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The hidden crisis on college campuses: 36 percent of students don't have enough to eat

By **Caitlin Dewey** April 3 at 7:00 AM

Caleb Torres lost seven pounds his freshman year of college — and not because he didn't like the food in the dining hall. A first-generation college student, barely covering tuition, Torres ran out of grocery money halfway through the year and began skipping meals as a result.

He'd stretch a can of SpaghettiOs over an entire day. Or he'd scout George Washington University campus for events that promised free lunch or snacks. Torres told no one what he was going through, least of all his single mom.

"She had enough things to worry about," he said.

Now a senior and living off-campus, in a housing situation that supplies most of his meals, Torres is finally talking about his experience with the hunger problem on America's college campuses: a quiet, insidious epidemic that researchers say threatens millions of students every year.

According to [a first-of-its-kind survey released Tuesday](#) by researchers at Temple University and the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, 36 percent of students on U.S. college campuses do not get enough to eat, and a similar number lack a secure place to live. The report, which is the first to include students from two-year, four-year, private and public universities, including GWU, found that nearly 1 in 10 community college students have gone a whole day without eating in the past month. That number was 6 percent among university students.

Researchers blame ballooning college costs, inadequate aid packages and growing enrollment among low-income students — as well as some colleges' unwillingness to admit they have a hunger problem. College hunger is not a new issue, researchers caution. But it appears to be growing worse, and not merely because college is getting more expensive.

"Prices have gone up over time," said Sara Goldrick-Rab, a professor of higher education policy at Temple and the lead author of the report. "But the rising price is just a piece. This is a systemic problem."

Goldrick-Rab's report is based on data from 43,000 students at 66 schools and used the Department of Agriculture's assessment for measuring hunger. That means the thousands of students it classifies as having "low food security" aren't merely avoiding the

With [a 2017-2018 tuition](#) of more than \$53,000, and a brand-new food court hawking poke bowls and yogurt topped with rose petals, GWU does not outwardly look like a place where students encounter hunger.

"I'm not going hungry per se, but there are days I'm just not going to eat," she said. "Today, I am kind of hesitant to buy food, because I have less than \$100 and I need to do laundry. Do I want to do my laundry or do I want to eat today? That is the kind of question I'm dealing with."

To alleviate these issues, GW opened [a food pantry](#) in 2016, stocked with canned goods, produce and day-old bagels, tucked behind an unmarked door in the same food court where students flock for poke. Hundreds of schools have recently launched these sorts of pantries: Membership in the College and University Food Bank Alliance has swelled from 15 in 2012 to more than 600 today.

Colleges are taking other steps as well. Some have altered their dining plans to cover more meals or to offer more low-cost options, or have begun distributing free dining hall vouchers to students who need them. Others have partnered with nonprofits to redistribute unused meals to hungry students.

Michigan State University, the first school to establish an on-campus pantry, has begun screening students for food insecurity during routine visits to its campus health center. In New York, St. John's University has started advertising an emergency fund that disburses small, one-time grants to students with unexpected expenses.

“This is top-of-mind right now on many campuses,” said Amelia Parnell, the vice president for research and policy at the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. “When we think about reasons students drop out, financial issues — like the ability to pay for food and housing — are one of them.”

But advocates say higher education is still not doing enough to solve student hunger. There is persistent skepticism about the depth of the problem at some institutions. Others have proven skittish about opening a food pantry or even surveying students, concerned with the message it will send prospective students and donors.

“All the great hunger efforts underway are not even half a drop in an empty bucket given the scale of this crisis,” said Wick Sloane, a writing professor at Bunker Hill Community College in Boston who has advocated for low-income students. “All of us in higher ed know this.”

Sloane and other advocates have called on the federal government to provide free or reduced-cost meals at colleges, as is already done in primary and secondary schools. This fall, the federal Government Accountability Office is scheduled to release a study on the extent of college hunger, which gives advocates hope that lawmakers are paying attention to the issue.

Advocates would like to see changes to the food stamp program to make it more available to college students. There are also calls to reevaluate the financial aid process, with particular attention to how the government assesses "need."

But unfortunately, those changes will come too late for many. Torres will graduate from GW in May. With little initial support at school, Torres moved off-campus sophomore year on the advice of a friend, renting a room in the home of a middle-aged couple known for helping down-on-their-luck students.

Torres says he hasn't worried about food since then — and that he feels "blessed every day." But he hopes future college students will have other, more institutional support to keep them from going hungry.

"We're in a time where there is going to be a lot of change," he said. "And I'm pleased with where I see it going."

This story has been updated.


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