

Student Homelessness and Food Insecurity among UAlberta Students

July 30, 2019



Overview

In December 2018, the SU completed an annual survey of 5042 undergraduate points of contact, reasonably well distributed by gender, faculty, and year of study. Some questions addressed student homelessness (including 'hidden homelessness') and food insecurity. Although the survey report examined both questions, this briefing explores them from different angles and in greater depth.

55 students reported two or more homelessness-related experiences since enrolling at UAlberta. Men, non-binary students, FNMI students, LGBTQ2S+ students, and students with disabilities were all severely overrepresented. Students do not tend to associate their experiences with homelessness; for example, while 25 students stayed in a car, abandoned building, or other place not meant for housing, only 13 had identified as homeless.

Food insecurity presents a contrasting picture. 310 students reported significant food insecurity (which our survey defined as skipping meals three or more times per week due to the cost of food). While significant food insecurity is much more common than homelessness-related experiences, food insecurity affects all students more or less evenly. There are some exceptions: non-binary and LGBTQ2S+ students are at special risk for food insecurity, as are students who parent.

There is a relatively small noticeable correlation between food insecurity and homelessness-related experiences. Students at high risk for one are somewhat more likely to face high risk for the other. Students who have any homelessness-related experience are at least twice as likely to struggle with the price of food. That includes ostensibly innocuous or more-common experiences like couch-surfing or being evicted.

Spotlight on Homelessness

The 2018 survey captured six homelessness-related experiences with this question: *“Since you enrolled at UAlberta, have you faced any of the following housing challenges? (Choose all that apply.)”*

Homelessness-related experience	Respondents
Been evicted or forced to leave my residence	67
Slept at the Commuter Study Hostel because I had nowhere else to go	26
Slept on campus, other than at the Commuter Study Hostel, because I had nowhere else to go	69
Stayed in a car, abandoned building, or other place not meant for housing	25
'Couch-surfed' or stayed with friends without paying formal rent	115
Identified as homeless	13

Clearly, dozens of students have experienced precarious or even dangerous housing situations; just as clearly, most of them have not identified as homeless while in those situations.

Number of types of homelessness-related experiences	Respondents
0 ¹	4810
1	177
2	39
3	10
4	2
5	2
6	2

Out of roughly 5000 respondents, 55 faced two or more of the six types of experiences. Proportionately, they would represent around 350 UAlberta undergraduate students. These 55 at-risk students display significant variation with respect to the survey’s demographics and populations of interest. (The following charts exclude the relatively few students who preferred not to answer some or all of the questions involved.)

¹ Includes students who did not answer the question; students who selected ‘prefer not to answer’; and students who answered that they did not face any of these experiences.

Homelessness-related experiences by gender

'At-risk' = 2+ types of homelessness-related experiences since enrolled at UAlberta



Homelessness-related experiences by FNMI identity

'At-risk' = 2+ types of homelessness-related experiences since enrolled at UAlberta



Homelessness-related experiences by LGBTQ2S+ identity

'At-risk' = 2+ types of homelessness-related experiences since enrolled at UAlberta



Homelessness-related experiences by disability identity

'At-risk' = 2+ types of homelessness-related experiences since enrolled at UAlberta



Homelessness-related experiences for students who parent

'At-risk' = 2+ types of homelessness-related experiences since enrolling at UAlberta

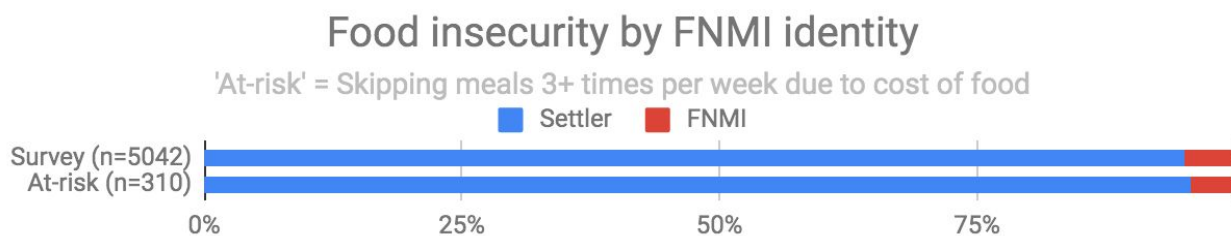
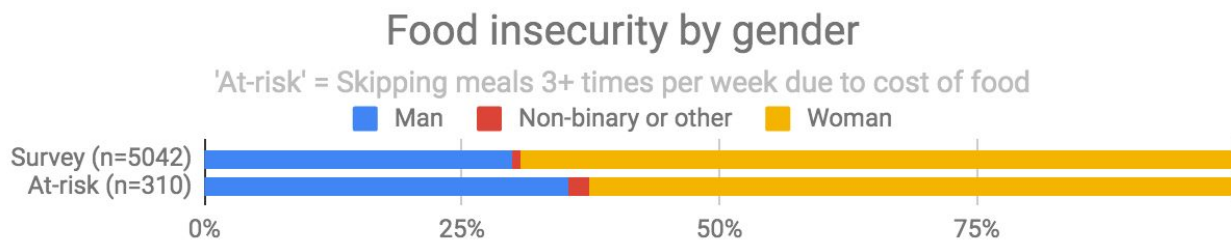


Spotlight on Food Insecurity

The 2018 survey evaluated food insecurity with this question: *“Do you skip meals due to the cost of food? (Choose the closest answer.)”* For later approximation purposes, each response has been assigned a numeric value that reflects increasing severity.

Answers	Rating	Respondents
No ²	0	2316
Yes, once or twice a month	1	1061
Yes, once or twice a week	2	548
Yes, more than twice a week	3	310

310 students, representing 7.3% of those who opted to answer the question, skip meals three or more times per week due to the cost of food. These 310 at-risk students display significant variation with respect to the survey’s demographics and populations of interest. (The following charts exclude the relatively few students who preferred not to answer some or all of the questions involved.)



² Includes only those students who answered that they never skipped meals due to the cost of food.

Food insecurity by LGBTQ2S+ identity

'At-risk' = Skipping meals 3+ times per week due to cost of food



Food insecurity by disability identity

'At-risk' = Skipping meals 3+ times per week due to cost of food



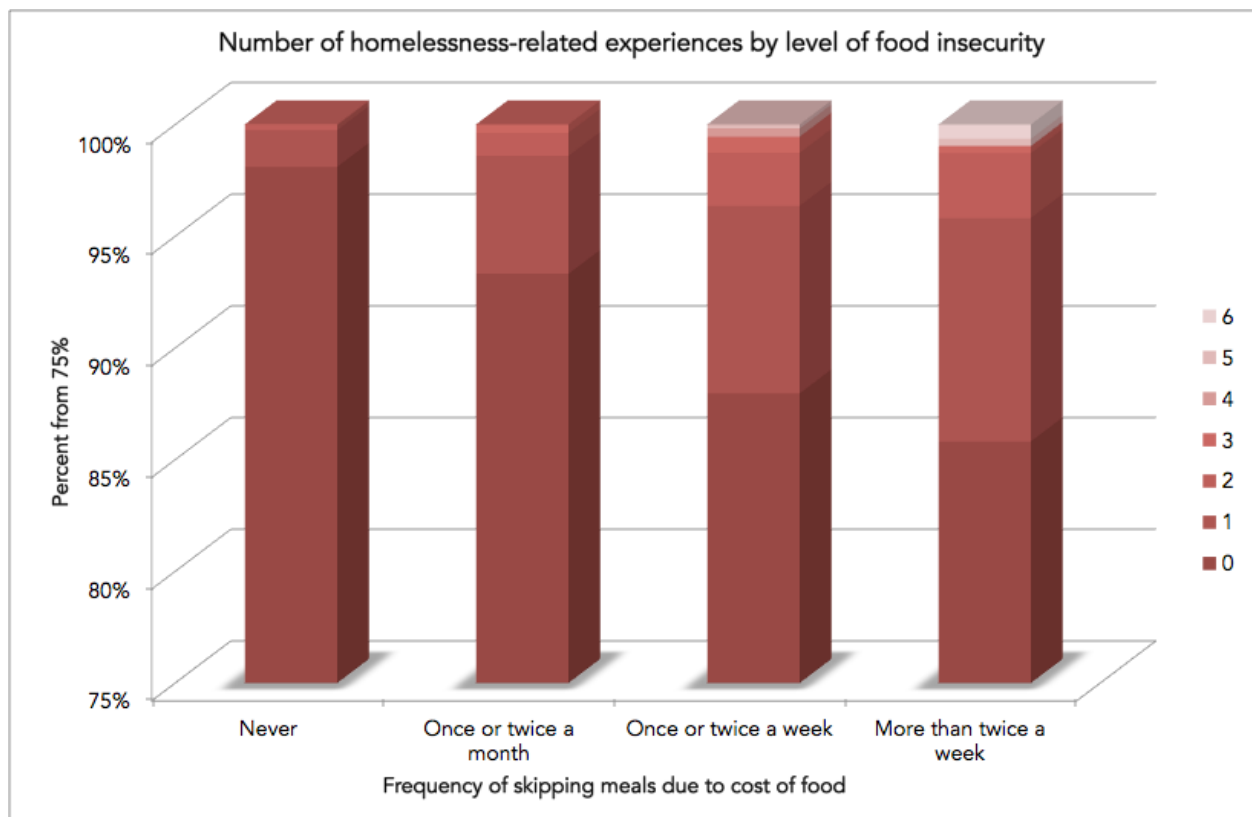
Food insecurity for students who parent

'At-risk' = Skipping meals 3+ times per week due to cost of food



Correlation between Homelessness and Food Insecurity

As discussed, the UAlberta undergraduate student body sees varying but overlapping distributions of food insecurity and homelessness-related experiences. Homelessness-related experiences remain much more rare than food insecurity, but for many UAlberta students, there is some degree of correlation between food insecurity and homelessness. A Pearson correlation using Excel's CORREL function found a weak but positive relationship of 0.18 between food insecurity value (0-3) and number of types of homelessness-related experiences (0-6).



If a student skips meals at least once a week due to the cost of food, they have a one-in-five chance of a homelessness-related experience:

How often do you skip meals due to the cost of food?	Average number of types of homelessness-related experiences (0-6)
Never	0.02
Once or twice a month	0.09
Once or twice a week	0.18 (one out of five)
More than twice a week	0.22 (one out of five)

The more types of homelessness-related experiences a student reported, the worse their food security situation:

Number of types of homelessness-related experiences	Average level of food insecurity (0.0-3.0)
0	0.7
1	1.4
2	1.7
3	1.5
4	2.0 (skipping meals once or twice a week)
5	2.5
6	3.0 (skipping meals more than twice a week)

Note that many of the numbers involved here are very small and not generalizable; a total of six students reported four or more types of homelessness-related experiences. At minimum, however, this correlation indicates that a relative handful of students are experiencing both homelessness and food insecurity at serious levels.

Homelessness-related experience	Average level of food insecurity (0.0-3.0)
Been evicted or forced to leave my residence	1.5
Slept at the Commuter Study Hostel because I had nowhere else to go	1.7
Slept on campus, other than at the Commuter Study Hostel, because I had nowhere else to go	1.6
Stayed in a car, abandoned building, or other place not meant for housing	1.8
'Couch-surfed' or stayed with friends without paying formal rent	1.5
Identified as homeless	2.2
None of the above	0.7

Students who have any homelessness-related experience are at least twice as likely to struggle with the price of food. That includes apparently innocuous or more-common experiences like couch-surfing or being evicted. There is little difference between the precarious food situation of a student living in a car or abandoned building and a student who sleeps on campus because they have nowhere else to go.