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Hungry to Win: A First Look at Food and Housing Insecurity Among Student-Athletes

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Executive Summary

Student-athletes compete in school and on the field. They are often full-time students and full-time athletes, making it challenging to manage their time, health, and finances. Some receive financial assistance for their participation. Full scholarships are uncommon and generally awarded at Division I schools. Most student-athletes, however, receive only partial scholarships or none at all. Yet nearly all face additional rules, restrictions, and requirements based on their funding, their coaches, and the collegiate athletics association.

For example, student-athletes are frequently prohibited from working while their sports are in-season. They are also unable to accept “extra benefits” from anyone to help with living costs. Former Baylor running back Silas Nacita was homeless but lost NCAA eligibility after accepting unapproved housing, while former UCLA linebacker Donnie Edwards was forced to pay restitution for accepting groceries left for him when he was food insecure.¹

This is the first report to expand on media coverage documenting incidents of food and housing insecurity, even homelessness, among student-athletes. Given the limited sample size, it can be assumed that the prevalence—and the consequences—of these incidents are much more pervasive.

The basics:

- 3,506 student-athletes participated in this survey.
- They attend a variety of institutions and play at different levels: 13 Division I schools, 11 Division II schools, 24 Division III schools, and 124 two-year schools.
- We know where participants play but not what they play. We also don’t know whether or not they are on scholarship, full or partial.

Respondents in this sample reveal:

- Nearly 14% of student-athletes at Division I schools experienced homelessness in the previous year and 24% were food insecure in the prior 30 days.
- Rates of homelessness and food insecurity were higher among student-athletes at Division II schools and two-year colleges, where statistically very few students receive full scholarships.

Introduction

In the popular imagination, college students are focused solely on gaining the knowledge and building the relationships that will help them to succeed in life, both professionally and personally. But the reality today is often much more complicated. Some students have plenty of financial support, while others must take care of themselves. Some students need only worry about academics, while others must first secure financial aid and/or take a job, part-time or full-time, to pay for school. And once tuition is covered, living expenses can present an additional challenge, often just as substantial.

Student-athletes are no different. They are typical #RealCollege students, with the same concerns and barriers to success, who happen to participate in organized competitive sports sponsored by their colleges and universities.

That involvement brings its own constraints that limit the ability of student-athletes to fund basic necessities like food and housing. Plus, student-athletes often must cover additional costs related to their specific sports, including equipment and travel.

While many athletes come to college hoping for a full-ride that completely covers their costs, few students receive such support. In Division I and II, only about three in five student-athletes receive an athletic scholarship, and most of those are partial scholarships. The NCAA reports that about \$2.9 billion in athletic scholarships are distributed among approximately 150,000 students each year, an average of just over \$19,000 per student. Even “full” scholarships may not provide enough support to cover the real costs of attending college. At Division III schools and community colleges, student-athletes are only eligible for financial aid and institutional grants. What happens when student-athletes fall short on funds? Media reports of homelessness and food insecurity among student-athletes are part of a national debate over whether athletes should be compensated for their time, since they cannot work during the season. But there is little quantitative data on how many student-athletes are affected by these problems. Players have spoken up about experiencing food insecurity, from basketball player Shabazz Napier at the University of Connecticut to football star Donnie Edwards at UCLA.² Baseball player Jack Gallant reported “some hungry nights” while playing for Fitchburg State University, and Bunker Hill Community College’s athletics director, Dr. Loreto Jackson, notes food insecurity among her students.³ In 2015, Silas Nacita at Baylor made headlines when he was ruled permanently ineligible for NCAA football for accepting food and housing when he was homeless.⁴



Such rules and restrictions complicate the lives of student-athletes, offsetting many of the benefits of their scholarships and other supports (i.e., tutors, training tables, etc.). All students face the new economics of college, defined by high prices, a low-wage labor market, and a dysfunctional financial aid system coupled with a shredded safety net. But student-athletes may be further disadvantaged by prohibitions on their employment and their ineligibility for campus and personal supports other students can accept.⁵

The NCAA has taken steps to expand food supports for student-athletes, allowing unlimited meal plans, supplemental meals to meet additional needs, and snacks. But there is little data to assess whether athletes are getting more to eat as a result of these policies. And nothing has changed regarding eligibility for housing supports. Since student-athletes were the target of 2006 legislation pushed by then-Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), their access to government-subsidized housing has been especially restricted. Those restrictions have also had consequences for students who are not athletes.⁶

Whether or not student-athletes are on full scholarship or play for Division I, they are subject to extensive demands on their time, and face the same nutritional needs. Food and housing insecurity is an academic concern as well as an athletic one. Studies find negative implications of basic needs insecurity when it comes to academic performance, athletic performance, and overall health.⁷ It is therefore important that colleges and universities intent on winning games and creating college graduates address these issues.

THE SURVEY

Now in its fifth year, the [#RealCollege survey](#) is the nation's largest, longest-running annual assessment of basic needs insecurity among college students. In the absence of any federal data on the subject, the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice created the survey to evaluate access to affordable food and housing among college students. Over the last five years, more than 330,000 students at 411 colleges and universities have taken the survey.⁸

The most recent survey was fielded in fall 2019, with students completing it in August, September, and October. Nearly 167,000 students from 171 two-year institutions and 56 four-year institutions responded.⁹ It was sent electronically to all enrolled students, ages 18 and over, at those institutions.

In a concluding section on the survey, students were asked “*Are you a student-athlete on a team sponsored by your institution’s athletics department?*” This is a question from the National Survey of Student Engagement, a widely used instrument.¹⁰

Based on that definition, 3,506 student-athletes responded to the survey. Table 1 describes the sample across NCAA divisions and college types. The students attend 13 Division I schools, 11 Division II schools, 24 Division III schools, and 124 community colleges. We know where students play but not what they play. We do not know whether or not they receive scholarships, full or partial.

Basic needs insecurity is an issue about which many students feel shame and stigma, and according to media reports, student-athletes are sometimes fearful of revealing their concerns. This sample of survey respondents is predominately White and disproportionately female. Women tend to take surveys at higher rates than men, and are overrepresented among non-athletes as well. They constitute about 61% of this sample, but just 44% of Division I, II, and III athletes nationwide." The majority of student-athletes are White, so this sample is not unusual in that regard. For example, white males are 63% of all male athletes in Divisions I, II, and III combined; white females are 71% of all female athletes in those divisions. But men and women of color are concentrated in a few sports (e.g., football and basketball) where Division I full scholarships are more common; there are only a small number of these individuals in this sample (see the [online appendix](#)).

TABLE 1. Distribution of Student-Athletes and Participating Institutions

	Division I	Division II	Division III	Two-Year Colleges
Institutions				
Number of College Participants	13	11	24	124
Total Number in Country	347	312	442	577
Student-Athletes				
Number of Survey Respondents	452	417	997	1,640
Total Number at Institutions (estimated response rate)	5,851 (8%)	3,665 (11%)	8,904 (11%)	17,351 (9%)

Source: [U.S. Department of Education: Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act](#) (2018); 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The two-year college column includes only schools with [varsity athletics programs](#). Estimated response rates were calculated by using information on student-athlete enrollment from 2018. For more details on estimated survey response rates used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).



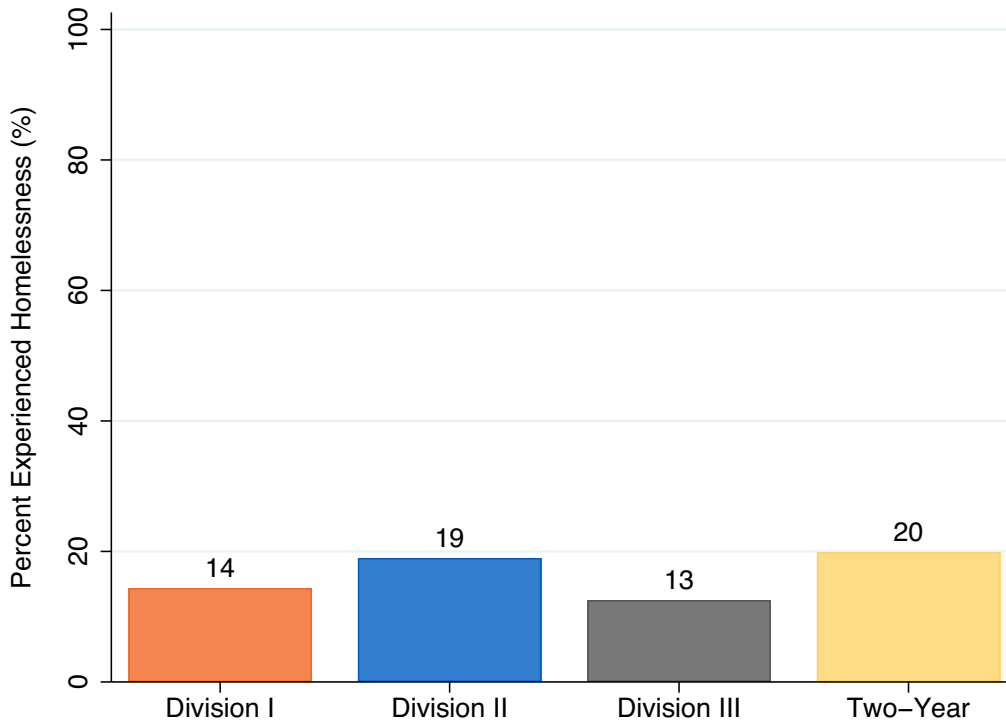
SECTION 1: Prevalence of Basic Needs Insecurity

HOMELESSNESS AMONG STUDENT-ATHLETE RESPONDENTS

According to the U.S. Department of Education and the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, a student is homeless if they do not have a fixed, regular, and adequate place to live.¹² We asked students to either self-identify as homeless or indicate their living conditions *over the previous year*. Based on those responses, we classified them as having experienced homelessness or not. We know only that they were homeless at least once; we do not know the duration of that experience or when it occurred. Both chronic and episodic homelessness can reduce academic performance and negatively impact health and well-being.

Nearly 14% of Division I student-athletes who responded to the survey were homeless in the prior 12 months. That rate was higher in Division II (19%) and lower in Division III (13%). One in five student-athletes at two-year colleges were homeless (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Homelessness Among Student-Athlete Respondents

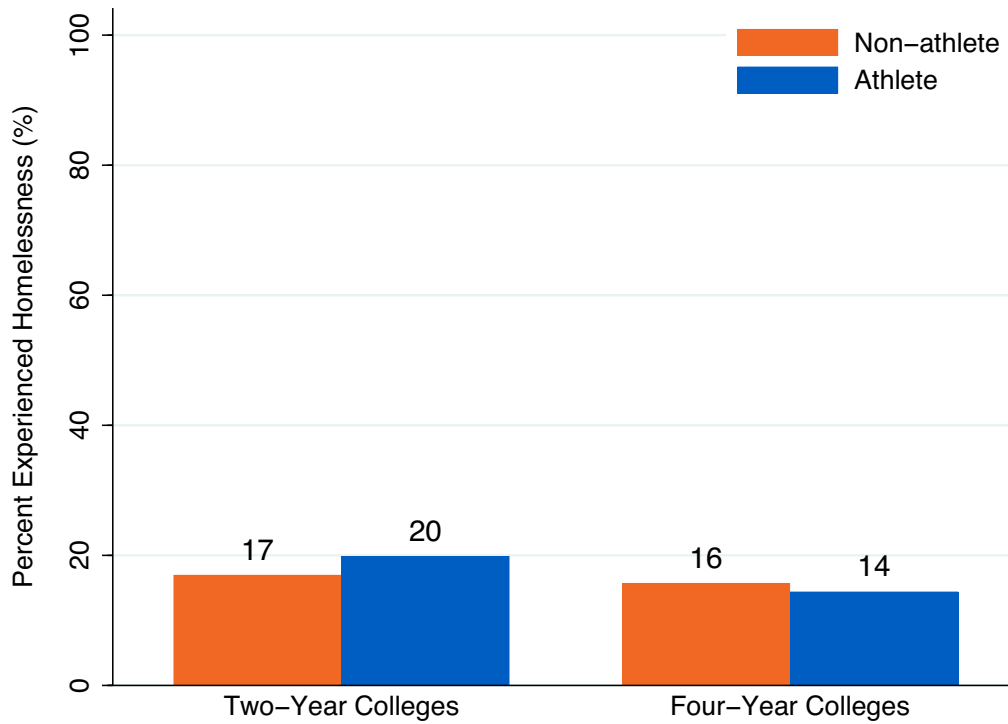


Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: For more details on the homelessness module used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).

Student-athletes who responded to the survey experienced homelessness at very similar rates to non-athletes who responded to the survey. For example, the rates are similar for athletes and non-athletes at four-year institutions (Figure 2). At two-year colleges, student-athletes (20%) were more likely to experience homelessness compared to non-athletes (17%).

FIGURE 2. Homelessness by Athlete Status and College Type



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: For more details on homelessness module used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).



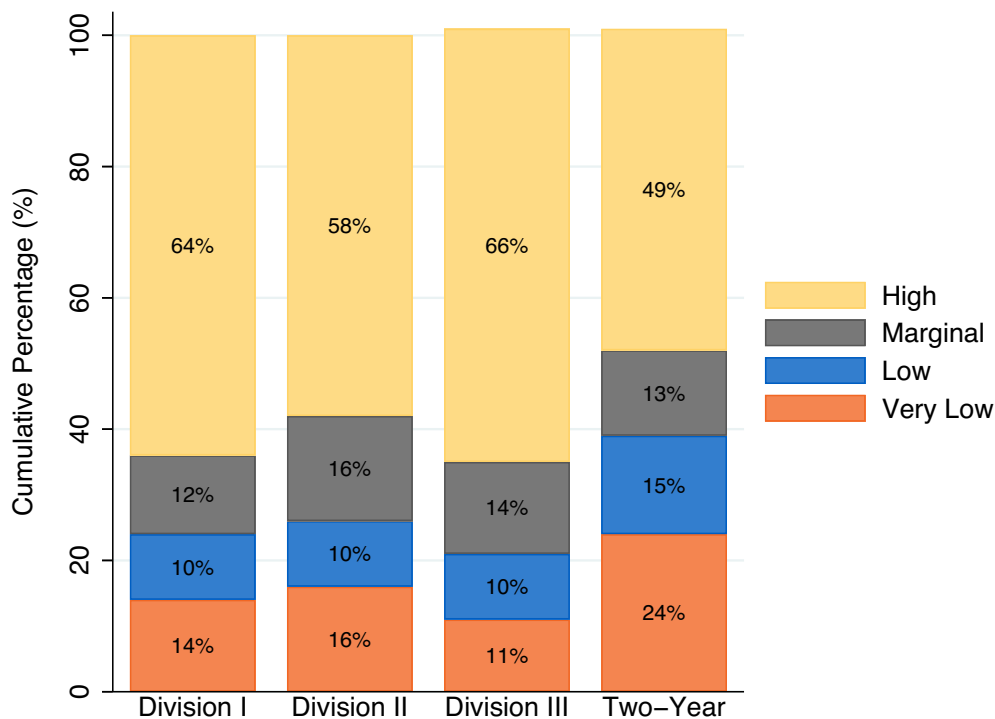
FOOD INSECURITY AMONG STUDENT-ATHLETE RESPONDENTS

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, **food insecurity** is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire such food in a socially acceptable manner. The most extreme form is often accompanied by physiological sensations of hunger.¹³ We evaluated food security using the USDA’s 18-item set of questions and assessed students’ experiences over the 30-day period preceding the survey. Individuals classified at the high or marginal level of food security are deemed food-secure; those at the low or lowest levels of food security are considered food-insecure.

Nearly one in four (24%) Division I student-athletes who responded to the survey experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days. More than half of those students were assessed at the very low level of food security, which can mean they are cutting the size of their meals, skipping meals, and/or going without food for a day or more because of a lack of money.

Student-athletes at Division II and Division III schools experienced food insecurity at rates of 26% and 21%, respectively. Students-athletes attending two-year colleges experienced higher rates of food insecurity, at 39% (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. Food Security Among Student-Athlete Respondents By Division

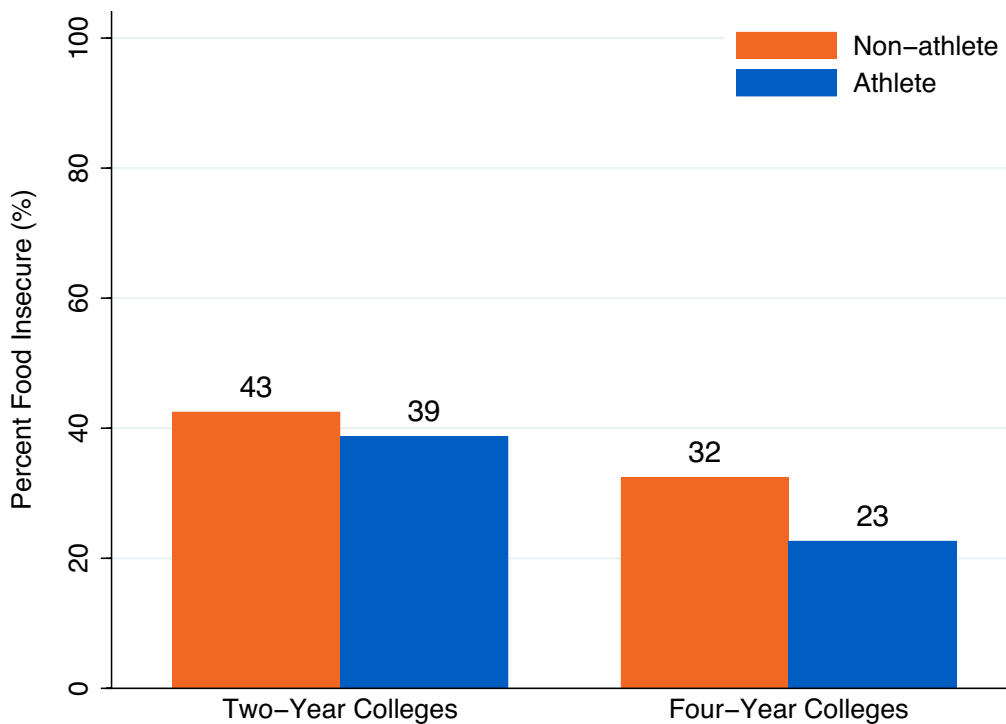


Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Cumulative percentage may not add up to 100 due to rounding. For more details on the basic needs insecurity modules used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).

Rates of food insecurity do not vary substantially across the three divisions. Compared to non-student-athletes, student-athletes had lower rates of food insecurity. Among students at four-year institutions, the gap between student-athletes and non-athletes is 9 percentage points, while at two-year institutions it is three percentage points, favoring athletes (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. Food Insecurity by Athlete Status and College Type



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: For more details on the food security module used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).



SECTION 2: Overlapping Challenges

SCHOLARSHIPS, WORK, AND MEAL PLANS

NCAA rules prevent student-athletes on scholarship (full or partial) from working during the season, and coaches often expect the same of students who are not receiving scholarships. We assessed students' employment in the 30 days prior to taking the survey. We measured whether they were currently working, seeking work but not working (unemployed), or out of the labor force (not working or seeking work).

As expected, in comparison to non-athletes, student-athletes are less likely to work or work long hours during the school year. Just over one in five non-athletes was not working in the 30 days prior to the survey, compared to more than one in three student-athletes at Division I schools, and around one in four at Division III schools and two-year colleges. Nevertheless, the proportion of students working up to 20 hours per week is about the same for athletes and non-athletes (39% at Division I, 48% at Division II, 55% at Division III, 42% at two-year colleges, and 33% for non-athletes). Moreover, both athletes and non-athletes struggle with unemployment, seeking work but unable to find it (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Employment Status by Athlete Status and Division

	Athletes				Non-Athletes
	Division I (%)	Division II (%)	Division III (%)	Two-Year Colleges (%)	(%)
Not in Labor Force	37	30	24	26	21
Unemployed	16	11	11	14	14
Working 20 Hours or Less	39	48	55	42	33
Working 21 to 30 Hours	4	7	5	9	14
Working More Than 30 Hours	5	4	5	9	17

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Survey questions about work status and number of hours worked were randomly administered to a subset of respondents. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

Students who are not working or seeking work may not need to work, perhaps because they receive a full scholarship. Alternatively, they may need income but are not allowed to work. We compared rates of homelessness and food insecurity based on students' employment status to better understand this (Table 3).

Notably, rates of homelessness among athletes who are not working in Division I are as high as the rates for student-athletes who are working (13%). Division I athletes seeking work but unable to find it experience homelessness at an even higher rate (25%).

On the other hand, rates of food insecurity among Division I athletes who are not working (8%) are much lower than for student-athletes who are working (31%). In Divisions II and III, athletes who are working are experiencing homelessness and food insecurity at much higher rates than students who are not; this is also true at two-year colleges.

TABLE 3. Food and Housing Insecurity by Employment Status Among Student-Athlete Respondents

	Working	Unemployed	Not in Labor Force
Division I			
Homeless (%)	13	25	13
Food Insecure (%)	31	34	8
Division II and III			
Homeless (%)	15	9	9
Food Insecure (%)	30	24	12
Two-Year Colleges			
Homeless (%)	22	22	13
Food Insecure (%)	39	43	23

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Due to small sample sizes, Division II and Division III have been collapsed. Survey questions about work status and number of hours worked were administered to a subset of randomly selected respondents. For more details on how each measure of insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).



Most student-athletes at four-year institutions live on campus and have a meal plan. However, even student-athletes using meal plans face food insecurity. Specifically, 21% of student-athletes with meal plans were food insecure, compared to 37% of those without meal plans. At four-year institutions, Division II and III athletes saw the biggest reduction in food insecurity if they had a meal plan—17% of those with a meal plan were food insecure, compared to 34% of those without a meal plan (Table 4).

TABLE 4. Food Insecurity Among Student-Athletes By Meal Plan

	Food Insecurity Rate Among Students with a Meal Plan (%)	Food Insecurity Rate Among Students Without a Meal Plan (%)
Division I	21	28
Division II	17	34
Division III	17	34
Two-Year Colleges	35	40
Overall	21	37

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#). The percentage of student-athletes with a meal plan varies by college type (Div I: 60%, Div II: 47%, Div III: 77% and Two-Year: 19%).

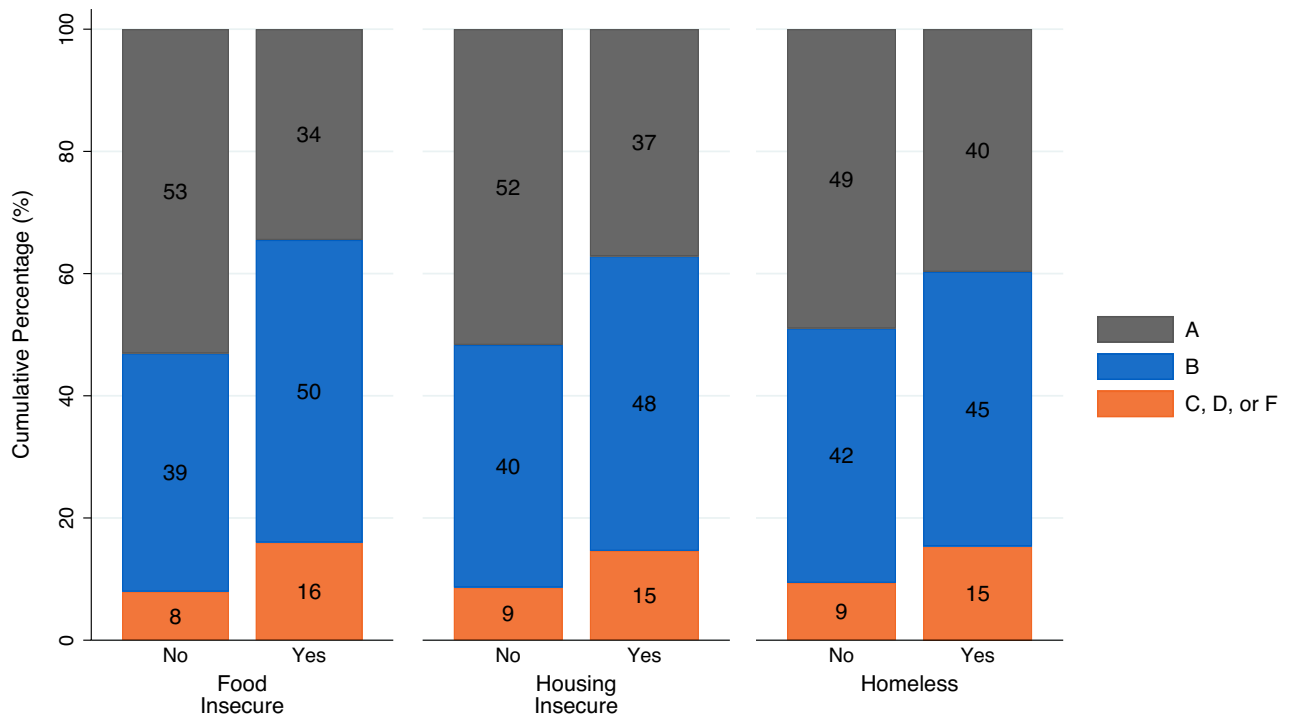


GRADES

NCAA rules require that Division I student-athletes meet and maintain specific academic requirements, referred to as progress toward degree requirements, in order to continue playing throughout college. Student-athletes attending Division I colleges must complete six credit hours each term and are allowed five years of eligibility and financial aid tied to athletics. At Division II colleges, student-athletes must complete at least nine credit hours and can only compete for the first five years of enrollment. While student-athletes attending Division III colleges are not required to meet a minimum standard to maintain eligibility, they still must remain in good academic standing to compete.

Food and housing insecurity are associated with lower grades among student-athletes. For example, approximately half of the student-athletes whose basic needs were secure reported earning A's, that rate was less than 40% for students dealing with food and/or housing insecurity (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5. Self-Reported Grades by Basic Need Insecurity Status Among Student-Athlete Respondents



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

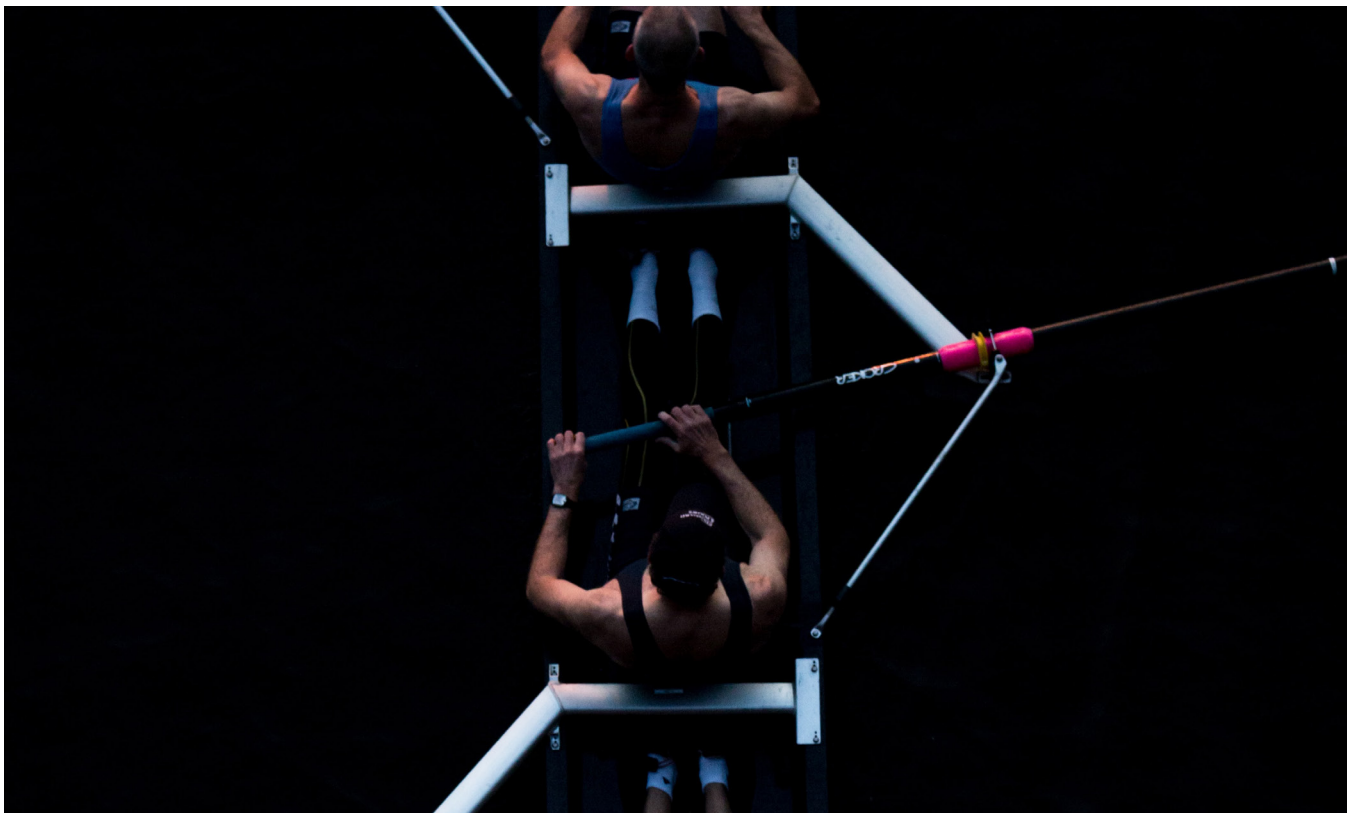
Notes: Cumulative percentage may not add up to 100 due to rounding. For more details on the basic needs insecurity modules used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).

SECTION 3: Moving Forward

Student-athletes are not paid to play, and their success after college depends as much on what they do in the classroom as how they perform in their sports. On top of dual demands on their time and resources, they have the same basic needs that all college students have, and that all human beings have. And if student-athletes are going to win games and succeed in college, then those basic needs for food and housing must be met first.

This report expands beyond the stories of individual student-athletes who have spoken up about these challenges, and looks at the broader statistics to begin to assess the scope of the problem. But it is only a first look at the challenge. Further data collection should build on the sample used in this report. Next year, the Hope Center plans to collect additional information to clarify what sports students play and at what level. Our efforts to measure food and housing insecurity among college students more broadly have led to major shifts in college practices and state and federal policies. As new guidelines for college sports are being considered, evidence should lead the way.

Thanks to David Helene, Derek Houston, Max Lubin, and Abigail Seldin for their contributions to and support of this work.



APPENDIX

COLLEGE PARTICIPANTS

Division I

Colorado State University Fort Collins (CO)
 Drexel University (PA)
 La Salle University (PA)
 Lehigh University (PA)
 St. John's University (NY)
 Stony Brook University (NY)
 Temple University (PA)
 The University of Montana (MT)
 University of Kansas (KS)
 University of Massachusetts Lowell (MA)
 University of Memphis (TN)
 University of Northern Colorado (CO)
 West Virginia University (WV)

Division II

Colorado School of Mines (CO)
 Emporia State University (KS)
 Fort Lewis College (CO)
 Grand Valley State University (MI)
 Metropolitan State University of Denver (CO)
 Minnesota State University Moorhead (MN)
 Southwest Minnesota State University (MN)
 University of Alaska Fairbanks (AK)
 University of Central Missouri (MO)
 University of Missouri St. Louis (MO)
 Western Washington University (WA)

Division III

Bridgewater State University (MA)
 Cedar Crest College (PA)
 Fitchburg State University (MA)
 Framingham State University (MA)
 George Fox University (OR)
 Maryville College (TN)
 Muhlenberg College (PA)

Northern Vermont University Johnson (VT)
 Rhode Island College (RI)
 SUNY Cobleskill (NY)
 SUNY College Old Westbury (NY)
 SUNY Cortland (NY)
 SUNY Fredonia (NY)
 SUNY Maritime College (NY)
 SUNY New Paltz (NY)
 SUNY Oneonta (NY)
 SUNY Oswego (NY)
 SUNY Polytechnic institute (NY)
 SUNY Potsdam (NY)
 St. Norbert College (WI)
 The College at Brockport (NY)
 University of Massachusetts Boston (MA)
 Westfield State University (MA)
 York College of Pennsylvania (PA)

Two-Year

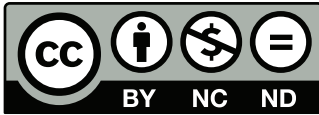
Alfred State College (NY)
 Anoka-Ramsey Community College (MN)
 Atlantic Cape Community College (NJ)
 Bay de Noc Community College (MI)
 Bellevue College (WA)
 Bergen Community College (NJ)
 Blue Mountain Community College (OR)
 Bristol Community College (MA)
 Brookdale Community College (NJ)
 Bucks County Community College (PA)
 Bunker Hill Community College (MA)
 Camden County College (NJ)
 Cayuga Community College (NY)
 Cedar Valley College (TX)
 Central Lakes College Brainerd (MN)
 Centralia College (WA)
 Cerritos College (CA)
 Chaffey College (CA)
 Clackamas Community College (OR)
 Clark College (WA)

- Columbia Basin College (WA)
 Community College of Allegheny County (PA)
 Community College of Baltimore County (MD)
 Community College of Philadelphia (PA)
 Community College of Rhode Island (RI)
 Compton College (CA)
 County College of Morris (NJ)
 Cuyamaca College (CA)
 Daytona State College (FL)
 Delaware County Community College (PA)
 Dine College (AZ)
 Dutchess Community College (NY)
 Eastfield College (TX)
 Edmonds Community College (WA)
 Essex County College (NJ)
 Everett Community College (WA)
 Fashion Institute of Technology (NY)
 Finger Lakes Community College (NY)
 Florida State College at Jacksonville (FL)
 Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College (MN)
 Galveston College (TX)
 Glendale Community College (CA)
 Grayson College (TX)
 Green River College (WA)
 Grossmont College (CA)
 Hibbing Community College (MN)
 Highline College (WA)
 Holyoke Community College (MA)
 Hudson Valley Community College (NY)
 Itasca Community College (MN)
 Jamestown Community College (NY)
 Jefferson State Community College (AL)
 Linn-Benton Community College (OR)
 Lower Columbia College (WA)
 Massasoit Community College (MA)
 Mesabi Range College (MN)
 Miami Dade College (FL)
 Middlesex County College (NJ)
 Minnesota State Community and Technical College (MN)
 Mohawk Valley Community College (NY)
 Monroe Community College (NY)
 Montgomery College (MD)
 Mountain View College (TX)
 Mt. Hood Community College (OR)
 Napa Valley College (CA)
 Nassau Community College (NY)
 North Central Texas College (TX)
 North Lake College (TX)
 Northern Essex Community College (MA)
 Northern Virginia Community College (VA)
 Northland Community and Technical College (MN)
 Ocean County College (NJ)
 Olympic College (WA)
 Onondaga Community College (NY)
 Passaic County Community College (NJ)
 Patrick Henry Community College (VA)
 Pierce College-Fort Steilacoom (WA)
 Portland Community College (OR)
 Rainy River Community College (MN)
 Raritan Valley Community College (NJ)
 Reedley College (CA)
 Richland College (TX)
 Ridgewater College (MN)
 Riverland Community College (MN)
 Riverside City College (CA)
 Rochester Community and Technical College (MN)
 Rogue Community College (OR)
 Rowan College at Burlington County (NJ)
 Rowan College of South Jersey (NJ)
 SUNY Adirondack (NY)
 SUNY Corning Community College (NY)
 SUNY Delhi (NY)
 SUNY Erie Community College (NY)
 SUNY Morrisville (NY)
 SUNY Orange (NY)
 Salish Kootenai College (MT)
 San Diego City College (CA)
 San Diego Mesa College (CA)
 San Diego Miramar College (CA)
 San Jose City College (CA)
 Santa Rosa Junior College (CA)
 Santiago Canyon College (CA)
 Shoreline Community College (WA)
 Skagit Valley College (WA)
 South Puget Sound Community College (WA)
 Southwestern Oregon Community College (OR)

Spokane Falls Community College (WA)
St. Cloud Technical and Community College
(MN)
Sussex County Community College (NJ)
Tacoma Community College (WA)
Tallahassee Community College (FL)
Treasure Valley Community College (OR)
Trinity Valley Community College (TX)
Umpqua Community College (OR)
Union County College (NJ)
United Tribes Technical College (ND)
Wake Technical Community College (NC)
Walla Walla Community College (WA)
Wallace State Community College Hanceville
(AL)
Wenatchee Valley College (WA)
Westchester Community College (NY)
Western Technical College (WI)
Whatcom Community College (WA)
Yakima Valley College (WA)

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- ¹ Strachan, M. (2015). [*Baylor rules former homeless football player is permanently ineligible for accepting food, housing.*](#) *Huffington Post*; Springer, S. (1995). [*Edwards suspended for one game: UCLA linebacker ordered to pay restitution for \\$150 worth of groceries left at his apartment, allegedly by agent.*](#) *Los Angeles Times*.
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- ⁵ Goldrick-Rab, S. (2019). [*College is creating poverty.*](#)
- ⁶ National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2016). [*HUD clarifies definition of "independent student" for Section 8 eligibility.*](#)
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- ⁹ Goldrick-Rab, S., Baker-Smith, C., Coca, V., Looker, L., Richardson, B. & Williams, T. (2020). [*#RealCollege 2020: Five years of evidence on campus basic needs insecurity.*](#) Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.
- ¹⁰ Rollins College. (2017). [*NCAA definitions*](#); The NCAA defines a student-athlete as a student "whose enrollment was solicited by a member of the athletes staff. . .with a view toward the student's ultimate participation in the intercollegiate athletics program."
- ¹¹ Lapchick, R. (2018). [*The 2019 racial and gender report card: College sport.*](#) *The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport*. African-Americans are 45% of athletes playing Division I football, 54% of Division I men's basketball, and 43% of Division I women's basketball.
- ¹² [*The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987.*](#) Pub. L. No. 100-77, 101 Stat. 482 (1987).
- ¹³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2012). [*U.S. adult food security survey module: Three-stage design, with screeners.*](#)



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