

# Evaluating diet quality in community café meals for individuals facing food insecurity

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In recent years, the prevalence of food insecurity has notably increased, prompting a need for innovative programs like community cafés that use a pay-what-you-can system. [New research](#) in the *Journal of Nutrition*

*Education and Behavior*, reviews how the quality of meals eaten at these pay-what-you-can restaurants compares to meals eaten elsewhere.

Lead author Alexandra L. MacMillan Uribe, Ph.D., RDN, Texas A&M Institute for Advancing Health Through Agriculture, explained, "Community cafés are nonprofit restaurants that welcome anyone in the community to pay what they can afford for a restaurant-quality meal without verification of need. The increasingly popular café model presents a promising solution to improve [diet quality](#) through the availability of healthy meal options."

While guests of any income or food security status can dine at community cafes, this research focused on guests with food insecurity. The community café where the research was conducted is a sit-down restaurant located in the Southern US with seasonal menus focusing on local fare for breakfast and lunch and prioritizes "produce-forward" meals without disclosing prices.

To recruit participants, wait staff provided information about the study to interested guests, who were then screened for food insecurity to ascertain eligibility. The guests reported what they had just consumed at the community café and what they had consumed for the equivalent meal the day before when they had not eaten at the café.

The study revealed that meals from the community café had significantly higher diet quality than meals not eaten at the café, as measured by the Healthy Eating Index (HEI), a measure of how closely a diet aligns with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. This difference was particularly pronounced for individuals with very low food security, where café meals showed a robust improvement in overall diet quality compared to the comparison meals.

Despite these improvements, both café and comparison meals had

relatively low HEI scores, highlighting ongoing challenges in achieving optimal diet quality, especially for those experiencing food insecurity. The findings underscore the [potential benefits](#) of offering nutritious options and empowering guests to make their own food choices, addressing critical aspects of food access and dietary quality for vulnerable populations.

The researchers propose that future studies could assess changes in diet quality among new café patrons over time or how posting nutrition information or nutrition counseling could help patrons make healthier meal choices. Understanding how community cafés can enhance diet quality, as highlighted by this study, offers promising avenues to improve overall health and reduce diet-related disease risks among individuals experiencing [food insecurity](#).

Dr. MacMillan Uribe noted, "These investigations are crucial for developing effective strategies to promote healthier eating habits in vulnerable populations through community-based food programs like community cafés."

In reference to the five dimensions of food access (availability, accessibility, affordability, acceptability, and accommodation), critical components to ensuring the stable availability of nourishing, affordable, and suitable foods, Dr. MacMillan Uribe commented, "It can be reasoned that the café increases availability by offering nutritious food options on their menu, affordability through the pay-what-you-can-system, and acceptability by preparing highly palatable, nutritious foods that respond to their guests' taste preferences and dietary needs."

**More information:** Alexandra L. MacMillan Uribe et al, Diet Quality of Community Café Meals Among Guests With Food Insecurity, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2024.04.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2024.04.009)

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