

Basic Needs Insecurities among College Students at Minority-Serving Institutions

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Key Findings

- Almost two-thirds of students at HBCUs, PBIs, and HSIs had experienced basic needs insecurities (i.e., food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness) while in college.
- Nearly half (44 percent) of surveyed students at participating minority-serving institutions were food insecure.
- Eleven percent had faced all three forms of basic needs insecurity within the past year (from October/November 2020 to October/November 2021).
- Respondents with basic needs insecurities were more likely to be female, identify as a first-generation student, and indicate they were likely suffering from anxiety and/or depressed mood.

It is well documented that college students struggle to maintain access to basic needs—such as food, housing, technology, and transportation—at alarmingly high rates compared to the general adult population in the United States.ⁱ In fact, 43 percent of undergraduate students were food insecure in the Trellis’ Fall 2021 Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS).ⁱⁱ

Research suggests students with basic needs insecurities are more likely to encounter negative academic, physical, mental, and social outcomes, including (but not limited to) lower GPAs, a higher risk of obesity, and increased likelihood of mental health challenges, including stress, depressed mood, and anxiety.^{iii, iv}

These challenges, and the overall prevalence of basic needs insecurity, are more pronounced among certain groups of historically marginalized students, including students of color at traditionally under-resourced Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs)¹, and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs)². While minority-serving institutions (MSIs) provide upward mobility for millions of students from low-income families and communities of color, these institutions face persistent funding inequities when compared to non-MSIs; these inequities can threaten MSIs ability to holistically support their students’ academic success, health, and mental/physical wellbeing, especially during a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic.

This brief examines SFWS data from 14,117 students attending 26 MSIs from Trellis’ Fall 2021 Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS)—including 19 HSIs; five HBCUs; and three PBIs.³ With nearly two-thirds of students from these MSIs facing one or more forms of basic needs insecurity (i.e., food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness), it is critical for college administrators, the broader campus community, and policymakers to have a full understanding of these students’ lived experiences.

¹ Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs) are colleges and universities where “undergraduate students who identify as Black make up at least 40 percent of total enrollment and students who identify as low-income and/or first-generation college students make up at least 30 percent of total enrollment.”

² Hispanic Serving Institutions are “colleges and universities [where] undergraduate students who identify as Hispanic make up at least 25 percent of total enrollment.”

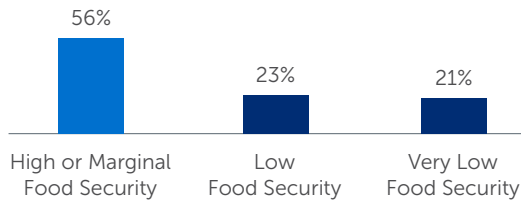
³ One of these institutions is considered both a HBCU and HSI, resulting in a total of 27 classifications.



Food Insecurity

Forty-four percent of students at participating MSIs (n=11,362) exhibited signs of low food security (27 percent) or, even more concerning, very low food security (21 percent) in the past 30 days from time of administration.⁴

Q84-89: USDA Food Security Scale (30-Day)



The most common expression of food insecurity among surveyed students at MSIs was the inability to eat balanced meals, with 45 percent indicating they often or sometimes were unable to do so in the past 30 days. Previous studies conducted by Trellis and others (see [Studying on Empty](#)) have not only connected food insecurity to poor health outcomes, but also to students' mental health, academic performance, and their overall ability to be successful in college.^{vii}

In SFWS, respondents with low or very low food security were more likely to report certain demographics and hardships compared to their food secure peers. Higher percentages of food insecure students at HBCUs, PBIs, and HSIs identified as female, a first-generation college student, were likely experiencing at least one mental health challenge, and reported financial challenges while enrolled at higher rates.

Housing Insecurity & Homelessness

Many students struggle with housing insecurity, and its most extreme form, homelessness, while enrolled in college. Housing insecurity encompasses a wide range of challenges, including difficulty paying for rent and utilities (in part or in full), needing to move frequently, exceeding the capacity of a dwelling, and more.

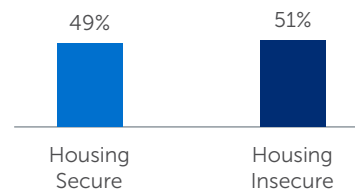
Fifty-one percent of respondents attending MSIs were housing insecure in the prior 12 months; these students were more likely to experience housing insecurity and homelessness than peers at non-MSIs.

Homelessness is a significant obstacle to students achieving their full academic potential. The persistent stigma and other issues surrounding homelessness can result in students feeling like they do not belong and/

or will not succeed in college.^{viii} At participating minority-serving colleges and universities, only five percent specifically identified as homeless, but 16 percent indicated homelessness since starting college or within the 12 months prior (through their survey responses).

Overall Basic Needs Insecurity

Q93-98: Housing Security Scale



Unfortunately, college students frequently experience one or more forms of basic needs insecurity at a time, whether that be food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness.

In the Fall 2021 implementation of the Student Financial Wellness Survey, 63 percent of students attending HBCUs, PBIs, and HSIs experienced a combination of food insecurity, housing insecurity, and/or homelessness. Distressingly, 11 percent of these students reported facing all three conditions.

Conclusion

While there is a high prevalence of basic needs insecurity among college students, generally, students of color attending MSIs are at even greater risk of experiencing these conditions. To help these students meet their needs and reach their full academic potential, colleges and higher education policymakers can affirm a "student-first" culture by focusing on:

1. Supporting students' needs, including prioritizing schedules that accommodate working students and student-parents, as well as offering high impact interventions (e.g., eight-week minimesters, child-care services, etc.).
2. Watching for signs of poverty on campus (i.e., training campus employees to spot signs of food/basic needs insecurity, like students living in cars or showering on campus).
3. Designating space on campus to provide students with food pantries and resource centers; and destigmatizing poverty by ensuring that these resources are open access, in prominent locations,

⁴ Low food security is defined as "reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet [with] little or no indication of reduced food intake," while very low food security consists of "multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake." Very low food security also tends to be more persistent and longer lasting than low food security.



and well publicized (see the Trellis brief on food pantry awareness and utilization, "[Hungry Minds](#)," for more).

4. Connecting students to public benefit services (e.g., SNAP, WIC, TANF) and assisting with relevant application(s).
5. Increasing emergency aid available to students to help overcome temporary financial obstacles, like car repairs, gaps in daycare coverage, rent payments, and utility bill spikes.
6. Advocating for the permanent expansion of SNAP eligibility to include those who are (1) eligible to participate in federal or state work study programs during the regular academic year; and/or (2) have an expected family contribution (EFC) of zero dollars for the academic year.

Without direct action, the circumstances of basic needs insecure students are unlikely to improve in the near future. For students experiencing basic needs insecurity, prompt intervention is needed to not only keep them enrolled, but to create an environment where they can achieve their full academic potential.

Measures

Housing Security and Homelessness

The Student Financial Wellness Survey incorporates standard housing security and homelessness measurements commonly used by other researchers studying basic needs security to ensure data validity and facilitate comparisons with findings in prior research.

Housing Security			
	True	False	I don't know
I had difficulty paying for my rent.			
I didn't pay the full amount of my rent.			
I had difficulty paying the full amount of a gas, oil, or electricity bill.			
I moved 3 or more times.			
I lived with others beyond the expected capacity of my house or apartment.			
I moved in with other people due to financial problems.			

Since starting college, have you ever been homeless?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Homelessness			
	True	False	I don't know
I was thrown out or forced out of my home.			
I was evicted from my home.			
I stayed in a shelter, transitional housing, or independent living program.			
I stayed in an abandoned building.			
I didn't know where I would sleep at night.			
I didn't have a home.			
I temporarily stayed with a relative, friend, or couch surfed while I looked for housing.			
I slept in an outdoor location such as a street, sidewalk, or alley, bus or train stop.			

Food Security

To measure food security within the prior 30 days, a short-form, six-question scale designed by the USDA was utilized.^{ix} This short-form scale has been shown to identify food-insecure individuals and households with high sensitivity and specificity, and minimal bias. 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 don't know]
I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals [Often, Sometimes, Never true, I don't know]
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, I don't know]
[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, I don't know]
In the last 30 days, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough food? [Yes, No, I don't know]



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 25, 2021 and closed on November 15, 2021. One hundred four (104) institutions participated in the survey—71 two-year colleges, 20 public four-years, and 13 private not-for-profit four-years. A total of 715,545 undergraduate students were invited to take the survey, of whom 63,751 responded, yielding a 9.0 percent response rate.

Recent Trellis Research publications

Hungry minds: Student awareness and use of food pantries at 91 colleges and universities

Cornett, A. (2022). Hungry minds: Student awareness and use of food pantries at 91 colleges and universities. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/71646-Research-Brief-MAY2022_FINAL.pdf

No food for thought: Insights on basic needs insecurities and mental health challenges from Trellis' Fall 2020 Student Financial Wellness Survey

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. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/portfolio-items/no-food-for-thought-insights-on-basic-needs-insecurities-and-mental-health-challenges/>

State of student aid and higher education in Texas.

Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., & Webster, J. (2022). State of student aid and higher education in Texas. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SOSA-2022.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>

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 2023 implementation of SFWS? Learn more here: www.trelliscompany.org/SFWS-get-started

Newsletter Subscription

Interested in receiving our monthly newsletter, Trellis Research News: Data, Trends, and Insights, via email?

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¹ USDA. (2022). Food security status of U.S. households in 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/key-statistics-graphics>

² Webster, J., Cornett, A., Niznik, A., Knaff, C., & Gardner, T. (2022). Unpublished manuscript.

³ Leung, C. W., Farooqui, S., Wolfson, J. A., & Cohen, A. J. (2021). Understanding the cumulative burden of basic needs insecurities: Associations with health and academic achievement among college students. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 35(2), 275-278.

⁴ Cornett, A. & Fletcher, C. (2022). The impacts of COVID-19 on the experiences of students with basic needs insecurity: Evidence from a national survey. *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, 51(1), Article 1. <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/cgi/article=1780>, <https://doi.org/10.55504/0884-9153.1780>

⁵ Espinosa, L., Kelchen, R., Taylor, M. (2018). Minority serving institutions as engines of upward mobility. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/MSIs-as-Engines-of-Upward-Mobility.pdf>

⁶ Dahl, S., Strayhorn, T. Reid Jr., M. Coca, V., & Goldrick-Rab, S. (2022). Basic needs insecurity at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A #RealCollegeHBCU report.

⁷ Fernandez, C., Webster, J., & Cornett, A. (2019). Studying on empty: A qualitative study of low food security among college students.

<https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Studying-on-Empty.pdf>.

⁸ Kruevelis, M. (2019, November). "I know what's at stake" How homelessness impacts college success in New York City. *Young Invincibles*.

<https://younginvincibles.org/i-know-whats-at-stake-how-homelessness-impacts-college-success-in-new-york-city/>

⁹ United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). (2021b). What is food security?

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