

Left on the Table: CalFresh Eligibility and Enrollment Among UCSD Undergraduates

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Background

- Food insecurity affects academic performance and overall well-being
- Prevalence at UCSD is 3-4 times higher than the California rate
- CalFresh, California's SNAP program, provides eligible low-income students with up to \$298/month in food benefits, but previous surveys have demonstrated low enrollment
- UCSD launched campus-wide communication campaign in 2025 to increase student awareness and enrollment in CalFresh
- Survey conducted to assess current levels of food insecurity, CalFresh coverage and ongoing barriers to enrollment

Methods

- Design: cross-sectional online Qualtrics survey (SURFFS) in February 2026
- Population: UCSD undergraduates (N = 1,325) recruited through campus-wide emails, flyers, and billboards
- Measures: USDA 6-item Food Security Score, self-perceived food security, CalFresh eligibility and enrollment status, and reasons for enrollment
- CalFresh eligibility: Determined using proxies for federal and state criteria (family income, residency, age, full-time student, not living with parents, dining plan <11 meals/wk and ≥1 student exemption)
- Analysis: Univariate and bivariate analyses, prevalence ratios (PR) with 95% confidence intervals, and p-values, performed with EpiAnalysis, an R/ShinyApp

Results

Food security

- 48% self-perceived; 40% by USDA 6-item measure
- Self-perceived: 6% very low; 42% low food security
- USDA: 18% very low; 22% low food security
- 85% agreement between measures
- 23% of USDA food secure self-perceived as insecure
- 11% of USDA food insecure self-perceived as secure

CalFresh enrollment

- 42% of respondents potentially eligible; eligible students 1.8x more likely to be food insecure (55% vs. 30%; p<0.0001)
- Among the eligible: 40% enrolled, 15% previously enrolled, 45% never enrolled
- Of non-enrolled: 22% applied but denied; 38% considered but never applied
- Top barriers: unsure of eligibility (61%), don't need it (35%), don't know how to apply (33%)

Conclusions

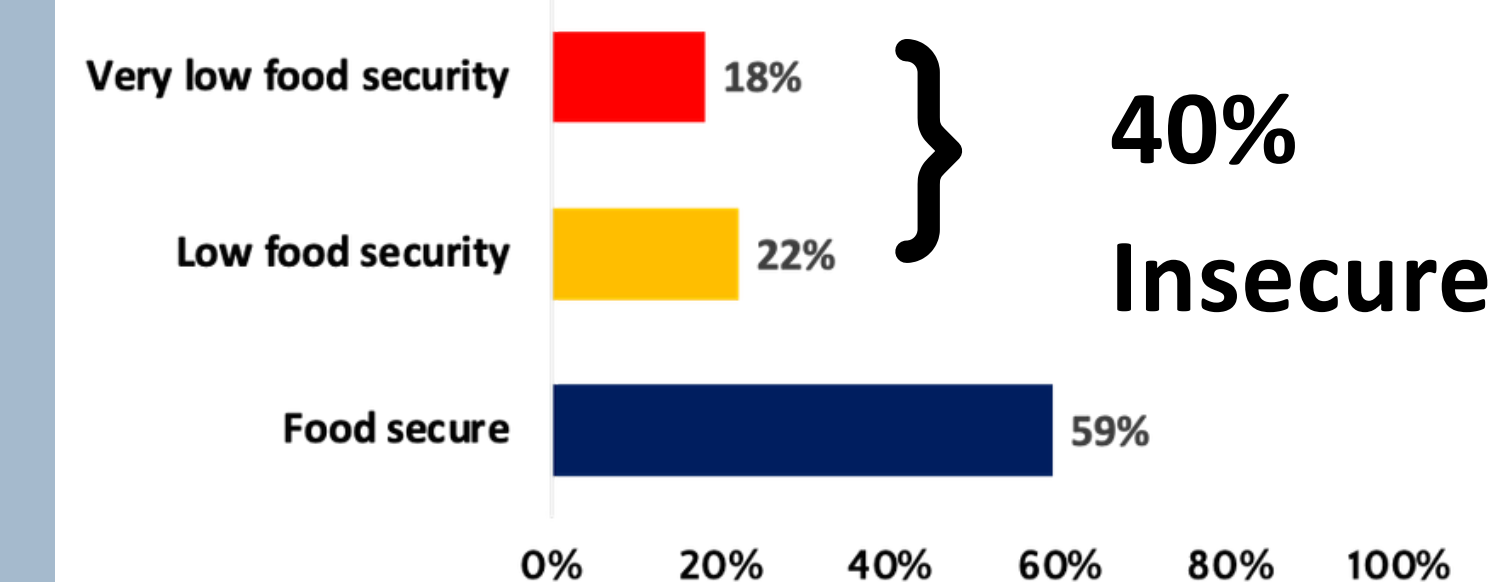
- Food insecurity affects 48% of UCSD undergraduates and is especially high among CalFresh-eligible students, yet only 40% are enrolled
- Misalignment between perceived and measured food insecurity may limit help-seeking, highlighting the need for proactive outreach
- Gaps persist: many eligible students misunderstand their eligibility, and a significant minority of applicants are denied
- Targeted outreach, application assistance, and streamlined enrollment are needed to close the gap

60%
of eligible UCSD
undergraduates
leave \$298/month
on the table

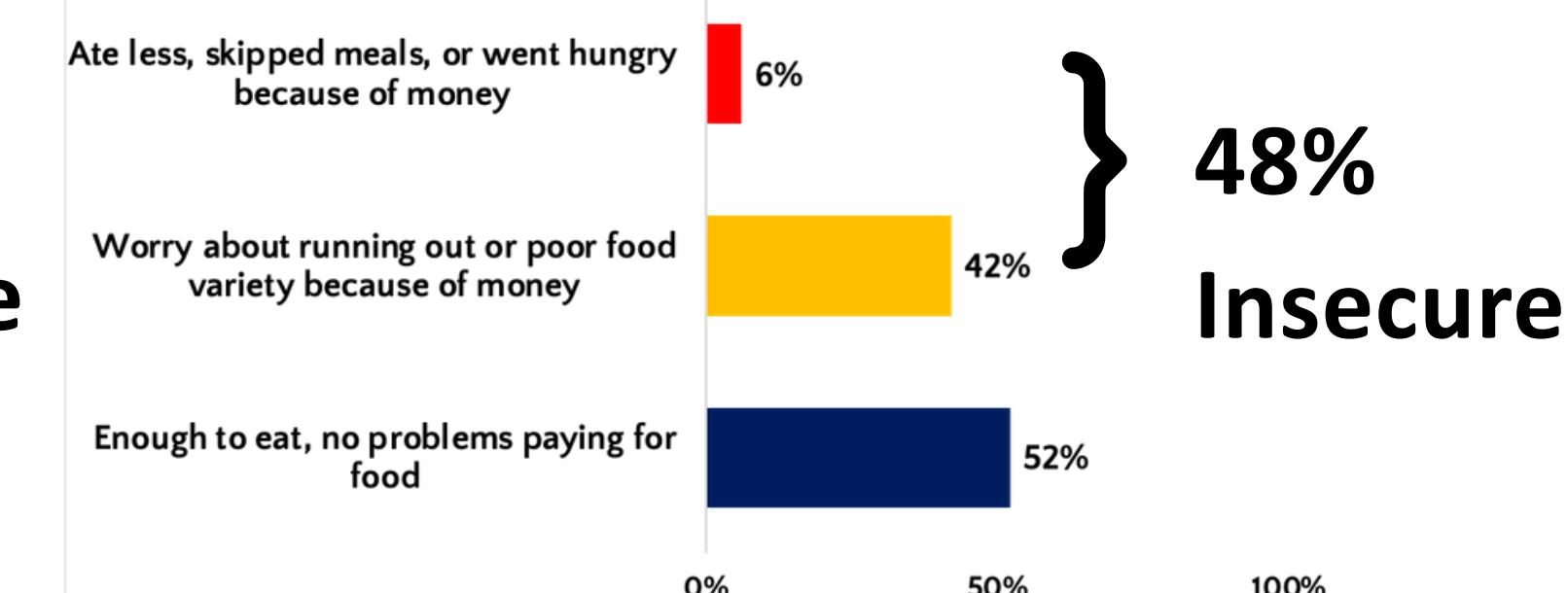


Levels of Food Insecurity

USDA: 6-item scale (N=1324)



Self-perceived food security (N=1290)



40%
Insecure

48%
Insecure

CalFresh Enrollment Among Eligible Undergraduate Students (N=498)

40%

Currently
Enrolled

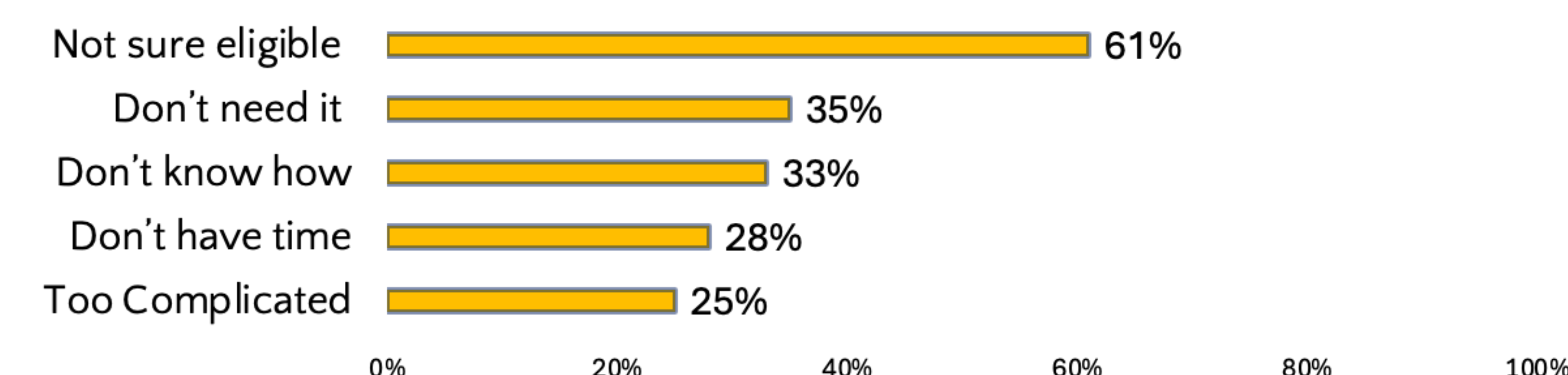
15%

Previously
Enrolled

45%

Have Never
Been Enrolled

Reasons For Not Applying to CalFresh (N=400)



Where Did They Stop? (N=144)

