

FROM NEEDS TO ACTION: SUPPORTING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT CSULB

Student Participatory Action Research
and Knowledge (SPARK) Program



BACKGROUND

June 2025

Social support is an important factor in college students' quality of life, mental health, and academic achievement, but its relationship to students' experiences of basic needs is understudied. A team of five MPH student researchers at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) conducted a survey to explore peer, family, and institutional support among undergraduate students and how different types of support shape students' basic needs experiences, access to resources, and use of basic needs services.



METHODS



Literature review on social support and basic needs for college students



Online survey of 280 CSULB undergraduate students



Quantitative analysis to assess the role of peer, family, and institutional support in basic needs experiences & resource use



Qualitative analysis to explore student recommendations for social support in relation to basic needs

THE CENTER FOR EQUITABLE HIGHER EDUCATION

The Center for Equitable Higher Education at California State University, Long Beach (CEHE) ensures that California higher education systems prioritize student basic needs and implement equitable and effective programs so that students thrive and graduate. CEHE works to:

- Amplify the voices of students and practitioners as the experts of their experience;
- Build evidence on student basic needs in partnership with students, faculty, practitioners and other leaders in the field; and
- Support practitioners, policy makers and other leaders as they work to meet student basic needs.



<http://www.csulb.edu/cehe>

THEME #1: PEER SUPPORT



ISSUE

Students who experience basic needs challenges, such as food and housing insecurity, may feel isolated from their peers due to perceived stigma. We explored the association between food security and students' 1) loneliness and 2) sense of belonging to the campus community.



FINDINGS

Within the study sample, over half (54.2%) had low or very low food security. Students who were food insecure were four times less likely to feel a sense of belonging on campus, compared to their food secure peers.

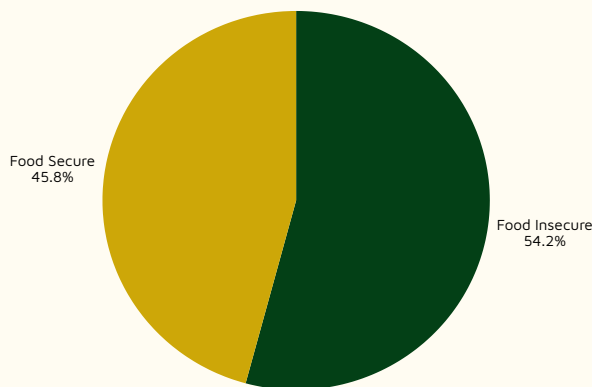


FIGURE 1. FOOD SECURITY PREVALENCE

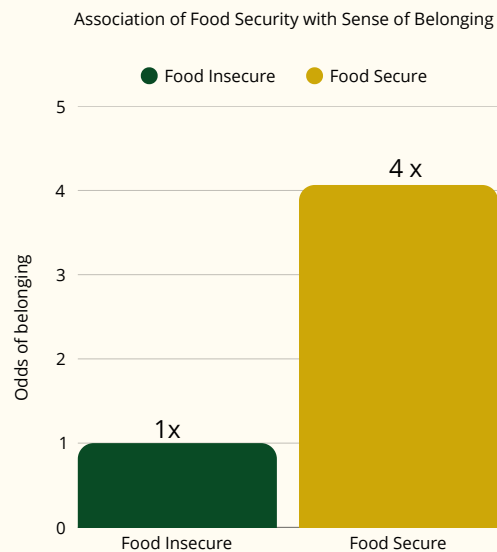


FIGURE 2. FOOD SECURITY AND BELONGINGNESS



STUDENT VOICES

"My peers, such as friends and roommates, influence my basic needs by sharing responsibilities like cooking meals, splitting rent, and exchanging financial advice. Information about budgeting, meal planning, and household tasks is often communicated openly, helping to balance the load and ensure everyone's needs are met." (Male, 18, 1st-year student)

"My peers share information about meal deals at school, helping with food choices. However, there's also peer pressure to hang out and spend money on food, which can impact my budget." (Female, 24, 2nd-year student)

THEME #2: FAMILY SUPPORT



ISSUE

Nationwide, nearly 1 in 4 college students lives with at least one parent. Family can be a valuable resource for college students by providing material and/or emotional support. We explored whether living with a parent, roommate, or alone was associated with food insecurity among undergraduate students.



FINDINGS

More than half of the students surveyed (55.4%) lived with at least one parent. Over a quarter (26.4%) lived with another CSULB student. Food insecurity was significantly less prevalent for students living alone or with a CSULB student. Though not statistically significant ($p=0.069$), students living with a parent more commonly experienced food insecurity.

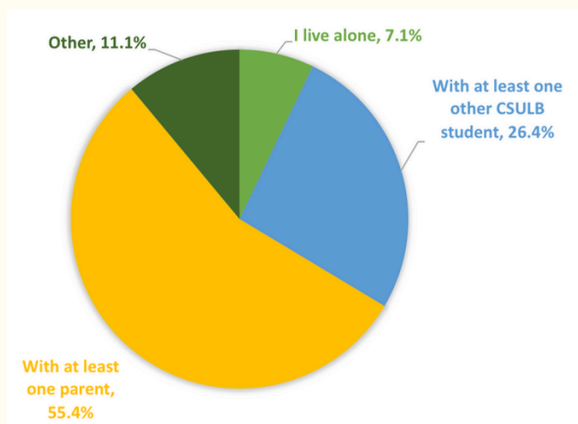


FIGURE 3. STUDENT LIVING SITUATION

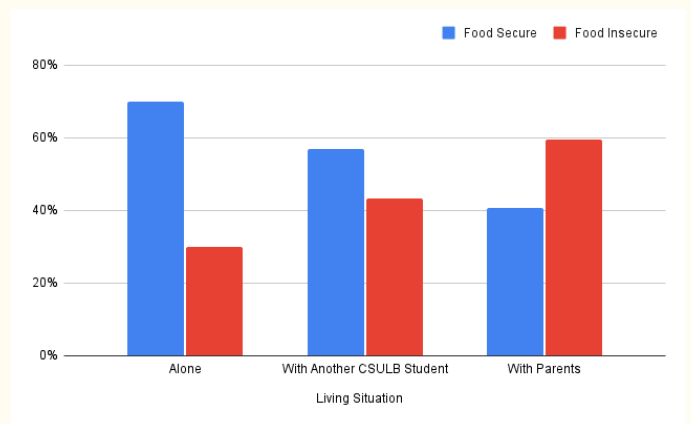


FIGURE 4. LIVING SITUATION AND FOOD SECURITY



STUDENT VOICES

"I am financially independent from my family. This is mainly because they don't have enough resources to sustain my living expenses as well as their own. In other words, they already have a lot on their plate so I am financially self sustaining for as long as I'm still attending school at CSULB. They always say they're willing to help, but I know better to stretch what little resources they have to accommodate for me." (Female, 21, 2nd-year student)

"My family has experienced food insecurity during early years of my childhood. [...] Because of this dynamic, I've learned the importance of helping each other out even if it means making sacrifices." (Female, 22, 3rd-year student)

THEME #3: INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT



ISSUE

While many college campuses, including CSULB, provide basic needs resources, systems-level barriers may make it challenging for students to utilize these resources. We examined one such potential barrier—the distance that a student lives from school—and its association with students' use of on-campus services provided by the Basic Needs program.



FINDINGS

Nearly half (48.6%) of the students surveyed lived more than 10 miles away from the CSULB campus. Distance from campus was inversely correlated with students' use of Basic Needs services overall. However, students living 3+ miles from campus were significantly more likely to use meals assistance, emergency grants, and financial literacy resources.

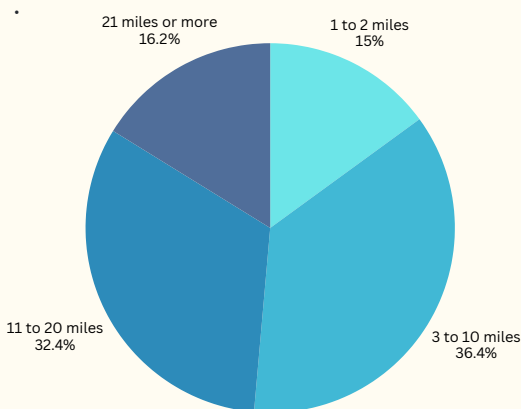


FIGURE 5. DISTANCE OF STUDENT RESIDENCE FROM CAMPUS

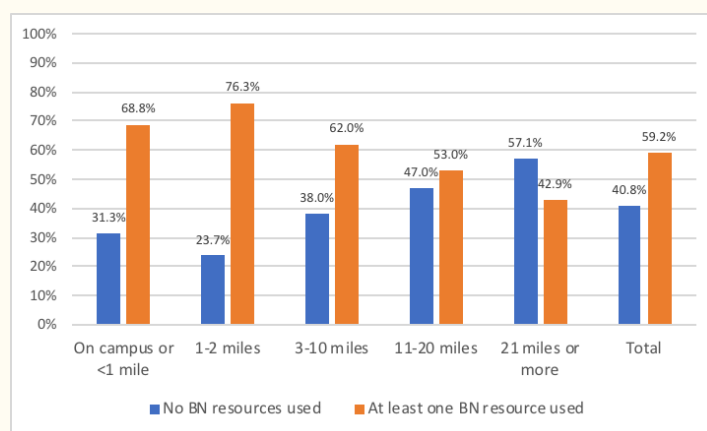


FIGURE 6. BASIC NEEDS SERVICE USE BY DISTANCE FROM CAMPUS



STUDENT VOICES

"On campus housing is increasing in price to where I cannot support myself living here next year even though I really enjoy living on campus. And off-campus housing is incredibly expensive as well and it becomes hard to support myself." (Female, 21, 1st-year student)

I feel supported by the amount of resources that are available. However, there are times when the resources don't exactly fit a persons needs, or the service is overwhelmed by the amount of students in need of said service. For example, CAPS...is constantly overwhelmed by the amount of students trying to make appointments, and not enough counselors. This prevents students from actually being supported." (Female, 22, 3rd-year student)

THEME #4: SPECIAL POPULATIONS



ISSUE

Basic needs experiences, social support, and resource utilization can vary widely by student demographics. We highlight one often-overlooked population—older students—and examine their use of basic needs resources on campus. We also draw from student voices in identifying additional populations who face greater barriers to utilizing basic needs resources.



FINDINGS

While some resources, like the Beach Pantry, were uniformly used across age groups, use of other food and housing resources was significantly greater in older students (ages 24+). For older students, non-use of resources was most commonly due to lack of awareness, stigma, and services not meeting needs, whereas non-use among younger students was most commonly due to lack of need.

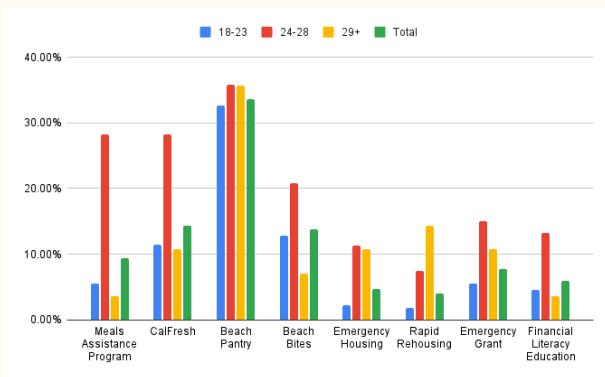


FIGURE 7. OVERALL BASIC NEEDS
RESOURCE USE, BY AGE

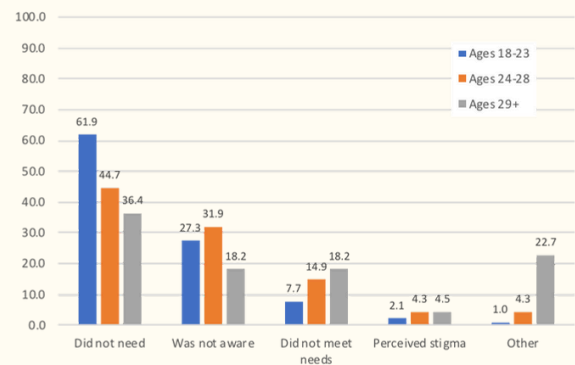


FIGURE 8. REASONS FOR NON-USE OF
HOUSING RESOURCES, BY AGE



STUDENT VOICES

“I wish there were more awareness for older students. I think we are a growing demographic—older generations returning to school—and it would be really helpful to not feel so out of place.” (Female, 31, 4th-year student)

“The CalFresh program would have been very helpful when I was unemployed but I didn’t qualify then. [...] Money and housing support would be wonderful for more than just emergencies.” (Female, 23, 2nd-year student)

The resources offered by the Basic Needs program are very helpful. I didn’t know about them until last semester. These resources should be promoted more throughout campus, such as by using posters with the resources offered.” (Female, 26, 3rd-year student)

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CALL TO ACTION



Recommendation #1: Targeted communications campaign to raise awareness of basic needs resources

- Consistent messaging about basic needs resources through email, social media, in-class presentations, & print materials
- Training peer educators to engage in outreach and navigate services

Recommendation #2: Small changes for bigger impact

- Adjusting existing resources to meet the needs of a diverse student body; for example, by extending food pantry hours
- Engaging community and campus partners to connect students to a wider net of resources, such as meal vouchers, rental assistance, and budgeting

Recommendation #3: Research evidence to support evidence-based programming

- Partnering with researchers and practitioners to generate high-quality research evidence and recommendations on student basic needs
- Amplifying student voices and experiences in basic needs research

Recommendation #4: Re-imagining basic needs in the context of social support

- Creating “Beach Family” cohorts to foster long-term campus connections that can serve as a support system for students
- Providing families with information about the important role they play in student success during orientation and enrollment events
- Engaging students, faculty, and staff in a collaborative effort to address student basic needs across the institution



ADDRESSING BASIC NEEDS MAKES A DIFFERENCE!

“Receiving 10 free meals at the dining halls helped me greatly when I was homeless. The emergency grant helped me get my mother and I a car and helped us afford a room to rent after being evicted. Thank you!” (Female, 21, 2nd-year student)