

Food Insecurity Among College Students in Michigan

INTRODUCTION

At a time when a college degree [boosts workers' earnings by 75%](#), [recent data](#) shows pervasive hunger among college students in Michigan. According to national estimates, twenty-three percent of college students overall, or about 63,000 students in Michigan, are estimated to be experiencing food insecurity. Students who are hungry are [more likely to drop out of college](#) without getting a degree, which negatively impacts their ability to find a well-paying job that provides a family-sustaining wage.

Greater access to food assistance for college students would make it possible for more students to earn their college degree and find a job that generates higher earnings for individuals and families, increase the state and regional tax bases, and reduce state expenditures on safety net programs. In short, expanding SNAP benefits provides college students temporary support that can promote long-term economic stability for families.

This report is the first of its kind to provide estimated food insecurity rates for students at each college and university across Michigan. To further increase access to SNAP and address college student food insecurity comprehensively, this report includes policy recommendations for streamlining access to SNAP at the federal, state, and institutional level.



The Center for Higher Education
Policy and Practice



BACKGROUND: SNAP RULES CREATE BARRIERS FOR ELIGIBLE STUDENTS

Research shows that food insecurity impacts college persistence and completion yet federal rules make it difficult for college students in need to access food assistance. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, is an efficient way to deliver food assistance. According to [research](#) published by the American Educational Research Association in 2020, students enrolled in SNAP were more likely to persist in college than those of similar income levels who were not enrolled.

However, according to a 2019 [report](#) by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), less than half of the 3.3 million college students who are eligible for SNAP received the benefit due to complicated rules. SNAP prohibits students enrolled in college more than half time from receiving SNAP benefits unless they meet one of the following criteria:

- Are under age 18 or are age 50 or older
- Are unable to work due to a physical or mental condition
- Work at least 20 hours a week in paid employment
- Participate in a state or federally financed work-study program (no minimum hours of work required)
- Participate in an on-the-job training program
- Care for a dependent child household member under the age of six
- Care for a dependent child household member aged six to 11 years and lack the necessary childcare enabling you to attend school and work 20 hours a week or participate in work-study
- Are a single parent enrolled full-time in college and taking care of a dependent child under 12 years old
- Receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits
- Are assigned to, placed in, or self-placed in a college or other institution of higher education through programs under SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T), Title I of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA), or Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA). Certain other employment and training programs for low-income households, which are operated by a state or local government and have an equivalent component to SNAP E&T also meet the criteria.

Unfortunately, this criteria does not align with the information collected on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), so it is difficult for financial aid administrators, who would be well positioned to reach out to students, to identify students who might be eligible for SNAP and let them know. As a result, many students who are eligible for SNAP slip through the cracks. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, or USDA, [82% of individuals in the general population who are eligible](#) for SNAP receive these benefits, but according to the GAO only [31% of college students do](#).

MICHIGAN HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Michigan institutions of higher education enroll nearly 274,000 students annually. [New data](#) from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey reveals that, nationally, more than 1 in 5 college students are food insecure. Among students enrolled in community college, this number nears a quarter, while those enrolled at B.A.-granting institutions experience food insecurity at a rate lower than the national average. Roughly one-third of students at for-profit colleges experience high food insecurity—the largest proportion of students across all institutional sectors.

Recently, Michigan has made progress in addressing food insecurity among college students in the state. In November 2023, the Michigan Senate adopted a [resolution](#) urging “the United States federal government to amend the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to simplify the college student exemptions to make aid more accessible for prospective and enrolled students who come from low-income families.”

METHODOLOGY: ESTIMATING FOOD INSECURITY RATES

The following tables provide the enrollment data and estimates of the number of students who were food insecure at each Michigan college or university during the 2020-21 school year. These estimates were constructed using institutional enrollment data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS,) and data on students experiencing food insecurity from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), released in the summer of 2023. Although the food insecurity rates used in this report to extrapolate the Michigan figures are national estimates, NPSAS reports similar rates at the state level in Michigan. We used national data to estimate the number of students experiencing food insecurity at Michigan colleges because NPSAS state-specific data does not include a breakdown of food insecurity rates by institutional category. By using the national rates of food insecurity reported in NSPAS, we were able to better estimate the rates of food insecurity at different types of Michigan schools. In the tables below, the “high food insecurity” category includes students reporting multiple instances of “disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake,” as well as those reporting “reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet.” Those experiencing “marginal food insecurity” report “anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house,” though “little or no change in diet or food intake.” [1]

[1] These categorizations follow the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) food security scale [definitions](#), though this report uses the “high food insecurity” label to describe those in the USDA “low food security” and “very low food security” categories. Similarly, this report uses “marginal food insecurity” to identify the “marginal food security” category, as defined by USDA.

Table 1. Enrollment and Estimated Food Insecurity Rates at Michigan Community Colleges

INSTITUTION NAME	ENROLLMENT	# EXPERIENCING HIGH FOOD INSECURITY (23.4%)	# EXPERIENCING MARGINAL FOOD INSECURITY (11.4%)
Bay de Noc Community College	900	211	103
Delta College	2,771	648	316
Glen Oaks Community College	421	99	48
Gogebic Community College	685	160	78
Grand Rapids Community College	4,183	979	477
Kalamazoo Valley Community College	2,439	571	278
Kellogg Community College	1,066	249	122
Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College	51	12	6
Kirtland Community College	440	103	50
Lake Michigan College	1,506	352	172
Lansing Community College	4,105	961	468
Macomb Community College	7,289	1,706	831
Mid Michigan College	1,229	288	140
Monroe County Community College	907	212	103
Montcalm Community College	465	109	53
Mott Community College	2,123	497	242
Muskegon Community College	1,575	369	180
North Central Michigan College	680	159	78
Oakland Community College	6,325	1,480	721
Saginaw Chippewa Tribal College	32	7	4
Southwestern Michigan College	838	196	96
St Clair County Community College	1,410	330	161
Washtenaw Community College	3,667	858	418
Wayne County Community College District	1,728	404	197
West Shore Community College	316	74	36

Table 2. Enrollment and Estimated Food Insecurity Rates at Public, Bachelor's-Granting Colleges in Michigan

INSTITUTION NAME	ENROLLMENT	# EXPERIENCING HIGH FOOD INSECURITY (20.9%)	# EXPERIENCING MARGINAL FOOD INSECURITY (12.7%)
Central Michigan University	11,622	2,429	1,476
Eastern Michigan University	10,150	2,121	1,289
Ferris State University	7,654	1,600	972
Grand Valley State University	19,102	3,992	2,426
Lake Superior State University	1,535	321	195
Michigan State University	35,692	7,460	4,533
Michigan Technological University	5,391	1,127	685
Northern Michigan University	6,015	1,257	764
Oakland University	12,745	2,664	1,619
Saginaw Valley State University	6,227	1,301	791
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor	30,681	6,412	3,896
University of Michigan-Dearborn	5,237	1,095	665
University of Michigan-Flint	3,343	699	425
Wayne State University	14,006	2,927	1,779
Western Michigan University	13,937	2,913	1,770

Table 3. Enrollment and Estimated Food Insecurity Rates at Private, Non-profit, Bachelor's-Granting Colleges in Michigan

INSTITUTION NAME	ENROLLMENT	# EXPERIENCING HIGH FOOD INSECURITY (18.8%)	# EXPERIENCING MARGINAL FOOD INSECURITY (11.7%)
Adrian College	1,751	329	205
Albion College	1,539	289	180
Alma College	1,397	263	163
Andrews University	1,367	257	160
Aquinas College	1,160	218	136
Baker College	2,306	434	270
Calvin University	2,965	557	347
Cleary University	486	91	57
College for Creative Studies	1,215	228	142
Compass College of Film and Media	71	13	8
Concordia University Ann Arbor	905	170	106
Cornerstone University	1,046	197	122
Davenport University	2,664	501	312
Finlandia University	382	72	45
Grace Christian University	952	179	111
Great Lakes Christian College	167	31	20
Hillsdale College	1,448	272	169
Hope College	2,918	549	341
Kalamazoo College	1,455	274	170
Kettering University	1,741	327	204
Kuyper College	86	16	10
Lawrence Technological University	1,702	320	199
Madonna University	1,657	312	194
Northwood University	1,508	284	176
Olivet College	922	173	108
Rochester University	782	147	91
Sacred Heart Major Seminary	80	15	9
Siena Heights University	1,254	236	147
Spring Arbor University	1,000	188	117
University of Detroit Mercy	2,306	434	270
Walsh College	87	16	10
Yeshiva Gedolah of Greater Detroit	92	17	11

Table 4. Enrollment and Estimated Food Insecurity Rates at For-Profit Colleges in Michigan

INSTITUTION NAME	ENROLLMENT	# EXPERIENCING HIGH FOOD INSECURITY (32.9%)	# EXPERIENCING MARGINAL FOOD INSECURITY (11.5%)
Chamberlain University-Michigan	259	85	30
Dorsey College	1,034	340	119
MIAT College of Technology	2,304	758	265
Ross College-Grand Rapids North	446	147	51

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Federal Policy

- Congress should simplify the SNAP college student exemptions by adding the following exemptions for students *who also meet income requirements of the SNAP program*:
 - Students with an **Expected Family Contribution of \$0** as determined by the FAFSA. This provision was [put in place](#) on January 16, 2021, and continued throughout the public health emergency. It allowed students with the highest level of financial need, approximately \$30,000 in household income, to apply for SNAP. This should be made permanent.
 - Students with **any dependents under the age of 18**. This change would align the parenting exemption for students with that of other SNAP recipients and eliminate the confusing [three-tiered parenting rule](#) in place now.
 - Students who are enrolled in another **means-tested benefit** or who have an immediate family member enrolled in another means-tested benefit. NCAN [research](#) shows that students from the lowest-income households are less likely to complete the FAFSA than their peers. This approach provides a mechanism to capture eligible students who do not fill out the form.
 - **Undergraduate students who are considered independent** for the purposes of federal student aid, including veterans, active-duty military personnel, students with a history in the foster care system, and older students. This category would simplify the recertification process for students and align it with federal financial aid eligibility.
- The U.S. Department of Education should **allow students to give consent on the FAFSA for their data to be used for outreach about SNAP**. The new FAFSA form, which will launch in December, asks applicants for their consent to retrieve certain verified tax information from the IRS. Students could also be asked to indicate whether they give consent for their FAFSA data to be shared with the state SNAP agency for the purpose

of identifying and conducting outreach to students who may be eligible for SNAP. Once students consent, college administrators, state and county officials should use the information to conduct proactive outreach to students who are eligible to apply for SNAP because they meet the student eligibility criteria.

Recommendations for State Policy

- **Eliminate the interview requirement for recertification for students**, so long as an individual's identity is verified and all other mandatory verifications, such as residence and income, are provided. The interview presents a logistical hurdle for many students who are balancing school, work, and personal responsibilities. Extending the pandemic interview requirement waiver for students who have complete applications would streamline the process and address unique logistical challenges for students to complete this requirement.
 - **Extend the recertification period to 12 months.** States have the option to recertify SNAP eligibility on an annual basis instead of every 6 months. Doing so would make it possible for students to receive and retain eligibility throughout the academic year so they can focus on their studies.

Recommendations for Institutions of Higher Education

- **Provide dedicated funding to support outreach and application assistance on college campuses.** Understanding the complex eligibility requirements for students is one of the biggest barriers to students receiving SNAP. College administrators need to work closely with state and/or county officials to understand the requirements, conduct targeted outreach to students who are most likely to qualify, and make it easier for students who are participating to use their benefits on college campuses. Dedicated, expert personnel can help identify students who are likely eligible for the program and support them through the application process.
 - **Use pre-verified data to identify students who may be eligible.** By using pre-verified data, such as FAFSA information, to identify students who may be eligible, colleges can increase the number of potentially eligible students who are able to receive this benefit.

CONCLUSION

With an estimated 63,000 college students in Michigan experiencing food insecurity, policymakers must act to increase college students' access to SNAP. Providing students with simple pathways to access SNAP can help increase college students' chances of ultimately achieving a degree or other credential at a time when postsecondary education is needed more than ever to succeed in the labor market.