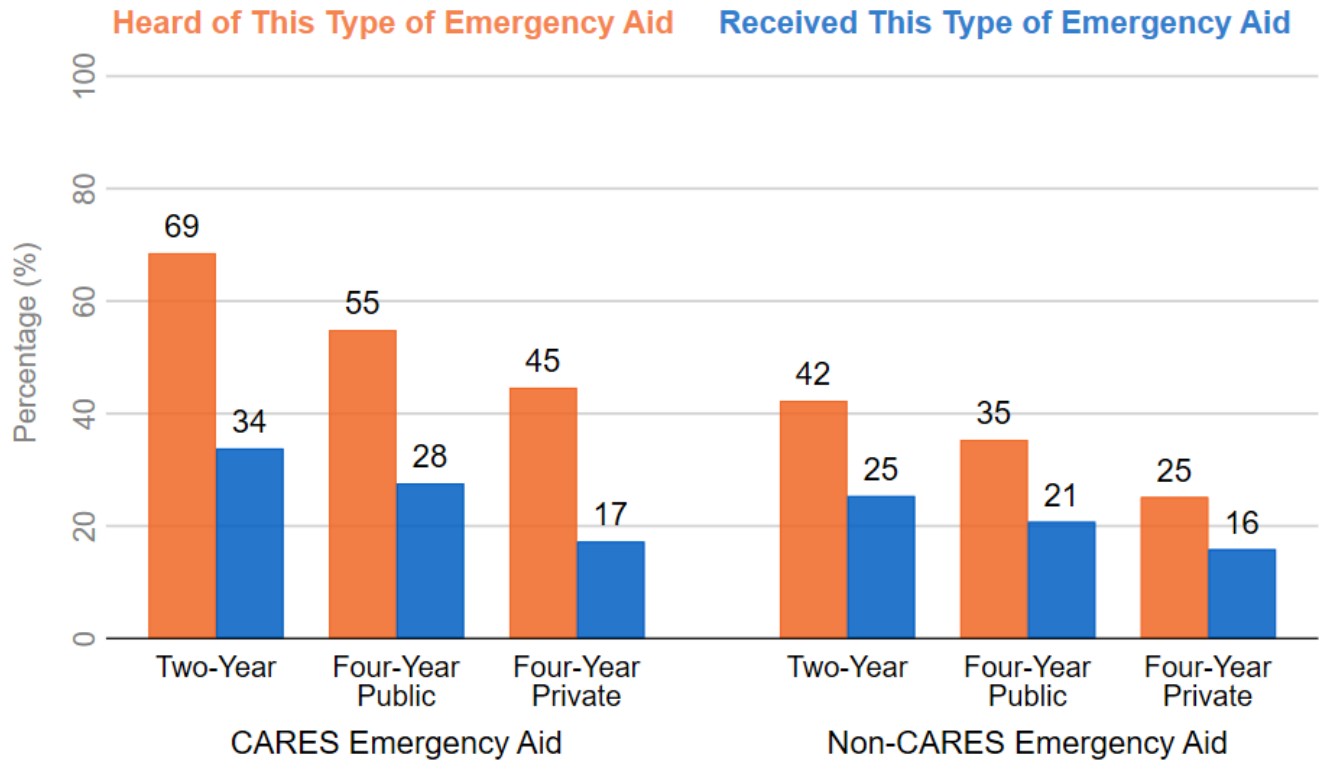
One support for students that became crucial during the pandemic was *emergency aid*. Most colleges and universities have some program for distributing small grants to help students with basic needs, such as rent, food, and other costs incurred because of unforeseen circumstances.<sup>83</sup> Studies have shown that as little as \$250 in emergency aid can make the difference between a student graduating on time or not.<sup>84</sup> Because emergency aid was greatly expanded and altered in 2020 due to the CARES Act, survey respondents were asked both about aid programs in place prior to the pandemic and about CARES Act–related aid.<sup>85</sup>

Overall, about one in four Philadelphia-area respondents who were experiencing basic needs insecurity received a CARES Act grant, and about one in five received another form of emergency aid (Figure 19). Receipt of CARES and non-CARES emergency aid was highest at two-year colleges, followed by public four-year institutions, and then private four-year institutions. At two-year colleges, more than a third of students experiencing basic needs insecurity received a CARES Act grant; at private four-year colleges, just 17% did.

For some students, lack of knowledge appears to be a barrier to receiving aid. For instance, at private four-year colleges, only 45% of students experiencing basic needs insecurity were aware of the CARES Act grant, and just a quarter knew about non-CARES emergency aid. Private four-year students were also less likely than their peers at other colleges to receive aid. This suggests there is an opportunity for institutions to promote and distribute emergency aid more effectively.



**FIGURE 19 | KNOWLEDGE AND RECEIPT OF CARES ACT GRANTS AND OTHER EMERGENCY AID AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA STUDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY SECTOR**



39 |

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results are among students who experienced any basic needs insecurity, meaning students who experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was created, refer to the [web appendices](#).

## EMERGENCY AID: A NATIONAL LOOK

National findings from the [#RealCollege Survey](#) suggest that emergency aid funding was critical in keeping students afloat in 2020.<sup>86</sup> More than three in five emergency aid recipients used the funds to stay enrolled or afford educational materials.<sup>87</sup> The extra funds also reduced stress for about seven in 10—a critical need given rates of anxiety during the pandemic—and allowed about half of aid recipients to pay for food, transit, or housing.<sup>88</sup> Despite these clear benefits, fewer than two in five students were aware of general (non-CARES Act) emergency aid programs, and nearly three in five who applied for aid found the process stressful.<sup>89</sup> Colleges can and should reduce these barriers with efficient and equitable emergency aid distribution systems.

The Hope Center will explore these issues further in a forthcoming report on emergency aid, slated for fall 2021. To learn more about The Hope Center’s emergency aid work, visit: [hope4college.com/emergency-aid-during-the-pandemic-improving-equitable-practice-and-documenting-impact/](https://hope4college.com/emergency-aid-during-the-pandemic-improving-equitable-practice-and-documenting-impact/).

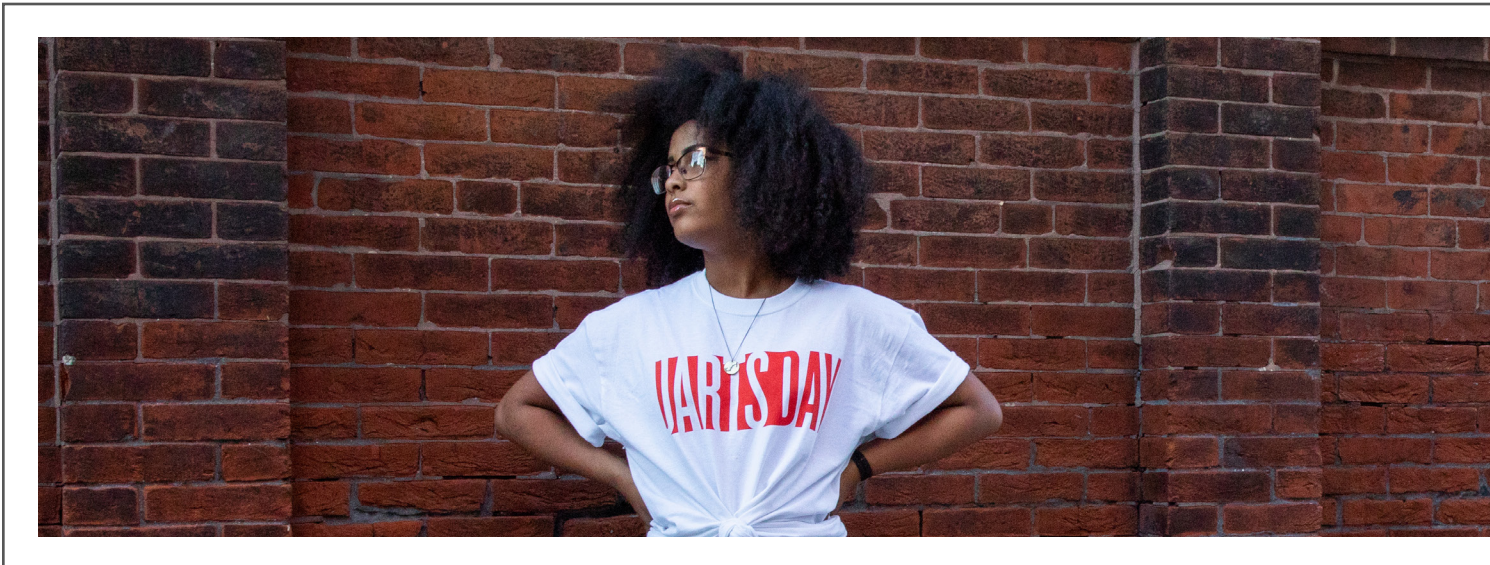
## CONNECTING STUDENTS TO SNAP

SNAP is the nation’s most important anti-hunger program, reaching 38 million people in 2019 alone.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, SNAP has historically failed to reach college students. Although college students’ access to SNAP was temporarily expanded in December 2020, the program’s complex and restrictive eligibility criteria were designed to exclude students.<sup>91</sup> Even among those students who are SNAP-eligible, barriers to accessing the program exist. A 2018 study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office estimated that 57% of SNAP-eligible students who were also at risk of food insecurity did not apply for SNAP, perhaps because they did not know they were eligible.<sup>92</sup>

In the face of these challenges, many Philadelphia-area colleges, community organizations, and student-led advocacy groups have stepped up to increase student awareness of SNAP. Single Stop staff at the Community College of Philadelphia and La Salle University help students navigate the SNAP application process, and the Greater Philadelphia [Coalition Against Hunger](#) runs a SNAP hotline. Similarly, [Benefits Data Trust](#) operates a public benefits hotline and is piloting a hotline with Montgomery County Community College; both lines provide information about SNAP. [Community Legal Services Philadelphia](#) also helps students apply for SNAP benefits and appeal eligibility decisions through their phone intake system. Nationally, the student-led [#FUELHigherEd campaign](#) works for increased access to SNAP among college students, and the [College SNAP Project](#) gives students resources to apply for SNAP. All of these important efforts can help reduce student food insecurity.

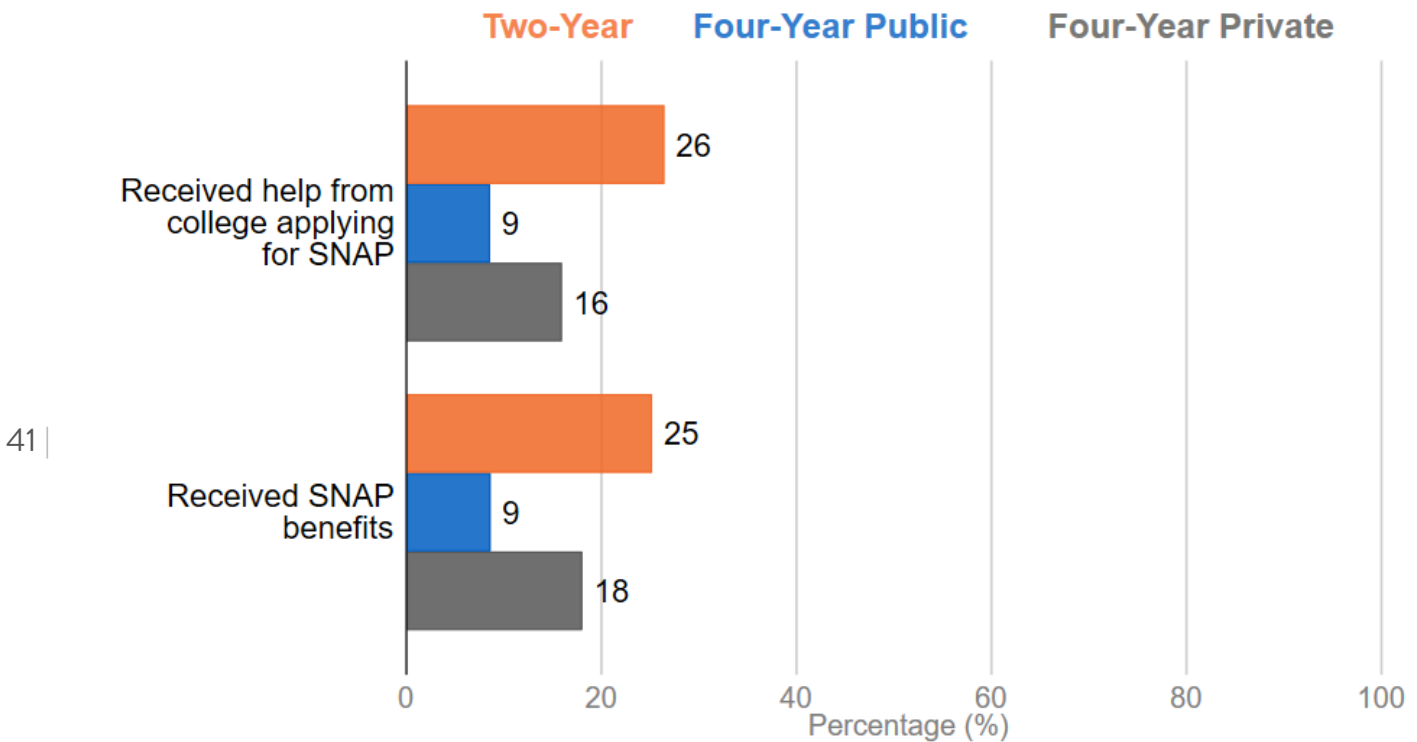
40 |

Given these factors, we are particularly interested in SNAP utilization among Philadelphia-area college students who experienced food insecurity. While some students are not eligible for SNAP, many of those who are do not receive the benefit.<sup>93</sup> As such, Philadelphia-area institutions and community organizations have an opportunity to expand on the efforts they have already championed and help more students access SNAP.



Among two-year students in the Philadelphia area who were experiencing food insecurity, 26% received help applying for SNAP from their college, and 25% received SNAP benefits (Figure 20). At four-year institutions, students who were experiencing food insecurity were much less likely to use SNAP. Just 18% of private four-year students and 9% of public four-year students accessed SNAP.

**FIGURE 20 | USE OF AND HELP APPLYING FOR SNAP AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA STUDENTS EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY, BY SECTOR**



41 |

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Students may receive SNAP benefits without having any assistance from their college in applying, or may have had assistance applying for SNAP without receiving the benefit itself. Results are among students who are experiencing food insecurity. For more details on how our measure of food insecurity was created, refer to the [web appendices](#).



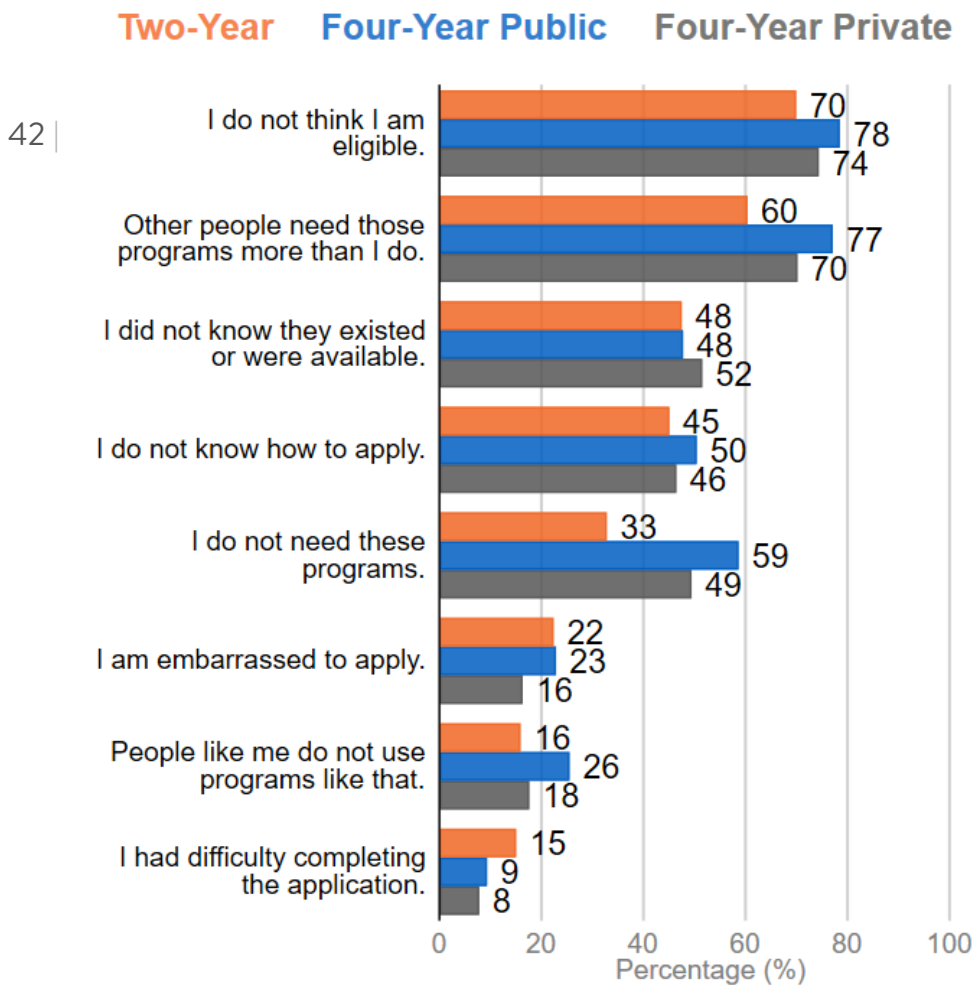
Colleges students are not okay...We need a second and third stimulus check from the government. We are fighting school work, graduate assistantships, full time positions, family struggles, food insecurities, clubs and organizations, leadership roles ALL during a global pandemic... We need grace, not productivity models being forced.”

– Philadelphia-area undergraduate

When we asked students experiencing basic needs insecurity why they did not get help from their college when applying for SNAP, or use other campus-based supports, about seven in 10 believed they were ineligible (Figure 21). Approximately half said they did not know the supports existed or weren't sure how to apply. As such, across colleges, there is an opportunity to increase students' awareness of available supports and their eligibility rules.

At public four-year colleges, stigma also appeared to be a barrier to utilizing supports. Public four-year students were 26 percentage points more likely than two-year students to say they did not need the programs, despite experiencing basic needs insecurity. Students attending public four-year colleges were also 10 percentage points more likely than two-year students to say that "people like them" do not use support programs. Meanwhile, students at private four-year colleges were the least likely to be too embarrassed to apply for support.

**FIGURE 21 | REASONS WHY PHILADELPHIA-AREA STUDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY DID NOT USE CAMPUS SUPPORTS, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | This question asked about the following campus supports: help from their college applying for SNAP, help finding affordable housing, emergency housing, and emergency financial aid. Some students may have reported multiple reasons for why they did not use campus supports. Results are among students who experienced any basic needs insecurity, meaning students who experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to [web appendices](#).



## TAKING ACTION

In 2020, La Salle University became the first four-year institution in Philadelphia to establish a Single Stop, and it is believed to be the nation’s first private four-year college or university to align with the program.<sup>94</sup> Housed in the university’s Office of Ministry, Service and Support, La Salle’s Single Stop helps students access resources to meet their basic needs. A student questionnaire helps staff identify which public benefits programs—including Medicaid, SNAP, and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)—might be accessible to students. On average, students helped through La Salle’s Single Stop gain access to more than \$3,000 worth of public benefits.<sup>95</sup>

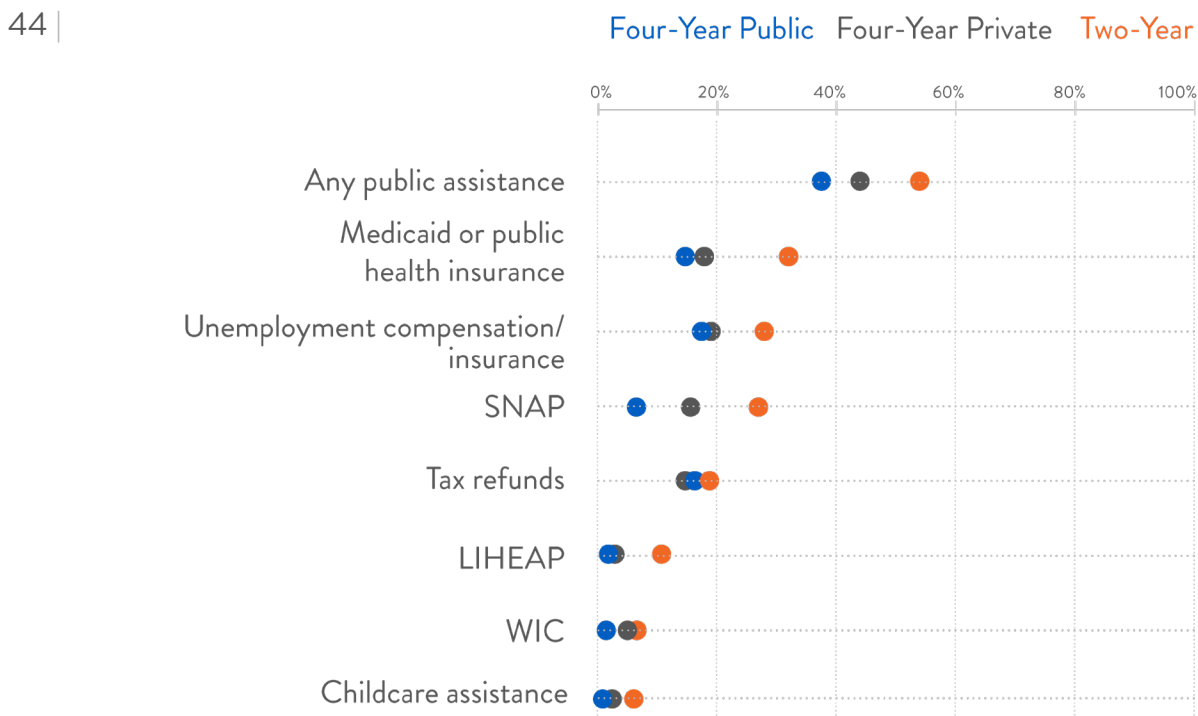


## OTHER PUBLIC BENEFITS

Beyond SNAP, we asked students about their use of other public benefits provided by local, state, or federal government agencies. These benefits are intended to help people experiencing financial hardship meet their basic needs. Like SNAP, most public benefits (e.g., Medicaid and public housing) have strict and often complex eligibility criteria and application processes that are difficult to navigate—especially for students.

Despite restrictive eligibility and bureaucratic hurdles, about two in five Philadelphia students experiencing basic needs insecurity accessed at least one public benefit in 2020. Specifically, 53% of two-year, 44% of private four-year, and 37% of public four-year students utilized supports (Figure 22). The most frequently used benefits were Medicaid, unemployment insurance, SNAP, and tax refunds. Again, while it is a good sign that some students in need were accessing public benefits, we must also ask why the majority were not—especially at public four-year colleges, where just over one in three students with need were accessing supports

**FIGURE 22 | USE OF OTHER PUBLIC BENEFITS AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA STUDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results are limited to students who experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, LIHEAP = Low Income Housing Energy Assistance Program, and WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. For results for additional public benefits, see [web appendices](#).



## TAKING ACTION

In 2020, [Benefits Data Trust](#) (BDT), a national nonprofit that harnesses the power of data, technology, and policy to provide efficient and dignified access to public benefits, partnered with Montgomery County Community College (MCCC) to help students get resources to pay for food, healthcare, housing, and more. MCCC students can now access a dedicated hotline with personalized, one-on-one assistance to determine eligibility and submit applications for multiple benefits, including SNAP, Medicaid, and the state childcare subsidy. BDT’s hotline is integrated with institutional programs that support student success, including MCCC’s [wellness initiatives](#). This project aims to increase the number of students maximizing the recent federal expansion of SNAP eligibility and Pennsylvania’s expanded SNAP eligibility rules for community college students (as of 2016, most Pennsylvania community college students meet [SNAP’s work requirements](#)).

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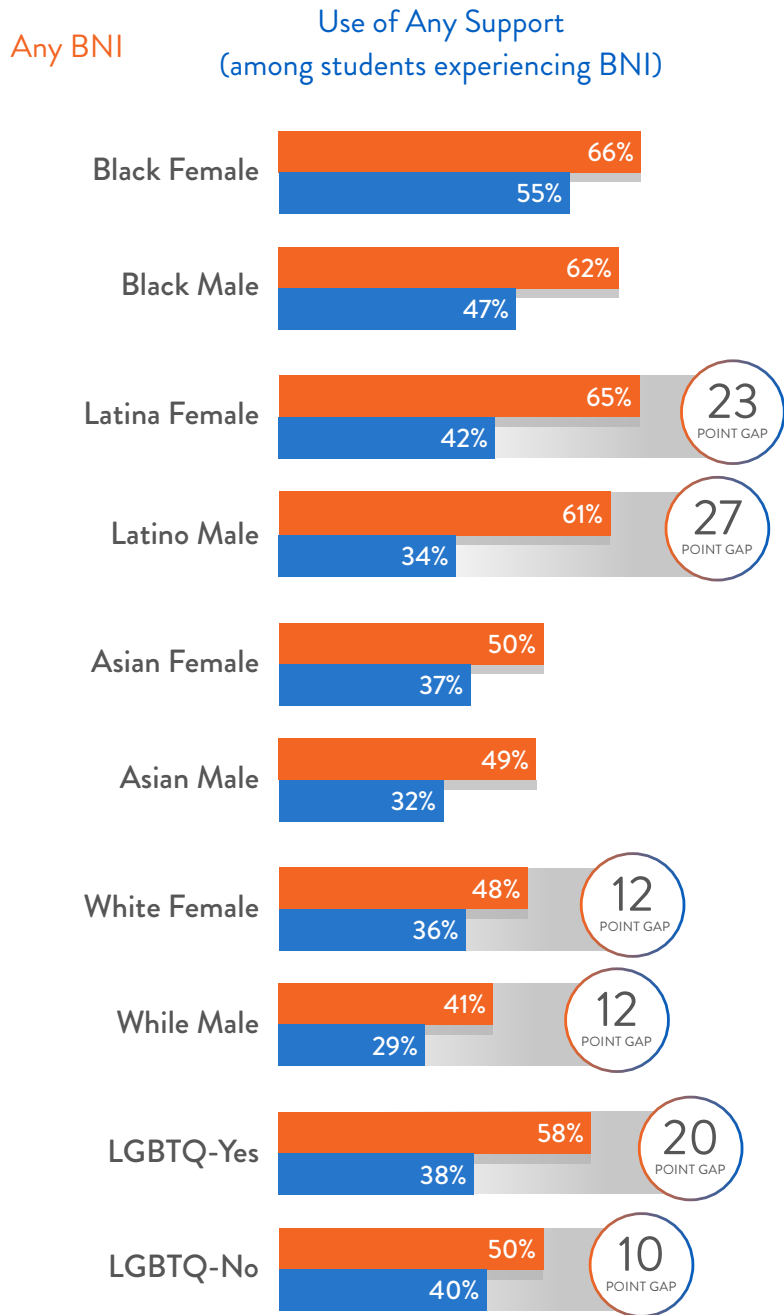
## DISPARITIES IN USE OF KEY SUPPORTS

In addition to overall underutilization of supports, we also saw disparities in utilization of emergency aid and help accessing SNAP across gender, race, ethnicity, and other demographic categories.

For example, while 61% of Latino male students experienced basic needs insecurity, only 34% of those experiencing basic needs insecurity utilized these critical supports, meaning the gap between need and use of supports was 27 percentage points (Figure 23). For Latina female students in Philadelphia, the gap between need (65%) and use of supports (42%) was 23 percentage points. By comparison, among White students, need only outpaced use of supports by 12 percentage points.

Further, 58% of students who identify as LGBTQ experience basic needs insecurity, but only 38% of those experiencing needs utilize available supports—a gap between need and utilization of 20 percentage points. For non-LGBTQ students, this gap is 10 percentage points.

**FIGURE 23 | DISPARITIES IN GAPS BETWEEN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AND USE OF SUPPORTS AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY, GENDER, AND LGBTQ STATUS**



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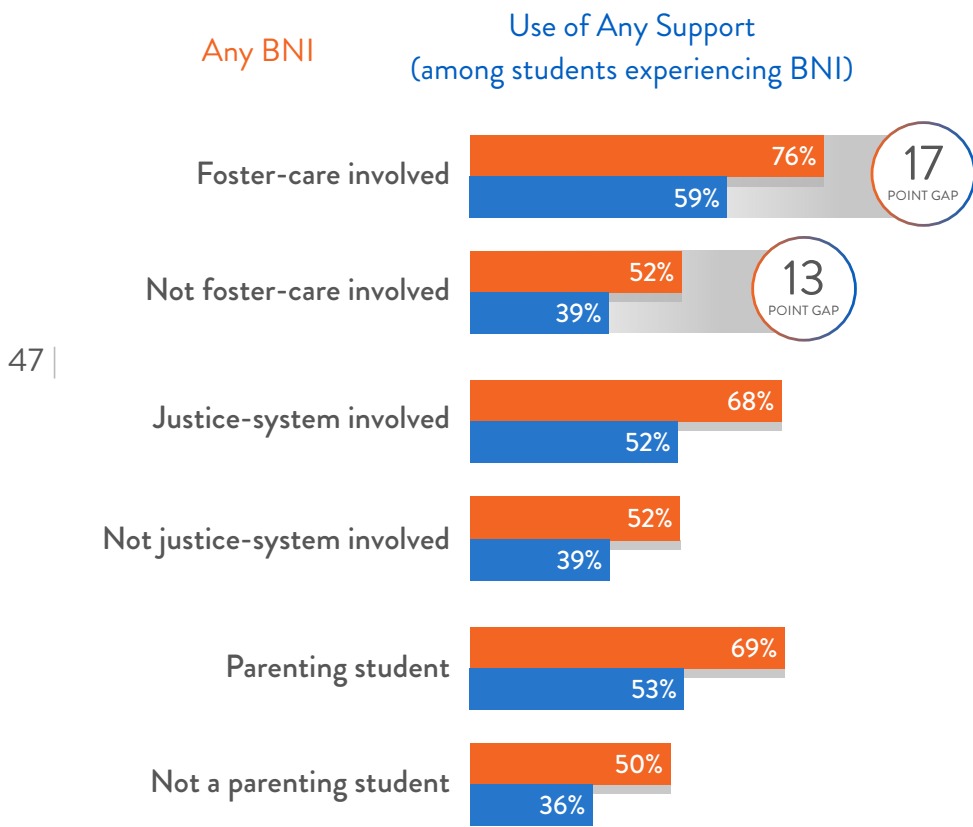
SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Classifications of gender identity and racial/ethnic identity are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications. “Use of any support” means students received help from their college applying for SNAP and/or received an emergency aid grant (either CARES or non-CARES). Rates of using supports are among students experiencing any basic needs insecurity: students who experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was created, refer to the [web appendices](#).



Students with experience in the foster care system, students with experience in the criminal justice system, and parenting students also experienced larger gaps between need and utilization of supports when compared to their counterparts (Figure 24). For instance, while the gap between need and use of support was 17 percentage points for students with experience in the foster care system, it was 13 percentage points for students with no foster care experience.

**FIGURE 24 | DISPARITIES IN GAPS BETWEEN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AND USE OF SUPPORTS AMONG PHILADELPHIA-AREA SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY FOSTER CARE INVOLVEMENT, JUSTICE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT, AND PARENTING STATUS**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Students who have been convicted of a crime are considered justice-system involved. “Use of any support” means students received help from their college applying for SNAP and/or received an emergency aid grant (either CARES or non-CARES). Rates of using supports are among students experiencing any basic needs insecurity: students who experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was created, refer to the [web appendices](#).

It is important to note that, in nearly every student grouping listed above, more than half of those who were experiencing some form of basic need insecurity were not getting help with SNAP or emergency aid. This is an indication that more work to ensure all students have access to supports needs to be done.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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The 2020 #RealCollege Survey delivers a clear message: students and colleges in the Philadelphia region are suffering, and the need for student-centered policies and practices is more urgent than ever. More than half of surveyed Philadelphia-area college students experienced some form of basic needs insecurity. Many students experienced depression or anxiety, and students who were experiencing basic needs insecurity did not always receive the support they needed. Additionally, despite heightened awareness of racial disparities, Black, Latinx, and American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous students were more likely to experience basic needs insecurity than White students.

The pandemic and its resulting economic crisis did not create these challenges, but they exacerbated the lengths students had to go to overcome them. Among students with a part-time job prior to the pandemic, two in five lost that job, and a quarter lost hours or pay. Seventy-one percent of parenting students had to care for children at least 40 hours per week while attending classes, and 77% needed to help their children with their schooling while trying to attend college classes. Significant numbers of Philadelphia-area students also either knew someone who got sick with or died from COVID-19, or were infected themselves.

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Without direct action, the situation is unlikely to improve in the short term. If FAFSA completion rates and enrollment trends are any indication, the challenges faced in fall 2020 will persist. Unless students with the most need receive adequate support, they are unlikely to return to college in fall 2021. Even if they do enroll or re-enroll, they may be more likely to stop out. Colleges are likely to face budget problems for several more years, and there is uncertainty about when students will be able to safely and fully return to campuses.

Despite these challenges, college staff continue to support their students in creative and often selfless ways. Many Philadelphia-area nonprofits and student-led organizations stepped up their support for students in 2020. Ensuring #RealCollege students weather the pandemic—and truly thrive once it ends—will mean implementing new policies and practices, not just short-term patches. It will mean permanently bolstering campus-based basic needs supports and instituting more robust, formal collaborations with community organizations. It will also mean changing laws at the state and federal levels.

Included below are recommendations for getting started.

**The Hope Center offers the following recommendations for local government, philanthropists, and corporations:**

- **Expand the [Catto Scholarship](#):** This recently launched program will provide nearly 4,500 first-time, full-time Community College of Philadelphia students with supports they need to graduate, including “last dollar” scholarships and wrap-around support services. The local philanthropic and corporate community should invest to double the number of student participants, bolster the Community College of Philadelphia’s capacity to administer the program, and expand eligibility to returning and part-time students.
- **Invest in local college access and attainment programs:** The [Cecil B. Moore Scholars Program](#), operated by Temple University in partnership with [Steppingstone Scholars](#), provides students from public high schools in the eight zip codes surrounding Temple with college preparation assistance, focused advising and mentoring, and college scholarships. Similarly, Chestnut Hill College’s [Helping Others by Providing Education \(H.O.P.E.\) Scholarship](#) provides financial support to “near completers” to finish their education in the college’s Accelerated Adult Degree Program. Expanding these programs would give more Philadelphians the resources and support they need to earn a college degree.
- **Expand Philadelphia’s [Poverty Action Fund](#):** This \$10 million fund, enacted by Philadelphia City Council in 2019, aims to lift 100,000 Philadelphians out of poverty by 2024 through investments in proven or promising anti-poverty initiatives.<sup>96</sup> The fund is a great start, and we recommend that it expands its scope to increase post-secondary access, retention, and attainment.
- **Invest in [benefits hubs](#):** Around the country, colleges and universities are seeing their investment in benefits hubs pay off. These “one stop” centers—which are centralized, highly visible, [evidence-based](#), and well-resourced (often funded by local United Way chapters)—help students meet their basic needs. The Community College of Philadelphia has a long-standing Single Stop, and La Salle University recently instituted one as well.<sup>97</sup> Philadelphia’s philanthropic community should consider supporting existing and new Single Stop programs and benefits hubs at city colleges and universities.
- **Expand student access to public housing and housing vouchers:** The Philadelphia Housing Authority and the Community College of Philadelphia will soon launch a partnership to provide a small number of dedicated housing units to full-time students with housing insecurity. This is a step in the right direction, and promising efforts in [Washington State](#) and [California](#) can help further [guide](#) this work.
- **Explore the creation of a citywide emergency aid fund:** Area philanthropic, corporate, and political leaders should consider creating a permanent citywide emergency aid fund to supplement existing funds at colleges and universities. When students can get help paying for unexpected medical bills, car repairs, or other urgent needs, they are more likely to stay in and graduate from college.

## State policymakers also have significant opportunities to support students' basic needs:

- **Coordinate federal and state benefit programs:** When education, workforce, and human service agencies come together, the economic mobility of state residents improves. Pennsylvania should start by convening working groups that include decision-makers from across state agencies. The recently launched [Parent Pathways initiative](#), led by Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services, is a great model.
- **Help expand student access to public benefit programs:** Although the primary eligibility criteria for public benefits are set at the federal level, states have significant flexibility to improve and broaden access. For instance, states can raise the gross income limit in SNAP, or designate postsecondary programs as eligible under the SNAP Education and Training program. Pennsylvania has already taken a first step by [championing](#) the temporary federal expansion in SNAP eligibility to college students, made possible by the Consolidated Appropriations Act, and providing [guidance](#) to colleges regarding the expansion. Pennsylvania should also ensure students can access cash assistance via Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), as well as childcare subsidies (which help low-income families pay their childcare fees) such as those provided by Early Learning Resource Center (ERLC).
- 50 | • **Support [Hunger Free Campus legislation](#):** Introduced in the Pennsylvania General Assembly in 2020, and passed in several other states, this legislation could provide significant resources for colleges to pilot or expand innovative, locally tailored, anti-hunger efforts on campuses, filling gaps within public benefits programs.<sup>98</sup> Student-led groups like [Swipe Out Hunger](#) and [Challah for Hunger](#) are leading campaigns to expand such legislation across the country.





## Colleges and universities can directly support students in a number of ways:

- Seize the opportunity to expand emergency aid programs:** The Consolidated Appropriations Act and the American Rescue Plan allotted a combined \$63 billion to institutions of higher education across the country.<sup>99</sup> While institutions are only required to distribute about half of these funds to students, we strongly encourage them to consider dedicating more, which would help curb falling enrollment and retention.<sup>100</sup> As they [distribute federal funds](#), colleges should also set the stage for sustained levels of expanded emergency aid, as students will continue to have significant need.
- Discuss basic needs during enrollment, orientation, registration, and other key moments:** Colleges should proactively let potential and current students know that their institution has a culture of caring and supports students' basic needs. They should use this culture as a selling point. Providing information about existing supports from day one will help students feel welcome, destigmatize the use of public benefits, and empower students to seek out support when and if they need it.
- Increase student awareness of available supports:** Colleges should add a statement of care on [class syllabi](#), post about available supports on their webpage and student portal, create a distinct basic needs webpage, and collaborate with student organizations to promote basic needs supports and a message of caring. Identifying and targeting outreach to students who may be eligible for benefits before they need them is also key to getting support to students with need.
- Gather data on basic needs:** We encourage all local colleges and universities to monitor the security of their students' basic needs, as well as students' access to and use of supports. This data is key to appropriately allocating resources, and it can help colleges fundraise and engage policymakers. The Hope Center's [Guide to Assessing Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education](#) is a great place to start.
- Streamline student supports:** Colleges must ensure students can make "one stop" when seeking out resources—and that seeking out support does not cause students who are experiencing basic needs insecurity even more stress. This will require collaboration between front-line staff and college leadership. It may also require colleges to establish external partnerships with community-based organizations, community health centers, and government agencies, all of which can provide non-academic supports that institutions struggle to provide on their own.

## Community-based organizations (CBOs) are critical to meeting students' basic needs:

- **Consider strategic, mutually beneficial partnerships with colleges:** Colleges do not have unlimited resources to meet the basic needs of their students, many of whom come from the very neighborhoods where CBOs are rooted. At the same time, many community organizations have explicit goals of helping residents achieve social and economic mobility. Therefore both colleges and CBOs will benefit by ensuring that basic needs supports don't stop just because a community member is pursuing a post-secondary degree.
- **Build relationships with local colleges:** CBOs that don't already have a point of contact with local colleges' student affairs offices should establish one. CBO leadership should introduce themselves to student affairs leadership, let them know they care about their students, and explain how to refer students to community services. CBOs can also set up an on-campus presence, or host or participate in campus-based events, to reinforce the notion that colleges are part of the community.
- **Ensure services are accessible to students:** CBOs should audit their systems and processes for inquiring about, applying for, and receiving services to ensure that they are welcoming to students. CBOs should also use the communication platforms that students use and train their staff in the public benefits eligibility issues that are unique to students.
- **Promote public benefits:** Many students could benefit from and are eligible for programs like SNAP, Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Medicaid, TANF, ELRC, and LIHEAP, but they remain underutilized. Many CBOs are experts in helping people navigate these programs and can be enormously helpful to colleges that don't have that expertise. CBOs can form partnerships with colleges to be their dedicated benefits referral resource.

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For information on national policy recommendations, read The Hope Center's [policy priorities](#). For details on several of the recommendations above, see the [Resources section](#) of our website.

## HOW TO GET INVOLVED WITH #REALCOLLEGEPHL

[#RealCollegePHL](#) is an effort to bring together and support Philadelphia-area colleges, universities, community organizations, foundations, policymakers, student advocacy groups, and others who care about #RealCollege students. Through technical assistance, regular gatherings, learning sessions, the dissemination of research, and advocacy, #RealCollegePHL seeks to strengthen the regional higher education infrastructure so that all students can achieve their dreams.

If you are an institution of higher education or a community organization that is interested in #RealCollegePHL, please contact us at [hopectr@temple.edu](mailto:hopectr@temple.edu). We also welcome continued engagement with The Hope Center. Follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) or subscribe to our [newsletter](#).

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While the data in this report paint a sobering portrait, our hope for change is fueled by the tenacity and commitment of faculty and staff at the 13 Philadelphia-area institutions that participated in 2020 #RealCollege Survey. We applaud their tireless efforts. We also want to highlight the efforts of local student-led organizations, which mobilized their members to distribute food to students in need, and to ensure that their peers knew about emergency aid and other supports.

The Hope Center would like to acknowledge these community organizations who have been active in the #RealCollegePHL effort and in supporting students in our region:

- [12Plus.org](https://12plus.org)
- [Believe in Students](#)
- [Benefits Data Trust](#)
- [Broad Street Ministry](#)
- [Campus Philly](#)
- [Challah for Hunger](#)
- [College Possible](#)
- [Community Legal Services of Philadelphia](#)
- [Covenant House Pennsylvania-Philadelphia](#)
- DePaul USA/St. Joseph's House
- [Eddie's House](#)
- [Episcopal Community Services](#)
- [GraduatePhiladelphia!](#)
- [Jewish Vocational Services](#)
- [Mission First Housing](#)
- [Philabundance](#)
- [Philadelphia Futures](#)
- Philadelphia Health Management Corporation/[Turning Points Program](#)
- [Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development \(PHENND\)](#)
- [Project Home](#)
- [Share Food Program](#)
- [Sharing Excess](#)
- [Steller Center for Social Justice – Beasley School of Law, Temple University](#)
- [Swipe Out Hunger](#)
- [Temple University Student Government Association](#)
- [UESF](#) (formerly the Utility Emergency Services Fund)

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- **Communications:** Stefanie Chae and Deirdre Childress Hopkins

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The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of our funders.

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## About The Hope Center

The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University is redefining what it means to be a student-ready college, with a national movement centering #RealCollege students' basic needs. Food, affordable housing, transportation, childcare, and mental health are central conditions for learning. Without those needs being met, too many students leave college in debt and/or without a degree.

To learn more about the report's authors, visit [hope4college.com/team/](https://hope4college.com/team/). For media inquiries, contact Director of Communications Deirdre Childress Hopkins, at [deirdre.hopkins@temple.edu](mailto:deirdre.hopkins@temple.edu).



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<sup>62</sup> Whitford, E. (2021, February 9). [\*Colleges could lose \\$183 billion during pandemic.\*](#) *Inside Higher Ed.*

<sup>63</sup> Brubaker, H. (2021, February 27). [\*COVID-19 hit to Pennsylvania’s largest universities nears \\$800 million.\*](#) *The Philadelphia Inquirer.*

<sup>64</sup> Southwick, R. (2021, February 3). [\*Pa. budget: Colleges would get no increase, or cut, in Gov. Wolf’s plan.\*](#) *Pennsylvania Real-Time News.*

<sup>65</sup> National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020; National College Attainment Network, 2021.

<sup>66</sup> The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021.

<sup>67</sup> The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021.

<sup>68</sup> The survey questions used to measure homelessness were developed by researchers at California State University. For information on the items, see: Crutchfield, R. M., & Maguire, J. (2017). [Researching basic needs in higher education: Qualitative and quantitative instruments to explore a holistic understanding of food and housing insecurity](#). For the text of the McKinney-Vento Act, see: [The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987](#). Pub. L. No. 100-77, 101 Stat. 482 (1987). See [web appendices](#) for more details about the measure of homelessness.

<sup>69</sup> The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Zhu, J., Harnett, S., & Scuello, M. (2018). [Single Stop final impact and implementation report](#). Metis Associates.

<sup>71</sup> Eichel, L., & Schmitt, M. (2018). [Who's not finishing college in Philadelphia](#). The Pew Charitable Trusts.

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<sup>84</sup> Anderson, 2021.

<sup>85</sup> U.S. Department of Education, 2020.

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<sup>87</sup> The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021.

<sup>88</sup> The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021.

<sup>89</sup> The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021.

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<sup>95</sup> Vito, 2020.

<sup>96</sup> City Council of Philadelphia. (2020, March). Philadelphia poverty action plan.

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<sup>98</sup> Swipe Out Hunger. (2021). [Hunger free campus bill.](#)

<sup>99</sup> National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2021.

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