Beyond the Cafeteria: Exploring the Impact of Living Situations on College Students' Food Choices

Grace Hoang, Sadie Lyman, Kaitlyn Grijalva | HWSPH & Human Longevity Science | June 2024

INTRODUCTION

- Healthy eating habits promote metabolic functioning, however there is an increasing prevalence of diet-related conditions among the university population.[1]
- According to the CDC, only 1 in 10 (~9%) adult Americans consume the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables.[2]

Objective: To determine whether there is a relationship between an undergraduate students' living situation and their dietary habits.

METHODOLOGY

Sample:

- Cross-sectional survey using Qualtrics in April-May of 2024 available to undergraduate students at UCSD
- Participants were recruited through email and social media. Ages 18-24+ reported daily intake for 5 food groups inspired by the Healthy Eating Index (HEI) scale (n=90).[3]

Outcome:

- Diet was assessed by scoring (0-10) each question relating to the consumption of food and tallying up the scores at the end of each survey.
  - A higher score implies healthier eating according to our scoring guidelines, with a lower score representing the opposite.

Exposure:

- Living situation was assessed by separating two groups based on survey answers for the question, "What is your current living situation?"

Analysis: Independent two sample t-test using R statistical software

RESULTS

***Fig. 1:** Demographic Distribution*

Living Situation: *n = 90*	
On-Campus	30 (33.3%)
Off-Campus	60 (66.7%)
Age	
18-19 years	21 (23.3%)
20-21 years	45 (50.0%)
22-23 years	18 (20.0%)
>24 years	6 (6.7%)
Sex	
Male	15 (15.6%)
Female	75 (83.3%)
Year	
First Year	14 (15.6%)
Second Year	12 (13.3%)
Third Year	29 (32.2%)
Fourth Year	32 (35.6%)
Other	3 (3.3%)

***Fig. 2:** Average calculated Food Group Score by Living Situation*

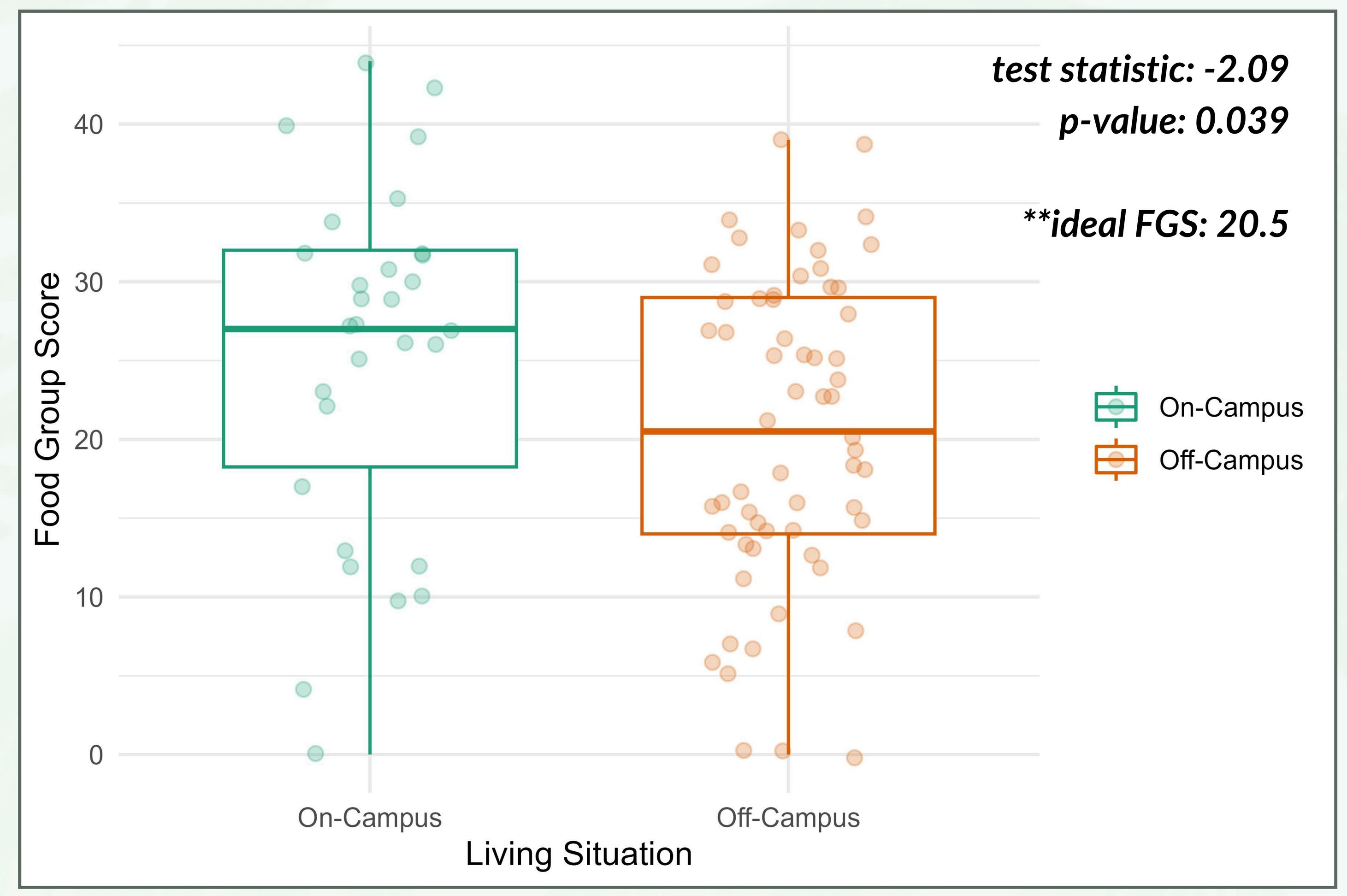
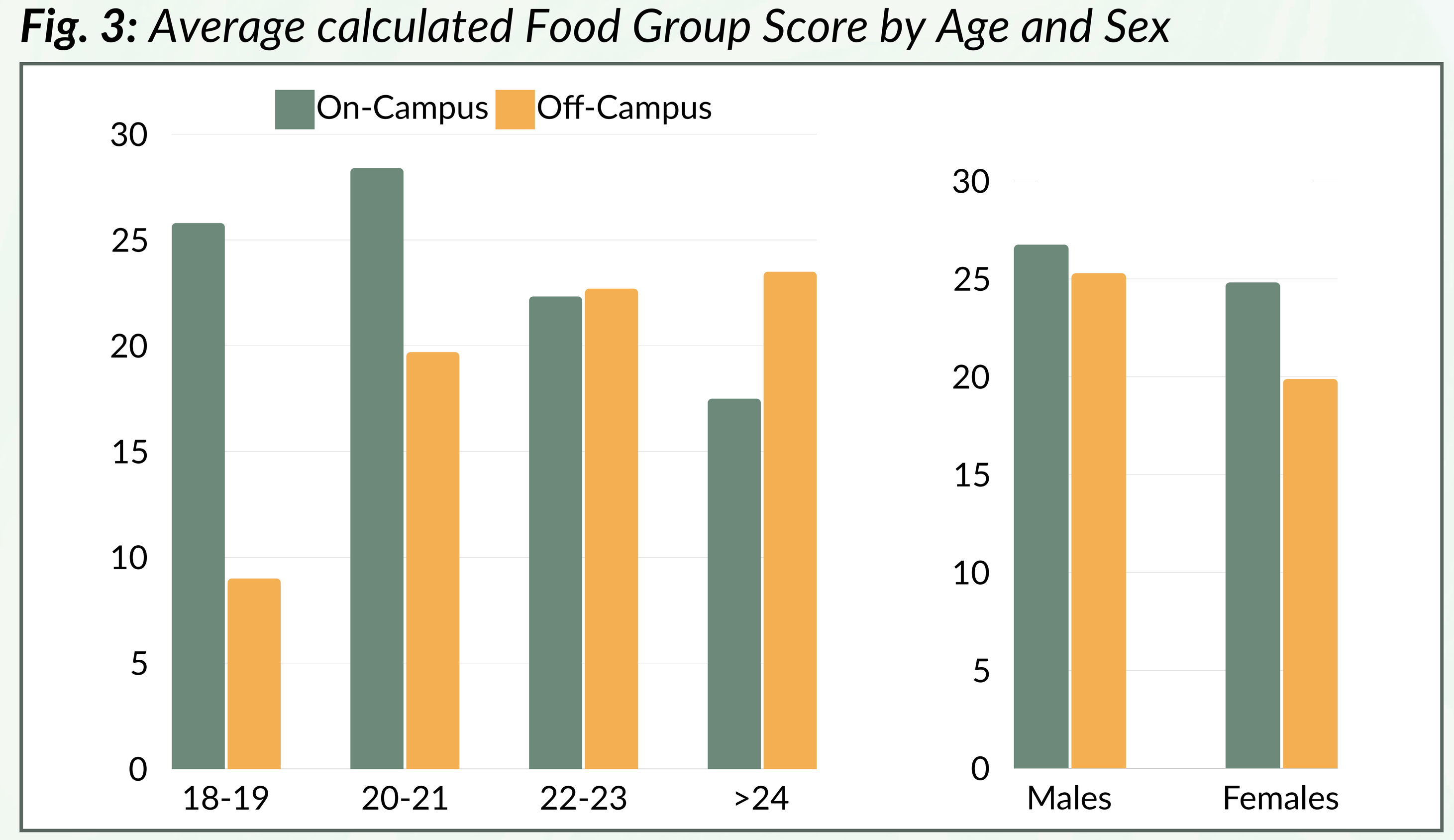


***Fig. 3:** Average calculated Food Group Score by Age and Sex*



- Predicted mean values of off-campus group (**FGS = 25.33**; 95% CI: 17.88, 23.16) estimated -4.82 point deviance from total FGS compared to on-campus group's predicted mean score (**FGS = 20.52**; 95% CI: 21.60, 29.07) (***Fig.2***)
  - Test statistic of -2.09 with **p-value = 0.039 < 0.05** (*Fig. 2*)
- Mean FGS: on-campus males (26.75), females (24.82); off-campus males (25.28), females (19.89) (***Fig. 3***)
- Accounting sex with living situation: p-value between female groups (0.21 > 0.05) with -3.71 point deviance in FGS compared to the on-campus group; there is no significant statistical difference where sex is included (***Fig.3***)

CONCLUSION

- The recommended total FGS according to the HEI is 20.5.[3]
- Comparing the average score for off-campus students resulted in 20.52 and on campus 25.33 (***Fig.2***).
- Our initial hypothesis estimated students living on-campus would score higher overall on the HEI scale of healthy dietary habits.
- Our findings support this hypothesis as a statistical difference was found between each living situation group with a p-value of 0.039.
- These results highlight for disparities experienced by undergraduate students in terms of healthy food accessibility.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Support for Off-Campus Students:

- Develop initiatives to support off-campus students in accessing affordable and convenient sources of fresh produce and food assistance benefits
  - e.g. partnerships with local farmers' markets, community gardens, or grocery stores to offer discounts/transportation options for students living off campus; assistance when applying for food benefit programs including SNAP and EBT

REFERENCES

See QR Code for References: