

University of Guelph Student FoodBank

A Snapshot of Student Food Security and Wellbeing

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Introduction

This project was prepared for, and in partnership with, the University of Guelph Student FoodBank, which provides students with access to emergency food and anti-poverty resources (Central Student Association, 2020). This project aimed to provide a snapshot of the self-reported food security of student patrons. In June 2020, students were invited to complete a survey to gather demographic information and an understanding of clients' food insecurity and wellbeing while using the student FoodBank. This report will outline the main goals of the project, describe the tools and methods used, present the key findings, and discuss the implications of these results and any further recommendations.

Background

The University of Guelph Student FoodBank was created and funded by students in 2004 and is now a service offered through the Central Student Association (Central Student Association,



2020). The FoodBank offers various programs, including access to emergency food, a Breakfast Club, and cooking classes (Central Student Association, 2020).

A recent report outlining the prevalence of food insecurity at the University of Guelph found that nearly one quarter (23%) of student respondents had experienced food insecurity over the previous 12 months (Ahmadi, Laban, & Primeau, 2020). In addition, approximately one third of all respondents reported that they sacrificed buying healthy foods to pay for essential expenses, such as rent, tuition, or textbooks. Among students who reported experiencing food insecurity, roughly 78% reported making these sacrifices (Ahmadi, Laban, & Primeau, 2020). These findings highlight the essential need for the Student FoodBank and the services it offers.

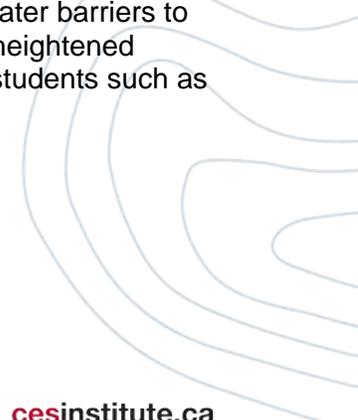
Intake Data Collection and Analysis

This project aimed to capture the self-reported and perceived level of wellbeing and food security among FoodBank student patrons. The intake data presented in this report offers a preliminary understanding of the demographic characteristics of students who seek out FoodBank services, their experiences with food security (e.g., food availability and access) and their wellbeing. The FoodBank collects intake data from its clients during registration at the beginning of each academic period (i.e., semester). The intake data used for the purposes of this project was collected at the beginning of the Summer 2020 semester, during the first week of June. Intake data was collected using a survey software platform called Qualtrics. The survey included the regular intake questions used by the FoodBank on a semesterly basis as well as an optional component designed specifically for our project. In total, 283 respondents completed the survey.

Findings

Student FoodBank Client Demographics

The University of Guelph Student FoodBank offers emergency food support to both undergraduate and graduate students experiencing food insecurity during their studies at the university. Intake data collected during the Summer 2020 semester indicate that it is largely graduate students (74%) who access the FoodBank, with undergraduates accounting for 24% of FoodBank clients (2% of respondents preferred not to indicate their level of study). The vast majority (95%) of students accessing the FoodBank were enrolled as full-time students. In total, 77% of respondents identified as international students, with 21% of clients identifying as domestic students (2% preferred not to indicate their status). The disproportionate representation of international students in our sample may suggest that these students face greater barriers to food security than domestic students. Possible contributing factors may include heightened tuition costs and limited access to other supports that are available to domestic students such as state-administered student loans (i.e., the Ontario Student Assistance Program).



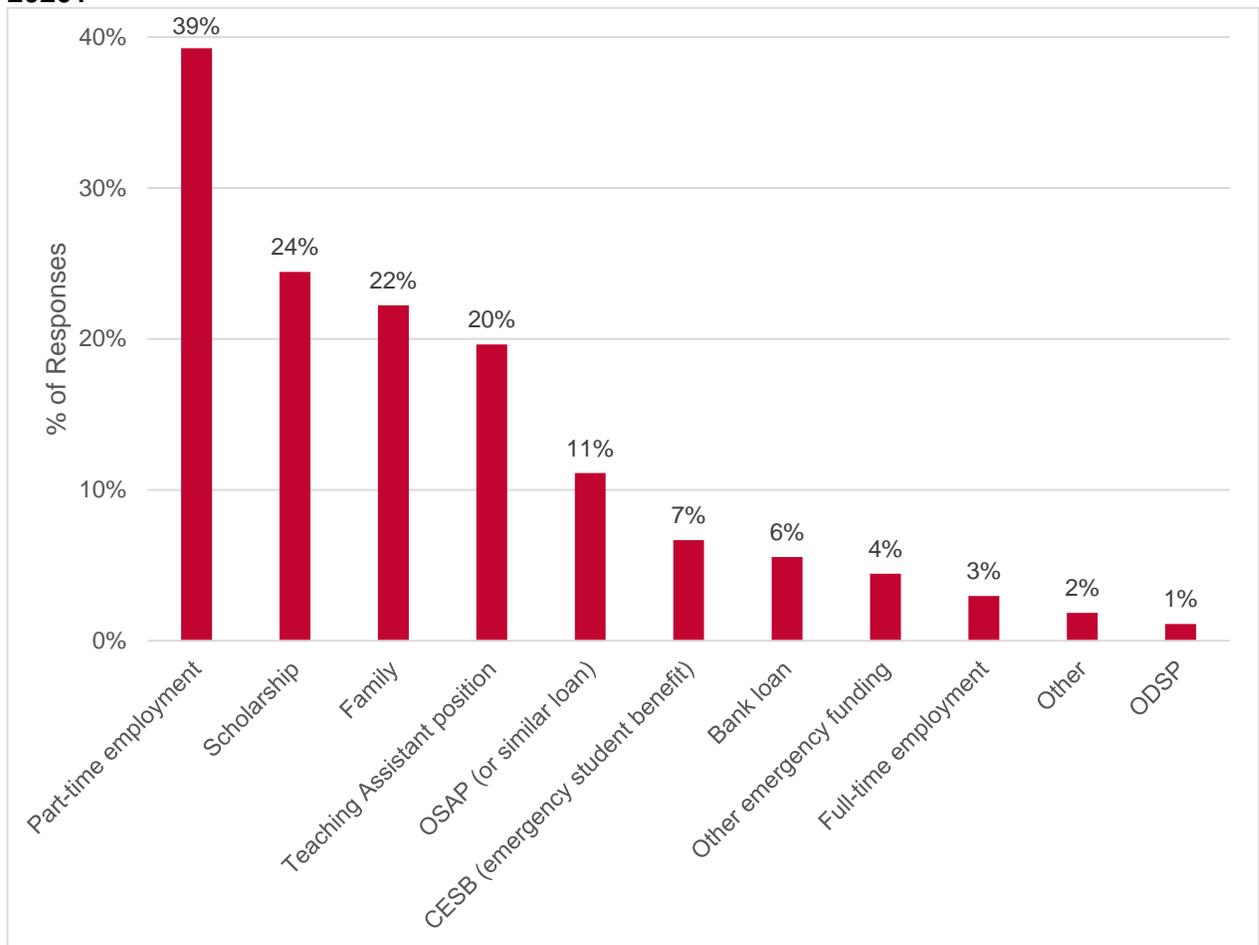
Sources of Income

Respondents indicated that main sources of income available to them included:

- Part-time employment (37%)
- Student scholarships (23%)
- Financial support from family members (21%)
- Income from Teaching Assistant positions (19%)

A full list of income sources indicated by respondents can be found in Figure 1. Some respondents noted that other important sources of income included Research and Graduate Research Assistantships, the university's emergency bursary for international students, and the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB).

Figure 1: Which of the following resources did you use from September 2019 – February 2020?



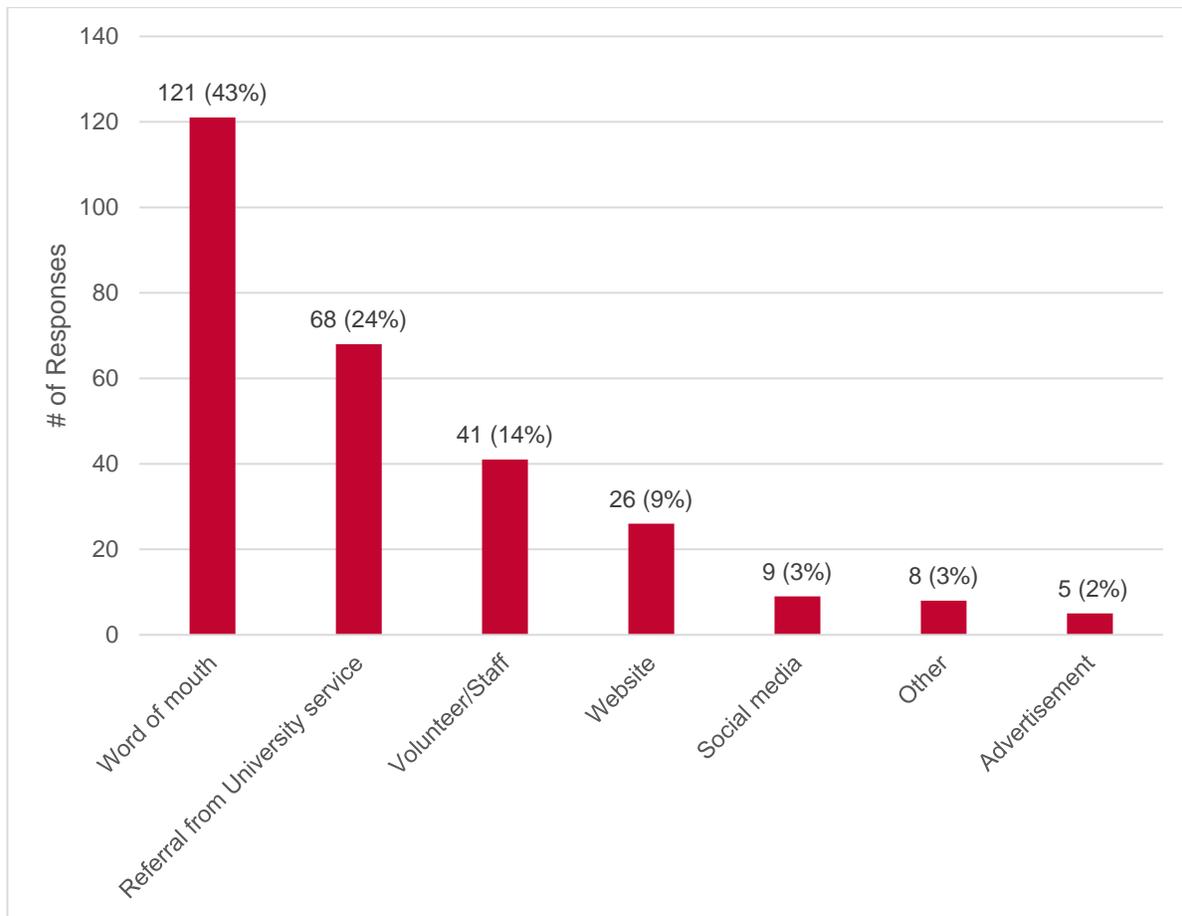
Services Accessed by FoodBank Clients

Further information pertaining to the use of the Student FoodBank provided by clientele, such as how they learned about the FoodBank, how long they have been using the FoodBank, and factors contributing to their need for accessing this service, are outlined below. Other services and forms of support (both on and off campus) that are commonly used by students accessing the Student FoodBank are also discussed below.

How Students Learned About the FoodBank

Students enrolled to use the FoodBank had initially learned of this resource through a variety of channels, including via word of mouth (43%), referral from other services provided at the university (24%), and from staff and volunteers (14%). See Figure 2 for a full list of channels through which respondents initially heard of the FoodBank.

Figure 2: How did you hear about the FoodBank?



Other Services and Supports Accessed by FoodBank Clients

Many respondents indicated that in addition to using services offered by the FoodBank they engaged with other services or sources of support offered by the university and beyond, such as:

- 61% relied on personal supports (i.e., friends, family, partner)
- 30% utilized other Central Student Association services (i.e., Student Help and Advocacy Centre, Bus Pass, SafeWalk)
- 24% accessed non-university social or food services (i.e., The SEED, Guelph Food Bank, Chalmers, etc.)
- 19% made use of Financial Services at the university
- 18% accessed Health and Wellness Services (i.e., Student Accessibility Services, Counselling Services, Wellness Education Centre, Student Support Network, Student Health Services)
- 14% relied on non-university financial services (i.e., bank loans, lines of credit, Ontario Student Assistance Program, Ontario Disability Support Program)
- 12% accessed Academic Services (i.e., Student Life including BounceBack, Learning Services, Writing Services, Co-op and Career Services, program specific counselling office)
- 2% accessed Advocacy Services (i.e., Guelph Resource Centre for Gender Empowerment and Diversity, Office of Diversity and Human Rights, OUTline, Aboriginal Resource Centre, student groups, Multi-Faith Resource Team)

Length of Time Using the Student FoodBank

At the time of data collection, the length of time for which respondents had been using the services provided by the FoodBank varied:

- 38% had been accessing FoodBank services between zero and six months;
- 31% had been accessing the FoodBank between six months to one year;
- 13% had been accessing the FoodBank for one to two years;
- 10% of respondents had been accessing the FoodBank for two years or more.

Nine respondents (3%) indicated an 'other' amount of time, and 14 respondents (5%) preferred not to indicate how long they had been accessing the FoodBank.

Reasons for Accessing the FoodBank

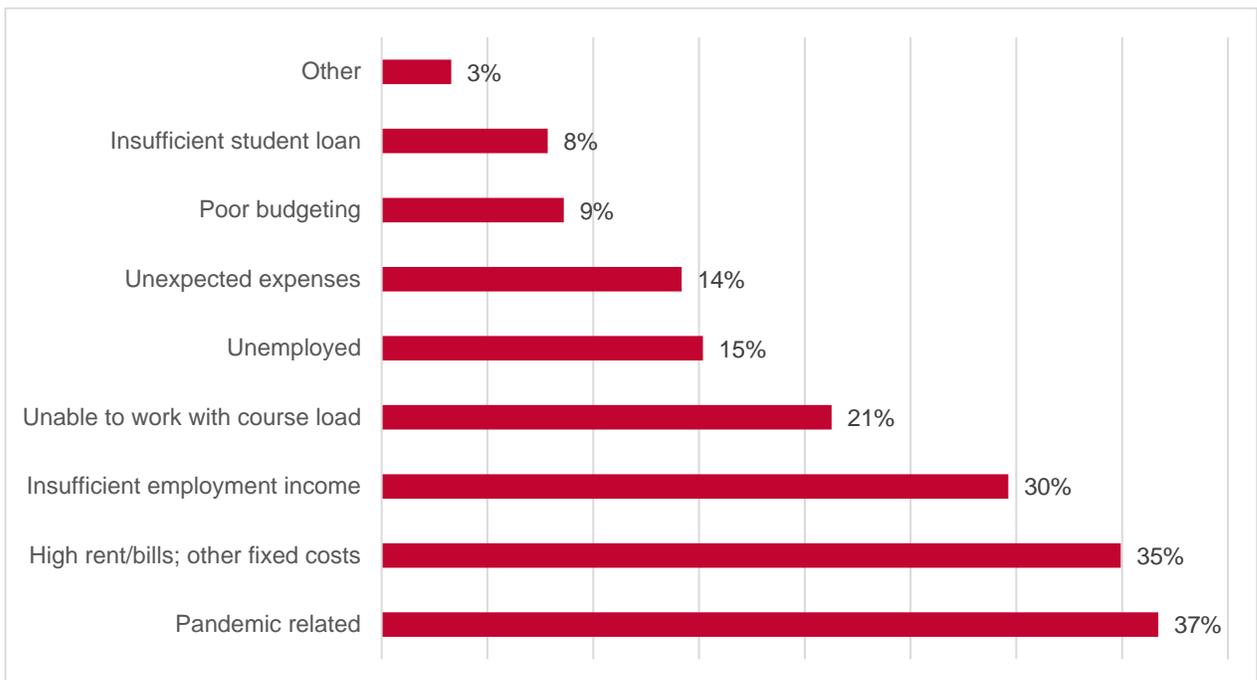
Factors contributing to respondents' need to access emergency food services through the FoodBank varied. Reasons contributing to need for access included:

- High cost of living including cost of rent and other fixed costs (49%)

- Income insecurity stemming from low paying employment or insufficient hours of employment (41%)
- Having no time to work as a result of their student course load (30%)

Further, 51% of respondents indicated that circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic had contributed to their need to access the FoodBank. A full list of reasons or contributing factors for respondents' need to access the FoodBank are displayed in Figure 3, below.

Figure 3: What was your primary reason for visiting the FoodBank?



Food Security and Student Wellbeing

This section will discuss results from questions that gathered information on the nature and extent of Student FoodBank clients' experiences with food (in)security, as well as the impact of these experiences on students' health and wellbeing.

Food Availability and Access

Two key aspects of food security are **availability** of and **access** to foods that one finds acceptable or prefers to eat. For food to be **available**, it must be present in the physical environment in which a person lives (they must be able to find it) (WFP USA, 2019). To be



accessible, food must be within reasonable reach of a person (they must be able to get to it without too much trouble) as well as financially viable or affordable (WFP USA, 2019). When responding to the following questions about food availability and access, students were asked to think back to the time between September 2019 and February 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

When asked if respondents had any difficulty in **finding** the types of foods they preferred to eat:

- 20% indicated they did not encounter any difficulty
- 18% rarely experienced difficulty
- 41% sometimes encountered difficulty
- 10% often experienced difficulty
- 3% found it was always difficult to find the foods they preferred to eat

Another 8% of respondents preferred not to indicate their level of difficulty. Some foods that respondents listed as being difficult to find included halal meats and cultural items such as particular vegetables, spices, and starches. The food items that were most mentioned as difficult to find included items from Indian, Chinese, and African cuisines or diets.

When asked if they had difficulty **affording** the foods they preferred to eat from September 2019 to February 2020:

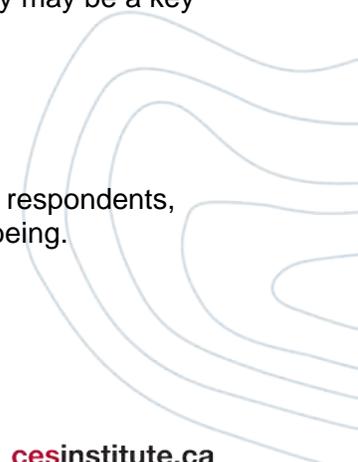
- 7% of respondents indicated they did not encounter any difficulty
- 12% of respondents rarely experienced difficulty
- 43% of respondents sometimes encountered difficulty
- 24% of respondents often experienced difficulty
- 4% of respondents found it was always difficult to afford the foods they preferred to eat

Another 11% of respondents preferred not to indicate their level of difficulty. When asked which foods in particular were difficult to afford, many respondents indicated meat products (47%), fruits (41%), dairy products (41%), and vegetables (40%). Respondents noted they also had difficulty affording bakery items, fish and seafood, pulses and rice, nuts, and gluten free products.

Based on these responses we can see that many respondents faced difficulties in both finding and affording the types of foods they preferred to eat. Overall, respondents encountered more difficulty in affording foods, indicating that insufficient income or income insecurity may be a key determinant of food insecurity in our sample.

Impacts on Health and Wellbeing

Responses indicated that concerns around food and food security had, for many respondents, impacts not only on their physical health but on other aspects of health and wellbeing.





Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate which areas of their life (if any) were negatively impacted by concerns about accessing food. The data revealed that:

- 42% of respondents perceived negative impacts on their physical health
- 36% of respondents perceived negative impacts on their mental health
- 32% of respondents perceived negative impacts on their social life
- 25% of respondents indicated negative impacts on their experiences or ability to engage with extracurricular activities
- 19% of respondents indicated that concerns over accessing food had impacted their grades in school

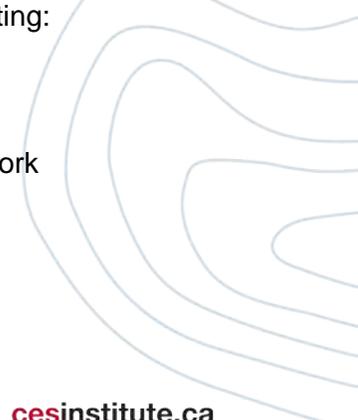
As one respondent stated, “In terms of food, whenever I go to the grocery store and buy food, I feel guilty because I am aware that I don't have an income to make up for that money I'm spending”.

Finally, 42 respondents (15%) indicated that concerns over access to food negatively impacted their ability to care for dependents, indicating that student food insecurity (particularly for graduate or mature students) may have a ripple effect, impacting the lives and health of individuals beyond our study population. See Figure 6 for a comprehensive list of perceived negative impacts of experiences of food insecurity.

Further, worry over food impacted overall sense of wellbeing for many respondents, as portrayed in Figure 7. When asked to characterize the extent to which concerns about food impacted their daily lives:

- 32% of respondents reported mild to moderate concern, relaying that concerns around food caused them worry but that they were still able to enjoy other aspects of their lives
- 22% of respondents reported moderate to severe concern, relaying that concerns around food caused them great worry and negatively impacted their ability to enjoy other aspects of life
- 8% of respondents reported a high level of concern, relaying that concerns about food take up most of their time and limit their ability to enjoy other aspects of life
- Only 5% of respondents reported that concerns about food do not impact their ability to enjoy other aspects of life
- Finally, 12% of respondents reported they were ‘not sure’, and 9% of respondents preferred not to answer

Experiences of food insecurity may be further exacerbated by disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many respondents were greatly impacted by the pandemic, reporting:

- Widespread job loss
 - Inability to work due to childcare constraints
 - Inability to access safe and productive spaces to complete their school work
 - Loss of housing or inability to find housing
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- Loss of financial support from family members who were also impacted negatively by COVID-19
- Difficulty adapting to online learning
- Stress resulting from concerns around future financial implications of delays in research

As a result, many respondents worried about their ability to afford cost of living and tuition in the Fall 2020 semester and beyond, felt that they cannot care for dependents adequately, and reported a lower level of wellbeing and perceived mental health. As expressed by one respondent: “I am working from home, where I do not have access to a desk or even a comfortable chair that isn’t my couch... I am lonely and my mental health is suffering...I lost my part time job, but because it was casual, I am not entitled to any government aid to make up the loss. Without a part time job, my rent is accounting for 100% of my income and so I am subsisting on loans”. This sentiment of decreased mental and economic wellbeing was widely echoed across those respondents who offered additional commentary, another student stating, “I am not enjoying life as before, just trying to get by each day”.

Concluding remarks

Intake data overall confirms the presence of food insecurity amongst FoodBank clients. While physical access to food is challenging for many, lack of financial access to food seems to be the driving force behind use of the FoodBank. Not only does food insecurity impact students’ perceptions of their physical and mental health, but it also impacts many other facets of student life, and may create barriers to positive and successful student experiences for many, in particular for graduate and international students at the University of Guelph. Experiences of food insecurity may be further exacerbated by disruptions due to COVID-19, which may, in turn, add to student hardship during this difficult period. In order to gain a better understanding of how the FoodBank services help to alleviate some of the negative outcomes of food insecurity for students, future research could follow up on the work done here to evaluate the FoodBank programming and its impact on student patrons, particularly during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

References

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