Conceptualizations of Food Insecurity Among Nutrition, Public Health, and Social Work Students

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Background: Recently, a call to action was made for schools that educate health professionals to provide training on social and economic determinants of health. Training future professionals in health-related fields (eg, nutrition, public health, and social work) to understand and identify the context-specific social determinants of health, including food insecurity, should be prioritized when designing curricula for clinical and public settings.

Objective: This study explored how students conceptualize food insecurity and their understanding of the complex conditions that lead to experiences of insufficient food resources.

Use of Theory or Research: Students’ responses regarding the factors that influence or cause food insecurity were classified under the five levels of the social-ecological model (individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, or policy).

Target Audience: A convenience sample of 306 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in academic health-related programs (47.4% nutrition and dietetics, 21.6% public health, 19.0% social work) at 12 US universities participated in a cross-sectional online survey.

Evaluation Methods: Responses to an open-ended question soliciting the students’ definitions of food insecurity were analyzed for themes. A team of four researchers developed a codebook using an inductive approach. Two researchers then independently coded the responses, reconciled differences within the coding process, and identified emerging themes.

Results: Students’ understanding of food insecurity was diverse—definitions representing a continuum of responses ranging from physiological experiences of hunger to worrying about food access. Themes associated with individual, interpersonal, and community-level factors influencing food insecurity were identified. Students highlighted food quality, access, and consistency as essential features of being food secure.

Conclusion: Understanding the multi-dimensional factors contributing to food insecurity and the contexts in which food insecurity occurs is essential for future nutrition, dietetics, and public health professionals. Nutrition professionals teaching in higher education settings have an opportunity to support students’ understanding of food insecurity and its multiple factors.

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Background: Recent research increasingly associates ultra-processed food (UPF) consumption with a range of diet-related diseases, leading to discussions of interventions for reducing UPF consumption. However, little is known regarding consumer perceptions of UPF, including the degree to which consumers prioritize nutrient content relative to degree of processing when evaluating a food’s overall healthfulness.

Objective: To identify the proportion of adult consumers who have heard of the term “ultra-processed food” in a statewide sample of adults residing in Vermont, and to examine the criteria Vermont consumers prioritize when evaluating a food product’s healthfulness.

Study Design, Setting, Participants: Online survey collected from 671 Vermont residents in 2022, randomly sampled from a commercially available email list. Survey

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