

# Taking a Bite Out of Healthy Living: The Impacts of Food Insecurity on Post-Secondary Students

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## Abstract

Food security is an important social determinant of health that impacts physical and mental wellbeing. Unfortunately, students are prone to food insecurity due to unique financial constraints. This paper will review factors contributing to food insecurity in students, the impact of food insecurity, and identify potential solutions.

## Introduction

Food security is defined as when “people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” [1]. Food is a physiological need for basic human functioning and is not only considered a human right but is also an important social determinant of health [2]. There is a strong body of evidence supporting the relationship between food and well-being. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, without physiologic fulfilment from sufficient food, individuals cannot be well enough to attain higher functions such as maintaining relationships and attaining self-actualization [3]. Unfortunately, in our society, food insecurity is all too common, affecting approximately 5 million Canadians in 2020 alone. Food insecurity is most prevalent in low-income households, elderly populations, and single parent families. It also has been linked to adverse health outcomes such as hypertension, diabetes, and obesity [2].

One population that is often overlooked and particularly vulnerable to food insecurity is post-secondary students [4]. In a study conducted by Feige and Yen, 2021, it was found that financial strain and worry over student debt is a common concern for many Canadian students [4]. In addition to making tuition payments, there are also potential costs of books, transportation, and rent which can be difficult for students to afford with limited financial income and government loans. While food insecurity experienced by post-secondary students is a large and complex concern, there is a lack of research available on the prevalence of food insecurity in Canadian students [5]. The Canadian government annually administers the Canadian Community Health Survey which measures household food insecurity [6]. While the data collected provides insight on fluctuations in food insecurity by geographical regions, age groups, and sex, there are no further filters to better understand how students specifically are affected by this issue [6]. Thus, there is an urgent need for further research to elucidate the national prevalence of food insecurity in post-secondary students and better support those in need.

## Factors Contributing to Food Insecurity in Post-secondary Students

Post-secondary students are a population that is under unique financial constraints. Beyond the rising cost of living in Canada [7],

many students face an additional barrier – choosing not to maintain a job while in full-time studies. Only about half of Canadian undergraduate university students work [8], and those that do not are limited by strict budgets informed by student loans or summer income. With rising costs of food [9], many students must choose between either going deeper into debt or limiting their food purchases to cheaper, less healthy alternatives, or less food in general. Furthermore, the busy schedule of university classes and extracurricular activities can create additional obstacles, including insufficient time to access, prepare, and consume food, as well as limited access to fresh food. Many student housing districts have limited walkable access to groceries stores [10], leaving students with inadequate options to purchase groceries.

### **Impact of Food Insecurity on Post-secondary Students**

Having restricted access to food has extensive effects on post-secondary students. It has been established that inadequate access to nutritious food has adverse effects on academic performance [11]. Cheaper options are usually less nutritious, and an inadequate diet also puts students at risk of malnourishment and obesity [12]. Furthermore, food insecurity predisposes individuals to development of depression and anxiety [13]. Beyond this, post-secondary education is often the first period in many young adults' lives when they live independently. Being able to access affordable, healthy food is needed to inform lifelong cooking and eating habits [14].

### **Proposed Solutions**

The multifactorial impact of food insecurity on students highlights the need for effective and long-term solutions. One of the most common approaches to addressing food insecurity

on campuses is the implementation of food pantries [15]. Food pantries aim to increase accessibility and reduce the financial barrier to accessing food. However, there are flaws in the food pantry model for post-secondary students. Many initiatives are run by student organizations which incur high degrees of leadership turnover and changes in availability based on the motivation of the student organization [15]. There may also be stigma associated with visiting food pantries run by peers or colleagues. Some institutions also distribute a list of resources for food assistance programs on their website. While it is helpful to have available resources, there needs to be more of an onus on post-secondary institutions and government to have a more coordinated response.

The 2021 National Student Food Insecurity Report outlines recommendations for addressing food insecurity at Canadian post-secondary institutions [16]. It was found that 40.3% of survey respondents felt that grocery gift cards would assist with increasing affordability of groceries, promoting autonomy in purchasing food of their choosing, and removing the stigma associated with accessing food banks [16]. Additionally, food literacy can also be encouraged through educational workshops on creating budgets, learning about nutrition, and cooking easy meals. On a policy level, 21.6% of respondents stated the desire for the provincial or federal government to provide tuition support to ease the financial burden on students and help with allocating more money towards meals [16].

### **Conclusion**

Food insecurity is a pervasive and often overlooked concern in post-secondary students, a particularly vulnerable population. Changes should be implemented at a local level at post-secondary institutions as well as on a policy level to create meaningful change.

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