

Teen and college food insecurity a hidden crisis, research shows

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WACO—Food insecurity among teenagers and college students represents a hidden crisis, student researchers from two faith-based Texas universities told seminar participants at Baylor University summit on hunger and poverty.

The problem remains largely hidden—even in college towns like Waco and Abilene that have many churches—in part because young people want to avoid the social stigma of acknowledging a need for help, the researchers noted.

Ana O’Quin, an undergraduate social work student at Baylor, and Shannon Que, a graduate student at Abilene Christian University, presented their findings and recommendations during a breakout session at the Together at the Table Hunger conference, sponsored by the [Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty](#).

O’Quin, who completed her research under the direction of faculty adviser Stephanie Boddie, assistant professor of church and community ministries at Baylor, noted teenagers tend to avoid talking about their lack of access to food—or accept help from agencies and institutions in their communities—because of their desire not to stand out from their peers.

Listen to the ‘real experts’

In some instances, teenagers in food-insecure households forgo meals or

share them to ensure their younger siblings have enough to eat, O'Quin reported.

"Effects of food insecurity on teenagers include engaging in risky behavior and transactional dating (trading sexual favors for meals), shoplifting and selling drugs," she said.

In terms of food insecurity's impact on academic performance, hungry teens have difficulty focusing and are more likely to be frequently tardy or absent, she noted.

In McLennan County, where 18.9 percent of individuals are food insecure, O'Quin interviewed a focus group of teens from Waco high schools and surveyed 19 community leaders.

O'Quin presented a series of recommendations, including increased funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and she commended a SNAP outreach program the faith-based non-profit Caritas of Waco conducted in partnership with the Waco Independent School District. In the past five years, 350 McLennan County high school students who are food-insecure or homeless were able to obtain SNAP benefits through the program, which allows them to apply at school.

O'Quin also noted the teens she interviewed offered several innovative ideas such as increasing mentorship programs in schools to break the cycle of poverty, encouraging teens to join after-school programs where food is provided, and encouraging local restaurants and businesses to donate excess food to local pantries or shelters.

"The real experts on food insecurity are the teens themselves who experience it on a daily basis," she said.

Food insecurity among college students



Katie Thompson (2nd from right) with the Center for Public Justice recognized winners of the Hatfield Prize for student-faculty research at Christian colleges and universities. They are (left to right) faculty adviser Stephanie Bodie and undergraduate student Ana O'Quin of Baylor University, along with graduate student Shannon Que and faculty adviser Stephen Baldrige of Abilene Christian University. They are pictured with Jeremy Everett (right), founder of the Texas Hunger Initiative and director of the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty. (Photo / Ken Camp)

In Abilene, Que worked with faculty adviser Stephen Baldrige to examine food insecurity on college campuses. Nationally, about one-fourth of the students at four-year universities and more than half of the students in community colleges experience food insecurity, she noted.

Abilene is home to three private faith-based four-year universities—Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene Christian University and McMurry University—and two community colleges—Cisco College and Texas State Technical College.

In response to reports of students experiencing food insecurity, Cisco College launched Food for Thought, an on-campus food pantry. Several local churches, including Pioneer Drive Baptist, offer free weekly meals to the community, including college students, Que noted.

The Center for Public Justice recognized O'Quin, Que and their faculty advisers as winners of the Hatfield Prize for student-faculty research at Christian colleges and universities. The award is named in memory of Sen. Mark Hatfield of Oregon, and it is made possible through the support of the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The student-faculty research reports are published online [here](#).

This is part of an ongoing series about how Christians respond to hunger and poverty. Substantive coverage of significant issues facing Texas Baptists is made possible in part by a grant from the Prichard Family Foundation.