Inequities in Chronic Food Insecurity Among CSUF College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Background and objective: Food insecurity can be detrimental to the health and academic performance of college students. The pandemic caused food insecurity rates to increase. While many people were no longer food insecure a year later, little is known about long-term food insecurity among students during the pandemic and those most at risk. To determine which students were more likely to experience chronic food insecurity, I examined the association between chronic food insecurity and students’ sociodemographic characteristics.

Methods: Students (n=332) from California State University, Fullerton responded to an online survey conducted at the beginning of the pandemic (June to July 2020) and a year later (March to April 2021). Food insecurity at 3 time points (1 year before March 2020, March-June 2020, and January-April 2021) was assessed using the validated USDA 10-item Adult Household Food Security Scale. If students reported food insecurity 2 or more times, they were considered to be chronically food insecure. Chi-square tests determined the association of chronic food insecurity with each of the following sociodemographic measures: race/ethnicity, Pell grant status, first-generation college student status, low-income, parental status, and college level (undergraduate/graduate).

Results: Nearly 20% of students reported being chronically food insecure. Black (29.2%), Hispanic (20.9%) and Middle Eastern/North African students (21.4%) were more likely to report chronic food insecurity compared to White (16.7%) and Asian (14.7%) students. Being a first-generation college student, having children, and receiving the Pell grant were each significantly associated with an increased risk of experiencing chronic food insecurity.

Conclusion: Campus-wide efforts to provide food assistance to college students exist. However, more may need to be done to ensure that the most vulnerable students are aware of and receive the assistance that exists both on and off campuses.