

UC Graduate Student Food Security

BACKGROUND

The University of California (UC) administers student experience surveys for undergraduate and graduate students in alternating years. These surveys, known as the UC Undergraduate and UC Graduate Student Experience Surveys (UCUES and UCGSES) include questions that measure the prevalence of food insecurityⁱ based on the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) food security modules.ⁱⁱ

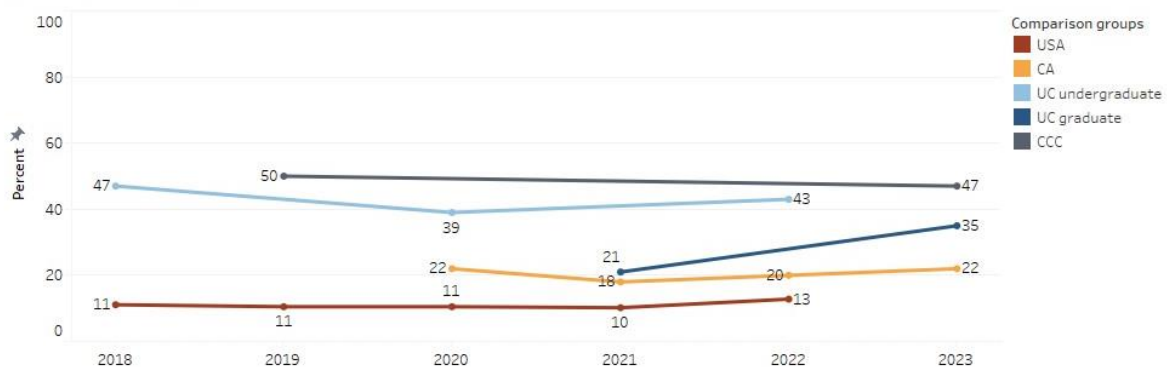
Between 2016 and 2021, graduate and undergraduate student food insecurity rates have fluctuated, with a significant rise in 2022 for undergraduates and in 2023 for graduate students. The following summarizes key findings for graduate students from the 2023 UC Graduate Student Experience Survey (UCGSES) related to food insecurity, comparisons with national and California trends, and external factors that may have contributed to graduate student food insecurity fluctuations.

UC GRADUATE STUDENT FOOD INSECURITY VERSUS NATIONAL TRENDS

Graduate students at UC have historically experienced higher food security rates than undergraduates, but greater fluctuations in those rates. In 2016, 26 percent of graduate students experienced food insecurity, while 47 percent of undergraduates experienced food insecurity in 2018. Those rates decreased and then increased for both populations in the next two iterations of the student experience surveys, though by significantly different percentages.ⁱⁱⁱ Between 2021 and 2023, food insecurity increased for graduate students by 67 percent (fourteen percentage points), while food insecurity increased for undergraduates by 10 percent (four percentage points) between 2020 and 2022.

Food insecurity rates for the general population also fluctuated statewide and nationally in recent years. In 2021, 18 percent of California residents experienced food insecurity, increasing in 2023 to 22 percent. Figure 1 shows national and California food insecurity rates between 2018 and 2023, compared with UC graduate and undergraduate rates in the same time period. Note that methodologies differ for the data sets and are therefore not wholly comparable.^{iv} Additionally, the graduate student food security analysis in this factsheet is based on UCGSES survey respondents **only**. As such, results are estimates.

Figure 1: Food Insecurity Rates: National, State, and UC Undergraduate and Graduate Students



GRADUATE STUDENT FOOD INSECURITY BY CAMPUS

Graduate food insecurity is not evenly distributed among the campuses, with 2023 rates ranging from approximately 24 percent at Berkeley to just under 46 percent at Riverside. UC San Diego saw the greatest increase since 2021, with an approximate twenty-one percentage point rise. Riverside and Merced campuses followed closely behind, with approximately eighteen and seventeen percentage point increases, respectively. Figure 2 shows campus food insecurity rates and changes since the 2021 UCGSES.

Figure 2: Percent and Percentage Change of Graduate Student Food Insecurity By Campus

Campus	UCGSES 2023 Survey	UCGSES 2021 Survey	Change from 2021 to 2023
Overall	34.6	20.6	14.0
Berkeley	24.1	15.4	8.7
Davis	34.8	18.5	16.3
Irvine	37.2	22.9	14.3
Los Angeles	36.0	20.5	15.5
Merced	41.1	24.4	16.7
Riverside	45.7	27.4	18.3
San Diego	41.6	20.9	20.7
San Francisco	31.6	16.2	15.4
Santa Barbara	36.4	24.7	11.7
Santa Cruz	40.7	26.6	14.1

GRADUATE STUDENT FOOD INSECURITY BY SUBPOPULATION

Historically underrepresented populations are more impacted by food insecurity at UC, a pattern that persists in the overall college student population beyond UC and nationally in the general population.^{v,vi} At UC, nonbinary, African American, Hispanic/Latinx, and first generation graduate students experienced the highest food insecurity rates by subpopulation. Nonresident international, men, first generation, and

Hispanic/Latinx students experienced the highest increases since the 2021 UCGSES. Figure 3 shows graduate student food insecurity rates and changes since 2021 by ethnic identities, gender, first generation, and residency.

Figure 3: Percent and Percentage Change of Graduate Student Food Insecurity By Subpopulation

Subpopulation	UCGSES 2023 Survey	UCGSES 2021 Survey	Change from 2021 to 2023
Overall	34.6	20.6	14.0
African American	45.5	32.3	13.3
American Indian	32.1	19.7	12.4
Hispanic/Latinx	43.7	30.2	13.5
Asian	28.1	17.7	10.4
White	27.5	15.4	12.1
Women	33.9	20.6	13.3
Men	34.8	20.0	14.8
Nonbinary	55.3	N/A	N/A ^{vii}
LGBTQ	40.7	27.8	12.9
First Generation	43.0	28.4	14.6
CA Resident	34.2	21.2	13.0
Nonresident Domestic	25.1	16.3	8.8
Nonresident International	40.5	21.7	18.8

Students with certain intersectional identities were also more highly impacted by food insecurity than the general graduate student population. Approximately sixty percent of students identified as belonging to an underrepresented group (URG), LGBTQ, and first generation were food insecure, while approximately 51 percent of those identified as LGBTQ and first generation only were food insecure. The greatest increase was in the former group, with a sixteen percentage point increase. Figure 4 shows food insecurity rates and changes since 2021 by multifactor analysis.

Figure 4: Percent and Percentage Change of Graduate Student Food Insecurity: Multifactor

Subpopulation	UCGSES 2023 Survey	UCGSES 2021 Survey	Change from 2021 to 2023
URG + First Generation	49.4	34.8	14.6
LGBTQ + First Generation	50.5	35.4	15.1
URG + LGBTQ	51.8	40.1	11.7
URG + LGBTQ + First Generation	59.6	43.6	16.0

EMERGENCY COVID-19 RELIEF PROGRAMS AND INCREASED COST OF LIVING

Emergency programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were mainly available to graduate and undergraduate students between 2020 and 2022, including the pandemic Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF),^{viii} Housing is Key,^{ix} eviction protections,^x Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or CalFresh in California) college student eligibility expansions and SNAP emergency allotments.^{xi} Most of these resources were unavailable by the onset of the UCGSES survey administration in April 2023, and several programs had sunsetted well before then. Additionally, some graduate students may have returned to family homes that had more resources during the pandemic.

Simultaneously, the nation experienced historic rises in cost of living, including shelter, energy,^{xii} and food costs. Between January 2020 and December 2023, overall consumer prices grew by over 19 percent. Food costs increased by approximately 25 percent, energy by 28 percent,^{xiii} and rent by 23 percent statewide, with most UC campuses being in counties with high housing costs.^{xiv} Additionally, the State did not increase permanent funding for basic needs until the Budget Act of 2023. As such, campuses were operating their basic needs and rapid rehousing programs with State funding levels established in 2019.^{xv}

CONCLUSION

UC has been measuring food insecurity for graduate students since 2016, with the UCGSES surveys using more detailed methods since 2021. Historically underrepresented populations are disproportionately affected, with nonbinary, African American, and nonresident international graduate students experiencing the highest food insecurity rates by gender, ethnicity, and residency. The significant rise in graduate student food insecurity between 2021 and 2023 may be influenced by the historic rises in cost of living and the ending of pandemic emergency programs.

ⁱ See [measuring-food-insecurity.pdf \(universityofcalifornia.edu\)](#) for further information on how food insecurity was determined.

ⁱⁱ [USDA Economic Research Service — Survey Tools](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Graduate student food insecurity results for 2016 were gathered from the Graduate Student Well-Being Survey (GSWBS). The GSWBS included fewer food security questions based on the USDA adult food security module than the UCGSES or the UCUES. Therefore, results from GSWBS are not comparable with the UCGSES or the UCUES.

^{iv} National food insecurity was pulled from [USDA Economic Research Service — Key Statistics & Graphics](#) and state food insecurity data from [cafoodbanks.org/food-insecurity-data/](#), which employ slightly different methodologies. State data is collected via the US Census Household Pulse Survey.

^v [USDA Economic Research Service — Key Statistics & Graphics](#)

^{vi} [The Hope Center Student Basic Needs Survey | The Hope Center | The Hope Center \(temple.edu\)](#)

^{vii} Data not available for Non-Binary population in 2021 UCGSES.

^{viii} UC Student Financial Support Data Tables. <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/about-us/information-center/financial-support>. Between spring 2020 and spring 2022, approximately \$596 million in HEERF grants were disbursed to UC students based largely on anticipated financial need.

^{ix} A federal pandemic housing support program available between April 2020 and March 2022: [CA COVID-19 Rent Relief — Housing Is Key](#)

^x [Tenant Protection Information — Housing Is Key \(ca.gov\)](#)

^{xi} [SNAP — Expiration of Program Flexibilities for the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency | Food and Nutrition Service](#). SNAP expanded college student exemptions under Public Health Emergency (PHE) regulations between January of 2021 and May of 2023. SNAP emergency allotments were also in place from 2021 to March 2023.

^{xii} See [Measuring Price Change in the CPI: Household energy : U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics \(bls.gov\)](#) for more information on how energy prices are calculated.

^{xiii} [Inflation Tracker \[EconTax Blog\] \(ca.gov\)](#)

^{xiv} [California Housing Affordability Tracker \(January 2024\) \[EconTax Blog\]](#)

^{xv} [Bill Text — AB-102 Budget Act of 2023. \(ca.gov\)](#)