

# Students at two-year colleges and vocational schools more likely to be hungry

August 2 2017

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For the majority of college students, having enough food is not on the list of challenges they face in their education. However, a recent study shows that, for some college students, hunger is definitely one of the problems they face and this can impede their ability to succeed in college.

"Consistent with what most people probably believe intuitively, [food insecurity](#) is not a major issue at elite four-year campuses," says University of Illinois agricultural economist Craig Gundersen. "For example, here at Illinois, the median family income is \$109,000 and only 6.1 percent of the entire [student](#) body are from the bottom twentieth percentile of national income levels. In fact, over half of the students at U of I come from the top 20 percent. I don't mean to say that none of the students at U of I has this problem, but it is quite rare."

This, however, is not a rare problem at two-year colleges and vocational schools, Gundersen says. "The data show students who attend these schools are generally from poorer households. They don't have to live on campus in dorms with required meal plans in dining halls. In fact, they are more likely to be still living at home with their parents. If their parents are [food](#) insecure, then so are they.

"There is also a greater percentage of students at two-year and vocational schools who are going back to school later. They are perhaps 25 years old and already heads of their own households, working to pay for their own tuition as well as their own family's needs," Gundersen says.

Gundersen believes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) is the best social safety net to combat food insecurity in the United States. And this effort should be extended to college students, especially community college students.

"Nearly one in five two-year college students live in a food-insecure household, but eligibility and take-up rates among college-age students are low," Gundersen says. "Policy makers may want to consider lowering the minimum number of off-campus work hours that are necessary for otherwise-eligible students to receive SNAP benefits."

Gundersen says previous studies on this topic surveyed [college](#) students visiting food pantries and through voluntary online surveys. Not surprisingly, those studies found much higher percentages of students, as high as 60 percent, being food insecure on four-year campuses.

"With a rigorous study like the one my colleagues and I conducted, the numbers are not as dramatic, but they are more descriptive of what's actually going on," Gundersen says. "Some 13 percent of [college students](#) at four-year schools are food insecure, which mirrors the national average of the entire population. And 21 percent of students in two-year and vocational schools are food insecure. These data tell a more complete story."

For this study, Gundersen and his colleagues use data from the October and December supplements to the Current Population Survey. It is a survey conducted by the Census Bureau that gathers information from questionnaires from approximately 60,000 households nationwide. The October supplement includes questions about education and members of the household who are enrolled in [school](#). The December supplement addresses questions about SNAP benefits and food insecurity.

Gundersen adds that people on four-year campuses who are really struggling with food insecurity are not the students. "...it's the people cleaning up after our students, cooking, and serving food in the dining halls. Those are the people with low incomes who are at severe danger of food insecurity and have high rates of food [insecurity](#)."

**More information:** "Assessing food insecurity on campus: A national look at food insecurity among America's college students," [www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2017/08/assessing-food-insecurity-on-campus-0.pdf](http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2017/08/assessing-food-insecurity-on-campus-0.pdf)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Students at two-year colleges and vocational schools more likely to be hungry (2017, August 2) retrieved 19 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-08-students-two-year-colleges-vocational-schools.html>

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