

# The prevalence of food insecurity among UK university students

A.A. Aldubaybi<sup>1</sup>, L.J. Coneyworth<sup>1</sup> and P.H. Jethwa<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Division of Food, Nutrition and Dietetics, School of Biosciences, University of Nottingham, Loughborough, UK

Food insecurity may be defined as the unreliable access to a sufficient quantity of safe, affordable and nutritious food. Food insecurity is associated with a variety of negative health outcomes, impacting physical and mental health as well as social and emotional well-being. In 2020, 8% of UK households regarded themselves as food insecure, a number which has doubled since 2018. A recent systematic review on college/university students in the United States revealed that 14% to 59% of them had undergone food insecurity, which exceeded the national prevalence (12.3%)<sup>(1)</sup>. However, very little is known about university students studying in the UK, thus the aim of this study was to examine the prevalence of food insecurity and associated drivers in UK university students and explore the potential for food insecurity to influence health, particularly mental wellbeing and ability to cope in stressful situations. Students studying at a UK university (n = 289) completed an online questionnaire combining the Household Food Insecurity Access scale with the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale and the Coping Flexibility Scale with demographic and financial questions. We observed that 28% of the student population reported themselves as food insecure, a figure that doubles the national average of 8–10% in 2021<sup>(2)</sup>. Although insignificant, we observed that male students (32.1%) were more likely to report food insecurity compared to female students (26%, p = ns). We observed no significant difference between the prevalence of financial independence between food insecure (34.9%) and secure students (65.1%), those who deemed themselves food insecure stated they had with less savings (P < 0.05) and were more likely to borrow money from friends and family (P < 0.005). Furthermore only 15.9% of food insecure students felt confident about managing money to purchase food (P < 0.01) and were more likely to have no money to spend on food (P < 0.001) compared to food secure students. Furthermore, food insecure students stated that they had difficulties in acquiring a variety of nutritious foods due to the price of healthy nutritious foods (P < 0.001) and the distance to food shops as they lacked their own transportation (P < 0.01). Lack of both financial stability and access to nutritious food may contribute to the observed significant negative correlation between mental wellbeing and food insecurity status (r = -.209\*\*, P < 0.001) which may be due to the inability to cope with stressful situations (P < 0.01). Food insecurity is common among UK university students in line with other countries, however whether the financial burden of managing money or the lack of nutritious food leads to a decline in mental wellbeing is unknown and requires further investigation.

## References

1. Ahmad NSS, Sulaiman N, Sabri MF, *et al.* (2021) *Int J Environ Res Public Health* **18**(11), 5627.
2. Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (2021) *UK Food Security Report 2021* [Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1077015/United\\_Kingdom\\_Food\\_Security\\_Report\\_2021\\_19may2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1077015/United_Kingdom_Food_Security_Report_2021_19may2022.pdf)].