

Food Security

Abstract Title

Exploring the prevalence and association of food insecurity and psychological distress in university students. N. Hattangadi¹, E. Vogel¹, P. Côté², L. Carroll³. ¹University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Oshawa, ON, ²University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT)-Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College (CMCC) Centre for the Study of Disability Prevention and Rehabilitation, Oshawa, ON, ³University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB.

Abstract

Introduction: In 2016, 45% of Canadian university students reported disabling depression and 65% reported overwhelming anxiety. In the same year, one-third of university students in Canada reported experiencing food insecurity. Although it is hypothesized that food insecurity is associated with poor mental health, few studies have investigated this association.

Objectives: We conducted a cross-sectional study at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in Oshawa, ON to assess the prevalence and association of food insecurity and psychological distress in university students.

Methods: We surveyed undergraduate students (all years) in the Faculties of Health Sciences and Education in October, 2017. We used valid and reliable instruments to measure depression, anxiety and stress symptoms (DASS-21), and food insecurity (USDA six-item tool). We administered a web-based questionnaire in-class, followed by two online waves (e-mail broadcasts) reminding enrolled students to access the online questionnaire. We used logistic regression to compute the association.

Results: We recruited 882 undergraduate students. The 12-month period prevalence of marginal to severe food insecurity was 27% (95% CI: 24.1-29.9). Compared to food secure participants, those with marginal food insecurity or moderate-severe food insecurity were more likely to report psychological distress (OR=2.2; 95% CI 1.3-3.6 and OR= 3.4; 95% CI 1.8-6.6, respectively).

Conclusions: We found a strong association between food insecurity and psychological distress in undergraduate university students. Further investigations are needed to determine whether food insecurity is a risk factor for the development of psychological distress in this population.

Significance to the field of dietetics: Findings illuminate the invisible experience of food insecurity in university students and its potential impact on mental health. Dietitians are well positioned to collaborate with administrators, faculty, Ministries of Higher Education, and others, in developing short- and long-term strategies to reduce its negative impact on university students.