



2023 JMU Student Basic Needs Survey

Prepared by the JMU Basic Needs Advisory Board

Spring 2025

About the James Madison University Basic Needs Advisory Board

The JMU Basic Needs Advisory Board (BNAB) includes faculty, staff, students, and community partners who research, create, and advocate for resources and policy changes to better support students facing financial hardship. The Basic Needs Advisory Board is currently chaired by Jeremy Hawkins (Off Campus Life) and Adrienne Harmon-Griggs (CISR) and reports to Dr. Tim Miller, the Vice President of Student Affairs. Learn more about the BNAB and its work at <https://www.jmu.edu/ssh/about/index.shtml>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The 2023 JMU Student Basic Needs Survey, conducted by the JMU Basic Needs Advisory Board, aimed to assess the extent of basic needs insecurity among students, focusing on food, housing, and health. This report highlights the challenges faced by students and provides recommendations for addressing these issues.

Methods

The survey was administered to the entire JMU student community between April 3-23, 2023. A total of 1,226 respondents were included in the analysis. The survey included questions on demographics, economic challenges, housing insecurity, food insecurity, and health.

Key Findings

Economic Challenges

- **Paying for School:** Students rely on various sources such as family contributions, loans, personal jobs, grants, and scholarships.
- **Employment:** 58% of respondents were employed, with 25.9% working more than 20 hours per week.
- **Unexpected Expenses:** Two-thirds of students faced unexpected financial expenses, impacting their studies. Common expenses included car repairs (30.5%), medical bills (23.7%), and housing costs (20%).

Housing Insecurity

- **Prevalence:** 33.4% of respondents reported housing concerns, and 8% experienced homelessness in the past year.
- **Factors:** Difficulties in paying for housing or utilities, poor housing conditions, lack of safety, and lack of permanent housing were common issues.
- **Affected Groups:** Housing insecurity was more prevalent among graduate students (43.6%), adult degree students (66.7%), and was highest among part-time students (61.9%), first generation students (63%), student parents (73.5%), students who had been in foster care (82.9%), and student veterans (88.2%).

Food Insecurity

- **Prevalence:** 38.6% of respondents were food insecure, with 17% experiencing low food security and 21% very low food security.
- **Affected Groups:** Food insecurity was more prevalent among graduate students (53.7%), adult degree-seeking students (66.7%), and was highest among international students

(58.8%), part-time students (63.5%), parenting students (64.5%), student veterans (78.4%), and students who had been in foster care (78.6%).

- Strategies: Students coped by skipping meals, borrowing money, using credit cards, and relying on friends and family.

Health and Mental Health

- Overall Health: 11% of respondents rated their health as fair and 2% as poor. Food and housing insecurity were linked to poorer health outcomes, with 18% of food-insecure students rating their health as fair and 3.6% as poor.
- Mental Health: 90% of respondents faced mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and stress. Housing and food insecurity exacerbated these issues.
- Health Insurance: 21% of students lacked health insurance, and 11% reported inadequate coverage for physical health needs, while 12% reported inadequate coverage for mental health needs.

Other Consequences

- Academic Impact: Basic needs insecurity affected students' academic success, with food-insecure respondents being 2.1 times more likely to report a GPA below 3.0 compared to food-secure respondents. Only 52.4% of housing-insecure students reported having a GPA above 3.0.
- Satisfaction: Among all respondents, 66.1% reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their JMU experience. Comparatively, only 46.6% of housing-insecure students and 51.6% of food-insecure students reported similar satisfaction levels.

Recommendations

For Faculty and Staff

- Educate and stay informed about basic needs insecurity.
- Normalize discussions about basic needs in the classroom.
- Integrate awareness into the curriculum.
- Be mindful of the financial implications of class materials.
- Advocate for systemic changes to support students.

University-Level Actions

- Expand access to information about college costs and resources.
- Create positions for a Basic Needs Coordinator and graduate assistants.
- Invest in comprehensive resources to support students.
- Increase need-based financial aid.
- Continue legislative advocacy for student support.

Specific Areas of Focus

- Food Insecurity: Enhance SNAP benefits navigation, expand food recovery programs, and offer no-frills dining options.
- Housing Security: Provide emergency housing, expand campus housing options, consider no-interest loans for housing deposits, and develop a guaranty program.
- Student Wellness: Help students access affordable health insurance and expand partnerships to address basic needs and health services.

Conclusion

The survey underscores the significant challenges faced by JMU students in meeting their basic needs. Addressing these issues is crucial for promoting student well-being, academic success, and overall satisfaction with the JMU experience. The recommendations provided aim to create a supportive environment that enables all students to thrive.



Photo courtesy of James Madison University

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in tuition costs and a decrease in financial aid availability at colleges and universities nationwide (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Leachman & Saenz, 2019). In Virginia, tuition costs at public four-year institutions appear to have stabilized, however, this is in part due to high levels of inflation. Consequently, even with recent increases in state appropriations, there has been a 15% increase in student debt burden over the past decade (JLARC 2024). Public institutions continue to provide students with education at a lower cost compared with private colleges and universities. Still, tuition costs and limited need-based financial aid, coupled with cost-of-living increases that have greatly outpaced wage growth, have increased financial hardship for both students and families. As a result, it is difficult for many students to meet their basic needs, including adequate food, housing, and health care (Baker et al., 2020; McKibben, Wu, & Ableson, 2023).

In response to the growing awareness of basic needs insecurity on college campuses across the nation, a cross-departmental and cross-disciplinary Basic Needs Coalition was formed at James Madison University in 2019. Spearheaded by JMU Off-Campus Life and Community Service-Learning, the Coalition was tasked with exploring the extent of food and housing insecurity among JMU students and developing proposals to guide the university's response to identified student needs. In spring 2019, the Coalition launched its first campus-wide survey and conducted a series of focus groups to generate data to better understand the specific needs of students. The Basic Needs Coalition has since become the Basic Needs Advisory Board—in recognition of the extent of student need at JMU, as well as an ongoing commitment to supporting student wellness.

The Basic Needs Advisory Board again administered a JMU Student Basic Needs Survey in spring 2021 and spring 2023 to strengthen previous survey findings, understand how student needs may have changed, and to explore additional areas of concern, particularly the effects of basic needs insecurity on student health and mental health. This report presents findings from the 2023 survey. We begin with a discussion of survey methods, including survey administration and a brief overview of changes included in the 2023 iteration of the survey. We then provide an overview of respondents' characteristics and, where available, compare the demographics of survey respondents with those of the JMU student body. Next, we turn to the survey findings. The report highlights some of the economic challenges faced by students, examines student experiences related to food and housing insecurity, and explores associations between basic needs insecurity and student health and mental health, academic achievement, and overall student satisfaction with the JMU experience. Finally, we provide preliminary recommendations for ways to better address students' basic needs through university programs and practices, as well as through advocating for state-level policy change.

METHODS

To identify basic needs trends in the JMU student body, the Basic Needs Advisory Board (BNAB) initiated a university-wide basic needs survey. The 2023 survey is the third iteration of JMU basic needs surveys. BNAB researchers redesigned several aspects of the 2021 basic needs survey instrument for the 2023 version of the survey. Researchers reduced the length of the previous survey, added physical and mental health quality of life questions, and reworded several questions to align with the Speak Up Dukes campus climate survey (Fall 2021). These changes shortened the survey while delivering more robust data about students' basic needs. The 67-item survey is a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions, and included validated measures of food insecurity, homelessness, health, and mental health. These are described in each of the relevant sections below.

Survey Administration

Researchers used a census distribution plan to encourage participation from the entire JMU student community. The team distributed the survey widely via emails to currently enrolled students, listservs, social media, and faculty between April 3-23, 2023. Students consented to participation prior to beginning the survey. Respondents could enter to win one of twenty \$25 gift cards. To maintain participant anonymity, the survey and gift card registration were set up so there was no link between the survey responses and the form to enter the drawing. Procedures were approved by the JMU Institutional Review Board to ensure protection of human subjects (IRB protocol 23-3910).

Participants

A total of 1,401 students consented to taking the 2023 survey. Researchers used several criteria to screen respondents for inclusion in the analysis. First, respondents who submitted the survey in less than 120 seconds were omitted ($n = 140$). The survey included a final question asking respondents whether they answered the questions honestly. Those that indicated that they did not answer 'some' or 'all' of the questions truthfully ($n = 27$) were dropped. Other omissions included a respondent who did not indicate their enrollment as a student and seven other respondents who did not complete the first five survey items. After screening criteria were applied, 1,226 respondents remained for analysis. Table 1 below gives an overview of demographics and other key characteristics of survey respondents and, where available, compares these to the overall JMU student body (unless otherwise noted, data for the JMU student body comes from the James Madison University Student Enrollment Fact Book. Response rates varied across survey questions and are taken into consideration in computing percentages.

Table 1. Respondent and JMU Student Characteristics				
	Survey Respondents Spring 2023		JMU Student Body Spring 2023	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Student Year (n = 1,226)				
Undergraduate Students	1,093	90%	19,172	91.7%
Graduate Students	123	10%	1,727	8.3%
Student Status				
Full-time	1,094	89.6%	18,577	88.9%
Part-time	127	10.4%	2,322	11.1%
In-state	947	77.4%	16,349	78.4%
Out-of-state	242	19.7%	4,505	21.6%
International	34	2.8%	261	1.2%
Transfer student	226	18.5%	1,025	4.6%
Race and Ethnicity (n = 1,147)				
African American or Black	78	6.8%	952	4.6%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	27	2.4%	25	.1%
Caucasian or white	894	78%	15,587	74.6%
Hispanic or Latinx	114	9.9%	1,555	7.4%
Middle Eastern or North African	28	2.4%	--	--
Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian	15	1.3%	25	.1%
Southeast Asian	44	3.8%	---	---
Other Asian or Asian American	62	5.4%	---	---
Asian	---	---	985	4.7%
Another race or ethnicity	14	1.2%	---	---
Unknown/Unreported	79	6.4%	485	2.3%
Other Characteristics				
First Generation	435	35.5%	---	16%
Student Parent	166	13.6%	--	--
Veteran	51	4.2%	842	3.9%
Foster Care	70	3.8%	--	--
Student Athlete	148	12.1%	---	---
Gender (See Table 2)				

Student Year

Like the general student body, most respondents (90%) were undergraduates. There was relatively even distribution among undergraduates by student year (see Figure 1). Ten percent of respondents were graduate students, including 8% masters-level and 2% doctoral, as well as 1% adult-degree students.

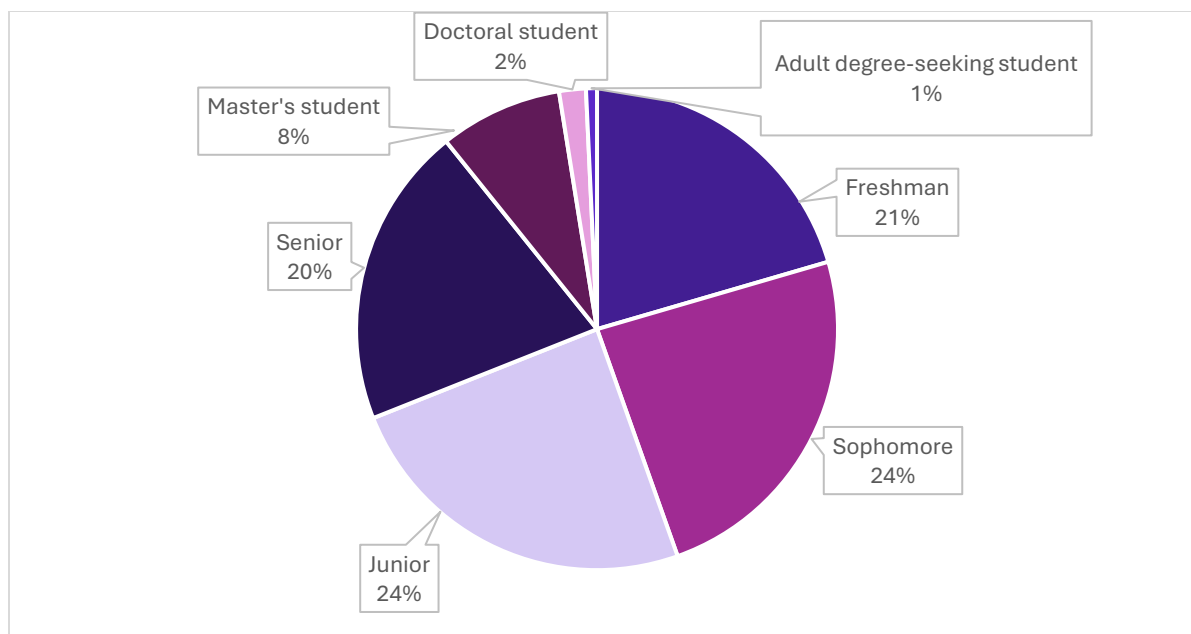


Figure 1: Student Year Among Survey Respondents

Student Status

The distribution of full-time and part-time students, as well as out-of-state students relative to in-state students, was relatively similar among survey respondents and JMU as a whole (see Table 1). Additionally, 20.8% of respondents identified as international students, while JMU data shows that approximately 1.2% of JMU students identify as international students (Overview of International Students, 2022). There were substantially more transfer students among survey respondents (18.5%) than at JMU overall (4.6%).

Race and Ethnicity

More than two-thirds of respondents (78%) identified as white, slightly higher than JMU students overall (74.6%). However, since survey respondents could select multiple categories, students identifying as racial or ethnic minorities were represented at higher rates than in the student body. For example, 6.8% of respondents identified as African American or Black, compared with 4.6% of all students. Similarly, 9.9% of respondents identified as Latino or Hispanic, compared with 7.4% of JMU students. A higher percentage of respondents was also noted among American Indian or Alaskan Native students (2.4% versus 0.1%) and Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian (1.3% versus 0.1%). Additionally, 3.8% of respondents selected Southeast Asian, and 5.4% as Other Asian or Asian American. Comparatively, JMU data shows that 4.7% of students who identify as Asian. Finally, 2.4% of survey respondents said they were Middle Eastern or North African, and 1.2% as another race or ethnicity.

Gender and Sexual Orientation

JMU data from Spring 2023 shows a student body comprised of 58.4% female and 41.5% male students (1% was unknown or unreported). The 2023 Student Basic Needs Survey included expanded gender categories, with respondents able to select more than one response (See Table 2). Among survey respondents who indicated their gender (n = 1,029), 71.1% identified as

female, 23.2% as male, 3.2% as agender, genderqueer, genderfluid, or nonbinary, 1.1% as another gender not represented among survey choices, and 0.3% were unsure (1.1% said they preferred not to answer). Additionally, fourteen respondents indicated that they were transgender.

Table 2. Gender of Survey Respondents		
	Frequency	Percent
Agender, Genderqueer, Genderfluid, or Non-Binary	33	3.2%
Female	732	71.1%
Male	239	23.2%
Another Gender Not Listed	11	1.1%
Not Sure	3	0.3%
Prefer Not to Answer	11	1.1%
Transgender	14	1.4%

Students were also asked about their sexual orientation. Among those who responded to this question, 74% (n = 751) identified as straight or heterosexual, 14% as bisexual, pansexual, or fluid (n = 146), 4% as asexual or aromantic (n = 41), 3% as lesbian (n = 26), 2% as gay (n = 17) (an additional 3% were either unsure or identified as another orientation not listed).

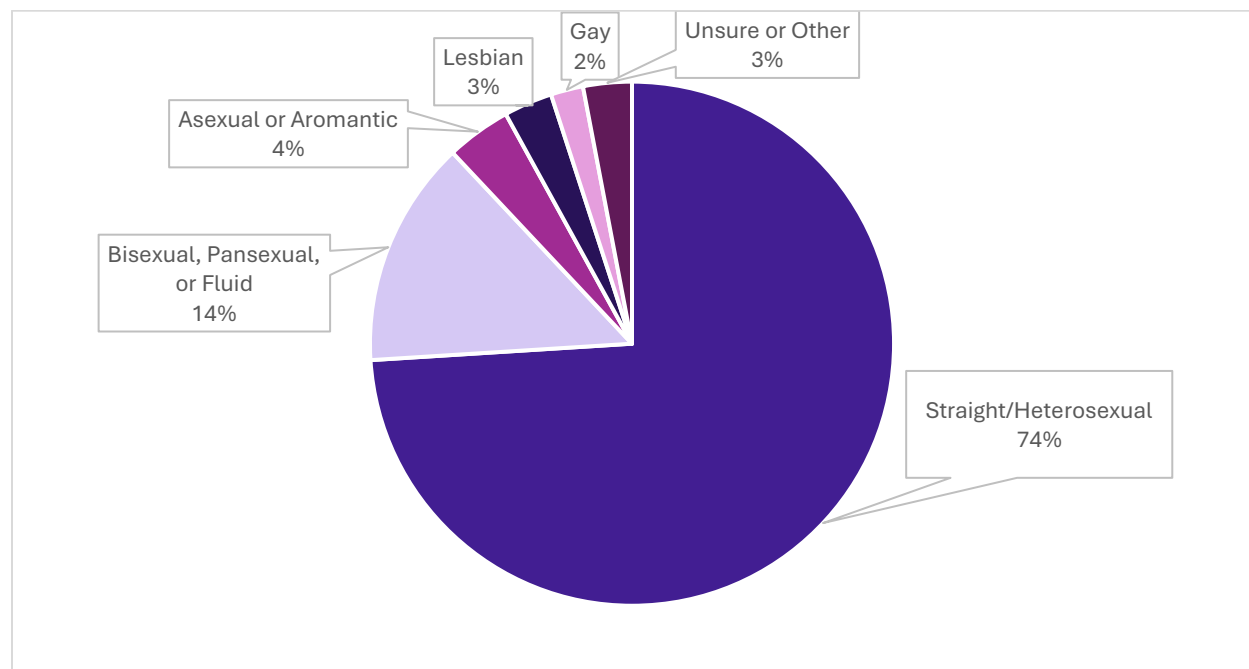


Figure 2: Sexual Orientation

Gender and sexual orientation questions were combined to create a LGBTQ+ variable used in subsequent sections of this report. Students were considered LGBTQ+ if they answered yes to any of the following: Agender, genderqueer, genderfluid, or nonbinary, transgender, asexual or

aromantic, bisexual/pansexual/fluid, gay, lesbian, or another orientation not listed. A total of 247 respondents indicated that they identified with one or more of these categories.

First Generation Students

More than a third of survey respondents identified as first-generation students, including 41.1% of undergraduates. This is much higher than JMU data showing that 16% of students are first generation students. In both instances, first generation status includes students without at least one parent who graduated from a four-year college or university (James Madison University, 2024).

Student Parents

Among survey respondents, 13.6% (n = 166) had at least one child or dependent who lived in their household or a child who didn't live in the home but was supported financially by the student. The majority of parents/caregivers (74%) were undergraduate students, however, among undergraduates, 11.7% (n = 123) were student parents, compared with 32.2% of graduate students (n = 39) and 44.4% of adult degree students (n = 166). Additionally, 61.5% of first-generation student respondents and 46% of transfer students were parents. (see Figure 1)

Student Veterans

The BNAB survey asked whether students had served in the U.S. Armed Forces, Military Reserves, or National Guard. This option was selected by 4.2% of respondents. Comparatively, data from JMU VALOR indicates that there were 162 JMU students who identified as veterans during the 2024-25 school year (0.7%).

Foster Care History

Students were also asked whether they had been in foster care. Here, 3.8% of respondents indicated past foster care experience.

Student Athletes

Lastly, 12.1% of survey respondents identified as student athletes.

While the 2023 JMU Student Basic Needs Survey provides good representation of student experiences at JMU, participant demographics indicate some self-selection bias, as respondents included higher percentages of students typically at higher risk of housing and food insecurity when compared with the JMU population overall (e.g., first-generation, veterans, transfer, international students). This may overestimate the extent of basic needs insecurities and create limitations in generalizing some of the findings to the JMU student body. On the other hand, overrepresentation among these subgroups, along with expanded demographic categories among survey respondents, can allow for a better understanding of the ways in which these groups are impacted by basic needs insecurity.

FINDINGS

Findings from BNAB Student Basic Need Survey are presented below and are divided into five sections: Economic Challenges, Homelessness and Housing Insecurity, Food Insecurity, Health and Mental Health, and Other Consequences of Limited Resources.

I. Economic Challenges

The 2023 basic needs survey explored how JMU students pay for school, student employment, unexpected expenses, and use of public benefits.

How JMU Students Pay for School

JMU students pay for the expenses associated with attending college through a variety of sources. The most common selected by survey respondents include family contributions, loans, personal contribution or job, grants, and non-need scholarships (see Figure 3). Respondents could select multiple options. Results here are similar to the Fall 2021 Speak Up Dukes campus climate study, matching four of the top five responses. In the campus climate survey, students identified family contribution, loans, parent employer tuition assistance, grants, and personal contribution/job as the most common ways to pay for school.

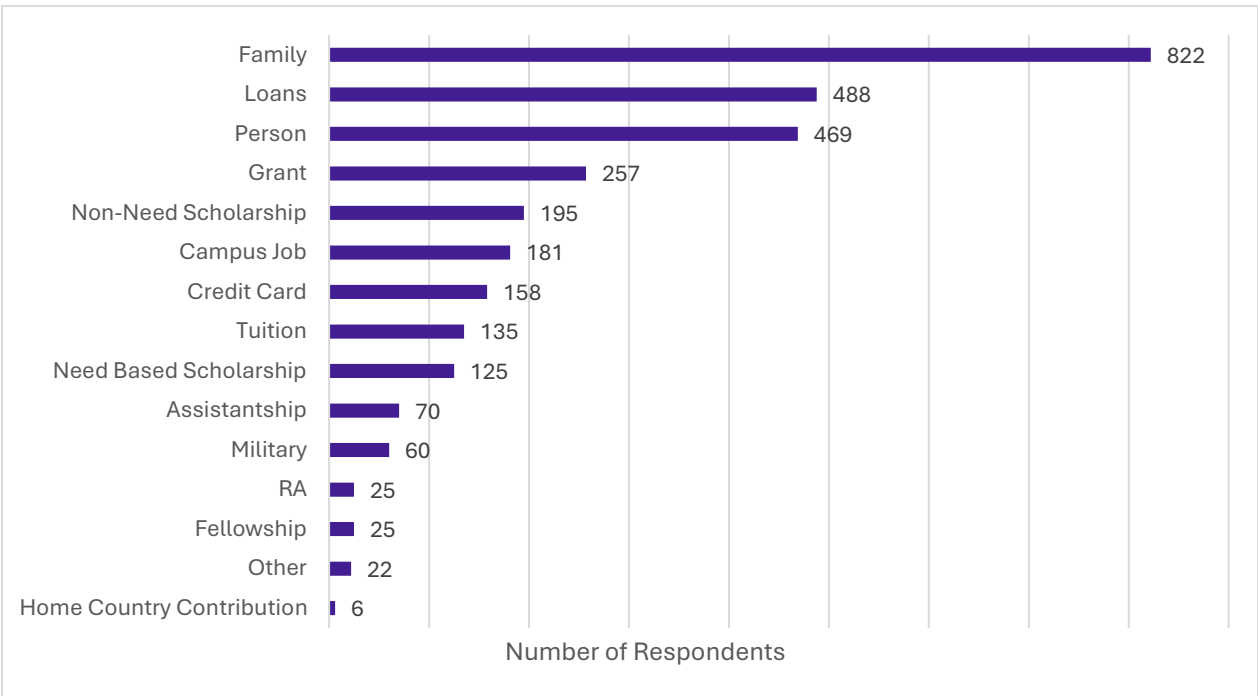


Figure 3: How Respondents Pay for School

Employment

Results revealed that 58% of respondents (n = 716) reported they were currently employed and **of those employed, 25.9% worked more than 20 hours per week and 3.5% more than 40 hours per week.** These data tell us many of our students are balancing their academic endeavors with a significant amount of time for outside work.

Unexpected Expenses

Although many students reported working a significant number of hours, students nonetheless noted that it was hard to keep up with unexpected expenses. **Two out of three students reported unexpected financial expenses that had adversely affected their studies.** In contrast, the 2021 campus climate survey found that nearly one in three respondents had experienced financial hardships. Students indicated various expenses, including car repairs, computer issues, medical bills, utilities, and housing most frequently (Figure 4). Nearly a quarter of respondents identified medical bills as an unexpected financial expense; many students also said that they did not seek needed medical care due to financial constraints (this is explored further in a subsequent section of the report). Of note, this question includes just *unexpected* expenses and does not indicate whether overall expenditure in a category represented a financial strain. For example, while just 2.3% of respondents said they had unexpected childcare expenses, childcare costs were likely a significant expense for many of the 13.6% of respondents who were student parents.

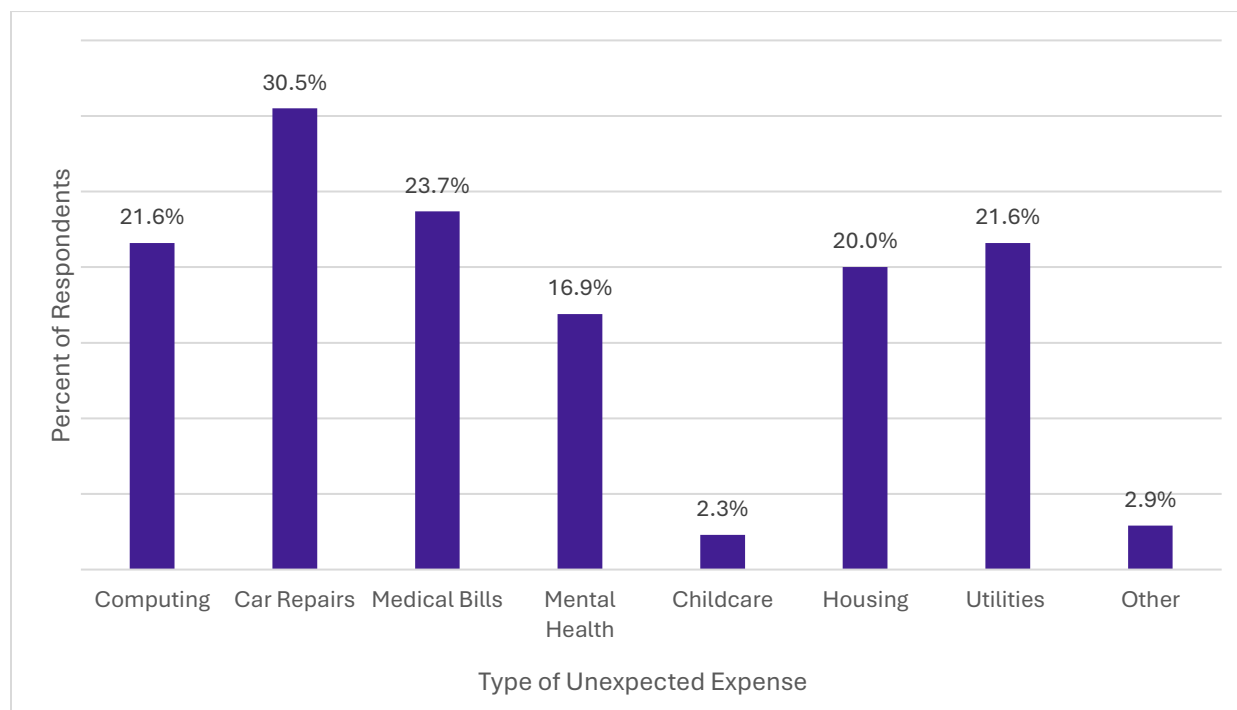


Figure 4: Unexpected Financial Expenses

Use of Public Benefits

Students were asked whether they received resources from a variety of sources in the last year. This included means-tested programs with income qualifications as well as assistance like Veterans Benefits and tax refunds. 36.6% of respondents (n = 387) reported receiving resources from at least one of these sources, while 671 indicated that they had not received any of these. Tax refunds (including the Earned Income Tax Credit) were the most frequent resources endorsed (n = 165), followed by Medicaid (n = 89), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (n = 74), and Veterans benefits (n= 46). Few

Table 3: Respondent Receipt of Public Benefits		
	Frequency	Percent
Tax Refund	165	15.6%
Medicaid	89	8.4%
SNAP	74	7.0%
Veterans Benefits	46	4.3%
TANF	37	3.5%
Utility Assistance	36	3.4%
WIC	29	2.7%
SSI	27	2.6%
SSDI	28	2.6%
Childcare Assistance	23	2.2%
Unemployment	23	2.2%
Transportation	25	2.4%
Housing Assistance	2	0.2%

students reported support from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Utility Assistance, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), childcare assistance, Unemployment Insurance, transportation assistance, or housing assistance. Recent research shows that many eligible college students do not participate in government assistance programs, despite being eligible. For example, analysis of SCHEV data shows that in 2019, just 11% of likely income-eligible undergraduates in Virginia were enrolled in SNAP (Hilliard & McKibben, 2023).



Photo courtesy of James Madison University

II. Homelessness and Housing Insecurity

Housing insecurity is a multifaceted construct that is often difficult to define and measure. It exists on a spectrum with the most extreme being individuals experiencing homelessness, defined as a lack of fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act, 2021). Students may also encounter other housing-related challenges that can be defined as housing insecurity, including lack of affordable housing and stress associated with not having the financial means to pay for utilities.

A 2019 review study on housing insecurity on college campuses reported approximately 45% of college students face some type of housing insecurity, including lack of affordable housing, instability, and homelessness (Broton, 2020). Similarly, a 2020 nationwide survey of college students found that 48% of respondents had experienced housing insecurity and 14% had experienced homelessness in the prior year (Butler & Torres, 2023). **Results from the 2023 JMU basic needs survey found that 33.4% of respondents (n = 395) reported concerns about their current living situation and 8% (n = 93) reported a period of homelessness during the past 12 months.** Moreover, research shows that many students do not necessarily identify as “homeless” or “housing insecure” despite experiencing hardships that qualify under these definitions (School House Connection, 2018). Thus, this is likely an underestimate of the number of homeless and housing insecure students at JMU.

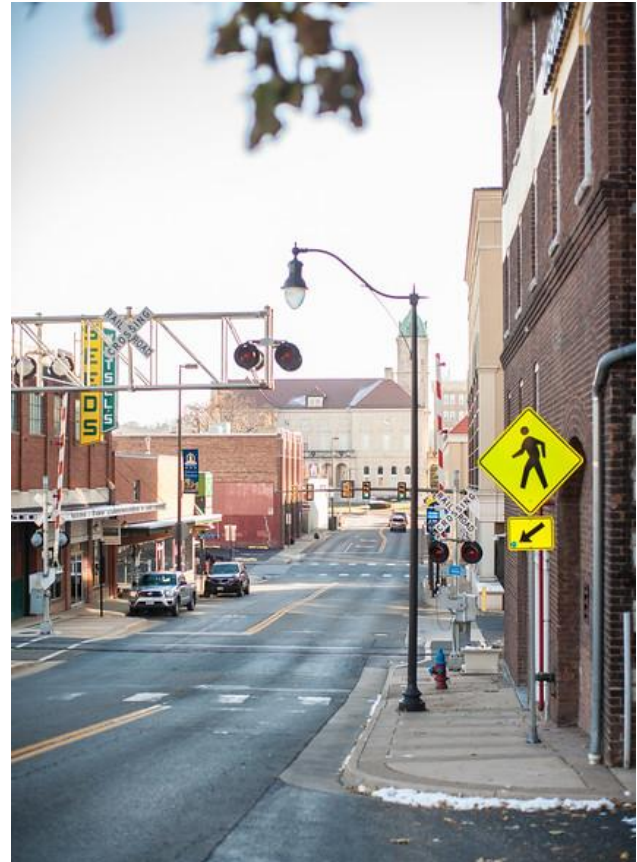


Photo courtesy of James Madison University

Housing insecurity (including homelessness) at JMU was higher among certain groups of students. Figure 5 shows the percentage of housing insecurity by student characteristics. Housing insecurity was higher among graduate students (43.6%) and adult degree students (66.7%) than undergraduate respondents (31.8%). Student parents, students who had been in foster care, and student veterans reported the highest rates of housing insecurity. International students, students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and transfer students also experienced higher rates of housing insecurity than respondents overall.

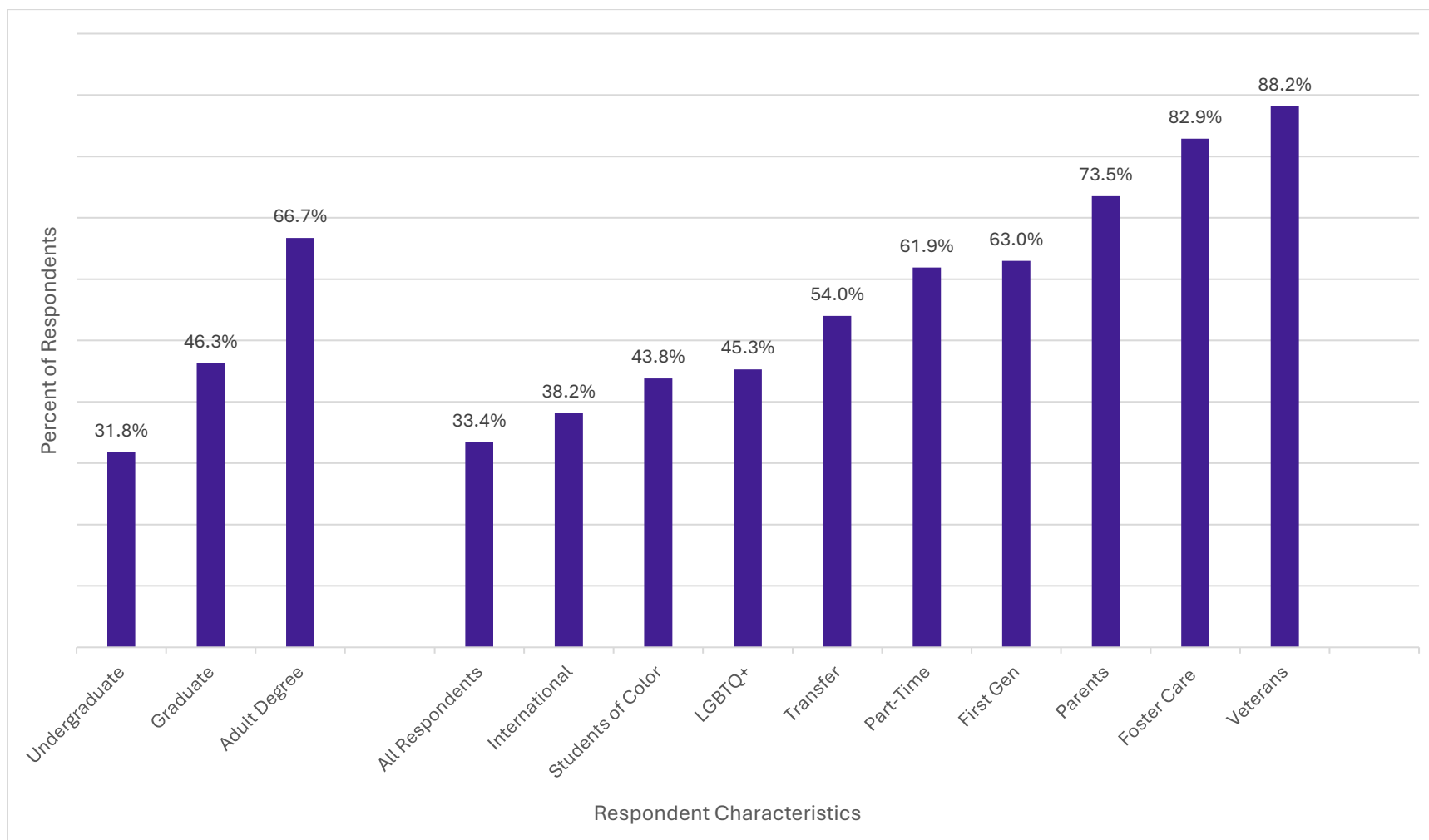


Figure 5: Housing Insecurity by Student Characteristics

Students were asked to select factors related to “why” they had housing concerns (see Figure 6). Of the respondents who reported having housing concerns there were a variety of housing-related factors: **47.2% noted difficulties with paying for housing or utilities, 38.7% endorsed concerns with the condition of their housing, 26% identified not feeling safe in their current housing situation, and 22.9% reported not having permanent housing.** In addition to selecting from a list of options, students could add additional concerns. Of the thirteen students who provided additional information, five reported that cost or rising rent and tuition/room and board costs were areas of concern. Additional factors included: housing rules, health concerns, and roommate difficulties.

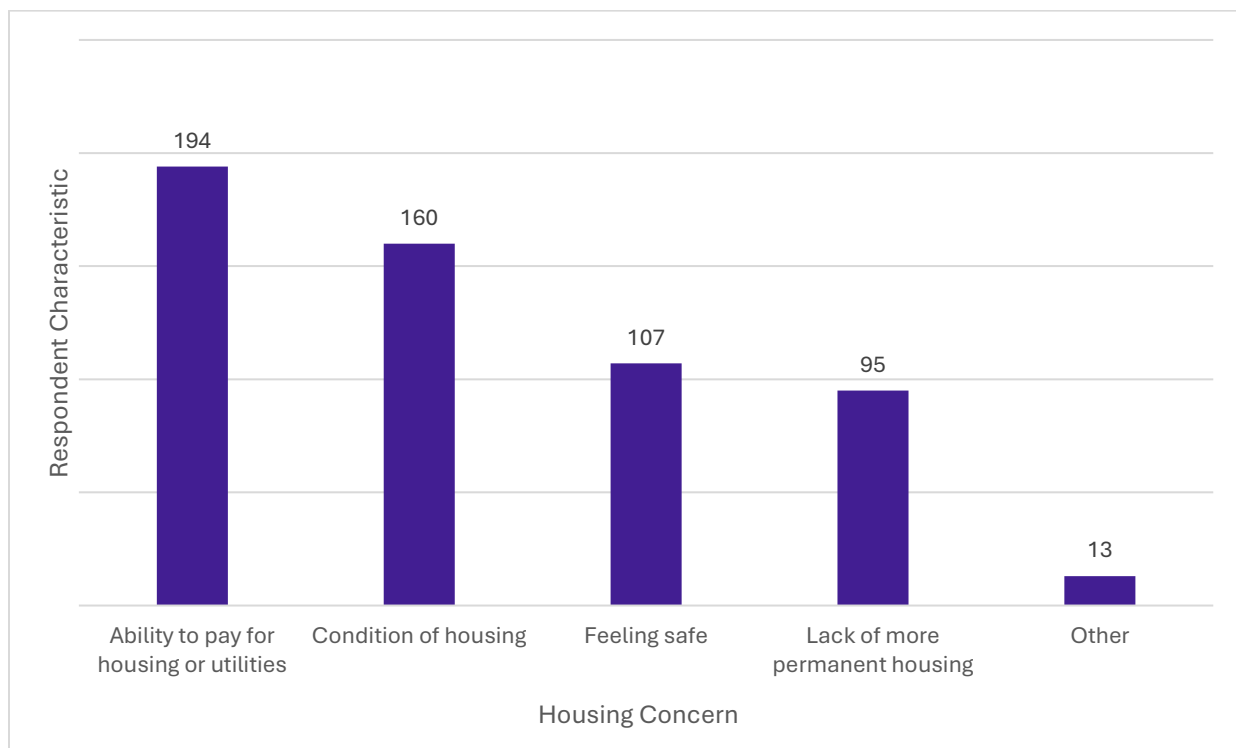


Figure 6: Housing Concerns among Respondents

Homeless and housing insecure students are also more likely to experience other types of basic needs insecurity (Leung, Farooqui, Wolfson & Cohen, 2020). **Indeed, among students reporting housing concerns on the 2023 JMU Student Basic Needs Survey, 62.5% also reported food insecurity.**

III. Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is defined as a “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire such foods in a socially acceptable manner” (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017). Other researchers have frequently used the validated USDA Adult Food Security Survey Module, either in the original 10-items form or a shorter 6-item survey, to assess college food security (USDA, 2025). Scoring is used to categorize respondents with high, marginal, low, or very low food security based on their reported experiences over the past year, although some have respondents report over the past month instead. The percentage of college students determined to be food insecure (low and very low food security categories, combined) using the 6-item survey (used here) has ranged from 37.5% (Becerra et al, 2020) to 54% (Adamovic et al, 2020) in large convenience samples of students from public U.S. institutions. **Based on the results from the 2023 Student Basic Needs Survey, 38.6% (n = 473) of respondents were identified as food insecure and among those, 17% and 21% were classified as low food security and very low food security, respectively (see Figure 7).**

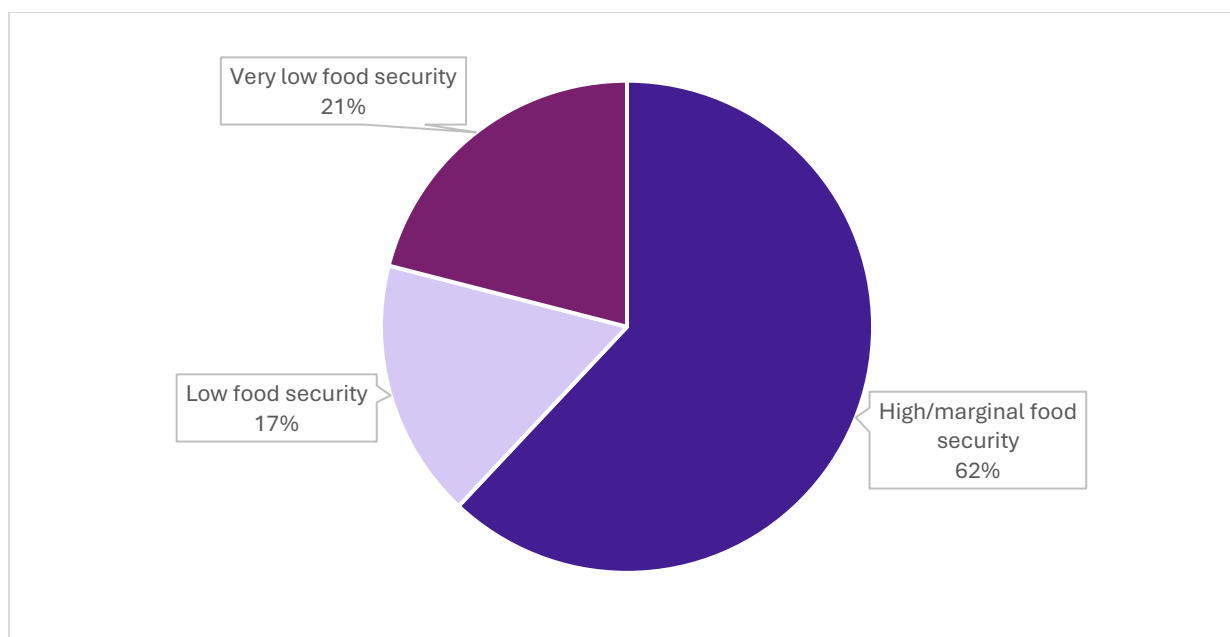


Figure 7: Food Insecurity among Respondents

Figure 8 shows the percentage of respondents identifying as food insecure by student subgroup characteristic. Food insecurity was more prevalent among graduate students, with 53.7% of graduate students (n = 66) and 66.7% of adult degree-seeking students indicating that they had experienced food insecurity over the past 12 months, compared with 38% of undergraduates. Consistent with other research findings, certain groups were also overrepresented among those experiencing food insecurity. These include transfer and first-generation students, students of color, students identifying as LGBTQ+, international students, part-time students, student parents, student veterans, and students who had previously been in foster care.

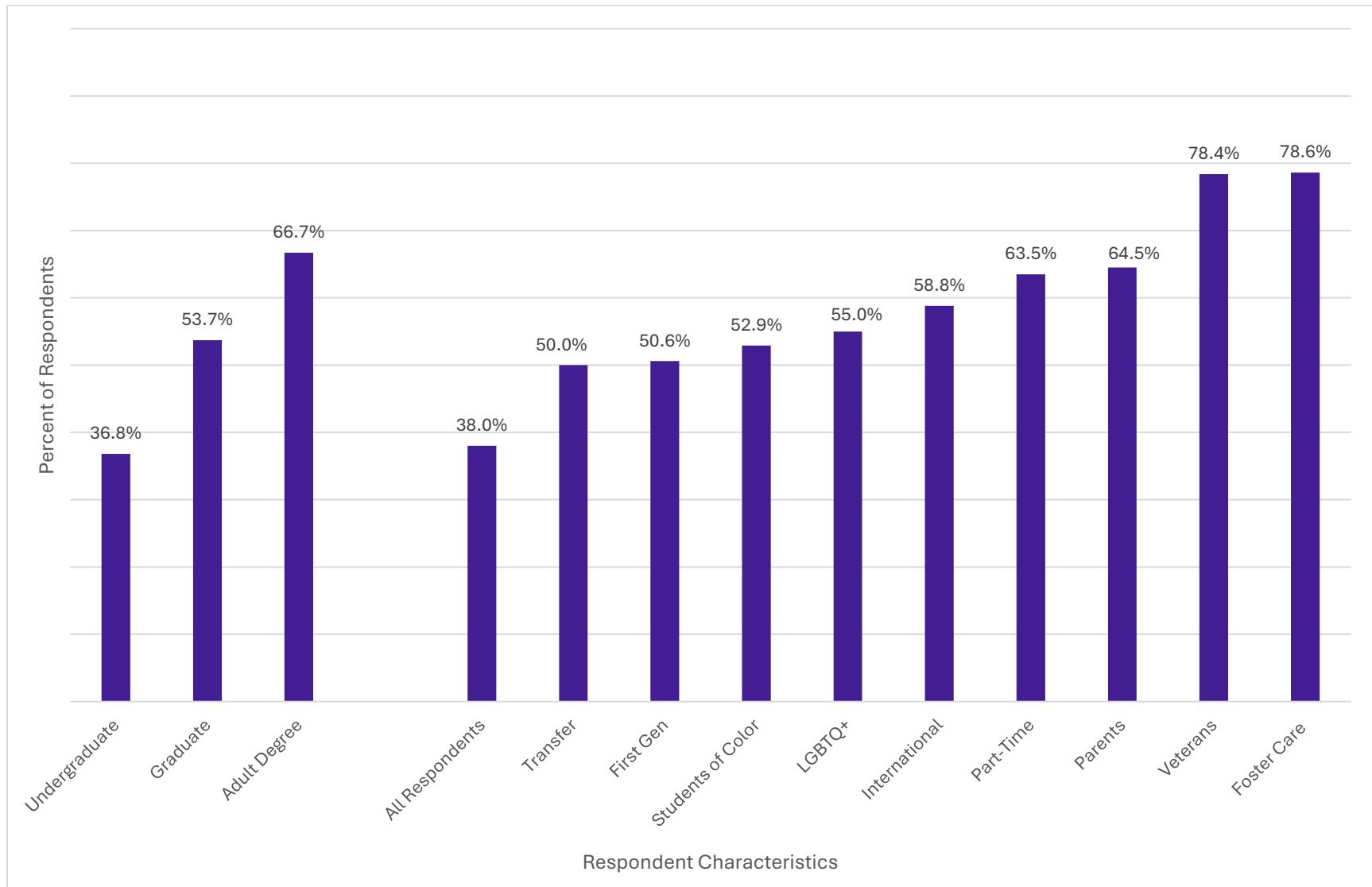


Figure 8: Food Insecurity by Respondent Characteristic



Photo courtesy of James Madison University

While respondents noted a variety of strategies to cope with running out of food, respondents most frequently indicated skipping meals (17.5%) or getting money or food from friends, family, or roommates (15.3%). Other strategies include using a credit card, being fed by friends or family, taking food from dining halls, going to a food pantry, getting free food from work, or taking food from stores or restaurants without paying for it (see Figure 9). Statistically significantly more respondents who were food insecure also indicated using The Pantry on-campus and donated meal vouchers for on-campus dining facilities.

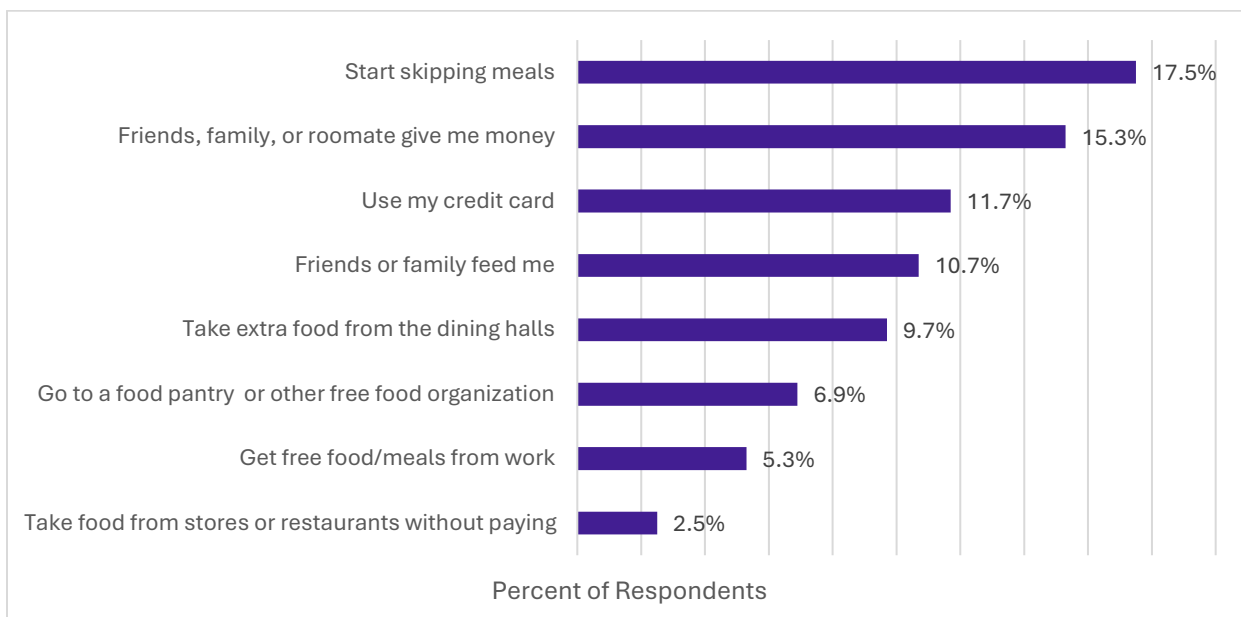


Figure 9: Strategies Used by Respondents When Running Out of Food

IV. Student Physical and Mental Health

As noted earlier in this report, the 2023 JMU Student Basic Needs Survey includes new questions related to student physical and mental health. In addition to reporting the number of respondents reporting disabilities, self-assessed health and mental health, and health insurance status, we also look at the effects of basic needs insecurities on student health.

Students with Disabilities and Medical Conditions

Thirty-nine percent of all survey respondents (n = 479) reported at least one or more disability or medical condition, while a similar number reported no disabilities or medical conditions (n = 463); 75 respondents indicated that they preferred not to answer. The most frequently cited were psychological disorders (e.g., depression, etc.) (n = 287), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (n = 169), and chronic illness (e.g., cancer, diabetes, autoimmune disorders, etc.) (n = 102). Additional categories are reported in Figure 9 below. Disabilities in the “other” category include anxiety, asthma, POTS, OCD, social anxiety, and suspected ASD. Respondents could select more than one disability.

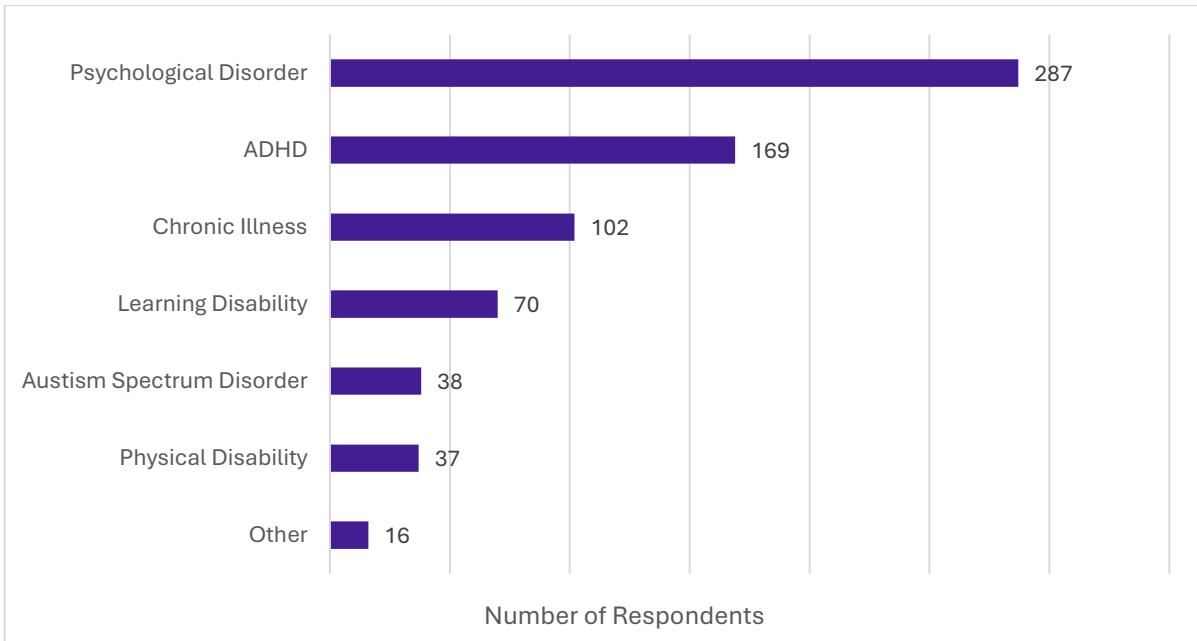


Figure 10: Disabilities and Medical Conditions

Overall Health

The 2023 JMU Student Basic Needs Survey included a 4-item Healthy Days Measure from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to better understand student health and mental health (CDC, n.d.). While the majority of JMU respondents rated their overall health as excellent, very good, or good, 11% indicated that they were in fair health and 2% poor health. Respondents’ self-reported health status is associated with student basic needs. While 16% of food-secure respondents said they had excellent health, this drops to just 3.9% among students who are food-insecure. Conversely, 18% of those experiencing food insecurity rated their health

as fair and 3.6% poor, compared to 8.3% and 1.4% of food-secure students. Among students with housing concerns, 18.6% reported fair or poor overall health (see Figure 11).

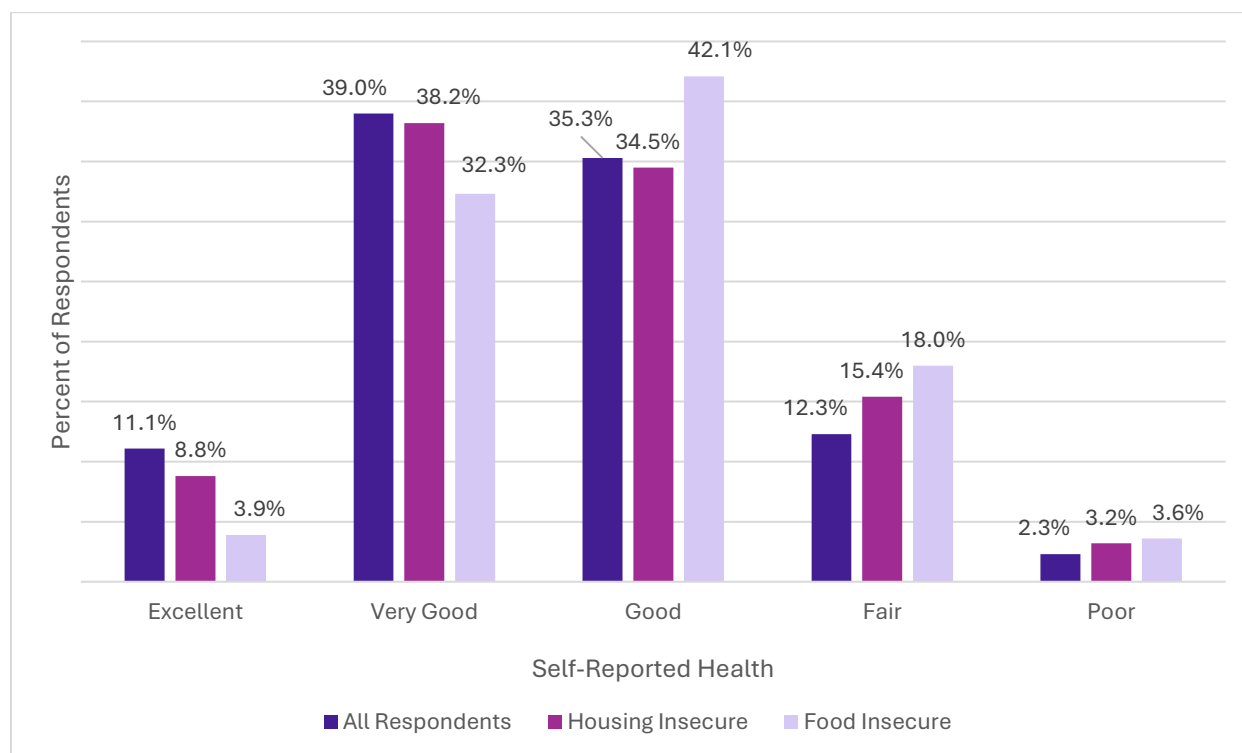


Figure 11: Respondent Health Status

Students were also asked to estimate the number of days over the past month that their mental and physical health “were not good.” Results show that poor mental health was widespread among survey respondents. Students reported experiencing nearly 10 negative mental health days per month (see Figure 12).

A large body of research has demonstrated that food and housing insecurity have a significant, negative effect on student health and mental health (Hagedorn et al., 2021; Knol et al., 2017; Kornbluh et al., 2024; Martinez et al., 2020; Nagata et al., 2019; Neal & Zigmont, 2022; Oh et al., 2022; Olfert et al., 2023). These associates are also reflected in findings from the BNAB survey. Students who reported housing insecurity had significantly more negative physical health days $t(884) = -3.46, p = <.01$ and mental health days $t(900) = -.867, p = .013$ compared to housing secure students. Housing insecure students reported 10.2 negative mental health days during the month compared to 9.6 days among students without housing concerns. Furthermore, housing insecure students reports 5.3 negative physical health days compared to 3.65 for housing secure students. Students experiencing food insecurity also reported significantly more negative mental health days compared to food secure students ($t(900) = -5.11, p = <.001$). Food insecure students reported 11.6 poor mental health days and 5 poor physical health days compared with 8.5 and 3.6 days, respectively, for food secure students (see Figure 12).

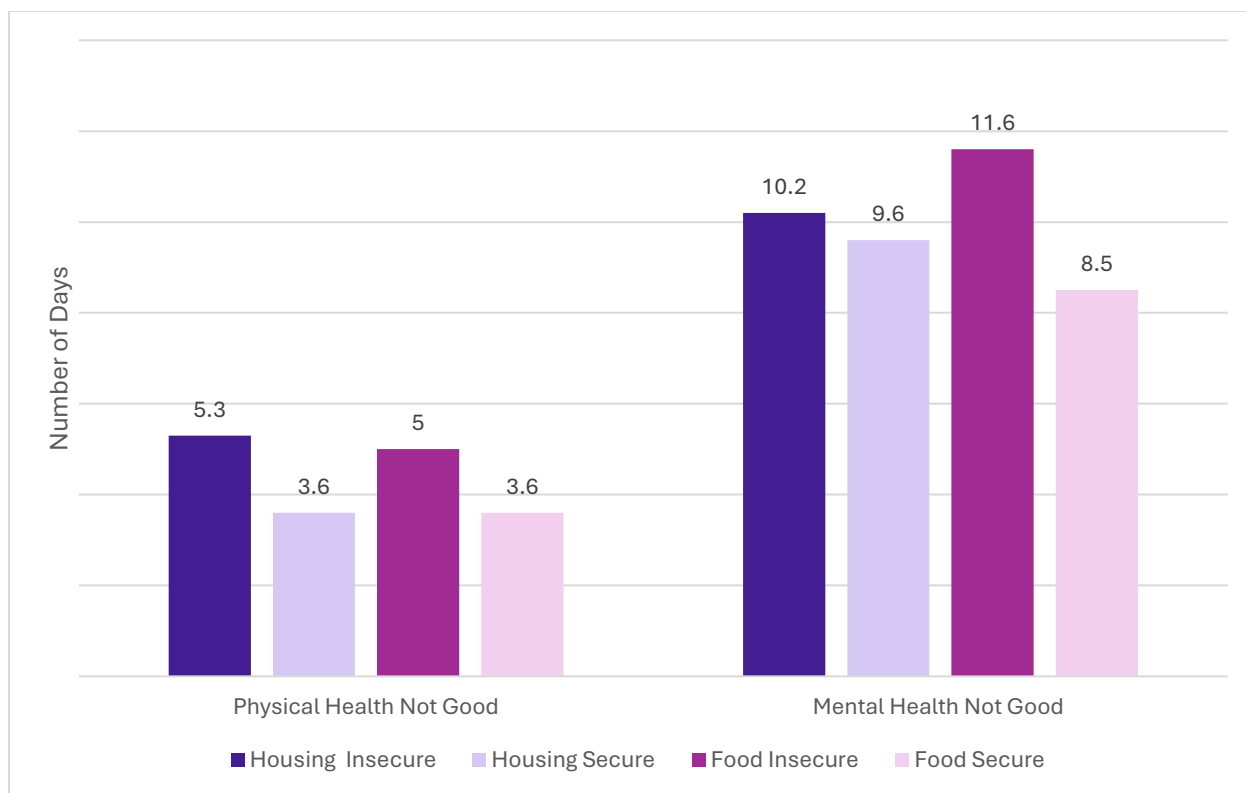


Figure 12: Number of Days in Past 30 Days That Physical and Mental Health Were Not Good

Mental Health Challenges

Most respondents (90%) indicated that they had struggled with one or more mental or emotional health challenges over the past month. While students reported a wide variety of conditions, the most common mental health challenges were anxiety and depression. It is important to note that the survey did not distinguish between students with a clinical diagnosis and those with undiagnosed mental health conditions). Respondents who are housing insecure reported higher rates of mental health challenges across almost all categories compared with respondents overall. These challenges were even greater for food insecure students (see Figure 13 and Figure 14).

When students were given the opportunity to provide additional comments, one respondent noted: ***“Constantly worrying about money and working to get a little more money, to barely cover expenses, while also trying to be a good student it is extremely harmful to my mental and physical well-being. There aren’t enough hours in the day to work, study, commute, cook food, complete chores, worry, and also perform any meaningful self-care.”***

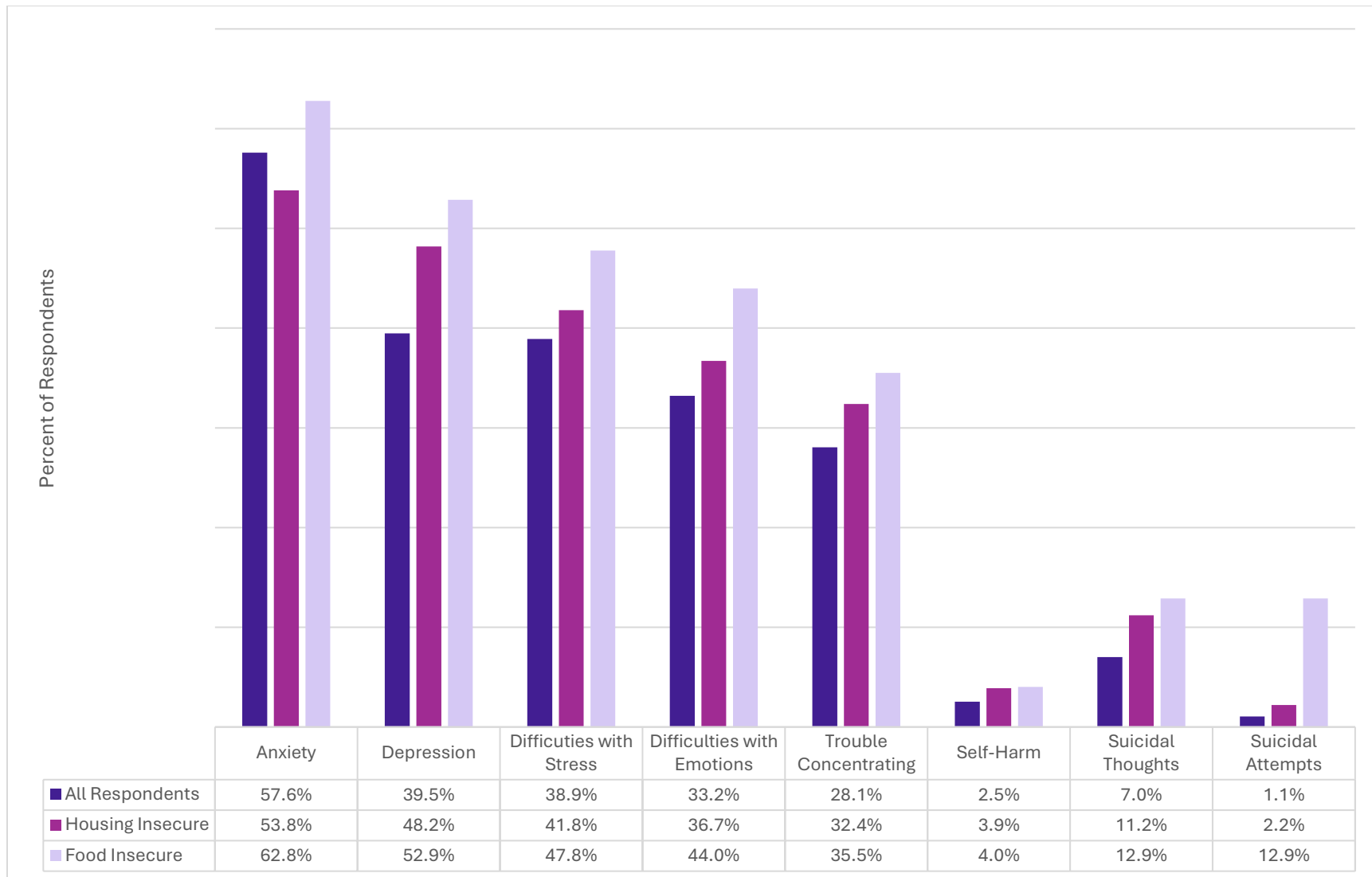


Figure 13: Mental Health Challenges Among All, Housing Insecure, and Food Insecure Respondents

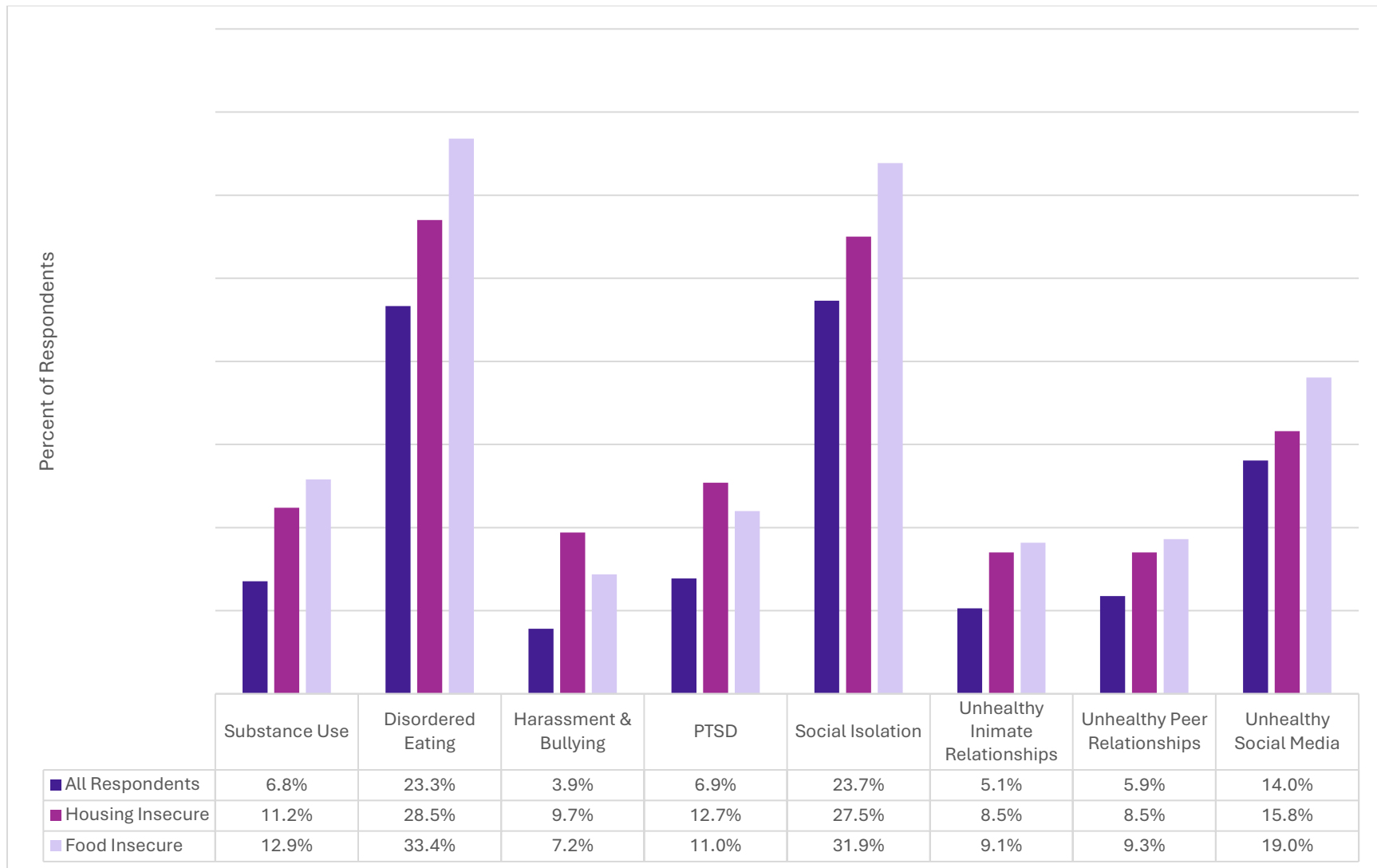


Figure 14: More Mental Health Challenges Among All, Housing Insecure, and Food Insecure Respondents

Researchers conducted a further analysis of survey data to determine the impact of housing insecurity on the likelihood of experiencing the mental health challenges detailed above, employing a logistic regression model that controlled for race and gender. Compared with respondents who were housing secure, **students who had experienced housing insecurity or homelessness in the previous 12 months reported:**

- 9.7 times greater odds of experiencing harassment and bullying
- 3.6 times greater odds to endorse symptoms of PTSD
- 2.6 times greater odds of reporting substance use difficulties
- 2.3 times greater odds of reporting suicidal thoughts
- 4.1 times greater odds of reporting suicidal attempts
- 2.7 times greater odds of reporting unhealthy intimate relationships
- 2.1 times greater odds of reporting unhealthy peer relationships

A similar analysis was used to compare food secure and food insecure students. **Compared to their food secure peers, food insecure student reported:**

- 1.4 times greater odds of having anxiety
- 2.3 times greater odds of depression
- 1.7 times greater odds of having difficulties with stress management
- 2.2 times greater odds of noting disordered eating
- 3.5 times greater odds of experiencing bullying and harassment
- 1.6 times greater odds of having difficulty concentrating
- 2.6 times greater odds of endorsing PTSD
- 2.6 times greater odds of engaging in self-harming behaviors
- 4.7 times greater odds of substance use engagement
- 4.9 times greater odds of attempted suicide
- 3.4 times more likely to report unhealthy intimate relationships
- 2.7 times more likely to report unhealthy peer relationships

Health Insurance Coverage

Given the number of students reporting negative physical and mental health, it is important to examine whether students have health insurance to access and afford needed services. Among respondents, 79.3% reported having insurance and 70% indicated a parent as the primary insurance holder. However, **more than one-fifth of students (21%) said that that did not have health insurance. An additional 11% and 12% indicated their insurance was not adequate for their physical and mental health needs.**

Inadequate insurance was even more apparent when examining subgroups of students who identify as food insecure and/or housing insecure. Though food insecure students were slightly more likely to report health insurance (20% versus 21%), greater proportions indicated that their coverage was inadequate to cover physical health and mental health care needs (17% and 19% respectively). Strikingly, among those identified as housing insecure, 63% reported that their health insurance was not adequate in covering their physical health needs. Students noted

a variety of different reasons why their health insurance was inadequate, including high deductibles and high co-payments.

In responding to a follow-up prompt that asked “How has your physical, mental, academic, or social well-being been affected by inadequate health Insurance?” one student wrote: ***“I am disabled and chronically ill, and if I have to spend \$25 of more every time I need to go to the doctor, that could easily become over 1k a semester, so instead I chose to never go.”*** Another student noted that there is a ***“lack of providers in Harrisonburg who accept Medicaid, resulting in longer waiting times for appointments.”*** A number of students mentioned concerns about their ability to pay for therapy and medications. One student wrote ***“I have not been able to receive the therapy treatment that I have been seeking which has made me less motivated to perform in other aspects of my life at times, such as physical, academic, and social aspects.”***



V. Other Consequences of Limited Resources

In addition to the challenges noted above related to inadequate housing, food, and health, and mental health care, students reported several other ways that they had been impacted by limited resources in the past 12 months (see Figure 14). Students most frequently reported forgoing social activities (36.5%), while others reduced driving (17.1%) and cut back on co-curricular activities (14.9%). Many, however, reported that limited resources affected their ability to afford academic-related expenses, including purchasing books (19.8%), a computer (4.8%), or internet (4.7%). Nearly 10% had a hold put on their account that made them unable to register for classes. Other noted inability to participate in opportunities like study abroad (23.8%), alternative spring break (18.7%), and internships (9.8%). Limited resources also affected students' housing, with 6.8% of respondents unable to pay their rent or mortgage, with 1.5% getting a summons to appear in housing court. Respondents also reported having to live in housing that was overcapacity (3.3%), being unable to pay heating bills (6.7%), and cutting back on utilities (13.3%). Respondents also had to forego or postpone needed mental health (11.7%), medical (11.6%), and dental care (9.5%), and reduce the quality of childcare (0.5%). To try to make ends meet, respondents borrowed money from friends and family to pay bills (20.9%) and increased credit card debt (13.3%); 2.3% reported referrals to collections agencies for outstanding debt.

JMU students are having to make significant sacrifices to make ends meet. Findings here are similar to the 2021 Campus Climate Survey, which reported that nearly one in three JMU students indicated they experience financial hardships, including difficulty affording tuition (19%), books and course materials (18%), food (15%), housing (15%), and health care (6%) (Rankin & Associates, 2022).



Photo courtesy of James Madison University

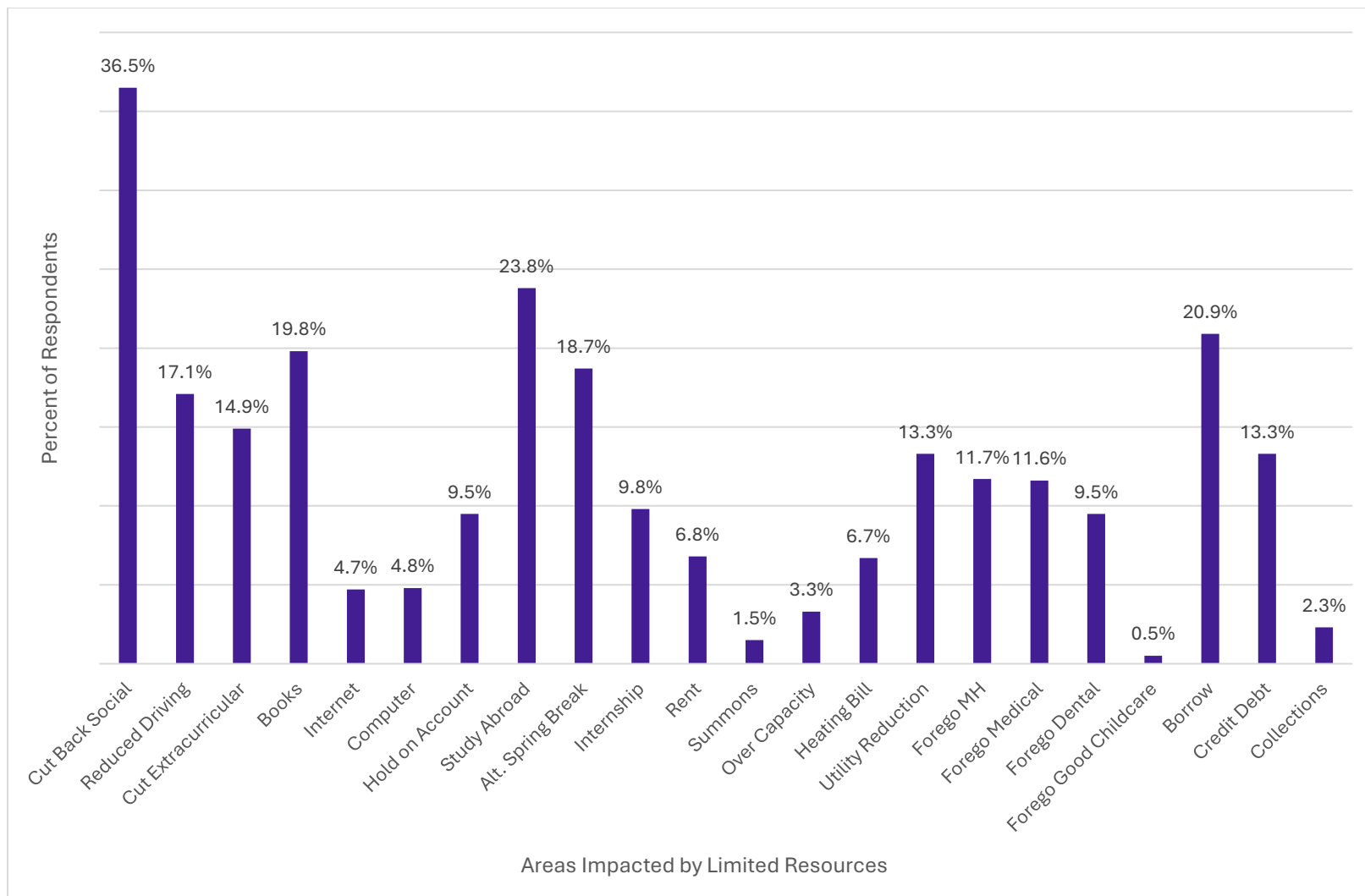


Figure 10: Consequences of Limited Resources

Student Academic Achievement

Consistent with previous research, we found that lack of resources impacts student academic success (Wooten et al, 2019; El Zein et al, 2019). Overall, two-thirds of the students who completed the 2023 JMU Student Basic Needs Survey (66.3%; n = 812) reported having a GPA above 3.0, and 26.5% a GPA between 2.0 and 2.99. Respondents with basic need insecurities reported lower GPAs. Results from a binary regression controlling for race and gender indicated that **food insecure respondents were 2.1 times more likely to report a GPA below 3.0 compared to food-secure respondents**. Furthermore, only **52.4% of housing insecure students reported having a GPA above 3.0**. **Housing insecure students were 2.6 times more likely to report a GPA below 3.0 compared to their housing secure peers**.

Satisfaction with JMU

Basic needs insecurity not only affects students’ grades but also their overall experiences at JMU. Among all respondents to the 2023 survey, 66.1% reported being “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their experience at JMU. Comparatively, 46.6% of housing insecure students and 51.6% of food insecure students reported a similar level satisfaction (see Figure 11). Conversely, 10.6% of housing insecure and 10.4% of food insecure students reported some level of dissatisfaction with their JMU experiences, compared with 6.9% of students overall.

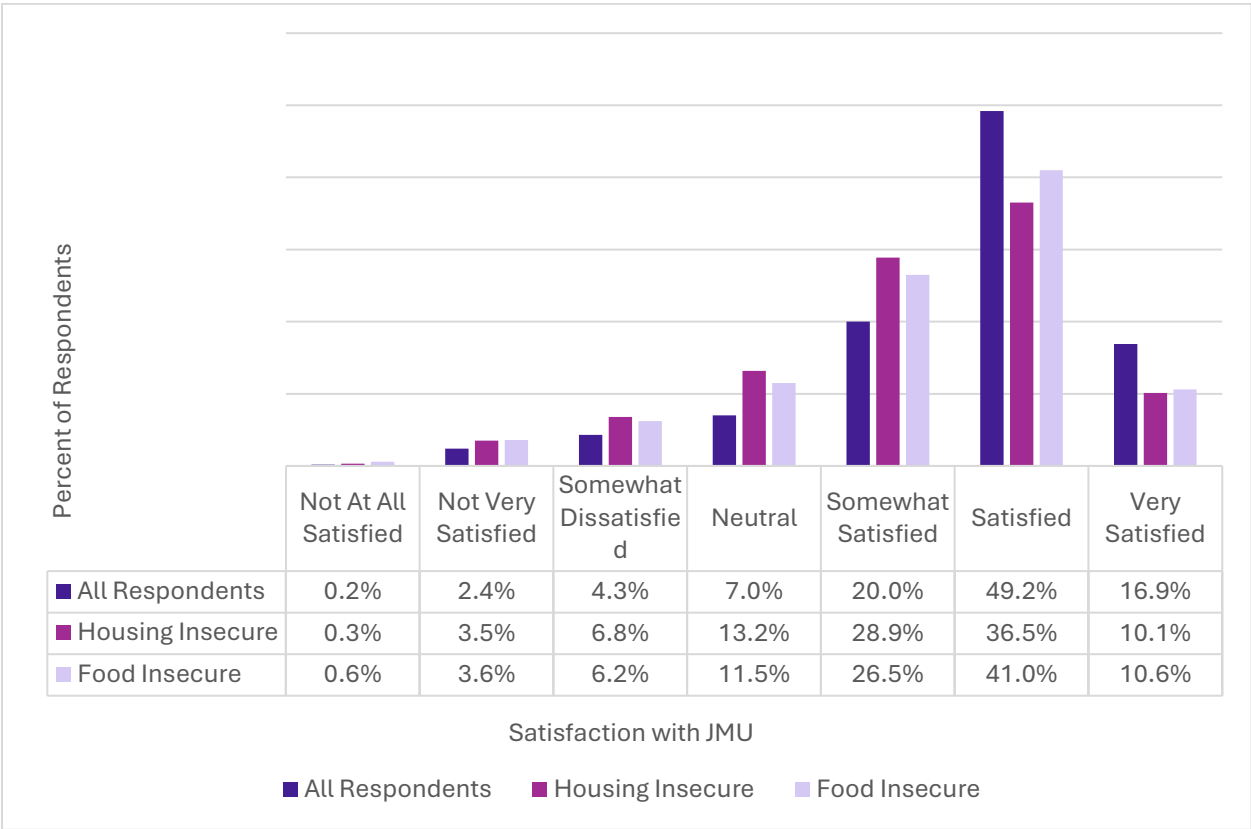


Figure 11: Respondent Satisfaction with JMU Experience

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from the 2023 JMU Student Basic Needs Survey highlight the significant difficulties that many of our students are facing across campus:

- 33% of respondents reported experiencing housing insecurity
- 38% of respondents reported food insecurity
- Of these students, 62% were both food and housing insecure
- Students facing food and housing insecurity reported higher negative mental and physical health days during the month compared to the general population
- 21% of students endorsed a lack of health insurance and many also reported neglecting physical and mental health supports due to finances.
- Students facing food and housing insecurity had lower GPAs and less satisfaction with their JMU experience.

These findings are consistent with a growing body of research linking basic needs insecurities to poor student health and wellbeing, including higher perceived stress and depressive symptoms. Basic needs insecurity is also associated with decreased academic success among college and university students, including lower GPAs and less likelihood of reenrolling the following year (Diamond, Stebleton & delMas, 2020; Martinex, Frongillo, Leung & Ritchie, 2020).

Addressing student basic needs should be a priority for James Madison University and is well aligned with the university's strategic plan. Under JMU's current strategic plan, the university seeks to achieve national prominence; embrace access, inclusion, and diversity; provide outstanding programs; prioritize excellence in teaching and scholarly endeavors; provide services to promote health and well-being in the JMU community; promote student life and success; and build an engaged community. Lack of resources leaves many JMU students behind, unable to fully participate in the university's robust academic and co-curricular experiences and therefore unable to succeed to their full potential. This, in turn, affects JMU as a whole. Addressing student basic needs insecurities not only promotes an accessible, inclusive campus for students from a variety of backgrounds, but by investing in its students, JMU can demonstrate that the university is a good return on investment for students and families. A healthier, happier, and academically successful student body can better attract prospective students, improve the relationship between JMU and its alumni, and help the university stand out on the national stage as a leader in higher education.

Below we provide a wide range of recommendations for improving basic needs insecurities. The Basic Needs Advisory Board looks forward to conversations with the campus community to discuss which seem most feasible and to establish short and long-term priorities for the university. We begin by pointing to some actions that JMU faculty can take to better support students, before turning to a variety of new programs and initiatives that the university could consider. In addition to general strategies, we propose steps that JMU can take to address the specific areas in which our students are struggling. These include economic need, food insecurity, housing insecurity, and poor health and mental health.

Recommendations for Faculty and Staff

Basic needs insecurities are a barrier to student wellbeing and academic success. There are several steps that JMU faculty and staff can take to help better support students.

Educate & Stay Informed

Faculty should work towards having a better understanding about the presence of basic needs insecurity among students and the links between lack of basic needs, mental and physical health, and academic performance. Faculty should also work towards understanding resources available at the university and within the greater community to support students. These resources include housing assistance, food pantries, financial aid, mental health counseling, and the Jones Miller Emergency Assistance Fund. Explore the [JMU Student Support Hub](#) or scan the QR code to the right to learn more.



Normalize Basic Needs Insecurity

Create a supportive classroom environment in which students feel safe to share experiences without stigma. Include a statement of basic needs resources on syllabi and discuss these resources in class. An example syllabus statement is available for use on the Student Support Hub under [How Faculty and Staff Can Help](#).

Integrate Awareness into the Curriculum

When appropriate, incorporate relevant topics related to basic needs into course content, such as discussing social determinants of health or the compounding factors of stress, basic needs, and mental health.

Be Mindful of Class Materials

Consider the financial implications of assignment materials and activities, work towards offering alternative options where necessary to minimize added costs for students. Check out the JMU Library's recommendations for "11 Easy Ways Faculty Can Make Textbooks More Affordable" <https://www.lib.jmu.edu/make-textbooks-more-affordable/>. The Student Support Hub includes a section for students on affordable technology and textbooks.

Advocate for Systemic Changes

Support institutional policies and initiatives aimed at addressing basic needs insecurity on a broader scale, such as advocating for increased funding for student support services.

University Recommendations for Addressing Basic Needs

Adequately addressing student basic needs insecurities will require additional resources and institutional-level commitment, and in some cases, support from the state legislature. We provide a variety of recommendations below that the university should consider.

Expand Access to Information about College Costs and Resources

There are various ways to help students better understand all the resources offered by JMU. Students should be made aware of these resources by introducing them during Weeks of Welcome and providing reminders throughout their time at JMU (e.g., emails or posting it on Potty Mouth).

Reengineering Madison's new university-wide Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) system presents an opportunity to support student basic needs. Sending personalized messages to prompt students to use resources ("nudging") and utilizing case management not only represent emerging best practices (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2021) but also capitalize on and align with JMU's adoption of the new CRM. For example, sending students personalized text messages about the pantry allowed [Western Michigan University](#) to increase food program retention rates by 12%, and Amarillo College more than doubled use of its Advocacy and Resource Center through personalized emails to students (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2021). BNAB should collaborate with Student Success Analytics to explore ways to reach more students in need of support.

It may also be helpful to have a homelessness and hunger awareness week on campus to help reduce stigma and help students, faculty, and staff learn more about available services. There is a resource guide on the [JMU Student Support Hub](#) that identifies campus and community resources for JMU students. We should continue to update the Student Support Hub and work to make the resources more widely known through other venues. For example, JMU could encourage academic and other departments to link to this resource page. Additionally, the Basic Needs Advisory Board should seek student insight into needed resources, as well as those that should be featured on the Student Support Hub. Collaborating with students to create a guide that highlights resources and provides a student-informed perspective on the costs of attending JMU could help incoming students better navigate college-related costs.

Create Basic Needs Coordinator and Graduate Assistant Positions

JMU should create a Basic Needs Coordinator position. The Basic Needs Advisory Board and its associated programming like The Pantry are currently supported by an AmeriCorps VISTA. However, this position is coming to an end, while at the same time we are seeing increased demand for basic needs resources across campus. A Basic Needs Coordinator would perform important functions such as coordinating The Pantry at JMU; meeting with students and connecting them to resources; leading evaluation and assessment, marketing and outreach, and collaboration efforts across campus; developing and overseeing programming (e.g., financial education, nutrition education, and life skills); supervising Off-Campus Life's (OCL)

Financial Literacy graduate assistant; supporting OCL office functions; and providing leadership to the BNAB. Given the breath of the work to be done, we also recommend that JMU create a new graduate assistant position to support the Basic Needs Coordinator. A recent, nationwide survey of student basic needs by the Hope Center (2025) found that “one of the most effective ways to connect students to public benefits is to connect them to someone with experience navigating the system...this addresses both the information barrier and the administrative burden placed on the student.” Creating these positions would provide official infrastructure needed to solidify the BNAB and support its functions and would underscore JMU’s position as an institution that innovates, invests in its students’ success, and holds promising opportunities for graduate assistants in line with its R2 status.

Invest in More Comprehensive Resources

Given the basic needs insecurities faced by students, it is essential for JMU to expand current resources to meet a variety of needs. JMU’s investment in the Pantry locations and in dining vouchers have been important programs in addressing student food insecurity. Similarly, the new Jones Miller Emergency Fund will help students respond to some of the unanticipated financial barriers they encounter. In addition to expanding these existing resources to meet student needs, JMU should continue to reduce barriers to student success, such as childcare resources for parenting students (specific suggestions for programs to address food, housing, health, and mental health are provided in the next set of recommendations).

Some universities have taken their resources and created comprehensive support programs for students (i.e., one stop shops) that provide a range of information, resources, and programming. A few of these are highlighted below.

- [Kennesaw State University CARE Services](#): Provides emergency assistance, pantry access, case management, as well as an inclusive living community for students (Kennesaw State University, n.d.)
- [University of California Davis Aggie Compass Basic Needs Center](#): Provides emergency financial assistance, pantry access, SNAP enrollment assistance, emergency housing, and case management. (University of California Davis, n.d.).
- [Florida State University Unconquered Scholars Program](#): Provides one on one advising, summer bridge program, college life coaching, academic advising, tutoring, Financial Aid Assistance and Advocacy, Academic and Skills workshops, and mental health services (Florida State University, n.d.).
- [West Chester University Promise Program](#): Provides year-round housing, food and supplies from the resource pantry, employment opportunities, access to scholarships, monthly programming (West Chester University, n.d.).

The TRIO Student Support Services program may provide an option for expanding services for under resourced students, including FAFSA counseling, financial planning, and targeted mentoring and academic supports.

Increase Need-Based Aid

A 2022 Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission study on higher education financial aid grants and awards found that JMU students have substantial unmet financial need (\$2.2 million in AY 2020-21). Given the rising cost of living, JMU should explore ways to increase need-based aid. This would reduce financial stress on financially insecure students and make JMU more accessible to potential students from under-resourced families. Expanding need-based aid may be attractive to students who don't already benefit from in-state tuition rates, thereby helping JMU to attract competitive students from out of state and internationally.

Continue Legislative Advocacy

Rising levels of basic needs insecurity are driven by a variety of factors, many of which are beyond the capacity of JMU to address on its own. In its advocacy efforts, JMU should track and advocate strongly for legislation that would promote students' basic needs security. BNAB should work with the JMU Office of State Government Relations, the Madison Center for Civic Engagement, and the Student Government Association to track and advocate for relevant legislative action (e.g., increases to financial aid through the state's Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program (VGAP) and the Virginia Commonwealth Award; legislation like Hunger Free Campus, etc.).

Expand Research Partnerships

The BNAB should continue to study basic needs across campus to align programming and other resources with areas of student need. Cultivating interdisciplinary research collaboration around this topic may be a useful step for the BNAB and may contribute to JMU's strategic goals of supporting students' acclimation and providing high-quality, innovative programs and services. The BNAB has convened a learning community of campus pantries at other Virginia colleges and universities. This focus could be expanded to include additional ways to support student basic needs, shared research initiatives, and communicate shared priorities with lawmakers, however, BNAB will need adequate staffing capacity to regularly convene stakeholders. BNAB could also explore 4-VA to drive collaborative research on student basic needs across the Commonwealth.



Photo courtesy of the Commonwealth of Virginia

Recommendations to Increase Food Security

JMU has made progress in serving the needs of food insecure students in recent years. Since the Pantry was established in 2020, it has expanded to three different locations across campus and has seen continued growth in student participation. In the first week of classes in fall 2024, the Pantry served 210 students, distributing 1,792.6 lbs. of food and other goods; these are almost twice the numbers of the previous fall. The number of dining hall punches donated directly from JMU Dining Services has increased and the number of students using these punches have increased. JMU Dining Services provides 4,000 vouchers a year that students can use for meals at the dining halls and donates fruits and vegetables to the Pantry weekly. Dining Services is also helping to provide cooking classes at The Pantry. Additionally, students have benefited from food purchased at a discount from the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank (BRAFB), a partnership with Danone, which contributes to an endowment and makes in-kind donations to The Pantry. Additionally, the Student Support Hub's listing of microwaves around campus and cooking classes provided at UREC have increased students' ability to prepare affordable food on campus.

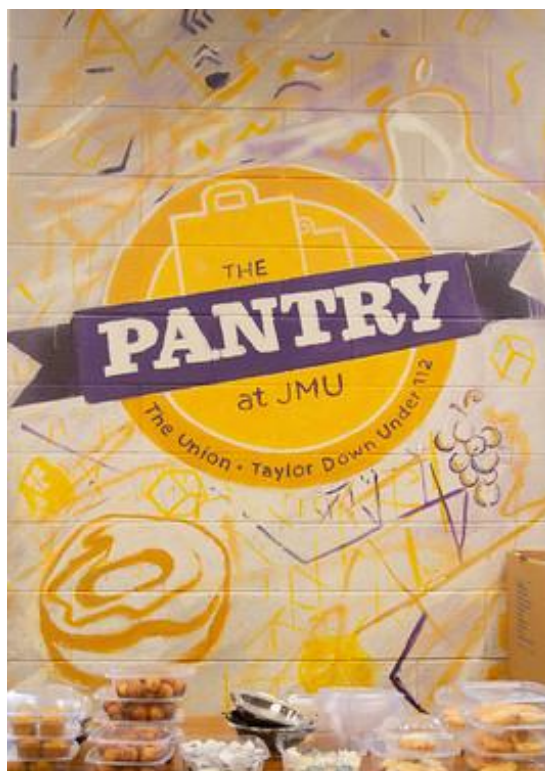


Photo courtesy of James Madison University

However, as demand increases, these programs need continuing support from JMU and expansion of funding sources. Costs are increasing for the food that The Pantry obtains from sources such as BRAFB. Though the number of donated vouchers is also increasing, the voucher program is unfortunately not able to match demand and provide vouchers to all students who need them. Further, food security accounts for appropriate and culturally relevant foods for one's dietary needs; continuing to expand the variety of nutrient-rich foods offered at The Pantry would support students in adequately meeting their nutritional needs, particularly for those with restricted diets. As such, food insecurity initiatives such as The Pantry should continue to be a priority in fundraising initiatives such as Giving Day. Additionally, we advise JMU to expand in-kind and corporate partnerships to provide food to The Pantry. A more comprehensive approach will help JMU to meet its students' needs and address food insecurity.

SNAP Benefits Navigation

Few respondents to the 2023 JMU Student Basic Needs Survey reported using public benefits such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), despite a high prevalence of food insecurity. BNAB has offered SNAP training for both staff and students to increase knowledge about program eligibility; JMU should also explore other avenues to support students who may be eligible for SNAP and assist them with obtaining benefits. As noted above,

hiring a Basic Needs Coordinator and dedicated graduate assistant would expand JMU's ability to assist students with SNAP enrollment.

Facilitate Use of SNAP at Campus Farmer's Markets and Other Campus Locations

JMU is surrounded by Rockingham County, one of the largest agricultural counties in the state (Shenandoah Valley Partnership, n.d.). It may be helpful to partner with local farmers to offer fresh, affordable food. Farmers markets and other mobile markets can participate in the Virginia Fresh Match Program (part of the national "Double Bucks" program), in which markets match SNAP benefits dollar for dollar to extend students' capacity to buy fresh produce (Virginia Farmers Market Associates (n.d.). JMU could also explore ways to expand SNAP access at other campus dining facilities.¹



Photo courtesy of James Madison University

Expand Current Food Recovery Program

While JMU currently has an existing Food Recovery Program, it is small and does not currently provide meals on campus. Thus, it may be helpful to examine the current program and find ways to strengthen it to serve both students and community partners (currently recovered food is provided to the Salvation Army). The [Food Recovery Network](#) and other recovery initiatives glean unused food from campus locations (e.g., dining halls, catering kitchens). They then repurpose the food into ready-to-eat meals that are distributed through The Pantry, in residence halls, or alternative locations (Food Recovery Network, 2020). There are several

¹ Students who reside on campus and have a university meal plan that covers more than half their meals are not eligible to receive SNAP benefits (USDA, 2022).

mobile apps that food donors can use to post the availability of excess food that can be picked up and distributed to students. In focus groups that accompanied the initial 2019 JMU Student Basic Needs Survey, students said that they would be more likely to use The Pantry if they could just grab an already-prepared, healthy, well-balanced meal, with vegetarian and vegan options. This makes the ready-to-eat meals provided through food recovery an especially useful contribution to The Pantry. However, it is difficult to arrange consistent, sizeable food donations without a more organized, systematic approach. Ways to expand food recovery efforts would be a valuable area of investment and innovation for JMU. Future survey iterations from the BNAB hope to explore innovative ways to improve the Pantry's service delivery to reduce perceived stigma. Some universities have created a non-transactional cafe model or mobile pantries to expand student access to recovered food (Stringer, 2020).

Offer a No-Frills Dining Option

In focus groups held following the initial 2019 JMU Student Basic Need Survey, students suggested that JMU could offer a “no-frills” dining option with a limited menu (e.g., one or few options). One student made the point that when he worked in food service preparation elsewhere, they made meals for \$1.65 per meal. A potential avenue of exploration would be whether JMU and Aramark could provide options that would be less expensive for students than current meal plans. This seemed to hold appeal for focus group students, even if these dining options had fewer choices or simpler meals. In pursuing any potential changes to JMU dining or meal plan options, the university should solicit and incorporate the feedback of students who are food insecure.



Photo courtesy of James Madison University

Recommendations to Increase Housing Security

James Madison University could be at the forefront of the movement across higher education to better identify and support students experiencing housing insecurity. Most colleges have focused their efforts on supporting food insecurity; comparatively, the student housing crisis has gone largely unaddressed.

JMU promotes housing security through measures such as mandatory on-campus residence for undergraduate students' freshman and sophomore years, and the provision of Utilities Deposit Assistance Program. A robust core of student support resources—such as the Office of Residence Life, Off-Campus Life, and Office of Student Accountability and Restorative Practices—can guide students through conflicts with roommates and landlords. These resources can make a big difference for the 49.1% of the housing-insecure surveyed students who noted difficulties with paying for housing or utilities, and the 27.1% who identified not feeling safe in their current housing situation. The high percentage of students reporting these concerns shows the importance of maintaining, investing in, and publicizing these resources. However, gaps exist in JMU's response to housing insecurity that may contribute to these concerns. Upperclassmen lack guaranteed on-campus housing, and many report inadequate housing conditions off-campus. Furthermore, on-campus housing is not available to students for weeks at a time over summer and winter breaks. Additionally, both on-campus and off-campus housing can be costly to students and can contribute to basic needs insecurity. We call on JMU to examine the housing interventions that other universities have taken and adopt solutions to this problem.

Provide Emergency Housing

Students may benefit from having some residence halls or campus apartments reserved for students who require short-term emergency housing. 22.9% of our housing insecure students lacked a permanent residence and 8% of them reported being homeless in the past year. Many others reported issues such as difficulty paying rent that may threaten students with the prospect of homelessness. It is unsurprising that the stressful experience of housing insecurity correlated with high rates of mental and physical health concerns. Having a reserved space on campus may help these students to feel secure that they have a safety net. Alternatively, if it is not viable to provide emergency housing on campus, JMU may consider offering emergency housing vouchers to cover several nights in a hotel/motel room. An example of this can be found at the [University of North Carolina at Charlotte](#) (n.d.).

Expand Campus Housing Options

In recent years, JMU has allowed students to remain in residence halls over Thanksgiving and Spring Breaks. However, other university breaks pose challenges for students whose families experience housing instability. Additionally, students who need to work locally over breaks, those for whom travel costs are prohibitive, or students who do not have family to support them when the university is closed face housing challenges as well. As a result, JMU could explore maintaining optional on-campus housing options for students during breaks.

Given the number of off-campus students experiencing housing insecurity, another solution may be to expand JMU's guaranteed on-campus housing to more students who need it. Housing could be offered to students who meet particular criteria, such as \$0 family contribution. Additionally, offering a community experience for under-resourced students may be helpful for creating an inclusive and supportive environment for students. For example, [Kennesaw State University](#) (n.d.) offers an on-campus community living option as part of their comprehensive support program for students entering college with prior McKinney Vento Status and/or foster care experience during their K-12 education.

The University of Virginia (UVA) is working on an affordable housing initiative to support the development of 1,000+ affordable housing units over time on land that is owned by UVA or the UVA Foundation. Case studies of the UVA initiative and similar undertakings at other universities are described by the [Penn Institute for Urban Research](#) (Elhenz, 2023).

Consider No-Interest Loans for Housing Deposits

Research shows that many students lack adequate savings for a security deposit (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015). JMU already has a well-developed Utility Deposit Assistant Program (UDAP) that helps students cover the initial cost of connecting to water/sewer, gas, and electric utilities (unpaid bills up to a certain amount are charged to a student's account rather than being sent to collections). The university could develop a similar program or provide no-interest loans to cover the cost of security deposits.

Develop a Guaranty Program

Not all students have families in a position to cosign housing applications. JMU could consider offering a guarantor program to students, through which students can apply for JMU to act as their guarantor for their housing contracts. [New York University](#) has run a similar program for many of its graduate students since it piloted its guaranty program in 2001. This induces landlords to rent off-campus apartments to students that they might not be willing to otherwise, while conditions such as the student signing an indemnity agreement, being in good standing with the bursar's office, and making academic progress protect the university's investment in the students' housing.



Photo courtesy of James Madison University

Link Students to Federal Housing Resources

A growing number of colleges employ a homeless liaison to support students who are unhoused or at risk of housing insecurity (Alonso, 2023). Liaisons can assist students with obtaining federal housing vouchers and may choose to target groups at high risk of homelessness like student veterans and students aging out of foster care. However, it is important to note that existing federal housing resources are already highly strained, and federal restrictions limit eligibility for college students under age 24 (Hope Center, 2025). Evaluations of college voucher programs have also shown some mixed results, due in part to housing availability (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2024). This makes it even more pressing for JMU to expand university housing resources to students.

Establish a HOST Program

Local families and individuals can host JMU students during school breaks and for longer times during the academic year. [North Carolina State University](#) established a program, which turned into HOST (Housing Options for Students Today), a non-profit using this model (HOST, n.d.). Other universities have created similar models with a focus on alumni involvement. For example, [The University of Utah](#) created a host home program in which alumni are offered \$5,000 a semester to board students (Greenberg, 2022).



Photo courtesy of James Madison University

Facilitate Community Partnerships to Connect Students with Housing

Developing community partnerships with community agencies with expertise in housing can lead to additional options for homeless and housing insecure students. Collaboration can also help ensure that university-level housing solutions do not exacerbate homelessness and housing insecurity in the broader community. According to the City of Harrisonburg (n.d.), affordable housing has been an ongoing priority, and there are several local organizations that address housing and homelessness, including the Harrisonburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority, Mercy House, Valley Interfaith Action, and Valley Open Doors.

Provide Legal Aid and Support Local Eviction Reduction Programs

While a Basic Needs Coordinator could help students navigate some housing challenges, more serious issues like eviction notices or lease disputes require legal services. JMU could partner with a legal aid organization to provide legal advice to students who are having issues with their landlords or in need of housing-related legal aid. The university could also support the establishment of a local eviction reduction program. A state-pilot program, the Virginia Eviction Reduction Pilot (VERP), was created in 2020, with the first round of grantees selected the following year (VA Department of Housing and Community Development, n.d.). The pilot aimed to address higher than average eviction rates and low rates of legal representation for tenants facing eviction across the Commonwealth. There is not currently a similar eviction reduction program in Harrisonburg or Rockingham County. Given that 33% of our surveyed students experienced housing insecurity, with 47.2% of them noting difficulties with paying for housing or utilities, the issue of summary evictions may be an important one for JMU students. It may be a worthwhile investment for JMU to work with community stakeholders to develop an eviction reduction program proposal for future funding cycles.

In the meantime, it should also be a priority to publicize housing law resources from groups like the Virginia Poverty Law Center's [Housing Advocacy](#) program (n.d.) on the Student Support Hub. The Virginia Eviction Reduction Pilot (Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, n.d.) also publishes a list of [eviction prevention programs by locality](#). JMU could also better publicize community resources and events. For example, Virginia Organizing and River City Bread Basket just had an event that included educating people about renters' rights (Famet, 2024).



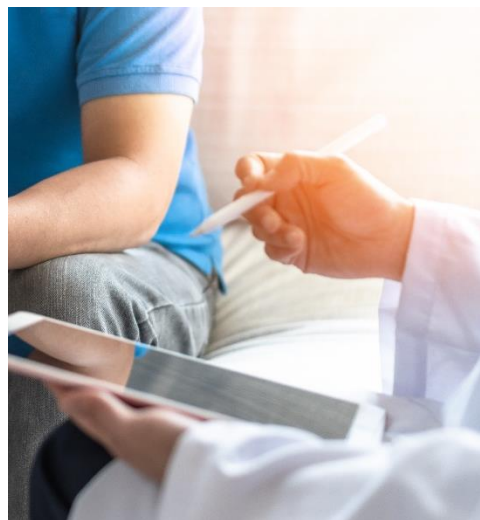
Photo courtesy of James Madison University

Recommendations to Address Student Wellness

Student health and well-being has become a priority at JMU in recent years, as evidenced by the new [President's Council on Health and Well-Being](#), “charged with coordinating and providing campus-wide oversight of efforts for promoting health and well-being at JMU.” JMU partnered with the JED Foundation in 2022 to inform university services and initiatives to promote student wellbeing. Additionally, the University Health Center addresses many student health needs at low or no charge, and JMU has made significant strides in expanding mental health access in recent years, including subscribing to resources like Timely Care and the implementation of a campus law enforcement and mental health co-response program. Still, findings from the 2023 JMU Student Basic Needs Survey reinforce the need to further expand JMU’s ability to meet students’ health needs. A high percentage of survey respondents reported experiencing physical and mental health issues, and many indicated that they had insufficient insurance or financial resources to access adequate care. A strategy to address these gaps must include both programs and practices to directly increase student access to health and mental health care, and indirectly through programs to meet student basic needs.

Help Students Access Affordable Health Insurance

Addressing the issue of health insurance access is yet another area where students would be well served to have a staff member dedicated to assisting them with benefits navigation. A Basic Needs Coordinator could assist students with finding and enrolling in affordable health insurance plans and determining their Medicaid eligibility. Additionally, JMU should consider offering health coverage to graduate students, especially considering the lack of health insurance experienced by this population of students. Another way to assist students with obtaining insurance that meets their health needs could be to follow UVA’s example and to offer [health insurance subsidy](#) (University of Virginia, n.d.) to help graduate students to pay for health insurance premiums. Finally, given the unmet health needs among basic needs-insecure students, the BNAB can highlight and promote community resources that may assist students with accessing affordable healthcare.



Expand Basic Needs and Health Services Partnerships

Food, housing, and other basic needs are critical to student health. The BNAB is pursuing dialogue with the President’s Council on Health and Wellbeing and others to ensure that basic needs are highlighted in university efforts to promote student wellbeing. Partnering with the University Health Center and University Counselling Center to promote the Student Support Hub and identify unmet referral needs will be another valuable approach. Basic needs security should be a priority for parties that aim to address health needs at JMU, and vice versa.

CONCLUSIONS

Findings from the 2023 JMU Basic Needs Survey highlight that many JMU students are struggling to meet their basic needs. Unmet financial need and unanticipated financial costs mean that students must make difficult trade-offs—forgoing books and supplies, sacrificing enriching academic and co-curricular experiences, and going without basic resources, including food, housing, and health care. Survey results showed that inability to secure adequate food and housing has significant consequences for poor student mental and physical health. For many respondents, health impacts are exacerbated by inadequate health insurance. Food and housing insecurity also affect student academic performance and overall satisfaction with the JMU experience.

JMU has made meaningful progress in addressing student basic needs, demonstrating a commitment to student well-being. However, there is still more we can do to ensure that every student has the resources they need to thrive. As a university that encourages students to “Be the change,” we have an opportunity to lead by example. By taking bold, substantive action to strengthen student basic needs support, JMU can set a standard for institutions across Virginia and beyond, fostering success for all students.



Photo courtesy of James Madison University

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