

The Effects of Food Insecurity on College Students

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Abstract

Food insecurity (FI) relating to college students has been a subject that has bound arguments over cause and effect to one particular understanding. Discourse over legislation has become fundamental in creating steps that are focused on solving the effects of FI on college students relating to a micro-level. Food insecurity must first be solved on a small scale to be effective on larger scales. The importance of finding new ways to stop the spread of FI lies in understanding how hunger can affect students. Realistically, for students to function with high cognitive ability, the body must obtain nutrients only available through eating food, with healthy food being the most useful for hungry organs like the brain. The cost of nutrition is especially important for college students who must balance budgets by juggling school, rent, food, and lifestyle choices among other things. This paper explores the importance of students, and general audience members alike, understanding the steps associated with mitigating the effects of food insecurity by creating activism that involves the members of local communities and thus effectively creating positive change that anyone can become a part of.

Contemporary slam poet, Priya, conveys important emotional characteristics arising from food insecurity. In “Let’s All Stop World Hunger,” Priya is a slam poet who has challenged audiences to contemplate surreal issues such as the effects of food insecurity on future generations. Priya’s artistic flare provides a grim reality with a glimmer of hope about food insecurity. Priya provides exigence through being an adult and experiencing life where everyone is affected either directly or indirectly by that through friends’ family or acquaintances who lack resources. In “Let’s All Stop World Hunger,” Priya states:

Hearts are torn.
When there’s no food to eat.
No shelter nor heat.
No food nor meat.
All they can do is wait.
It was not written in their fate.
But we’re not late.
We can get things straight
Their life holds a weight.

Priya assigns a close correlation to food insecurity and the ability for students to receive proper resource allocation by creating an interesting emotional dynamic allowing audiences to understand the emotional connection to the reality of lacking resources, especially when talking about resources necessary to live. As an academic writing poetry on the effects of resource insufficiencies Priya paints a hopeful opportunity for the potential to reverse aspects of these circumstances for victims. Supplemental assistance is a key contributor when discussing actions that can alleviate food insecurity (FI); thus, research looking into the effects of food insecurity emphasises the importance of keeping an open mind to when helping students in need. College students face a myriad of problems daily; so, when it comes to juggling life, having several responsibilities often bring up challenges. At the most basic level food insecurity (FI) can force students to become less productive

in school. Consequently, students who do not face resource instability especially relating to food insecurity often take the tribulations like the effects of FI and the outcomes of dealing with deficiencies for granted because of not experiencing such circumstances firsthand. Food insecurity has not been resolved because society needs to work collectively rather than individually. Stereotyping of students creates many problems because communities become more separated. Students are part of a growing population contributing to America's future. Recognizing the tribulations that many students face, especially relating to food insecurity, allow community members to build steps to mitigate the issues that are ever present amongst college campus.

Defining food insecurity for college students is complex because campuses are made up of a diverse population and spectrums of age, gender, race, sex, and ethnicity. Several sources that have been investigated define food insecurity in an abstract manner. Enacting a moldable definition allows the issues surrounding food instability to remain both demanding for relevant and the future fluid definitions allow for audience interpretation and discussion. Regan et al., authors of "Food Insecurity Among College Students," claim that food insecurity broadly defined captures an individual's inability to purchase food based on economic stability (Regan et al. p. 4). Realistically this definition brings up more questions than answers because many people who are interested in learning more about solving FI are then facing the perplexities associated with understanding how food insecurity relates to economic instability. Regan et al. also specified economic insecurity stating, "economic insecurity, broadly defined, refers to the economic risk and unpredictable events (such as job loss, income instability, or illness) that can derail families' and individuals' financial stability" (Regan et al. pp.1-2). For years, the stereotype of college students has been depicted by Ramen noodle diets, saltine crackers, Ball Park hot dogs, and the list goes on. The tie between economic instability and FI shows how important working definitions are when understanding how food insecurity affects college students. The stereotype on students is outdated and downplays the effects of FI. Consequently, with a push for students to eat healthier, and as more people become aware of the positive benefits of eating nutritious food, trying to live a healthy life is not conducive to students' budgets. College students and families, especially those below the poverty line, must rely on the supplemental resources available, most being SNAP benefits, also known as, supplemental nutrition assistance program. Mulik & Hanyes-Maslow, authors of "The Affordability of My Plate: An Analysis of SNAP Benefits and the Actual Cost of Eating According to the Dietary Guidelines," show the importance of factchecking information that is either outdated or lacking proper research regarding the cost effectiveness of these programs. SNAP goes hand and hand with My Plate, a government-regulated dietary guideline. My Plate recommends that fruits and vegetables make up half of every meal, along with dairy, complex carbohydrates, and other sources of protein. Unfortunately, these sources of nutrition come at a cost. Families below the poverty line face egregious prices associated with following federal recommendations. The authors' analysis states, "The additional costs needed on an individual basis was the largest for boys aged 12–17 years (\$75/mo) and men aged 18–50 years (\$72/mo), because they consumed the largest quantity of food compared with all other gender and age groups" (Mulik et. Al. p. 6). This analysis shows that out of pocket costs associated with SNAP benefits are gender specific, but any contributing factor associated with food insecurity should be focused on mitigating FI rather than eliminating it entirely. Food insecurity is a problem stemming from multiple facets; thus, local communities need to focus resources appropriately to support college students, as well as other members of society.

Although some problems associated with SNAP are gender specific, all contributing factors work towards allowing students and community members alike to create community driven activism, small-scale actions made by people just like fellow students. These steps help to eliminate some of the most drastic effects cause by FI by allowing positive actions to gain momentum little by

little. Issues associated with food insecurity have snowballed because of the lack of attention; consequently, many contributing factors that will be discussed have spun out of control. One of best ways of starting to chip away student's food insecurity deals with activism on a local level. Laska et al., authors of "Perspective Food Insecurity Among College Students: An Analysis of US State Legislation Through 2020," have demonstrated important ways to eliminate the effects of food insecurity by isolation. The authors investigated state and federal legislative efforts that the communication stakeholders (colleges, college students, families, and state and federal government) have implemented when working with one another to create hunger-free environments. The idea of a "hunger-free campus" was first adopted by the state of California, with efforts focused on creating sanctuaries, or safe zones that have been effective in isolating the effects of food insecurity on college campuses. California's legislation has made clear three pertinent ideas: 1) colleges must provide a food pantry program that can be used for regular distribution of food at campuses; 2) colleges must provide a meal-sharing program where students can donate nonperishables; 3) campuses must provide information for governmental assistance programs for students to apply to. Keeping this understanding in mind, the costs associated with such infrastructure can seem overwhelming but many would argue that the price is worth it. All students contribute to America's future; thus, investing in programs like those implemented by California are necessary to continue the fight against food insecurity on campus. The authors agree, claiming, "states have and should, in the authors' opinion, continue to play a key role addressing college FI through legislation to alleviate hunger and promote federal nutrition assistance" (Laska et al. p. 6). Efforts made must be collaborative in order to solve FI starting at a local level. Proposals that investigate the importance of community engagement are more conducive to cost-effective guidelines that can work toward solving food insecurity. Therefore, allowing stakeholders, or community members, to become involved not only builds stronger communities but can be a key factor in eliminating the effects of FI.

California is a great example of how communities can work together to incorporate stakeholder activism. Becoming a part of the community action involved in solving FI allows students to have additional support when reaching to achieve their academic goals. Interestingly, problems associated with college food insecurity have some historical involvement, meaning that students who come to school hungry and lacking resources might be directly tied into the historical problems associated with familial poverty. A recent study by Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, and Hernandez (2017) found that 67.0% of students experience some degree of food insecurity, with former foster youth and students with children among those most likely to experience this challenge" (Wood et. al. p. 1). Many students who faced past traumatic experience such as a lack of maternal support fall under categories that need more resources than other students. Allocation of resources alleviates strong counter arguments that are centered in costs associated with local projects like hunger-free campuses. Setting up tiers of supplemental assistance allows students to receive just the right amount of support and saves other resources for those students who are in dire need. It may seem callus to categorize students' needs based on support received out of school; however, creating an imperfect model leads to figuring out the smaller kinks later down the road.

The effects of food insecurity relating to mental health is a subjective experience; inevitably these efforts lead to involuntary setbacks that food insecure students face. These problems can stem from hungry organs like the brain not receiving proper nutrition. Anxiety and other mental health related illnesses have become an epidemic across America. Interesting enough many aspects associated with food insecurity tie into other problems like mental health. With this being the case, helping to solve food insecurity or rather mitigating issues around food insecurity creates positions for mental illness to become less prevalent. Wood et al., authors of "Experiences With 'Acute' Food Insecurity Among College Students," argue, "Exposure to food insecurities is associated with

unhealthy eating, an increased likelihood of chronic illness, and anxiety and stress” (Wood et. Al. p. 1). This contribution is interesting because it adds an important facet describing whether students are facing chronic or acute food insecurity relating to mental illness. Realistically this connection creates a dilemma because a student’s emotional stability goes hand and hand with problems being faced inside and especially outside of school. When defining chronic versus acute food insecurity, there are categorical nuances which determine the severity of each instance; these categories especially relate to timeliness. Specifically, when relating this topic to the present day; COVID-19 is a big contributor to acute food insecurity; this is because of the timeliness in which students are facing economic downfalls associated with instability. Research from Wood et al. shows that 12.3% of community college students faced food insecurity before the Coronavirus. This only deals with part of the issue. Students who have been facing FI because of past traumatic experiences are contributing factors to furthering research into other issues. Investigating issues surrounding FI, such as a lack of a familial support, can help to determine the long-term effects of FI, especially relating to mental illness on campuses.

Chronic versus acute food insecurity is best defined by Marissa Sassi, author of *Understanding Food Insecurity*. Sassi defines acute food insecurity relating to rapid traumatic disasters, whereas chronic food insecurity shows much longer-term effects. One quote that helps to shed light on acute food insecurity states, “This type of food insecurity can be overcome using the long-term development measures normally introduced to address poverty, including interventions aimed at improving education, access to productive resources, especially credit, and access to food to enable the chronically food insecure to increase their productive capacity” (Sassi p. 23). This quote actively defines the issues surrounding chronic food insecurity because most of the definitive solutions proposed are time-consuming and are associated with correcting long-term afflictions by improving systemic programs like education and the productive capacity for food share programs. Whereas acute food insecurity, mainly dealing with natural disasters, is solved through governmental assistance; however, intervention is often centered on short-term programs in which mitigation can lead to students becoming much healthier over a shorter period of time. The main difference, and a lot of the substantial issues associated with long term food insecurity, are the many other co-factors. Circumstances like economic stability and mental illness share a twisted relationship with food insecurity because both sources of anguish feed off one another; therefore, it is important to explore how chronic food instability can be dictated and affected by other aspects associated with the lack of.

Throughout the research discussed, the cause-and-effect relationship between FI and poverty affecting other aspects of student life is a reoccurring problem that needs mitigation. Positive effects can be accomplished if audience members understand that poverty comes in many forms. The main goal of solving food insecurity is starting on a small scale, effectively creating rhetorical baby steps that can significantly tackle FI on local levels. Community outreach programs should focus on resources relating to economic disparity rather than just throwing money at issues associated with FI. Creating an important foundation in building efficient food pantries, hunger-free campuses, and donation programs all have been proven to be effective in helping students. Before throwing money at FI the benefits of asking neighbors and colleges to work together creates stakeholder relationships. When creating local hunger-free zones that depend on donations of time and energy, community members investing in the health of students inevitably saves money, which can be effective in the short term. When problems associated with acute food insecurity come into play, local jurisdictions will be more financially equipped to handle these issues; this is true especially when isolating the problem and using the money saved to eliminate acute FI relating to unpredictable disasters. Inevitably these efforts may require investments of money; but establishing a baseline and allowing students to become involved directly ties into mitigating the effects of food

insecurity on campus in the most cost-effective manner. Awareness, as well as community members working together, saves money and allows for more people to become involved in helping college students.

The collaborative efforts of communities like Colorado Springs need to be the driving force behind solving food insecurity. Community members involved must focus on creating opportunities for college students to succeed. Yes, that means that a lot of time energy and money will go investing in programs; but these are investments to improve the futures of young people seeking post-secondary education. This also means that America is valuing students' lives more than materialistic variables, like money. The age-old stereotype of a college student Ramen noodle diet is changing; there are more students who are inclined to live a healthy life, as the futures of America the duty becomes a community effort to empower college students to become healthier and to live a more sustainable life for all who are on a budget. There must be support from fundraising efforts and individuals directly involved which will create interwoven relationships between college communities and the members of their local community who are effected, thus helping to establish successful environments for students. Community members will be the forerunners for promoting action to live in a better America. Because problems associated with food insecurity are so vast, it is important to work toward small goals, eventually working up to creating change on a large-scale. Everyone has a role in shifting the future from past discrepancies that has left American college students behind. Collectively, local areas must take a stand; working together and helping neighbors will reduce food insecurity. Change must start with small steps.

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