

# One in three college students is food insecure in the United States

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Since the onset of the pandemic, food insecurity has skyrocketed throughout the United States. One of the hardest hit segments of the population has been students in higher education. Food insecurity now affects one-in-three college students.

According to a survey conducted during the fall 2020 semester from Chegg.org, the research and advocacy arm of the course materials and services company Chegg, nearly one third (29 percent) of students have missed a meal at least once a week since the beginning of the pandemic. In addition, more than half of all students (52 percent) sometimes use off-campus food banks, and 30 percent use them once a month or more.

According to the survey, nearly one third of students reported they had been laid off due to the pandemic, and 40 percent of those who skipped meals said they did so to pay for debt or study materials.

For working class youth, making the decision to go to college means sacrificing basic necessities such as health care, adequate housing, and food security. Under the dire conditions created by the ruling class response to the pandemic, seeking higher education comes at a staggering price for a whole generation of youth.

The cost of college alone is enough to keep working class youth chained to the banks well into old age. The average public university student now borrows \$30,030 to attain a bachelor's degree. The total student debt outstanding in the Federal Loan Portfolio is over \$1.56 trillion.

Many working class youth qualify for food assistance programs throughout their tenure at K-12 schools. The USDA National School Lunch Program provides low-cost or free meals to 29.4 million K-12 students of low-income families. The fact that so many children rely on these programs in order to eat each day is a staggering indictment of the difficult conditions facing working class families in the most "advanced" capitalist country in the world.

When these students graduate high school, this meager safety net is no longer available. College students face strict eligibility requirements for the Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program (SNAP).

In a report from the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness (NSCAHH) from 2016, 46 percent of US college students reported experiencing food insecurity in the past 30 days, yet only 18 percent of college students qualified for SNAP and just 3 percent received benefits. While there is limited data out on the situation over the last year, one can assume these figures are now much starker than in 2016.

In December 2019, rule changes to the SNAP program specifically targeted "able-bodied adults without dependents." These changes made it even more challenging for states to waive requirements that someone work at least 20 hours per week, excluding otherwise eligible students from the program.

What this means in practical terms is that many college age students are forced to work 20 hours a week on top of a full class load just to be able to afford food.

Sal, a community college student from Silicon Valley, California, spoke with the WSWs about how food insecurity has affected him.

As a full-time college student, it's not realistic for me to work a full-time job, meaning that I have limited income. Because of this I rely on CalFresh (food stamps) benefits, which offer just over \$200 a month, in order to help with grocery expenses. However, this usually does not suffice. During most months, my benefits are exhausted by around the 3rd week, forcing me to dip into my checking account in order to buy food.

This puts additional strain on my already-shoestring budget and causes needless stress over whether I'll be able to pay important bills including those for rent and car insurance. While I'm still able to do well in my classes, this stress does have a noticeable effect on my ability to focus on my studies and is particularly bothersome during exams,



writeups, and other high-pressure assignments.

Social support systems such as SNAP have been under assault for decades, by Democrats and Republicans alike. Many students are forced to rely on school food pantries to make it through the month.

Arik, a student at South Florida University told the WWSWS that being food insecure has affected his academics: “Most of the time it made it harder for me to study. I’d be stressed out and focused more on how I’ll satisfy my hunger rather than passing my classes.”

Arik continued, “It’s made me less energized and lethargic. I feel really weak throughout the day at some time.”

This epidemic of food insecurity affects students from all across the country. A 2019 study published in the journal *Advances in Nutrition* reviewed 51 studies on food insecurity on college campuses. The review, titled *Food Insecurity among College Students in the United States: A Scoping Review*, estimated that food insecurity prevalence at universities was as high as 47 percent on community college campuses and 37 percent at 4-year degree universities.

The figures ranged from a low of 14 percent (University of Alabama) to a high of 75 percent (University of California, Davis), and included rural schools such as Appalachian State University (46 percent) and large urban universities like Kent State (37 percent).

The *Healthy CUNY 2018* survey found that 15 percent of students at the City University of New York reported they were often or sometimes hungry in the last year—affecting about 34,000 students. Forty-eight percent reported being hungry in the last 30 days.

The rest of New York state is facing similar issues. The State University of New York (SUNY) is offering \$1,000 grants for the purchase of refrigerators for on-campus food pantries.

The Hope Center for College, Community and Justice conducted a study of college students in Denver, Colorado and found that 40 percent of the roughly 65,000 college students in the city suffer from food insecurity.

At the University of Colorado, Denver, the university has created a food bank program for students. All students at UC Denver are provided with 10 points each week to choose non-perishable and personal hygiene items at the food pantry.

Food pantry systems are in dire need of additional funding, but in December 2020 the University of Colorado system provided just an additional \$50,000 towards student hunger in Denver, just a few dollars per food insecure student.

Such conditions are a glaring indictment of the crisis facing students across the country. Research by *Feeding*

*America* has found that upwards of three-quarters of university students are financially independent. That is, they do not have family members to support them financially through their education and must provide almost entirely for themselves.

Students are finding themselves in an increasingly precarious situation as wages continue to stagnate, and as the cost of living and tuition skyrocket. From 1987 to 2017, the cost of tuition at public four-year institutions rose 213 percent (seven percent per year), more than three times the average annual rate of inflation and nominal wage growth since 2007.

The pandemic has greatly exacerbated this crisis. Workers aged 18-24 were the most likely to be unemployed during the pandemic, and disruptions to campus services reduced student access to food pantries and nutritional food. The true impact of the pandemic on student hunger is still to be determined.

Students all over the country are drawing far reaching conclusions from the conditions they face.

Sal explained what he thinks student hunger says about the state of society:

It highlights the stark inequality and unfairness of the status quo ... expressed by the aphorism “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” Basically, our society deems it acceptable that certain people born to unfortunate circumstances must struggle throughout their entire youth just to acquire a reasonable chance at economic security, whereas those raised by more well-to-do parents and who’ve enjoyed a relatively painless life exert much less effort not only to secure basic economic needs, but also to excel and pursue their dreams. Society turns a blind eye and has a dismissive, cavalier, almost nihilistic attitude to what, upon a close and objective assessment, is evidently a harsh injustice.

When Arik was asked what he thought the conditions facing students showed about society he replied that it means “we live in a failed state.”



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