



# DSHS Economic Services Administration Service Trends Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Report to the DSHS Economic Services Administration, Office of the Assistant Secretary and the DSHS Economic Services Administration, Community Services Division

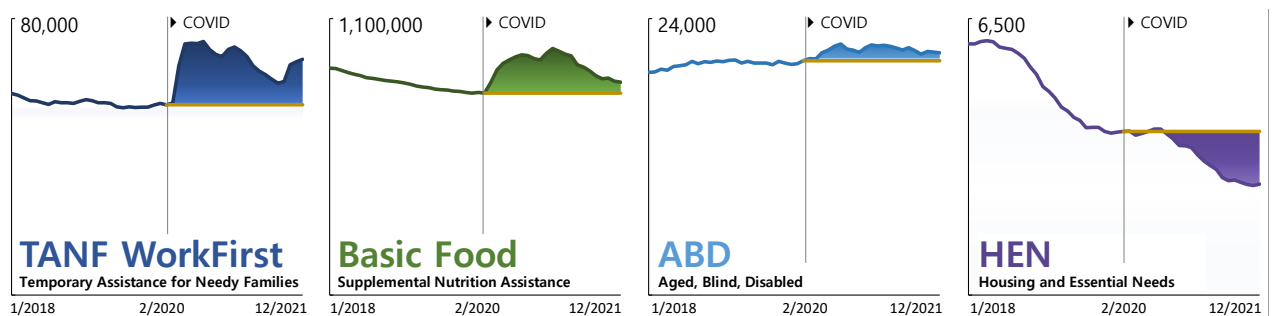
**T**HE COVID-19 PANDEMIC began in Spring 2020 and caused 22 million job losses nationally within two months. In Washington state, the unemployment rate rose from 3.9 percent in February 2020 to 16.8 percent in April 2020. Because of the pandemic, more low-income families experienced material hardship and turned to public assistance for help. This study describes changes in the number of participants in four public assistance programs before and during the pandemic: 1) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), 2) Basic Food, 3) Aged, Blind, or Disabled (ABD) cash assistance program, and 4) Housing and Essential Needs (HEN) Referral program.

## Key Findings

- 1. The number of TANF and Basic Food recipients dramatically increased during the pandemic and, at the end of 2021, caseloads remained above pre-pandemic levels.** In contrast, the number of ABD recipients increased only slightly during the pandemic, while the number of HEN Referral recipients remained the same during early months of the pandemic before declining significantly.
- 2. Subgroup trends by race/ethnicity, age, and region generally followed the program-specific overall trend,** but had different levels of percent change during the pandemic.
- 3. The number of homeless economic service recipients as of the end of 2021 was below the pre-pandemic level for all four public assistance programs.** This is a sharp contrast to the substantially elevated and sustained recipient numbers for their non-homeless counterparts. The number of disabled or incapacitated recipients for TANF and Basic Food also declined or remained near pre-pandemic levels suggesting that homeless and disabled individuals may have faced barriers to establishing or maintaining connections to public assistance during the pandemic.

FIGURE 1.

### The COVID Pandemic Resulted in Dramatic Caseload Changes



## Study Design

We identified monthly counts of recipients of TANF, Basic Food, ABD, and HEN Referral between January 2018 and December 2021 using the DSHS Integrated Client Databases. To quantify changes in recipient or referral numbers in response to the pandemic and allow for comparisons across programs, we also examined the percent change in the number of clients relative to February 2020. Information about each of the programs and client characteristics as of February 2020 are outlined below and in Figure 2.

### Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

TANF provides temporary cash assistance to families with or expecting children. In February 2020, there were about 55,000 TANF recipients. Slightly more than a quarter of TANF recipients were adults aged 18 and older and 6 out of 10 TANF recipients were female.<sup>1</sup> About one third of TANF recipients were homeless or unstably housed and three percent were disabled or incapacitated. About one third of TANF recipients were in each DSHS Region. Non-Hispanic white recipients were the largest group (38 percent), followed by Hispanic (27 percent), Black (23 percent), American Indian or Alaska Native (13 percent), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (7 percent), and Asian recipients (5 percent).

### Basic Food

Basic Food, the name for Washington State's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), provides monthly benefits to low-income individuals and families that can be used to buy food. In February 2020, there were about 803,000 Basic Food recipients making it by far the largest of the programs we examined. As of February 2020, about two-thirds of Basic Food recipients were adults, more than twice the percentage for TANF adult recipients. About half of Basic Food recipients were female (54 percent) and about half were non-Hispanic white (49 percent). Homeless recipients were less represented in the Basic Food program than in TANF (20 versus 33 percent), but a higher percentage of disabled recipients were participating in the Basic Food program than in TANF (34 percent versus 3 percent).<sup>2</sup> Basic Food recipients were evenly spread across the three DSHS Regions.

### Aged, Blind, Disabled (ABD)

The Aged, Blind, or Disabled (ABD) program provides cash assistance and a referral to HEN to low-income adults who are over age 65, blind, or likely to meet Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability criteria. In February 2020, there were about 20,000 ABD recipients. A higher percentage of homeless (56 percent) and disabled recipients (81 percent) were represented in the ABD program than in TANF and Basic Food. ABD recipients were all adults and almost half of them were female (49 percent) and half were non-Hispanic white (50 percent). Nearly half of ABD recipients (49 percent) were from Region 2, followed by Region 3 (29 percent) and Region 1 (22 percent).

### Housing and Essential Needs (HEN) Referral

The Housing and Essential Needs (HEN) Referral program connects clients who are unable to work for at least 90 days due to physical or mental incapacity or substance use disorder to the Department of Commerce for access to essential needs items and rent or utility assistance through homeless prevention providers. In February 2020, there were 3,847 HEN Referral recipients. About two-thirds of HEN Referrals recipients were homeless or unstably housed and female clients made up 39 percent of the caseload. Region 3 had the most HEN Referrals (39 percent), followed by Region 2 (34 percent) and Region 1 (27 percent). About six out of ten HEN Referrals were for non-Hispanic white clients, followed by Black (13 percent), American Indian (13 percent), Hispanic (12 percent), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (4 percent), and Asians clients (4 percent).

<sup>1</sup> Adults on child-only TANF cases would not be included in these numbers because they are not TANF recipients.

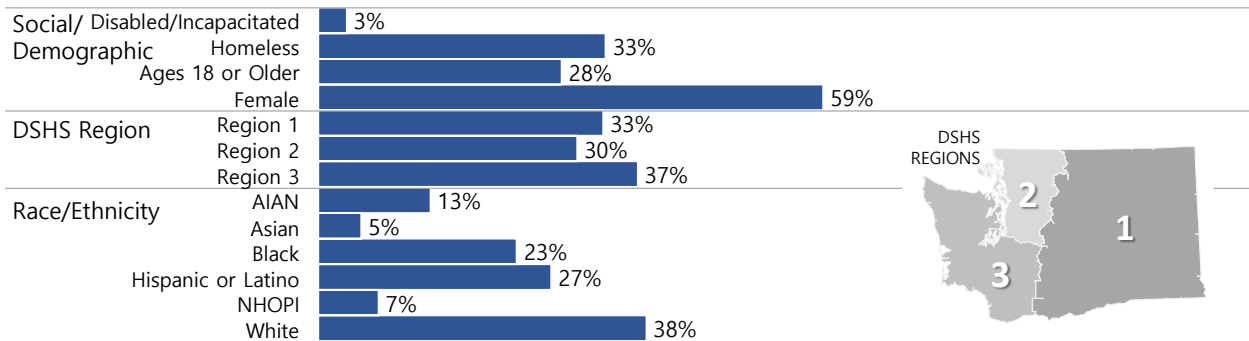
<sup>2</sup> Parents and children who receive SSI cannot be a recipient on a TANF case because of federal law. Minor children of parents with SSI are still eligible for TANF if the household is otherwise financially eligible. Since SSI receipt was a primary way we identified disabled clients, we would expect low rates of disability in the TANF population. No such restriction exists for Basic Food.

FIGURE 2.

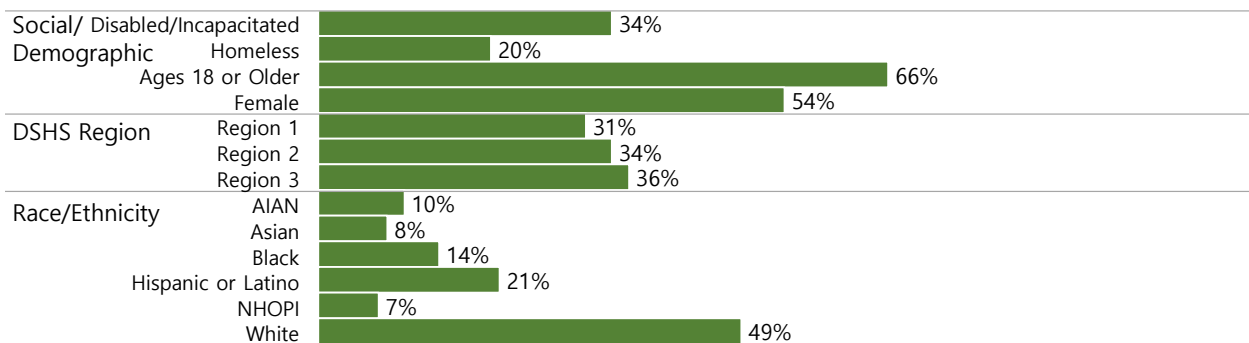
## Selected Pre-Pandemic Client Characteristics Across Public Assistance Programs

Characteristics Measured as of February 2020

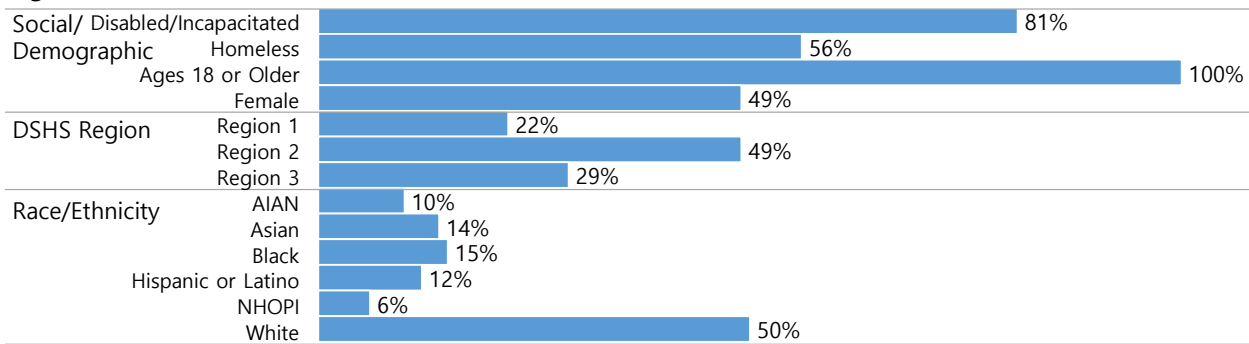
### TANF TOTAL = 55,083



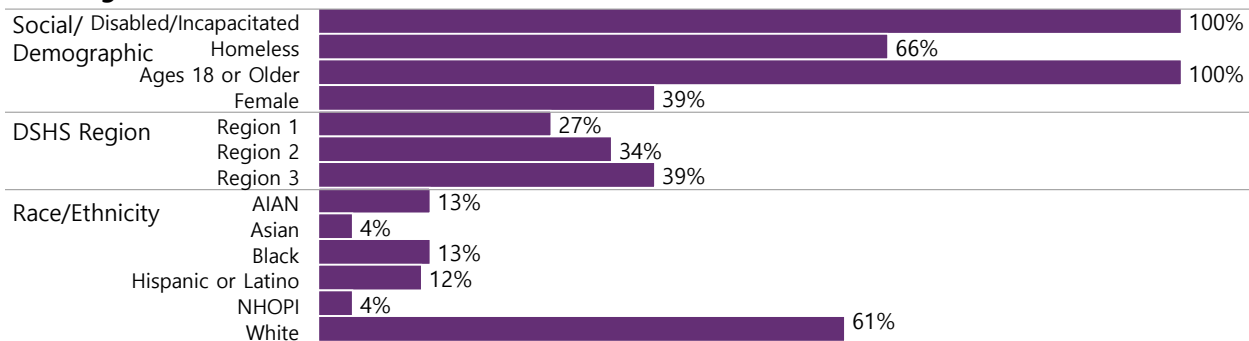
### Basic Food TOTAL = 803,571



### Aged, Blind, Disabled TOTAL = 20,343



### Housing and Essential Needs TOTAL = 3,847



AIAN = American Indian/Alaska Native • Black = Includes African American

NHOPI = Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander • White = White/Non-Hispanic • Persons may claim more than one race/ethnicity.

## Key COVID-related Program and Policy Changes

The ESA Community Services Division (CSD) made a number of program and policy changes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While public benefit caseloads changed in response to the pandemic, the program and policy changes also influenced caseload dynamics. Key changes are outlined below to offer context for the trends examined in this report. More detailed information on policy changes can be found in the ESA Briefing Books which are published annually.<sup>3</sup>

### Changes to In-Office Services

In March 2020, Governor Inslee issued the Stay Home, Stay Healthy order. As directed by the Governor, staff at local Community Services Offices (CSOs) and the Customer Contact Service Center began primarily teleworking. However, CSD maintained a skeleton crew at CSOs to provide very limited in-person services by appointment only including issuing Electronic Benefit cards for homeless customers and providing limited services that could not be delivered by mail. During the study period for this report, CSD delivered most services by telephone through the statewide Customer Service Contact Center, online through Washington Connection, and by mail. Field offices reopened February 28, 2022 restoring all on-demand in-person services; however, the reopening was after the end of the study period.

### Changes in Policies

CSD made several federally allowable or federally supported changes to programs in response to COVID<sup>4</sup> including:

- For those with an eligibility review due between April and June 2020 and between November 2020 and February 2021, CSD deferred required cash and food eligibility reviews when access to on-demand in-person CSD services was limited.
- Between April 2020 and June 2020 and between November 2020 and June 2021, CSD suspended mid-certification review reporting requirements for cash and food benefit recipients. While it falls outside the study period for this report, mid-certification review reporting requirements were also waived from January 2022 to June 2022.
- Beginning in March 2020, all TANF WorkFirst participants were granted a temporary exemption from participation requirements.
- Beginning April 2020, DSHS expanded the criteria for TANF 60-month time limit extension to support families experiencing hardships due to the COVID-19 emergency.
- The Disaster Cash Assistance Program (DCAP) was reactivated in April 2021 with program changes allowing clients to apply monthly instead of once in a 12-month period. Applicants to DCAP were also considered for other CSD cash benefit programs so this change may have had an impact on ABD and TANF caseloads.
- Requirements for medical evidence were made more permissive so that ABD applicants had options within broader range of medical information they could provide for eligibility determinations.
- Effective March 2020 CSD discontinued treatment monitoring and obtaining good cause for ABD clients failing to participate in medical and mental health services, substance use assessment and treatment, and the SSI application process.
- Effective March 2020 CSD provided flexibility to postpone ABD disability review through emergency rule. CSD also relaxed medical evidence requirements for applicants, such as the ability to accept medical evidence older than 90 days at application.

<sup>3</sup> Briefing books available here: <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/manuals/briefing-book>. Sections on COVID-19 response were included in the SFY 2020, SFY 2021, and SFY 2022 briefing books.

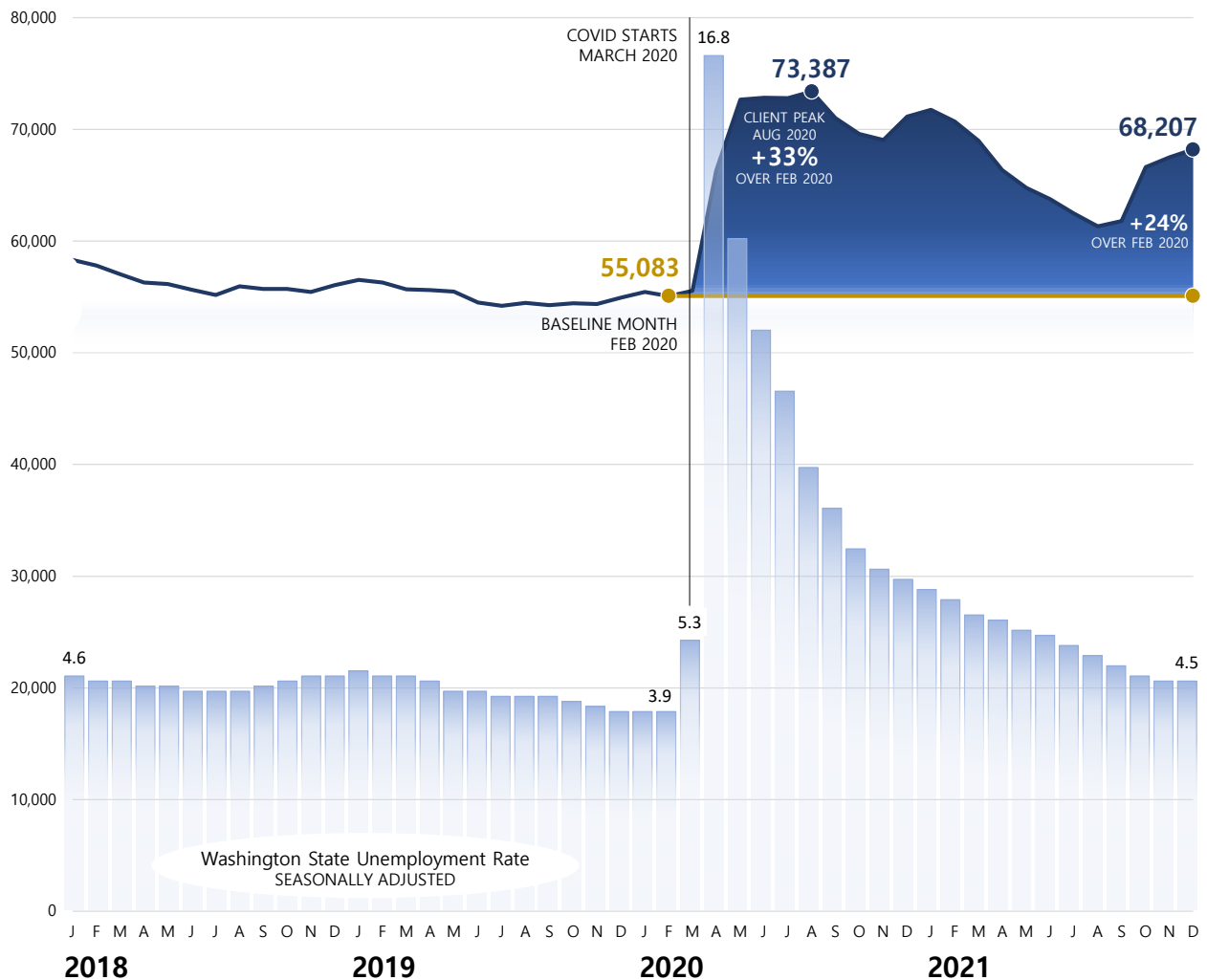
<sup>4</sup> Some of these policies continued beyond the end of the study period for this report.

# Service Trends Before and During the Pandemic

## Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

Figure 3 displays the number of TANF recipients by month for the January 2018 to December 2021 time period as well as Washington’s monthly unemployment rate. The number of TANF recipients had been stable at around 55,000 over the two-year period before the pandemic started in March 2020. The number of TANF recipients increased rapidly over the early months of the pandemic then leveled out before reaching its peak in August 2020. From February 2020 to the peak in August 2020, the number of TANF recipients climbed 33 percent to over 73,000. After the peak, the number of TANF recipients declined up until August 2021. The number of TANF recipients then rebounded after September 2021. As of December 2021, it was higher than the pre-pandemic level by 24 percent. These trends indicate that many individuals connected with the TANF program due to the economic instability brought on by the pandemic and that there was a secondary wave of connection in fall 2021. The secondary increase may have been driven by the end of federal pandemic emergency unemployment benefits in September 2021.

FIGURE 3.  
**Number of TANF Recipients Before and During the Pandemic**  
 Monthly Counts of Clients from January 2018 through December 2021



## Basic Food

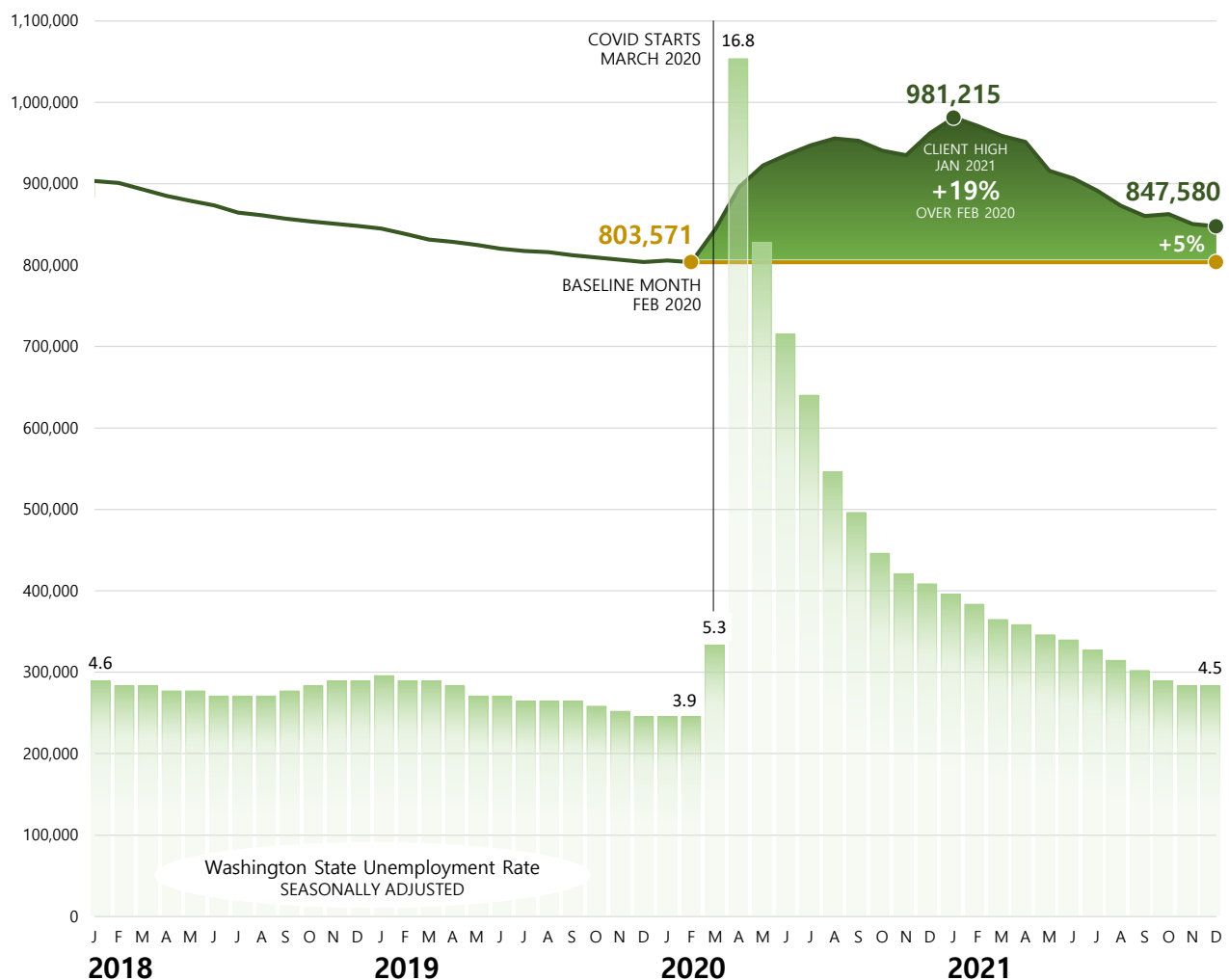
Figure 4 displays the number of Basic Food recipients by month for the January 2018 to December 2021 time period. The number of Basic Food recipients had a declining trend during the 2-year pre-pandemic period from about 900,000 in January 2018 to about 803,000 in February 2020. The number of Basic Food recipients rapidly increased during the early months of the pandemic then slightly declined during fall 2020 but climbed again to the pandemic peak of over 981,000 in January 2021, a 19 percent increase from the pre-pandemic level. The number of Basic Food recipients started to decline after the January 2021 peak and as of December 2021, over 847,000 people were receiving Basic Food assistance, a 5 percent increase over the February 2020 baseline.

These trends indicate that many individuals connected with the Basic Food program due to economic instability brought on by the pandemic. In absolute numbers, the increase in Basic Food recipients was substantial, though the percent increase was lower than for the TANF program. The Basic Food trend was similar to the TANF trend during the COVID time period except that it did not exhibit the secondary wave of participation in Fall 2021.

FIGURE 4.

### Number of Basic Food Recipients Before and During the Pandemic

Monthly Counts of Clients from January 2018 through December 2021



## Aged, Blind, or Disabled Assistance

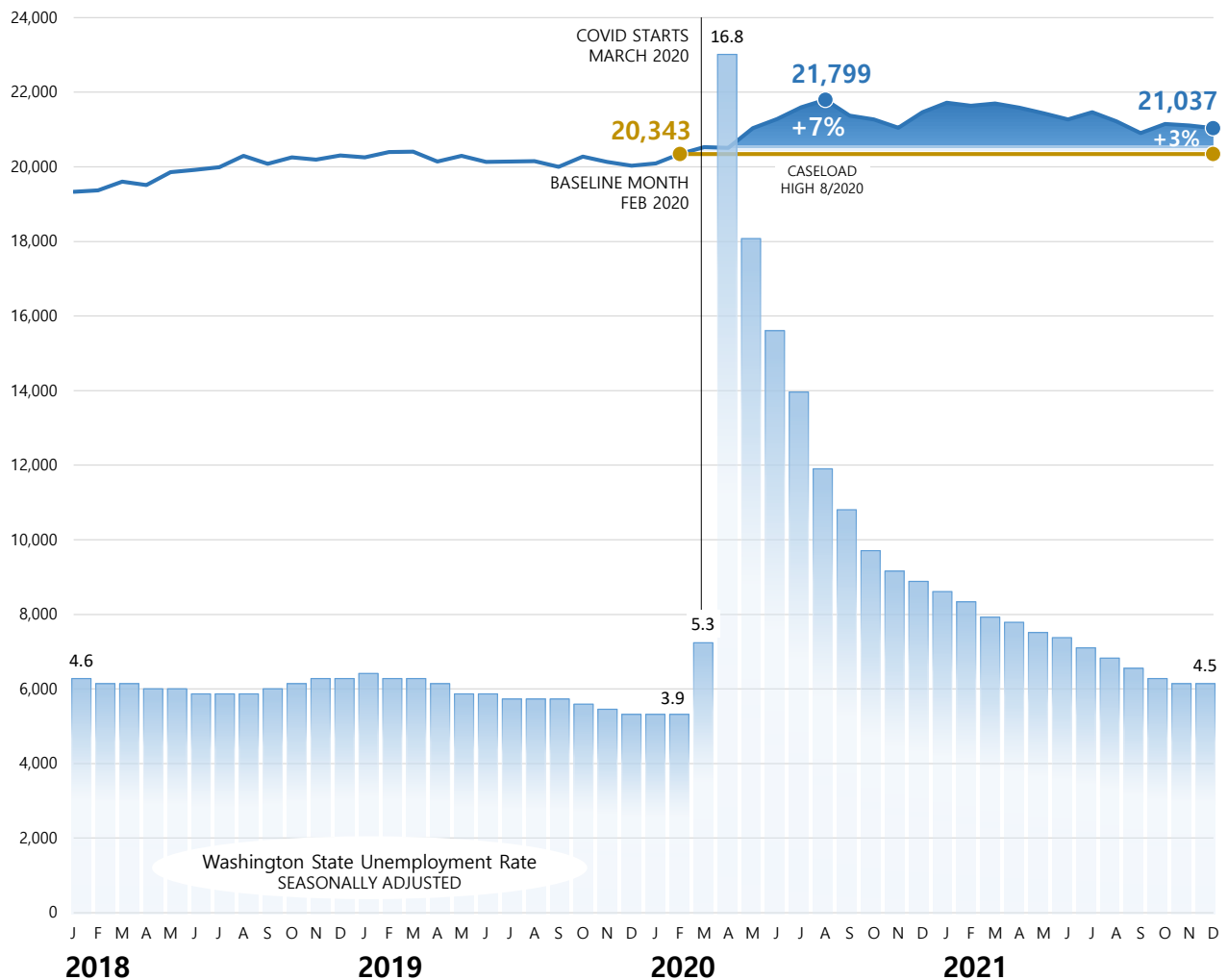
Figure 5 displays the number of ABD recipients by month for the January 2018 to December 2021 time period. The number of ABD recipients had been stable at around 20,000 over the 24 months before the pandemic started. During the pandemic, the number of ABD recipients increased only slightly, reaching the pandemic peak in August 2020, with a 7 percent increase from the pre-pandemic level. As of December 2021, the number of ABD recipients was only 3 percent higher than the pre-pandemic level.

Participation in ABD appears to have been less sensitive to the economic changes that occurred during the pandemic, likely because this population was not in the workforce and therefore stay-at-home orders and layoffs did not impact them as directly.

FIGURE 5.

### Number of Aged, Blind, or Disabled Recipients Before and During the Pandemic

Monthly Counts of Clients from January 2018 through December 2021



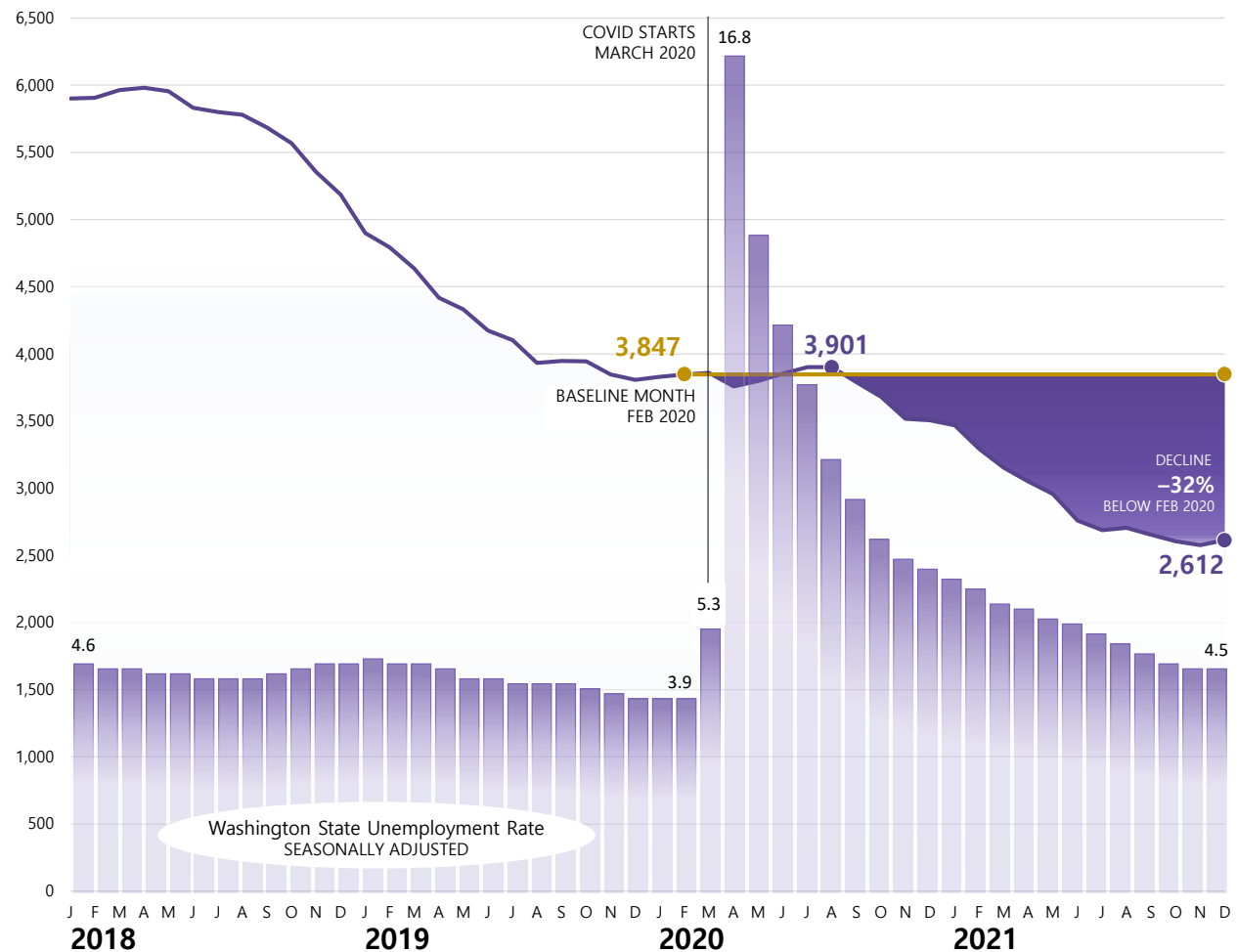
## Housing and Essential Needs Referral Program

Figure 6 displays the number of HEN Referral recipients by month for the January 2018 to December 2021 time period. Prior to the pandemic, the number of HEN Referral recipients declined from about 6,000 in January 2018 to about 4,000 in July 2019 and then remained stable through February 2020. The number dipped in the first months of the pandemic before peaking in August 2020 less than 2 percent higher than February 2020. Since August 2020, the HEN Referrals caseload has been on a downward trend. As of December 2021, the number of HEN Referral recipients declined 32 percent from the pre-pandemic level. The decline is distinct when compared to the three other programs.

One possible explanation is that individuals who may have benefitted from a referral to the HEN program faced obstacles navigating the application process when offices were closed except for very limited in-person services. There were also widespread shelter closures during the pandemic, which may have cut off a route of referral for homeless individuals to HEN. At the same time, the eviction moratorium may have reduced the number of people requiring rent or utility assistance. Finally, Commerce waived the requirements for clients to renew HEN Referral eligibility with DSHS in order to maintain access to HEN housing supports during the pandemic. This may have reduced the number of HEN Referral recipients that followed through with required reviews and therefore contributed to the caseload decline.

FIGURE 6

**Number of HEN Referrals Program Participants Before and During the Pandemic**  
Monthly Counts of Clients from January 2018 through December 2021





## Service Trends by Race

Figure 7 displays summary information about the change in service use since the pre-pandemic baseline level in February 2020 by race/ethnicity and for each program. The top panel shows, for each racial/ethnic group, the percent increase from February 2020 to the pandemic peak the number of recipients at the pandemic peak, and the month the pandemic peak occurred for each program. The bottom panel shows the percent change from February 2020 to December 2021 for each racial/ethnic group as well as the number of recipients as of December 2021. While all racial/ethnic groups displayed trajectories similar to the overall trajectories for each program discussed in the preceding section, the percent change and timing of pandemic peaks were distinct.

### TANF Trends by Race

The pandemic peak increase in TANF participation differs across racial/ethnic groups. The number of Asian TANF recipients increased by 55 percent from the pre-pandemic level. This percentage change was twice the percent increase that of non-Hispanic white counterparts (27 percent). Asian TANF recipients also experienced an earlier peak than other groups, in May 2020. Other groups experienced peaks in June, July or, August 2020. The number of both Hispanic and Hawaiian or Pacific Islander recipients increased by 42 percent, followed by Black and American Indian or Alaska Native TANF recipients, at 34 and 30 percent, respectively. As of December 2021, the number of Asian recipients was 36 percent higher than the pre-pandemic level, followed by Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (31 percent), Black (30 percent), American Indian or Alaska Native (25 percent), Hispanic (23 percent), and non-Hispanic white (18 percent) recipients. The larger percent increases for recipients of color suggest the economic impacts of the pandemic hit families of color the hardest.

### Basic Food Trends by Race

Hispanic Basic Food recipients experienced the largest percentage increase (31 percent from the pre-pandemic) among racial and ethnic groups, while the American Indian or Alaska Native recipient group experienced the smallest increase of only 15 percent. As of December 2021, the number of Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander Basic Food recipients was up by between 8 to 11 percent. In contrast, the number of American Indian recipients declined by 1 percent from the pre-pandemic level as of December 2021.

Among non-Hispanic white recipients, by December 2021 the number of Basic Food recipients returned closer to pre-pandemic level at about a 2 percent increase over February 2020. As with TANF, the pattern of Basic Food receipt indicates a greater participation growth, in percentage terms, for clients of color than for non-Hispanic white clients, with the notable exception of American Indian or Alaska Native clients. It is unclear why American Indian client numbers dropped by December 2021.

### ABD Trends by Race

The number of American Indian or Alaska Native ABD recipients increased the most at the pandemic peak (17 percent from the pre-pandemic) among racial/ethnic groups while the Asian recipient group experienced only a 3 percent increase from the pre-pandemic at its peak. As of December 2021, ABD recipient numbers for most of racial/ethnic groups were higher than the pre-pandemic level by 7-11 percent, but the non-Hispanic white recipient number was close to the pre-pandemic level (1 percent increase) while Asian ABD recipient number declined by 2 percent from February 2020.

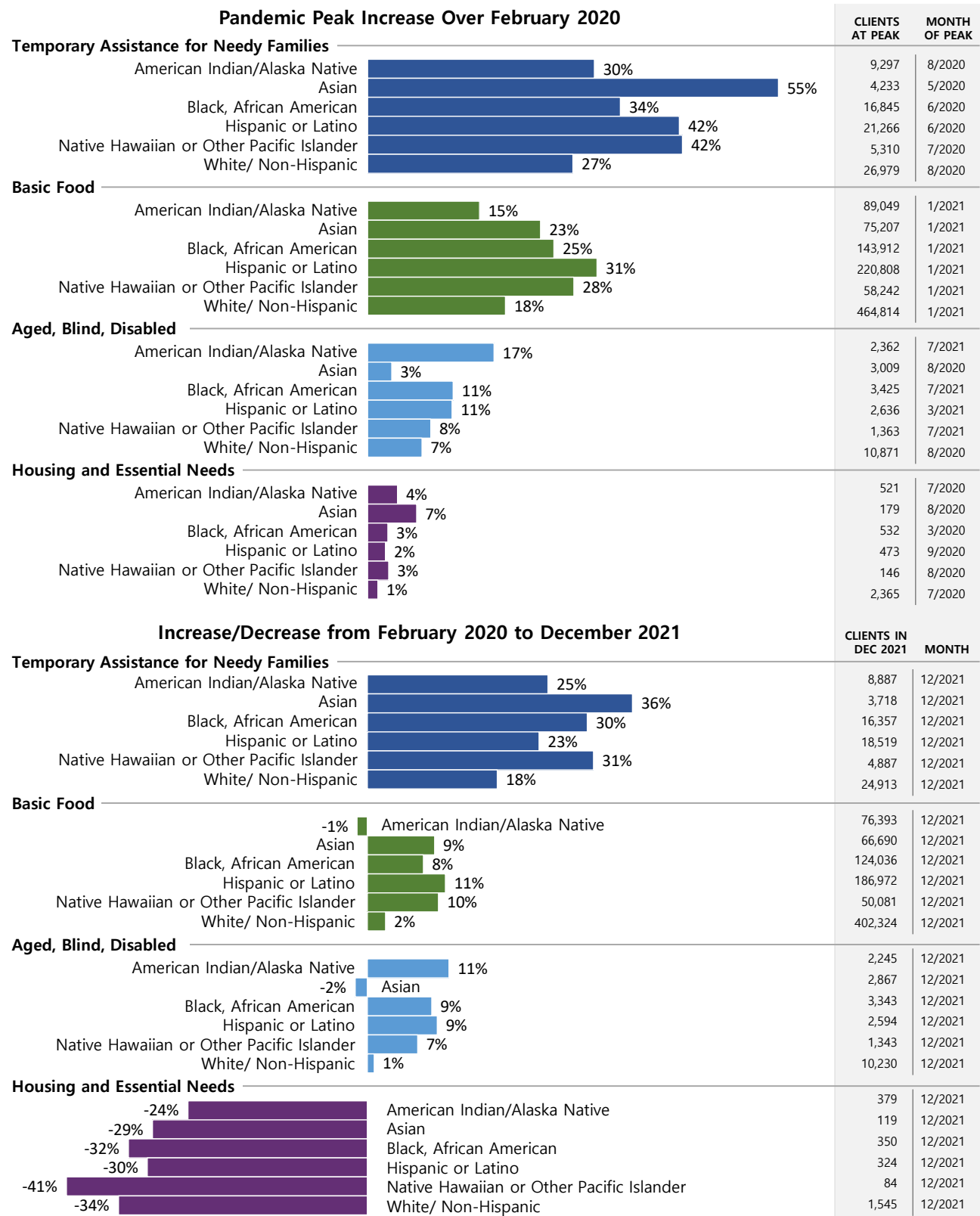
### HEN Referral Trends by Race

The number of HEN Referral recipients increased only slightly across all race/ethnicities, with the highest increase for Asians (7 percent) and lowest for non-Hispanic white clients (1 percent). As of December 2021, all racial/ethnic groups were below February 2020 levels. The number Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander HEN Referral recipients showed the largest decline from the pre-pandemic level (41 percent) while the decline for American Indian clients was the smallest (24 percent).

FIGURE 7.

### Change in Service Use by Race/Ethnicity for Each Program

Percent Change Relative to February 2020 at Pandemic Peak and as of December 2021



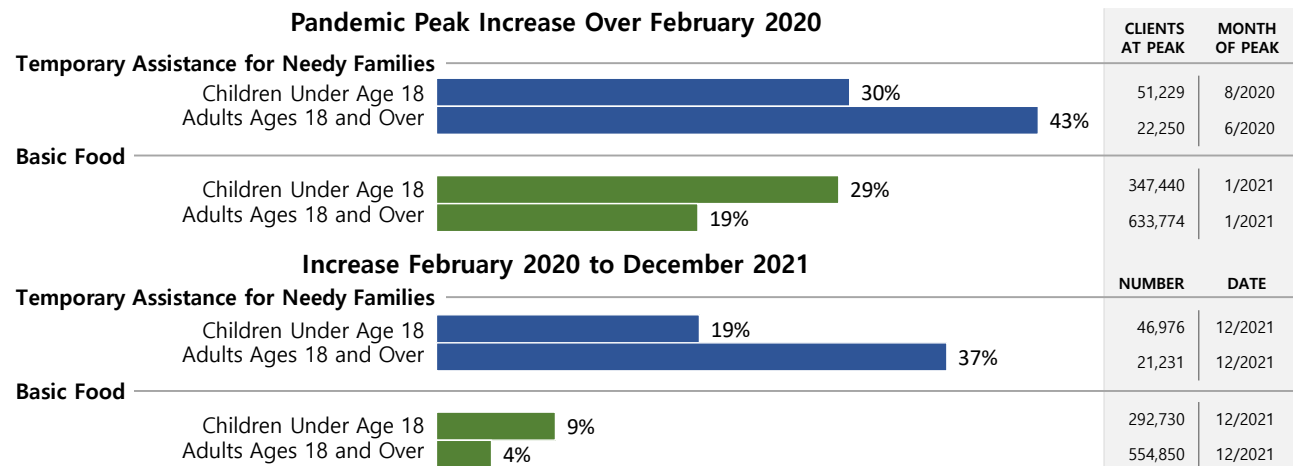
## Service Trends by Age Group

Figure 8 displays summary information about the change in service use since the pre-pandemic baseline level in February 2020 by age for TANF and Basic Food. ABD and HEN Referral program do not serve children, so those programs are excluded from this figure. The number of adult TANF recipients increased more at the pandemic peak than child TANF recipients (43 percent versus 30 percent increase) and maintained a larger increase as of December 2021 (37 percent versus 19 percent increase). Conversely, the number of Basic Food recipients under age 18 had a greater percent increase at the pandemic peak compared to their adult counterparts (29 percent versus 19 percent increase) and higher percentage increase as of December 2021 (9 percent versus 4 percent increase).

The greater growth in the adult population for TANF is likely because adult TANF cases increased while child-only cases remained steady. On the other hand, Basic Food benefits are not specifically geared toward families (two-thirds of Basic Food recipients as of February 2020 were 18 or older), so the greater growth in children receiving Basic Food may mean that in relative terms more families with children turned to Basic Food than adults not living with children during this time period.

FIGURE 8.

### Change in Service Use by Age Group for TANF and Basic Food Percent Change Relative to February 2020 at Pandemic Peak and as of December 2021



## Service Trends by DSHS Region

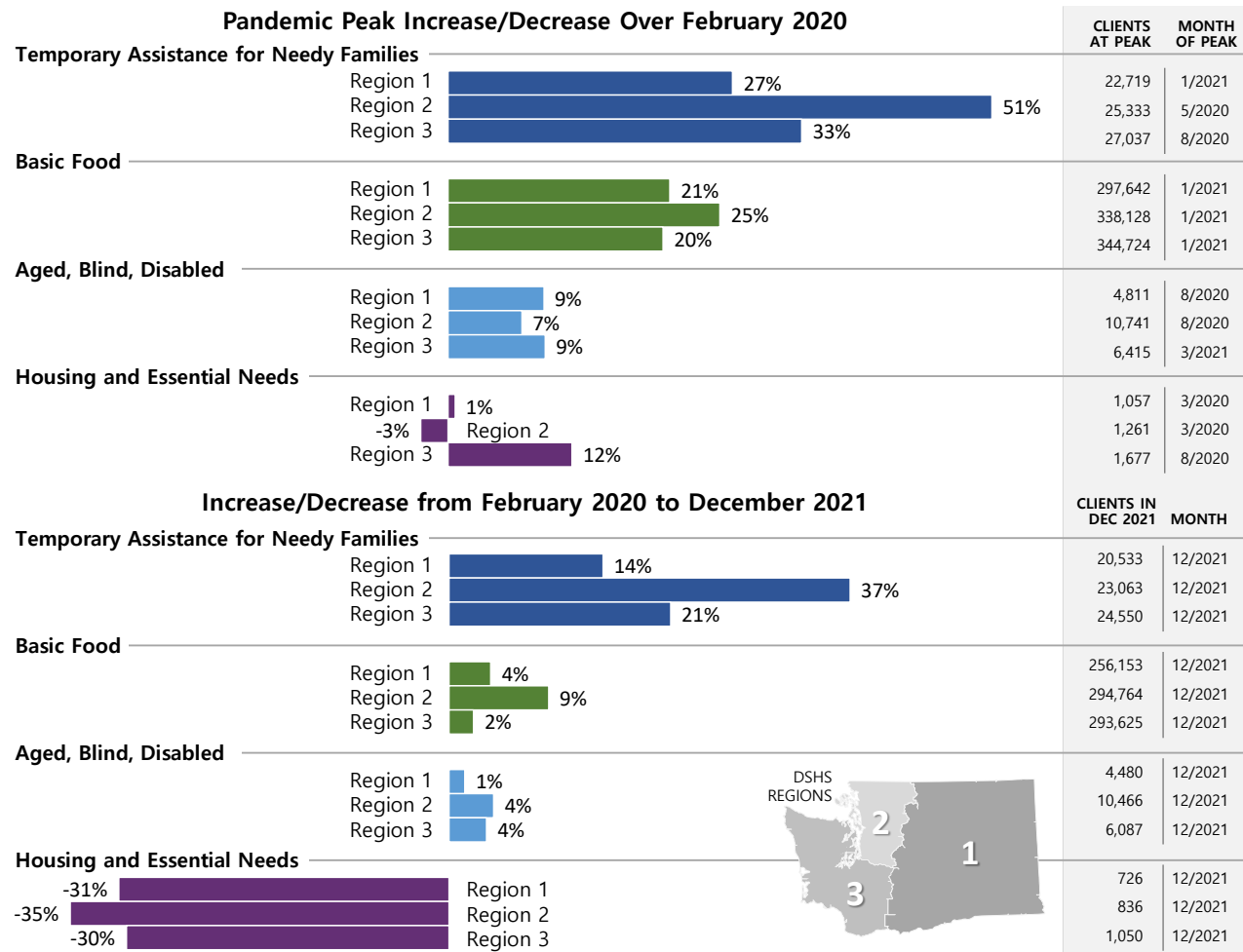
Figure 9 displays summary information about the change in service use since the pre-pandemic baseline level in February 2020 by DSHS Region and for each program. Region 2—which includes King County and the northern Puget Sound Region—showed a substantially higher pandemic peak than other two regions for TANF (51 percent increase) as well as a somewhat higher pandemic peak for Basic Food (25 percent increase). As of December 2021, Region 2 also maintained a higher percentage increase from pre-pandemic (37 percent increase for TANF; 9 percent increase for Basic Food) than other regions.

There was no noticeable regional difference in the percentage change of ABD recipients. All regions showed downward trends of HEN Referral recipients by December 2021, but Regions 1 and 3 had slight increases in HEN Referral recipients initially before declining. It is unclear if the need for TANF and Basic Food was higher in Region 2, or if there may have been greater barriers to access in Regions 1 and 3 for those programs.

FIGURE 9.

## Change in Service Use by Region for Each Program

Percent Change Relative to February 2020 at Pandemic Peak and as of December 2021



## Service Trends by Homeless Status

Figure 10 displays the monthly trend in the percent change for homeless or unstably housed clients versus housed clients across all four programs relative to February 2020. Because the trends for homeless clients did not follow the aggregate trends, we display the entire trend line from February 2020 to December 2021. Underlying counts are available in the Appendix.

The number of homeless or unstably housed TANF recipients increased by 18 percent during early months of the pandemic, but declined after peaking in June 2020 and fell below the pre-pandemic level in February 2021. This trend sharply contrasts to that of non-homeless TANF recipients, which sustained substantially elevated recipient numbers throughout the pandemic with a pandemic peak of 45 percent increase from the pre-pandemic, which only slightly decreased to 38 percent by December 2021.

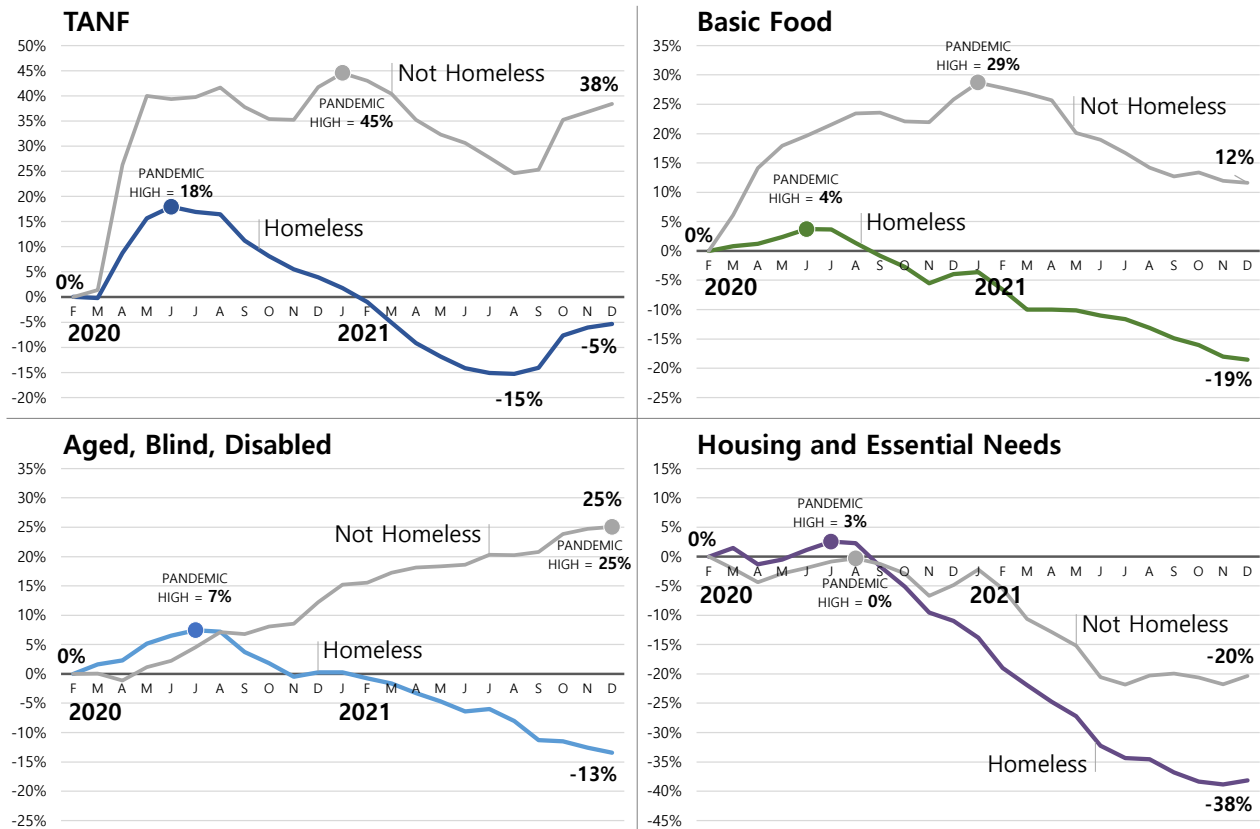
The number of homeless Basic Food recipients increased by 4 percent during the early months of the pandemic but steadily declined since July 2020 and fell below the pre-pandemic level in September 2020. As of December 2021, the number of homeless Basic Food recipients was down by 19 percent from the pre-pandemic level. In contrast, the number of non-homeless Basic Food recipients steadily

increased over the first year of the pandemic, reaching a 29 percent increase from pre-pandemic in January 2021. The number of non-homeless Basic Food recipients then fell until December 2021 but remained 12 percent above the pre-pandemic level.

FIGURE 10.

### Change in Service Use by Homeless Status for Each Program

Monthly Percent Change in Homeless and Not Homeless Clients from January 2018 through December 2021 Relative to Client Counts in February 2020



The number of homeless ABD recipients increased by 7 percent during the early months of the pandemic, but since its peak in July 2020, it steadily declined, reaching a 13 percent decline from pre-pandemic as of December 2021. This trend sharply contrasts to that of non-homeless ABD recipients, whose numbers steadily increased during the pandemic, reaching the pandemic high of 25 percent increase in December 2021.

The number of HEN Referral recipients who were homeless remained close to the pre-pandemic level in the early months of the pandemic before starting a steady decline in August 2020. As of December 2021, the number of HEN Referral recipients who were homeless was down by 38 percent from the pre-pandemic level. In contrast, the number of non-homeless HEN Referral recipients followed the trajectory of homeless clients up until November 2021 before rebounding in January 2021. The number of non-homeless HEN Referral recipients then declined, but this decline was only half of the percentage decline for homeless clients (20 percent versus 38 percent decline).

The marked decline across programs in the number of homeless recipients could be due to a number of factors. Homeless people may be exiting programs more often or entering programs less often over this time period than their housed peers. Also, an individual's homeless status could change over the time period from homeless to housed making overall homeless numbers decline, although we believe this explanation is less likely given that we defined homelessness as any indicator of homelessness in

the prior 12 months. One major barrier for homeless individuals to maintaining or accessing benefits during this time period was that Community Services Offices were closed for most in-person services. If in-person services were the preferred way for homeless individuals to sign up for or maintain ongoing benefits, the closures may have affected the number of homeless individuals connected to benefits.

## Service Trends by Disability Status

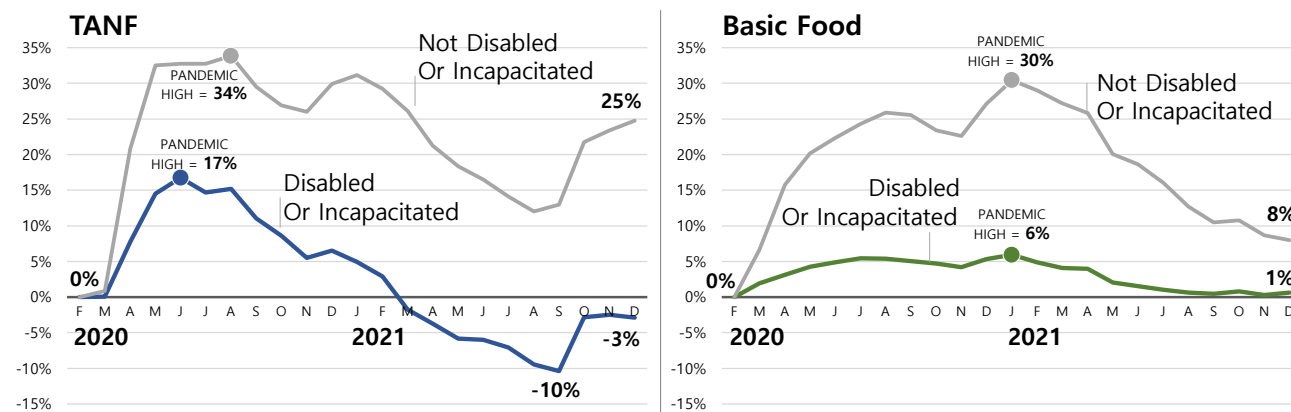
Figure 11 displays the monthly trend in the percent change of the number of disabled or incapacitated clients versus non-disabled or incapacitated clients for TANF and Basic Food relative to February 2020. Because the trends for disabled or incapacitated clients in these programs did not follow the aggregate trends, we display the entire trend line from February 2020 to December 2021. Trends in ABD percent change for disabled or incapacitated versus non-disabled or incapacitated clients did not exhibit any differences so we do not report them here. HEN Referral recipients must be incapacitated to be eligible, so the comparison was not applicable for that program. Underlying counts are available in the Appendix.

The number of disabled or incapacitated TANF recipients increased by 17 percent during early months of the pandemic, but after peaking in June 2020, the number started to decline and fell below the pre-pandemic level in March 2021. After bottoming out in September 2021, 10 percent down from pre-pandemic, it climbed back to 3 percent lower than the pre-pandemic in December 2021. This trend sharply contrasts with that of non-disabled or incapacitated TANF recipients, which sustained substantially elevated recipient numbers throughout the pandemic with a pandemic peak of a 34 percent increase from the pre-pandemic level and ended the year in December 2021 with a 25 percent increase from pre-pandemic.

FIGURE 11.

### Change in Service Use by Disability or Incapacity Status for TANF and Basic Food

Monthly Percent Change of Disabled or Incapacitated Clients and Not Disabled or Incapacitated Clients from January 2018 through December 2021



The number of disabled or incapacitated Basic Food recipients slightly increased during the pandemic with the pandemic high of a 6 percent increase from the pre-pandemic in January 2021 but fell back to the pre-pandemic level starting in September 2021 and ended the year in December 2021 only 1 percent above the pre-pandemic level. In contrast, the number of non-disabled or incapacitated Basic Food recipients substantially increased during the pandemic with a pandemic high of a 30 percent increase from pre-pandemic in January 2021. The number of non-disabled or incapacitated Basic Food recipients steadily declined after the peak in January 2021 but remained above the pre-pandemic level by 8 percent as of December 2021.

As with homeless or unstably housed recipients, disabled or incapacitated recipients may have faced increased barriers to accessing and maintaining public benefits during the pandemic due to office closures. However, disabled or incapacitated individuals also may stay on benefits long-term, for example, accessing Basic Food through the Washington State Combined Application Program (WASHCAP). Since WASHCAP eligibility lasts for 36 months, we would expect less volatility because clients would not lose access to the program due to administrative closures. However, it still may have become more difficult for disabled or incapacitated individuals to establish benefits during this period.

## Discussion

We examined service trends for four selected programs before and during the pandemic which differed notably across the four programs. TANF, which is funded through a fixed block grant, had an increase in the number of recipients from the pre-pandemic level and remained well above pre-pandemic levels at the end of 2021 despite broader downward trends in the TANF caseload since the implementation of welfare reform. The number of Basic Food recipients significantly increased during the pandemic before returning to levels slightly elevated from pre-pandemic by the end of 2021. This was not surprising given that Basic Food is a countercyclical entitlement program with uncapped federal expenditures. TANF and Basic Food caseloads likely remained above pre-pandemic level in December 2021 due to slow recovery for the low-wage workforce, especially in the service sector, and due to generous COVID-19 era policies enacted by ESA including deferred program eligibility reviews and suspension of mid-certification reviews for all cash and food program participants which reduced program exits.

In contrast to the TANF and Basic Food programs, the number of ABD recipients increased only slightly during the pandemic, and the number of HEN Referral recipients remained the same during early months of the pandemic before decreasing by nearly a third as of December 2021. One contributing factor for the differences in caseload changes across programs is the differences in the populations targeted by each program; the ABD and HEN Referral programs target a population that is less likely to participate the labor market and thus, is less affected by the pandemic recession relative to TANF and Basic Food clients.

The declining number of homeless or unstably housed recipients across all four programs is a concerning pattern. The decline could have resulted from two factors: fewer program participants may have experienced homelessness, or homeless individuals may have participated less in the programs during the pandemic. Although the eviction moratorium might have reduced housing instability among program participants to some extent by effectively preventing court-ordered eviction, it is questionable whether it decreased all other forms of housing instability, such as doubling up and couch surfing, which tend to increase during economic recessions. On the other hand, it is plausible that homeless recipients might face additional barriers to applying for and maintaining benefits during this pandemic when physical offices are closed except for very limited services, contributing to lower program participation among the homeless.

This is the first study by RDA that describes the service trends of four public benefit programs before and during the pandemic and sets the groundwork for future analyses. Potential follow-up analyses include the following:

- Exploring potential explanations for service trends observed in this report, with a particular focus on policy interventions implemented during the pandemic designed to minimize disruptions in benefit receipt. For example, future research could examine whether the recertification waiver contributed to continuity in benefit receipt, particularly for those clients who have difficulty complying with administratively burdensome procedural rules.
- Adopting a longitudinal approach to track trajectories of benefit use during the pandemic as compared to pre-pandemic trajectories and to examine outcomes (e.g. employment, health) for

those connecting during the pandemic, as compared to outcomes in prior time periods. Potential measures of interest could be length of time receiving benefits, reasons for exit, and patterns of cycling on and off of benefits.

- Investigating differences between individuals who connected to benefits during the pandemic, perhaps for the first time in their lives, and those who connected prior to the pandemic. Potential focus areas could be the characteristics of newly connected clients and their service use, program exits, and economic and health outcomes in the years following their connection to benefits and comparing their experiences to those who connected prior to the pandemic or those who connected during the pandemic but had previous experience with economic services.
- Examining the trends in receipt of benefits among the homeless or unstably housed population during the pandemic. This could include using a longitudinal approach to understand the caseload dynamics of homeless and unstably housed individuals including exits, exit reasons, volume of applications, application denial rates, etc.



APPENDIX TABLE

FIGURE 1A.  
DSHS Region  
Map by County



TABLE 1A.  
Trajectory Comparison between Homeless versus Not Homeless and Disabled or Incapacitated versus Not Disabled or Incapacitated Benefit Recipients  
February 2020 through December 2021

	TANF				Basic Food				Aged, Blind, Disabled		Housing and Essential Needs		
	Homeless	Not Homeless	Disabled or Incapacitated	Not Disabled or Incapacitated	Homeless	Not Homeless	Disabled or Incapacitated	Not Disabled or Incapacitated	Homeless	Not Homeless	Homeless	Not Homeless	
<b>2020</b>	FEB	18,354	36,729	1,821	53,262	163,653	639,918	273,006	530,565	11,443	8,900	2,541	1,306
	MAR	18,317	37,230	1,822	53,725	164,974	679,039	278,285	565,728	11,627	8,904	2,578	1,279
	APR	19,956	46,372	1,963	64,365	165,652	730,140	281,575	614,217	11,706	8,800	2,508	1,249
	MAY	21,226	51,427	2,085	70,568	167,497	754,847	284,706	637,638	12,036	9,001	2,529	1,268
	JUN	21,649	51,189	2,126	70,712	169,749	765,563	286,401	648,911	12,185	9,098	2,570	1,281
	JUL	21,463	51,326	2,088	70,701	169,622	777,766	287,883	659,505	12,295	9,302	2,606	1,295
	AUG	21,369	52,018	2,098	71,289	165,898	789,886	287,737	668,047	12,265	9,534	2,599	1,302
	SEP	20,409	50,591	2,022	68,978	162,255	790,642	286,858	666,039	11,868	9,505	2,499	1,290
	OCT	19,843	49,737	1,978	67,602	159,214	781,379	285,893	654,700	11,651	9,619	2,411	1,268
	NOV	19,358	49,682	1,921	67,119	154,668	780,188	284,485	650,371	11,389	9,661	2,299	1,219
	DEC	19,072	52,065	1,940	69,197	157,160	804,932	287,586	674,506	11,476	9,989	2,263	1,243
	<b>2021</b>	JAN	18,683	53,082	1,911	69,854	157,741	823,474	289,231	691,984	11,471	10,252	2,190
FEB		18,177	52,529	1,874	68,832	152,871	817,918	286,381	684,408	11,359	10,282	2,058	1,235
MAR		17,414	51,563	1,789	67,188	147,282	811,635	284,155	674,762	11,258	10,438	1,985	1,167
APR		16,671	49,666	1,753	64,584	147,273	804,156	283,798	667,631	11,071	10,513	1,912	1,138
MAY		16,183	48,585	1,715	63,053	147,010	768,758	278,662	637,106	10,906	10,533	1,850	1,108
JUN		15,758	47,989	1,712	62,035	145,661	760,974	277,276	629,359	10,715	10,554	1,722	1,038
JUL		15,578	46,902	1,692	60,788	144,594	746,959	275,766	615,787	10,758	10,708	1,668	1,021
AUG		15,548	45,761	1,649	59,660	142,152	730,586	274,668	598,070	10,522	10,700	1,663	1,041
SEP		15,767	46,031	1,632	60,166	139,243	721,209	274,349	586,103	10,153	10,751	1,606	1,046
OCT		16,942	49,681	1,770	64,853	137,357	725,519	275,128	587,748	10,128	11,022	1,566	1,037
NOV		17,244	50,250	1,776	65,718	134,185	716,391	273,839	576,737	10,004	11,101	1,554	1,022
DEC		17,366	50,841	1,769	66,438	133,309	714,271	274,717	572,863	9,906	11,131	1,572	1,040

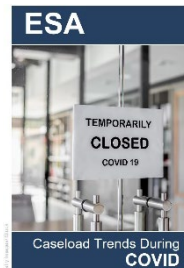
## TECHNICAL NOTES

### STUDY DESIGN AND OVERVIEW

We examined trends in public assistance service use by measuring monthly counts of recipients of TANF, Basic Food, ABD, HEN Referral between January 2018 and December 2021 using the DSHS Integrated Client Database (ICDB). To quantify changes in recipient or referral numbers in response to the pandemic and allow for comparisons across programs, we also examine the percent change in the number of clients relative to February 2020.

### MEASURES

- **Demographic characteristics:** Race, gender, and age comes from compiled client records in the ICDB. Race/ethnicity was not mutually exclusive, except for the non-Hispanic white category.
- **Homeless or unstably housed:** Indicators for homelessness or housing instability come from living arrangement codes recorded in the Automated Client Eligibility System (ACES) and from address information indicating homelessness or housing instability. This indicator is inclusive of types of housing instability such as couch surfing or doubling up. An individual was considered homeless if they had any indicator of homelessness or housing instability in the measurement month or previous 11 months.
- **Disabled or Incapacitated:** Disability was identified through participation in Washington State Combined Application Program (WASHCAP), which provides a simplified food benefit for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients, or through having an approved client disability or incapacity code in ACES or SSI/SSDI unearned income. An individual was considered disabled or incapacitated if they had any of these indicators in the measurement month or previous 11 months.
- **Region:** Region was identified based on where the client resided in the measurement month according to the best geographic information contained in the ICDB across all data systems.



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