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Getting help when needed: food insecurity among college students and the impact of food pantry availability

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GETTING HELP WHEN NEEDED:
FOOD INSECURITY AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS
AND THE IMPACT OF FOOD PANTRY AVAILABILITY

by

JASMINE LOFTIN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Sociology
in the College of Sciences
and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Dr. Amy Donley

ABSTRACT

Although studies on food insecurity among low-income families and children are prevalent, it's rare to come upon a study specifically measuring food insecurities among college students. There are limited accesses for students to government assistance such as food stamps because of their "dependency" on their parents. Although, on paper, the student may still be a dependent, there are a myriad of instances where they are unable to receive monetary help from their parents for different circumstances. My current study is examining an understudied population of college students who would highly benefit from local food pantry availability, specifically the local Knights Helping Knights pantry. The data for this study will consist of results from pen and paper surveys given to the students who attend the Knights Helping Knights food pantry located on campus. The goal of the research is to examine the barriers to asking for help and the experience of stigma among clients of food pantries, primarily college students. Stigmas are known to prevent many people, of all ages, from receiving the assistance they may need, particularly food stamps or food banks. The Knights Helping Knights pantry was originally created because of the lack of part time jobs among students living on campus or relatively close, along with declining financial assistance from family members due to the suffering economy.

With over 50,000 students enrolled at the University of Central Florida, the need for assistance grew, as did the pantry, which recently transitioned from a small room to a much larger space located in the heart of the campus marketplace. In just one semester, spring 2012, the pantry had just over 3000 student visitors, providing over 10,000 lbs. of food. Students are allowed 5 lbs. of food a day and are now able to choose toiletries. Visitors are even given the option of choosing gently used, donated clothing if needed. The Knights Pantry has become a

model for other universities and colleges, actually receiving phone calls and emails on how to initiate pantries of their own, even being awarded 2011 Outstanding Service Project of the Year by The Association of College Unions International. A partnership with Hope Helps, Inc. allows the pantry to utilize their 501 (c)(3) status and falling under their umbrella allowed the pantry to partner with Second Harvest to ensure the pantry stays stocked. Donations are also accepted at any of the 15 available drop boxes, along with food drives that are held to benefit the pantry.

This research will reflect insight into the negative stigmas preventing students from attending the pantry and to examine how prevalent food insecurity at the University of Central Florida. Although this study is only examining the local area it will assist with further research of college students and food insecurity worldwide.

DEDICATION

For my parents, Janette Loftin and Tyree Oneal, for their constant support, wisdom, motivation, and love. It is because of you two that I am where I am today.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	3
Food Stamps	3
Food Banks and Pantries.....	5
College students.....	6
Current study	7
THEORETICAL ORIENTATION.....	8
RESEARCH QUESTION	9
HYPOTHESES	10
METHODS/SAMPLE	11
MEASUREMENTS.....	12
Demographics	12
Independent variables	12
Dependent variables	12
RESULTS	14
CONCLUSION.....	17
APPENDIX.....	20
APPENDIX A.....	23
REFERENCES.....	27

INTRODUCTION

Although Studies on food insecurity among low-income families and children are quite prevalent, it is rare to find a study specifically measuring food insecurity among college students. Over the past few decades, research has been conducted explaining the growing necessity of government assistance programs, such as food stamps, and the more recent demand at food pantries and food banks. However, full time college students have limited access to government assistance programs because they are often viewed as a dependent for tax purposes and, therefore, unable to report their own income for eligibility. This, in turn, can cause the students to rely more heavily on local food banks and pantries for assistance as their eligibility is based on their own individual need.

As students begin the transition into adulthood, 18-25 year olds are considered emerging adults and are characterized as being unstable financially, affected by the rising cost of education and a lack of financial support from parents (Worthy et. al 2010). Where can college students turn for food assistance if they cannot depend on parents or receive food stamps? How many college students, at any point, suffer from food insecurity? The purpose of this research is to examine the awareness of the local food pantry, Knights Helping Knights, created for University of Central Florida students and staff and to explore the barriers to asking for help and the experience of stigma among the clients who do utilize the pantry. Stigmatization is known to prevent many people, of all ages, from receiving the assistance they may need, particularly food stamps or receiving food from food banks. The findings of this research will increase our insight into the understudied population of college students and their struggles with food insecurities,

along with the barriers that prevent them from reaching out for help. These findings are important because they will contribute to the Knights Pantry outreach program and assist them on working to decrease the negative stigmas that may be affecting the students from participating.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food insecurity is defined as a reduced availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or a limited or uncertain ability to acquire appropriate foods in socially acceptable ways. Food insufficiency, also used interchangeably with insecurity is defined as inadequacy in the amount of food intake because of lack of money or resources that provide access to enough food (Khan et. al 2011). In a struggling economy, food insecurity is a prevalent topic among researchers. However, studies examining food insecurity among college students are not so common. With myriads of government assistance programs, charities, and food banks, recent data collected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture claims that in 2008, 49.1 million people lived in food insecure households, including 16.7 million children (Khan et. al 2011). Amid the research of suffering people, there is a gap of information, excluding any knowledge of food insecurity among college campuses.

Food Stamps

The U.S. Food Stamp program began in the early 1960's and, since its birth, has become this nation's leading, food assistance program. Program eligibility is determined by the household's financial resources and incomes, which vary from state to state. According to Bhattarai, Duffy and Raymond (2005), among low-income households, food stamp participation rates are most prevalent among nonwhite and nonelderly households and for households with children.

In 2001, 1.46 million adults in California experienced food insecurity and had incomes below 130% of the federal poverty level, yet 1.21 million were not receiving food stamps (Algert et. al 2006). Several studies have sought to determine what barriers are experienced by those

suffering from food insufficiencies that prevent them from receiving the government assistance that they need. Barriers suggested by several studies included stigmas associated with receiving assistance, language discrepancies, and little to no knowledge about the food stamp program (Algert et. al, 2006, Hoisington et. al 2002). Algert, Reibel and Renvall (2006) suggested in their study that the participants who spoke little to no English appeared to experience the biggest barriers in receiving food stamps because of the language differences. Lack of communication and understanding made the process that more difficult for those who experienced the language barriers.

Bhattarai et al. (2005) analyzed many of the barriers and suggested that the actual food stamps application process could play a major role in the decision made to not apply for government assistance. The application averages from 12-13 pages in paper form and can be difficult for those who are not literate in the English language. Many states also require call backs and interview processes that can come into conflict with the individuals' work schedule, preventing them from attending. Also mentioned in the study is the intimidation the application may impose on the individual, specifically the many threats of fines and jail sentences for those who give false information. The food stamp application process is difficult for many people and the benefits are often meager.

Negative stigmas are also associated with apprehensions towards applying for food stamps. The fear of stigma was noted as a factor in keeping many poverty stricken families from participating in public, and even private, food assistance programs (Bhattarai et. al 2005). Recently, in an effort to lessen the negative stigmas and embarrassments associated with food

stamps, the Food Stamp Program has adopted a new method for their recipients. Zekeri (2004) studied the effects of the new electronic benefit transfer card on stigmas compared to the original paper coupons. Of the 857 participants of the study, 67% reported that the new electronic method reduces embarrassment or negative social stigmas. They also consider it a safer method because it reduces fraud and increases security.

Food Banks and Pantries

Research on food pantries has not been nearly as extensive as the research on food stamps. Similarly to food stamps, Bhattarai et al. (2005) noted pantry participation is associated with low-income women with low education levels, single young mothers with children, and older women living in rural areas. The Third National Hunger Study reported that 23.3 million low-income people rely on the Second Harvest network for food services each year, 68% of all food shelves receiving services from the Second Harvest (Verpy et.al 2003).

Biggerstaff et. al (2002) conducted a study in order to clarify who exactly uses food pantries and soup kitchens in Virginia and focused on whether attendees are single or have families, and characteristics of their backgrounds including housing status, victims of domestic violence, or benefit recipients. The author concludes with results that indicated that the most common characteristics of pantry clients were those who have been unemployed for at least six months, were female, and were single parents. An interesting find was that there was a significant amount of participants who lived in a household with a member that was employed, however they still had to seek help from the pantry.

A common concern with food pantries are the nutritional values of the food that are donated and in then distributed. A recent study recorded concerns of different cultural needs when it came to which foods were available, in addition to health and nutritional values for low income families (Verby et.al 2003). The authors also sought to find how food pantry staff and donors could be better educated to better suit the health needs of the users. Verby et. al discovered that both donors and food pantry clients expressed concerns toward the nutritional value of food available at the pantry. Another finding was that many pantry clients would encourage money donations so that they could use vouchers for the foods not readily available at the pantry, such as meats.

College students

Research about food insecurity among college students is extremely rare and there aren't as many resources for those who need assistance, making capability more difficult to receive assistance. In a study of 441 non-freshman at the University of Hawaii, findings suggested that 21% of students reported food insecurity, along with 15% having low security and 6% having very low security, based on food insecurity existing when there is limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods (Chaparro et. al 2009). Approximately one in four students reported having one or two indicators of food insecurity. It was suggested that students who lived off campus with roommates and also students living on campus were significantly more likely to be food insecure than those living with parents or relatives (Chaparro et.al 2009).

Many college students who come from low income homes rely on financial aid and scholarships to finance most of their expenses, however, suffer to maintain an income for food.

A study was conducted to explore the spending habit of college students, especially those who are newly established on their own. Consisting of 450 undergraduate surveys, results of the study illustrated that individuals who come from low economic families faced harder struggles in their transition to adult hood. The research also suggested that, in terms of gender, males had more financial knowledge and knew more about loans and credit debts. Financial habits were also related to communication with parents and family, especially maternal influences (Worthy et. al 2010).

Current study

This current study aims to explore the barriers experienced by college students to asking for help and to also examine the negative social stigmas that may prevent them from attending the campus food pantry. The Knights Helping Knights pantry was originally created because of the lack of part time jobs among students living on campus or relatively close, along with declining financial assistance from family members due to the suffering economy. With over 50,000 students enrolled at the University of Central Florida, the need for assistance grew, as did the pantry, which recently transitioned from a small room to a much larger space located in the heart of the campus marketplace. In just one semester, spring 2012, the pantry had just over 3000 student visitors, providing over 10,000 lbs. of food. The study will specifically examine those students who already use the pantry to help to gain insight on their initial apprehensions and potentially help to alleviate future stigmas for those wanting to receive food assistance.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Erving Goffman's theory of social stigma can assist in explaining the negative stigmas people may experience that can prevent them from attending food pantries for help. Goffman defines stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" and that reduces the bearer "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Link et. al 2001). Link (2001) also suggests that along the stigmatization process, the labeled person experiencing the stigma label experiences status loss and discrimination. The fear of stigmatization by college students can definitely play a vital role in their attendance of the food pantry, especially because of the pantry being located in such close quarters of other popular locations on campus, such as the cafeteria "Marketplace" and several dormitories.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the stigmas preventing UCF students from attending the local food pantry, Knights Helping Knights, and how can we increase outreach among students?

HYPOTHESES

- 1) Students who attend the pantry had to overcome at least one barrier before attending for assistance.
- 2) The majority of UCF students are not aware that there is a food pantry on campus.
- 3) For the students that are aware that there is a pantry, word of mouth will prove to be the most common source of knowledge of its existence.

METHODS/SAMPLE

The data for this study will come from two sources. The first consist of results from pen and paper surveys given to the students who have received food from the Knights Helping Knights food pantry located on campus. When students come to the pantry to receive food, they will be asked to complete a short anonymous survey. Another survey will also be distributed to undergraduate students through the online surveying system, Qualtrics. This survey will measure general awareness of the pantry. The general survey was released to Introductory Sociology classes, through Qualtrics, and a link was also posted in online UCF group pages, such as a UCF Sociology group, a UCF jobs and internship group, and a class of 2013 UCF group.

The sample for this study will consist of 266 undergraduate students from the University of Central Florida, regardless of class level. 215 will come from the general survey and the remaining 51 will be from the pantry survey. Once the surveys are completed, all of the data will be analyzed SPSS.

MEASUREMENTS

Demographics

There are three different demographic variables that will be assessed in this research. The first is the measure for the student's year of college, ranging from first-year freshman to 4 or more year senior, with graduate students being included in a separate category. The measurement for student's sex will also be assessed, along with the measure of age, which students will manually enter instead of choosing a prewritten answer. The student's class standing and age will potentially be used to assess whether or not these factors influence perceived stigmas

Independent variables

Control variables include those that could potentially affect the outcomes of the dependent variables. In this study, those would include whether or not the person lives on campus or off campus, if they still live with parents and relatives, roommates or alone, and their financial history; the economic class of their family. It is important to know if the participant receives monetary help from their parents or other family members. Another includes their employment status at the time, ranging from not working at all to working a full time job.

Dependent variables

To measure the barriers students may have had to overcome, participants will range their difficulty in attending the pantry on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "very difficult" to "not difficult at all". Participants will also be able to explain any factors that may have prevented them from getting assistance from the pantry, making this a text variable. Another dependent variable is how the participant became aware of the pantry, along with whether or not they share the information with others, which will contribute to the pantry's outreach research.

For the second data source, the dependent variables will measure awareness of the pantry. This will also be measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “knew a lot about the pantry” to “didn’t know about the pantry at all”.

RESULTS

The first of the data collected were the surveys of actual Knights Helping Knights attendants. Of the 51 participants, 66.7% have worked while being a full time student, with 58% of those having to work full time. Table 1 shows the gender and age breakdown of the participants, with females representing about 73% of them. 58.8% of the students do live off of campus, about 12% with parents and about 87% with a roommate. Although more than half of the students live off campus, almost 70% replied “no” when asked whether or not the location of the pantry has ever had an effect on them attending. Approximately 47.2% of the students reported spending the most money on food. A great amount of students are receiving financial aid, more than 70%, about half of the participants also receive assistance from their families. 47% of the students reported spending the most money on their food, with bills and gas accounting for approximately 18% of their funds.

Questioning the outreach tactics of the KHK pantry, when asked how they heard of the availability of the pantry, 35.4% credited friends and word of mouth, followed by 17.7% having walked by. With word of mouth accounting for the highest percent of pantry awareness, it proves my third hypothesis to be true. An outstanding 90% of students have never visited a pantry other than KHK and 44% actually answered yes when asked if there were times when they wanted to attend the pantry more than what is allotted. Results from the frequencies run indicate that although approximately 18% of the students receiving aid from the pantry have applied for food stamps, only 3.9% are actually receiving them. 21.6% of the students have come from families that have received food stamps at some point. Table 2 illustrates the most common responses

when asked how else they would receive their food, if not for the KHK pantry. Responses included “buy cheaper food”, “eat less”, “no idea”, “work more”, and “food stamps”. A complete list of responses can be read in table 3.

Participants were asked to rate how difficult of a decision it was to receive help from the pantry, on a scale of 1-5. 74% reported it to not be a difficult decision, with almost 72% rating their decision a 1, 12% reporting a 2, about 8% reporting a 3, and 4 being the highest score reported with about 6%. Also aiming to measure any barriers they may feel to receiving help, students were asked to list any factors that prevented them from receiving help and some responses included “embarrassment”, “time constraints”, “shame”, and “pride”. A complete list of responses can be found in table 3.

The second survey was generated for University of Central Florida students only, working to measure awareness of the pantry and the need of the pantry on campus. Distributions of participants’ ages, class level, and gender are illustrated in table 4, with a mean age of 20. Over 40% of the respondents are freshman, about 31% are sophomores, 16.7% are juniors and almost 10% were seniors.

The general survey revealed that approximately 24% of those students have skipped a meal before because they couldn’t afford food and about 14% have been in need of assistance in acquiring food. The awareness of the pantry is high, with about 75% being aware that there is a food pantry on campus, with 63% actually knowing where it is located. Table 6 includes questions asked to measure awareness and responses. However, when mentioning the actual name “Knights Helping Knights”, only 37% of the respondents knew what it was. When asked

where the students first heard about KHK, responses included “freshman orientation”, “classmates”, “walked by”, “my friends” and “posters on campus”. A complete list of responses can be found on table 5.

CONCLUSION

With this study being the first done on food insecurity among this college campus, there were many unknowns and unanswered questions. It was obvious from both of the surveys conducted that students were well aware that if they ever needed assistance acquiring food there are resources readily available to them on campus. However, although the existence was known, students weren't as able to recognize the "Knights Helping Knights" actual name, not associating the two together. For those respondents that were aware of the pantry's existence, hearing from a friend, or word of mouth, proved to be the most common form sharing information among each other, proving my third hypothesis to be true. One of the questions in the survey asked whether or not if they would inform their friends of the pantry if they noticed they may be in risk of food insecurities and 100% answered yes. This illustrates that word of mouth is one of the most powerful sources of information.

An alerting statistic from the general survey was that almost 25% of students surveyed have skipped a meal before because they couldn't afford food. Over half of these students are living off campus with friends or roommates and they are finding it to be not as easy as when they lived at home with a parent or family member. Nearly 14% reported at some point of their stay at UCF, they have been in need of assistance acquiring food. It's evident that the existence of the on-campus food pantry is needed by students. It is difficult to measure food insecurity among the entire campus because of its extremely large size and population. However, if this study is used as a small scale, it is critical to ensure that every student is aware that the pantry is a resource available for them because food insecurity among UCF's students may be larger than

one thought. Outreach tactics and awareness throughout the students was also a question, hoped to be answered by both surveys.

The general survey included several questions where students were able to enter their textual answers, mainly to allow them to give open-ended answers and not restrict them to pre-chosen ones. When asked to list any known resources available to students for food assistance about 42% entered or included Knights Helping Knights as a resource. Similarly, only about 44% of students surveyed reported ever seeing fliers around campus advertising KHK. These numbers can suggest that an increase in advertisement or awareness may be beneficial for both the students and the pantry. If more students were aware, then obviously they may be able to receive more help, especially since students are allotted up to 5lbs. of food a day. The pantry, however, can also benefit from increased awareness greatly because of donations and volunteers. With the pantry offering, not only food, but also clothes and toiletries, donations are heavily encouraged and needed. Volunteer are also encouraged to assist the pantry.

The survey distributed to the actual pantry attendants aimed to measure any stigmas or barriers students may have experience when deciding to attend the pantry for help. It also offered more insight into the outreach efforts of the pantry. Surprisingly, about 90% of the students surveyed have never been to a pantry other than KHK. This pantry is the first exposure for most of these students, which can suggest one barrier they may have had to overcome. The uncertainty they may have felt as well as the fear of the unknown could have easily played a major role in their decision to received food assistance; almost 25% of the students reported it to be a difficult decision.

Another open ended question asked students to list any factors that may have prevented them from receiving help. Answers included shame, embarrassment, pride, and emotional setbacks. Evidently, social stigmas are playing a role in the decision making of the students and are taken into account when deciding on whether or not it is worth to walk into the pantry and ask for help, proving our hypothesis to be true. When asked how else they would get their food, if not for the KHK pantry, responses included buy cheaper or less food, don't know, not sure, and work more. It's concerning that students would have to resort to eating poor quality food or less of the nutritious because they are unable to afford it. This illuminates the work of the pantry and just how essential its existence is to these students.

Being the first study done on this campus of food insecurity and the need of the Knights Helping Knights food pantry, it has provided the basic statistics of how many students are aware of the pantry and how many of our students actually are at risk of food insecurity. This study could be used as a stepping stone into a more elaborate study, working to deeper understand just how prevalent food insecurities may be among college campuses.

APPENDIX

- 1) Are a full time student?
- 2) Do you, or have you ever, worked while also being a full time student?

If yes, seasonal, part time or full time?
- 3) Do you receive financial aid?

If yes, about how much of your financial aid goes toward food. (percentage based)
- 4) Do you receive any monetary assistance from any family members?
- 5) What do you spend the most money on?
- 6) How did you hear of Knights Helping Knights?
- 7) How many times do you attend the pantry a week?
- 8) Have you ever visited a pantry other than KHK?
- 9) Are there times when you want to attend more than what is allowed?
- 10) Do you think your friends know about Knights Helping Knights?
- 11) Have you told anyone, voluntarily, that you attend Knights helping Knights?
- 12) Would you tell your friends about the pantry if you noticed they may need help?
- 13) Was it a difficult decision to go get help from the pantry?
- 14) How difficult was it to get help from the pantry?
- 15) What, if any, factors prevented you from receiving help from the pantry.
- 16) Did your family receive food stamps?
- 17) Have you ever applied for food stamps?
- 18) Are you receiving food stamps now?
- 19) If you weren't attending Knights helping Knights, how else would you get your food?

20) Has the location of the pantry ever effect whether or not you attend?

If yes, how so?

21) Sex?

22) Age?

23) Do you live on campus or off?

24) Do you live with your parents?

25) Do you have a roommate?

If yes, are they a friend or family member?

APPENDIX A
TABLES

Table 1. Demographics for Pantry Survey N=51

Mean age*	21
18-20	66.7
21-26	31.3
27+	2
Gender	
Male	27.5
Female	72.5
Housing	
On campus	41.2
Off campus	58.8
Full time student	
Yes	96.1
No	3.9

*Note: All numbers are percentages except for mean age.

Table 2. “How else would you receive food if not for KHK?”

Apply for food stamps	4.0
Ask family or friends	15.9
Buy cheaper/less food	8.0
Don't know/not sure	13.9
Church pantry	2.0
Use more financial money on food	6.0
Get a job/work more	14
Store	31.6

Note: All numbers are percentages

Table 3. List of Factor preventing them from receiving help

Embarrassment /shame	12.0
Time constraints	17.8
None	37.3
Missing (N/a)	19.6
Quality of food	2.0

Note: All numbers are percentages

Table 4. General Survey Demographics N=215

Mean age*	20
18-20	83.3
21-26	13.1
27+	3.9
Gender	
Male	30.1
Female	69.9
Class Rank	
Freshman	42.1
Sophomore	31.1
Junior	16.7
Senior	9.6
Graduate	.5

*Note: All numbers are percentages except for mean age

Table 5. Where did you first hear about Knights Helping Knights?

Orientation	9.5
Friend/roommate/classmate	9.9
Poster/ flyer	4.0
Walked by	5.0
LEAD scholar	1.0
Strategies for Success class (SLS)	2.0
Campus tour	2.0

Note: All numbers are percentages

Table 6. Knowledge of the pantry from General Survey

Are you aware of any resources available for food assistance on main campus?	
Yes	62.7
No	37.3
Do you know if there is a food pantry on the UCF main campus?	
Yes	77.4
No	22.6
Do you know the location of Knights Help Knights pantry?	
Yes	63.3
No	36.7
Do you know what Knights Helping Knights is?	
Yes	37.1
No	62.9
Have you seen any fliers around campus advertising Knights Helping Knights?	
Yes	43.5
No	56.5

Note: All numbers are percentages

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