

Issue At A Glance:

Food Insecurity among University Students

Compared to the general population, university students in the United States face a higher burden of food insecurity, which negatively affects their physical, mental, emotional and academic wellbeing. This brief reviews the reasons for food insecurity among university students, the barriers they face and possible solutions to this critical issue.

Introduction

As defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), food insecurity is a “household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.”¹ Food insecurity negatively affects physical, mental, emotional and academic wellbeing.² For example, children in food insecure households are almost twice as likely to suffer from depression or anxiety compared to children in food secure households.²

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 13.7 million households, or 10.5% of all U.S. households, experienced food insecurity at some point during 2019.³ The economic repercussions of the pandemic further exacerbated the situation, resulting in more than doubling of the food insecurity rate. According to one estimate, nearly 1 in 4 U.S. households experienced food insecurity in 2020.⁴ Even before the pandemic, however, up to 50% of university students experienced food insecurity.⁵

Often overlooked, university students are vulnerable to food insecurity. This brief will spotlight the reasons for food insecurity among university students, the barriers they face and possible solutions to this issue.

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Categories of Food Security

High Food Security: “no reported indications of food-access problems or limitations.”¹

Marginal Food Security: “one or two reported indications—typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house. Little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake.”¹

Low Food Security: “reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake.”^{1*}

Very Low Food Security: “reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.”^{1*}

*These two categories represent food insecurity.



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Reasons for Rising Food Insecurity among University Students

University students in the U.S. disproportionately experience higher rates of food insecurity compared to the general population, with rates ranging from 20% to more than 50%, depending on the studies.⁶ Even at the lower end of the estimate, the rate is higher than the 10.5% reported for the general population. More concerning is the trend that the rate of food insecurity among university students has been increasing over the years. Several reasons exist for this alarming increase.

One important reason for the increase is because a much higher proportion of university students face financial challenges today than in the past due to there being more nontraditional students.⁶ In the past, a typical college student attended college full time right after high school, depended on parents for financial support, worked either part-time or not at all during the school year, and did not have any dependents. Now, only a third of the students fit that description. In 2016, for example, about half of all undergraduate students were financially independent from their parents; a quarter worked full time; and more than a fifth had dependent children.⁶ In addition, a higher proportion of students are from low-income households where parents cannot provide financial support.⁶

Even as more students face financial challenges, university education has become more expensive with rising tuitions and cost of living. Between 1989 and 2016, for example, the cost of a 4-year degree doubled, even after adjusting for inflation.⁶ With such increases, federal subsidy for low-income students such as Pell Grants have less purchasing power. In addition, public universities have less money to provide financial aid to students or provide affordable food and housing options. With the value of minimum wage declining, it is now also more difficult to pay for college by working.⁶

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (H.R. 133) and Temporary Waivers for Student Eligibility for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP)

Better known for the portion designating \$900 billion in stimulus relief for the COVID-19 pandemic, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 also authorized two important SNAP eligibility waivers for students. Until 30 days after the COVID-19 public health emergency is lifted at the federal level, students enrolled at least half-time in an institution of higher education can be eligible for SNAP if they are *eligible* to participate in state or federally financed work study and if they have an expected family contribution of zero dollars.⁷



Barriers and Solutions

Barriers to Obtaining Food Assistance

In a 2018 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), approximately 7.3 million U.S. college students had household incomes below the level that qualifies them for SNAP yet only 2.26 million (31%) were actually enrolled in this food assistance program.⁸ Why is this discrepancy occurring?

This unfortunate discrepancy stems from the program's eligibility rules that explicitly intend to keep college students from enrolling. Due to complaints that college students from middle-income and wealthy families were qualifying for SNAP by establishing independent households, the Congress in 1980 declared that full-time students were ineligible for food stamps unless they were working 20 hours a week or more or qualified for 1 of several possible exemptions.⁶

Even if a student belongs to a low-income family that qualifies for SNAP, he/she cannot be included in the parents' SNAP grants if the student does not eat at least half of the meals at home. Also, part-time students are considered "able-bodied adults without dependents" and subject to work requirements unless they have children.⁶

Furthermore, even if a student qualifies for SNAP, the rules are written such that it is difficult for the student to know if he/she is eligible. Even when the student knows that he/she is eligible, the cumbersome application



process and stigma can also deter the student from applying.⁶

In addition to these barriers in obtaining assistance through SNAP, students may also face barriers in obtaining food from food banks if the hours of operation are during class. Lack of transportation could be a barrier as well if there is no food pantry on campus or nearby.

Potential Policy Solutions

One important policy solution would be to eliminate the barriers to SNAP enrollment that university students face. Recently, the federal government issued two temporary waivers to SNAP for university students (see the blue section on p.2), but they are tied to the public health emergency period declared for the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, more permanent policy changes are needed.

In addition, SNAP enrollment should align with the Federal Work-Study Program to reduce the application burden.⁶ Better outreach for SNAP enrollment on campus could also help. Moving beyond SNAP, expanding the school breakfast and lunch programs to include public universities and allocating federal funding for hunger-free campuses could help reduce food insecurity among our students.

Conclusion

It is unacceptable that up to 50% of university students suffer from food insecurity in a wealthy country like the United States. With a growing body of evidence demonstrating that university students experiencing food insecurity have poorer health, higher rates of depression, greater academic challenges and lower grades than their counterparts, it's imperative that we address this issue before it gets even worse.⁹ Furthermore, the fact that students of color and first-generation students are at the highest risk of food insecurity makes it a health equity issue as well.⁹

While on-campus food pantries and local food banks provide much needed emergency assistance, more permanent solutions are needed. Unfortunately, proposed federal bills such as the College Student Hunger Act of 2019 (H.R. 3809) have not progressed much since their introduction.^{9,10} With the pandemic further exacerbating the problem of food insecurity, policy makers at the federal, state, and local levels as well as university administrators and community leaders need to tackle this issue thoughtfully, systematically and promptly to ensure that our students—the future of our country—do not go hungry.

References

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Did you know?

According to the latest student loan debt statistics from 2020, the United States has 44.7 million borrowers who collectively owe \$1.56 trillion in student loans.¹¹

If you're a CA college student with food insecurity, visit <https://students.getcalfresh.org/> for more info on applying for CA's SNAP program.



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