
Food Insecurity in College during the COVID-19 Pandemic

December 9, 2020

Research Conducted for:
UNT Dean of Students

Professor Dr. Lisa Henry
Anthropology Department
University of North Texas
Ethnographic and Qualitive Methods
ANTH 5031 2020

Students

Jamie Allen, Dallas Atchley, Ebone Fletcher,
Gabriela Gutierrez, Elsa Irby, Anya Meave, Natalie Muyres,
Amna Saleemi, Marieke Smits, Tyler Stodola, Morgan Villegas

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
INTRODUCTION	6
RESEARCH GOAL:	6
MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS:.....	6
METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE	6
DEMOGRAPHICS	7
AGE	7
RACE/ETHNICITY	7
GENDER.....	7
YEAR IN COLLEGE.....	8
RESIDENCY STATUS: ON-CAMPUS OR OFF-CAMPUS.....	8
DEPENDENTS	8
TRANSPORTATION.....	8
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS.....	9
FINANCIAL AID	9
EXPERIENCES OF FOOD INSECURITY PRIOR TO COVID-19	10
THE MEANING OF FOOD INSECURITY	10
PANDEMIC CONSEQUENCES: EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY	11
PANDEMIC AS TIPPING POINT	11
FEAR OF THE VIRUS	12
ABLE TO GO HOME	12
UNCONVENTIONAL COPING STRATEGIES	13
REALIZATION OF PREVIOUS FOOD INSECURITY	13
EXPERIENCE OF FOOD INSECURITY: COMPOUNDING ISSUES.....	14
<i>International Students – Limited job options</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>International Students – Transport.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>General Population - Health Issues</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Experience of Food insecurity: Feelings of Wellbeing (Summary).....</i>	<i>15</i>
FINANCIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FOOD INSECURITY	15
HEALTH AND NUTRITION	17
DIET PRIOR TO COVID-19.....	17
DIET CHANGE DUE TO COVID-19	17
DIET DURING COVID-19	18
PRIORITIES WHEN ACCESSING FOOD.....	19
THE IMPACT ON PHYSICAL HEALTH.....	20
THE IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH.....	21
ACADEMIC IMPACT AND CONCERN.....	21
COPING.....	22
COPING PRIOR AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC	22
COPING STRATEGIES TO ENSURE FOOD IS AVAILABLE DAILY	23
SUPPORT	25
FAMILY AND FRIEND SUPPORT	25

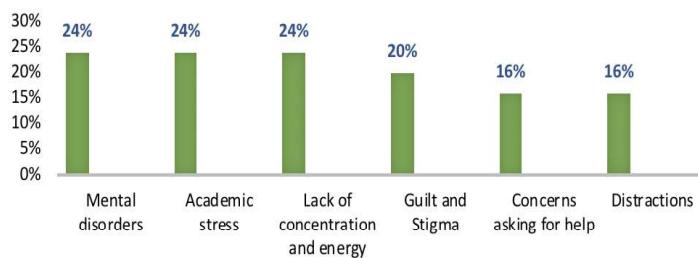
DISCUSSING FOOD INSECURITY WITH OTHERS	26
STIGMA OF FOOD INSECURITY: EMOTIONAL RESPONSE AND PARENTAL INFLUENCE:	26
COMMUNICATION	27
FOOD SUPPORT COMMUNICATION	27
FINANCIAL SUPPORT COMMUNICATION	27
EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION METHODS	28
POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS	28
FOOD RESOURCES.....	29
EXTERNAL RESOURCES STUDENTS FIND MOST HELPFUL	29
UNT RESOURCES STUDENTS FIND MOST HELPFUL.....	29
<i>UNT Food Pantry Usage:.....</i>	30
UNT RESOURCES STUDENTS ARE REQUESTING	30
<i>Existing Resources:.....</i>	30
<i>Nonexistent Resources:.....</i>	30
<i>Improvements to Existing Resources:</i>	31
<i>Food Items Most Wanted from the UNT Food Pantry:</i>	31
<i>Non-Food Items Most Wanted from the UNT Food Pantry:.....</i>	31
<i>Pandemic-Specific Food Pantry Services and Items Wanted at the UNT Food Pantry:.....</i>	32
SOLUTIONS: COMMUNICATION IS KEY.....	32
IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AND INCREASE CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION	32
<i>Communication Priorities:.....</i>	33
INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT	33
ONGOING PROGRAM EVALUATION	34
REFERENCES.....	35

their diet. Additionally, two different participants admitted that the foods they are forced to eat affect how they physically feel, as they feel unhealthy because while the foods they eat are filling and convenient in terms of cooking time and shelf life, they are not always healthy.

The Impact on Mental Health

An additional goal of this study was to understand the impact that food insecurity had on the participants' mental health.

MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS



Many participants between the ages of 18-25 described their worries regarding a lack of money to meet their necessities. Meanwhile, other participants mentioned that mental disorders like depression, anxiety, and even eating disorders were heightened with an increased state of food insecurity. One participant states, "*I'm constantly stressed, and I have so much anxiety and increased panic attacks now...And then I cannot concentrate on my studies because... I'm feeling very weak all the time*" (female, South Asian, 25-year-old sophomore living off campus). Some participants noted that they were stressed about their ability to complete and succeed academically and had a lot of stress pertaining to school. The impact of food insecurity on academics will be further discussed in a forthcoming section.

Additionally, several participants described a general lack of concentration and energy because of their food choices. Mostly female (graduate students) participants said they experience guilt when utilizing resources like the food pantry because they feel shameful of their predicaments in being unable to provide food for themselves. Similarly, a few participants admitted that they are afraid of asking others for help for similar reasons. Stigma and guilt pertaining to food insecurity during COVID-19 will be further discussed in a forthcoming section.

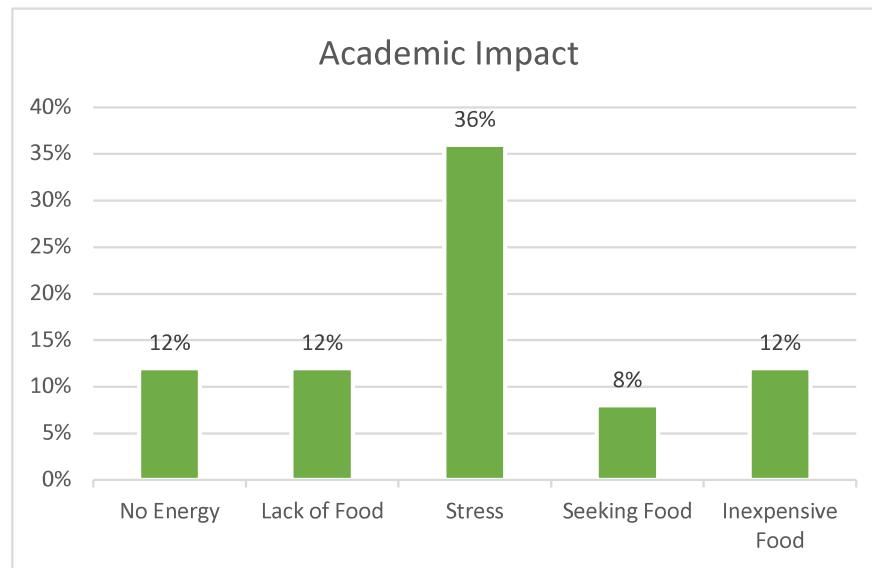
Some other impacts on mental health that participants brought up include stressing over their preexisting conditions. Further, international students discussed their concerns regarding their home countries and families back home. A few participants also touched on developing a negative self-image as a direct result of their struggles with food insecurity.

Academic Impact and Concern

The academic impact that food insecurity has had on students during the COVID-19 pandemic is that students are unable to focus. About 52% of participants identified not being able to focus on their studies. It was a great concern because they did not have enough energy to complete their

academic work due to a lack of food consumption. One participant stated, “*So, I'm hungry all throughout the day. That's usually only on Sundays though, where I'm just hungry all throughout the day and I'm having to try and study at work, my mind's a little foggy*” (Carlos, a male, White, 20-year-old senior living on campus). Another participant shared that studies require a lot of “brain food” which typically helps them study for longer periods of time, but with a lack of food they are only able to study for 1.5 hours. This is down from the four consecutive hours of previous study time with consistent access to food (Mathew, South Asian, 25-year-old sophomore living off campus). Responses from the focus group support this experience.

Stress was found to be the second greatest problem that was connected to the academic impact of the pandemic. 32% of participants indicated increased stress due to concerns such as needing to search for food and stretch their budget. As noted by a student’s response: “*You know, it's just more of that added stress of like trying to figure out how to stretch my budget in ways that I need to... is just a really stressful thing to do*” (Sam, non-binary, Caucasian, 22-year-old senior living off campus).



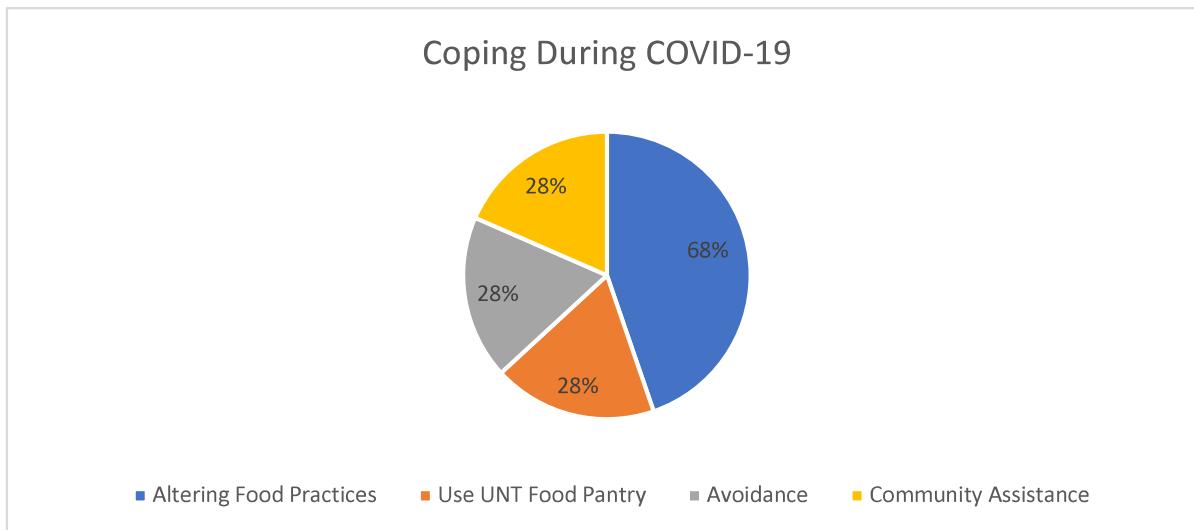
Coping

Coping Prior and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Prior to COVID-19, students utilized a range of methods to cope with food insecurity experienced. While some students expressed using school functions, work, and other community resources to obtain meals prior to the pandemic, some looked to consuming snacks, saving food, and prioritizing items for budget friendly recipes. A participant shared, “[...] before I came into college, when I had food insecurity, it was like I was saving food, so, and not eating as much at like family dinners, so I can make sure that my little brother had more” (Sophia, female, Caucasian, 20-year-old junior living off campus). By doing this, the participant learned to only eat half her meals and save the rest for later to ensure she and others can eat.

In addition, the financial impact during COVID-19 directly affected how much and what kinds of foods students were able to buy. Twenty percent of participants depended on the UNT cafeteria as their primary source of food, which was closed when the pandemic began. A few students have utilized a food pantry but expressed concerns for health impacts, including nutritional value of their food items and unmet allergy restrictions. *“I cannot get food from food pantry because most of their food has sodium, they’re like and like, so that really is bad for me like, doctors strictly told me not to. So now I’m just, my food is just limited to snacking. That’s it.”* (Amala, South Asian, 25-year-old sophomore living off campus). Participants have had to cope by minimizing their budget and using their savings, when applicable. One participant reported selling plasma while two others sold their car and clothing to ensure they had money for food.

There were two main types of coping methods participants used during COVID-19. The first was that of food coping where students altered their food practices to prolong food sources, secure food, and store food items. Seven participants (28%) were identified as using the UNT Food Pantry to which one responded, “[...] *I use the UNT food pantry to help cut costs on food. So, a lot of what I’m eating for that is like snacks and like pastas [...]*” (Sam, non-binary, Caucasian, 22-year-old senior living off campus). The second strategy to cope with food insecurity included distraction, such as new hobbies, playing video games, reading books, and exercise. One student noted: “[...] *I think with this pandemic, like one good thing that happened is that we have gotten so much time with ourselves, and, like, staying at home, you, like, try to pick up new hobbies, and I picked up learning how to cook.*” (Michael, Asian, 22-year-old junior living off campus).



Coping Strategies to Ensure Food is Available Daily

Students incorporate many strategies to ensure that they are able to feed themselves and their families every day. However, we found that some strategies were utilized more frequently than others. For example: 80% of participants were found to prioritize selecting foods with high concentrations of carbohydrates such as potatoes, pasta and rice due to their ability to leave students filling full for longer periods of time versus other more nutritious but less filling foods.

References

Baker-Smith, Christine, Vanessa Coca, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Elizabeth Looker, Brianna Richardson, and Tiffani Williams. 2020. #RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity. https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019_RealCollege_Survey_Report.pdf

Goldrick-Rab, Sara, Vanessa Coca, Gregory Kienzl, Carrie R. Welton, Sonja Dahl, and Sarah Magnolia. 2020. #RealCollege During the Pandemic: New Evidence on Basic Needs Insecurity and Student Well-Being. https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Hopecenter_RealCollegeDuringthePandemic_Reupload.pdf

University of North Texas. 2020a. UNT Teaching Commons:
<https://teachingcommons.unt.edu/teaching-essentials/engaged-learning/unt-student-demographics>

University of North Texas. 2020b. Admissions; <https://admissions.unt.edu/freshman/how-to-apply-for-scholarships-and-financial-aid>