

No Food for Thought: Insights on Basic Needs Insecurities and Mental Health Challenges from Trellis' Fall 2020 Student Financial Wellness Survey

Allyson Cornett, CPH, MPH and Carla Fletcher, MS
March 2022

Recommended Citation: Cornett, A., & Fletcher, C. (2022). *No food for thought: Insights on basic needs insecurities and mental health challenges from Trellis' Fall 2020 Student Financial Wellness Survey*. Trellis Company.

College students are unable to meet their basic needs (food, housing, utilities, etc.) at greater rates than the general adult population of the United States.¹ When students lack enough to eat and/or are unable to secure safe, stable housing, they often face tolls to their psychological and physical health. Additionally, compared to peers who are basic needs secure, students struggling with basic needs insecurities often encounter adverse academic outcomes, including poor grades, enrollment disruptions, academic dismissal, or suspension, etc.^{2,3}

Even in a non-pandemic academic setting, these challenges can severely complicate a student's ability to focus on schoolwork and being academically successful.⁴ Unfortunately, research suggests the pandemic has exacerbated instances of basic needs insecurity among college students, especially among vulnerable groups.⁵

This brief examines data from 20,095 students with one or more forms of basic needs insecurity (BNI) (i.e., food insecurity, housing insecurity, homelessness) from Trellis' Fall 2020 Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) with a special lens on their mental health (see page 3 for the measures used). With more than one-third of all postsecondary students experiencing mental health challenges before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and many more living with food and housing insecurity, having a full understanding of students' lived experiences during the past year is critical.⁶

Key Findings

- More than half of students were experiencing one or more basic need insecurities at the time of the survey—50 percent of four-year students and 54 percent of two-year students.
- Nearly one in ten students—nine percent—had experienced homelessness, food insecurity, and housing insecurity within the past year (from October/November 2019 to October/November 2020).
- The majority of respondents with BNI reported the COVID-19 outbreak had added to their levels of stress, anxiety, or depression—89 percent at two-year colleges and 92 percent at four-year institutions.
- Respondents with demonstrated basic needs insecurities were more likely to work while enrolled, identify as a first-generation student, be female, and financially support children or other dependents.

¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2018). Food insecurity: Better information could help college students access federal food assistance benefits. Retrieved from: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/696254.pdf>

² Fernandez, C., Webster, J., & Cornett, A. (2019). Studying on empty: A qualitative study of low food security among college students. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Studying-on-Empty.pdf>

³ Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., Scheider, J., Hernandez, A., & Cady, C. (2018). Still hungry and homeless in college. Retrieved from: <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Wisconsin-HOPE-Lab-Still-Hungry-and-Homeless.pdf>

⁴ Goldrick-Rab, S., Baker-Smith, C., Coca, V., Looker, T., & Williams, T. (2019). College and university basic needs insecurity: A national #realcollege survey report. Retrieved from: https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/HOPE_realcollege_National_report_digital.pdf

⁵ Goldrick-Rab, S. (2021). Students are humans first: advancing basic needs security in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success*, 1(1), 3–17. https://doi.org/10.33009/jsoop_ipss129262

⁶ Eisenberg, D., Ketchen Lipson, S., Heinze, J., et al. (2021). The healthy minds study: Fall 2020 data report. Retrieved from: <https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HMS-Fall-2020-National-Data-Report.pdf>



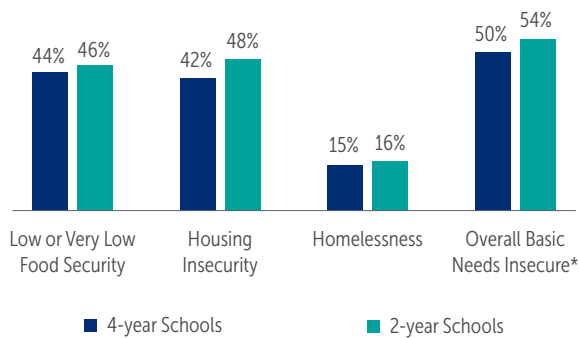


Basic Needs Insecurities (BNI) of Survey Respondents

College students often experience one or more forms of basic needs insecurity (BNI) at a time, whether that be food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness.

In Trellis’ fall 2020 implementation of the Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS), 54 percent of surveyed two-year students experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness. This incidence was slightly lower at four-year institutions, where 50 percent of respondents faced one or more basic needs insecurities. Students with demonstrated BNI were more likely to report certain life circumstances, including: (1) working while enrolled; (2) being a first-generation student; (3) identifying as female; and (4) financially supporting children or other dependents.

Basic Needs Insecurity, by Sector



*Provides a measurement of students experiencing one or more basic needs insecurities.

Post-secondary students with low or very low food security are also at much higher risk of housing insecurity.⁷ In fact, 29 percent of two-year students, and nearly a quarter of four-year respondents, were classified as both food insecure and housing insecure at time of survey administration. More troubling, nine percent indicated they had experienced all three forms—food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness—within the past year (from October/November 2019 to October/November 2020).

Mental Health Impacts of Students with BNI

Not only has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted students’ basic needs insecurities, but also their mental health. While mental health challenges have been present on college campuses long before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic—with more than a third of students meeting the criteria for at least one mental disorder or condition in 2018-2019—the coronavirus pandemic and its surrounding circumstances can potentially worsen existing mental health problems.⁸ In the Fall 2020 SFWS, 89 percent of respondents with BNI at two-year colleges reported the COVID-19 outbreak had added to [their] levels of stress, anxiety, or depression. This was slightly higher at four-year colleges and universities, where 92 percent indicated the pandemic had negatively impacted their mental and emotional health. Mental health problems can have severe consequences on students’ lives, including their energy levels, cognitive ability, relationships with family and friends, and academic performance. While mental health can be challenging for all students, SFWS results suggest certain groups of BNI respondents, such as Black and female students, are particularly at risk.

Conclusion

With such high percentages of students facing mental health, food, and housing-related crises during the ongoing emergency of the pandemic, institutions must make quick interventions to keep these students in school. To better address the needs of these students, colleges and universities can direct students to public assistance programs that can assist with food and housing needs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which was temporarily expanded in January 2021 to allow students who qualify for federal or state work-study programs to qualify automatically. Institutions can also provide students with mental health support, such as access to free or reduced-cost mental health services, medical counseling, mental health teleconferencing, and virtual support groups. Offering these services on-campus within a “one-stop” resource center is an accessible avenue for students, faculty, and staff to receive needed assistance and services.

⁷ Dubick, J., Matthews, B., & Cady, C. (2016). Hunger on campus: The challenge of food insecurity for college students.

Retrieved from: https://studentsagainsthunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Hunger_On_Campus.pdf

⁸ Eisenberg, D., Ketchen Lipson, S., Heinze, J., et al. (2021). The healthy minds study: Fall 2020 data report.

Retrieved from: <https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HMS-Fall-2020-National-Data-Report.pdf>



Measures

To better understand the lived experiences of survey respondents, several scales for measuring basic needs security (i.e., food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness) were incorporated in the instrument.

Food Security

To measure food security within the prior 30 days, a short-form, six-question scale designed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was utilized. This short-form scale has been shown to identify food-insecure individuals and households with high sensitivity and specificity, and minimal bias.⁹ USDA methodology assigns levels of food security to individuals based on how many affirmative responses they give to certain questions. Under the short-form survey, individuals who give 2-4 affirmative responses have “low food security” and individuals who give 5-6 affirmative responses have “very low food security”; both are considered “food insecure.” Respondents with 0-1 affirmative responses are characterized as having “high or marginal food security” or food secure.

Table 1. USDA 30-Day (Short-Form) Food Security Scale

| |
|--|
| The food that I bought just didn't last and I didn't have money to get more (Often, Sometimes, Never True) |
| I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals (Often, Sometimes, Never True) |
| In the last 30 days, did you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes, No) |
| [If answered Yes to previous question] How many days did this happen? |
| In the last 30 days, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes, No) |
| In the last 30 days, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough food? (Yes, No) |

Housing Security and Homelessness

The Student Financial Wellness Survey also incorporates housing security and homelessness measurements commonly used by other researchers studying basic needs security. Housing insecurity is characterized by leading experts in collegiate basic needs as, “a broad set of housing challenges that prevent someone from having a safe, affordable, and consistent place to live.” For the purposes of this survey, homelessness, the most extreme expression of housing insecurity, is defined as, “a person without a fixed, regular, and adequate place to live”.¹⁰ Respondents were categorized as ‘Housing Insecure’ if they answered “True” to any of the six housing insecurity questions; they were classified as ‘Homeless’ if they answered ‘Yes’ and/or ‘True’ to any of the specific questions on homelessness.

Table 2. Housing Security Scale*

| | |
|---|--|
| I had difficulty paying for my rent (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I didn't pay the full amount of my rent (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I had difficulty paying the full amount of a gas, oil, or electricity bill (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I moved 3 or more times (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I lived with others beyond the expected capacity of my house or apartment (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I moved in with other people due to financial problems (True, False, I don't know) | |
| Homelessness Scale* | |
| Since starting college, have you ever been homeless? (Yes, No, I don't know) | |
| I was thrown out of my home (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I was evicted from my home (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I stayed in a shelter (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I stayed in an abandoned building (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I didn't know where I would sleep at night (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I didn't have a home (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I temporarily stayed with a relative, friend, or couch surfed while I looked for housing (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I slept in an outdoor location such as a street, sidewalk, or alley, bus or train stop (True, False, I don't know) | |
| I slept in a closed area/space not meant for human habitation such as a car or truck, van, RV, or camper, encampment or tent, or unconverted garage, attic, or basement (True, False, I don't know) | |

⁹ United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). (2021). What is food security? <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement.aspx>

¹⁰ Baker-Smith, C., Coca, V., Goldrick-Rab, S., Looker, E., Richardson, B., & Williams, T. (2020). #RealCollege 2020: Five years of evidence on campus basic needs insecurity. https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019_RealCollege_Survey_Report.pdf



About the Data/Methodology

The Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) is a self-reported, online survey that seeks to document the well-being and student success indicators of post-secondary students across the nation. While not nationally representative, responses were weighted to reflect the total student composition at participating institutions. The survey opened on October 19, 2020

and closed on November 19, 2020. Sixty-two colleges and universities participated in the survey – 46 two-year institutions, 12 public four-year institutions, and 4 not-for-profit private four-year institutions. A total of 391,740 undergraduate students were invited to take the survey, of whom 37,936 responded, yielding a 9.7 percent response rate.

Recent Trellis Research publications

Student Financial Wellness Survey Report: Fall 2020

Webster, J., Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., & Knaff, C. (2021). Student financial wellness survey report: Fall 2020. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SFWS-Report-Fall-2020.pdf>

State of Student Aid in Texas

Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., & Webster, J. (2021). State of student aid and higher education in Texas. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SOSA-2021.pdf>

Studying on Empty: A Qualitative Study of Low Food Security Among College Students

Fernandez, C., Webster, J., & Cornett, A. (2019). Studying on Empty: A Qualitative Study of Low Food Security Among College Students. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Studying-on-Empty.pdf>

Longitudinal Fluidity in Collegiate Food Security: Disruptions, Restorations, and its Drivers

Cornett, A., & Webster, J. (2020). Longitudinal Fluidity in Collegiate Food Security: Disruptions, Restorations, and its Drivers. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Research-Brief_FSS_Longitudinal-Fluidity.pdf

About Trellis Company and Trellis Research Services

Trellis Company ([trelliscompany.org](https://www.trelliscompany.org)) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation focused on helping people leverage the power of post-secondary education and learning to improve their quality of life and the communities where they live.

Trellis Research ([trelliscompany.org/research](https://www.trelliscompany.org/research)) provides colleges and policymakers insight into student success through the lens of higher education affordability. With more than three decades of experience studying key issues such as student debt, student loan counseling, and the financial barriers to attainment, our research team explores the roles of personal finance, financial literacy, and financial aid in higher education.

Interested in collaborations or need research expertise? Trellis Research welcomes opportunities to inform policymakers and help organizations address their analytical needs. For more information, please contact Trellis Research at Trellisresearch@trelliscompany.org or visit us on Twitter ([@TrellisResearch](https://twitter.com/TrellisResearch)).

The Student Financial Wellness Survey is a free national survey offered by Trellis Company that explores the connections between student finances, academic success, and more. Interested in participating in the Fall 2022 implementation of SFWS? Learn more here: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/research/trellis-company-student-financial-wellness-survey/>

Newsletter Subscription

Interested in receiving our monthly newsletter, *Trellis Research News: Data, Trends, and Insights*, via email? Subscribe here: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/research/data-trends-insights/>