

Food Insecurity Prevalence Among Alabama College Students: Initial Impressions

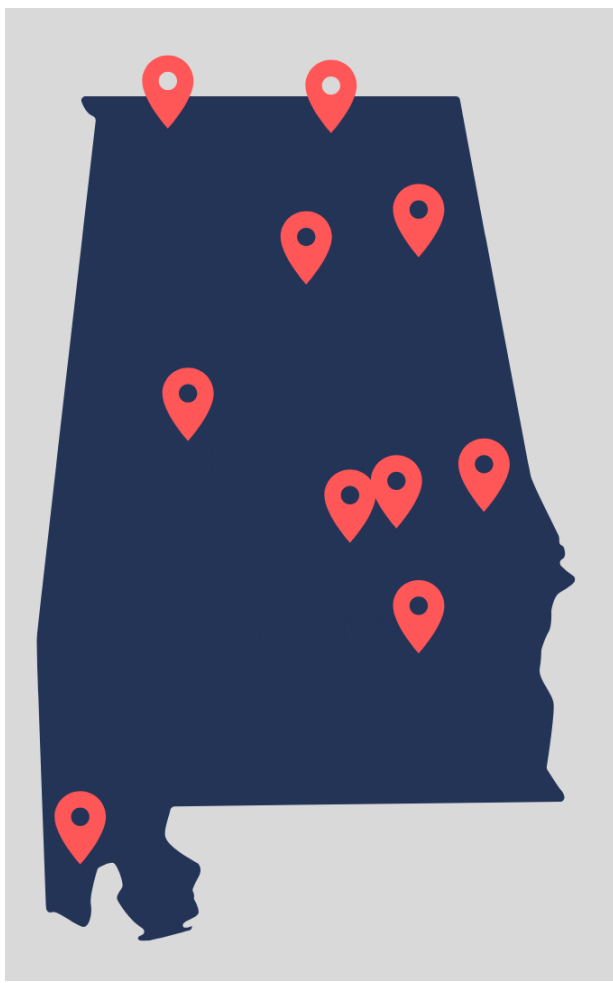
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Introduction

College student food insecurity is a topic of growing interest in academia; it has been linked to decreases in class attendance, academic performance, physical health, and mental health among college students (Phillips, McDaniel, & Croft, 2018; Silva et al., 2017; Mukigi et al., 2018). In spite of the barriers student hunger creates for academic success, research on college student hunger is lacking. As part of an applied research project among 10 four-year universities within the Alabama Campus Coalition for Basic Needs (ACCBN), Auburn University’s Hunger Solutions Institute is coordinating efforts to address campus hunger in practical, data-driven ways. The data discussed below presents initial impressions from aggregated food insecurity prevalence data from 3 of the 10 participant universities.

Purpose

- Identify the prevalence of food insecurity among Alabama four-year college students.
- Evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on issues related to food insecurity among college students.
- Discover demographic indicators that may make students more vulnerable to hunger.



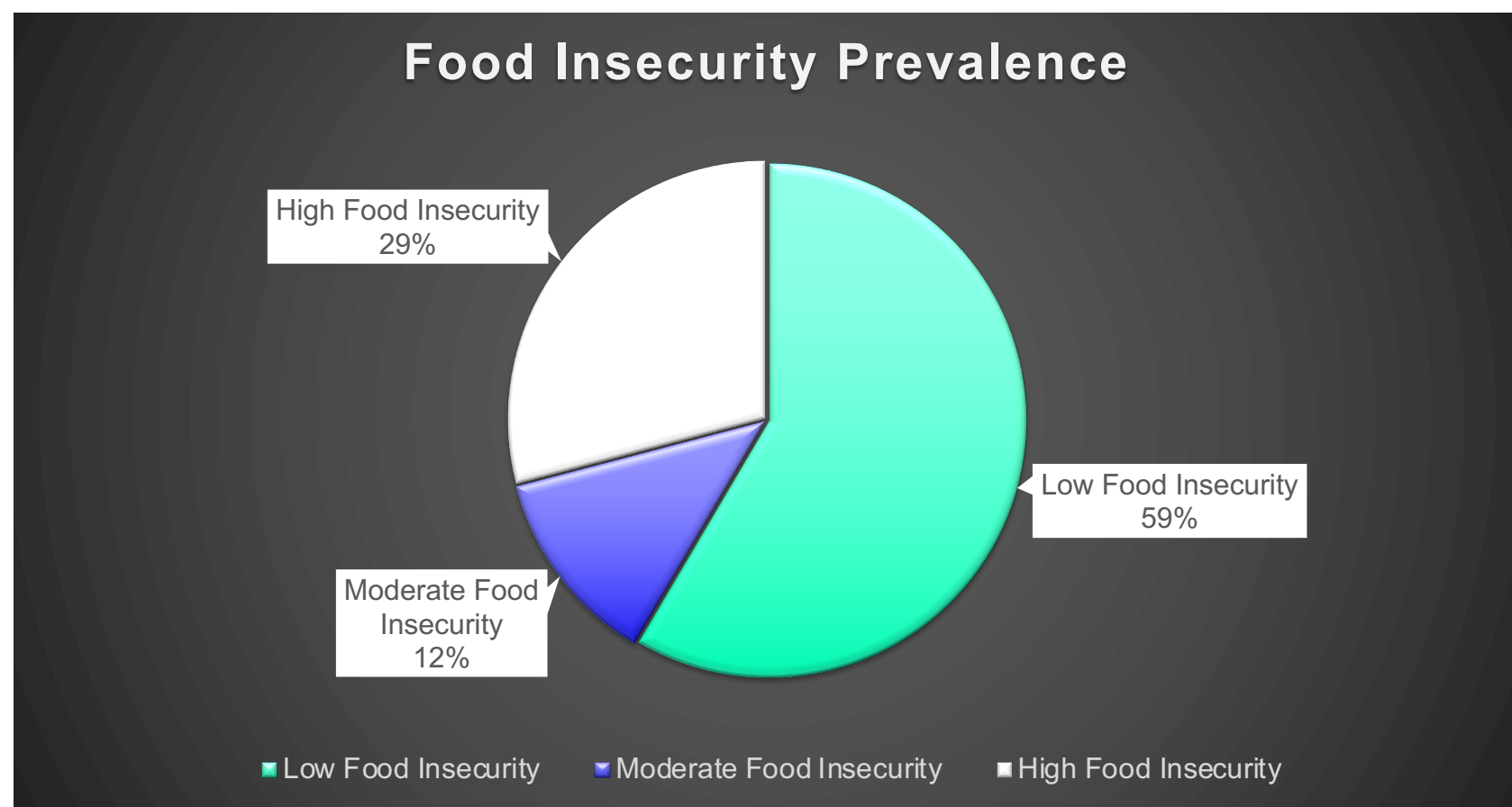
Methods

The online surveys included in this analysis were designed and disseminated by three four-year Alabama universities; each university was required to include the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module: Six-Item Short Form (USDA 2012) and demographic information in the survey. 2,5965 students completed the surveys between October and November 2020. Data was submitted to the Hunger Solutions Institute and data was aggregated, when possible, to analyze common variables.

Data was statistically analyzed for descriptive information, reviewing the impact of the COVID pandemic on student experiences, and to identify factors that may contribute to college student vulnerability for food insecurity.

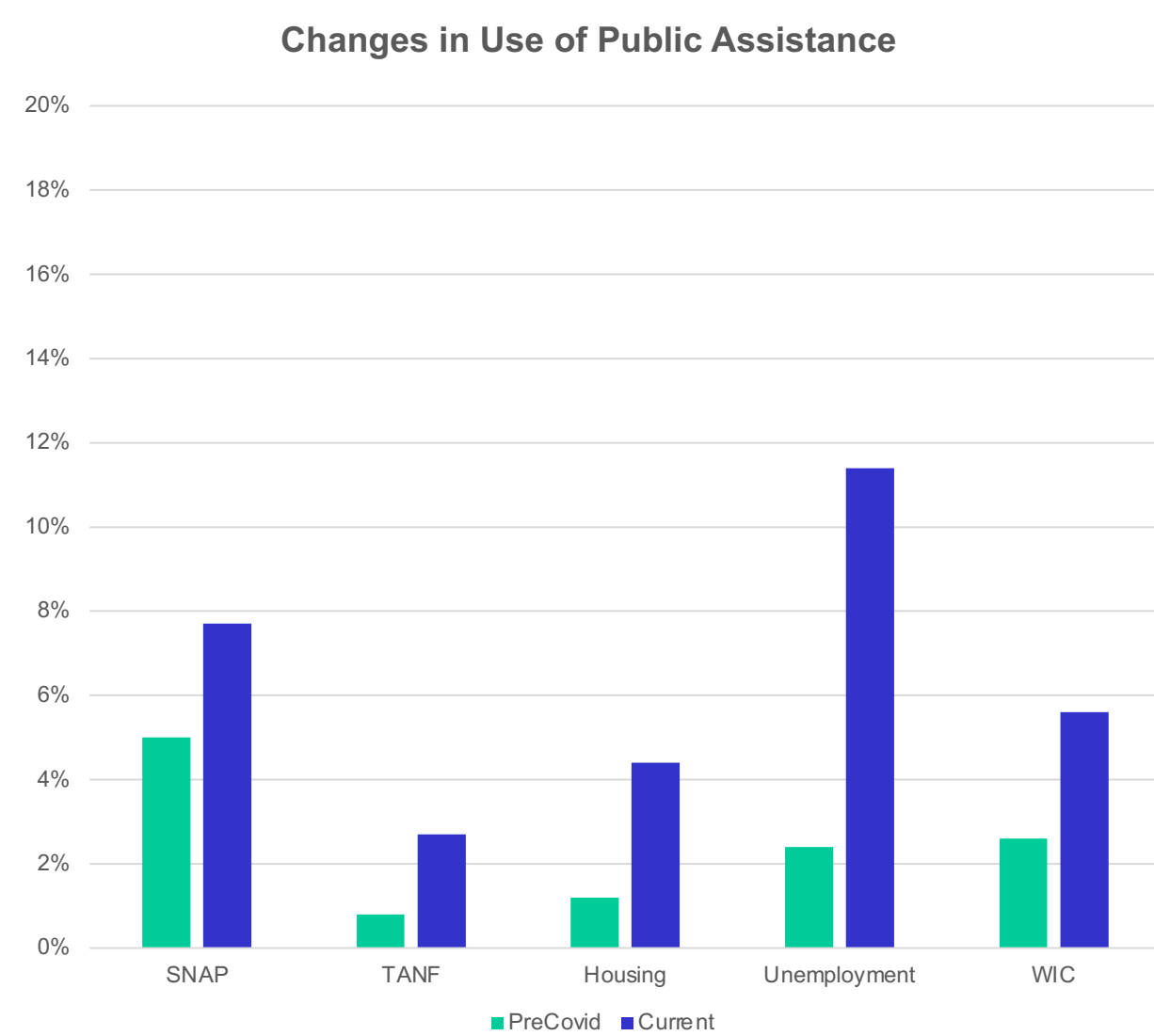
Results

A food insecurity raw score was calculated with guidance from the USDA (2012); descriptors were revised to indicate level (low, medium, high) of food insecurity experienced in the last 30 days. **Aggregate results from the three universities indicate 59% of respondents experienced low food insecurity, 12% experienced moderate food insecurity, and 29% experienced high food insecurity.** 11.1% of the aggregate sample indicated that, in the last 30 days, they had had to skip or cut meals 3 or more days.



Higher food insecurity was associated with:

- **Age** – More food insecurity among younger students
- **Ethnicity** – Highest among Black students
- **Employment** – Highest among individuals working more than one job.
- **Enrollment** - Higher among those in school full-time rather than part-time
- **Government assistance** – Higher food insecurity among those receiving at least one form of government assistance (SNAP, TANF, Housing, Unemployment, WIC)



Respondents indicated **significant changes in type of employment (full-time, part-time, multiple jobs, or contract/seasonal) since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a significant increase in use of public assistance to meet basic needs.**

Discussion

Initial impressions from data collection throughout the state of Alabama suggest that a considerable number of college students in the state (41%) are experiencing at least a moderate level of food insecurity. It is evident that a student’s age, ethnicity, current employment, enrollment, and use of government assistance impacts the likelihood with which the student will experience food insecurity. While it currently remains unclear to what extent the novel coronavirus pandemic has impacted college student food insecurity, it is evident from this data that it has resulted in changes in college students’ employment and an increase in use of public programs designed to assist individuals to meet basic needs.

More research is needed to identify the prevalence and demographics of students who are likely to experience food insecurity. In addition, it is likely that the current public health crisis and the associated economic conditions have increased the need to provide support and assist students to meet basic needs (Feeding America 2020). Efforts should be made to utilize this data to inform the development of university and community programs that assist students in need of food resources.

Literature Cited

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