

# 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](mailto:research@csac.ca.gov)

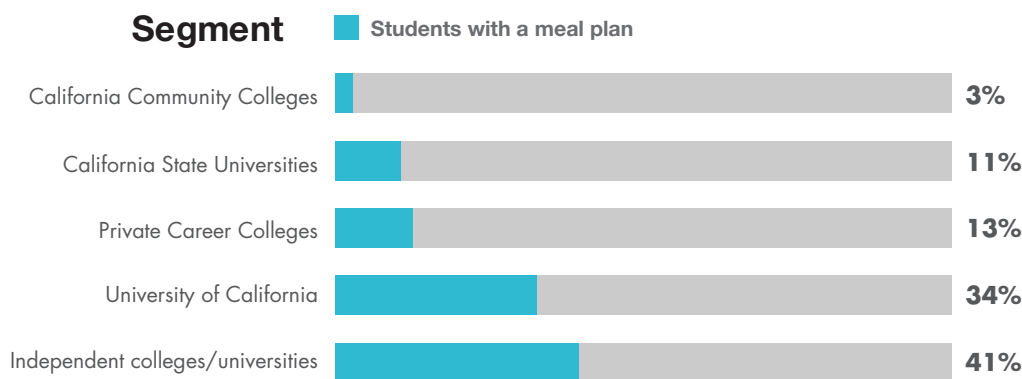
with any questions

# 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

<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>**

“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 questions<sup>2</sup> 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

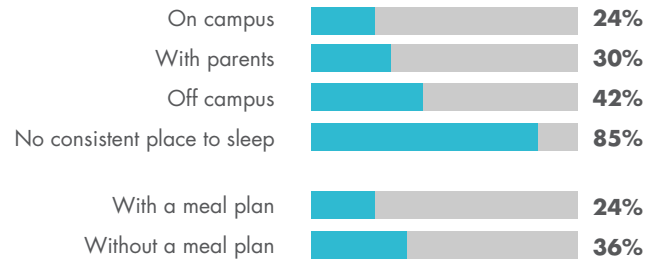
#### Of those who responded often or sometimes true to any of the above:

**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

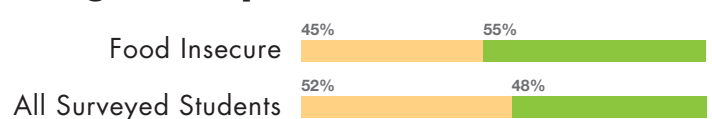
Students living on campus and those with a meal plan reported lower rates of food insecurity than those without. Even though students living on campus and students with a meal plan tend to have more resources, almost a quarter of both groups still experienced food insecurity in the last 30 days.



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

- older (age 22 and above);
- female;
- Black or Hispanic/Latino<sup>3</sup>
- 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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>

<sup>3</sup> 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.