

How college students cope with episodic and persistent food insecurity

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College students are at greater risk for food insecurity than the general population, a University of Illinois study shows. Credit: University of Illinois

College students, especially first-generation and minority students, are more likely to experience food insecurity than the general population.

This can contribute to social inequalities and make degree attainment more difficult for those students, University of Illinois researchers say.

"Food insecurity is an equity issue because it impacts [student success](#). College students experiencing [food insecurity](#) have lower dietary quality, lower reported mental and physical health, and even lower graduation rates and educational attainment," says Ana Mitchell, a doctoral student and National Science Foundation graduate research fellow in the Division of Nutritional Sciences, part of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at U of I.

Mitchell is the lead author of a new study that estimates episodic and persistent food insecurity among [college](#) students, as well as their coping strategies for food attainment and management.

"College students are at a greater risk for food insecurity than the general population, not only because of the financial investment to attend college, but also because college is a very unique time period, where individuals are often on their own for the first time and have limited experience managing resources like money and food," she explains.

Mitchell and co-authors Brenna Ellison, Purdue University, and Meg Bruening, Penn State University, collected 888 surveys from undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Illinois. They found that 22% of respondents had experienced food insecurity in the past year. Slightly more than half of those reported episodic food insecurity (within the past year but not in the past month), while 10% faced persistent food insecurity (in the past year and the past month). Furthermore, first-generation students, Black students, Hispanic students, and those receiving [financial support](#) from the government were more likely to experience episodic or persistent food insecurity.

The researchers also found differences in coping strategies based on food security status.

"Among all students, the most used coping strategies were buying the cheapest food available, stretching food to last longer, and eating less healthy meals," Mitchell says. "Students facing persistent food insecurity used coping strategies more frequently. Many of these strategies lead to less healthful diets, which may put students at greater risk for diet-related diseases in the long term."

Food insecure students were more likely to seek support from family or friends if possible, rather than access formal types of support such as food pantries. This may be due to barriers like stigma, inconvenient hours, or location, among other reasons documented in previous studies, Mitchell notes.

"While college campuses may offer food assistance resources such as pantries, they are generally geared towards providing short-term, emergency food, and they are often associated with stigma that may deter [student](#) use. For students facing persistent or chronic food insecurity, food pantries may not be the most reasonable solution, but they are the most widely implemented solution currently on college campuses," she states.

An alternative option could be the implementation of free or reduced-price meals for students in need, similar to those offered in the National School Lunch Program, Mitchell suggests. This could minimize the stigma associated with receiving assistance, because students would obtain food in dining halls alongside paying students. Another systemic solution could include expanding Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) eligibility for college students.

Lastly, Mitchell says food security isn't just about getting enough food,

but also [nutritious food](#).

"Food assistance programs are moving from food security to nutrition security, which means ensuring individuals have access to foods and beverages that promote well-being and prevent disease. We need to think about not only how we can make sure students have enough food and aren't facing hunger, but also making sure their food is nutritious and healthy," she concludes.

The paper, "Persistent and episodic [food](#) insecurity and associated [coping strategies](#) among [college students](#)" is published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*.

More information: Ana Mitchell et al, Persistent and Episodic Food Insecurity and Associated Coping Strategies Among College Students, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2022.06.003](#)

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