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Prevalence and Correlates of Food Insecurity and Homelessness Among University Students

Mary E. Haskett Dana Kotter-Grühn Suman Majumder

Recently, there has been a steep increase in attention to insecurity among college students for basic needs (e.g., Miles, McBeath, Brockett, & Sorenson, 2017; Morris, Smith, Davis, & Null, 2016); however, published research on student food insecurity and housing insecurity remains sparse. It is critical to understand the prevalence of these challenges because they are associated with mental health functioning, academic success, and graduation rates (see Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez, & Cady, 2018). Prior studies (Miles et al., 2017; Tsui et al., 2011) point to high co-occurrence of food insecurity and homelessness, so the intersection of these challenges should be explored. To prevent basic needs insecurity and offer appropriate support for those who are affected, we must understand correlates of college food insecurity and student homelessness. Thus, the purpose of this investigation was to answer questions of prevalence, co-occurrence, and correlates

of food insecurity and homelessness. A novel feature of this study was our examination of the degree to which cumulative marginalized/minoritized characteristics predicted food insecurity and homelessness. Cumulative risk models, in which risks that tend to cluster together are equally weighted, are widely used in developmental psychology and have advantages over studies of single predictors of outcomes (Ashworth & Humphrey, 2019; Evans, Li, & Whipple, 2013); to date, such models have not been applied to studies of student food insecurity or student homelessness, even though predictors tend to be correlated (Crutchfield & McGuire, 2019).

METHOD

The research office at our large public university in the Southeastern US randomly selected 7,000 students; 1,923 completed our online survey (27.5% response, much higher

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than most prior studies). They represented the student body in race (4.7% African American; 5.3% biracial or multiracial; 14.9% Asian; 71.3% White; 3.8% other), ethnicity (6.0% Hispanic), and degree sought (71.0% undergraduate, 27.8% graduate, 1.1% associate's). Mean age was 21.74 years ($SD = 4.4$; 17–61 years). The vast majority, 94.7%, were enrolled full time. The sample slightly overrepresented women, 51.3% compared to the university population with 45.6%; 39.6% were men; and the remainder used a different term when asked about their gender identity (e.g., genderfluid, transMale). Most, 78.8%, considered themselves to be heterosexual, 9.0% did not reply to the item, 5.7% were bisexual, 2.7% were gay/lesbian, and the remainder were asexual, questioning, or used a different term. An e-mail invitation to voluntarily complete the online survey was sent to the 7,000 students in Fall 2017. The survey was a modification of the one developed by the California State University system (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2017) and the Hope Center (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Kinsley, 2017). Our IRB approved the study.

To measure food insecurity, the USDA Household/Individual Food Security Survey Module (FSSM) 10-item version was used with a 30-day time frame (Bickel, Nord, Price, Hamilton, & Cook, 2000). Two of the 10 questions asked participants to report the number of days various food situations occurred in the past 30 days. The response format might have been confusing, because almost no participant answered those 2 questions; therefore, we adjusted the coding for the 10-item survey using a conservative approach to defining very low food security. Those who provided affirmative responses to none (0) of the FSSM items were food secure, participants with scores of 1–2 were marginally food secure, those with scores of 3–5 were low food secure, and those with scores of 6–8 were

very low food secure. We generated a food insecurity variable by combining students who were low food secure or very low food secure.

The U.S. Department of Education (2016) definition of *homelessness* includes individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. To assess homelessness using this definition, we asked students to indicate all the places they had stayed in the past 12 months, with 9 items indicative of homelessness (e.g., at a shelter, temporarily staying with friends, outdoor location). The items were recommended by Crutchfield and Maguire (2017), who received consultation on items from Schoolhouse Connection (nonprofit organizations that work to address homelessness through education) and the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (membership association dedicated to educational equity and excellence for children and youth experiencing homelessness). In addition to the primary variables, the survey included yes/no questions about use of financial resources (e.g., financial aid, Pell grant), government resources (e.g., child care subsidy, SNAP), and campus and community resources for food and housing.

An aggregate score was developed based on 14 characteristics individually known to be associated with food insecurity or housing insecurity in one or more prior studies (e.g., Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Miles et al., 2017). The variables were non-White race, Hispanic ethnicity, nonheterosexual, nontraditional binary gender identity, first-generation student, transfer, veteran, international student, parent of a child under the age of 18, current or former foster care youth, student with disabilities, out-of-state student, age over 24 years, and part-time status. Students received a score of 0–14 based on the number of characteristics that applied to them. For example, a first-generation student with a young child would

receive a score of 2; an out-of-state, African American veteran who reported a disability would receive a score of 4.

RESULTS

Of the 1,584 students who provided information on food security over the past 30 days, 1,024 (64.6%) were classified as food secure, 326 (20.6%) as marginally secure, 144 (9.1%) as low food secure, and 90 (5.7%) as very low food secure. In combination, 234 students (14.8% of the sample) were food insecure (low food secure or very low food secure) within the last 30 days. Students who identified as women, students belonging to a racially marginalized group, and students who identified as Hispanic were overrepresented in the food insecure group. Chi-square tests for race, ethnicity, and gender by food security indicated significant differences by gender, $\chi^2(2, N = 1,562) = 15.9, p < .001$, and ethnic identity, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,556) = 4.1, p < .05$. Specifically, 16.3% of women, compared to 12.0% of men and 22.0% of Hispanic/Latino as compared to 14.3% of non-Hispanic/Latino students were food insecure. The effect of race by food security status was not significant, $\chi^2(6, N = 1,558) = 10.2, p = .12$, but it is noteworthy that the highest percentage of food insecurity (24.0%) was found for students who were African American (as compared to 13.5% of students who were White). There was no difference in food insecurity by degree sought.

A total of 1,703 students provided information on their housing situation, and 163 (9.6%) had experienced homelessness over the last 12 months. Of the students who had been homeless 4.6% temporarily stayed with a friend or relative, while 2.6% had slept outdoors (e.g., bus stop, under a bridge). Staying in campers, motels, other closed areas, and treatment centers were mentioned by a combined 5.0% of those who had experienced

homelessness in the past 12 months. Although men and women were about equally affected by homelessness, $\chi^2(2, N = 1,694) = 5.9, p = .05$, students who identified outside of the traditional gender binary were overrepresented in the homeless group, making up 0.8% of the sample but 2.5% of the homeless group. Within the Hispanic student group, 15.5% experienced homelessness as compared to 9.3% of non-Hispanic/Latino students, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,686) = 4.3, p < .05$. Homelessness did not differ by race, $\chi^2(6, N = 1,689) = 7.6, p = .27$, or degree sought, $\chi^2(2, N = 1,702) = 3.3, p = .19$. Among the 143 students who had been homeless, 25.2% were food insecure; food insecurity was lower, 13.8%, for students who had not been homeless, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,511) = 13.2, p < .001$.

Only 1.0% of the full sample and 2.1% of students who were food insecure received SNAP benefits. Of those students, 38.5% belonged to the food insecure group. Among students who did not receive SNAP benefits, 14.6% were food insecure. A total of 4.0% of students received Medicaid benefits; 25.0% of students on Medicaid as compared to 14.4% of students not on Medicaid were food insecure, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,584) = 5.2, p < .05$. Among students who received assistance from an off-campus food bank over the last year (0.8% of the full sample), 58.3% were food insecure as compared to 14.4% of students who did not receive help from a food bank, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,584) = 18.2, p < .001$. We found no significant effects for assistance use (e.g., SNAP benefits, Medicaid, food bank) as a function of homelessness status, all $ps > .05$.

As for the aggregate of characteristics known to be related to a higher likelihood of food and housing insecurity, the mean aggregate score was 1.40 ($SD = 1.25$), with a range of 0–6 out of a possible 14. The most commonly endorsed item was non-White race ($n = 505$, 26.3% of the total sample of 1,923).

The least common was current or former foster youth ($n = 3$, 0.2%). Logistic regression analyses with the aggregate as predictor and either food insecurity or homelessness in the past year as the criterion showed the aggregate was a significant predictor of both food insecurity, $B = .28$, $p < .001$, $OR = 1.32$, 95% CI [1.19, 1.47], and homelessness in the past year, $B = .17$, $p < .001$, $OR = 1.19$, 95% CI [1.05, 1.35], although the amount of variance explained by the aggregate was low. The model fitness (Hosmer–Lemeshow test) and explained variance were as follows: food insecurity model, $\chi^2(1) = 25.04$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .020$, homelessness model, $\chi^2(1) = 7.03$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .007$. The odds ratios indicate that the risk of being food insecure or homeless increases by 32% or 19%, respectively, for each 1-unit increase in the aggregate.

DISCUSSION

Over 14.0% of the students at our university had experienced food insecurity in the past month and nearly 10.0% had been homeless within the last year. This rate of food insecurity was at the low end of the wide continuum of rates in prior studies (14.0% in Gaines, Robb, Knol, & Sickler, 2014; over 50.0% in Patton-Lopez, Lopez-Cevallos, Cancel-Tirado, & Vazquez, 2014). The rate of food insecurity was comparable to our statewide household average rate of 15.1% for 2014–2016 (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbit, Gregory, & Singh, 2017). We have an on-campus food pantry and an outreach program to connect students to SNAP benefits, so one could argue that those resources contributed to low rates of food security for our sample; however, we found that few students used those services. Homelessness rates on our campus were at the high end of the few extant studies (e.g., Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018) and were higher than expected based on a survey of high

school students in our state which revealed a homeless prevalence rate of 4.5% (Armstrong, Owens, & Haskett, 2018). The availability of affordable housing has decreased in our city, which makes students vulnerable to housing instability. Furthermore, our residence halls close during university breaks, which leaves some students without housing. The most common living situations for students who faced homelessness were (a) temporarily staying with a relative or friend or couch surfing until they found other housing and (b) living in outdoor locations. We asked students to indicate which living conditions they had experienced in the past 12 months, but did not ask about the length of time they had been in each situation, so some students might have been homeless only briefly. It is important to note that staying outdoors and doubling-up due to financial hardship for even brief periods of time is unstable and potentially dangerous (Curry et al., 2017), so student development professionals should be concerned about these situations even if they are brief. Very few students reported that they had stayed in shelters, perhaps due to lack of available shelters near campus, difficulty navigating the shelter system, and/or fear of physical harm in shelters (Ha, Narendorf, Santa Maria, & Bezette-Flores, 2015).

The connections between sexual orientation, gender identity, and basic needs security of college students are not well understood, but those who identify as LGBTQ appear to be at elevated risk for food insecurity and homelessness (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). We found women and persons who did not identify using the traditional gender binary were more likely to experience food insecurity and homelessness. There also were expected ethnic differences in food security and homelessness, but few differences by race; these effects might be underestimated due to small samples for some racial groups.

These findings point to specific groups of students for whom resources could be directed through outreach.

Because marginalized/minoritized characteristics rarely occur in isolation, we used a novel approach to examine the degree to which an aggregate score predicted food insecurity and homelessness. Results showed that the more marginalized/minoritized characteristics students endorsed, the higher the likelihood of food and housing insecurity, regardless of whether each individual factor was a predictor of insecurity. The amount of variance accounted for by the score was small, however, so other factors and interactions among demographic factors must be considered in future studies. Predictors in our study were all individual-level contributors. In future studies, systemic risks (e.g., availability of affordable housing, racism) and sociopolitical risks (e.g., federal policies related to SNAP benefits) should be included in the aggregate score.

Finally, our study sheds light on students' use of resources. Most students who might qualify for services did not use them. This was especially true for students who had been homeless. Even students who took advantage of resources were still vulnerable. To illustrate, more than one third of students who received SNAP benefits were food insecure despite access to that benefit. Most students were aware of the campus food pantry, but few used it, possibly due the stigma related to food insecurity and the use of assistance. A goal for future studies is to ask students what resources they would use so student affairs professionals can focus on normalizing and facilitating use of those resources and services.

We examined students' experiences at a single point in time. Learning how food insecurity and homelessness develop and exploring the fluidity of these experiences over time will be critical to inform effective prevention. The scale and complexity of

student food and housing insecurities demands a multifaceted solution with all stakeholders contributing to the resolution. Student affairs professionals are uniquely situated for a leadership role in this effort. At our university, a steering committee of faculty, staff across units (e.g., Student Ombuds, Dining, Housing, Wellness, Diversity, Health), and graduate students and undergraduates with relevant lived experiences has been active since release of the survey findings with the objectives (a) to increase awareness of the issue, (b) to lower stigma associated with poverty and using resources, and (c) to generate solutions. We have led initiatives such as influencing University Housing to shift their policy and remain open all year; launching a media campaign to normalize use of resources ("You don't have to choose"); moving the food pantry from a basement to a highly visible location in the center of campus; developing an online hub of resources; supporting a new student coalition on basic needs security; and assisting in the launch of a meal donation program. Given particular risks associated with LGBTQ status, we plan to partner with the campus and community LGBT centers to identify approaches to reducing basic needs insecurity for that population, with the recognition of wide individual differences among students on the queer spectrum. Because limited housing is a particular concern, we are developing a host home program for short-term housing and a set of strategies for emergency housing (e.g., partnerships with hotels for vouchers). Our aspirational goals are for every staff and faculty member to be knowledgeable about resources so that students experience no wrong door when they seek assistance and to have a team of navigators who assist students on the cusp of unmet basic needs through compassionate case management. We attribute the steering committee's progress thus far

to our decision to begin by conducting the student survey and securing the support of upper-level administrators who serve as advisors to the steering committee. The data provided a compelling basis for quick action. We will evaluate the impact of these initiatives via qualitative data from students who have

received services and readministration of the student survey every 3 to 4 years.

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