

Food and housing insecurity among community college student-veterans

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Abstract

In this manuscript, the authors examined the rates of food and housing insecurity experienced by student-veterans enrolled at community colleges in fall 2020. The results of a multi-institutional survey of student-veterans at 113 community colleges suggested that 37.6% of community college student-veterans experienced food insecurity and 52.5% of community college student-veterans experienced housing insecurity. Additionally, 17.8% of community college student-veterans experienced homelessness in the past year. The results also suggest that community college student-veterans who experienced food and housing insecurity had lower grade point averages, higher rates of clinically significant generalized anxiety disorder, and higher rates of clinically significant major depressive disorder. Examples of strategies to support community college student-veterans experiencing food and housing insecurity are included.

INTRODUCTION

Although nearly a quarter of student-veterans are enrolled at community colleges (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021) and students enrolled in community colleges tend to have consistently higher rates of food and housing insecurity compared to students enrolled in 4-year colleges and universities (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Ilieva et al., 2018; Innis et al., 2020; The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021), there is a dearth of research about the food and housing insecurity experienced by student-veterans enrolled at community colleges. In general, student-veterans tend to experience much higher rates of food and housing insecurity (including homelessness) compared to the national average (Henry et al., 2021; Kamdar et al., 2021; Widome et al., 2015). While the challenges veterans experience with basic needs insecurity have risen to national attention—and philanthropists and policymakers have identified food and housing insecurity as the most pressing issues impacting veterans (Bob Woodruff Foundation, 2022; Cohen et al., 2020;

Dubowitz, 2021)—there is a lack of information about the rates of food and housing insecurity experienced by community college student-veterans across the nation.

To expand our understanding of basic needs insecurity experienced by student-veterans enrolled in community colleges, in this manuscript, we used the results of a multi-institutional survey of basic needs insecurity to examine the rates of food and housing insecurity experienced by student-veterans enrolled at 113 community colleges across the United States in fall 2020. We also investigated the demographic characteristics of community college student-veterans who experienced food and housing insecurity and analyzed the implications of food and housing insecurity by examining the associations of those forms of basic needs security with community college student-veterans' academic outcomes and mental health. Finally, we offer recommendations for community colleges to support student-veterans who are experiencing basic needs insecurity.

FOOD AND HOUSING INSECURITY

Food insecurity is a multifaceted concept defined by different measurements ranging from the uncertain ability to procure nutritious foods, the limited availability of nutritious foods, the inability to procure nutritious and safe foods, interrupted eating patterns, or a reduction in the quality of diet due to the lack of resources to access nutritious food (Anderson, 1990; Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020; Soria et al., 2022). Housing insecurity is similarly measured in multiple ways, including lacking affordable housing alternatives or the ability to pay rent, mortgage, or utilities on time; living with others beyond the expected capacity of the residence or staying temporarily with others (e.g., couch surfing); experiencing increases in the cost of housing that make it difficult to afford housing; living in places not designed for human habitation (e.g., vehicle); moving three or more times in a year; or experiencing homelessness (Broton, 2020; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Soria et al., 2022; The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021).

There are significant negative ramifications for college students who experience food and housing insecurity. For instance, students who experience those forms of basic needs insecurity tend to have poorer quality of health, decreased quality of sleep, disruptions in academic progress (e.g., dropping or missing classes), reduced degree completion rates, lower grade point averages, and higher rates of stress and mental health disorders (Martinez et al., 2020; Smith & Knechtel, 2020; Soria & Horgos, 2021; Wolfson et al., 2022).

Researchers have pointed toward the potential for student-veterans to experience higher rates of food and housing insecurity compared to other college students (Schinkel et al., 2022; Smith & Knechtel, 2020); however, the samples in prior studies tend to be drawn from student-veterans at single 4-year institutions, leaving a large gap in the literature regarding the experiences of community college student-veterans. In acknowledgment of the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the lives of college students, we situated our study using data drawn from students in fall 2020, the semester after the World Health Organization declared the pandemic. During the pandemic, many college students encountered significant financial hardships (Soria et al., 2022), college students' basic needs insecurity increased (Mialki et al., 2021; Soldavini et al., 2021), and the disparities in food and housing insecurity widened between community college students and students enrolled at 4-year institutions (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021). The effects of the ongoing pandemic may still resonate among community college student-veterans, so we situated this initial study within these societal contexts.

DATA SOURCE AND PARTICIPANTS

We used data from the 2020 #RealCollege Survey (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021), which was administered to 1.84 million undergraduates at 127 community and technical colleges and 72 four-year colleges in 42 U.S. states in fall 2020. The survey was emailed to undergraduates and it was framed as a survey about college life, not about food and housing insecurity. The survey includes items related to students' demographic characteristics, food and housing insecurity, use of campus resources to mitigate basic needs insecurity, and symptoms of mental health disorders.

The response rate of community college students was 10.8% ($n = 112,204$), although only 88,733 students responded to the items we used in analyses. Only 113 out of the 127 community colleges had at least one student-veteran respond to the survey. We created a variable identifying student-veterans that was a composite of two variables: "Have you ever served in the U.S. Armed Forces, Military Reserves, or National Guard?" and "Have you received veterans benefits in the past 12 months?" If students answered "yes" to the first question and either "yes" or "no" to the second question, we classified them as student-veterans. Some individuals who had served in the military noted that they did not receive veterans benefits; however, it is possible that they interpreted the item as referring to educational benefits (e.g., GI Bill) instead of other benefits they may have received (e.g., service disability benefits).

The final sample included 3352 community college student-veterans (3.7% of the survey population), 1019 students receiving veterans benefits who did not serve in the military (1.1%), and 84,362 students who had not served in the military or did not receive veterans benefits (95.1%). The percent of student-veterans enrolled in community colleges in our sample (3.7%) is slightly lower than what is reflected in national statistics: approximately 4.8% of community college students are student-veterans and 1.6% are on active duty, in the reserves, or in the National Guard (Phillips & Tekle, 2019). The survey may have received lower response rates proportional to the number of student-veterans enrolled due to the overall decline in community college students' enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic. From fall 2019 to fall 2020, community college student enrollment dropped 10.1% and the decreases in enrollment from fall 2019 to fall 2020 were highest among community college students aged 24 or older (36.7%), men (21.0%), Native American men (20.1%), Black men (19.2%), and Hispanic men (16.6%) compared to all other community college students (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020a, 2020b).

DATA ANALYSES

After calculating the rates of food and housing insecurity in the sample, we conducted a series of analyses. First, we examined whether there were statistically significant differences in food and housing insecurity rates between community college student-veterans and other (nonveteran) community college students. Second, we examined whether some community college student-veterans may experience significantly higher rates of basic needs insecurity based upon their demographic characteristics. Third, we examined whether community college student-veterans who experienced basic needs insecurity had significantly different grade point averages and symptoms of mental health disorders (e.g., generalized anxiety disorder [GAD] and major depressive disorder [MDD]) compared to community college student-veterans who did not experience basic needs insecurity. We conducted all analyses using z -tests for two proportions and an a priori alpha criterion level common social science research ($p < 0.05$; Soria, 2022).

FOOD INSECURITY

The survey assessed students' recent food security using the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA, 2012) 18-item set of questions (e.g., "in the last 30 days, did you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?"). The sum of affirmative responses represents students' raw food insecurity score, recoded to 1 = high food security (raw score 0), 1 = marginal food security (raw score 1–2), 2 = low food security (raw score 3–7 if children present and 3–5 if no children present in the home), and 3 = very low food security (raw score 8–18 if there are children present in the home and 6–10 if there are no children present in the home).

In the sample, 24.2% of community college student-veterans experienced very low food security and 13.4% experienced low food security. The percentage of community college student-veterans who experienced very low food security (24.2%) was significantly ($p < 0.05$) higher than the percentage of other community college students who experienced very low food security (22.9%). Additionally, the percent of community college student-veterans who experienced low food security (13.4%) was significantly ($p < 0.05$) lower than the percent of other community college students who experienced low food security (16.1%).

Combining the percentage of students who experienced very low and low food security provides a dichotomous measure of food insecurity. Overall, 37.6% of community college student-veterans experienced food insecurity compared to 39.0% of other community college students, a difference that was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Among all the individual survey items used to measure food security, the highest percentages of community college student-veterans specified that they worried that food would run out before they could purchase more food (40.5%), that they could not afford to eat balanced meals (38.3%), and they cut the size of their meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food (32.6%).

HOUSING INSECURITY

The survey also assessed students' recent housing insecurity using 10 items (e.g., "In the past 12 months, was there a rent or mortgage increase that made it difficult to pay?"). Students were coded as experiencing housing insecurity if they responded "yes" to any of the items and that they had moved at least three times in the last 12 months, dichotomized to 1 = students were experiencing housing insecurity, 0 = students were experiencing housing security.

In the sample, 52.5% of community college student-veterans experienced housing insecurity compared to 52.2% of all other community college students, a difference that was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). Over one in six community college student-veterans (17.8%) experienced homelessness in the past year compared to 14.0% of all other community college students, a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$).

Among all the individual survey items used to measure housing security, the highest proportion of student-veterans indicated that they did not pay the full amount of the costs of their utilities in the past 12 months (28.7%), were unable to pay (or ended up underpaying) their rent or mortgage in the past 12 months (28.1%), and had an account default or go to collections (21.2%). The figures are somewhat comparable to nonveteran community college students: 29.1% did not pay the full costs of utilities and 27.4% were unable to pay or underpaid their rent or mortgage. However, 16.2% of nonveteran community college students had an account default or go to collections, which was significantly ($p < 0.05$)

lower than the percent of student-veterans who had an account default or go to collections (21.2%).

Overall, the findings suggest that over half of community college student-veterans experienced housing insecurity and close to one-third could not pay the full costs of their utilities, rent, or mortgage—figures that are comparable to all other community college students. In three student veterans which is similar to community college students in general. However, student-veterans were more likely to experience homelessness and to have accounts go into default or into collections relative to other community college students.

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT-VETERANS WHO EXPERIENCED FOOD AND HOUSING INSECURITY

To provide a broad overview of the demographic characteristics of community college student-veterans who were most likely to have experienced food or housing insecurity, we created a composite variable of students who had experienced either one (or both) food and housing insecurity and defined the variable as “experienced basic needs insecurity.” In the sample, 60.9% of community college student-veterans experienced basic needs insecurity compared to 61.6% of other community college students, a difference that was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Scholars have traditionally found that college students from marginalized and minoritized identities (e.g., students of color and students with disabilities) are more likely to experience food and housing insecurity compared to their peers (Soria, 2023a; Soria & Coca, 2023; Soria et al., 2022; Soria et al., 2023; The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021). We, therefore, explored whether there are significant differences in community college student-veterans’ rates of basic needs insecurity by their disability, race/ethnicity, gender, and parents’ education. We also explored differences by student-veterans’ economic background and whether they lived with a partner or spouse. When reviewing the demographic characteristics of community college student-veterans who experienced basic needs insecurity, the results were often consistent with those prior studies.

We observed that community college student-veterans with disabilities were at greater risk of experiencing basic needs insecurity. Student-veterans with multiple disabilities (70.2%) and psychological disabilities (68.8%) had significantly ($p < 0.05$) higher rates of basic needs insecurity compared to community college student-veterans without disabilities (52.2%). Black or African American and Latinx community college student-veterans had significantly ($p < 0.05$) higher rates of basic needs insecurity compared to White community college student-veterans (73.4, 64.3, and 53.5%, respectively). Transgender community college student-veterans had significantly ($p < 0.05$) higher rates of basic needs insecurity (86.0%) compared to student-veterans who identified as cisgender women (65.2%) and men (57.3%).

Community college student-veterans who were the first in their families to attend college (first-generation students) had significantly ($p < 0.05$) higher rates of basic needs insecurity (63.1%) compared to community college continuing-generation student-veterans (54.0%). Community college student-veterans from families that experienced trouble making ends meet financially while growing up had significantly ($p < 0.05$) higher rates of basic needs insecurity (68.4%) compared to community college student-veterans from families that did not experience trouble making ends meet while growing up (52.5%). Community college student-veterans who did not live with a spouse or domestic partner had significantly

($p < 0.05$) higher rates of basic needs insecurity (68.8%) compared to community college student-veterans who lived with a spouse or partner (53.6%).

FOOD AND HOUSING INSECURITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT-VETERANS' ACADEMIC OUTCOMES AND MENTAL HEALTH

We examined the potential implications of community college student-veterans' experiences with food and housing insecurity with regard to student-veterans' academic outcomes and mental health. Students self-reported their grade point averages in the current term. We discovered there were statistically significant ($p < .05$) differences in community college student-veterans' self-reported grades based upon whether or not they experienced basic needs insecurity. Community college student-veterans who experienced basic needs insecurity reported significantly lower grades than those who did not experience basic needs insecurity. We observed that 70.8% of community college student-veterans who experienced basic needs insecurity reported their grades were B or higher compared to 78.8% of community college student-veterans who reported grades of B or higher and who did not experience basic needs insecurity. Among the community college student-veterans who experienced food insecurity, 18.5% indicated their grade point averages were between B- and F compared to 9.5% of student-veterans who did not experience basic needs insecurity. Those results are congruent with a general body of research suggesting that food and housing insecurity can have negative effects on college students' academic outcomes (Weaver et al., 2019).

We also examined community college student-veterans' symptoms for MDD and GAD. We used a nine-item scale to screen for MDD symptoms known as the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-9; Kroenke et al., 2001). The PHQ-9 includes nine questions about the frequency of depressed mood and anhedonia (e.g., "feeling down, depressed, or hopeless") over the past 2 weeks. We also used a seven-item scale to screen students for GAD symptoms known as the GAD-7 (Spitzer et al., 2006). The GAD-7 includes seven questions about the frequency of anxiety (e.g., "feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge") over the past 2 weeks (0 = not at all to 3 = nearly every day). Both the PHQ-9 and GAD-7 are used by clinicians as "screeners" for MDD and GAD; however, the instruments are not diagnostic tools in-and-of themselves. Individuals who meet clinically significant criteria for MDD and GAD should receive further clinician evaluation (Spitzer et al., 2006).

Congruent with prior research about the relationships between basic needs insecurity and mental health disorders among college students (Soria, 2023b; Soria & Horgos, 2021), the results suggested that community college student-veterans who experienced basic needs insecurity had higher rates of clinically significant MDD and GAD symptoms (40.7 and 38.9%, respectively) compared to student-veterans who did not experience basic needs insecurity (16.6 and 16.5%, respectively).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The results of this exploratory study indicate that community college student-veterans have alarmingly high rates of food insecurity (37.6%), housing insecurity (52.5%), homelessness (17.8%), and overall basic needs insecurity (60.9%) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the results suggest that community college student-veterans from marginalized and minoritized identities are more likely to experience basic needs insecurity compared to their peers and that student-veterans are more vulnerable to

homelessness than other students. Finally, the results suggest that basic needs insecurity may be harmful for community college student-veterans' grade point averages and mental health.

First and foremost, the results suggest that veterans' benefits (e.g., the Post 9/11 GI Bill) are insufficient to support the basic needs of student-veterans. While the rates of food insecurity were relatively comparable between community college student-veterans and other community college students, the rates of housing insecurity and homelessness were much higher among student-veterans, which is congruent with research about veterans in the general population (Bossarte et al., 2013). We also found that the prevalence of higher rates of MDD and GAD symptoms was congruent with prior research demonstrating that housing instability, food insecurity, and homelessness can increase psychological distress and suicidal ideation among veterans (Bossarte et al., 2013; Kamdar et al., 2021).

While colleges have initiated efforts to ameliorate students' basic needs insecurity, such as meal swipe sharing programs, food pantries, or emergency housing, it may be more challenging for community colleges to offer similar programs for a variety of reasons (e.g., limited resources, no residential facilities on campus, limited or no dining options). Further, student-veterans differ in many significant ways from other college students that may introduce additional barriers to their abilities to access those basic needs security programs, including heightened concerns about the stigma and shame associated with seeking basic needs assistance, a sense of pride promoting independence and adaptability with a reluctance to seek help, and limited time spent on campus (Kulesza et al., 2015; Schinkel et al., 2022).

There are several steps that community college practitioners can take to support student-veterans who are experiencing basic needs insecurity. For instance, to counter the stigma associated with visiting food pantries or seeking alternative assistance, an alert system (e.g., app, text messages, social media, website) could be implemented to inform student-veterans about food recovery programs, such as leftover food from on-campus events. Food recovery programs feature more anonymity and can lessen the stigma of receiving free food because the motivation is to prevent food waste (Schinkel et al., 2022). Rather than "being helped," student-veterans might view food recovery programs as "being helpful" with the goal of reducing wasted food. Such an approach may be effective because asking for help is a prevalent self-stigma among veterans (McDermott et al., 2017). Campus chapters of Student Veterans of America or Veterans Service Centers can also feature support and resources in a non-stigmatizing environment. For instance, the Veterans Service Center at the University of Wyoming features a computer lab, kitchen, lounge, free coffee and snacks, and other services (Schinkel et al., 2022). Finally, basic needs support services can be marketed to student-veterans who are most likely to benefit from those services (e.g., those with marginalized or minoritized identities).

To support student-veterans experiencing housing insecurity, it is time for the U.S. Department of Defense to reconsider how the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) is calculated for college students. At present, student-veterans receiving the Post 9/11 GI Bill who are enrolled in distance education courses can only be eligible for up to 50% of BAH and student-veterans who are enrolled part-time do not qualify for 100% BAH. The rates of BAH are designated by the zip codes of the college or university and are based upon rental housing data, which may not reflect student-veterans' residential zip code or type of residence. Further, the BAH does not address the lack of available housing or lack of affordable housing in any given area, compounding additional challenges experienced by student-veterans enrolled at community colleges who are not likely to have many on-campus housing options. Clearly, more work needs to be done at structural levels to address the high rates of housing insecurity and homelessness among community college student-veterans.

CONCLUSION

Student-veterans attending community colleges during COVID-19 fared worse relative to other community college students in terms of food and housing insecurity and these insecurities were even higher for students with mental health concerns. The high rates of food and housing insecurity experienced by community college student-veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic are inexcusable. The effects of basic needs insecurity on community college student-veterans' academic achievement and mental health cannot be overlooked because participants in this research study showed poorer academic performance when faced with food and housing insecurities and mental health issues. It is time for significant and structural changes to support those who have served the nation honorably, improve their quality of life, and reduce barriers to their degree completion.

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How to cite this article: Soria, K. M., & Smith, A. B. (2024). Food and housing insecurity among community college student-veterans. In P. A. Morris, & J. Deickman, (Eds.), *Practices, policies, and support for student veterans in community colleges. New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2024, 53–62. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20625>

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