TEACHING & LEARNING
IN THE TIME OF COVID-19
RESEARCH BRIEF:
LIVING AND LEARNING AT HOME
PART 1

September 23rd, 2020

photo by Julie Ann Matonis, Northside ISD
ABOUT THE URBAN EDUCATION INSTITUTE

OUR MISSION

The Urban Education Institute at UTSA produces scientific research to raise educational attainment, advance economic mobility, and help people achieve their potential in the greater San Antonio region.

We pursue our mission by (1) producing rigorous and actionable analysis that supports education policymaking, program implementation, and philanthropic giving; (2) convening community leaders to address entrenched challenges that harm education and human development; and (3) training the next generation of social scientists and educators to address education challenges through inquiry, analysis, and discovery.
INTRODUCTION

How do you feel when you are hungry? Are you at your best? We all have basic needs that must be met if we are to pursue and realize our fullest potential (Maslow, 1962). This is true for all of us. It is especially true for children because early development affects later development (Heckman & Kautz, 2013).

Today, we are seeing increasing attention given to narrowing the digital divide, as there should be. But just as the pandemic has caused us to recognize that lacking technology is a barrier to learning, we too should recognize how hunger and larger issues of family instability harm a child's growth.

In this third report on teaching and learning during the Spring 2020 pandemic, we present survey research findings that describe the socioeconomic context our public school families lived through. Readers will learn about how 26 percent of families reported being without money to buy food when they ran out, and about how this food insecurity was negatively associated with student engagement. In the end, we will see how vital our public school systems are to bridging divides—not just in technology—but also food, safety, and security.
This groundbreaking, community-wide survey of the most important members of our San Antonio educational ecosystem—students, parents, and teachers—would not have been possible but for the participating school districts, in alphabetical order: East Central, Edgewood, Harlandale, Judson, Northside, North East, and Southwest. An eighth set of schools that partner with traditional school districts known as the Centers for Applied Science and Technology (CAST) Network also participated. We also want to thank the San Antonio Food Bank and the City of San Antonio’s Office of Innovation for informing us about their work to feed families, connect families to the internet, and for responding to our early findings. These partnerships demonstrate that the values of science—such as truth-seeking, honesty, and discourse—make us stronger together. The authors of this research are deeply grateful for their participation.
Many local families struggled with food insecurity and older teen learners in those homes were less motivated and engaged during distance learning.

- 26 percent of students and parents surveyed said they were experiencing food insecurity – food ran out and they didn’t have money to buy more
- Families in each school system surveyed reported having experienced food insecurity, with the highest rates of 49 percent found in Edgewood ISD and 41 percent in Harlandale and Southwest ISDs
- A higher incidence of food insecurity was correlated with higher numbers of children in households
- Food-insecure high school students were less motivated during distance learning. While food-insecure high school students represented 20 percent of all high school students, they represented 65 percent of high school students who said they never turned in assignments
- Food-insecure high school students were also overrepresented among those who said they were never engaged by school lessons. They represented 25 percent of high school students who said they were never engaged by classroom lessons
FOOD INSECURITY

They are symbols of San Antonio’s pandemic spring – aerial photos of a vast parking lot crammed with cars as far as the eye can see. Inside the vehicles, families wait for Food Bank volunteers to load heavy boxes of fruit, vegetables, and frozen meals into their trunks.

Thousands wait at a San Antonio Food Bank distribution at Traders Village in April 2020, a reflection of the economic hardship here. Photo courtesy William Luther/San Antonio Express News
The images by the San Antonio Express-News of the food distribution quickly made national headlines. In normal times, such giveaways draw about 200 families. On this day in April, 10,000 waited in line – a reminder of how unprecedented hard times can impact a city already known as one of the poorest in the nation.

Food insecurity is defined as the disruption of food intake or eating patterns because of a lack of money and other resources. Bexar County’s pre-pandemic rates of food insecurity already were hovering at about 14 percent in 2018. That number doubled by the spring of 2020 and tripled among households with children, according to a study by the Northwestern Institute for Policy Research using the U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Study.

Food insecurity does not necessarily cause hunger, but families in crisis are at high risk for that outcome. Local school districts mobilized quickly during distance learning to distribute to-go meals, but gaps remained. Of those surveyed, 26 percent said they had experienced food insecurity since the pandemic began. Reaching school meals was difficult, many said, because their own transportation was limited and some school schedules for pickup were rigid. Food would run out before money existed to buy more. Close to 50 percent of those surveyed from Edgewood ISD said this was happening regularly at home. Such scarcity has been identified in the scientific literature as a precursor to decreased student learning and school engagement (Ashiabi, 2005). So while much of the talk on distance learning and school reopenings has focused on the digital divide and technology, we must continue to focus on ensuring students’ basic needs are met.
FAMILIES AND FOOD INSECURITY

26% of students and parents said food bought didn’t last and money didn’t exist for more during distance learning.
“All of our bills went up, and we were spending more on food. We didn’t get to benefit from the school meals because they had it at midday until a certain time [of the day], and it didn’t work for our schedule.” – Parent of 1st grader with three children at home

“I couldn’t keep up with groceries because I have all my grandkids living with me, and they go to school and my grocery bill has been wiped [out]. I had to have a gallon of milk and a loaf of bread every day – it’s nonstop.” – Grandparent of 5th grader with more than five children at home
“We were very affected - everyone was at the house... More electricity, more food, more water. We would have to go to the Food Bank when we ran out of food.” – Parent of 3rd grader with five children at home

“I am a small business owner and my business has had to be closed since COVID-19. We are struggling getting food. It is hard because I was one that donated and worked at food banks, and now we need the food.” – Parent of 8th grader with two children at home

“It was hard to get enough food to feed the family. We know the school was delivering food to families, but the school was far away, so we couldn’t go all the time. That was really hard.” – 11th grader
FOOD INSECURITY AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Of all high school students surveyed, 20 percent reported experiencing food insecurity.

- Of those who "always" experienced engaging lessons:
  - Food Secure: 90%
  - Food Insecure: 10%

- Of those who "some" to "most" times experienced engaging lessons:
  - Food Secure: 80%
  - Food Insecure: 20%

- Of those who "never" experienced engaging lessons:
  - Food Secure: 75%
  - Food Insecure: 25%

FREQUENCY THAT FOOD-INSECURE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS REPORTED TURNING IN ASSIGNMENTS DURING DISTANCE LEARNING

Of all high school students surveyed, 20 percent reported experiencing food insecurity.

- Of those who "always" turned in school assignments:
  - Food Secure: 80%
  - Food Insecure: 20%

- Of those who "some" to "most" times turned in school assignments:
  - Food Secure: 69%
  - Food Insecure: 31%

- Of those who "never" turned in school assignments:
  - Food Secure: 35%
  - Food Insecure: 65%
FOOD INSECURITY AND HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS

INCIDENCE OF FOOD INSECURITY RELATED TO NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN HOUSEHOLD

INCIDENCE OF FOOD INSECURITY RELATED TO PARENT EMPLOYMENT
**METHODOLOGY**

**SAMPLING STRATEGY**

We adopted a stratified random sampling scheme to ensure the respective representation of all K-12 students in participating seven independent school districts (ISDs) and CAST Network schools. For the purposes of this section, we use the term “school system” to include the ISDs and CAST Network.

We utilized student directories provided by participating school systems to determine the appropriate sample sizes. This approach enhanced our ability to calculate the weighted average of survey responses within and across school systems. We targeted around 136 randomly selected students to interview in each of the eight school systems. Samples were split proportionally according to the distribution of students by grade.

We interviewed parents of students ages 15 years old or younger, while students 16 or older were interviewed directly. A total of 1,125 parents and students participated in this study, comprised of 884 parents and 241 students from the ISDs, and 104 parents and 36 students from the CAST Network. See figure below for the detailed distribution of the sample across the participating school systems.
OPEN-ENDED ANSWERS

For the student and parent surveys’ open-ended answers, we conducted human-based content analysis to identify the manifest and latent ideas within response data. We developed a coding system per question that was uniformly applied to quantify qualitative data. Researchers discussed their approaches and questions that arose during coding to improve inter-rater reliability.

LIMITATIONS

This study may have two sources of biases stemming from the voluntary nature of study participation. Specifically, respondents voluntarily participated in the study as well as answered the questions. If certain characteristics of the respondents were correlated with survey response rates, our study results should be interpreted with caution.


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ABOUT THIS RESEARCH BRIEF

This research brief was created through the contributions of a team at the Urban Education Institute that included our entire staff, a team of UTSA student field researchers, and through the insights and work of other contributors.

OUR STAFF

Michael Villarreal, Ph.D.
Han Bum Lee, Ph.D.
Nicole Foy
Matt Singleton
Elena Serna-Wallender
Cambrey Sullivan
STUDENT RESEARCH TEAM

Valery Assad Gil  Cheyenne Hall  Josh Peck
Melissa Barrera  Sarah Hamm  Susan Richardson
Joseph Briones  Moises Hernandez  Ruby Rodriguez
Sandra Bustamante  Julia Lopez  Morgan Salari
Elena Caballero  Miranda Martinez  Peyton Spriester
Luisa Castelan  Marc-Anthony Medina  Charlie Rae Sullivan
Kaileigh Castillo  Evan Moore  Glenda Treviño
Bianca Garcia  Danielle Morales  Jordan Weinstein
Alida Gutierrez  Natalie Morales  Clarissa Venegas

CONTRIBUTORS

Sharon Nichols, Ph.D.  Lahnee Paschen
Cathy Green  Julianna Martinez
Kim Kennedy, Ph.D.  Erin Jaques
Melisa Perez-Treviño  Simone Carnegie-Diaz
Lisa Espinoza  Jasmine Victor

CONTACT US
Urban Education Institute
501 W. Cesar Chavez Blvd.
San Antonio, TX 78207
phone: 210.458.3348
e-mail: uei@utsa.edu

FOLLOW US ON FACEBOOK
facebook.com/UTSAurbaned

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@UTSAurbaned