

SEARS SURVEY SPOTLIGHT:

PRESENTED BY THE CALIFORNIA STUDENT AID COMMISSION



For more information please refer to our website

<https://www.csac.ca.gov/sears>

Contact research@csac.ca.gov

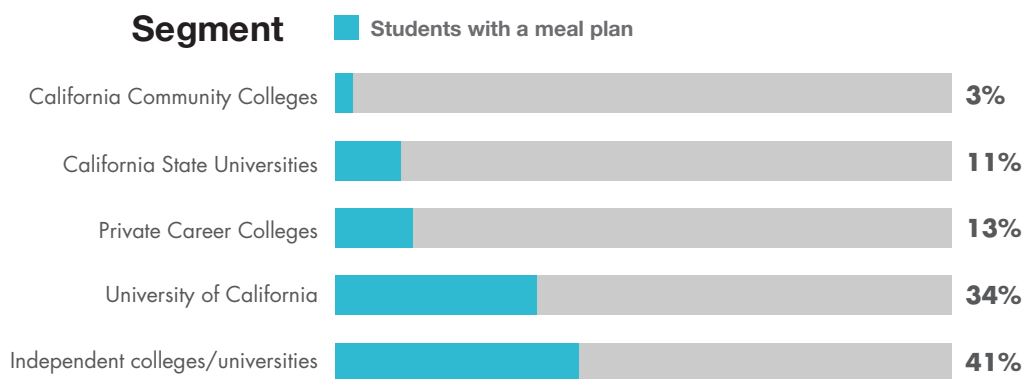
with any questions

Food Insecurity

Affording college means more than just paying for tuition. A student must also pay for food, as well as books and supplies, housing, transportation, and other expenses. This spotlight brief explores what students told us in the 2018-19 Student Expenses and Resources Survey (SEARS) about their experience paying for food while attending college.

How many students have a meal plan?

Each segment of higher education has a different percentage of students who report having a meal plan.



How much are students paying for food?

Across segments, 10% of students reported they have a campus meal plan and the average number of meals covered per week was 12. Of those with a meal plan, students reported spending an average of:

\$176/mo for food they buy in addition to their meal plan

Of those without a campus meal plan, students reported spending an average of:

\$316/mo for groceries and other food and snacks eaten and prepared at their residence

\$216/mo for food, snacks, and meals away from their residence, such as at restaurants or purchased from vending machines

¹ See, for example, Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., Schneider, J., Hernandez, A., & Cady, C. (2018). Still hungry and homeless in college. Madison, WI: Wisconsin HOPE Lab; El Zein, A., Shelnutt, K., Colby, S., Olfert, M., Kattelmann, K., Brown, O., & Mathews, A. (2017). The prevalence of food insecurity and its association with health and academic outcomes among college freshmen. *Advances in Nutrition*, 8(1), 4; Maroto, M. E., Snelling, A., & Linck, H. (2015). Food insecurity among community college students: Prevalence and association with grade point average. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 39(6), 515–526.

“We college students try to make it through as comfortably as we can so it doesn’t effect our education, even if it means skipping a meal or two.

Student, Los Angeles

Food insecurity is correlated with lower grades in college.¹

“I love school. And I will not eat just to pay for school.

Student, Orange County

“I have not bought books/school supplies to be able to pay rent/food.

Student, Northern Inland

SEARS was administered between fall 2018 and spring 2019; all CSU and UC institutions participated in the survey while CCCs, non-profit private institutions, and private for-profit colleges were sampled by region. CSAC conducted the survey on a web-based survey platform and students were given four weeks to complete it. A total of 15,419 students were counted as respondents (about a 10% response rate) at 110 institutions across 5 segments.

Students' level of food security was classified based on the number of affirmative responses to a set of 10 questions² and students with very low or low food security levels were considered food insecure.



Overall, 22% of students reported very low food security, and 13% of students reported low food security, for a total of **35%** of students experiencing food insecurity.

The survey asked about specific challenges students encountered with food within the last 30 days:

56% said they often or sometimes couldn't afford to eat balanced meals

48% said they often or sometimes worried food would run out

41% said that often or sometimes the food just didn't last and they didn't have money to get more

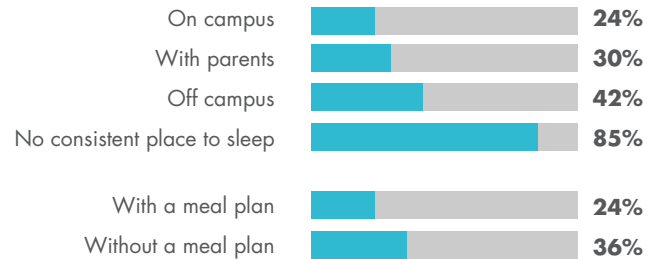
Of those who responded often or sometimes true to any of the above:

65% said they cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food

58% said they ate less than they felt they should because there wasn't enough money for food

49% said they were hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food

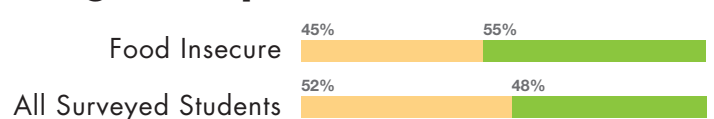
Students living on campus and those with a meal plan reported lower rates of food insecurity than those without. Even though students living on campus and students with a meal plan tend to have more resources, almost a quarter of both groups still experienced food insecurity in the last 30 days.



Students who were classified as food insecure were more likely to be:

- older (age 22 and above);
- female;
- Black or Hispanic/Latino³
- Having dependents

Age Group



The survey also asked students if they received food assistance from a variety of sources.

- 7%** reported using CalFresh/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- 5%** reported using an on-campus food pantry
- 2%** reported using the Women, Infants, and Children Program
- 1%** reported using a community food pantry or meal provider
- 1%** reported using other student's meal plans

Among all students surveyed, **87%** did not receive any food assistance.

Among food insecure students, **82%** did not receive any food assistance.

² SEARS used the U.S. Adult Food Security Survey Module designed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/survey-tools/#adult>

³ Due to small sample sizes, the Commission doesn't report on other racial and ethnic groups, but acknowledges that they may also be struggling with food insecurity and other obstacles.