



THE MENTAL COST OF EATING: ASSESSING ANXIETY PREVALENCE ACROSS FOOD SECURITY STATUS WITHIN UCSD

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Objective

- To examine the association between food insecurity and generalized anxiety among UC San Diego undergraduate students

Background

- Among University of California (UC) campuses, 33% of undergraduate students were food insecure¹
- Food-insecure students were significantly more likely to report symptoms of depression, anxiety, and perceived stress compared to their food-secure peers^{2,3}
- Demographics include a substantial proportion from low socioeconomic backgrounds⁴

Methodology

Sample:

- Cross-sectional online survey via Qualtrics, distributed to UCSD undergraduate students in April-May of 2025
- Participants were recruited through social media, email, and via in-person outreach

Survey Design:

- Questionnaire included a combination of standardized and demographic questions:
 - Exposure** – Food Insecurity: USDA's Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM)
 - Outcome** – Anxiety Symptoms: Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item (GAD-7) scale
 - Other Variables:** age, race/ethnicity, year in college, FAFSA/financial aid status, and current living situation

Statistical Analysis:

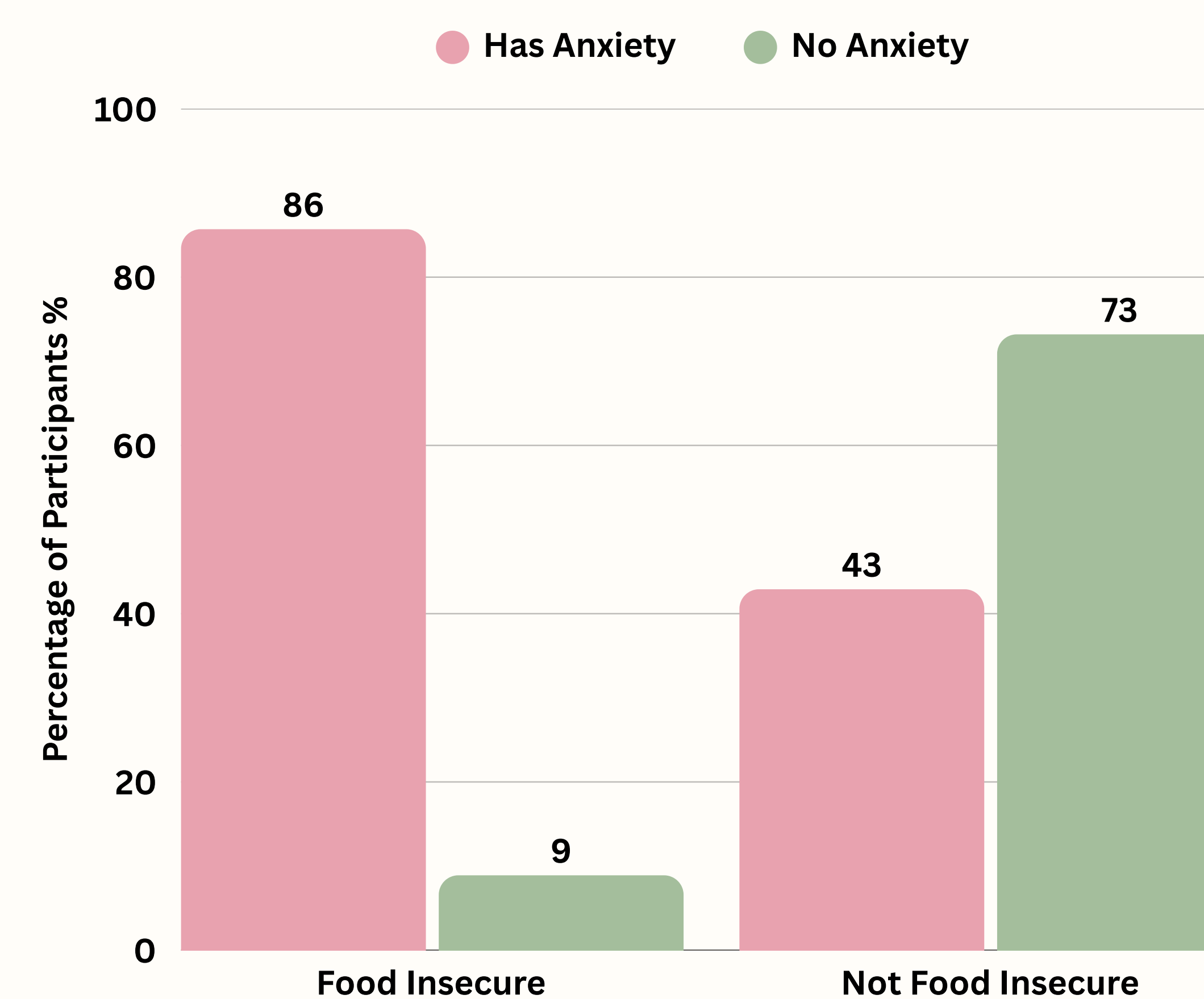
- Chi-square test** using IBM SPSS v29
- Survey responses were coded into Likert-scale scores, then summed to create food insecurity and anxiety scores (cutoffs: 7+ for food insecurity, 6+ for anxiety)
- Participants were grouped into 4 categories based on their food security and anxiety status using Microsoft Excel

Results

Table 1. Sociodemographic Distribution

Academic Status (n = 91)	
Undergraduate (Year 1)	19 (20.9%)
Undergraduate (Year 2)	13 (14.3%)
Undergraduate (Year 3)	20 (20.0%)
Undergraduate (Year 4+)	38 (41.8%)
Sources of Financial Aid	
Family Support	57 (62.6%)
Grants (Pell, Cal)	56 (61.5%)
Scholarships	33 (36.3%)
Loans	28 (30.8%)
Housing Status	
On-campus	41 (45.1%)
Off-campus (with non-related roommates)	40 (43.9%)
Off-campus (with family)	10 (11.0%)
Food Assistance Programs	
CalFresh or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	46 (50.5%)
Campus Food Pantry (UCSD Triton Food Pantry)	34 (37.4%)
Free/Discounted meal programs or reduced-cost meal programs	11 (12.1%)
Emergency food programs (e.g. meal vouchers, free meals)	3 (3.30%)

Figure 1. Food Security and Anxiety Status

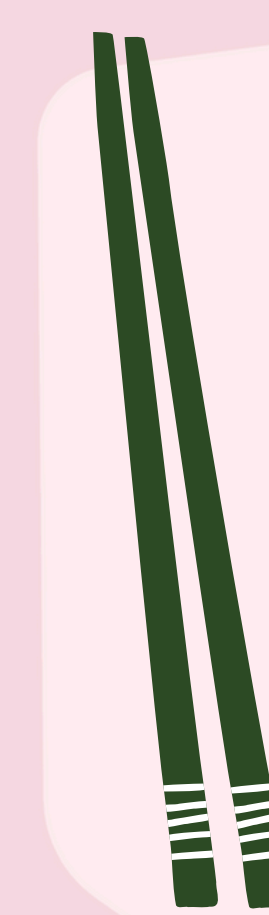


85.7% (30 out of 35) of food insecure students have anxiety.
Only 26.8% (15 out of 56) of food secure students have anxiety.

Students experiencing food insecurity were over:

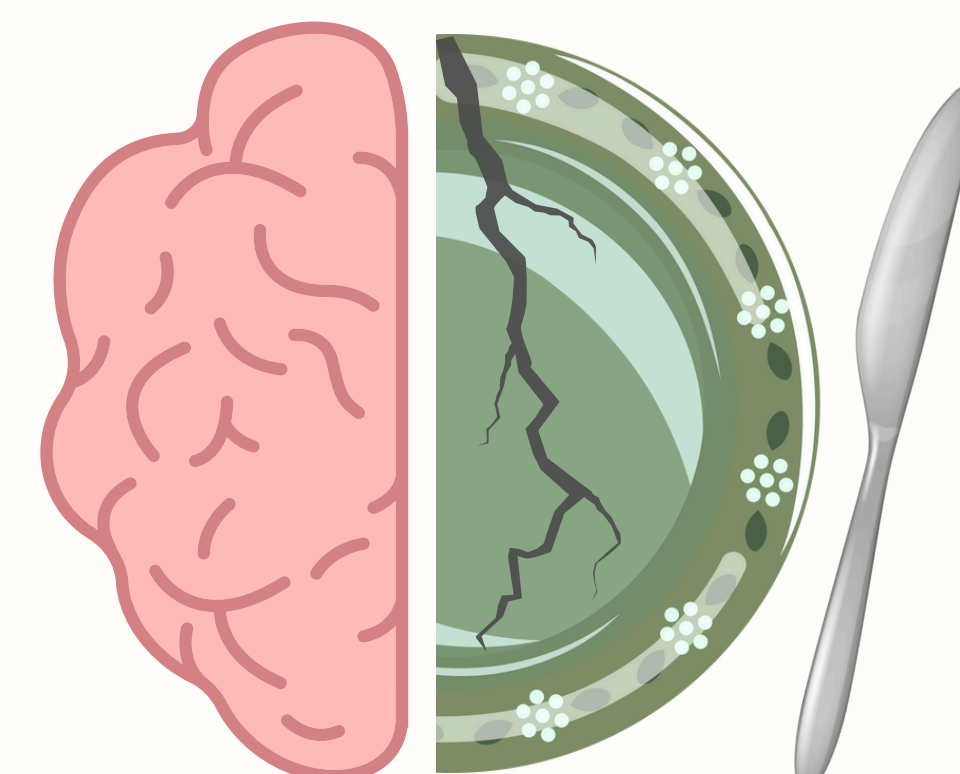
3X
more likely

to report
symptoms
of anxiety



Significant
association between
food insecurity &
generalized anxiety

$$\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 27.61$$
$$p < 0.001$$



- 91 valid responses were analyzed from 105 UC San Diego undergraduates who filled out the survey; most identified as female (57), followed by male (34), and one non-binary respondent
- 50 were unemployed, while others worked part-time (36), full-time (3), or held multiple jobs (2)

Conclusion

- Our findings indicate a strong association between food insecurity and generalized anxiety among UC San Diego undergraduate students
- Future research should investigate the relationship between housing, access to food programs, and food insecurity and anxiety among undergraduate students.
- Future research should also investigate how this association varies across other major universities in San Diego and beyond, particularly in urban, rural, and city settings with differing economic pressures

Policy Implications

- To address the link between food insecurity and anxiety, UCSD could implement campus-wide initiatives that expand access to affordable, stigma-free food resources and increase awareness of available support
- Given San Diego's high cost of living, strengthening programs like the Triton Food Pantry and promoting resource visibility may help improve student mental health

Acknowledgements

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for References!

