

FOOD INSECURITY AT UNIVERSITY

An UMSU Welfare submission to
Victorian Legislative Council Legal and
Social Issues Committee Inquiry



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FOREWORD

The UMSU Welfare Department recognises that the increasing cost of living has placed unprecedented financial strain on students. The rapid increase in demand for UMSU Welfare services since the beginning of 2024 has highlighted the severity of the issue. In the first semester of 2024, UMSU Welfare served over 6,500 students through Union Mart. This includes students who came through our Parkville store during normal operating hours, those who accessed the Reserve Fund, those who attended our Southbank stall and those who came during public holidays and non-study periods.

Student unions were placed, and so remain, in a perilous position since the 2006 removal of Universal Student Unionism by the Howard Government. The effect of this was to deprive student unions of their independent streams of income and thus render student representatives dependent upon Student Service and Amenities Fees (SSAF). The impacts of these changes continue to be felt on campuses around the country. Student unions no longer have a seat at the table for larger discussions about campus development and as a result, we now have many campuses that prioritise commercial success over the wellbeing and health of students. This report details the extent to which this has harmed students at the University of Melbourne.

The findings from the Cost of Living Crisis Survey presented in this report unequivocally support the stories and experiences we hear from students every day. Not only are students worried about their futures, many are struggling to afford necessities right now. They're rent stressed, skipping meals and living below the poverty line. This is not business as usual. Urgent reform is needed: students are suffering, both physically and mentally. It is the intention of UMSU Welfare to have this report provide the basis for reform on the part of UMSU and the University.

Joshua Stagg and Divyanshi Sati UMSU

Welfare Office Bearers (2024)

Disha Zutshi

President

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that university students in Australia experience food insecurity at higher rates than the general population.¹ Food insecurity was an issue for university students before the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis, especially affecting low-income students, students renting and those receiving government support payments.² The current cost of living, housing crisis and rising tuition fees and student debt, among other things, likely mean that more students are experiencing food insecurity. Tackling food insecurity is essential to make sure that higher education remains accessible to all Victorians.

In first semester of 2024, Union Mart, a food bank initiative of the UMSU Welfare Department, provided over 6500 University of Melbourne students with free groceries, household and sanitary items. However, we recognise that Union Mart is only a band-aid solution to the food insecurity afflicting university students across the country. As such, we welcome the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria and hope that our submission can shed light on the stories of students and inform structural solutions that move beyond charity and food relief.

The data used in this submission was collected as a part of the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) Welfare Department's 2024 Cost of Living Crisis Survey which received nearly 1700 responses from current students (77% international). The overall findings from the survey will be published in the Cost of Living Crisis Report. The report details how students are struggling amid the rising cost of living across areas like housing, health, studies and food insecurity, whilst offering recommendations for reform. The final report will be made available on the UMSU Welfare website in late July.

The experiences of University of Melbourne students detailed in this submission are an example of how the rising cost of living is hurting students around Victoria. Although we focus on how rising prices have affected students' food security, we have included a snapshot of students' mental and physical health, financial circumstances and housing situation. Research from around the world has shown that students don't experience food insecurity in a silo, but also with hardship in other areas of their lives.³

¹ Kent, K., Visentin, D., Peterson, C., Ayre, I., Elliott, C., Primo, C., & Murray, S. (2022). Severity of food insecurity among Australian university students, professional and academic staff. *Nutrients*, 14(19), 3956.

Bennett, C. J., Christian, M., Phan, S., McCabe, M., Cornish, K., & Kleve, S. (2022). Food insecurity during COVID-19: An Australian university experience. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 30(6), e5401-e5411.

Whatnall, M. C., Hutchesson, M. J., & Patterson, A. J. (2020). Predictors of food insecurity among Australian university students: A cross-sectional study. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 17(1), 60.

² Gallegos, D., Ramsey, R., & Ong, K. W. (2014). Food insecurity: is it an issue among tertiary students?. *Higher Education*, 67, 497-510.

³ Broton, K. M., & Goldrick-Rab, S. (2018). Going without: An exploration of food and housing insecurity among undergraduates. *Educational Researcher*, 47(2), 121-133.

Jeffrey, C., Dyson, J., & Scrinis, G. (2022). Hunger for change: Student food insecurity in Australia. *Geoforum*, 136, 186-193.

“Rising prices have squeezed our spending capacity. Along with rising price[s] there is less [work available] causing [a reduction in our income]. As a full time masters student and a mom of a toddler, this rising price has caused mental and emotional pressure to me.

I want to give adequate and balanced food to my child and family, but it is not possible most of [the time]. I have cut off entertainment and we have [reduced] our travel by almost 50%. I travel only when I have to go [to] University and [I try] to do groceries and other shopping on that day so that there is no extra expenses on travel. This puts extra pressure on me and [I] cannot concentrate on my studies well.

This has caused pressure on my husband, he feels guilty [about] not being able to fulfil family needs.” – Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the Cost-of-Living Crisis Survey, we recommend that the State Government:

Campus Food Security

1. Raise awareness of student food insecurity with higher education stakeholders including education institutions and the Federal Government.
2. Work with Victorian higher education providers and student representatives to develop and implement guidelines for affordable, nutritious and sustainable food offerings on campus. This may include a Food Sustainability Ratio which guarantees that at least 25% of retailers at every campus have a caloric and nutritionally sustainable meal available for less than \$5 indexed annually against CPI.
3. Liaise with stakeholders and representatives from Victorian higher education providers to ensure that food security is a key consideration of future campus developments and surrounding areas.
4. Encourage and support student unions and relevant student representative organisations to establish and maintain independent not-for-profit food co-operatives on campuses, as well as to expand their current food relief programs.
5. Encourage large education institutions to introduce a University Nutrition Program which discretely provides students in difficult financial situations and those from equity groups with subsidised, very low cost/free meals on campus.

Housing

6. Repeal section 21 of the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 (Vic), so that students living in university-owned and affiliated student accommodation can receive the same legal protections as renters living elsewhere in Victoria.
7. Introduce protections for students living in purpose-built student accommodation including annual caps on rent increases.
8. Advocate for more university funded housing subsidies for students, especially international students and those with dependents.
9. Raise awareness of student food insecurity with student accommodation providers and liaise with providers to develop in-house food programs.

Transportation

1. Expand student concessions for public transportation to graduate and PhD students and extend the Free Tram Zone to Stop 17 Grant St-Police

Memorial/St Kilda Rd in Southbank to the south, and Stop 1 Melbourne University/Swanston St in Carlton to the north.

Finances

2. Lobby the Federal government for a permanent and adequate increase to the rate of Aus Study, Youth Allowance and Abstudy whilst lowering the age of independence.
3. Lobby the Federal Government to increase the Australia Awards Stipend and that of other Federally funded scholarship programs for international students studying in Australia.
4. Lobby education providers, especially large universities to provide additional financial support and bursaries specifically for international students.
5. Lobby education providers to increase the stipend for PhD students to a baseline of \$40,000 AUD per annum indexed annually with inflation. There should also be additional funding available for PhD students with dependents.

FOOD INSECURITY & THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

Research has frequently linked food insecurity and lower academic performance among university students as well as poorer mental health and sleep outcomes.⁴Students' responses to food-related survey questions show that most students are struggling to access and afford nutritious foods particularly in response to the rising cost of living. Most of the students surveyed are skipping meals, buying less protein and fresh produce, and feel that the quality of their diet is depleting. Survey responses also highlight that the food available on campuses is not affordable for all students and is likely contributing to students' experiences of food insecurity. Close to half of respondents indicated that they go hungry on campus because they are unable to afford a meal.

Our *Campus Food Security* recommendations (1 to 5) pinpoint campuses as key sites of intervention to mitigate student food insecurity by offering affordable, nutritious, socially and ecologically sustainable food to students. They also recognise that many students are currently getting by thanks to the various free food initiatives of student-run organisations. Any campus-based interventions must involve students in decision making, whether that be subsidised cafeterias or food co-operatives. The popularity of UMSU's Union Mart demonstrates the importance of programs led by students.

Skipping Meals

When asked whether they have had to skip meals due to rising prices, over 55% of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed.

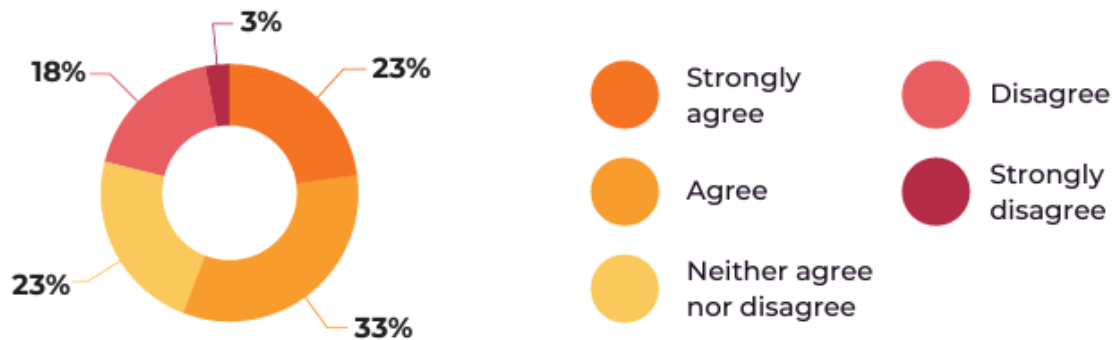
Weaver, R. R., Vaughn, N. A., Hendricks, S. P., McPherson-Myers, P. E., Jia, Q., Willis, S. L., & Rescigno, K. P. (2020). University student food insecurity and academic performance. *Journal of American college health, 68*(7), 727-733.

Nagata, J. M., Palar, K., Gooding, H. C., Garber, A. K., Whittle, H. J., Bibbins-Domingo, K., & Weiser, S. D. (2019). Food insecurity is associated with poorer mental health and sleep outcomes in young adults. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 65*(6), 805-811.

Coffino, J. A., Spoor, S. P., Drach, R. D., & Hormes, J. M. (2021). Food insecurity among graduate students: Prevalence and association with depression, anxiety and stress. *Public Health Nutrition, 24*(7), 1889-1894.

Raskind, I. G., Haardörfer, R., & Berg, C. J. (2019). Food insecurity, psychosocial health and academic performance among college and university students in Georgia, USA. *Public health nutrition, 22*(3), 476-485.

💬 I often have to skip meals due to rising prices.



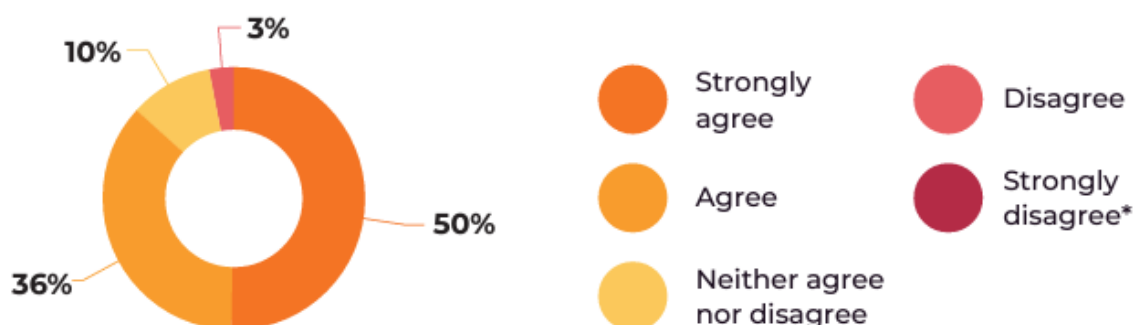
*Note: Segments representing less than 1% are too small to be visible on the chart.

'I often skip meals due to rising prices' – Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne

Changing Shopping Habits

Over 85% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that they have removed items from their normal grocery shop due to rising prices. When asked what items they were removing, the most common categories included fresh food and proteins.

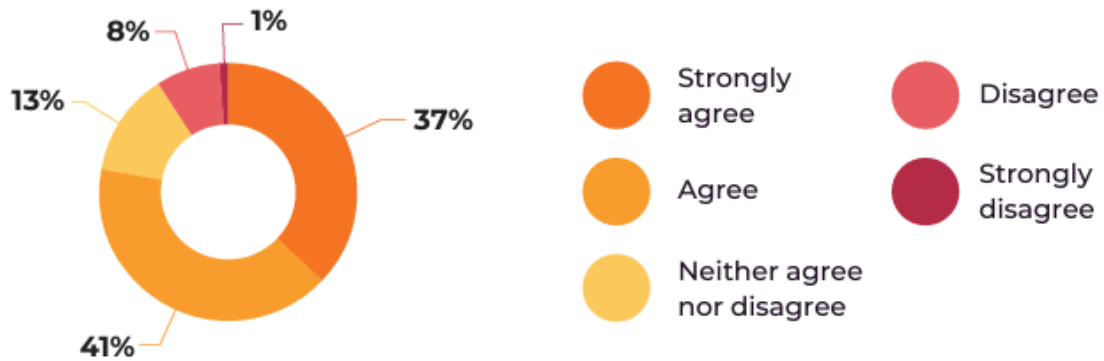
💬 I have found myself having to remove items from my normal grocery shop due to rising costs.



A Less Balanced Diet

When asked if they agreed with the statement that their diet was less balanced due to rising food prices, over 77% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed.

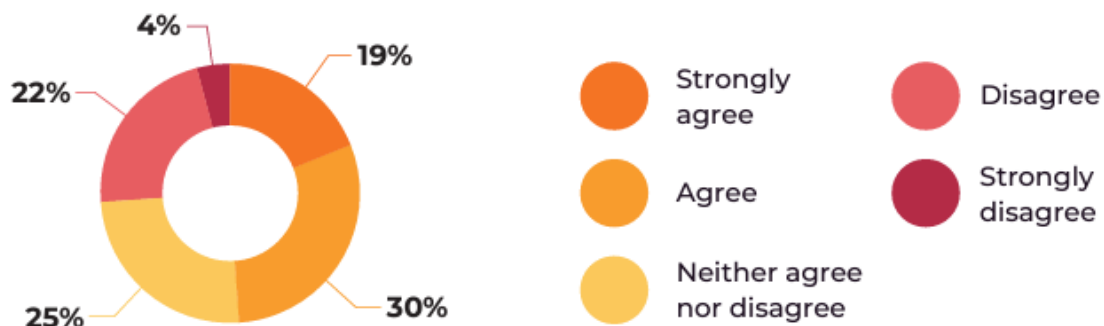
My diet is less balanced due to rising food prices.



Hunger on Campus

When asked whether they had to deal with hunger in class because they could not afford a meal on campus, nearly 50% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed.

I have to deal with hunger in class because I cannot afford a meal on campus.

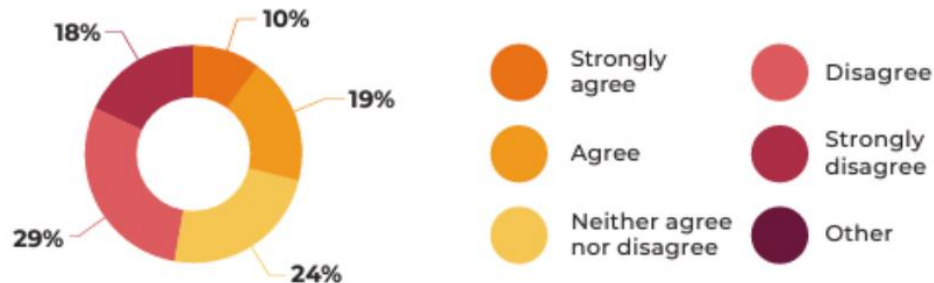


Drivers: Unaffordable Food on Campus

There is significant concern amongst students that the availability of affordable food options on campus has failed to remain a relevant consideration in the development of the university. There must be a proportional number of affordable options relative to more expensive retailers on campus. Further, there must be tenancies made available to not-for-profits. With the above in mind, UMSU Welfare is recommending the implementation of a ratio that requires 1 in 4 of food providers on campus to offer a meal that is equal to or less than \$5 (indexed annually) per serving. This meal must be equivalent to at least $\frac{1}{3}$ of the estimated daily caloric intake of an average adult and must be nutritious. The

best way for this to be implemented appears to be establishing not-for-profit eateries on campus. The FSR provides a sustainable means of scaling up and positively developing our campuses whilst still ensuring that there are affordable options for all students.

I think that there are affordable options for food on campus.



PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

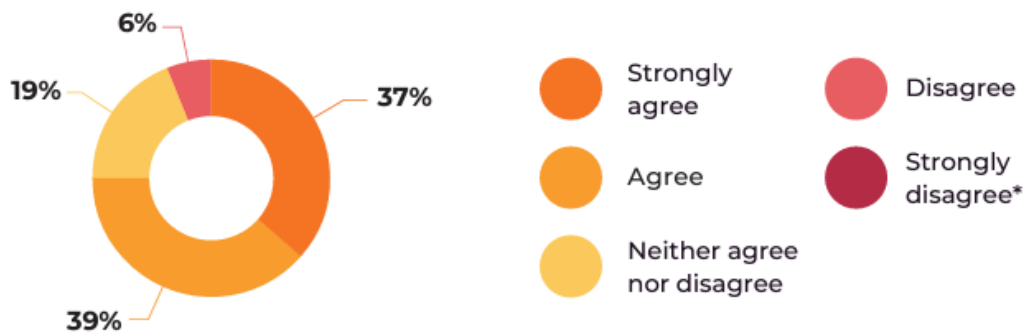
“So much insecurity, having to stretch meals, not getting the right nutrition which has led to health problems” - Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne

Although we did not ask students how food insecurity had directly affected their mental and physical health, the survey responses indicate that the rising cost of living (including of food and other necessities) is negatively impacting students' health.

Mental Health

When asked if they agreed with the statement that the current cost of living crisis was having a negative impact on their mental health, 76% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed.

🗨️ The current cost of living crisis has had a negative impact on my mental health.

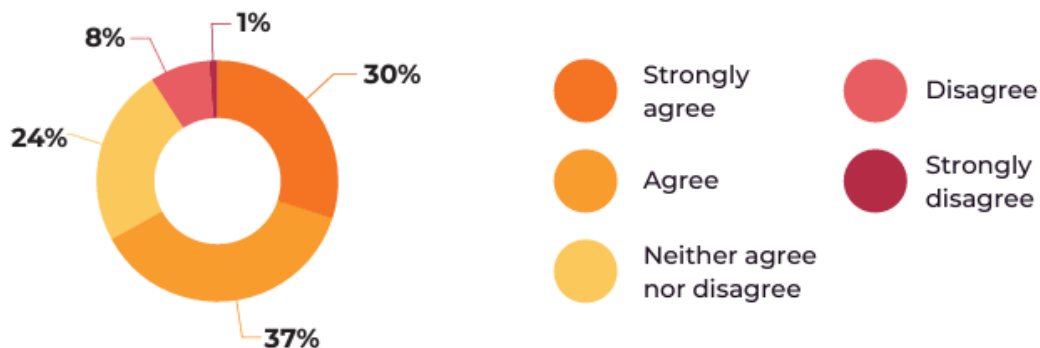


*Note: Segments representing less than 1% are too small to be visible on the chart.

Physical Health

65% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the cost of living crisis had had a negative impact on their physical health.

🗨️ The current cost of living crisis has had a negative impact on my physical health.



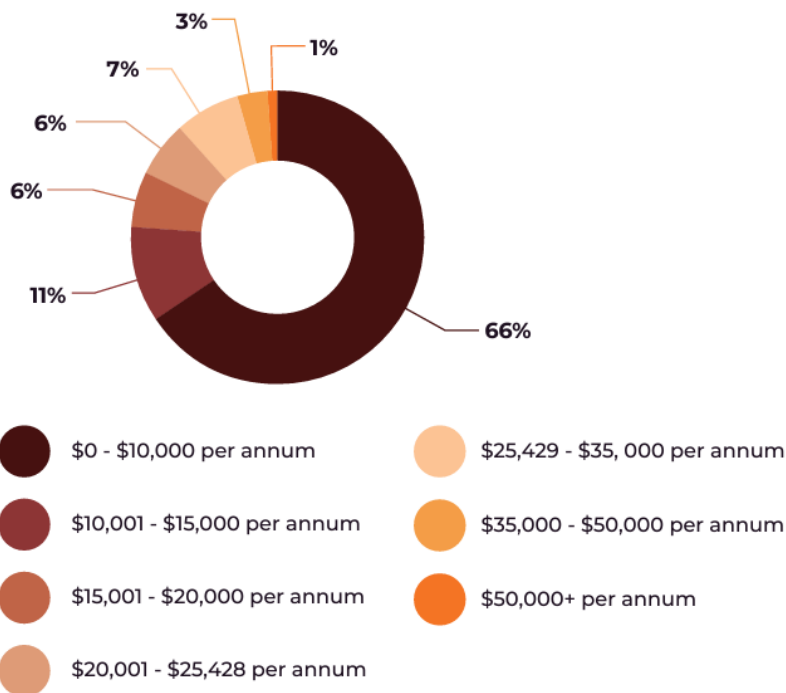
DRIVERS: POVERTY AND HARDSHIP

Responses from the survey point to insufficient income and housing stress as some of the underlying drivers of food insecurity among students. Our recommendations (6 to 14) for housing interventions, extending public transport concessions and better financial support for students, especially for international students, respond to students' ongoing experiences of poverty and hardship.

Income of Students

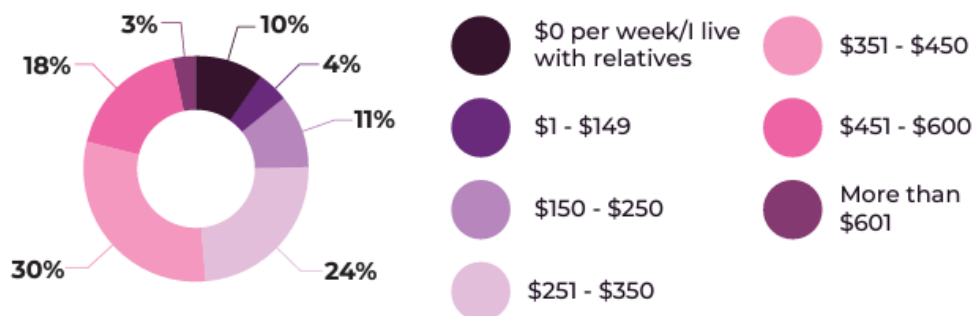
The vast majority (65%) of respondents indicated that they fell into the income bracket of less than or equal to \$10,000 per annum. Given that the poverty line in Australia is an annual income of at or below \$25,428, nearly 90% of respondents reported annual incomes at or below the poverty line.

🗨️ **What income bracket do you fall in?**



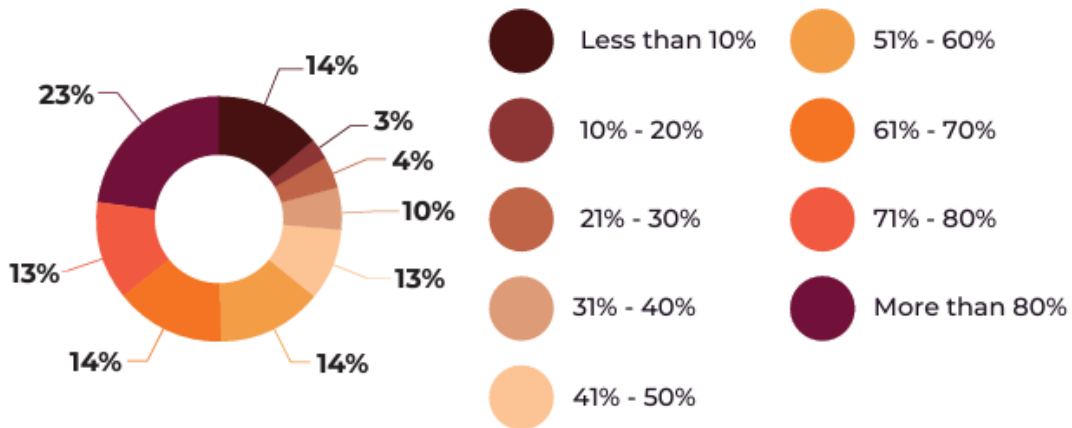
Housing

🗨️ **How much do you pay in rent (per week)?**



The majority of respondents are paying between \$351 and \$450 a week in rent.

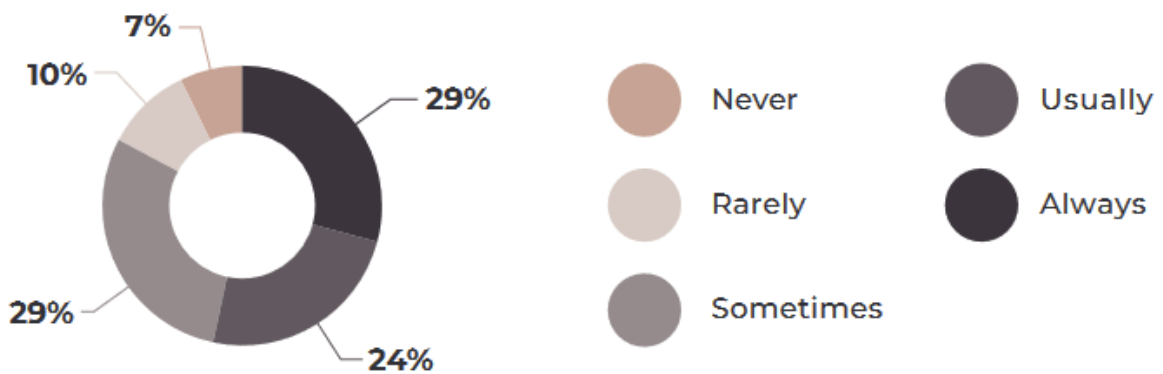
How much of your weekly income do you spend on rent?



When asked what percentage of their income they spend on rent, 87% of respondents indicated their rent is more than 30% of their weekly income which classifies them as experiencing 'housing stress'. Concerningly, close to one quarter of respondents said that they spend more than 80% of their income on rent.

Health Care and Medical Costs

I avoid medical appointments or picking up prescriptions due to concerns over their cost.



29% of students stated that they always avoid medical appointments or picking up prescriptions due to concerns over the cost. 24% stated that they usually do so, and an additional 29% stated that they sometimes do so.

STUDENT FOOD INSECURITY: IT'S ABOUT MORE THAN FOOD

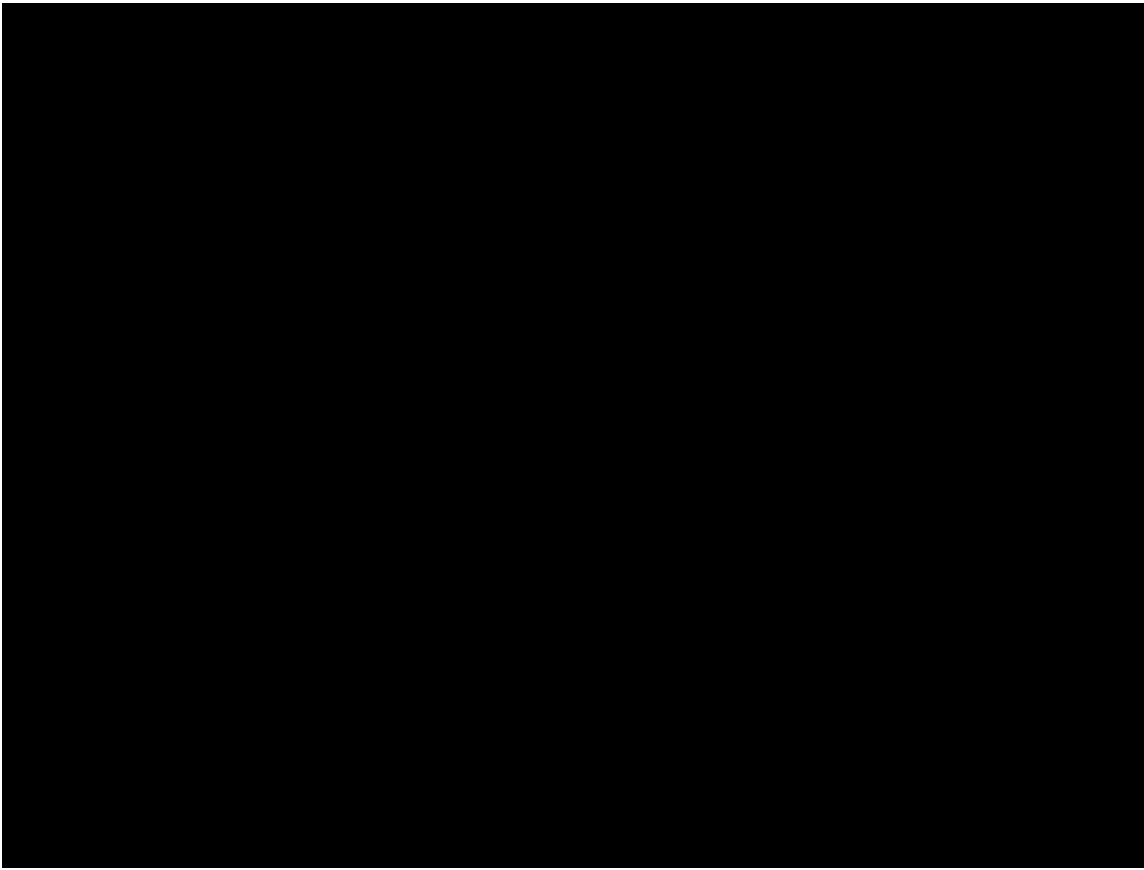
Like many other Victorians, higher education students are being affected by the rising cost of living. Food insecurity is symptomatic of the wider challenges facing these students as they navigate insufficient income and inadequate financial supports, a lack of affordable housing, rising debt and tuition fees, the pressures of paid employment and caring for dependents all whilst trying to manage their studies. These struggles are especially acute for international students who are often living away from home without family and a social support network.

If Victoria wishes to remain '*The Education State*' then the State Government must work closely with education providers, student organisations, student-housing providers and the Federal Government to support students and mitigate food insecurity. Campus-based food interventions are key, as well as those that make the lives of higher education students across the State easier.

UMSU WELFARE

UMSU Welfare is a department of the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU). We run a series of initiatives designed to improve student welfare on campus. Given the current cost of living crisis, our volunteer run foodbank, Union Mart, and our free meals have become our paramount priorities. Union Mart has developed into an institution with hundreds of volunteers serving over 6500 volunteers in the first semester of 2024. We run four days per week at the Parkville campus and one day per week at the Southbank campus.

We comprise of two elected Office Bearers, Joshua Stagg and Divyanshi Sati, and a series of seven elected Welfare Committee members.



The queue to Union Mart

APPENDIX

Terms of reference

That this House requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 14 November 2024, on the impacts and drivers of, and solutions for, food security in Victoria, including but not limited to —

(1) the impact of food insecurity in Victoria, on —

(a) physical and mental health;

(b) poverty and hardship; and

(2) options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.