



Campaign for a Healthy CUNY

NEW REPORTS DOCUMENT FOOD INSECURITY, HOUSING INSTABILITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS AMONG CUNY UNDERGRADUATES --April 26, 2011

The Campaign for a Healthy CUNY, a university-wide initiative to improve the well-being of the university community, today released three policy briefs describing the results of a survey of CUNY undergraduate students conducted in Fall 2010 to determine the prevalence of food insecurity, housing instability and psychological well-being among CUNY students. The survey was developed by a committee of CUNY faculty, staff and students appointed by CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein based on reports from college presidents that more CUNY students were appearing on their campuses hungry. "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 Goldstein told CUNY Trustees in April 2009.

The telephone and email survey was administered by the Baruch Survey Research Center to a randomly selected sample of CUNY students matched on key demographic characteristics to CUNY undergraduates as a whole. A total of 1,086 students responded to the survey and responses were weighted to correspond to the demographic composition of all enrolled CUNY undergraduates.

Among the findings were:

- Two in five (39.2%) CUNY students in the sample reported that they experienced food insecurity in the past 12 months. Applying this rate to the enrollment of 250,000 undergraduate students in the Spring 2010 semester yields an estimate that almost 100,000 CUNY students experienced some level of food insecurity in the last year. Using standard definitions, food insecurity was defined as reporting two or more of the following conditions occurring often or sometimes in the last year: worrying that you would not have enough money for food; cutting or skipping a meal because you did not have enough money to buy food; unable to eat balanced or nutritious meals because of a lack of money; or going hungry because of a lack of money. Almost a quarter of CUNY students (22.7%) reported that they often or sometimes went hungry in the last year because of lack of money.
- More than two in five (41.7%) CUNY students in the sample reported that they had unstable housing. It is estimated that more than 100,000 CUNY students experienced some level of housing instability in the last year. Housing instability was defined as reporting one or more of 12 housing-related problems. The most common problems CUNY students experienced were not having enough money to pay rent (28.6%) and experiencing a rent increase that made it difficult to pay rent (27.7%).
- Almost a quarter of CUNY students (24.3%) in the sample 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 younger students and those not getting work study support.
- Almost one in five students (19%) in the sample met the criteria for depression based on answers to a common screening test (the PHQ-8), suggesting that more than 47,500 undergraduate students at CUNY may have symptoms that meet a common definition of depression.
- About half (49.9%) of the respondents reported that some psychological symptoms associated with depression made it extremely, very or somewhat difficult for them to meet the demands of daily living such as work, taking care of things at home, or getting along with other people.

- Students were also asked to what extent they experienced various psychological, social or interpersonal problems. The most commonly reported problems were stress (reported by 57.2%), finances (49.6%), relationship difficulties (30%), anxiety (26.4%), and depression (23.1%). Disturbingly, more than two in five CUNY students (43.5%) in the sample reported experiencing three or more of these problems in the last year.
- Students also reported that these problems affected their academic progress at CUNY. More than three-quarters of the students experiencing the five most common problems indicated that this problem had an impact on their academic progress.
- Despite the prevalence of these problems, few CUNY students reported getting help:
 - 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.
 - More than 90% of the students reporting depressive symptoms did not report any visits to campus counseling services or the student health center in the last year.

According to Nicholas Freudenberg, Distinguished Professor of Public Health at the City University of New York School of Public Health at Hunter College and Co-Chair of the committee that developed the survey, “These disturbing findings show that a significant portion of CUNY students are experiencing problems related to food, housing and psychological well-being. Most report not getting help, yet we know these problems interfere with academic progress. As the economic crisis continues and as New York City and State and the federal government make further cuts in safety net programs, it is important to strengthen our efforts to ensure that CUNY students have enough to eat, safe affordable housing and psychological support services. By studying these problems and taking action to address them, CUNY once again demonstrates its commitment to the well-being of our students, their families and New York City as a whole.”

In the last year, CUNY has expanded its efforts to meet the needs of its students by:

- Establishing Single Stop Centers on all CUNY community college campuses. Single Stop helps eligible CUNY students enroll in more than 40 public benefits programs.
(<http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/sa/singlestop.html>)
- Improving student counseling and mental health services on CUNY campuses.
- Establishing food pantries on selected CUNY campuses.

In the coming months, the Campaign for a Healthy CUNY is requesting that students, faculty, staff and administrators suggest how the CUNY community can better address the problems described in this report. Please send suggestions to healthcunysurvey@gmail.com.

Full copies of the three reports are available free at:

<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/cunyfoodinsecurity.pdf>
<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/cunyhousinginstability.pdf>
<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/cunypsychwellbeing.pdf>

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