

How Widespread is College Student Food and Housing Insecurity?

By **Mathew Smith**, *Policy Analyst*
September 19, 2019 in **Data, Education**

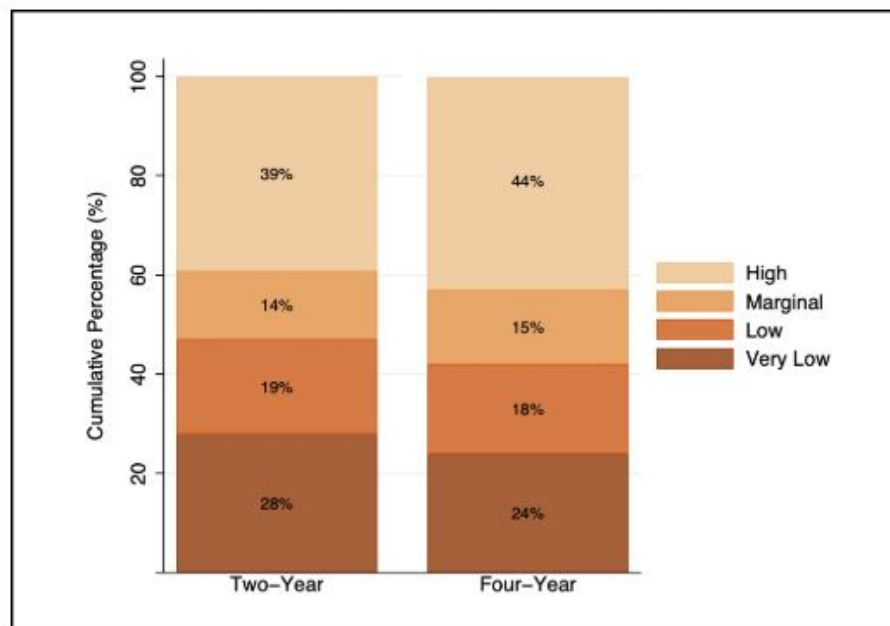
Getting to college is a huge challenge, but for many students, having the basics to get by once they're attending school is a significant barrier. Specifically, food and housing insecurity affects millions of college students every year. Food insecurity is a disruption of normal eating patterns resulting from a lack of money or other resources, and housing insecurity is used as an umbrella term that captures challenges ranging from an inability to pay rent to homelessness.

Although there is not a nationally representative study examining food and housing insecurity among college students, multiple studies do provide insight into the issue. One of the largest national surveys is conducted regularly by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. Nearly 86,000 college students participated in the study last fall from 123 different two- and four-year institutions. Their survey found that 45 percent of respondents were food insecure in the last 30 days, 56 percent were housing insecure in the previous year, and an astounding 17 percent were homeless in the previous year. However, this high rate of homelessness among college students is partly a result of a broader definition of homelessness used by the Hope Center survey. For instance, only 5 percent of community-college students and 2 percent of college students at four-year institutions self-identify as being homeless. The other college students who were counted as homeless were identified as such based on their responses to the Hope Center

survey. The vast majority of the non-self-identified homeless students were categorized this way because they temporarily lived with a friend or a relative.

The Hope Center survey further disaggregates their findings between community colleges and four-year institutions. For instance, 60 percent of students at two-year institutions were identified as housing insecure compared to 48 percent of students at four-year institutions. The higher prevalence of insecurity among students at two-year institutions remains consistent across the other measures of the survey as well. The Hope Center survey identified about 47 percent of students at two-year institutions and 42 percent of students at four-year institutions as food insecure, about a 5 percent difference. Below is a breakdown of the measure of food security by two- and four-year institutions.

Food Security Among Survey Respondents from Two and Four-Year Colleges



Source: College and University Basic Needs Insecurity: A National #RealCollege Survey Report

The Hope Center survey provides some troubling insights into the challenges facing many college students. However, these findings cannot be extrapolated beyond this sample and applied to the college student population at large. Although the

challenges identified in this survey affect college students across the nation, the extent of food and housing insecurity varies across regions. And while being a student may make someone more vulnerable to these issues, local economic conditions and other demographic factors will also drive these measures in unique ways from campus to campus.

In a recent meta-analysis published in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, researchers estimated that 32.9 percent of U.S. college students experienced food insecurity. However, most of the universities included in the analysis were four-year, urban based public institutions. Based on what we know from the Hope Center survey, we may expect this estimate to be lower than the true proportion of food-insecure college students specifically because of the higher percentage of food insecure students at two-year institutions. The researchers go further to say that their analysis also lacked variation in “rural and small town post-secondary education settings, Hispanic serving institutions, historically black colleges and universities,... and for-profit universities.” Although the estimate may be a conservative one, the findings from this research are consistent with the Government Accountability Office (GAO) review of food insecurity on college campuses. In their research, the percentage of food insecure college students ranged from 9 percent to 50 percent, but 22 of the 31 studies that examined the issue estimated college student food insecurity to be above 30 percent.

Another recent survey of 34 two- and four-year institutions across 12 states found similarly high levels of housing insecurity. The research found that 53 percent of students at two-year institutions and 46 percent of students at four-year institutions were housing insecure. Unsurprisingly, the survey also found that almost two-thirds of food insecure college students experienced some form of housing insecurity. The high degree of correlation between food and housing insecurity begins to conjure an image of an exceptionally vulnerable student population; a population that may be regularly skipping meals to pay rent or may be a hospital bill away from eviction. Although this survey is not nationally representative of the entire college student population, this high rate of food and housing insecurity is consistent

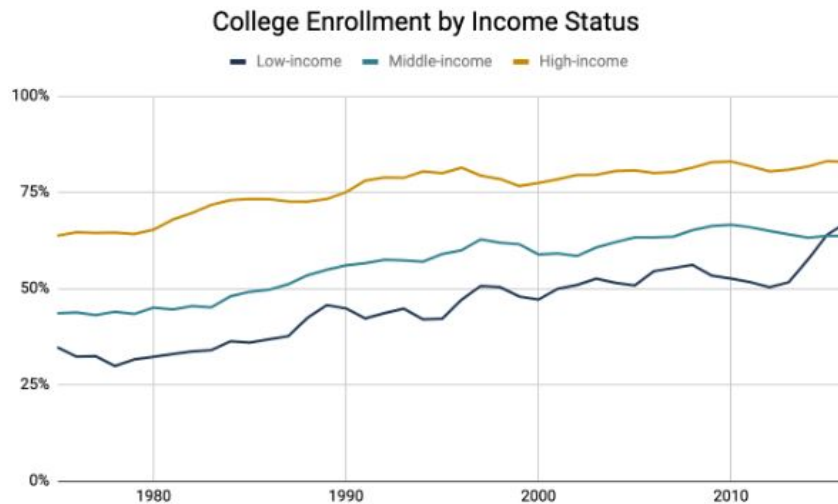
across many of the most robust studies on college housing and food insecurity.

Driving Factors

Many of the factors that drive college student housing and food insecurity are the same factors that drive food insecurity and housing insecurity for the population at large, like low income, under employment, and disability.

However, there are also unique factors that make the population of college students exceedingly vulnerable to food and housing insecurity. First is the rising cost of education. Over the last 30 years, the net cost (taking into consideration grant aid and tax benefits) of attending a four-year public college has nearly doubled from roughly \$8,000 to \$15,000. During the same period, the net cost of attending a two-year institution increased from \$6,800 to \$8,000. While the costs of education continue to increase the financial burden on students and their families, federal grants cover a diminishing percentage of the overall costs of obtaining a degree. For example, roughly 40 years ago, a Pell Grant would cover 50 percent of the full costs of in-state tuition, fees, room, and board at public two-year colleges. Today, that proportion has dipped to just 37 percent.

However troubling the rising cost of education is for families across the country, this only explains in part the high proportion of college students experiencing housing and food insecurity. As the real cost of higher education has increased, so has the proportion of low-income students entering college. The graph below shows the percentage of graduating high school students entering college by income status.



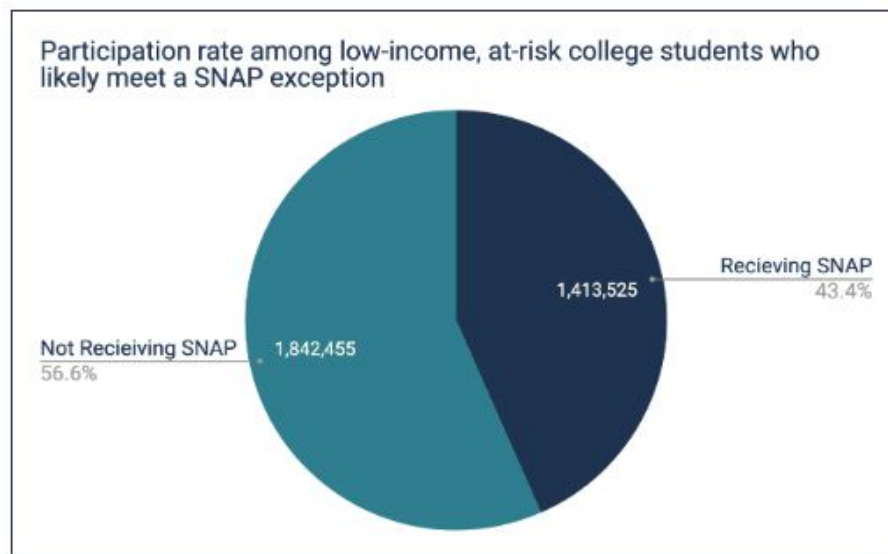
Source: The National Center for Education Statistics, Percentage of recent high school completers enrolled in college, by income level: 1975 through 2016, graphic by Aunt Bertha

Over the same period that the cost of education at a four-year institution has doubled, the proportion of low-income high school graduates entering college has increased from under 45 percent in 1990 to more than 67 percent in 2016. In fact, we can see that the line representing low-income student enrollment in higher education actually surpasses the proportion of middle-income students enrolling in higher education. Although the difference between the percentage of low-income students entering college is not yet statistically different from the percentage of middle-income students entering college, the trend illustrates a rapid expansion in the number of low-income students that colleges are serving.

Challenges

One of the primary ways the U.S. government fights food insecurity is through the Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program (SNAP). In fiscal year 2017, the government spent \$68 billion on SNAP, and it remains the largest food-assistance program in the country. SNAP households receive about \$253 per month on average, or about \$1.40 per person per meal. Although SNAP likely will not cover the full cost of a typical food budget, the additional support can be critical for individuals and families struggling to make ends meet month to month. At the same time, college students face eligibility restrictions that often prevent them from obtaining SNAP benefits. The Food Stamp Amendments

of 1980 generally prevent the “traditional” college student, who may have a low-income while in college but ostensibly receives financial support from their parents, from receiving SNAP benefits. There are a number of exceptions to these restrictions, notably for parents and those who are disabled; however the majority of college students who are eligible for SNAP do not receive the benefit. In a review conducted by the GAO, the agency found that among potentially SNAP eligible low-income college students with one additional risk factor for food insecurity, 57 percent were not enrolled in SNAP.



Source: United States Government Accountability Office, Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits, graphic by Aunt Bertha

Although SNAP eligibility restrictions make many students ineligible for the benefit, there are nearly 2 million *likely eligible* college students who are not receiving SNAP. This discrepancy may be caused by a lack of awareness of the program, confusion around student eligibility, the stigma of receiving public benefits, or some combination of these factors. Federal and state governments, as well as colleges themselves, will need to respond to this challenge through thoughtful legislation and meaningful investments.

Policy and Campus Action

Fortunately, some states and universities have begun to address these issues directly. In 2017, California passed legislation to clarify student eligibility requirements for

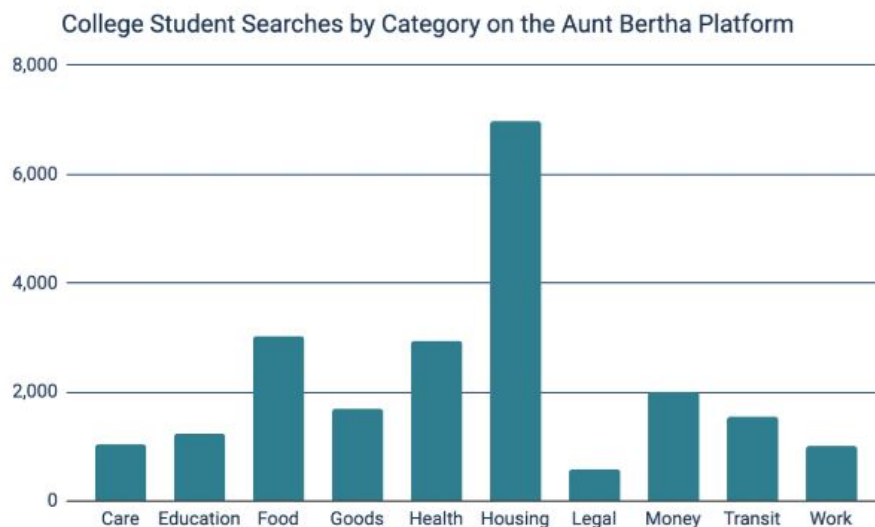
SNAP. In order to address the under-utilization of SNAP by college students, this bill requires the Student Aid Commission to notify recipients of state higher education grants if they qualify for SNAP. This legislation also requires the state and county human service agencies to maintain updated lists of specific exemptions to SNAP student eligibility restrictions, thus reducing much of the confusion surrounding student SNAP eligibility. In similar fashion, Illinois passed a bill in 2018 that would help clarify some of the student exemptions to SNAP, in addition to better aligning federal SNAP benefits with need-based financial aid for part-time students.

We are also seeing an expansion in the number of on campus food pantries. Just last year, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that every New York State public college at the State University of New York and the City University of New York systems would have a food pantry or equivalent located on campus. This will require only a \$1 million investment from the state to ensure all 88 campuses are properly resourced, but it is an important signal that state government and college campuses are taking the issue of food insecurity seriously.

In addition, many colleges are taking it upon themselves to address the growing concern over student housing and food insecurity. Researchers from the GAO found that 8 of the 14 campuses they contacted indicated that they were coordinating student access to social programs or systematically screening for student eligibility for SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, and the Earned Income Tax Credit. The report went on to describe three colleges that were purchasing software programs to act as a centralized referral hub for student services. These referral platforms would allow college faculty and staff to share information on students and make referrals to student services. To quote directly from the report, “at a college we visited that is using such software, officials said that a professor might note in the centralized portal that an at-risk student was either failing or not attending a class, and that student would be flagged in the portal to notify academic advisors, counselors, and other college staff who can direct the student to the on-campus resources they may need, such as the food pantry or help in completing a SNAP application.” Although this level of service navigation and intervention may not be

traditionally in the scope of what colleges do, this may be what is necessary to support this particularly vulnerable student population.

In fact, Aunt Bertha is already being used by a number of forward-thinking colleges to connect students to resources, with thousands of students using the platform to find services near them. Below are searches on the Aunt Bertha platform made by college students or care managers on behalf of college students organized by search category.



Source: Aunt Bertha data

We can see that the prevalence of food and housing needs among students is also reflected in the student searches in Aunt Bertha. Housing is by far their top-searched need and food is the next-most-searched need. By using Aunt Bertha to connect to services, whether it be subsidized housing or SNAP benefits, thousands of college students are accessing programs that will help them with what is clearly a pervasive need across campuses.

Conclusion

As the cost of education increases and financial aid covers a diminishing share of the costs of obtaining a degree, many students are struggling to meet some of their most basic needs. At the same time, a higher proportion of low-income students are entering college, and these institutions are oftentimes unprepared to help.

Although food and housing insecurity vary by campus and region, the research clearly shows there is a large and systemic problem. Conservatively, we might estimate that 1 in 3 college students is food insecure and maybe as many as half of all students are housing insecure.

These problems can be exacerbated by a policy regime that often excludes college students from benefits based on an outdated understanding of who is enrolling in higher education. If we want a higher education system built to meet the needs of the diverse student population currently enrolled, various levels of government and two- and four-year institutions will need to make strategic investments in how they support students experiencing food and housing insecurity. States such as California and New York have begun aligning state policy and making thoughtful investments in college campuses to meet the needs of food insecure students, but these issues affect students nationwide and will require a broader commitment and investment from across government and higher education.

Tags college education food food banks food insecurity housing housing insecurity students

This post was written by **Matt Smith**

Matt Smith is a policy analyst at Aunt Bertha who has completed the government service hat-trick (having worked for federal, state, and local government). Prior to writing for this blog, Matt enjoyed a simple life of relative anonymity, hiking his dog Eli on the trails surrounding Austin, Texas.