

'Not poor enough': A Systematic Review of the Barriers and Facilitators in Coping with Food Insecurity as Perceived by Students in Post-secondary Education.

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Background

Following the Covid-19 outbreak, 41% of university students across the UK and the US have reported worrying that their food would run out and almost 35% have reported high or very high levels of food insecurity (Defeyter et al., 2020).

According to Anderson (1990), 'food insecurity exists whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain' (p.1560). Several reviewers have synthesised findings that indicate relationships between food insecurity and anxiety, depression, perceived stress, poor physical health, and lower academic performance (Bruening et al., 2017; Cady, 2014; Duran & Núñez, 2020; Lee et al., 2018a). However, the presentation of coping strategies is often aggregational and offers little insight to how different factors interact and influence coping.

Beyond accumulating debt through depending on financial strategies, self-reliance can encompass dehumanising practices, such as repressing hunger, stealing money or food, or even selling one's blood (Lee et al., 2018a). Little is known about the efficacy of campus-based programmes, and the stigma around food insecurity been linked to limited use of community support, but there are still questions around the meaning students give to these experiences (Davis et al., 2020; Evans, 2016). Regarding official aid, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), it's possible that the requirements imposed may constitute working students unable to receive these benefits (USDA, 2018).

Research Question

This review was informed by the following research question:

What does the literature suggest about how perceived factors influence coping with food insecurity among post-secondary students?



Methodology

A systematic review (Hanley & Cutts, 2013) of the peer-reviewed qualitative and mixed methods research published between 2010 and 2020 was undertaken. A Boolean logic was applied in searches across six databases, both education and health focused: PsycINFO, ERIC, ASSIA, MEDLINE, Embase, and Scopus.

Specifically, the keywords used were: food insecurity, student*, college*, universit*, qualitative (af). Scanning reference lists helped identify further papers.

Study Flow

The search protocol resulted in a total of 1548 studies. The quality of the papers that met the inclusion criteria was appraised using the NICE (2014a, 2014b) quality appraisal checklists for qualitative and mixed-methods studies, the Journal Article Reporting Standards for Qualitative Research and the Mixed Methods Article Reporting Standards (Appelbaum et al., 2018; Levitt et al., 2018). Figure 1 represents the PRISMA flow diagram Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff & Altman, 2009).

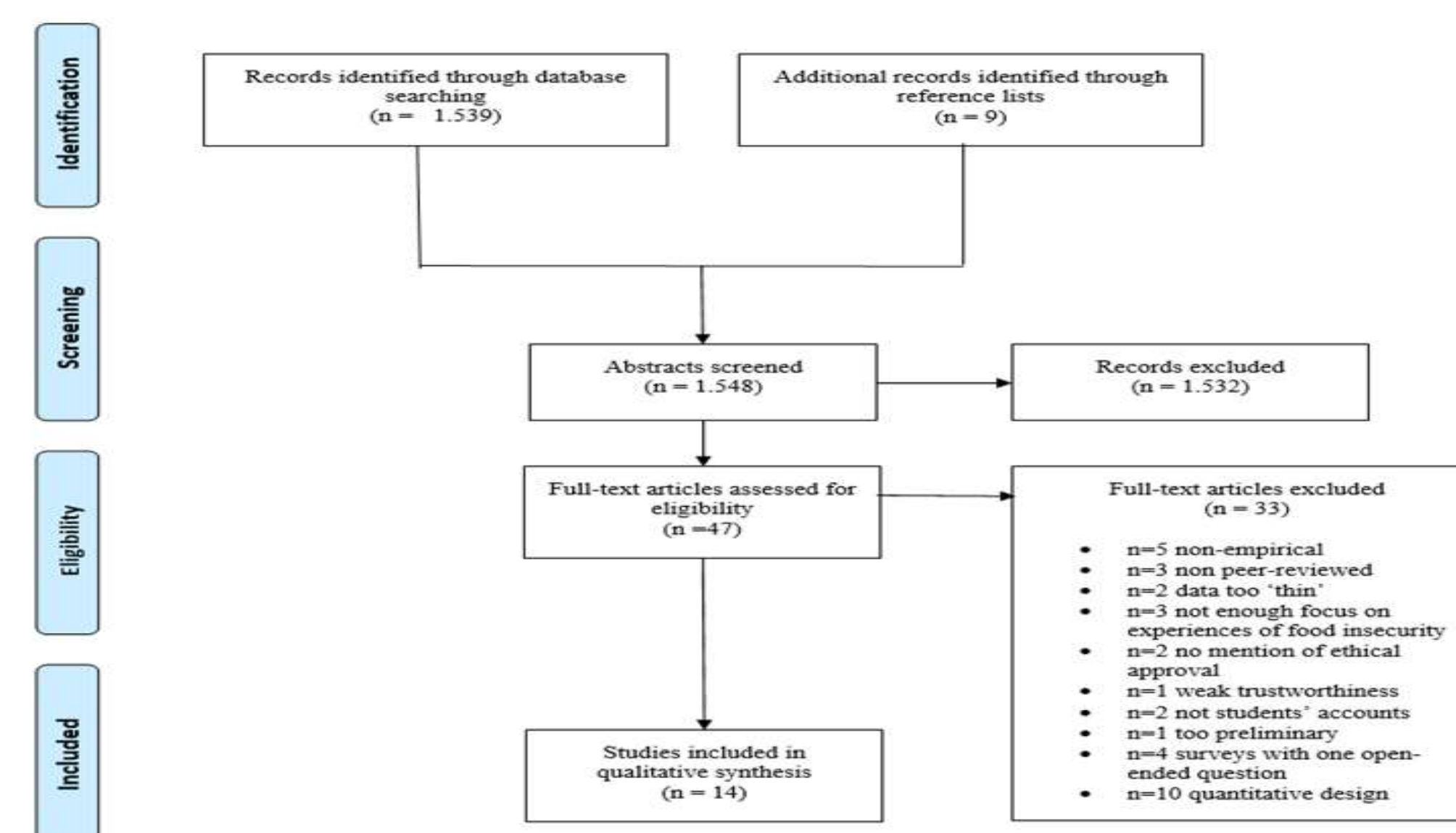


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of the article search and appraisal processes

Data Synthesis

Data were synthesised using a meta-ethnographic approach (Noblit & Hare, 1988). This systematic approach translates ideas, concepts, and metaphors across different studies (Munro et al., 2007). This process results in the elucidation of new insights, the third-order constructs, while preserving meaning through maintaining the descriptive nature of some of the original findings (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Findings

Seven main third-order constructs were identified:

Theme 1: Cost of living: Housing costs worked against budgeting skills. The rising cost of food promoted low quality diets and prevented students from creating supportive peer networks.

Theme 3: Stigma: Students would avoid revealing their struggles, thought they did not deserve campus, community or official support and normalised being the starving student stereotype.

Theme 5: Campus networks: Emotional support was sought only when peers were perceived to be in similar situations. Faculty members encouraged applying for benefits through challenging feelings of undeservingness.

Theme 7: Accessibility of services: Meal plans were often rejected due to their high cost and the limited quantity of food offered. Food pantries were a convenient, yet non-inclusive 'safety nets'. Accessing benefits was impeded by hostile and elaborate qualification processes that excluded students who received minimum wage, were not financially supported by their parents or were already granted another, insufficient benefit.

Theme 2: Individual factors: Lack of knowledge and of previous coping experiences hindered receiving aid. Where knowledge existed, self-advocacy depended on faculty support.

Theme 4: Independence: Silence and survival tactics were seen as parts of being an independent adult.

Theme 6: Academic costs-opportunities: Education was seen as promising future security, which promoted enduring hunger-avoidance strategies and feeling unworthy of using food banks or official aid. For previously homeless students, education offered opportunities in learning about benefit systems, creating networks or having a sense of stability.

Discussion

The findings echo how inflation and uncoordinated policies limit the reliability of the individual strategies dictated by norms around independence and post-secondary education.

What are some implications for the collaboration amongst students, faculty and counselling psychologists?

- Organising anti-stigma campaigns that highlight how systems and exogenous shocks (Yaro, 2004) create and maintain food insecurity.
- Demonstrating respect to student's need for dignity and agency (Winter, 2018) when offering money or goods.
- Challenging feelings of undeservingness.
- Locating inclusive donations when designing campus pantry programmes.
- Creating reheating facilities on campuses that allow socialisation.
- Facilitating self-advocacy skills.
- Taking actions to transform wider state policies (Twill et al., 2016), such as yielding influence to advocate for students' increased and timely access to benefits.

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