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Food Insecurity on College Campuses: FAQs

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Since 2015, more than 100 peer-reviewed articles have been published on the topic of food insecurity among college students. Interest in the topic continues to grow, especially as food insecurity relates to larger discussions about college affordability – a priority for the Biden administration. In this article, we offer a set of commonly asked questions about food insecurity on college campuses, informed by our own research and experiences discussing this topic with others.

Q: What is food insecurity and how is it measured?
A: The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as insufficient access to nutritionally adequate and culturally appropriate food to maintain an active and healthy lifestyle. In 2019, 9.8% of U.S. adults experienced food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020).

At the national level, food insecurity is assessed in the Current Population Survey (CPS) using the 18-item Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM). In the HFSSM, the first ten questions ask about the household's food conditions as a whole and food conditions of adults in the household. The last eight questions ask about food conditions for children in the household, when applicable. Since the CPS is a large survey, efforts must be made to reduce respondent burden. There are two screener questions that households are asked prior to completing the HFSSM. If a household answers the two screeners in a food secure pattern *and* household income is above 185% of the federal poverty line, the household is considered food secure and is not required to complete the HFSSM (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020).

Table 1 outlines the screening questions and HFSSM and denotes responses that indicate food security/insecurity.

Table 1. Screening Questions and Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) from the Current Population Survey (CPS)

Screener Questions	*Food Secure Responses*	*Food Insecure Responses*
S1. Did you ever run short of money and try to make your food or your food money go further?	No	Yes
S2. Which of these statements best describes the food eaten in your household?	Enough of the kinds of food I/we want to eat	Often not enough to eat; Sometimes not enough to eat; Enough but not always the kinds of food I/we want to eat
HFSSM Questions	*Food Secure Responses*	*Food Insecure Responses*
1. We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.	Never true	Often true; Sometimes true
2. The food that we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more.	Never true	Often true; Sometimes true
3. We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.	Never true	Often true; Sometimes
4. Did you or other adults in the household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?	No	Yes
5. (if Yes to 4) How often did this happen?	Only 1 or 2 months	Almost every month; Some months but not every month
6. Did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food?	No	Yes
7. Were you ever hungry, but didn't eat, because there wasn't enough money for food?	No	Yes
8. Did you lose weight because there wasn't enough money for food?	No	Yes
9. Did you or other adults in your household ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?	No	Yes
10. (if Yes to 9) How often did this happen?	Only 1 or 2 months	Almost every month; Some months but not every month
11. We relied on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed our children because we were running out of money to buy food.	Never true	Often true; Sometimes true
12. We couldn't feed our children a balanced meal, because we couldn't afford that.	Never true	Often true; Sometimes true
13. The children were not eating enough because we just couldn't afford enough food.	Never true	Often true; Sometimes true
14. Did you ever cut the size of any of the children's meals because there wasn't enough money for food?	No	Yes
15. Were the children ever hungry but you just couldn't afford more food?	No	Yes
16. Did any of the children ever skip a meal because there wasn't enough money for food?	No	Yes
17. (if Yes to 16) How often did this happen?	Only 1 or 2 months	Almost every month; Some months but not every month
18. Did any of the children ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?	No	Yes

Notes: Adapted from Coleman-Jensen et al. (2020). For all items, questions were asked about the occurrence in the last 12 months. Households are considered food insecure if they report 3 or more indications of food insecurity.

Q: How big is the food insecurity problem on college campuses?
A: The short answer is we don't exactly know. Currently, there is no national estimate of food insecurity among college students. Instead, researchers have most often published estimates based on surveys conducted on individual campuses or from a group of campuses. Recent literature reviews on the college student population report average food insecurity prevalence rates of 35-51% (Bruening et al, 2017; U.S. GAO, 2018; Nazmi et al., 2019; Nikolaus et al., 2020), with individual studies ranging from 10-75% (Nikolaus et al., 2020). A few studies have estimated the prevalence of college food insecurity using CPS data (see Blagg et al., 2017; Gundersen, 2020), but there are several reasons the CPS may not be the best data source for drawing conclusions about college student food insecurity – for a discussion, see Ellison et al., 2021.

Q: Why is there such a large range of food insecurity prevalence estimates in the college population?
A: It is difficult to point to a single factor that explains why food insecurity rates on college campuses are so different. Here, we discuss several. First, the type of college may influence rates. Students at community colleges typically exhibit higher rates of food insecurity than students at 4-year institutions (Blagg et al., 2017; Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Gundersen, 2020; Nikolaus et al., 2020).

Secondly, the way food insecurity is measured may impact the observed prevalence rate. While Table 1 shows the full 18-item HFSSM used in the CPS, many researchers use shorter versions of this scale when fielding surveys on college campuses. Some studies use only the first ten questions (known as the 10-item Adult Food Security Survey Module, or AFSSM), while others use a shorter 6-item survey. The 6-item survey is a subset of the AFSSM. Nikolaus et al. (2020) found that rates of food security were highest when the 6-item survey is used. Further, the CPS traditionally asks households about the occurrence of items in the last 12 months; however, a 30-day time referent may also be used. In college student studies, many researchers opt for the last 30 days instead of the last 12 months to better capture students' food experiences while on campus (and not at home or away for an internship/job over summer break, for example). Using the shorter time referent is also associated with higher rates of food insecurity among college students (Nikolaus et al., 2020).

Lastly, there is emerging evidence that students may interpret food security questions differently than the general population (Ames and Barnett, 2019; Nikolaus et al., 2019). For example, the term "money" may not be as straightforward for students who have a variety of financial resources to support food acquisition like current/previous employment, grants/scholarships, loans, money from family members, meal plans, free food events, and so on. Interpreting "household" can also be challenging for students – for example, who "counts" as a member of the household and what if there is no household?

To date, food insecurity has not been measured consistently across college campus, so it is extremely challenging to compare existing prevalence estimates. An additional challenge is that the current USDA measures have not been validated for use with the college student population (Ellison et al., 2021). Thus, more quantitative and qualitative research is needed to ensure we have a valid and reliable measurement that can be used with college students.

Q: Which college students are more likely to be food insecure?
A: Research consistently indicates that community college students, first generation college students, underrepresented minorities, and students who receive financial support are at greater risk for food insecurity during college (Blagg et al., 2017; Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Gundersen, 2020; Nikolaus et al., 2020). Some research indicates that students with families are more likely to be food insecure (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). These patterns are similar to the general population where Hispanic and Black households, and those households with children are at greater risk of food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020).

Q: What resources are typically available for students on campus?
A: The resources available for food insecure students vary by college campus. Food pantries are one of the most common resources used to help students struggling with food insecurity, with over 700 food pantries on college campuses (College and University Food Bank Alliance, 2021). Some campuses supplement food pantries with community gardens and/or meal sharing programs (for example, Swipe Out Hunger) where students can donate meals on their meal plans to other students in need. Other campuses encourage students to reach out to their Dean of Students to provide financial support to

students in need. While food pantries and similar resources are an important stop gap to providing emergency food access, these resources often do not address the root cause of insufficient access to food. Some campuses employ staff to assist eligible students to enroll in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The efficacy of these resources to help students with food insecurity has yet to be evaluated.

Q: Are there policies trying to address food insecurity on college campuses?
A: Both state and federal legislation has been introduced to address college student hunger (and homelessness), and college affordability (with the argument that more affordable higher education would enable students to have more money for food and housing). Specifically, 12 unique bills were introduced at the federal level, with none making it out of committee (Laska et al., 2020a). State-level policies have been more successful, with 8 bills enacted across 7 states (California, Washington, Hawaii, Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, Connecticut), and 6 more states with bills introduced (Laska et al., 2020b). The enacted bills include efforts to designate campuses as hunger-free zones and providing funding to campuses that align with hunger-free zone designations, assessing the scope of food insecurity on college campuses in the state, provide staffing and other resources to support SNAP outreach to students, provide waivers to participate on SNAP, and pilot programs to address student food insecurity and homelessness (Laska et al., 2020b).

Q: Isn't "living on ramen" for a few years a rite of passage?
A: Unfortunately, living on ramen has been normalized, but should not be considered a rite of passage. Living on a diet of ramen (or some similarly cheap, processed food) does not provide adequate nutrition for anyone, including young adults whose brains and bodies may still be growing. Research has shown that students report food insecurity also have lower GPAs over time (van Woerden et al., 2019). Proper nutrition has been linked to positive brain function and better academic outcomes. Better academic outcomes result in better job prospects for students over time. More work is needed to make sure that all students, especially those facing food insecurity—once we better understand the scope of the problem – have access to healthy food in order to promote their academic and career success.

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