

Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ysdh20

Basic needs insecurity among LGBTQ+ college students

Adrian Allocca, Sarita Cargas, Acadia Buro, Diana Gonzales-Pacheco, Tammy Thomas & Kathryn E. Coakley

To cite this article: Adrian Allocca, Sarita Cargas, Acadia Buro, Diana Gonzales-Pacheco, Tammy Thomas & Kathryn E. Coakley (12 Mar 2025): Basic needs insecurity among LGBTQ+ college students, Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness, DOI: 10.1080/10530789.2025.2473752

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2025.2473752

Published online: 12 Mar 2025.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=ysdh20

JOURNAL OF SOCIAL DISTRESS AND HOMELESSNESS
https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2025.2473752

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

BRIEF REPORT

Check for updates

Basic needs insecurity among LGBTQ+ college students

Adrian Allocca[a], Sarita Cargas[b], Acadia Buro[c], Diana Gonzales-Pacheco[d], Tammy Thomas[c] and Kathryn E. Coakley[c]

[a]University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM USA; [b]Honors College, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM USA; [c]College of Population Health, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM USA; [d]College of Education and Human Sciences, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM USA

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Studies have indicated that a significant proportion of college students suffer from basic needs insecurity (food and housing). However, few studies have assessed the rates at which LGBTQ+ students experience needs insecurity compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. Fewer studies have assessed differences in insecurity between LGBTQ+ groups.

Method: This study is a secondary analysis of a survey including LGBTQ+ and cisgender/heterosexual students enrolled in 27 public educational institutions in a southwestern U.S. state ($N = 8,406$).

Results: Findings demonstrate that compared to heterosexual and/or cisgender students, LGBTQ+ identifying students were significantly more likely to experience food and housing insecurity and homelessness. Additionally, there were significant differences in the odds of insecurity between groups within the LGBTQ+ community.

Conclusion: Basic Needs insecurity among LGBTQ+ students is significantly higher compared to their heterosexual and cisgender classmates. Insecurities also differ within these minority groups, justifying a need to consider subgroups when studying LGBTQ+ individuals.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 August 2024
Revised 10 February 2025
Accepted 25 February 2025

KEYWORDS
LGBTQ+; insecurity; students; hunger; homelessness

Introduction

A college education is a pathway for social and economic mobility in the United States; offering a socioeconomic advantage compared to those who do not have one (Horowitz, 2018; Weaver et al., 2020). However, studies indicate students with a minoritized status experience barriers that hinder degree attainment (Mechler et al., 2021; Martell & Roncolato, 2023). This is likely due to a lack of financial stability and unmet basic needs e.g. food and housing (Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018; Ortagus et al., 2021; Shisler et al., 2023). Food insecurity correlates with a low GPA, taking fewer classes, and dropping out of school (Wolfson et al., 2021).

Basic needs (BN) insecurity is often more pronounced among the LGBTQ+ community as LGBTQ+ individuals endure higher rates of poverty and wage gaps (Mallory et al., 2020) often due to widespread difficulty finding/keeping employment, wage disparities, and stress-induced health problems (Sears & Mallory, 2011). Food insecure LGBTQ+ individuals are also less likely to utilize food pantries or other resources because of fear of discrimination (Henry et al., 2023).

In BN research, LGBTQ+ individuals are often mistakenly clustered into one reference group. It is inaccurate to claim all sexual and gender minorities experience same levels of insecurity. Although there is overlap between those who identify as a gender minority (not identifying with their sex assigned at birth) and/or a sexual minority (those who do not identify as heterosexual), it is a mistake to group these two categories together when investigating BN. Transgender and nonbinary (i.e. gender minority) individuals often face different obstacles to receiving BN compared to cisgender LGB (i.e. sexual minority) individuals (Russomanno & Jabson Tree, 2020; Grant, J. et al., 2011), and thus must be analyzed with these differences in mind.

Additionally, within existing literature on transgender and/or nonbinary individuals, data collection is inconsistent when describing gender identity for LGBTQ+ participants. Some studies categorize "transgender" and/or "nonbinary" individuals separately from "male" and "female" categories, see Laska et al.,

CONTACT Sarita Cargas cargas@unm.edu Honors College, 1 University of New Mexico, MSC06 3890, Albuquerque, NM 87131, USA
IRB Approval # 2211023853
© 2025 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

2021; Riddle et al., 2020, or delineate between "male/female" and "trans male" / "trans female" (for example see Russomanno & Jabson Tree, 2020). This is in conflict with the understanding that "male"/"female" refer to sex, not gender, and may lead to conflicting survey results. Many transgender individuals opt to identify themselves as "male" or "female" rather than "transgender", because these terms more accurately describe their gender identity (Erickson-Schroth & Cheng Thom, 2022). Variable structuring of surveys given to LGBTQ+ individuals will produce incongruous results regarding this group's experiences with BN. Naturally, the language and understanding of gender/sexuality is rapidly evolving. Therefore, the responsibility of remaining informed about the populations being studied rests on ourselves, as scientists. Only then can we provide targeted interventions. This study was structured to gain clearer insight from LGBTQ+ participants by presenting a survey allowing self-identification according to their separate identities, with a focus on better understanding differences between transgender and nonbinary individuals. We hypothesize that LGBTQ+ individuals will have more BN insecurity than majority groups and that there will be different levels of BN insecurity between these various groups.

Materials and methods

Participants

Full-time or part-time students, faculty, and staff at 27 public institutions of higher education in a southwestern state in the U.S. who were ≥16 years of age were eligible to participate in this study. This secondary exploratory analysis included students who self-reported sociodemographic information including their sexual and gender identities ($n = 8,406$). Most participants were >24 years of age (48.2%), undergraduates (92.2%), "heterosexual/straight" (71.8%), and identified as women (65.0%). In terms of sexual orientation, participants identified as "bisexual" (11.9%), "gay or lesbian" (5.0%), "more than one" (2.1%), "prefer not to say" (5.9%), and "prefer to self-identify" (3.3%). In terms of gender, participants identified as "genderqueer" (0.9%), "man" (26.1%), "woman" (65.0%), "nonbinary" (2.0%), "more than one gender" (2.4%) and "prefer not to say" or "prefer to self-identify" (1.8%). Those who selected "yes" to the question "Do you identify as Transgender" and identified as a man or woman were categorized as "trans man" (1.2%) or "trans woman" (0.6%).

Procedure/measures

From March to April 2023, a cross-sectional survey instrument designed by the research team was distributed to participating institutions. Institutions recruited potential participants via email and listservs, social media, and flyers. Participants took the survey on paper or online via Qualtrics and could enter a drawing to receive a gift card. A total of 18,369 responses were received; 1,623 did not complete all screening questions or were ineligible based on screening question responses. Other exclusions included reCAPTCHA score <0.50 ($n = 780$), duplicate responses ($n = 252$), and incomplete U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) 18-item household food security survey module (FSSM) ($n = 1,255$). Review of free text responses identified 772 additional participants for exclusion due to including symbols and/or nonsense answers. An additional 19 were excluded for missing participant type and 6 were excluded for being retired. In total, 4,707 responses were removed (25.6%) and the final analytic sample included 13,662 (74.4%) unique participants representing students, faculty, and staff. Of 13,662, 9,995 responses were students (73.2%), of which 8,406 (84.1%) provided gender and/or sexuality and were included in this secondary analysis.

To assess food security, the survey utilized the validated USDA Household FSSM. The number of affirmative responses to FSSM items was summed to calculate a food security score. Those with low/very low food security were classified as food insecure. Housing insecurity was measured using nine validated housing-related indicators recommended by the Hope Center (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018), including difficulty paying for a rent/mortgage increase and/or an inability to fully pay gas, oil, or electric bills. One or more affirmative responses indicated housing insecurity. Self-reported homelessness was assessed using the question "in the past 12 months, have you ever been homeless?" Students self-reported their GPA ("Thinking about the past academic semester, which of the following best describes your GPA?") and use of government programs including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

Statistical analysis

Analyses were conducted using SAS Version 9.4. Prevalence of each variable was calculated among

students by sexual and gender identities. Binary associations between gender and sexual orientation identities and outcomes (food insecurity, housing insecurity, homelessness, GPA < 2.0, and receipt of government assistance) were explored via chi-square tests of independence to establish reference groups for analyses. We then performed a series of logistic regressions comparing our groups of interest to a reference group ("men" for gender and "heterosexual/straight" for sexual orientation). We subset our data to the reference group and the comparator group of interest and then used logistic regression to calculate odds ratios (OR) and 99% confidence intervals (CI) for our four outcomes. This process was repeated for each comparator group. As an exploratory study, a correction for multiple hypothesis testing was not applied; however, we selected a *p*-value of <0.01 to indicate statistical significance to minimize type I errors.

Results

Shown in Table 1, students identifying as transgender had the highest odds of experiencing BN insecurities across all variables assessed compared to cisgender men. Transgender women had 12.77 (99% CI = 6.05-26.94) times the odds of homelessness compared to cisgender men, while transgender men had 7.81 (99% CI = 4.49-13.56) times the odds of homelessness. Among students identifying with other gender minorities, those who identified as genderqueer had the greatest odds of food insecurity (OR = 2.24; 99% CI = 1.13–4.44) and homelessness (OR = 3.47; 99% CI = 1.72–6.98) compared to cisgender men.

Compared to those who identified as heterosexual, students identifying as gay/lesbian had greater odds of experiencing food/housing insecurity and homelessness and were more likely to have a GPA <2.0. Gay/lesbian students had 2.00 (99% CI = 1.33–3.01) times the odds of homelessness and 1.69 (99% CI = 1.28–2.23) times the odds of being food insecure compared to heterosexual students. Students selecting "prefer to self-identify" on the sexual orientation question had lower odds (OR = 0.72, 99% CI = 0.52–1.00) of using government assistance. Use of government programs was not significant for other sexual orientation groups assessed.

Effect sizes were greater between gender subgroups compared to sexual orientation subgroups, suggesting gender is more strongly associated with BN insecurities than sexuality.

Discussion

This study found that college students identifying as a gender/sexual minority have a higher odds of BN insecurity and lower GPA. This study offers more insights into the specific experiences of sexual/gender-minoritized individuals, by avoiding unnecessary conflation of LGBTQ+ identities, with a focus on better understanding differences between transgender and nonbinary individuals.

This study further elucidates work by Laska et al., 2021, which categorized transgender/non-binary/other gendered as one group (42% food insecure), and Riddle et al., 2020, (41.2% food insecure). Transgender men and women experienced higher odds of insecurity across all categories at higher rates than all other sexual/gender minoritized groups studied. Similar findings were uncovered pertaining to gender minorities in general. This contrast may be due to greater financial strain on account of the unique cost

Table 1. Logistic regression results showing odds of outcomes [OR (99% CI)] among students by Gender & Sexuality (n = 8,406).

	Food insecurity OR (99% CI)	Housing insecurity OR (99% CI)	Homelessness OR (99% CI)	GPA < 2.00[a] OR (99% CI)	Received food assistance[b] OR (99% CI)
Gender [reference = man (*n* = 2,197)]					
Genderqueer (*n* = 74)	2.24 (1.13, 4.44)*	1.94 (0.98, 3.84)	3.47 (1.72, 6.98)*	1.76 (0.74, 4.18)	1.94 (1.05, 3.60)*
More than one (*n* = 200)	1.77 (1.18, 2.65)*	2.10 (1.36, 3.23)*	1.52 (0.87, 2.66)	1.51 (0.86, 2.67)	1.68 (1.14, 2.46)*
Nonbinary (*n* = 168)	2.08 (1.32, 3.27)*	1.96 (1.24, 3.12)*	0.85 (0.41, 1.79)	0.78 (0.35, 1.73)	1.16 (0.76, 1.75)
Prefer not to say or Self-Identify (*n* = 150)	1.48 (0.94, 2.32)	1.05 (0.67, 1.63)	0.81 (0.37, 1.81)	1.11 (0.54, 2.30)	0.74 (0.47, 1.17)
Transgender man (*n* = 99)	4.65 (2.24, 9.66)*	2.67 (1.40, 5.07)*	7.81 (4.49, 13.56)*	2.63 (1.31, 5.27)*	2.45 (1.41, 4.25)*
Transgender woman (*n* = 52)	5.34 (1.86, 15.29)*	5.50 (1.79, 16.90)*	12.77 (6.05, 26.94)*	3.92 (1.74, 8.85)*	8.99 (3.14, 25.76)*
Cisgender Woman (*n* = 5,466)	1.13 (0.99, 1.29)	1.23 (1.08, 1.41)*	0.40 (0.31, 0.52)*	0.60 (0.47, 0.77)*	1.17 (1.02, 1.33)*
Sexual orientation [reference = Heterosexual/straight (n = 6,039)]					
Bisexual (*n* = 1,000)	1.49 (1.24, 1.79)*	1.23 (1.02, 1.48)*	1.08 (0.76, 1.53)	1.08 (0.77, 1.51)	0.94 (0.79, 1.12)
Gay/lesbian (*n* = 423)	1.69 (1.28, 2.23)*	1.49 (1.12, 1.98)*	2.00 (1.33, 3.01)*	1.59 (1.04, 2.46)*	0.87 (0.67, 1.13)
More than one (*n* = 174)	1.07 (0.72, 1.60)	1.27 (0.83, 1.93)	1.90 (1.01, 3.55)*	1.12 (0.52, 2.38)	0.77 (0.51, 1.15)
Prefer not to say (*n* = 496)	1.32 (1.03, 1.70)*	0.93 (0.73, 1.19)	1.42 (0.93, 2.18)	1.47 (0.97, 2.23)	0.86 (0.68, 1.10)
Prefer to self-identify (*n* = 274)	1.32 (0.95, 1.83)	0.84 (0.61, 1.16)	0.91 (0.46, 1.78)	1.41 (0.80, 2.46)	0.72 (0.52, 1.00)*

[a]GPA missing for 367; [b]Receiving government assistance missing for 1; *p-value < .01.

of gender affirming care as well as increased social strain due to the current political climate. Additionally, transgender women, transgender men, genderqueer, and nonbinary students experienced differing odds of insecurity and low GPA. Comparable results found among sexual minoritized groups further justify studying these groups individually.

Various limitations may have affected data presented in this study. Data were collected via online survey distributed through multiple channels including social media. Demographic information was self-reported and non-verifiable due to participant anonymity. Non-response bias may have affected results, as those who participated in the survey may have been more or less likely to experience needs insecurity. Additionally, intersectional differences between gay men and lesbian individuals, or demographic information including race may have impacted data, and is worth further research.

To combat BN insecurity, colleges should not only recognize the distinct challenges the LGBTQ+ students face compared to their heterosexual peers, they should also acknowledge the differences among this cohort, as they are not a monolith and may be uniquely affected by stress associated with social safety (Diamond & Alley, 2022). Interventions addressing the unique challenges LGBTQ+ students face need to be created. They might include training college staff to be sensitive to discrimination against the students.

Future research should examine the underlying causes of the differences within this cohort of students to help better inform future solutions to the basic needs insecurity of our gender and sexually minoritized students. Researchers should also take care to adapt to the evolving language and categorize cohorts as granularly as the sample size allows.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was funded by the New Mexico Higher Education Department as part of Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham's Food Initiative.

Data availability statement

Due to the sensitive nature of data collected, the dataset associated with this paper is not publicly available.

Notes on contributors

Adrian Allocca: BS in psychology and pre-medicine, University of New Mexico.

Sarita Cargas: DPhil., MsT, MA Associate Professor of Human Rights, University of New Mexico Honors College.

Acadia Buro: PhD, Assistant Professor, University of New Mexico College of Population Health.

Diana Gonzales-Pacheco: PhD. Associate Professor in the Nutrition Program, University of New Mexico College of Education and Human Sciences.

Tammy Thomas: PhD, MPH, MSW Assistant Professor/ Director of Undergraduate Education, College of Population Health, University of New Mexico.

Kathryn E. Coakley: PhD, MS, RDN, Assistant Professor in the College of Population Health, University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center.

References

Diamond, L. M., & Alley, J. (2022). Rethinking minority stress: A social safety perspective on the health effects of stigma in sexually-diverse and gender-diverse populations. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, *138*, 104720. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2022.104720

Erickson-Schroth, L., & Cheng Thom, K. (2022). *Trans bodies, trans selves: A resource for transgender communities* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Goldrick-Rab, S., & Cady, C. (2018). *Supporting community college completion with a culture of caring: A case study of Amarillo College*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab.

Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., & Kinsley, P. (2018). *Guide to assessing basic needs insecurity in higher education*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab.

Grant, J., Lisa, A., Mottet, J., Tanis, D., With, J., Harrison, J., Herman, M., & Keisling. (2011). *Injustice at every turn a report of the national transgender discrimination survey*. National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. https://www.thetaskforce.org/app/uploads/2019/07/ntds_full.pdf

Henry, L., Ellis, D., Ellis, S., Fleck, M., Migdol, S., Rodriguez, N., Delgado, V., Esmonde, S., Islam, M. I., Kazaoka, K., Sun, W., & Tajallipour, P. (2023). Experiences of food insecurity among LGBTQIA+ college students in North Texas: Meaning, experiences, and recommendations for inclusive solutions. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *12*(2), 119–134. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2023.122.021

Horowitz, J. (2018). Relative education and the advantage of a college degree. *American Sociological Review*, *83*(4), 771–801. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418785371

Laska, M. N., Lenk, K., Lust, K., McGuire, C. M., Porta, C. M., & Stebleton, M. (2021). Sociodemographic and health disparities among students screening positive for food insecurity: Findings from a large college health surveillance system. *Preventive Medicine Reports*, *21*, 101297. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2020.101297

Mallory, C., Brown, T. N. T., & Sears, B. (2020). *Effects of stigma and discrimination*. JSTOR. https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep35034.6.

Martell, M. E., & Roncolato, L. (2023). Economic vulnerability of sexual minorities: Evidence from the US household pulse survey. *Population Research and Policy Review*, *42*(2), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-023-09778-y

Mechler, H., Coakley, K., Walsh-Dilley, M., & Cargas, S. (2021). Examining the relationship between food insecurity and academic performance: Implications for diversity and equity in higher education. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *152102512110538*. https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251211053863

Ortagus, J. C., Skinner, B. T., & Tanner, M. J. (2021). Investigating why academically successful community college students leave college without a degree. *AERA Open*, *7*, 233285842110657. https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211065724

Riddle, E. S., Niles, M. T., & Nickerson, A. (2020). Prevalence and factors associated with food insecurity across an entire campus population. *PLoS One*, *15*(8), e0237637. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0237637

Russomanno, J., & Jabson Tree, J. M. (2020). Food insecurity and food pantry use among transgender and gender non-conforming people in the Southeast United States. *BMC Public Health*, *20*(1), https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-08684-8

Sears, B., & Mallory, C. (2011). Documented evidence of employment discrimination & its effects on LGBT people. JSTOR. https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep35563.

Shisler, R., Cordero Oceguera, E., Hardison-Moody, A., & Bowen, S. (2023). Addressing and preventing food and housing insecurity among college students: An asset-based approach. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *12*(2), 135–153. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2023.122.022

Weaver, R. R., Vaughn, N. A., Hendricks, S. P., McPherson-Myers, P. E., Jia, Q., Willis, S. L., & Rescigno, K. P. (2020). University student food insecurity and academic performance. *Journal of American College Health*, *68*(7), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2019.1600522

Wolfson, J. A., Insolera, N., Cohen, A. J., & Leung, C. W. (2021). The effect of food insecurity during college on graduation and type of degree attained: Evidence from a nationally representative longitudinal survey. *Public Health Nutrition*, *25*(2), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1368980021003104