

Insecure Food & Housing Among Sonoma State Students

SOCI 336 Investigative Sociology

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May 2019

Abstract

The purpose of our research was to understand and describe the quality of Sonoma State University's students overall well being. Specifically, we researched the students who have or currently deal with insecure food and housing. We gathered information among the following variables: a) How many students are aware of the SSU food pantry and state or federal food assistance services b) if they feel their academic performance was/is negatively affected due to their insecure housing and/or food situation and c) what can the Sonoma State campus do in order to improve students food, housing and overall well-being. Our results showed that the majority of students do have secure housing; however, a select number of students worry about not having secure meals. In addition, an overwhelming amount of students were not aware of food services provided on campus to assist with food insecurities. Further research is needed such as possibilities as implementing campus, state and federal policy to assist students in need.

Introduction

Food insecurity affects the overall health and academic performance of students attending universities. In order to gain earning power, a degree from an accredited university is needed. There are significant differences in earning potentials between degree and non-degree holders (Schwarz, Kanchewa, Rhodes, et al., 2018). A degree requires a committed student with money and a competitive grade point average. In order to get into a university, students must meet requirements for their intended degree. Once admitted to a university, students are given access to courses, mental and health clinics, and activities; however, guaranteed food and shelter is not included in the tuition. Studies have shown “food insecurity is associated with adverse health outcomes” such as diabetes and depression (Gowda, Hadley, Aiello, 2012; Youngmi, Park and Huang, 2017).

Approximately one million students were identified as homeless in U.S. schools during the 2009-2010 school year (Miller, 2011). This number, as a matter a fact, does not reflect the students that are not accounted for because they either don't want this aspect of their life to be known or they were not included in the research. According to Miller's research, numbers continue to increase. Homelessness was 41 percent greater than two years earlier (Miller, 2011). Even though the numbers for homeless students continues to increase rapidly year after year, very little is getting done in order to support these students that are continuously having to face housing insecurities.

Through surveyed students at Sonoma State University, they reported skipping meals in order to pay the cost of housing, transportation and food. Students described being part of the college culture through classes and activities. However, a few students expressed being

homeless. In a study of first generation students, the struggle to make connections on campuses reported that up to 50 percent of the students experienced food insecurity and worried about having access to food (Schwartz et al., 2018). Previous studies have shown students that have dealt with food insecurity tend to have a serious impact on their health, energy levels and concentration in their studies (O'Neill and Maguire, 2017).

Meeting the cost of expenses associated with being a student is a major concern among first generation college students. First generation college students come from parents that do not have a degree from an accredited college or institution (Schwarz, Kanchewa, Rhodes et al., 2018). In some families, a degree from a university is a luxury. First generation degree seeking students often want a better future than what their parents were afforded. The average undergraduate loan debt is just under \$10,000 by the time a student reaches their senior year (Addo, Houle and Sassler, 2018). For some students, a degree is needed in order to surpass living the paycheck to paycheck cycle that was experienced in their own families.

In some cases, retaining and completing a degree for students becomes an issue. Degree completion and retention of students for each school is published for the public. The numbers that are presented to the public should cause alarm with school officials to look after their students. Although there are health services on campus and mental health services to help student, the likelihood that they will open up about food scarcity is rare.

Aims

The three aims for our study were to bring about awareness of food insecurity and homelessness amongst Sonoma State Students. At Sonoma State University this is a problem that not only affects our CSU campus, but many others as well. Shedding light to the topic allows us

to have an open conversation with other universities to understand what they have done and what we can do in our own university. One of our first aims is to inform people about the importance of homelessness and food insecurity amongst SSU students. In a paper survey that was conducted in a classroom of 30+ people we found that many people who aren't food insecure or homeless do not know about services on campus. It is important to bring awareness to all the support services that are provided at SSU for students. Informing all students allows the word of mouth to spread faster and those who need the resources to become aware faster. Our second aim is to learn about the homeless problem on campus, and how we can help these people get the housing they need in order to be successful college students. The third aim is to have more information regarding food resources and advocate for the food pantry on campus. Making the food pantry more known will allow the campus to receive more resources. This will bring more awareness to the assistance that students need and in the future to receive more funds to make it a bigger pantry.

Methods

For our research, we used survey method in order to reach the student population that we were aiming for. Once we had our survey ready to be sent out and used, we got help from social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. We extended our survey to student support programs such as the Extended Opportunity Program and Student Involvement Services. Aside from the online survey, we handed out printed paper copies of the surveys in classes. We reached out to 300 Sonoma State students to survey food insecurity and housing. These surveys helped us better understand the issue of food insecurity and housing, and awareness about on campus support services. The results we obtained by conducting the questionnaire will be a great

starting source by faculty and administration to determine what would be an appropriate response to this issue. The methods used for this research help to give the Sonoma community a better understanding of an issue that may have not been considered. Students within our group visited the on campus Lobo's pop up food pantry to find that fresh fruits were not available on a consistent daily basis. Only a limited amount of fruits were allotted to students that visited the pantry with their student identification. On a good day students were able to collect 4 oranges, 6 potatoes, one box of rice crispies and a jar of applesauce. The products for the Lobo's food pantry are purchased through the student union.

Literature Review

According to a survey taken in 2016 focusing on “Serving Displaced and Food Insecure Students in the CSU” the CSU campuses were ordered to meet the needs of displaced and food insecure students to ensure that they successfully graduate. Different campuses instituted their own programs to aid the food disparities being faced by the students attending their colleges. In the journal, CSU Chico, Fresno, Humboldt, Long Beach and San Bernardino, students were surveyed about the different services utilized among campuses. A total of 11 campuses were surveyed to find numbers of displaced and food insecure students in the CSU system. The key findings were that the estimation of displaced students is at 8.7% and food insecure students at 21% (Crutchfield, 2016).

In January 2018 a similar journal was published *Study of Student Basic Needs* this is the second phase to the 2016 *Serving Displaced and Food Insecure Students in the CSU*. The second phase emphasizes on the quantitative methods. The study found that 41.6% of CSU reported food insecurity. 20% of those students had experienced low food security and 21.6% had very low food security. The study found that 10.9% of CSU students experience homelessness one or more times in the last 12 months (Crutchfield, Maguire 2018).

As it is commonly seen and heard, tuition prices are skyrocketing. Students are barely being able to pay for these skyrocketing prices that they are often left with no money for housing. In 2013, nearly 60,000 applicants for Federal financial aid under the age of twenty-one self-identified as homeless (Klitzman, 2018). These numbers do not account for the students who are over twenty-one years of age. In a survey recently done with community college students

across the nation, thirteen percent of this population is homeless. Homelessness in this article is referred as “Individuals who ‘lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence’ and includes those who: (1) “share the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals;” (2) have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings...;” (3) “live in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings;” and (4) are “migratory children... living” in one of the above circumstances. One topic that is covered in this article is legislative framework. There is very minimal regulations on support or services for students who are facing homelessness. Some of the programs that have been implemented have been the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act which also created the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program and Every Student Succeeds Act. As of now, there are far more assistance programs for children than there are for college age students. Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is one of the financial programs that exists for college age students; however, many students still struggle because they are still being considered to be a dependent of their parents’ income therefore do not the amount of money that will be more adequate for their situation. This article strongly emphasizes the fact that students do not have the adequate or sufficient tools to perform well in school when they are constantly having to worry about where they will sleep next or get their next meal from. This article makes a huge point with, “We tell students to be college college-ready. We should be telling colleges to be student ready.” It is the responsibility of the

colleges to have the resources that their students need since they are paying a lot to have a spot in the school.

In a study conducted at UCLA by the Agriculture and Natural Resources, it was found that there are few students that live on campus and off campus that know about free food and housing services offered on campus. The study included eleven focus group interviews across four student subpopulations at UCLA. The subpopulations that were involved in the study were residential undergraduates (living on campus with a meal plan), nonresidential undergraduates (living off campus), graduate/professional students, and students using free food resources. This study was conducted by utilizing qualitative research methods in order to better understand how students perceive, experience and cope with food insecurity, and explore opportunities to address food insecurity by improving food literacy among students. Through the study, student experiences, perceptions and concerns related to both food insecurity and food literacy. Some themes that were explored were food insecurity and food literacy. Some common themes that seemed very popular amongst students were campus food environment not meeting student needs, a desire for practical financial and food literacy “life skills” training, and skepticism about the university’s commitment to adequately address student basic needs.

Among college students, it is estimated that food insecurity ranges from 14% to 72%. There is a huge gap between the lowest percent of college students that have reported food insecurity to the high number. It is quite confusing to understand to why or how this can happen from one campus to another. Some campuses have started to help these students that may be feeling or needing that extra help to be able to get fresh produce. In one survey done, 44 participants, or about 54%, were classified as food insecure: 32% experienced low food security

(reduced diet quality, variety, or variability) and 22 % experienced very low food security (skipping or reducing meal sizes). Some of the biggest issues being faced by students are that they are required to buy a meal plan from the school which are really expensive, access to kitchens to be able to cook their own foods, and leftover food is not adequately being used but rather being thrown away. A majority of students felt that the university was not listening or meeting their needs about food options, costs, and opportunities.

While most students are just happy to get into college, low income students are faced with the challenged trying to afford these institutions. The article, *The Dark Side of College (Un)Affordability: Food and Housing Insecurity in Higher Education* highlights the struggles students face due to lack of financial backing. These students are tasked with finding other ways to supplement income while attending college. This financial strain puts lots of stress on the students and can be detrimental to the success of their education. Students who experience food and housing insecurity are put at a major disadvantage compared to their classmates. Food and housing insecurity can result in lower grades because a student's main focus is not on school. Someone going through food insecurity and housing insecurity may also develop a mistrust in these institutions. This and many other factors are a major reasons why these students may leave or drop out of these institutions. Once a student begins to fall thru the cracks of the system it becomes harder to finish and may even lead to dropping out. Most Americans know that college is too expensive, so why do we think a young adult would be able to afford this.

The focus of this research has to do with prevalence of food insecurity among students who attend community college and the effect it has on their Grade Point Average. They took a cross sectional survey that look at students self reported GPA and their demographics. The study

was conducted in Maryland and they used two community colleges with different demographics. The first community college was in a poor low income area in Maryland. The second community colleges is located in an affluent community in Maryland. The researched showed that more than half of the students who conducted the survey classified as food insecure. Students who were most at risk tended to be single parents and students who were living on their own. They also showed that students who were African American or multiracial were more at risk of becoming food insecure. It also showed that people who were food insecure were more likely to have a lower grade point average than student who were not. Overall the results of this study shows that food insecurity may have an effect on students and that teachers, professors, and administrators should be more aware of.

When people hear or read the word food insecurity it refers to the lack of readily available nutritious and healthy foods. When someone is on a limited budget they are likely to purchase foods that are low cost and easily accessible which does not mean healthy and nutritious. People are not suffering from hunger but the food that is available isn't enough to sustain them through the day which is crucial for the concentration of a college student (Youngmi, Park and Huang, 2017).

Food insecurity is a issue that plagues colleges around the United States. The issue of food insecurity has the potential of harming student success and overall well being. Students who are food insecure are more likely to graduate late and have a higher retention rate. This article helps to show how this phenomena can actually be traced back to K-12 education. There is a direct pipeline from elementary school to college where low income student are more at risk of not receiving the proper nutrition and secure housing. All of these factors contribute to the

problem of food insecurity that has not been fully addressed. At times this population of college students may feel invisible because most student and faculty cannot directly see this problem. Even though this problem may not be visible to most people it can help to explain some of the issues colleges have with retention and graduation rates. It also can help to address some of the issues these colleges have with the overall wellbeing and mental health of their students. More importantly this information can be used to help faculty and administration that work in higher education to see of evident of a problem this is. Once this problem becomes a priority administration can start to look at ways to address and alleviate the issue of food insecurity that plagues these institutions. There response will be crucial in trying to repair the damage the food insecurity has done.

SSU Lobo's Food Pantry is a place where students who are facing food insecurity will be allowed to go and receive food several times a week. This program was implemented in hope of easing some of the problems we have on campus with malnourishment. The pantry is supported by several organizations on campus and also off campus like the Redwood Food Bank. This allows the pantry to become more known and receive more resources in the future. One of the downfalls of this pantry is that the foods are mainly non perishable. I do sometimes receive perishable food. The problem with this is that many students are eating food that is not good for their health. There should be a way that students are allowed to pick food from the SSU garden and take for themselves to make meals at home. As students we should be allowed to plant vegetables and fruits if we take care of them. To later on be able to eat what we have planted. This would be a good resource for food insecure students because this would only cost them their

time and not any money. This is important because this would allow students to work on campus for something that will benefit them and other students in need.

Another way students can have access to food on campus is by qualifying for the CalFresh program. The CalFresh Student Eligibility Handbook and CalFresh Outreach Program by Chico State University state several different requirements that need to be met by students who want to be eligible for CalFresh. According to the CalFresh Student Eligibility Handbook college students must be within the age group of 18 and 49 years old and must be physically and mentally fit for employment. Students also must be able to work an average of 20 hours per week and maintain an average of 80 hours per month. If students already have in-kind benefits such as free housing or utilities they will not qualify for CalFresh. Students also have to be employed during the months of June through August to be eligible as well. Students also must be recipients of Cal Grant A or B in order to receive eligibility for CalFresh. If students have people that are dependent on them, such as children, they will be eligible for more money through CalFresh. In the CalFresh Outreach Program article by Chico State University states that they will take a student's gross monthly income into consideration when deciding whether or not students are eligible for CalFresh.

As we are well aware our physical and mental health are impacted when we are in college. This impacts more students who are likely to be homeless and food insecure for the following reasons. One of the reasons is that many people are hungry while in class and are unable to focus on what the instructor is saying. This makes their grades become low and impact their overall gpa. This lessens their chances getting into graduate school. Another impact is that many people lack mental health care because they aren't able to cope with everything they are

going through in life. There needs to be more policies that will be implemented to help those students to succeed and receive the additional support they need to finish college.

It was found that food insecurity does not come solely from poverty. The ability to budget with “available resources” is a problem when limited funds can cover the basic needs for a student. The effect food insecurity has toward health is the, “stress and shifts in dietary patterns that characterize food insecurity incite an inflammatory state and alter immune function in food-insecure individuals.” Which correlate food insecurity with adverse health concerns such as cardiovascular problems that lead to chronic health conditions (Gowda, Hadley and Aiello, 2012).

An approach that we can do to combat the increase of homeless students dropping out of school is by providing a more supportive group system that makes students feel at ease when attending school. It is known that homeless students are more likely to become depressed or anxious due to their housing situation. Despite the increase in stress it adds to students when they are homeless and hungry by adding a positive school environment allows us to help them become successful. There are plenty of ways we can do this. An example would be to have rooms where students are allowed to go in and take naps. Taking a nap in a relaxing environment helps to re energize and refocus on school work. Another approach is by helping these students get free meals on campus. By having a full stomach in the beginning of the day helps to focus throughout the day. These two approaches help to boost students immune systems and do better in school.

As budgeting is an issue for college students and financing their classes, food and places to stay when school breaks take place is that there are no resources available for students that

come from unstable homes. It was reported on financial aid forms that up to 58,000 students revealed they are homeless but this number is not certain. In Pennsylvania a college called Bryn Mawr provides “housing and meals at no charge for students” that have no place to go during the holidays that are fighting an uphill battle for their educational pursuits (Snyder, 2018).

Results

The respondents of these surveys (Appendix A) were all students who are currently enrolled at Sonoma State University. According to our survey results 59% of students do not worry about having enough food. However, 27% of students at SSU do worry about not having enough food for their lifestyle. Fourteen percent of the remaining students who answered the survey sometimes worry about not having enough food. Although 50% of the respondents stated that they never missed a meal, 25% of the respondents answered that they missed meals due to the lack of access of food on campus or due to the cost of food on campus. Our survey also asked students about their knowledge on food assistance programs at Sonoma State. Fifty-six percent of the respondents answered that they were aware of food assistance programs and 44% of the respondents answered that they were not aware of these programs. Among the students that were aware of food assistance programs on campus 24% of respondents answered that they have used these programs while 72% of the respondents answered they have not used any type of food assistance programs. Out of the respondents that answered they had used an assistance program 44% of the respondents answered that they used CalFresh and 83% of the respondents answered that they have used Lobos Food Pantry.

The second part of our surveys asked students about their current housing situation. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents answered that they do have secure housing while ten

percent of the respondents answered that they did not have secure housing. Out of the respondents that answered they do not have secure housing 12% answered that they did not have secure housing on a daily basis. Another 12% of the respondents answered they did not have housing on a weekly basis and 53% of the respondents answered that they did not have secure housing a couple times throughout the year. Among these respondents 18% of students are couch surfing, 10% are living in a car and or shelter, 35% are living in a unsecure house and 12% answered their living situation as other.

Although our results do not show that there is a very high amount of food and housing insecurity at Sonoma State University, our research shows that there are still students on our campus who deal with food and housing insecurity. As the Sonoma State campus starts to grow and educate more students, on campus housing and on campus food services will start to become more impacted and expensive for students to afford. In order to avoid more students from being affected by food and housing insecurity our research group agrees that it is extremely important to educate our classmates, professors and Sonoma State University staff about ways to help those who are homeless and food insecure.

Conclusion

Our research spotlighted the lacking of administrative services to support students that may be skipping meals and or affected by housing insecurity on Sonoma State campus. The inadequate foods available on a daily basis at the Lobo's food pantry and the lack of guidance with Cal Fresh applications are the areas that need to be improved on our campus. This is especially detrimental for first year freshmen students living on campus since many do not have access to kitchens and are new to living on their own. A solution that our research group agreed

would be the best approach when tackling food and housing insecurity is to start offering more help to new students who get admitted to Sonoma State University. Other than checking for transcripts from previous schools, asking students directly if they are in need of additional services needs to be included when getting accepted into our university. Students and faculty need to collaborate with campus administration as well as education staff to develop programs to assist students. Humboldt State University currently offers a variety of services to their students and our research group agrees that Sonoma State University should follow their footsteps. Outreach from HSU includes a farm stand, Calfresh application help, community outreach, cooking classes are all improvements that should be made in order to help students who are being affected by food and housing insecurities on Sonoma State campus.

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Appendix A

Do you worry about not having enough food?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

Have you at any time in the past years missed one or more meals due to lack of access to food?

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ Every couple of days
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ A few times a year
- ☐ Never

Are you familiar with any food assistance programs on campus?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Have you used services on campus such as Cal Fresh or Lobos Food Pantry? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

- ☐ Cal Fresh Application Process
- ☐ Lobos Food Pantry

Do you have secure housing?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Have you at any time in the past year not had housing?

- ☐ Daily

☐ Every couple of days

☐ Weekly

☐ Monthly

☐ A few times a year

Please pick a housing option that's closest to you.

☐ Couch surfing

☐ Living in a car

☐ Living in a shelter

☐ Live in a house

☐ Other