

College students are less food insecure than non-students

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College students in a University of Illinois dining hall. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer, University of Illinois

College students are significantly less likely to be food insecure than non-students in the same age group, according to a new study from the

University of Illinois.

"College hunger" has been widely reported in the media, and several studies found very high [food insecurity](#) rates among [college students](#), sometimes up to 50 or 60%. "That did not make sense to those of us doing research on [food insecurity](#), so I wanted to check those findings," says Craig Gundersen, agricultural economist at U of I.

Gundersen, who conducts research on food insecurity measures, notes many of those studies used small, non-representative samples with low response rates. To provide more accurate results, he analyzed data from the 2014 to 2018 Current Population Survey (CPS), a national survey covering about 50,000 households. CPS is the official data source for food insecurity measures in the U.S.

His findings were clear.

"No matter how you look at it, [college](#) students have far lower rates of food insecurity than both non-college students of similar ages and the general population," he says.

According to his study, 9.9% of full-time college students ages 18 to 25 are food insecure, compared to 16.8% for non-students of the same age group. In the general population, about 12.5% were food insecure during the study's time frame.

Gundersen found the same trend for 26- to 30-year-olds (where just 7% are full-time students) though the gap is smaller than for the younger age group.

Only for part-time students, especially in the 26- to 30-year old group, are food insecurity rates almost equivalent to those of non-students.

Because CPS collects data per household, parents may be responding for adult children living at home. To account for this, Gundersen compared data from young people living on their own and those living with parents. The overall trend was similar, but the difference was even starker — 9.1% of students versus 18.4% of non-students were food insecure according to parent responses.

The pattern holds true across demographic groups, except for disabled students, where the food insecurity rate is closer to that of non-students.

This doesn't mean college hunger is a myth. Gundersen emphasizes one in 10 college students is still food insecure.

However, the problem is much more serious for non-students in the same [age groups](#), and that has implications for food aid relief and intervention policies.

"The main conclusion from this study is that full-time college students have food insecurity rates that are far below those of non-college students of similar ages, and quite a bit below those of the [general population](#)," he concludes. "Therefore, in thinking about who we should be especially concerned about with respect to policy and other interventions are those who are not in college, in the age group from 18 to 25, rather than college students."

More information: Craig Gundersen, Are College Students More Likely to Be Food Insecure than Nonstudents of Similar Ages?, *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/aepp.13110](https://doi.org/10.1002/aepp.13110)

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