

Prevalence and Correlates of Food Insecurity Among Students Attending a Midsize Rural University in Oregon

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine the prevalence and identify correlates of food insecurity among students attending a rural university in Oregon.

Methods: Cross-sectional nonprobability survey of 354 students attending a midsize rural university in Oregon during May, 2011. The main outcome was food insecurity measured using the US Department of Agriculture Household Food Security Survey Module: 6-Item Short Form. Socioeconomic and demographic variables were included in multivariate logistic regression models.

Results: Over half of students (59%) were food insecure at some point during the previous year. Having fair/poor health (odds ratio [OR], 2.08; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.07–4.63), being employed (OR, 1.73; 95% CI, 1.04–2.88), and having an income < \$15,000/y (OR, 2.23; 95% CI, 1.07–4.63) were associated with food insecurity. In turn, good academic performance (grade point average of ≥ 3.1) was inversely associated with food insecurity.

Conclusions: Food insecurity seems to be a significant issue for college students. It is necessary to expand research on different campus settings and further strengthen support systems to increase access to nutritious foods for this population.

Key Words: food insecurity, college students, rural, Oregon (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2014;46:209-214.)

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INTRODUCTION

Household food insecurity is defined as the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.¹ As measured by the US Department of Agriculture Household Food Security Module,² food insecurity is a marker of economic hardship because it assesses the adequacy and stability of a household's food supply over the preceding 12 months for active, healthy living of all household members. The most recent national data in 2011 indicate that 14.9% of all households (17.9 million) were food insecure.³ Furthermore, low-income households with incomes < 185% of the poverty

threshold (34.5%) and households with children (20.6%) were higher than the national average.³

Previous research has observed that food insecurity can disrupt optimal development throughout the life cycle, from the prenatal period into the elder years.^{4,5} A growing body of literature has documented the effects of food insecurity on cognitive, academic, and psychosocial development among school-aged and teenage students. These studies consistently observe that food insecurity is associated with lower academic performance, poor health, and decreased psychosocial function.^{4,10,11}

Among college students, financial hardship can translate into budget demands that compete with food dollars (eg, tuition, textbooks, housing,

utilities, health care).^{12,13} Over the past 30 years, the price of higher education has steadily outpaced inflation, the cost of living, and medical expenses.¹⁴ Recent changes to federal loan policies regarding the amount and duration of federal aid received, as well as how soon interest will begin to accrue after college, may exacerbate the financial challenges students face.¹⁵ Food insecurity, as a potential consequence of the increasing cost of higher education, and its likely impact on student health, learning, and social outcomes should not be considered an accepted aspect of the impoverished student experience, but a major student health priority.¹⁶

College students face life-changing milestones during their transition to adulthood that may have long-lasting effects.^{17,18} Food insecurity during these years can potentially affect college students' cognitive, academic, and psychosocial development.⁴ However, little research has addressed this issue. Studies addressing food insecurity among college students suggest a higher prevalence of food insecurity compared with the general population.^{19,20} A study in Hawai'i found that 45% of students were food

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insecure or at risk of food insecurity,²⁰ whereas another study in Australia found that almost 72% of students were food insecure.¹⁹ No such studies have been conducted in the continental US or in rural areas. The purpose of the current study was to address this gap in the literature by analyzing the prevalence of food insecurity and identifying its correlates among students attending a rural university in Oregon.

METHODS

Design and Participants

The authors distributed a cross-sectional, nonprobability, Web-based, 40-item survey via e-mail to all students (N = 5,438) attending a midsize rural university in western Oregon during May, 2011. A total of 354 students completed the survey (7% response rate). The e-mail contained an informed consent form and provided a link to the survey where participants confirmed consent before beginning the survey. The study was part of a broader effort to increase access to food among students on campus. The online survey was open for a 2-week period during which weekly reminders were sent.^{21,22} The study protocol was approved by the institutional review board at this university.

Theoretical Framework

Based on previous research,^{2,3,19,20,23} relevant factors associated with food insecurity among university students were included. Questions regarding credit card debt,²⁴ employment,²⁵ and financial aid²⁶ were also added. Table 1 shows the correlates used in this model.

FOOD INSECURITY

The researchers used the US Household Food Security Survey Module: 6-Item Short Form to measure food insecurity status.² The 6-item scale has been shown to have reasonably high specificity and sensitivity and minimal bias with respect to the 18-item measure.²⁷ The 6 items of the food security scale were reduced to 2 categories: 0 = food secure and 1 = food insecure.²⁷ The internal consistency

of the scale (Cronbach $\alpha = .83$) was similar to a previous study that used the same 6-item scale.²⁸

Statistical Analysis

Summary statistics were calculated for all variables included in this study. The researchers used chi-square goodness-of-fit tests to compare the fit of the sample with selected campus-wide demographic characteristics provided by the university's registrar office. A 2-step multivariate logistic regression model was built to evaluate the association between correlates and food insecurity status (step 1), adjusting for sociodemographic factors (step 2). All analyses were conducted using Stata 11 (StataCorp, College Station, TX, 2009). The Hosmer-Lemeshow test²⁹ was performed to assess model fit using the `lfit` command.

RESULTS

Table 2 presents the summary statistics for all variables included in the study. The sample was representative of the student population at this university for full-time ($\chi^2_{\text{goodness of fit}} = 0.10$; $P = .75$), undergraduate ($\chi^2_{\text{goodness of fit}} = 1.98$; $P = .16$), and Latino students ($\chi^2_{\text{goodness of fit}} = 1.29$; $P = .26$) but over-represented female students ($\chi^2_{\text{goodness of fit}} = 24.5$; $P = .01$). Less than a third of the sample reported residing on-campus (29%). Those who reported residing off-campus either lived with roommates (35%) or had other arrangements (36%), such as living by themselves (18%) or with their parents (4%). Half of the students (50.3%) said they had a job in addition to attending college. Those who reported the number of hours worked (n = 164) worked an average of 18.2 h/wk (SD, 9.3 h/wk). The majority of students (79%) reported having health insurance, which was obtained primarily from their parents (67%) or the university (22%). Few students (12%) reported having no credit card debt. The majority of participants were female (73%), single (73%), and 18–24 years of age (72%). Eight percent reported being Hispanic or Latino.

Food insecurity affected 59% of students. Participation in food assistance

programs (emergency food from a church, food pantry/bank, or emergency kitchen; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children; Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP]/food stamps; or private organizations) reached 27% of the sample. Most of these were SNAP recipients (n = 67; 70%). Table 3 presents the results of the final multivariate logistic regression model. The value ($P = .74$) for the Hosmer-Lemeshow test indicated good model fit. Income < \$15,000 was the strongest correlate of food insecurity among this sample of students (odds ratio [OR], 2.23; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.07–4.63). Similarly, students reporting fair or poor health were more likely to be food insecure (OR, 2.08; 95% CI, 1.07–4.63). Employed students and those participating in food assistance programs were also more likely to be food insecure (OR, 1.73, 95% CI, 1.04–2.88; and OR, 1.91, 95% CI, 1.05–3.45, respectively). However, students with a grade point average of ≥ 3.1 were 60% less likely to be food insecure (OR, 0.40; 95% CI, 0.22–0.69). No significant associations were found with living arrangement, health insurance status, physical activity, enrollment status, or demographic factors.

DISCUSSION

The current study found that the prevalence of food insecurity (59%) among a sample of college students attending a midsize rural university in Oregon was higher than that of the general population (15%), or even other college student populations (eg, 39% among students at the City University of New York³⁰; 45% among students at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa²⁰). Food insecurity is an indicator of economic hardship that college students are facing. A recent story in *The Atlantic*³¹ pointed out that across the country, stretching financial aid dollars or wages from part-time work has become more challenging for college students during the Great Recession, partly because "parents have fewer resources to help out, there is greater competition for work-study jobs, and many schools have increased tuition to cover their expenses." Without

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