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A Qualitative Study of Food Behaviors in University of Mississippi Students as They Relate to Nutrition Security

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Background

- Recent literature has estimated high rates of food insecurity among college students (30-40%)^{2,3,4,5,6,7,8}
- Thesis studies conducted at UM estimate that >40% of undergraduate students experience food insecurity^{9,10,11}
- A large majority of college students do not meet the recommendations made by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans^{12, 13, 14, 15}
- Nutrition security is defined as an individual having consistent access, availability, and affordability of foods that promote health and well-being¹⁶

Objective

To investigate food behaviors in University of Mississippi (UM) students in order to better understand nutrition security on the UM Oxford campus

Methods

- Focus groups (n=44) were conducted in spring 2022 with 3-8 participants in each group
- The participants were majority undergraduate students at UM
- Qualitative data was coded using NVivo software¹
- A thematic approach, using both inductive and deductive analysis, was used to code transcripts

Student Quotes

“I think ... we have access, [to] good food, but it's not nutritional or nutritious or super healthy for you or anything. I feel like I could not live my entire life eating the food that I'm eating here”

“I have access to [healthy food] but only if I want to give up other foods and get like less fresh fruits ... and so like the cost ratio, most of the time it isn't worth it for me...”

“I think also I'm, with that kind of, like, worried about the future. Like ... if I'm just trying to make ends meet right now, am I going to be able to, I don't know, provide for like children and everything like when I get older...”

“It dictates so much what I eat, but the meal plan I'm already technically paying for it. So I find it silly to kind of go out of it ... but I'd certainly like to not have to eat out every night essentially ... And I know that I can't do that. It's just, it's you're already kind of paying for the food and you have to ... use it if you if you're already paying for it.”

“I feel like the options aren't the healthiest. But it's fast food. And we're in college. So we can't really have high expectations.”

Results

- Students had various food sources: campus meal plan, cooking at home, fast food, social organization “Greek” meal plan, grocery stores, restaurants, and other sources such as free events and the campus food pantry
- Factors affecting food behaviors included budget/finances, time constraints, lack of resources, and other factors, such as personal preference and mental health
- Students reporting a lack of nutrition security were affected academically, emotionally, and socially

Conclusions

- Student descriptions of the UM food environment suggest a lack of availability of nutritious foods
- Problems with affordability of foods resulted in less nutritious, more affordable decisions
- Time constraints and lack of resources for food procurement and preparation were barriers to food accessibility
- Emotional stress and lack of focus were two of the main impacts described with nutrition insecurity

References



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