

Supporting Students' Basic Needs in Washington

Overview

Basic needs insecurity—which encompasses a lack of access to affordable housing, food, healthcare, and childcare—is a critical barrier that can undermine persistence and completion rates for postsecondary students.¹ The urgent impacts of the recent pandemic and economic crises have shone a light on postsecondary students' basic needs insecurity, but this is a long-term and persistent challenge. Despite Washington's strong state financial assistance programs, there is still often a gap for students with low incomes between financial aid amounts and their actual costs for foundational needs, above and beyond tuition.² These pressures are exacerbated by inflation and rising rents across the state. While decades ago some students may have been able to cover costs through employment earnings, national data shows that even students working part- or full-time are not insulated from basic needs insecurity.³

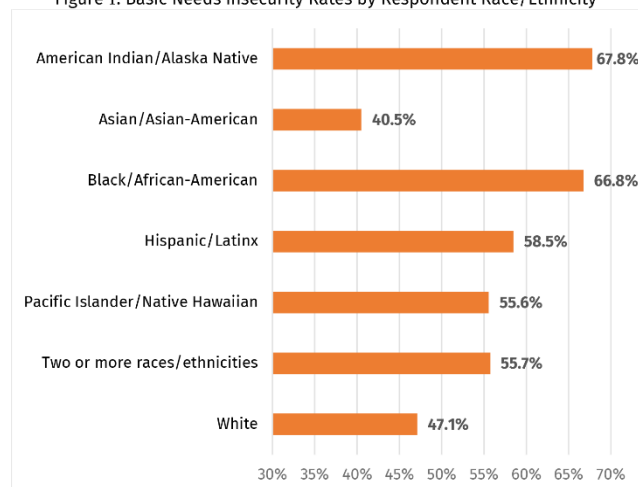
In Washington, we now know that basic needs insecurity is not just a challenge for a small percentage of students. According to 2022 Washington survey data,⁴ struggles with housing and food stability were common among survey respondents:

- 4 in 10 experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days.
- 3 in 10 experienced housing insecurity in the prior year.
- 1 in 10 experienced homelessness in the prior year.

These gaps in covering critical costs beyond tuition were pervasive among postsecondary students across all regions of the state in both two-year and four-year institutions.

As Washington focuses on increased equitability of postsecondary access, basic needs insecurity is undermining students' ability to persist and complete credentials with disproportionate impacts on some race/ethnicity populations and other groups: students with low incomes, former foster youth, first-generation students, parenting students, students living with a disability, and students who reported belonging to the LGBTQI+ community, among others.

Figure 1. Basic Needs Insecurity Rates by Respondent Race/Ethnicity



¹ One example is the negative impacts of food insecurity on postsecondary attainment outlined in U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2018). Food insecurity: Better information could help eligible college students access federal food assistance benefits. (GAO Publication No. 19-95) Washington, D.C.

² <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/COA%20Gap%20Myth%20of%20Full%20Ride%20Financial%20Aid%20%2803.20.23%29.pdf>

³ [Food Insecurity and Homelessness in American Higher Education: An Overview of New Nationally Representative Estimates \(2023\) – SARA GOLDRICK-RAB \(saragoldrickrab.com\)](#)

⁴ <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023.BasicNeedsReport.pdf>

In recent years, state policy to address postsecondary basic needs insecurity has been limited, including pilots for a few colleges, small increases in access to public benefits like childcare subsidies for some student populations, and sector-specific investments like the State Emergency Assistance Grants for community and technical colleges. That said, state pilots have offered a flexible opportunity for institutions and communities to learn from their strategies to support students' persistence in the face of basic needs insecurity. These strategies and learning have also significantly informed state-level understanding and guided new postsecondary basic needs policy in 2023.

Pilot strategies and learning

Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness (SSEH) grant program is an example of a Washington pilot that has helped institutions build supports and remove barriers for students struggling with basic needs insecurity while also shaping policy and investments through local practice and learning. Beginning as a 6-institution pilot with [2SSB 5800](#) (2019) and expanding to all public institutions with 2023 legislation, SSEH has provided small grants to institutions to develop strategies to identify and support the persistence of students experiencing homelessness and/or students who "aged out" of foster care. This flexible approach has incentivized institutions to coordinate existing and new systems and supports, create community partnerships, and share learning across institutions and through common data collection points. Key effective practices among the 39 currently participating institutions include:

- **Measuring the prevalence** of students' basic needs insecurity, and improving integrated systems to identify, intake, and track outcomes of students needing support.
- **Providing effective case management and resource navigation** to students experiencing homelessness and other basic needs insecurities within a coordinated system.
- **Developing flexible strategies to address housing and other student needs** through varied solutions including community partnerships, referrals, and campus resources.
- **Raising awareness and building commitment for solutions with all partners:** campus leadership, faculty, students, staff, and community leaders.

SSEH Snapshot

- 6,700 students experiencing homelessness or who have "aged out" of the foster care system have been served by SSEH in the first four years, with 39 institutions currently participating.
- 91% of baccalaureate students and 85% of CTC students completed the quarter in which they received SSEH services in the third year of the pilot.
- Innovative strategies to address student homelessness have included a master lease with a corporate partner, reserved college housing for flexible short-term and between-term housing, partnership with non-profit housing, eviction prevention funding, and support with start-up rental costs.
- Community organizations are integral partners in the services. In FY2022, SSEH case managers made 3,357 referrals to external agencies and programs, such as local food pantries, 211 Washington, WA Connection, Community Action Councils, Housing Authorities, non-profit housing support programs, and domestic violence services.

New legislation: Postsecondary Basic Needs Act

Identifying the key infrastructure needed for all institutions to improve support students, advocates pushed for the passage of the 2023 Postsecondary Basic Needs Act ([2SHB 1559](#)). Unlike most previous legislation to address postsecondary basic needs, this statute provides statewide policy for all public institutions, and it builds on the lessons of SSEH and other pilots, including:

- Recognizing the importance of staffing to address students' needs through funding navigators to both support students' access to resources and to develop community partnerships.
- Promoting long-term institutional leadership commitment through strategic planning and reporting on institutions' basic needs efforts.
- Monitoring postsecondary basic needs insecurity trends through statewide and institutional assessment of the prevalence of basic needs insecurity.

While institutions and agencies are early in implementation of the legislation, and full funding has yet to be achieved for the mandates, this policy provides a promising foundation inclusive of all public and tribal institutions.

Questions for Council consideration

- Do institutions have the flexibility and resources required to address students' basic needs security, including housing, food security, mental healthcare, childcare, and other non-academic needs?
- How can WSAC and other leaders promote a commitment to wrap-around support for students' persistence inclusive of basic needs security?
- What are some of the long-term and proactive directions to ensure that basic needs insecurity does not prevent students from postsecondary enrollment and attainment?

Resources on Supporting Students' Basic Needs

The Council has adopted a statement on postsecondary supports in its [2024 Strategic Plan](#):

Access to basic needs should not be a barrier for Washington residents seeking a postsecondary degree.

- Basic needs encompass access to affordable housing, sufficient food, quality childcare, mental healthcare, affordable transportation, and access to other fundamental needs.
- Access could be provided through higher education institutions, existing federal or state public benefits, and/or local resources such as community-based organizations with food banks, utility assistance funds, shelters, etc.

Additional resources and research on basic needs:

- **What is the prevalence of postsecondary basic needs insecurity?**
 - Washington's first statewide survey findings: [Executive Summary](#) and [Report](#) (WSAC, 2023).
 - Washington's findings align with [national data on the prevalence of postsecondary students' basic needs insecurity](#) (Sara Goldrick-Rab, 2023).
- **What are some examples of the impact of support for postsecondary basic needs?**
 - Washington Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness Pilot: [Three-year overview \(WSAC and SBCTC, 2022\)](#).
 - [United Way of King County's Bridge to Finish partnership](#) (MDRC and WSAC, 2022) with community and technical colleges is finding strong persistence outcomes for participating students.
- **What is the landscape of postsecondary mental/behavioral health and care access?**
 - [What evidence from research tells us: Addressing Mental Health Needs for Postsecondary Students](#) (WSAC, 2020).
 - Increases in need and challenges in care access, including in [Washington public universities \(Mental Health Project, 2022\)](#).
- **How are Washington students accessing public benefits for basic needs security?**
 - [Exploring Food Insecurity for Postsecondary Students in Washington](#) (ERDC and WSAC, 2021) is the first look at postsecondary enrollment in food benefits and may provide a model for exploring postsecondary enrollment in other public benefits.