Understanding the Root Causes to Food Insecurity In UBC Students

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SEEDS Sustainability Program

Responding to UBC student food insecurity

Through synthesis of survey data from AMS food bank users

What's the issue?

Food insecurity entails the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Affecting primarily low-income households, inaccessibility of food is often heavily linked to a lack of funding and time, both of which are often qualities of a full-time university student's lifestyle.

Vancouver's economic climate with disproportionate income to housing costs serves as a perfect environment to exacerbate these issues, leaving many students struggling to balance budgeting between education and costs of living.

How can we better understand the issue?

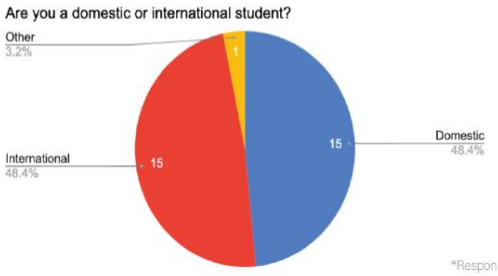
Through the usage of both a primary and secondary survey (provided by AMS Food Bank's 2024 intake survey), we determined meta-themes and demographics that would help determine common factors of food insecurity.

What are the causes?

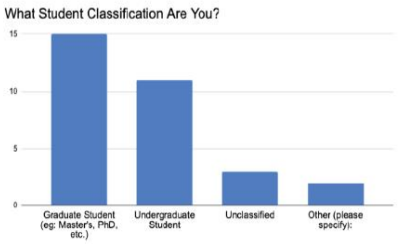
- Financial pressure - costs of living/inflation
- Food selection - limited access to dietary needs
- Non-modifiable circumstances - Personal health
- Employment - Job opportunities
- Family/dependants - Supporting others
- Currency - Exchange rate/transfers
- Housing - Finding and paying for housing
- Financial support - Loans/research funding
- Time restraints - Food prep/grocery shopping
- International student - Inaccesible domestic benefits

Who's affected?

Although food security can impact any student, certain demographics are more at risk.



*Responses to "Are you a domestic or internation student?" asked on primary survey



*Responses to "What student classication are you?" asked on primary survey

So what can we do?

Through our findings, we aim to identify immediate, mid-term, and long-term remedies to UBC's student food insecurity crisis of which notable examples are provided below:

- Immediate - Campus wide awareness of assisted food programs
- Mid-term - Pilot monthly food stipend program targeting individuals overlooked by mainstream support services
- Long-term - Cross-sectional Food Security Governance Council

Executive Summary

Increases in the cost of living, low wages, and limited access to affordable food are among the barriers that contribute to food insecurity, impacting 30-40% of University of British Columbia (UBC) students (UBC Food Hub, 2021). Moreover, the number of clients at the Alma Mater Society (AMS) Food Bank continues to increase each year. In 2023, the AMS Food Bank served over 14,559 students and their dependents-- a 122% increase in attendees in 2023 compared to the previous year (AMS Food Bank, 2024). While food banks provide temporary relief, they do not address the systemic financial and policy-related factors contributing to this issue. With the goal of reducing the number of AMS Food Bank clients, the purpose of this study is to first understand the root causes of food insecurity among UBC students.

This study aims to identify key themes and policies that impact food insecurity through three objectives: (1) analyze UBC student food insecurity through factors including financial status and demographics, (2) examine current policies and shortcomings in their effectiveness and equity, and (3) develop a strategy to address the underlying cause of food insecurity in students. Using survey based research methods, we will analyze data from a proprietary survey, AMS Food Bank data surveys, and a site visit to the AMS Food Bank. This project will utilize community-based action research (CBAR), in which community members will be involved throughout the project to help devise deliverables. This ensures that stakeholders can contribute to developing actionable solutions that help the community. Collecting client input through primary and secondary data will gather a comprehensive data set that encapsulates the experiences of our target population, assisting us in better understanding the barriers and resources related to food accessibility. Furthermore, it will assist in examining limitations and financial aid policies that disproportionately influence student food access.

Our findings will be used to create a deliverable that can be used by the AMS Food Bank to inform policy recommendations and actionable support strategies, such as expanding financial aid, reducing reliance on food banks, and driving systemic change. With the research findings, a strategy that addresses the root causes of student food insecurity will be developed.

By identifying the root causes of food insecurity in UBC students, and proposing more sustainable solutions, this research can serve as a precedent in defining and remedying the symptoms and causes of food insecurity. This ensures that students can focus on their academic success without barriers against accessible food.

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Abbreviations and Key Terms

AMS — Alma Mater Society
CBAR — Community-Based Action Research
FSI — Food Security Initiative
LFS — Land and Food Systems
LFSUS — Land and Food Systems Undergraduate Society
SEEDS — Social Ecological Economic Development Studies
UBC — University of British Columbia

Introduction

Research Topic

Food insecurity, defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live a healthy lifestyle, is a growing but often overlooked crisis among university students (BMC Medicine, 2023). While many assume that food insecurity is an issue primarily affecting lower-income households, its presence on university campuses highlights systemic gaps in financial aid, rising costs of living, and broader affordability crisis in higher education. Nationally, a 2021 survey of over 6,000 students across 13 Canadian university campuses found that 56.8% of students experienced moderate to severe food insecurity, five times higher than the 11.2% prevalence in the general population (Wang et al., 2023). These numbers suggest that for a significant portion of the student population, affording and accessing adequate nutritious food is a daily struggle. The consequences of this extend beyond hunger, affecting academic performance, mental health, and stress (Sison, 2023). It also increases the risk of chronic diseases and results in dietary compromises and poorer overall health (BCCDC, n.d.; Wang et al., 2023). Food insecurity exists when factors outside an individual's control negatively impact their access to foods that promote wellbeing, and is most acutely felt by those who experience the consequences of structural inequities such as systemic discrimination and colonial practices (BCCDC, n.d.).

Food banks, including the AMS Food Bank at UBC, play an important role in providing emergency food aid to students facing immediate food insecurity. In high-income countries where public assistance falls short, food banks and similar services aim to bridge the food security gap by offering short-term relief to individuals who are economically, socially, or geographically disadvantaged (Bazerghi et al., 2016). However, while food banks offer essential support in crisis situations, they are often limited in the nutritional quality and variety of food they can provide, and are not designed to address long-term food insecurity. The AMS Food Bank itself saw 16,590 user interactions between May and December 2024 alone, a 14% increase from the previous year (AMS Services, n.d.). As part of our broader goal to reduce food insecurity on campus, our project aligns with efforts to reduce over-reliance on emergency services like the AMS Food Bank by proposing sustainable, student-informed strategies that target underlying barriers to food access and contribute to a more resilient, nutritionally secure campus community.

Research Relevance

Societal Issues

Food insecurity is a growing societal issue in Canada, affecting 18% of families in 2022, an increase from 16% in 2021 (Uppal, 2023). Racialized communities are disproportionately impacted, with 38% of Black Canadians experiencing food insecurity compared to 16% of non-racialized, non-Indigenous families. Beyond access to food, food insecurity is linked to chronic health conditions, mental health challenges, increased hospitalization, and premature mortality, all of which place added strain on the healthcare system. Recognized as a key poverty indicator in Canada's 2018 Opportunity for All strategy, food insecurity often reflects deeper systemic inequalities (Uppal, 2023). Our project contributes to addressing this complex issue by advancing interventions that reduce reliance on emergency food aid, promote sustainable solutions, and improve access to nutritious food, ultimately supporting broader national goals to reduce poverty and health disparities.

The consequences of food insecurity extend far beyond hunger. Malnutrition, weakened immune function, and exacerbation of chronic health conditions are direct physical health impacts, while mental health effects, including heightened stress, anxiety, depression, and feelings of social exclusion, are also prevalent among food-insecure populations (Sison, 2023). In the university setting, these struggles can significantly impact academic performance, leading to difficulty concentrating, decreased class attendance, and lower overall achievement. Research has shown that students experiencing food insecurity are at a greater risk of falling behind academically due to the psychological burden of financial instability (Loofbourrow & Scherr, 2023). This

highlights the need to address these issues to reduce the prevalence of student food insecurity at UBC, not only for individual benefit but to improve the overall health of society.

This study focuses on identifying the root causes of food insecurity at UBC, recognizing that the issue disproportionately affects certain student demographics. International students, for instance, face distinct challenges such as visa restrictions that limit their ability to work, ineligibility for federal financial aid, and a lack of family support networks in Canada (Simpson, 2025). Similarly, as identified in our primary and secondary data collection, students with dependents and those from lower-income backgrounds are particularly vulnerable due to increased financial obligations and reduced access to affordable housing or meal plans. By assessing survey data from the AMS Food Bank annual reports and an additional targeted survey, this research uncovered the systemic barriers preventing UBC students from achieving food security. Our findings provide valuable insights into how students navigate these challenges, where existing support systems fall short, and what policy changes could create more sustainable solutions.

UBC Policies, Plans, and Practices

As of 2019, 35% of undergraduate students at the Vancouver campus, and 42% of undergraduate students at the Okanagan campus report low to very low food security (UBC Foodhub, n.d.a.). These numbers highlight that a substantial portion of the student population is struggling to meet basic nutritional needs, emphasizing the urgency for targeted interventions and policy changes to support student wellbeing. Our research focused on understanding how factors such as domestic versus international status, financial constraints, and access to social services influence food access. By examining our primary and secondary data, we aimed to identify which challenges are most pressing and where UBC's existing programs may need adjustments. Based on our findings, we will propose targeted modifications to existing programs, such as increasing awareness of available resources and developing suggestions for more affordable food on campus. Additionally, our research could support the evaluation and development of future FSI initiatives, ensuring that they are inclusive, equitable, and capable of addressing the root causes of food insecurity. Our project aligns closely with the UBC Wellbeing Strategic Framework, which envisions UBC as a health-and wellbeing-promoting university where all people, places, and communities can flourish (UBC, n.d.). By focusing on student food insecurity, our work directly supports one of the framework's six priority areas: food and nutrition. Specifically, our project advances the stated goal of reducing food insecurity for UBC community members by 2025. Through evidence-based recommendations and targeted policy suggestions, we contribute to embedding wellbeing into the university's organizational plans, policies, and decision-making processes, helping create a healthier, more supportive campus environment for all (UBC, n.d.). Our project will help create a healthier, more equitable campus landscape where all students can thrive.

Community Benefits

The impact of this research extends beyond addressing food insecurity at UBC, it has the potential to create lasting, structural changes that improve student well-being, academic success, and financial stability. By identifying the key financial pressures and the student demographics most affected by food insecurity, our findings can help shape targeted interventions that move beyond short-term relief measures toward sustainable, long-term solutions. Food insecurity does not exist in isolation; it is closely tied to other challenges students face, including the rising cost of tuition, limited access to affordable housing, and financial stress, all of which can negatively impact academic performance and mental health. Ensuring that students have consistent access to adequate and nutritious food is essential for fostering a supportive and equitable learning environment, as research has shown that food insecurity is linked to poor mental well-being, reduced concentration, and lower academic achievement (Meal Exchange, 2021).

This research will contribute to policy recommendations aimed at improving financial aid systems, expanding eligibility for food assistance programs, and increasing accessibility to tuition support and emergency

funding. It also carries broader implications for academic institutions across Canada and globally. As student food insecurity becomes a more widely recognized issue, universities are increasingly looking for effective strategies to mitigate its effects and support their student populations. By highlighting the systemic challenges contributing to food insecurity and identifying best practices for institutional intervention, our research can serve as a model for other universities seeking to implement meaningful, long-term solutions. Addressing food insecurity is not just about improving student health, it is about creating an educational system in which all students, regardless of financial background, have the opportunity to thrive academically and personally without the burden of food-related stress.

Project Context

UBC has implemented a variety of initiatives to address food insecurity among students, such as the UBC Meal Share Program, and the UBC Food Hub (UBC, n.d.). These programs aim to provide immediate relief by offering free groceries, meal vouchers, and financial assistance to students in need. While these efforts are essential, they primarily address short-term food insecurity rather than tackling its root causes. The Food Security Initiative (FSI) at UBC has taken steps toward both short-term relief and long-term systemic change. The Digital Food Hub provides resources on food literacy, budgeting, and financial aid, while the Physical Food Hub aims to serve as a collaborative space for innovation in campus food systems (SEEDS Sustainability Program, n.d.). Additionally, the UBC Meal Share Pilot Program offers direct financial support by adding funds to students' UBC cards, reducing barriers to food access (SEEDS Sustainability Program, n.d.). Despite these efforts, gaps remain, particularly for international students and other vulnerable populations who face additional financial and legal barriers, such as work restrictions and ineligibility for certain social services.

Food security at UBC has a rich history grounded in student-led advocacy, collaborative action, and interdisciplinary partnerships. The movement began in 1997, when a small group of ten students formed the UBC Natural Food Cooperative to address the high cost of natural foods. This group met regularly to prepare meals and collectively order bulk food directly from distributors, eventually leading to the opening of Sprouts, a student-run grocery store located in the Student Union Building in 2004 (Foodhub, n.d.a.). Around the same time, in 2005, a student founded Agora Café in MacMillan as a volunteer-run space committed to offering affordable, accessible, and sustainable food options. Agora continues to play a key role in supporting food security while also providing valuable hands-on experience in food service and business management for student volunteers across campus (Foodhub, n.d.a.).

Also in 2005, the AMS Food Bank was launched through the AMS Innovative Projects Fund. By 2007, it became an official AMS Student Service and remains one of the most used food access resources on campus today (Foodhub, n.d.a.). Over time, these early initiatives laid the groundwork for more holistic, systems-based approaches to food insecurity. In 2020, UBC launched the Food Security Initiative (FSI), an interdisciplinary collaboration between UBC Wellbeing and the UBC Food Systems Project. FSI represents a campus-wide commitment to addressing food insecurity through structural, sustainable strategies that span programs, policies, and community partnerships (Foodhub, n.d.a.). Collectively, these efforts reflect UBC's longstanding commitment to tackling food insecurity and fostering a healthier, more equitable campus food system.

The AMS Food Bank plays a central role in addressing student food insecurity at UBC, supporting over two thousand students annually through a model that balances equity, efficiency, and limited resources (Simpson, 2025). Most of the food is purchased using grant money from UBC, with corporate donors covering the cost of some major food items such as eggs. While grocery store donations, collected twice weekly, help supplement the inventory with items like premade meals, meat, and seafood, these contributions are not sufficient to guarantee food for every student (Simpson, 2025). Each item has strict limits, and students must show ID if they're collecting food for family members and can then purchase "family sized" packages. Despite efforts to maintain access, the Food Bank is facing immense pressure, serving approximately 26,000 clients this year, a dramatic increase from previous years, with international and graduate students comprising the majority of users (Simpson, 2025). The service, usually run during opening hours by one staff member and a team of volunteers, spends

around $500,000 annually on food but remains restricted to students due to demand. Although it remains the most used food access resource on campus, the Food Bank's staff and volunteers acknowledge its limitations and continue to seek university- and province-level solutions to address root causes of student food insecurity (Simpson, 2025).

Research Purpose, Goals, and Objectives

Purpose

To Understand the root causes of food insecurity among students at UBC.

Goals

1. To reduce the number of students experiencing food insecurity at UBC.
2. To reduce the reliance on the AMS food bank.

Objectives

1. To assess the root causes of food insecurity among students at UBC.
2. To evaluate which food security resources are currently being accessed by students and the extent to which they are being utilized.
3. Develop recommendations for UBC or governmental action to fill existing gaps in current support systems and alleviate food insecurity among students.

Background

Understanding Student Food Insecurity

Food insecurity entails the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Affecting primarily low-income households, inaccessibility of food is often heavily linked to a lack of funding and time, both of which are often qualities of a full-time university student's lifestyle. In consideration of the necessary commitments to higher education, students may be required to prioritize either personal wellbeing or academics, leading to reliance on external support systems such as food banks. However, many of these immediate relief programs fail to combat the systemic drivers of student food insecurity, and thus extensive inquiry into the cause and effect relationship between socioeconomic conditions and accessible food must be conducted. The objective of the following sections are to identify the prevalence, causes, consequences, and existing solutions of food insecurity within university settings.

Prevalence of Food Insecurity Among University Students

University students, given their association with prestigious academies and generally younger age, are not often considered in the same contexts as low-income groups that are traditionally linked to financial insecurity. However, the strains higher education places upon them create equal and sometimes greater causal circumstances for poverty that in turn influence the prevalence of food insecurity. This can lead to a disproportionate amount of students being vulnerable to food insecurity. In fact, a 2020 USDA study indicated that the national average of food insecure households was 10.5% compared to student rates falling within 14% to 59%, depending on the institution (Bruening et al. 2017). The overall higher proportion of food insecure students relative to normal household rates as well as the vast span of the former's range illustrate the frequency of the issue within university environments.

Causes of Food Insecurity in Higher Education

Most commonly, financial strain, difficulties in work-life balance, demographic risk factors, and structural challenges serve as broad, categorized descriptors of the causes of student food insecurity. Inflated living costs entail a broad, interconnected network of consequences which strain the lives of those affected, enforcing budgeting circumstances that pit the priority of necessities against each other (Forget, 2019). Among aforementioned necessities, housing and food frequently take precedence due to their fundamental roles in human survival. This phenomenon is all the more common in Canada, with many situational factors contributing to the issue's prevalence throughout recent history. As the housing market becomes increasingly commodified, affordable housing gets squeezed out in favor of the financial incentives that are often associated with developing for wealthier clients. In turn, those who already suffer from disproportionate income to costs of living ratios face exacerbated financial circumstances that limit spending on other needs. In these scenarios, rent or mortgage can easily consume the majority of one's income and create a lack of available resources for those affected to expend on food.

Furthermore, balancing academics with work and personal commitments creates restricting environments that limit time availability for acquiring food, cooking, or making enough money to purchase groceries in the first place. Additionally, jobs available to students also often offer low wages due to commonly being entry level positions. International students may suffer from limited allowed working hours and first-generation college students, students from low-income families, and students of color are particularly at risk of maintaining sufficient time and funds to allow for a healthy school-work balance (Silva et al. 2017).

Structural factors in the distribution of knowledge and facilities also impact food insecurity heavily. With dormitories sometimes lacking cooking facilities, students must rely on pre-made meals or food plans. Additionally, limited awareness and social stigmas surrounding the usage of assisted food programs have caused students to prioritize educational expenses over nutrition, thereby discreetly relying on informal food sharing networks to cope (Raskind 2019).

Consequences of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity among students creates a broad network of consequences with significantly expansive impacts. Exemplified in a study by Patton-Lopez (2014), it was found that students facing food insecurity reported higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, furthered by lack of nutrition which in turn leads to worsened health and academic performance. In further analysis of academic effects, it was found that food-insecure students are more likely to miss classes, have lower grade point averages, and are at higher risk of dropping out of university entirely. With a direct correlation between food insecurity and inconsistent academic performance, students suffering from inaccessible food are at risk of continuing an intergenerational cycle of poverty with postponed graduation and limited job opportunities being major causal concerns (Maroto, Snelling, and Linck 2015).

The broader, extended social implications founded by food insecurity in universities are troubling. With marginalized and disadvantaged groups being some of the main victims of such issues, inequalities are exacerbated and comprehensive education becomes increasingly further out of reach. Cyclical poverty is then developed which continues the preexisting undermining of an equitable access to education.

Institutional and Policy Responses

In recognition of the growing food insecurity crisis, many universities have implemented programs to address the subject. Immediate remedies to food insecurity on campus often come in forms of meal vouchers, community gardens, emergency grants, and campus food pantries/food banks. However, it is argued that although these approaches do help to alleviate accessibility issues, they often are underfunded and inconsistent, acting more as band aid solutions with minimal treatment of the root causes of food insecurity (Cady 2014). Thus, some universities iterate more holistic programs in their approach to food insecurity among student bodies. By first acknowledging food as a basic need and embedding it within student support infrastructure, baseline assistance can be given through precedents such as financial literacy workshops, nutritional education, mental health counseling, and housing assistance (Watson et al. 2017). By relieving deeper rooted ailments of food insecurity paired with immediate aid programs, solving food insecurity among students becomes increasingly feasible. Progressing even further, joint efforts through educational institutions and government policy are some of if not the most effective treatments to university food insecurity. With government assistance programs sometimes not applying to full-time students such as the US' SNAP program, it is up to educational institutions to help provide a platform for advocating greater assistance inclusivity (Blagg et al. 2017).

However, despite such progress, institutional and policy responses often fail to be fully comprehensive due to funding and resource limitations, administrative hurdles, and social stigma surrounding the usage of public aid. Thus, a call for greater awareness of these issues is necessary for garnering support, recognizing the severity of food insecurity, and removing feelings of isolation one may have when suffering through such difficulties.

Gaps in Literature and Future Research Directions

Many existing studies surrounding student food insecurity rely on cross-sectional survey data, which limits findings to a snapshot within an ever growing timeline. Without more comprehensive knowledge of how food insecurity may evolve in university environments, it is difficult to efficiently and precisely target its causes and symptoms. As such, longitudinal studies are necessary in order to determine the long-term effects that food insecurity has upon the educational climate and in turn the academic, mental and career outcomes of students affected.

Greater inclusivity of research methodologies must also be considered as many studies operate on larger scales where quantitative data is more easily collected. Research through this approach often overlooks localized issues and affected communities that may provide more insight into the reasons behind food insecurity. Cultural, racial, and regional differences influence how students experience and respond to food insecurity so participatory

student studies are necessary to ensure that policy interventions are responsive to the actual needs and lived experiences of those needing help.

Research Methodology and Methods

Research Methodology

This study utilizes Community-Based Action Research (CBAR), a participatory approach that prioritizes community-driven inquiry and action (Guillion and Tilton, 2020). Unlike traditional research which is normally conducted on participants, CBAR emphasizes working together with community members throughout the research projects such as the AMS Food Bank clients at UBC, who serve as the primary focus for this study. As Guillion and Tilton (2020) outlines, CBAR aims to understand issues from a ground level up perspective by utilizing the experiences, insights, and suggestions of community members rather than imposing top-down assumptions. The methodology follows the principles for authentic CBAR which includes:

1. The community defines and drives the research agenda,
2. Community members are involved in all research phases through power-sharing and co-learning and,
3. The outcomes benefit all parties and advance social change

In this study, the senior manager of AMS Student Services and two AMS Food Bank staff were involved as key stakeholders. Research priorities were co-developed through consultations, biweekly meetings, and weekly email updates with stakeholders, ensuring the research reflected actual community needs. Their feedback and support directly guided and shaped the survey design, data interpretation, and the development of actionable recommendations.

This participatory model upholds CBAR's ethical foundation of reciprocity, mutual respect and relevance (Guillion and Tilton, 2020). Our team served as facilitators of knowledge rather than sole producers of it, continuously integrating input from both AMS Food Bank staff and food bank clients.

We also integrated the Look-Think-Act (LTA) CBAR cycle throughout the project (Guillion and Tilton, 2020). Under the "look" category, we examined existing annual intake survey data provided by our clients and relevant literature to identify root causes of student food insecurity. In the "think" category, we were able to critically analyze themes found in our secondary data and refine them into meta-themes to understand patterns and systemic barriers. Lastly, in the "act" category, we designed and implemented a targeted client Qualtrics survey with open-ended questions. This provided students a platform to voice their experiences and opinions to inform future AMS Food Bank practices and university policy development.

By embracing the CBAR methodology, we aimed to produce knowledge that is immediately useful to the community and supports systemic improvements in food security infrastructure at UBC.

Research Methods

Using a qualitative research framework, this study conducted a secondary data analysis and administered a survey to explore the various factors of food insecurity among AMS Food Bank clients. We first analyzed secondary data from a 2024 AMS Food Bank survey to determine the key contributors to student food insecurity and inform the questions for the survey. The primary data collection consisted of a UBC qualtrics survey that collected responses from AMS Food Bank clients to: (1) gain more insight on the demographics (eg. international or domestic) of AMS food bank clients, (2) determine the barriers to food access on campus, and (3) receive student recommendations on ways to improve food insecurity.

<u>Secondary Data Collection</u>

Data was analyzed from an intake survey that was conducted by the AMS Food Bank in 2024. The survey is shared to the clients through the newsletter, website, and QR codes in the food bank. It must be completed before using the food bank for the first time each school year. The survey includes 18 questions from Statistics Canada's Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM) and other questions to assess the contributing factors to food insecurity. The responses that were analyzed only included those who consented to their quotes being shared. Before distributing the data to our group, our clients from the SEEDS Sustainability Program and AMS Food Bank first anonymized 1137 responses to the following prompt:

"Circumstances that have caused food-insecurity for you, to help us better understand what challenges students are facing. This may include costs, income, number of dependents, ability to access university or government support, etc." (AMS Food Bank, 2024)

Responses were then imported to a Google Sheets document (see Appendix A), where each member analyzed up to 200 by quantifying the occurrence of 12 predetermined themes (Table 1) among each response. Themes were determined by scanning the data for commonly mentioned contributors to food insecurity and categorizing them into overarching main categories. This initial analysis helped identify recurring themes to food insecurity and highlighted areas that needed further clarification through a subsequent analysis.

Table 1. Themes and definitions used for the initial analysis of AMS Food Bank survey responses

Themes to Food Insecurity	**Definition/examples**
Budget Restrictions	Compromising one need for another due to low income eg. having to reduce food purchases to afford rent
Expensive Groceries	Eg. groceries, nutritious foods, cultural food items that are high in cost
Expensive Housing	Eg. having pay high rent, housing options are too costly
Limited Income	Eg. Not having a consistent source of income, financial instability, "limited income", not being paid enough
Unemployment	Not having a job to produce income
Government/University Support Barriers	Mentions of bursaries, loans, low graduate stipends, grants
Health or Dietary Needs	Eg. no halal options, low affordability to produce, inability to have a balanced diet
Dependant(s)	Mentions of having to support others (eg. kids, partner) financially
Schooling Fees	Eg. tuition, international student fees
Multiple	Selected when participant describes more than 1 contributing factor to food insecurity
Other	General and vague comments that are uncategorizable eg. "income", "too many expenses", "cost of living"

No Response	Responses that do not answer the question eg. “no”, “none”, “n/a”

To further identify and quantify the specific causes of food insecurity, we developed 10 meta-themes and 37 sub themes, using the 12 themes as a framework to inform the new categories (See Table 2). The meta-themes represented the overarching categories to food insecurity, while the sub themes helped pinpoint specific contributing factors within each category. Together, these subthemes helped fully capture the scope and complexity of food insecurity and guide the questions for the survey.

Primary Data Collection

Our primary data consisted of a UBC Qualtrics survey with 8 multiple choice and 3 open-ended questions (see Appendix B) for AMS Food Bank clients. A total of n=31 respondents—or food bank clients— are all UBC students that have accessed the food bank in the 2024-2025 school year. Since our research goal is to decrease reliance on the AMS Food Bank, recruiting its clients allowed us to identify any barriers to food access that are specific to this population or the food bank’s operations. The objective of this survey was to fill in gaps in knowledge identified through the secondary data, such as the demographics of clients and the specific barriers to food access on campus. The data collected from the survey was used to identify areas for improvement within the campus food system and inform our policy recommendations to support systemic change. Our survey questions covered the following themes: (1) client demographics, (2) barriers to food access, (3) food accessibility and affordability across different times of the month and year, (4) contributing factors to food insecurity, and (5) recommendations to improve food security.

Methods of Administration

Survey participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Posters (see Appendix C) with a QR code linked to the Qualtrics survey were placed in the AMS Food Bank on March 25th to begin collecting responses. To further encourage responses, an incentive to win one of three $50 gift cards was advertised on the poster. The survey was closed on April 3rd. A Qualtrics survey was chosen as a method of data collection because it allowed for a high number of responses within a short time frame. Contrarily, focus groups typically require more time to organize and recruit participants. Given our limited timeline, the survey responses met our expectations and provided sufficient information to address our research questions.

Results

This study used both secondary and primary data to explore the underlying factors contributing to food insecurity among UBC students. The findings are presented below in two parts.

Secondary Analysis Results

Table 2. Meta-themes, sub themes, and definitions of themes used for subsequent analysis of AMS Food Bank survey responses

Table 2 shows secondary data that was drawn from 1,137 anonymized responses to an open-ended question included in the AMS Food Bank's 2024 intake survey. These responses were coded using 12 initial themes and then further refined into 10 meta-themes and 37 sub-themes (Table 2). The most commonly reported issues fell under the meta-theme of financial pressures. In particular, high housing costs (n = 235), the high cost of groceries (n = 212), and not having enough budget left for food after other expenses (n = 189) were the most frequently mentioned challenges. Other recurring concerns included the rising cost of living, tuition, inflation, and increased household expenses. Employment-related barriers were also significant: 115 participants reported being unemployed, 108 noted having limited or unstable income, and 58 cited limited job opportunities. Food-related barriers were also present, such as limited access to nutritious or culturally relevant food, including halal or allergy-friendly options. Students with dependents, those with disabilities, and individuals lacking family financial support were also identified as more vulnerable to food insecurity.

Meta-theme	Sub Theme	Definition	Frequency (n= 922)
Financial Pressures on Budgets	High housing costs	General mentions of housing costs or the high cost of rent	235
	Cost of expensive groceries	High cost of groceries or food, unaffordable food	212
	Not enough budget	Compromising one need for another due to a limited budget, or not having enough money for food after other expenses eg. rent	189
	Cost of living (eg. food, housing)	Mentions of "cost of living"	178
	Tuition	Mentions of the cost of tuition or schooling fees	69
	Inflation	Mentions of inflation or the cost of "x" increasing	30
	Skipping meals	Not eating food to save money for other expenses	18
	Increased household expenses (eg. bills)	Discussion of bills, insurance, etc.	16

Food Selection	Limited nutritious/balanced foods	Mentions of the nutritional quality of their diet or available food options, limited access to produce or meat	59
	Limited access to affordable food	Mentions of the limited accessibility of affordable food eg. no affordable grocery stores nearby	50
	Not enough food	Not enough quantity of food	11
	Cultural reasons eg. halal	Mention of the cost or availability of cultural foods	8
	Dietary preferences (eg. vegan)	Inability to access food that meets their dietary preferences	3
	Allergies	Limited access to food that they are not allergic to	1
Non-modifiable Circumstances	Other	For factors that do not fit in any of the other categories	35
	Low Income status	Respondent states that they are low income or grew up low income	33
	Disability	learning or physical disability	17
	Loss of a family member	Mentions of the passing of a family member	3
	Mental health (eg. diagnosis, therapy)	Costs relating to mental health that impact food security	2
Employment	Unemployed	Not having a job to produce income	115
	Limited wages/income	Eg. Not having a consistent source of income, financial instability, not being paid enough	108
	Limited job opportunities	Mentions of jobs being difficult to find	58
	Had to stop/no time to work	Quitting job or not being able to have a job due to limited time	29
	Laid off	Losing job or employment status	9
	Retired	Mentions of retirement status	2
Family/dependants	Caring for dependants (eg. kids)	Mentions of financially supporting others	60

	Unemployed dependants (eg. partner)	Dependants who can help support the household financially, but are unemployed and/or unable to find a job	30
	Limited funds from family	Mentions of tuition or money being provided by family, or lack thereof	20
Currency	Exchange rate	Mentions of home country's exchange rate to Canadian currency impacting the affordability of necessities	26
	Inability to exchange money	Difficulty using money that has been transferred to Canadian Currency	1
Housing	Limited Access to affordable housing	Mentions of the lack of affordable housing options on campus or in Vancouver, inability to find an affordable place	24
Financial Support	Loans/bursaries	Mentions of loans, bursaries, grants, scholarships, etc. (ie. a means of financial support that require an application process)	63
	Research/graduate Studies funding (loss of/limited)	Mentions of graduate stipend, payment from TAship, payment from doing work for UBC	53
Time	Food preparation	Mentions of difficulties relating to food preparation	6
	Grocery Shopping	Mentions of difficulties relating to grocery shopping	4
International Student	Schooling fees	Mentions of high schooling fees, specifically pertaining to international student status	29
	Job Restrictions	Inability to find job that meets international student restrictions	18
	Loans/bursaries	Relating to access of financial support eg. loans	11

Table 3. Distribution of UBC Food Security Resources Accessed by AMS Food Bank Clients

Table 3 shows that in terms of access to existing food support systems, 41.5% of respondents indicated that they had not accessed any UBC food security resources. Among those who had, the most commonly used supports included government

student loans (19.3%), the UBC Food Hub Market (17.6%), Sprouts and Agora Kitchen (12.5%), and UBC bursaries (12.3%) (Table 3). These findings suggest a gap in awareness, accessibility, or eligibility for campus food assistance programs.

Has accessed:	Count	Percentage
None of the above	723	41.50%
Government student loans (ex. BC student loans)	336	19.29%
UBC Food Hub Market (in CIRS)	307	17.62%
Sprouts or Agora Kitchen	218	12.51%
UBC Bursaries	214	12.28%
Acadia Park Food Hub	186	10.68%
Private student loans (ex. from a bank)	120	6.89%
UBC Meal Share Program	101	5.80%
Other	52	2.99%
Total	1742	

Primary Analysis Results

To build on the secondary findings and gather more targeted insight, a primary survey was administered to AMS Food Bank clients between March 25 and April 3, 2025. A total of 31 responses were collected. Most respondents were graduate students (Figure 1), and international students made up the majority of the sample (Figure 2). A small number reported having dependents (Figure 3).

Figure 1. Comparison of student classification for survey respondents (n=31)

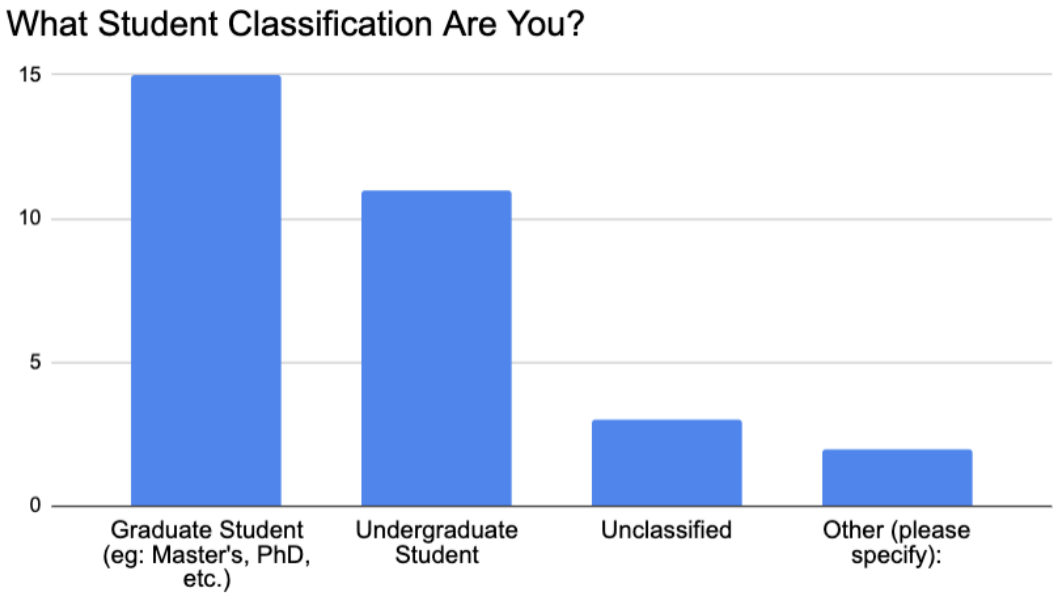

Figure 1 displays the student classification for survey respondents. Student classification is broken down into 4 categories, as seen in figure 1. Of the 31 respondents, the most prominent classification was identified in descending order, graduate students, undergraduate students, unclassified, and others (15, 11, 3, 2 students respectively).

Figure 2. Comparison of survey respondents by student status (international vs. domestic)

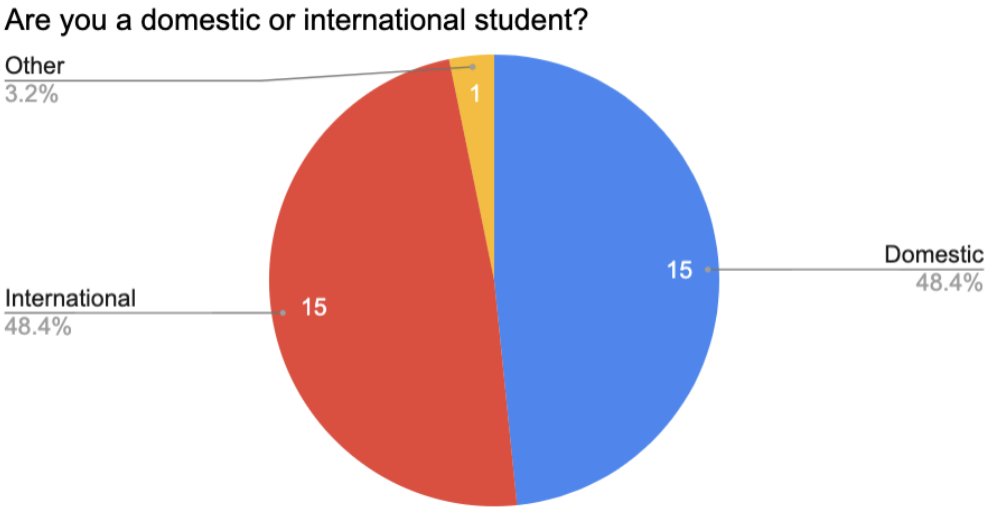

Figure 2 shows the percentage of survey respondents who were either international, domestic or other (15, 15, and 1 students respectively). There was an even split amongst international and domestic students.

Figure 3. Comparison of survey respondents with and without dependents

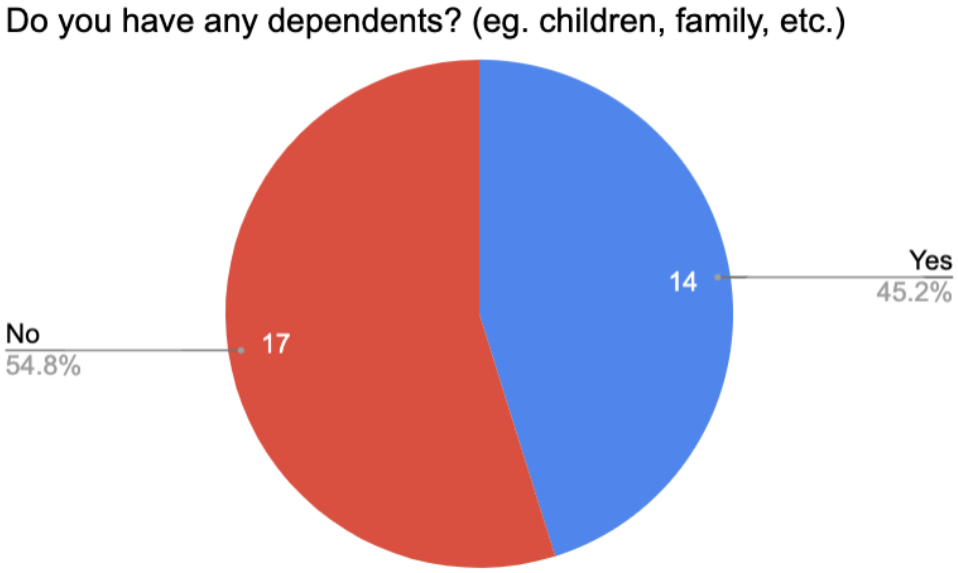

Figure 3 shows the percentage of survey respondents who have dependents and those who do not (17 and 14 students respectively).

Figure 4. Barriers contributing to difficulties in accessing food outside UBC campus among survey respondents

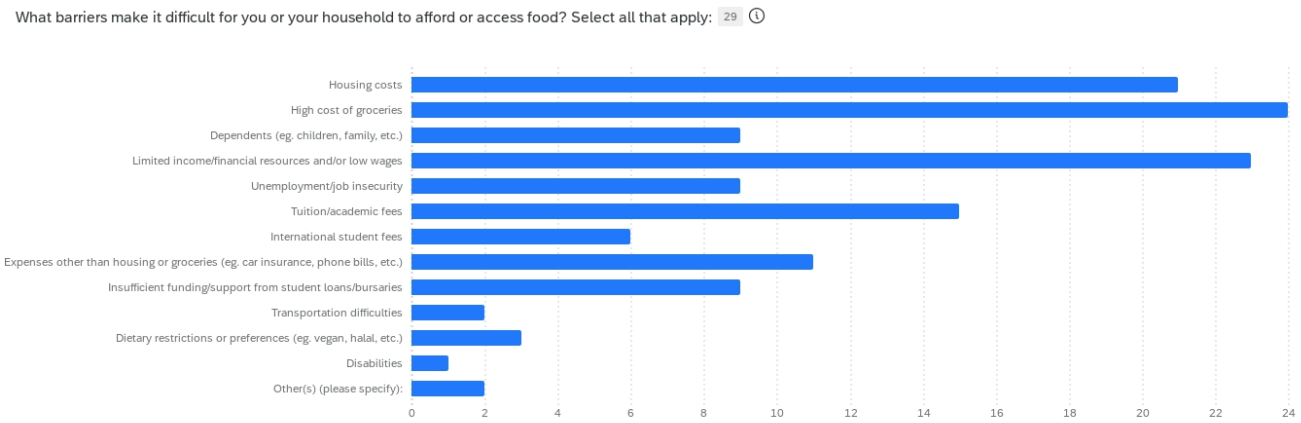

Figure 4 shows the barriers among the 29 respondents who answered the survey question regarding barriers to food access, the most frequently reported challenges were the high cost of groceries (n = 23), housing costs (n = 22), and limited income or low wages (n = 21). These financial pressures were followed by unemployment or job insecurity (n = 13), and tuition or academic fees (n = 13), which were also significant concerns. Additional barriers included expenses other than food or housing such as transportation, phone bills, or insurance (n = 10), and insufficient support from student loans or bursaries (n = 9). Fewer respondents cited factors such as international student fees (n = 6), dependents (n = 7), and dietary restrictions or preferences (n = 3). The least frequently reported barriers were transportation difficulties, disabilities, and “other” reasons, each with fewer than 3 mentions.

Figure 5. Factors contributing to difficulties in accessing food on UBC campus among survey respondents

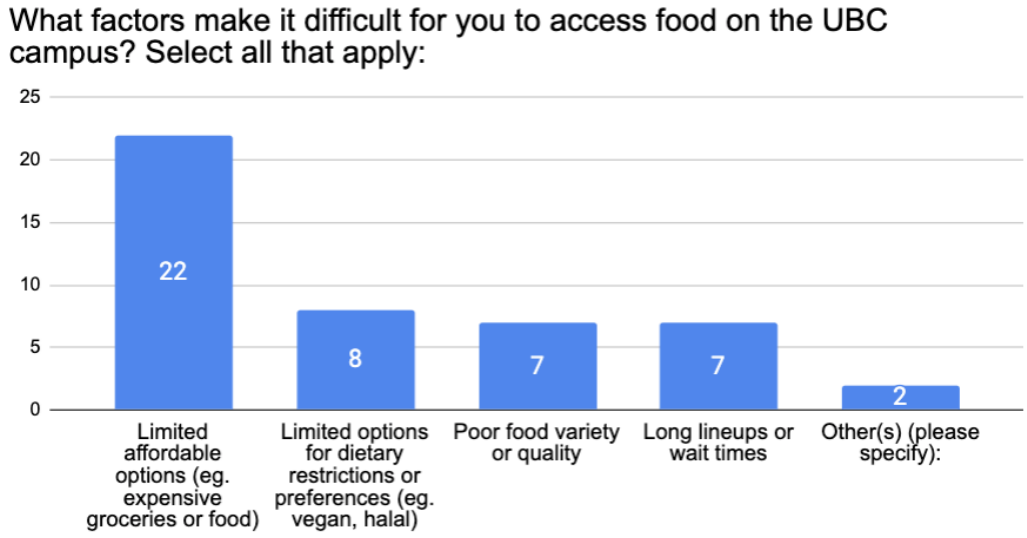

Figure 5 shows 29 respondents most common challenges to accessing food on campus, the most frequently cited barriers included the limited affordable options (n=22), limited dietary-inclusive options (n=8), poor food variety or quality (n=7), and long lineups or wait times (n=7) and lastly others (n=2).

Figure 6. Factors Contributing to Changes in Food Affordability Throughout the Year

Figure 6 displays the common factors that contribute to fluctuations in food affordability or accessibility throughout the month or year, monthly bill payments such as rent were the most commonly reported (n = 19). This was followed by tuition fee payments (n = 16), and income cycles such as timing of pay periods or student loans (n = 15). An equal number of respondents (n = 15) also cited increased spending on gifts, travel, or social events as a factor that impacts their ability to afford food. Increased academic workload, such as exams or project deadlines, was reported by 13 students as contributing to food-related challenges. Only one participant selected "Other".

Table 4. Qualtrics survey responses on recommendations to improve food insecurity

Table 4 shows the qualitative findings of respondent recommendations to improve food security at UBC. Students highlighted three major areas of concern: affordable food options, improvements to food programs, and affordable housing. The most common theme was the need for more affordable food options (n = 8), including suggestions for cheaper on-campus meals and lower grocery prices around campus. Representative quotes included "Provide some special student meal options with more affordable price" and "Lower grocery prices." Another key area was the need to enhance existing food programs (n = 6). Participants called for increased food quantity at food banks, subsidized meal plans, better food quality, and more inclusive dietary options. For example, one student emphasized, "More plant based options… can be produced for the cost of one meat-based meal, why not make it cheaper and/or support more people?" Others mentioned the need for food that is culturally appropriate and free from spoilage. A smaller number of respondents (n = 1) mentioned affordable housing as a crucial solution, linking high living costs to limited food access.

Theme	Suggestions	Quotes
Affordable food options (n=8)	Cheaper on-campus meals	"Provide some special student meal options with more affordable price"
	Affordable grocery prices around campus	"I would be great to have some cheap grocery stores on the campus" "Lower grocery prices"
Enhance food programs (n=6)	Increased food quantity at food banks	"More food in food bank"
	Subsidized meal options	"Cheaper meal plans"
	Better quality food	"No expired food"
	Plant-based and culturally-diverse options	"More plantbased options, it is (or should be) cheaper than meat and other animal products, well-balanced plantbased food is healthy, and it is way better for our world. If two plantbased meals can be produced for the cost of one meat based meal, why not make it cheaper and/or support more people?" "More adapt to different culture"
Affordable housing (n=1)		"Affordable housing"

Discussion

The findings of this research underscore that food insecurity among students at the University of British Columbia (UBC) stems from systemic and structural challenges rather than isolated individual experiences. Through a combination of secondary data analysis (n = 1,137) and primary survey responses (n = 31), the study identifies financial stressors—particularly high housing costs, expensive groceries, tuition fees, and limited income—as the most significant barriers to food access (Table 2). Moreover, Table 3 reveals that more than 40% of students had not accessed any food security-related services, suggesting gaps in visibility, accessibility, or trust in existing institutional support systems.

One of the most salient themes emerging from both data sets is the student demand for "better quality food." This term, as used by respondents, encompassed multiple dimensions: nutritional density, freshness, affordability, and cultural appropriateness. Several students expressed concern about having to resort to highly processed or preservative-laden food due to cost constraints. Others specifically highlighted a lack of nutritious, plant-based, or culturally inclusive options in current food offerings. These insights align with literature emphasizing the importance of nutritional adequacy and food dignity (Lucan et al., 2018).

Figures 4 and 5 further illustrate that key barriers to food access include limited affordable choices, dietary-inclusivity gaps, and poor food variety or quality. These findings emphasize that food insecurity extends beyond caloric deficiency—it impacts health, cultural identity, and academic performance. Seasonal and cyclical fluctuations in affordability (Figure 6) highlight that students are particularly vulnerable during tuition deadlines, high academic stress, or months with overlapping fixed expenses.

Graduate and international students emerged as particularly vulnerable subgroups. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, these students often face additional constraints such as ineligibility for financial aid, visa-related employment restrictions, and higher tuition fees. Their overrepresentation among AMS Food Bank users demonstrates the intersection of institutional and financial precarity and reinforces the need for targeted, inclusive strategies.

While the AMS Food Bank serves as an essential resource, our findings support prior critiques (Bazerghi et al., 2016; Lucan et al., 2018) that food banks are insufficient to meet the long-term needs of food-insecure populations. Table 4 details student recommendations for system-wide improvements, including the development of subsidized meal programs, culturally inclusive food options, and improvements in food freshness and nutritional value.

An unexpected finding was the significant proportion of respondents—over 40%—who had not accessed any food-related support apart from the AMS Food Bank, pointing to potential barriers in awareness, outreach, or trust. These insights suggest that institutional communication and stigma reduction must be prioritized in future interventions.

This study is not without limitations. The primary survey's small sample size and reliance on convenience sampling constrain the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the self-reported nature of survey responses may introduce social desirability or recall bias. Broader, mixed-methods research, including longitudinal studies and focus groups, would strengthen the evidence base and deepen our understanding of student food insecurity trends.

Nevertheless, this research advances institutional knowledge by highlighting the urgency of shifting from short-term relief to long-term, student-informed solutions. It supports the development of scalable, inclusive policies that ensure equitable access to nutritious food. The proposed strategies—such as subsidized meal pilots, student advisory groups, financial stipends, and the formation of a Food Security Governance Council—hold the potential to significantly improve food security outcomes at UBC and establish a model for post-secondary institutions across Canada.

Limitations

Like any study, ours faces limitations to a holistic understanding of our topic. We have identified them as the following:

Scope

As primarily only UBC food bank users were targeted in our study, analysis done from our collected data may not be indicative of the entire student body's relationship with accessible food. This could limit the applicable scope and scaling of our research to environments beyond UBC when using data as precedent for further expanded studies.

Ethics

Ethics of our secondary research method prevented direct collection of a student's international vs. domestic enrolment status which was only indicated if a respondent decided to mention theirs. Thus, an actual, representative ratio of domestic to international students recorded in our studies was unable to be determined which may prevent an accurate understanding of how this status affects access to government resources.

Time

Time and communication restraints prevented surveying a wider population of students. This possibly limited knowledge of outlier cases and a better understanding of the diverse individual experiences that make up UBC's struggle with food insecurity. Additionally, given the time constraints, long term studies of food insecurity's effects on students was impossible to determine. As such, analysis may not be wholly representative of the student body to a degree satisfactory to its entirety.

Method

As our data was collected as written/spoken student experience, this non quantifiable data is more prone to the personal exaggeration or understating of a situation compared to objectively measured data. Thus, analysis and recommendations are likely to be catered to circumstances specific to those surveyed rather than an all-encompassing social climate that may be more easily indicated by quantifiable survey data.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Action

Based on our analysis of primary survey data and first-hand feedback from AMS Food Bank staff, the following recommendations are meant to mitigate food insecurity at UBC with an awareness of operational capacity and budget constraints.

Immediate Action

- Launch a pilot low-cost meal program at The Porch and Agora Café. 76% of students cited few affordable choices as a major access barrier to food on campus. Partner with UBC Food Services to provide healthy $5 meals that are inclusive of diverse dietary needs (e.g. halal, vegetarian, vegan), both increasing affordability and inclusivity (Survey Data, 2025). To implement this effectively, we recommend taking an example from current university initiatives such as Swipe Out Hunger's "meal pass" or subsidized voucher systems. The programs would be run as a programmatic pilot of 6–8 weeks in periods of high-stress or high-need within the term (e.g. midterms or end-of-term). Meals would be $5 or less, with the balance paid by a combination of UBC, AMS, and external corporate or community sponsors (Swipe Out Hunger, 2023). This subsidization model makes the program accessible to students without charging UBC Food Services too much. The meals would be hot, freshly prepared, and culturally responsive — with halal, vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free options — and made available from The Porch and Agora Café, two high-traffic, accessible locations on campus. Pre-loaded student cards or QR codes could also be used by UBC to track distribution and assess participation, which would inform scalability following the pilot.
    - Responsible Stakeholders: AMS Food Bank, UBC Food Services
- Our primary survey results indicated that over 40% of students did not utilize the AMS Food Bank either because they had been stigmatized or were unaware that the service existed. To prevent this, we recommend an all-out, campus-wide awareness campaign using digital signage, posters, social media, and outreach during peak times. Importantly, such a campaign also needs to be incorporated in institutional channels such as first-year student orientation, graduate student orientation workshops, and academic advising materials, providing new students with early exposure to accessible food aid and budgeting services. This dual approach caters to immediate visibility as well as long-term integration of food aid awareness in students' life (Survey Data, 2025; Meeting Notes, 2025).
    - Responsible Stakeholders: AMS Communications, UBC Student Services, SEEDS Sustainability Program
- Based on our primary data, 24% of students were dissatisfied with the quality or diversity of food, and 28% noted a lack of food options to suit their dietary needs, for example, halal, vegan, gluten-free, and culturally familiar meals. We recommend that a student advisory group be created that works in collaboration with UBC Food Services staff and AMS Food Bank staff. The group would provide input on culturally inclusive menu planning, dietary accommodation, and seasonal variation to ensure food services are more reflective of the diverse needs of UBC students (Survey Data, 2025).
    - Responsible Stakeholders: UBC Food Services, AMS Equity Office

Mid-term Action

- Because international and graduate students represent the majority of AMS Food Bank users (80% and 60%, respectively), we recommend piloting a monthly food stipend program targeting individuals who suffer from chronic food insecurity but are often missed by mainstream support mechanisms. The stipend would provide $50–$100 per month as a UBCcard reload or reloadable meal/grocery card, which can be

used at campus convenience stores and some local grocery stores. The pilot would run for one academic semester (approximately 4–6 months) and would employ a needs-based application approach, using factors like tuition status, income, and food insecurity indicators. These would be supported by UBC, AMS, and external sponsors, in the vein of organizations like Swipe Out Hunger, that have successfully been able to roll out similar programs all across North America (Swipe Out Hunger, 2023).

- Responsible Stakeholders: UBC Student Services, AMS Executives

Long-Term Actions

- Establish alliances for discounted or donated food

  AMS already has valuable food recovery partnerships with Save-On-Foods and Urban Fare, and receives over 76,000 recovered items annually. We recommend expanding this model through partnerships with cooked food vendors (e.g., Pacific Poke, campus cafes), and student discount days or donated meal programs in partnership with campus restaurants and wholesalers (e.g., Gordon Food Service, Vancouver Food Runners).. The collaborating businesses can offer a monthly food donation, discount foods, or student discount days (e.g. $3 meal or 10% off). This plan not only reduces financial impact on students but also promotes greater campus-community understanding and aligns with existing initiatives toward sustainability.

  - Responsible Stakeholders: AMS Executives, UBC Food Services, Community Engagement Office

- While demand at AMS Food Bank continues to rise— with 26,000 clients projected to be reached in the upcoming year— a reliable and consistent core of volunteers is more necessary than ever. Averaged minutes of client meeting feedback, however, showed ongoing issues of volunteer burnout, inconsistency in availability, and the high-demand nature of replenishment work and food pack preparation. While the AMS Food Bank has a strong volunteer recruitment and training system in place, we recommend this to be complemented by collaborating with academic programs and student-led programs so that burnout is avoided and year-round consistency of volunteers is enhanced. This would include collaborating with student groups (e.g. Land and Food Systems Undergraduate Society (LFSUS), UBC Sprouts, UBC Social Justice Centre), academic departments (e.g. Land and Food Systems (LFS) and Social Work), and programs like WorkLearn, Residence Life, or Co-Curricular Record (CCR) to recruit and retain volunteers. These partnerships would provide students with meaningful service experiences as well as organized incentives like volunteer recognition, course credit, gift cards, or professional recommendations. Also, incorporating food bank volunteering into service-learning components of courses (e.g. in LFS 350 or CAP courses) can create a pipeline of consistent support while aligning with students' areas of academic interest. This approach would reduce the workload on AMS personnel, help in maintaining stable coverage during exam/busy academic seasons (e.g. March and April), and offer a more sustainable and community-focused platform for the food bank. Establishing a stable volunteer system also aligns with UBC's goals of increasing student engagement, leadership, and community involvement.

  - Responsible Stakeholders: AMS Food Bank, UBC WorkLearn Program, LFS Faculty, Residence Life, Student Clubs, SEEDS Sustainability Program

- To address student food insecurity with a coordinated, long-term strategy, we recommend the formation of a Food Security Governance Council— a cross-sectional group of representatives from the key stakeholders at UBC and in the broader community. While many food access initiatives already exist (e.g. AMS Food Bank, Sprouts, Agora Café, GSS initiatives), these activities work in isolation from each other and without centralized coordination or long-term integration with university planning. This council would bring together AMS leadership representatives, UBC Food Services, the SEEDS Sustainability Program, student food groups, the Faculty of Land and Food Systems, and student

representatives, particularly from groups most affected by food insecurity (i.e., international and graduate students).

- The council's role would be to develop and oversee a citywide food security plan, coordinate and evaluate existing programs, foster sustainable funding, and identify areas for policy innovation and collaboration, both intra-governmental and with external stakeholders like local grocers, non-profits, and municipal initiatives. Regular reporting and accountability measures would ensure transparency and quantifiable results.
- By institutionalizing food security leadership in this way, UBC can look beyond short-term or reactive solutions and instead incorporate food access within its ongoing commitments to student wellbeing, equity, and sustainability. This model has already been adopted at several institutions across North America, including through Swipe Out Hunger's campus frameworks and California State University's Basic Needs Committees, and has been shown to improve coordination, secure long-term funding, and scale food access initiatives (Swipe Out Hunger, 2022; CSU Basic Needs Initiative, 2023). While UBC's Meal Share provides one-time support through meal vouchers, Swipe Out Hunger aims at long-term stipends and scalable funding partnerships, which could provide a more sustainable structure for recurring support. This recommendation is an addition to the merit of both programs.
- Responsible Stakeholders: UBC Administration, AMS Executives, SEEDS Sustainability Program, Faculty of Land and Food Systems, Graduate Student Society (GSS)

➢ In order to address the sources of student food insecurity, AMS and UBC should engage in policy advocacy efforts that aim to ease the cost burden on students. Student food insecurity is also linked to increased tuition fees, inadequate financial aid, and inadequate affordable housing options. To tackle these upstream drivers, we recommend that UBC and AMS jointly advocate for a comprehensive tuition freeze on domestic and international students, in conjunction with increased provincial operating grants to universities (Action Network, n.d.; Government of British Columbia, n.d.). Also, advocacy must include calls to expand the BC Access Grant by raising funding ceilings and expanding eligibility to better support low- and middle-income students more effectively (Graduate Student Society at UBC, n.d.).

- In addition to tuition and aid reform, we recommend supporting policy changes that promote access to affordable student housing. This includes extending provincial tenant protections to university residences, granting institutions like UBC access to outside financing tools for student housing development, and public investment in on-campus housing projects (The Ubyssey, 2024; UBC Campus + Community Planning, 2023). These institutional changes can make students less reliant on food programming by addressing the fiscal pressures that bring about food insecurity in the first place. UBC and AMS can support this cause by creating a joint advocacy task force, sitting down with provincial policymakers, and accessing the student voice through campaigns, petitions, and collaboration with peer institutions.
- Responsible Stakeholders: AMS Executives, UBC Vice-President Students Office, UBC Government Relations, Graduate Student Society (GSS)

Recommendations for Future Research

Barriers to Access Equity

- Discuss barriers for food bank non-users
    - Since 42% of eligible students do not utilize the AMS Food Bank, future qualitative studies need to uncover why. Stigma, lack of awareness, and inconvenient hours are all potential barriers. These could be uncovered in interviews or focus groups, especially of students who are eligible but choose not to access services (Lucan et al., 2018; Meeting Notes, 2025).
- Boost intersectional demographic data collection
    - Data available does not fully capture the experience of students belonging to marginalized groups. Future surveys need to include indicators of race, disability, gender identity, and parental status in order to inform more targeted and equitable interventions.

Program Timing and Effectiveness

- Examine seasonal patterns of food insecurity
    - Initial findings and anecdotal evidence suggest food insecurity may peak close to tuition due dates and exam periods. The longitudinal tracking of students' food requirements over the school year could help in planning food drives, subsidies, or meal rollouts more suitably (StatsCan, 2024).
- Test and evaluate food access programs
    - If UBC implements new initiatives like stipends or low-cost meal pilots, future studies need to evaluate their effectiveness with pre/post surveys, usage data, and qualitative feedback. This enables refinement of delivery prior to wider campus-scale.

Conclusion

This study sought to identify and analyze the root causes of food insecurity among students at the University of British Columbia. Drawing on both secondary data from the AMS Food Bank and primary survey responses, the research confirms that food insecurity is prevalent and multifaceted, disproportionately affecting graduate students, international students, and individuals with limited financial resources. The central findings indicate that food insecurity is driven by systemic barriers, including high housing and grocery costs, tuition fees, and restricted access to adequate employment and institutional aid (Table 2). Over 40% of students surveyed had not accessed any campus food support services (Table 3), revealing a critical disconnect between need and existing resources. In addition, students articulated that food insecurity includes not only food quantity but also issues of food quality, nutritional value, and cultural suitability.

While these findings demonstrate alignment with our original objectives, they also offer new insights—particularly in how students define and experience "better quality food," and in the underutilization of support services. These outcomes advance the existing literature on post-secondary food insecurity and contribute to a growing body of knowledge that calls for systemic reform across Canadian universities.

Limitations of this study include the small primary survey sample size and its reliance on convenience sampling, which limits generalizability. Future research should aim to capture a more diverse and representative student sample and consider mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to better track shifting needs and evaluate interventions over time. Ultimately, this research underscores the urgency of moving from short-term relief to long-term, student-informed strategies. By implementing subsidized meal programs, monthly stipends, and cross-sector governance models, UBC has the opportunity to lead in building a sustainable, inclusive, and equitable campus food system—one in which no student must sacrifice health or academic success due to lack of food access.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Analyzed AMS Food Bank Survey Responses

SEEDS Secondary Data Analysis 1.xlsx

Appendix B: Qualtrics Survey Questions

1. What student classification are you?
    - Undergraduate student
    - Graduate student (eg. Master's, PhD, etc.)
    - Postdoctoral fellow
    - Unclassified
    - Other (please specify): _____
2. Are you a domestic or international student?
    - Domestic
    - International
    - Other (please specify): _____
3. Do you have any dependents? (eg. children, family, etc.)
    - Yes
    - No
4. Do you currently use the AMS Food Bank?
    - Yes
    - Not currently but I have before
    - No, I have never used the AMS Food Bank
5. What barriers make it difficult for you or your household to afford or access food? Select all that apply:
    - Housing costs
    - High cost of groceries
    - Dependents (eg. children, family, etc.)
    - Limited income/financial resources and/or low wages
    - Unemployment/job insecurity
    - Tuition/academic fees
    - International student fees
    - Expenses other than housing or groceries (eg. car insurance, phone bills, etc.)
    - Insufficient funding/support from student loans/bursaries
    - Transportation difficulties
    - Dietary restrictions or preferences (eg. vegan, halal, etc.)
    - Disabilities
    - Other(s) (please specify): _____
6. What factors make it difficult for you to access food on the **UBC campus**? Select all that apply:
    - Limited affordable options (eg. expensive groceries or food)
    - Limited options for dietary restrictions or preferences (eg. vegan, halal)
    - Poor food variety or quality
    - Long lineups or wait times
    - Other(s) (please specify): _____
7. What time of the year do you find it harder to access or afford food?
    - January-April
    - May-August
    - September-December
    - All of the above

- No specific time of the year
- Other (please explain):___

8. What factors contribute to changes in food affordability or accessibility during the month or year? Select all that apply:
    - Monthly bill payments (e.g. rent)
    - Tuition fee payments
    - Income cycles (eg. pay periods, student loans, etc.)
    - Increased spending on gifts, travel, or social events
    - Increased workload (eg. exams, projects, etc.)
    - Other (please specify):
9. If you could change one thing about UBCs current food system to improve student food insecurity, what would it be?
10. In your opinion, what are the biggest structural or systemic issues contributing to student food insecurity at UBC?
11. Has food insecurity been a challenge for you before or after coming to UBC? If so, what factors have contributed to that?
12. Enter your name and email for a chance to win one of three $50 gift cards!
    a. Name:
    b. Email:

Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Poster

SEEDS

We Want to Hear From You!

Share Your Input on Student Food Resource Accessibility

As part of a SEEDS research project, an LFS 450 student group is gathering student input to better understand the root causes of food insecurity and reduce reliance on the AMS Food Bank.

Complete this 5-minute survey by March 31st to share your input

Win 1 of 3 $50 Gift Cards

Scan the QR code or visit the link below to fill out the survey
https://ubc.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4VFI0Npxo64kRds