“Hungry and cannot afford to eat.”

Food Insecurity in College and University Workforce

Introduction

In 2023, 2,000 non-teaching staff in 27 New Mexico colleges and universities participated in a study assessing their basic needs security. The data revealed significant levels of food and housing insecurity and its affect on their mental health and productivity.[1]

Staff Data

- **93%** of survey participants work full-time.
- **41%** of college and university staff reported being food insecure.

Food Insecurity

Open-ended survey questions allowed staff to share their experiences with basic needs insecurities and the impact these challenges have on their lives. Numerous staff members stated being **hungry**, **skipping meals or eating one meal per day, and not eating enough.**

Staff members consistently cited **common themes** including:

- Financial hardships and low incomes
- High cost of food
- Lack of time to prepare or access healthy foods.

“I sometimes skip meals during the day due to not having the budget for a meals/groceries. It gets difficult to focus on work due to headaches and hunger.” -Staff

Food Security

The USDA has 4 levels of food security: high, marginal, low, and very low food secure. If one is in the top 2 categories, one is considered food secure. If one is in the last 2 categories one is food insecure.

Low Food Security

(Formerly known as food insecurity without hunger)

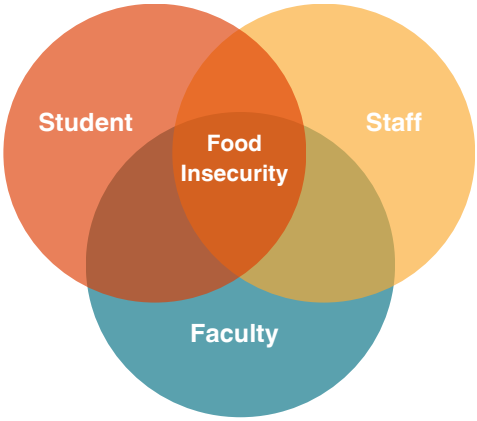
Reduced quality, variety or desirability of diet without substantially disrupting food intake or normal eating patterns.

Very Low Food Security

(Formerly known as food insecurity with hunger)

Multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake due to lack of money and other resources for food.

Source: USDA ERS - measurement. (n.d.). https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/measurement/

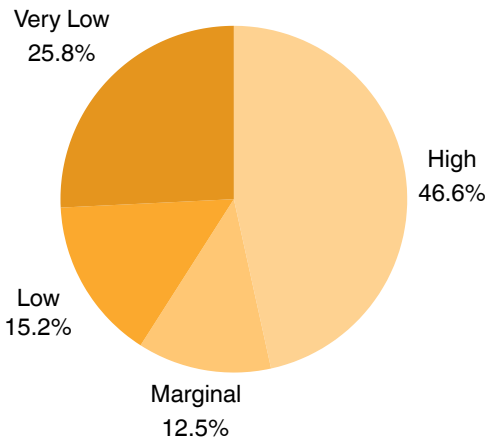


Basic Needs Project

Nutrition Security

Nutrition security ensures that all individuals have consistent, fair access to safe, nutritious, and affordable foods that are essential for good health and overall well-being.

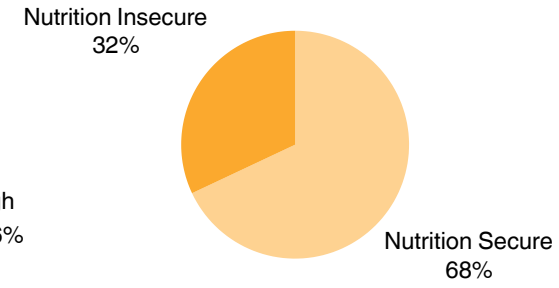
Staff Food Security



“....I am hungry and unable to concentrate.... Even though I work full time at a college, it is hard to keep food in the house at times.” -Staff

"I'm always looking for a better-paying job because I need more money to make ends meet." -Staff

Staff Nutrition Security



“Healthy food is so much more expensive than processed food, which is why we tend to buy the cheaper options.” -Staff

“I eat candy, at times, to curb my hunger and stay alert.” -Staff

1. The research team were University of New Mexico faculty: Drs. Cargas, Coakley, Gonzales-Pacheco, Thomas, and Buro." Additional data analysis was provided by Jennifer Minich from ICASA at New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology.

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“I often go to work hungry...”

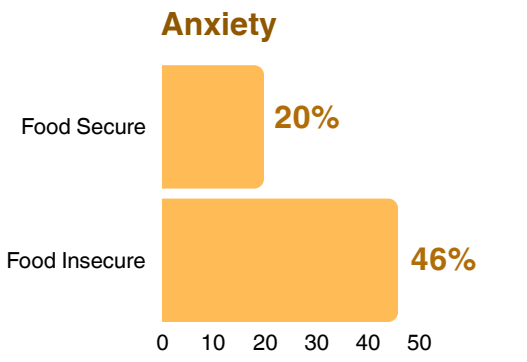
Mental Health and Job Performance

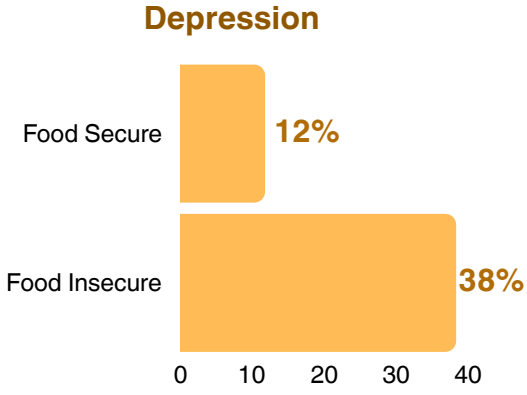
Basic needs insecurity is tied to serious mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and stress[4], with over half of staff reporting these conditions[2]. Leading to:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Reduced motivation
- Lower productivity

Results show that staff who are food insecure struggle more with mental health issues, mainly anxiety and depression, compared to staff who are food secure.

Staff Mental Health Screening





“The stress makes it hard to concentrate. I don't sleep well so that also contributes to my anxiety and stress.” -Staff

“Food insecurity has affected my work by keeping m[e] from completing tasks” - Staff

One common theme declared by staff members is the negative impact of food insecurity on their work performance, mental health and stress levels. Some also mention working long hours with low pay, which forces them to look for other or second jobs.

Current Interventions

The New Mexico Basic Needs Consortium, NM BNC, was created by faculty and staff in our colleges and universities to tackle needs insecurities among everyone in higher education. They are collaborating to design SNAP outreach programs as well as improve pantries by collecting consistent data on use and inventory. Many campuses have creative methods to provide free food but they are under resourced.

Food pantries are the primary response to food insecurity in higher education. However, many campuses lack these pantries and some limit staff access.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is another available resource, yet it remains significantly underutilized; 83% of staff report not being enrolled in SNAP, and only 17% of food-insecure staff currently use this assistance.

Increasing wages is among the proposed recommendations, however, compensation discussions are complex, as noted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). While institutions may argue that they pay staff according to occupation, skills, and labor market demand, it remains critical to address the broader issues of wage inequity and the persistent gaps that leave many staff members unable to meet their basic needs.

Recommendations

Colleges and Universities

- ***Establish basic needs offices:*** Basic needs offices should be established on all campuses to support students as well as staff and faculty by connecting them with essential resources, including SNAP outreach and other assistance programs.
- ***Consider offering low cost nutritious meals to staff on campus:*** Ensure affordable, nutritious meals are available in campus cafeterias to support staff well-being.
- ***Provide information on food assistance:*** Ensure campus pantries are accessible to staff and faculty, and that staff are informed about free or low-cost food options, including meal vouchers and on-campus pantries.
- ***Make campus food pantries more accessible:*** Extend food pantry hours and ensure they are well-stocked with sufficient, culturally appropriate food options.
- ***Raise wages:*** Consider adjusting wages to help staff cover basic living costs in line with inflation and the rising cost of living.

Community Engagement

- ***Collaborate with local organizations:*** Partnerships between colleges and local organizations could strengthen food assistance support.

Prepared By:
Nour Mansour
Sarita Cargas, D.Phil
Diana Gonzales-Pacheco, DCN, RDN, FAND

Questions? Contact:
basicneeds@unm.edu

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