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Food Insecurity and Homelessness in American Higher Education: An Overview of New Nationally Representative Estimates

This memo offers new nationally representative estimates of food insecurity and homelessness affecting the nation's college students, obtained from the just-released [National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 2020](#) (NPSAS), and compares them to estimates from my prior research studies conducted at The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.²

The results confirm that a sizable number of the nation's college students—including graduate students—are food insecure and some are homeless. [As long suspected](#), the rate is higher for college students than for the broader public. Moreover, we can now see that basic needs insecurity is a problem at every type of college and university and cuts across student demographics and even traditional measures of income and financial need.

- 23% of undergraduates and 12% of graduate students experienced food insecurity.
- 8% of undergraduates and 5% of graduate students experienced homelessness.
- Basic needs insecurity affects 35% of Black/African American students, 30% of Native American students, and 25% of Hispanic students.
- For-profit colleges and universities and Historically Black Colleges and Universities have the highest rates of basic needs insecurity among their students.

The coalition of institutions willing to assess and address these problems had higher rates of the challenges— now that *all* institutions are included the averages are lower, yet still substantial. We owe a debt of gratitude to those brave institutions that led the way and convinced the federal government to count what matters most to students - the security of their basic needs.

¹ Thank you to Annie Hemphill at Education Northwest for assistance.

² NCES has not (yet) produced its own analyses of these data. However, it produced a “first look” report in [June 2021](#) estimating pandemic impacts on students and a similar report in [July 2023](#) with estimates of financial aid usage. A full methodological report on this study has also not been released, so I’m presenting methodological details as described in those two briefs.

Background

The NPSAS examines the characteristics of students in postsecondary education, with special focus on how they finance their education. It is the only federally funded nationally representative cross-sectional study of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in postsecondary education and has been fielded every three to four years since 1987. In Spring 2020, for the first time, the study asked students questions to assess their experiences with food insecurity and homelessness.³ The sample includes students enrolled at any time between July 1, 2019, and June 30, 2020, at higher education institutions participating in federal financial aid programs. In total, 80,760 undergraduates completed surveys, a sample representing about 17.1 million undergraduates. In addition, 19,700 graduate students (representing 3.6 million) completed surveys.

The new data collection was a [direct response](#) to requests from myself and my research teams as well as myriad other researchers, institutions, advocates, and policymakers seeking this information, including the U.S. Government Accountability Office. We were [inspired and informed](#) by undergraduates who experienced food insecurity and homelessness and shared their personal stories, long before any quantitative data were collected or available. In turn we formed a coalition of institutions willing to measure and act on the data; recognizing however, that their students were also likely more affected than the average school.

I first filed a request to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) on this matter in [2015](#), and reiterated that request in [2017](#). In the meantime with my research team and the Association of Community College Trustees I launched the [#RealCollege survey](#), building on surveys I'd previously done in Wisconsin, in order to provide higher education and state governments at least some initial information about the problem. In addition, my collaborator Christine Baker-Smith served on the technical review panel for the 2020 study and together we offered additional support to NCES on measurement issues, as did several other key researchers including Rashida Crutchfield and Jennifer Maguire. Many colleges and universities, state policymakers, advocates, and think tanks – as well as several federal agencies, acted on the #RealCollege data while also reiterating the call for additional information. It is thanks to this broad national community that we finally have nationally representative estimates of these challenges.

One significant challenge of the NPSAS data is that the surveys were completed by students beginning in March 2020, an extraordinary period in American history and in higher education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many undergraduates faced additional financial challenges during this time and some left college entirely. This could affect the sample who completed the questions contributing to these data. Given this, I recommend limiting comparisons between these results and my prior studies from The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice to these reports: [Fall 2019](#), [Spring 2020](#), [Fall 2020](#). In addition, the 2020 [HBCU](#) report is relevant. Other estimates collected by researchers such as at the [Trellis Company](#), using data from Fall 2020, could also be examined.

³ Prior to that time there was just one indicator of homelessness based on whether a student's FAFSA indicated that they were homeless, a conservative measure that misses students who do not complete the form or meet the FAFSA criteria. In 2016 an [estimated 1 in 10 undergraduates](#) were homeless according to that measure.

The tables in this memo focus on several points that are particularly important to policymakers: overall rates of food insecurity and homelessness by sector and college type (until now we lacked estimates for private colleges and for-profit colleges), and disparities by key student demographics. Detailed types of food insecurity and homelessness are not yet available.⁴

There are many additional analyses that ought to also be conducted once the full [restricted-use individual-level data](#) are available, including comparisons between students' estimated unmet financial need according to the FAFSA and the basic needs insecurity they experience. This information should be used by policymakers in considering the reliability and validity of the information used for financial aid calculations and shared with students by institutions. The individual items in the food insecurity and homelessness measures should also be examined. However, the data on SNAP— while intriguing, is not an indicator of whether students received SNAP in college— it is an indicator of household receipt of SNAP in the year before the student attended college. Finally, data are also available for many other subgroups, including veterans, LGBTQ students, and so on as studies suggest they are deeply affected.

⁴ In terms of measurement: Both the NPSAS and the Hope Center estimates use the USDA 10-item measure of food insecurity, though my spring 2020 estimate used the 6-item. Students experiencing low and very low levels of food insecurity are deemed food insecure. The homelessness indicator is essentially aligned in terms of items, but the Hope Center estimates are over the past year, whereas the NPSAS estimates are over the past 30 days. The weighted sample response rate in the NPSAS is 61.5% (including 54% at community colleges), whereas in the Hope studies it is typically around 10% or less. The “Public 4-year college numbers” in the Hope Center reports include a small number of private colleges, with the largest number in fall 2020 (51 public, 21 private). Overall the Hope Center 4-year numbers are best labeled “public” for comparison purposes. Disparities from the Hope data are sometimes “any basic needs insecurity,” not just food insecurity.

FOOD INSECURITY

National Undergraduate Average: 23% (~ 4 million students)

National Graduate Student Average: 12% (~430K students)

A. Food Insecurity by Institutional Type (undergraduate students)

Sample	Hope Fall 2019	Hope Spring 2020	Hope Fall 2020	NPSAS (Spring 2020)
Community Colleges	42%	44%	39%	23%
Public 4-years	33%	38%	29%	22%
Private 4-years	na	na	na	18%
<i>Doctoral-granting</i>	na	na	na	18%
For-profit colleges	na	na	na	32%
< 2-year	na	na	na	37%
2-year*	na	na	na	40%
4-year	na	na	na	30%
HBCUs	na	na	46%	39%

*Note: T-test for differences between community colleges and 2-year for-profits shows $p < .001$

B. Food Insecurity by Institutional Type (graduate students)

	Public	Private	For-Profit
NPSAS (Spring 2020)	12%	12%	16%

*All are four-year doctoral-granting institutions

C. Food Insecurity by Demographic Disparities (undergraduate students)

Sample	Hope Fall '19	Hope Spring '20	Hope Fall '20	NPSAS (Spring '20)
Pell/ Non-Pell	na	na	17%pts	10%pts
Black/White	18%pts	19%pts	16%pts	14%pts
Hispanic/ White	11%pts	13%pts	10%pts	15%pts
Parenting / Non-Parenting	16%pts	1%pts	15%pts	8%pts

D. Food Insecurity by Detailed Race/Ethnicity Categories by Gender (NPSAS, undergraduate students)

Black or African American	35%
male	32%
female	36%
Hispanic or Latino	25%
male	23%
female	26%
American Indian or Alaska Native	30%
male	28%
female	30%
Asian	18%
male	18%
female	17%
Pacific Islander/Hawaiian	32%
male	27%
female	38%
Multi-racial	27%
male	23%
female	29%
White	18%
male	15%
female	20%

*Note: gender categories used are what's provided in the data. The very high rates for Native students are consistent with data from Hope's [Tribal Colleges](#) report.

HOMELESSNESS

National Undergraduate Average: 8% (~ 1.4 million students)

National Graduate Student Average: 5% (~180K students)

A. Homelessness By Institutional Type (undergraduate students)

Sample	Hope Fall 2019	Hope Spring 2020	Hope Fall 2020	NPSAS (Spring 2020)
Community Colleges	17%	11%	14%	8%
Public 4-years	16%	15%	14%	8%
Private 4-years	na	na	na	8%
<i>Doctoral-granting</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	7%
For-profit colleges	na	na	na	10%
< 2-year	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	15%
2-year*	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	13%
4-year	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	9%
HBCUs	na	na	20%	13%

*Note: T-test for differences between community colleges and 2-year for-profits shows $p < .001$

B. Homelessness By Institutional Type (graduate students)

	Public	Private	For-Profit
NPSAS (Spring '20)	5%	5%	3%

*All are four-year doctoral-granting institutions

C. Homelessness By Demographic Disparities (undergraduate students)

Sample	Hope Fall '19	Hope Spring '20	Hope Fall '20	NPSAS (Spring' 20)
Pell/ Non-Pell	na	na	na	5%pts
Black/White	na	na	na	5%pts
Hispanic/ White	na	na	na	1%pt
Parenting / Non-Parenting	na	na	na	-1%pt

D. Homelessness by Detailed Race/Ethnicity Categories by Gender (NPSAS, undergraduate students)

Black or African American	12%
male	13%
female	12%
Hispanic or Latino	8%
male	7%
female	8%
American Indian or Alaska Native	15%
male	24%
female	8%
Asian	7%
male	8%
female	6%
Pacific Islander/Hawaiian	8%
male	na
female	na
Multi-racial	11%
male	13%
female	9%
White	7%
male	7%
female	6%

*Note: gender categories used are what's provided in the data. The very high rates for Native students are consistent with data from Hope's [Tribal Colleges](#) report.

APPENDIX WITH ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ADDED JULY 30

Food Insecurity by Additional Subgroups (Undergraduates)

	Food Insecurity
High School GPA	
3.0+	18%
2.0-2.9	25%
Less than 2.0	30%
Gender	
Male	20%
Female	24%
Genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or a different identity	35%
Age	
18 or less	18%
19-23	21%
24-29	27%
30-39	27%
40+	23%
Dependency and Marital Status	
Dependent	20%
Independent, unmarried, no dependents	27%
Independent, unmarried, has dependents	21%
Independent, married, no dependents	17%
Independent, married, has dependents	21%
Single Parent (irrespective of independent/dependent)	37%
Not a single parent	21%
Military Status	
Veteran	22%
Active Duty	14%
Reserves	17%
No Service	23%
Disability (some type)	36%
Orphan, Ward of Court, Emancipated Minor, Legal Guardianship	36%
International student	19%
Employment	
Not Employed	24%
Working <20 hrs/week	20%
Working 20-39 hrs/week	25%
Working 40+ hrs/week	21%
Parents Don't Help Fund College (dependents)	28%
Income	
Below Poverty Line	31%
300+% of Poverty	13%
Pell	
Recipient	31%
Non- recipient	17%

Adjusted Gross Income (Parent- Dependents only)	
\$0	32%
Positive but less than \$33,139	27%
\$33,140-\$72,179	23%
\$72,180- \$132,559	15%
>\$132,559	11%
Net Price After Grants As % of Income	
0% ("Full need met")	21%
1-10%	15%
11-20%	17%
21-30%	20%
31-50%	23%
51-75%	28%
76%+	32%
Private Loans	
Not using	22%
Low amount (<\$3,999)	31%
High amount (>14K +)	23%
Federal Loans	
Not using	19%
Low amount (<1,000)	32%
High amount (>\$10K)	29%
Textbooks	
Spends \$0 on Textbooks	21%
Spends >\$1,000 on Textbooks	33%
Enrollment Intensity	
Exclusively full-time	22%
Exclusively part-time	23%
Mixed FT and PT	24%
Minority-Serving Institution	
No	20%
HBCU	39%
Black/African American-serving, non-HBCU	28%
Hispanic-Serving	24%
American Indian/Alaska Native-serving	36%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander-serving	18%
Institutional Selectivity (4-year institutions)	
Very selective	15%
Moderately selective	21%
Minimally selective	25%
Open admission	26%

Notes:

- The racial disparities noted in the memo are present within all institutional types, and the gaps are of similar sizes by type, except for for-profit 2-year colleges where racial disparities are magnified.
- The presence of food insecurity among *non*-Pell recipients and the observed gaps holds across institution types. Even at 4-year doctorate-granting private universities, 12% of non-Pell recipients are food insecure, as are 31% of Pell recipients. The same thing goes for AGI. Food insecurity affects 7% of students in the highest AGI category at private research universities and 12% of those at public flagships. And some students with \$0 net prices/full need met are still food insecure—26% at community colleges, 12% at public flagships, and 19% at private research universities. The rates are similar whether net price is calculated using Cost of Attendance or tuition (net tuition).