



# **Food Insecurity at CUNY: Results from a Survey of CUNY Undergraduate Students**



**April 2011**

**A Report from:  
The Campaign for a Healthy CUNY**

by

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*“One of the saddest moments that I have experienced recently occurred at a Council of Presidents meeting when some presidents indicated to me and other members of the chancellery that more and more students appear on their campuses are hungry. They have not had breakfast or may have missed a meal the night before. In light of the difficult economic times facing very low income students, I have asked the Office of Student Affairs to develop ... programs to focus on issues of hunger, nutrition and homelessness.”*

Chancellor Matthew Goldstein, CUNY Board of Trustees Meeting, April 27, 2009

## **Introduction**

In this series of reports, we present the results of a survey conducted among CUNY undergraduate students in summer and fall of 2010 examining food insecurity, housing instability, and a range of mental health issues. The motivation for the survey was concern on the part of the CUNY administration, reflected in Chancellor Goldstein’s comments above, about student hunger, homelessness, and psychological well-being in light of the economic recession. Following Chancellor Goldstein’s comments, the Office of Student Affairs created a committee co-chaired by Hunter College Distinguished Professor of Public Health Nicholas Freudenberg and Director of CUNY Mental Health and Wellness Services Luis Manzo. The formation of this committee was an important early step in the Healthy CUNY Initiative, an effort sponsored by the CUNY School of Public Health at Hunter College and the CUNY Chancellor’s Office, to promote health and well-being CUNY- students, faculty and staff. The committee of CUNY faculty, students and staff (listed in the Acknowledgements) met several times in 2009 and 2010 to design the survey and plan initiatives to better meet the food, housing, and psychological needs of CUNY students. The survey was conducted with support and advice from the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, the Baruch College Survey Research Center, and trained CUNY students who served as data collectors.

For each of the key topics covered by the survey--food insecurity, housing instability, and psychological well-being—we have developed a policy brief describing and interpreting the survey data. In this brief, we define our use of the term food insecurity, describe the magnitude of the problem among CUNY undergraduate students, identify subpopulations that experience high levels of food insecurity, and present data that compares the experiences of food insecurity among CUNY undergraduates to the experiences of residents of New York City, other college students, and other relevant populations. We also describe the kinds of services that CUNY and other agencies provide to address the problem of food insecurity, and the degree to which students are using these services and programs to help meet their food needs. The results reported here reflect the opinions and judgments of the authors, listed at the end, not of the City University of New York as an institution.

## **Survey Design and Methodology**

The findings in this report come from a survey that was conducted in the summer and fall of 2010 with two samples of CUNY undergraduate students. The survey questions, developed by the previously mentioned committee, asked students about their experiences with food insecurity, housing instability, and psychological problems in the last 12 months. The survey also asked students to describe their basic demographic and academic characteristics. We used the

same survey tool with the two samples, which were recruited in different ways to enable us to get more complete assessments of the food, housing, and psychological needs of CUNY undergraduates. The first round of the survey, labeled the CUNY Representative Sample, was carried out by Baruch College Survey Research (BCSR) on behalf of the Healthy CUNY investigators. BCSR staff administered the survey via Internet or telephone to a sample of 1,086 CUNY undergraduate students recruited to match all CUNY undergraduates by gender, age, race/ethnicity, cumulative grade point average, college, type of college, and class standing. The sample included respondents from all 17 CUNY community college and four-year schools where undergraduates are enrolled. The participating campuses were: Baruch College, Borough of Manhattan Community College (CC), Bronx CC, Brooklyn College, City College, College of Staten Island, Hostos CC, Hunter College, John Jay College, Kingsborough CC, LaGuardia CC, Medgar Evers College, NYC Tech, Queens College, Queensborough CC, and York College.

BCSR's data collection and data management activities were as follows. A total of 6,883 randomly sampled students were invited to participate in the survey by email, of whom a total 1,086 responded, a response rate of 15.7%. To ensure that the resulting sample was representative of the CUNY undergraduate population as a whole, the data were weighted by key demographic variables. Of the 1,086 respondents, 620 (57%) completed the survey online and 466 (43%) completed the survey by telephone. The telephone interview option was added for those who did not respond to the online option within two weeks and for those whose email addresses were determined to be invalid. The questionnaire was available in English only. All telephone interviews were conducted by trained interviewers in the BCSR computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) facility.

The second round of the survey, labeled as the CUNY Targeted Sample, was administered by trained CUNY students, who distributed and collected the surveys in person to students on the eight campuses with the highest rates of students receiving public assistance. This sample includes 1,114 students from Borough of Manhattan, Bronx, Hostos, Kingsborough, La Guardia, and Queensborough Community Colleges, and John Jay and Medgar Evers Colleges, both of which are four-year schools. While this sample was not representative of all CUNY students, it allowed us to compare higher need campuses with all campuses and to ascertain whether the needs of students who were reached by face-to-face encounters were significantly different than those of students were reached by telephone or online. Table 1 at the end of this report provides descriptive data for the two samples.

In this report, we present findings only from the CUNY Representative Sample unless otherwise noted. In analyzing the data from this sample, we began with analyses that describe the sample demographics. We then explored differences in the outcomes (food insecurity, housing instability, and measures of mental health) by key variables, such as race, age, and income. Predictors of these outcomes will be examined in future analyses. In Box 1 in the Appendix we describe the limitations of our survey.

## **Defining Food Insecurity**

Food insecurity is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as having “limited or uncertain access to nutritious, safe foods necessary to lead a healthy lifestyle.” The USDA notes that “households that experience food insecurity have reduced quality or variety of meals and may have irregular food intake.” To assess food insecurity, we asked four questions about food experiences in the past 12 months. These were:

1. How often did you worry that you would not have enough money for food?
2. How often did you cut or skip a meal because you didn’t have enough money to buy food?
3. How often were you unable to eat balanced or nutritious meals because of a lack of money?
4. How often did you go hungry because of a lack of money?

We defined a student as “food insecure” if they answered “often” or “sometimes” to two or more of these four questions.

## **Findings**

### *Prevalence of Food Insecurity*

Based on this definition, the survey showed that:

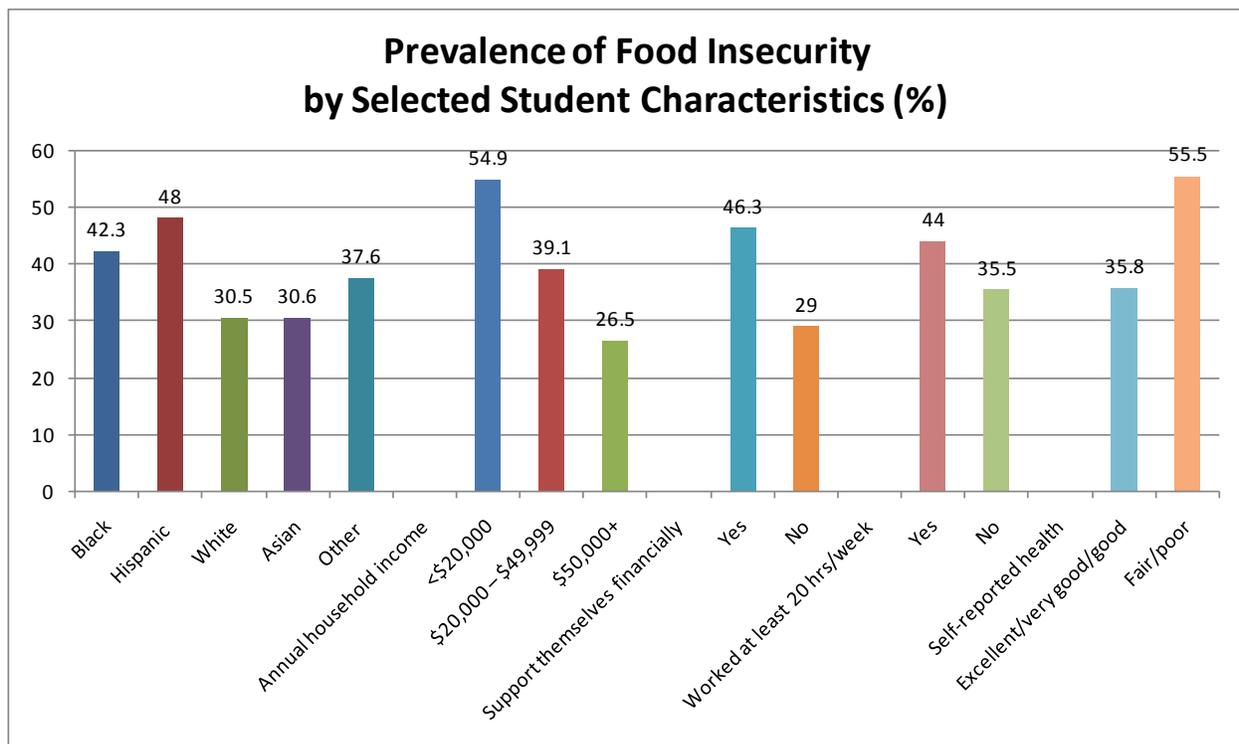
- Overall, 39.2% of CUNY students in our sample, about two in five, reported that they experienced food insecurity in the past 12 months. Applying this rate to the estimated enrollment of 250,000 undergraduate students in the Spring 2010 semester, this suggests that almost 100,000 CUNY students experienced some level of food insecurity in the last year.<sup>1</sup>
- About twice as many students reported that they often or sometimes worried that they would not have enough money for food (45.1%) as reported that they often or sometimes went hungry because of a lack of money (22.7%), suggesting that the highest level of food insecurity (hunger) is less common than lower levels.
- In addition, 19.1% of respondents reported that they knew of other CUNY students, not including themselves, who had food or hunger problems including lack, limited or uncertain availability of food in the last year. This suggests that many CUNY students are unaware of the extent of the problem of food insecurity among their peers.
- Some populations of CUNY students had significantly higher rates of food insecurity than others. For example, Black and Latino students were about 1.5 times more likely to report food insecurity than White and Asian students. Students reporting household incomes of less than \$20,000 a year (about 26% of all CUNY undergraduates) were more than twice as likely to report food insecurity as those with household incomes of more than \$50,000 a year. Students who support themselves financially were 1.6 times as likely to report food insecurity as those not supporting themselves. Students working more than 20 hours per week had a higher rate of food insecurity than those who did not work

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<sup>1</sup> See Box 1 in the Appendix for a discussion of the limitations of this estimate.

(44.0% vs. 35.5%). Finally, rates of food insecurity were higher among those reporting health problems. Students who reported that their health was fair or poor were more than 1.5 times more likely to report food insecurity than those who rated their health as excellent or good. Students who reported common symptoms of depression were more than 2 times as likely to report food insecurity as those without such symptoms.

- Almost a quarter of CUNY students (24.3 %) reported both food insecurity and housing instability. CUNY students over the age of 21 and those earning federal work study were more likely to report both problems than young students and those not receiving work study support.



### *CUNY Student Use of Food-Related Services*

Despite the prevalence of food insecurity among CUNY students, few reported using food assistance services and programs. The survey found that:

- Only 7.2% of students reported using the services of a food pantry or other food assistance program in the last 12 months.
- Only 6.4% of students reported currently receiving food stamps (i.e., SNAP benefits) even though 18% thought they were eligible and 16.6% had previously applied for this benefit.
- Among students currently receiving food stamps, 63% reported food insecurity, suggesting that for almost two-thirds of the recipients, food stamps were not sufficient to provide food security.

## Comparisons

To better interpret the meaning of the findings on food insecurity reported here, we compare the prevalence of food insecurity among CUNY students to rates for the United States and New York City populations and to other college students. According to a 2009 USDA Survey, about 20% of US households worried that their food would run out before the family got money to buy more, and almost 5% of adults reported that in the last year they were hungry because they could not afford to buy food. According to USDA, between 2006 and 2008, an average of 1.4 million New York City residents lived in food insecure households, about 17% of the city's population. This suggests that the prevalence of food insecurity among CUNY students (39%) is substantially higher than among US and NYC households and adults. In its 2010 annual poll of a sample of New York City residents, the Food Bank of New York City found that 37 percent reported difficulty affording food, a rate comparable to the CUNY finding.

In the only other study of food insecurity among college students that was found, a 2008 survey at the University of Hawaii at Manoa found that 21% of students were food insecure and 24% at risk of food insecurity.

## Next Steps

The data presented here suggest that many CUNY students experience food insecurity and that existing programs are not adequately addressing the problem of food insecurity. In the past few years, CUNY has initiated several new programs to address students' needs. For example, all CUNY community college campuses now have Single Stop offices, a program that links eligible students to government programs like the food stamp program and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) supplemental food program. Some campuses, like Kingsborough Community College and Hostos Community College, also offer food pantries on campus for students in need. However, the findings from this survey suggest that additional action is needed to ensure that CUNY students have the food security they need to productively pursue an education. Among the strategies that warrant discussion are:

- Efforts to enroll more CUNY students in the federal food stamp program
- Partnerships with food companies to provide discounts on healthy foods to CUNY students
- Increased linkages between New York City's many food assistance programs and CUNY campuses
- More on-site food pantries and food assistance programs
- Improved availability of healthy and affordable food through CUNY food services

Based on the findings from this survey, the Healthy CUNY Initiative will in the coming months develop specific recommendations to reduce food insecurity among CUNY students. If you have suggestions for addressing the needs described in this report or feedback on the survey, please send them to: [healthcunysurvey@gmail.com](mailto:healthcunysurvey@gmail.com). We look forward to your comments and ideas.

## Appendix

<b>Table 1: Comparison of Sample Characteristics</b>		
	<b>Representative Sample % (n)</b>	<b>Targeted Sample % (n)</b>
<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	n=1086	n=1114
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	58.7% (637)	62.6% (683)
Male	41.3% (449)	37.4% (408)
<b>Age (years)</b>		
<21	26.0% (282)	45.6% (493)
21-24	39.7% (431)	30.6% (331)
25-29	17.9% (194)	10.9% (118)
≥30	16.4% (178)	12.9% (139)
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
African-American/Black (non-Hispanic)	24.2% (260)	30.6% (335)
Hispanic	29.5% (318)	37.2% (407)
White (non-Hispanic)	20.0% (215)	10.7% (117)
Asian (non-Hispanic)	17.3% (186)	11.2% (123)
Other (non-Hispanic)	9.1% (98)	10.2% (112)
<b>US Born</b>		
Yes	58.1% (626)	57.4% (622)
No	41.9% (452)	42.6% (461)
<b>Has child(ren) in household</b>		
Yes	15.0% (161)	22.6% (247)
No	85.0% (917)	77.4% (847)
<b>Annual household income</b>		
<\$20,000	26.4% (272)	25.9% (268)
\$20,000 – \$49,999	27.3% (281)	22.4% (232)
\$50,000+	21.1% (217)	12.2% (126)
Not Sure	25.2% (260)	39.6% (410)
<b>Type of campus</b>		
Community College <sup>1</sup>	36.1% (390)	67.1% (735)
4-year College <sup>2</sup>	63.9% (692)	32.9% (361)
<b>Student Status (Spring 2010)</b>		
Full-time (12+ credits)	65.5% (704)	55.6% (603)
Part-time (<12 credits)	32.9% (354)	44.3% (480)
<b>Problem Outcomes in last year</b>		
Food insecurity	39.1% (410)*	45.4% (475)
Housing instability	42.7% (464)*	48.3% (538)
Both food insecurity and housing instability	24.3% (255)*	31.1% (325)
Psychological problems that interfere with school or work	50.4% (439)*	56.8% (447)
Depressive symptoms	19.3% (187)*	27.6% (195)

\*Data on problem outcomes not weighted here to enable direct comparison to Targeted Sample.

### **Box 1: Limitations of this Study**

Our study has several limitations. It is possible that our sample is biased, with students with the problems under study choosing to respond to the survey at higher rates than those unaffected. This would overestimate the true prevalence of the outcomes of concern. It is also possible that students experiencing food insecurity or housing instability would be less likely to have working email addresses or telephones or would choose not to disclose possibly stigmatizing problems, either of which could lead to an underrepresentation in our sample and thus an underestimate of the true prevalence of these conditions. The low response rate, 15.7%, is a cause for concern, although we did weight the resulting sample on several key demographic measures to ensure that it resembled the population of CUNY undergraduates as a whole on these characteristics.

A comparison of the rates of outcomes of concern between the representative and the targeted sample (last row in the table in the Appendix) shows statistically significant higher rates of the six outcomes of concern in the targeted sample. Since the targeted sample includes higher proportions of low income and Black and Latino students, groups with higher rates of food insecurity and housing instability in the population as a whole, this finding is not unexpected. However, the fact that two independent survey methods each showed high rates of problems provides some reassurance that these findings reflect a valid cause of concern. Whatever the limitations of the surveys, these data are the most complete available on the prevalence of these problems among CUNY students. Whether they over- or under-estimate the true prevalence of these problems, they indicate a clear need for action to ensure that all CUNY students can meet the basic needs of food and shelter that are a prerequisite for academic success.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors acknowledge the contributions from the committee that helped to design the survey: Mimi Abramowitz (Social Welfare, Hunter College), Laurie Beck (Student Affairs, CUNY), Jon Deutsch (Kingsborough Community College, Culinary Management), Keville Frederickson (Nursing, Lehman College), Mavis Hall (Student Affairs, CUNY), Stephen Loffredo (CUNY Law School), Iris Mercado (Nutrition, Hostos Community College), Lorraine Mongiello (student, CUNY School of Public Health), Anessa Novasio (student, CUNY Law School), Jan Poppendieck (Sociology, Hunter College), Nancy Romer (Psychology, Brooklyn College), Christopher Rosas (Student Affairs, CUNY), Thomas Salerni (Student Affairs, CUNY), Jessica Spalter (Student Affairs, CUNY), and Kevin Tucker (Student Affairs, CUNY). Thanks also to the staff of Baruch Survey Research, including Micheline Blum, Martin Frankel, Alexandra Derian, and Alexis Brown, to Christine Wade and the staff of at CUNY Institutional Research, and to Heidi Lopez at Kingsborough Community College's Single Stop office. We also thank the student teams who collected data from the targeted sample: Vladimir Charles (Borough of Manhattan Community College), Gena Derosena (Hunter College), Meltem Erdogan (Brooklyn College), Ginette Faustin (Brooklyn College), Amy Freeman (CUNY School of Public Health), Evonie Joseph (Hunter College), Wafa Hawamdeh (Brooklyn College), Katrina Montgomery (City College of New York), Ajatshatru Pathak (CUNY School of Public Health), Evelyn Reid (Medgar Evers College), Carolyn Sealy (Medgar Evers College), Stephanie Shuman (Hunter College), Amanda Smith (Queens College), Ruben Suarez (Hostos Community College), Mst Sultana (Brooklyn College), Juanita Sharpe (Medgar Evers College), and Nandini Shroff (CUNY School of Public Health). Finally, we thank the Office of the Chancellor of the City University of New York, the Executive Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs and the Vice-Chancellor for Student Affairs for their support of this work and their helpful comments on earlier drafts. The results reported here reflect the opinions and judgments of the authors, not of the City University of New York as an institution.

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Suggested Citation for this report: Freudenberg N, Manzo L, Jones H, Kwan A, Tsui E, Gagnon M. **Food Insecurity at CUNY: Results from a Survey of CUNY Undergraduate Students.** Healthy CUNY Initiative, City University of New York, April 2011. Available at: <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/cunyfoodinsecurity.pdf>