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## University students facing food insecurity due to pandemic

Four out of ten university students have reported they are worried that they will run out of food as they deal with the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, according to a new report.

A collaboration of universities in the UK and USA surveyed students on their levels of food insecurity during April, after universities in both nations ceased campus-based teaching.

The preliminary findings outlined in the report, [Food Insecurity and Lived](#)

[Experiences of Students](#), reveal students have high levels of food insecurity and low levels of mental wellbeing, alongside a high level of lost jobs and income since the outbreak of COVID-19.

The findings have been submitted to the UK Education Select Committee inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services.

The survey was completed by more than 1,200 students. The results reveal that 41% of students were worried that their food would run out and almost 35% of students reported high or very high, levels of food insecurity.

Those students who lived either alone or with other students were much more likely to face food insecurity than students who either lived at home already or who returned to their family home when lockdown began.

The situation was more positive for 56% of those students who were able to return home and live with their parents, as their parents purchased food and there was shared responsibility for preparing meals.

Financial worries were also a cause for concern. Almost 60% of students who responded to the survey said they were employed and reliant on this income to fund their education and living expenses. However, as many students are employed in the hospitality, leisure, and retail sectors they face a disproportionate loss in their jobs and income when businesses closed their doors.

There is already a known correlation between food insecurity and mental health and wellbeing, and this was confirmed further in the findings. One in five students report they are experiencing high levels of food insecurity and poor mental wellbeing, with many saying that they are eating unhealthy, ultra-processed foods and skipping meals

The authors of the report have called on the government and stakeholders in higher education, including Universities UK and the Office for Students to provide increased support for students.

In the UK, their recommendations include an increase and expansion in maintenance grants and loans and increasing the value of the hardship fund provided to UK universities.

Northumbria University's [Healthy Living Lab](#) is one of the UK's leading research centres into issues around the impact of diet on educational attainment and wellbeing, holiday hunger and food insecurity in children and young people. Researchers from the Lab worked in collaboration with internationally renowned academics from City, University of London; the universities of Sheffield and Ulster and Oklahoma State University in the USA, as well as representatives from the Students' Unions at Northumbria and Ulster universities to proactively investigate the emergence of wellbeing issues as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold

[Professor Greta Defeyter](#), Director of the Healthy Living Lab, explained: "Unfortunately we have become accustomed to seeing food banks on the high street, but I was surprised to hear that many universities around the world operate food banks or food pantries to alleviate student food insecurity.

"As in the wider society, this issue is not just about young people not being able to manage budgets. Rather, our research suggests that this issue is much more fundamental, it is a poverty issue, and challenges our perceptions of student equality and our belief systems of the stereotypical 'poor student'.

"Our research has shown that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a disproportionate number of higher education students face a primary loss of income, high levels of food insecurity, and poor mental wellbeing both in the UK and USA."

Dr Michael Long, Associate Professor for Sociology at Oklahoma State University, said: "It is clear from this study that food insecurity in university students is alarmingly high since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and will likely increase the existing inequalities in the food systems in the United States and the UK.

"While food insecurity is a substantial and potentially growing problem for university students in general and within Oklahoma, we hope that this research will lead to evidence-based solutions aimed at reducing food insecurity and inequality."

Dr Christian Reynolds of the [Centre for Food Policy](#), City, University of London and a visiting Researcher at the University of Sheffield's Institute for Sustainable Food, added: "This research is some of the first to have linked

food insecurity and the COVID-19 lockdown through to coping mechanisms such as eating unhealthy, ultra-processed foods and skipping meals.

“It was alarming to see that 33% of those who self-reported ultra-processed foods as their main type of food, also experience food insecurity,” he said, but he also reported an appetite for change adding that he had received emails from students who were hopeful that sharing their experiences will lead to wider support and structural changes.

Dr Sinéad Furey, Ulster University’s research lead for this project commented: “This research provides an essential insight and understanding of the challenges students face in accessing and affording food in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and has worryingly outlined that one in three students reported low or very low levels of food security, and two in five were worried that their food would run out. Our findings will now enable universities to produce revised recommendations for students to alleviate this pressing need. Not to take action is a disservice to the next generation of employment-ready graduates.”

Andrew McAnallen, President of Ulster University Students’ Union, added: “Throughout the COVID-19 lockdown students have been riddled with uncertainty, with many losing jobs or becoming furloughed as a result of the pandemic. For many, this has resulted in financial insecurity and many students are worried about being able to put quality food on the table as a result. This paper offers a really valuable insight into the vulnerable and challenging situation students have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and reinforces the need to create a higher education system which is publicly-funded, lifelong and sustainable.”

The paper [Food Insecurity and Lived Experiences of Students](#) is available to view here.

Northumbria University is already leading on a major £2 million national project for the Office for Students to [transform the way that universities use data and analytics](#) to identify mental health issues in students.

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