

## FOOD INSECURITY

### Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits

#### Why GAO Did This Study

Increasing evidence indicates that some college students are experiencing food insecurity, which can negatively impact their academic success. However, college students are only eligible for SNAP in certain cases. Given the substantial federal investment in higher education and the risk posed if students do not complete their degrees, GAO was asked to review food insecurity among college students.

This report examines (1) what is known about the extent of food insecurity among college students and their use of SNAP; (2) how selected colleges are addressing student food insecurity; and (3) the extent to which federal programs assist students experiencing food insecurity. GAO reviewed relevant federal laws and agency documents and studies on student food insecurity; analyzed 2016 federal student data (the most recent available), and visited four states, selected based on actions taken to address student food insecurity, geographic diversity, and other factors. GAO interviewed researchers; officials from Education, FNS national and regional offices; and officials at 14 colleges, including students at 8 of these colleges. GAO also emailed all state SNAP agencies about their efforts related to students.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FNS (1) improve student eligibility information on its website and (2) share information on state SNAP agencies' approaches to help eligible students. FNS partially concurred, and plans to review its information. GAO continues to believe additional action is warranted, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-19-95](#). For more information, contact Kathryn Larin at (202) 512-7215 or [larink@gao.gov](mailto:larink@gao.gov).

#### What GAO Found

There is limited information about the national prevalence of food insecurity among college students. GAO reviewed 31 studies that identified a wide range of food insecurity rates among the students studied, but the studies did not provide national estimates. College students at risk of food insecurity may be eligible for benefits from the Food and Nutrition Service's (FNS) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). However, GAO's analysis of Department of Education (Education) data shows that almost 2 million at-risk students who were potentially eligible for SNAP did not report receiving benefits in 2016. According to GAO's analysis, having a low income is the most common risk factor for food insecurity among college students. Among low-income students, most have one additional risk factor associated with food insecurity, such as being a first-generation student or a single parent.

The 14 selected colleges that GAO contacted were addressing student food insecurity in a number of ways. For example, all 14 were providing free food to students through on-campus food pantries, and most were offering emergency funds to help students pay for living expenses that might otherwise force them to choose between buying food or staying in school. Many of these colleges had centralized student services to better address their students' basic needs and provide other support, such as screening students for potential eligibility and helping them apply for federal benefit programs like SNAP.

#### Selected Colleges' Initiatives to Address Student Food Insecurity

					
Educating faculty, staff, and students	Nutrition, cooking, and budgeting classes	Food pantries and other food provision	Centralizing student services	• Help applying for benefits • Counseling • Disability support services • Financial aid • Veterans services	Emergency aid

Source: Information from colleges GAO contacted. | GAO-19-95

Federal student aid generally does not cover all college costs for low-income students, and college students may have limited access to federal food assistance programs such as SNAP because of program eligibility restrictions. Some state SNAP agencies reported that they are taking steps to help students access SNAP by conducting outreach to colleges and developing guidance. Nevertheless, at 9 of the 14 colleges GAO contacted, some college officials and students said that they were unfamiliar with or did not fully understand SNAP's student eligibility rules. Some college officials said that they would like information from FNS to better explain SNAP student rules, but FNS has not made such information easily accessible on its website. Further, college officials and state SNAP agencies noted that FNS does not share examples of actions taken by other states to help eligible students access SNAP. Clarification of SNAP student eligibility rules and enhanced information sharing about state efforts could help ensure that potentially eligible college students can access federal food assistance programs.