Experiences Of Food Insecurity Among Undergraduate Students At The University Of Waterloo:

Barriers, Coping Strategies, and Perceived Health and Academic Outcomes

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POPULATIONS AT RISK

Single mothers

Families with children

Social assistance recipients

Post-secondary students

Understudied, but vulnerable!
STARVING STUDENTS?

Commonality of students eating poor quality foods due to a limited budget.

Common belief: students have poor $$$ skills.
WHY ARE STUDENTS VULNERABLE?

Potential drivers:

- Rising tuition

- Insufficient student loans

- More students from low-income families? International students?
Convenience samples:

- Australia & US: 25-59% \(^8-11\)
- Canada: 39% \(^12\)

+ Rising community and campus food bank use \(^13,14\)
Coping strategies:

- Borrowing money, accessing loans or credit, food banks \(^8,13\)

Implications:

- Poor self-reported physical and mental health, reduced concentration, lower GPA \(^8,12,14,15\)
Lack of qualitative research

- Crucial to better understand the nature of food insecurity among this unique population

- Perspectives of students are essential for:
  - Finding out whether/how student food insecurity differs from what we already know
  - Better supporting health, wellbeing, and academic success
WHAT ARE THE EXPERIENCES OF FOOD INSECURITY AMONG STUDENTS?

- Perceived barriers and facilitators
- Strategies used to manage shortages
- Perceptions regarding implications for health and academic achievement
- Suggestions for improving food security
Purposive sampling: flyers posted on campus and handed to visitors at the campus food bank

Eligible participants were:

- Undergraduate students at the University of Waterloo
- Enrolled for at least 12 months
- Gave some indication of financial difficulty accessing food over the last 12 months
- Lived off-campus
- Lived without a parent or guardian
- 18+ years of age
DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

- **Semi-structured, in-depth interview:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<td>Can you tell me about a time since you’ve been a student when you didn’t have access to enough food or the food that you wanted?</td>
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<td>What was going on for you that made it difficult for you to get the amounts and/or types of foods you wanted and needed?</td>
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<td>How does it feel when you run out of money for food in the midst of these other priorities?</td>
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- **Demographic and health survey**

- **10-item Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM-Adult)**
Adaptive theory and thematic analysis

- Analyzed data for themes, building on prior literature while also being open to new concepts
PARTICIPANTS’ DEMOGRAPHICS AND FOOD SECURITY

14 student participants:

- 19 - 25 years
- 2nd - 5th year of study
- 3 international
- 7 co-op

Food Security Level:

- 6 Moderate food insecurity
- 4 Severe food insecurity
- 1 Severe food insecurity
- 3 Marginal food security
- 1 Unavailable

Freepik.com
UNDERSTANDING OF FOOD SECURITY

- Quantity is the primary concern
- Quality is important, but a secondary concern
- Absence of worry or hunger

“Having enough food would be eating some sort of breakfast and lunch and dinner” - Kelly

“After I can ensure myself to get fed, then I can consider the food choices I have” - Alan
EXPERIENCES OF FOOD INSECURITY

A preoccupation with the food supply

Food shortages and timing

Eating poor quality foods

Wanting to be independent

“Without wanting to, you end up skipping meals” – Riya

“If I can just manage this by myself, I’d rather do that than go asking for help every time I end up low on finances” - Aaron
Precarious finances a main barrier

- Consistent shortages
- Income shocks
- Cost of living
- Financial independence
- Co-op stream
- International students

"Just the way OSAP worked, I consistently never got enough" - Liam

"I’ll go on a grocery run today and end up coming home with just bagels [...] but I didn’t end up getting any real food that I really want to get [...] veggies and stuff were just too expensive for me to buy" - Isabel
OTHER FACTORS EXACERBATED PRECARIOUS FINANCES

Food literacy

"I don’t think I’d entered a kitchen ever, it was a thing mom does and we just get the food" - Parth

The food environment

- On-campus
- Off-campus

"You’re limited to the places or the food areas offered around you [...] there’s an abundance of convenience stores" - Riya

Time

"There’s sort of this idea that it’s okay to eat junk food, or food that isn’t good for you [...] the typical freshman 15? And then everyone’s eating Kraft Dinner and Mr. Noodles. And so you kind of feel like it’s okay" - Kelly

The starving student norm
Managed own money
- Scholarships or bursaries
- Government financial assistance or credit
- Part-time jobs
- Participated in studies
- Altered food budgets

Found free food on campus

Borrowed food or money

Shared food

Normalized

Resiliency

"[It’s] a part of growing up" - Parth

"I’m doing the best I can with the situation I have" - Alan
HEALTH AND ACADEMIC IMPLICATIONS

Physical
Mental
- Stress and worry
- Frustration

Psychosocial
- Stigma
- Social exclusion
- Social isolation

Academic
- Ability to focus
- Reduce studies, drop out

“I got so many things to do on my to-do list, and I still need to worry about my food” - Emma

“You can’t even tell that to your mom, because your mom would be stressing. She’s alone there, my dad’s not there […] I don’t want to stress her out” - Parth
STUDENTS’ SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE FOOD SECURITY

- Addressing root causes
  - Subsidization, additional financial aid

- Promoting food literacy and capacity building
  - Food vouchers for campus farmers market, nutrition education and cooking classes
**LIMITATIONS & STRENGTHS**

**Strengths:**
- Steps to ensure quality
  - Inter-coder agreement, peer debriefing
  - Transferability
- Recruited inside and outside of a campus food bank
- HFSSM-Adult provided context
- Partnership and knowledge translation with Meal Exchange

**Limitations:**
- Selection bias
- Incomplete HFSSM-Adult data
CONCLUSIONS

- Student food insecurity is similar to that among other populations, yet different

- Elements like a desire to be independent and the temporality of food shortages could not be captured with the HFSSM-Adult

- Students do not recognize or identify with the experience of food insecurity due to internalization of the ‘starving student norm’
Need attention to adequacy of financial support for post-secondary students

Need for interventions to:

- Raise awareness to subvert ‘starving student’ norm
- Address root financial causes of food insecurity among students to create effective, long-lasting change
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