

Food insecurity during college years linked to lower graduation rate

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A study led by a researcher at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that food insecurity among college students is associated with lower college graduation rates and lower chances of

obtaining a bachelor's or advanced degree.

Food insecurity is a household's lack of consistent access to adequate [food](#) resources. The study examined a nationally representative sample of 1,574 [college students](#) in 1999–2003 to assess whether they lived in a household experiencing [food insecurity](#). They found that nearly 15 percent of the students qualified as food insecure. Following up on data on [educational attainment](#) through 2015–2017, the researchers found that students in the food-insecure group were more than 40 percent less likely to graduate from [college](#) and more than 60 percent less likely to achieve a graduate or professional degree.

Food-insecure students whose parents and grandparents had not attended college fared even worse in terms of educational attainment—less than half graduated from college.

The study appears online in the September issue of *Public Health Nutrition*.

"These results suggest that we really need robust policies to address food insecurity among college students, especially now with the higher food insecurity levels observed during the COVID-19 pandemic," says study lead author Julia Wolfson, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of International Health at the Bloomberg School.

For the study, Wolfson and her colleagues examined data from a long-running U.S. government-sponsored project called the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, which has followed a nationally representative set of several thousand families in the U.S. since 1968, using annual—or, since 1997, biennial—surveys to collect sociodemographic, economic, and health information on family members. The researchers drew from this dataset a sample of 1,574 individuals who were enrolled in [higher education](#) at any point during the 1999–2003 surveys and were still being

tracked in the 2015 or 2017 surveys. They classified a student as food-insecure if they or their parents reported being food-insecure at any point when they were college students in 1999–2003. Most of the students in the sample attended college while living at home as dependents in a household.

Even after adjusting for other factors known to be linked to higher or lower educational attainment, Wolfson and colleagues found a strong inverse association between household food insecurity and educational attainment. Students from food-insecure households were 43 percent less likely to graduate from college, including with an associate's degree; 43 percent less likely to attain a bachelor's degree; and 61 percent less likely to attain a graduate or professional degree, compared to non-food-insecure students.

The analysis suggested that being a "first-generation [student](#)"—the first in a family to attend college—was another factor strongly associated with lower educational attainment. While 76 percent of students who were "food secure" and not first-generation students graduated from college, only 59 percent of food secure but first-generation students graduated from college—and less than half, only 47 percent, of food-insecure first-generation students graduated.

The study, Wolfson notes, is thought to be the first to examine food insecurity's effects on educational attainment in a [study](#) that tracks data for the same group of people over time. These results suggest that food insecurity is not just associated with but a contributing cause of lower educational attainment.

More information: Julia A Wolfson et al, The effect of food insecurity during college on graduation and type of degree attained: evidence from a nationally representative longitudinal survey, *Public Health Nutrition* (2021). [DOI: 10.1017/S1368980021003104](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980021003104)

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