

Food insecurity amongst third level students in Ireland during the covid-19 pandemic

S. Spain¹, R. Tucker², C. Du² and L. Keaver¹

¹Department of Health and Nutritional Sciences, Atlantic Technological University Sligo, Sligo, Ireland and

²Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition, Michigan State University, USA.

Food insecurity is a growing concern, potentially exacerbated by the coronavirus disease 2019 (covid-19) pandemic⁽¹⁾. However, efforts are being made worldwide to address this issue, from Europe to America there is a focus on combatting food insecurity amongst children by providing school meals⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾. This is a strong starting point, which could extend to post-primary and third-level cohorts, ideally translating into a reduction in the prevalence of food insecurity within the global population overall. However, action is required in Ireland with more domestic research required to formulate effective policies to combat the growing rate hypothesised. This study aims to contribute to fulfilling this research gap. A survey was distributed to third level students worldwide at 2 time points (June 2020, December 2020) during the covid-19 pandemic to assess health behaviours amongst this cohort during this time. Information on self-reported food insecurity stress influenced by the covid-19 pandemic amongst third level students in Ireland was extracted and analysed. To assess food insecurity stress, participants were asked if they experienced much less stress (-50), no change in stress (0) or much more stress (+50). Data analysis was conducted using statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) version 26 via frequency and descriptive functions, with difference tests relative to gender (male, female) and age (18–21, 21–25, 25+ years) carried out also. Participants of the first survey had a mean age of 24.9 ± 8.2 years, who were predominantly female accounting for 72.3% ($n = 138$) of this cohort. The majority of participants of the second survey were female also accounting for 84.8% ($n = 128$), with a similar mean age of 23.6 ± 6.2 years. In respect of food insecurity stress influenced by covid-19, more participants reported much more stress than usual as the pandemic progressed; 46.4% ($n = 52$) in June 2020 and 53.2% ($n = 59$) in December 2020. Similar trends were observed across genders; more males and females reported much more stress in December 2020 compared to June 2020. 42.5% ($n = 17$) of males reported much more stress than usual in June 2020 compared to 47.1% ($n = 8$) in December 2020, whilst 48.6% ($n = 35$) of females reported much more stress than usual in June 2020, compared to 54.3% ($n = 51$) in December 2020. However, no statistically significant difference was observed in reported impact across genders or age groups. Given this, third level students in Ireland may have been adversely impacted by the covid-19 pandemic in respect of food security. Therefore, an intervention is warranted to reverse this whilst combatting pre-existing food insecurity levels.

References

1. Spyreli E, McKinley M, Woodside J, *et al.* (2021) *BMC Public Health* **21**.
2. Dalma A, Petralias A, Tsiampalis T, *et al.* (2019) *Eur J Public Health* **30**(1), 171–178.