

ASSESSING FOOD INSECURITY AMONG WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY STUDENTS



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PURPOSE

To measure the prevalence of food insecurity among students at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), and identify risk factors

KEY FINDINGS

Almost half of all WLU students experience some food insecurity, including 17% who are severely food insecure. Risk factors for food insecurity included low proficiency in managing money and time, and having parents of lower socioeconomic positions (SEP).

BACKGROUND

- Food security is the concept of having physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.¹
- The transition from high school to university often includes adapting to a more independent living arrangement and lifestyle.
- Paying for tuition and other academic costs, and having poor cooking and budgeting skills, can be challenging to university students.
- Students of lower SEP may need to work to meet their living costs and are vulnerable to chronic stress and other health risks.²
- Food insecurity can cause mental health problems, sleep issues, and poor academic performance.^{2,3}
- Use of WLU Food Bank increased from 10 food parcels/term to 300+/term in a span of four years.⁴
- A recent national study on food insecurity among post-secondary students indicates that 40% of students are either moderately or severely food insecure.⁵

METHOD

- The study enrolled 782 WLU undergraduate students at the Waterloo campus.
- Participants were recruited through in-class announcements, campus TV ads, social media, and campus posters and handouts.
- Participants completed an online survey with 24-35 questions to measure socio-demographics, food-security-related behaviours, and levels of food security (based on the Household Food Security Survey Module from the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS)).
- CCHS questions were adapted to better suit the post-secondary school environment by modifying the assessment period and the measurement of living arrangements.
- Multinomial regression was used to control for confounders including cooking skill, food bank use, food accessibility near campus and residence, prioritization of home-cooked meals, and food situation when living with family.

RESULTS

	Canadian average ⁶	WLU students
Food secure	91.7 %	52.3 %
Food insecure - moderate	5.8 %	30.8 %
Food insecure - severe	2.5 %	16.9 %

Table 1: Prevalence of various food insecurity levels among all Canadians and WLU participants

Table 1 shows that just over half of all WLU students had access to sufficient and nutritious food in university, while 30.8% had some trouble accessing food (5.3 times the Canadian average), and 16.9% faced severe hunger problems (6.8 times the Canadian average).

After controlling for confounders, five variables predicted food insecurity: racial/ethnic minority, low parental education attainment, loan reliance, poor budgeting skills, time unavailability to cook food ($p < 0.05$ for all comparisons).

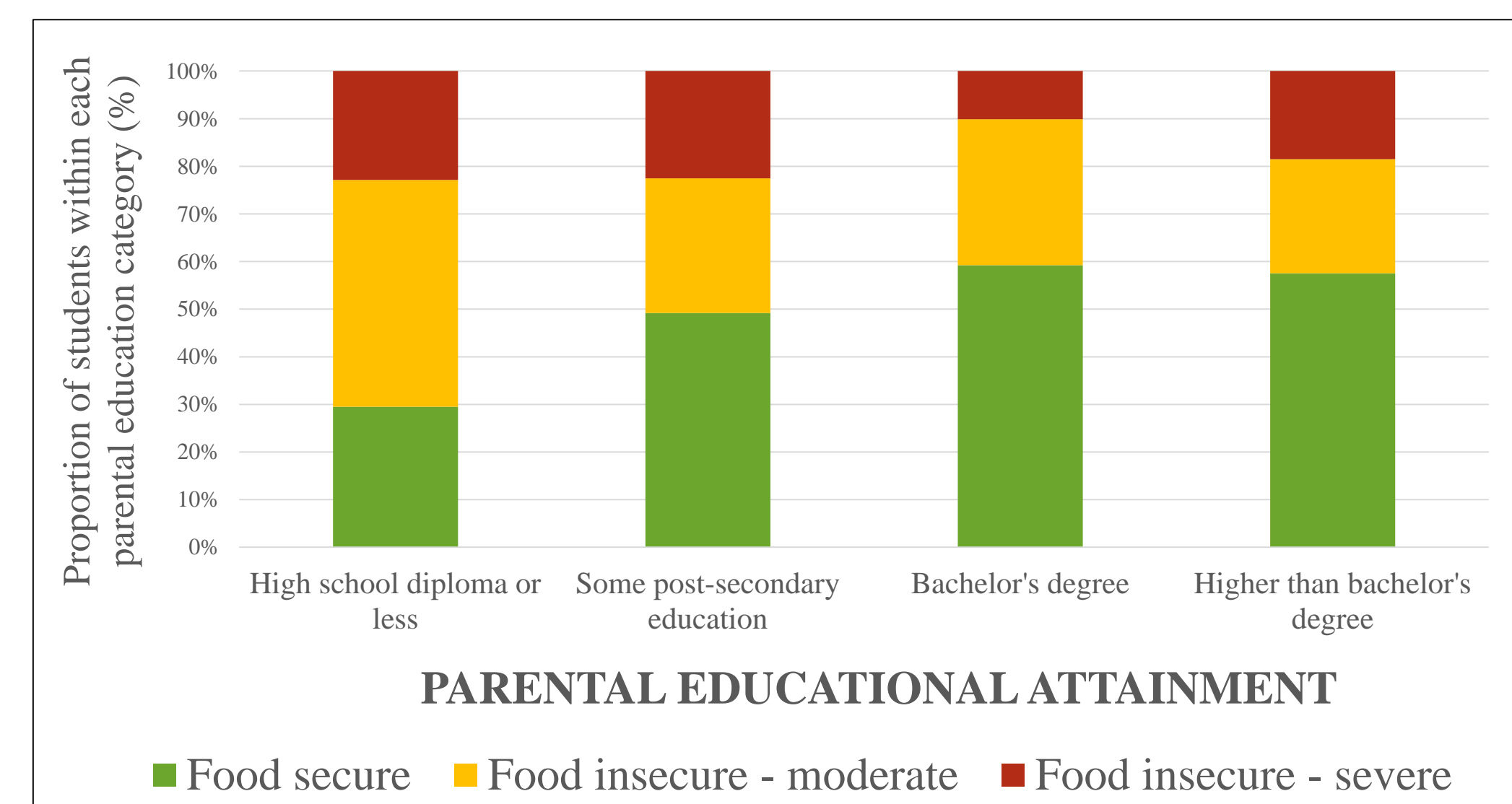


Figure 1: Comparing the proportion of students with different food security statuses within each parental educational attainment category

Figure 1 describes the increase in student food security with higher parental education attainment. Below, figures show students with high proficiency in budgeting money (Figure 2) and those with enough time to cook own food (Figure 3) were more food secure.

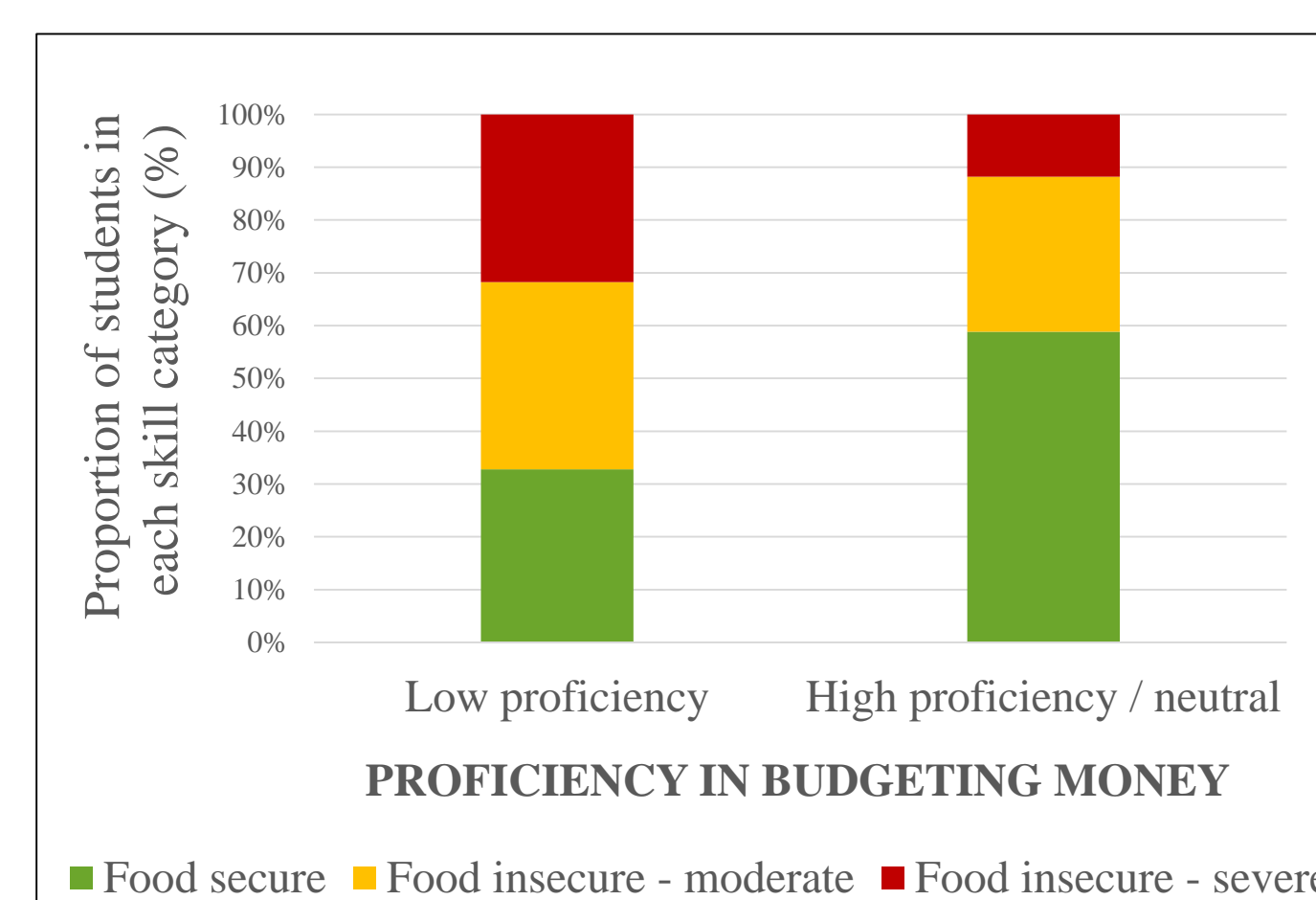


Figure 2: Analysis of self-reported budgeting proficiency and food security status

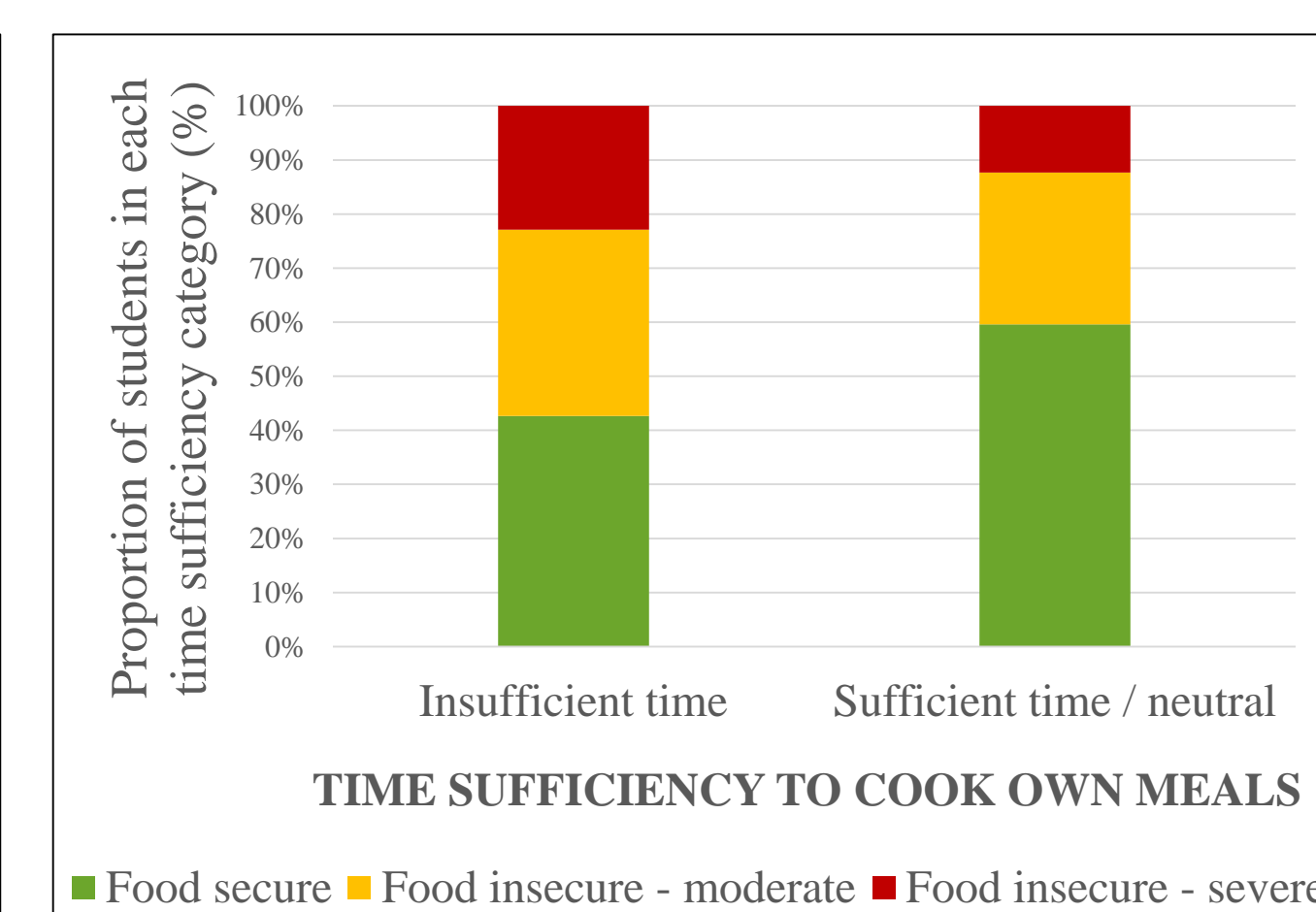


Figure 3: Comparison of time sufficiency to prepare own meals and food security status

DISCUSSION

- Students may experience food insecurity due to their lack of preparation for independent living and the rising costs of education.
- Levels of food insecurity at WLU were slightly higher compared to the recent national study of university students.⁵
- Socio-demographic factors such as low SEP and being a racial/ethnic minority were also associated with food insecurity, which suggests more fundamental causes.
- Food insecurity is emerging as an important issue to be mitigated to foster academic progression and well-being of university students.

IMPLICATIONS

- WLU administration and students, and their stakeholders, must be educated on this issue and should come together to develop interventions strategies.
- Identifying students vulnerable to food insecurity (low SEP) before entering post-secondary education may help direct sufficient resources to reduce harm from food insecurity.
- There is need for personal skill development of students on financial literacy and time management.
- This questionnaire will serve as a model to assess food security among Canadian post-secondary students in future studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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