

Community Fact Sheet

Assessing Health, Well-Being, and Food Insecurity Among 5th-7th Grade Students

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Volume 4, Issue No. 1

Who Are They?

In September, 2012, a team of trained interviewers administered a comprehensive survey to 334 5th-7th grade students attending Owl Creek School in Fayetteville, Arkansas. With nearly 70 percent of students eligible for free and reduced lunch, the survey was interested in examining children's health, well-being, their social relationships, and food insecurity.

The final sample was composed mostly of 6th (37%) and 7th graders (40%). The survey reveals some notable diversity among students attending Owl Creek; females accounted for 54 percent of the population, nonwhite students made up 48 percent, and 21 percent self-identified as being of Hispanic origin.

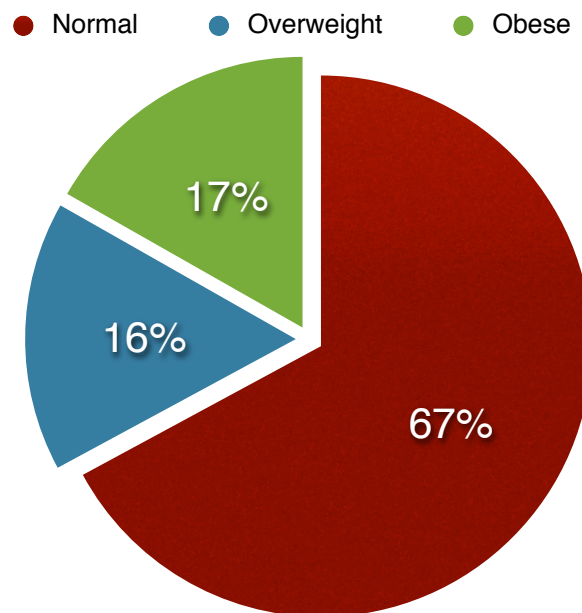
Weight Status

Many students and parents worry about their weight; nutrition and exercise habits during adolescence have consequences for health in adulthood. What and how much students eat continues to be an important research question as well as a focus of policy discussions in schools. We report in Figure 1, weight status outcomes based on height and weight of 5th-7th grade students. One-third of students were either overweight or obese; that percentage is higher than the average 11 year-old in both Arkansas and the United States.

Additional data from the survey suggests students barely get the minimum required weekly exercise (less than half reported doing strenuous exercise only 1-3 times a week) and fruit and vegetable intake (one-third of the students surveyed reported not eating a green salad at all in the past week).



Figure 1. Student Weight Status (BMI Categories)
Owl Creek 5th-7th Grade Students

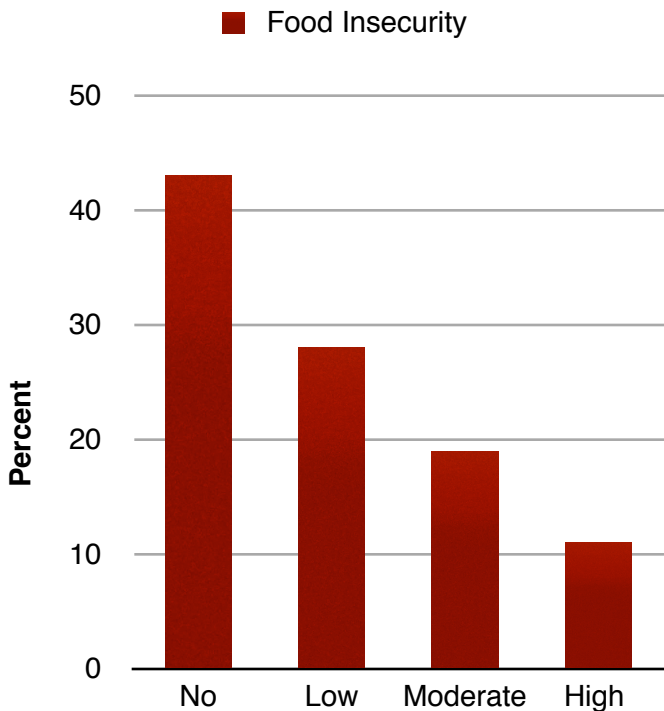


Source: Owl Creek Survey: Nutrition, Food Insecurity, and Health Among 5th-7th Grade Students (2013).

Poverty and Food Insecurity

Knowing already that 70 percent of Owl Creek students were eligible for the free/reduced lunch program, and that approximately 56 percent of the Fayetteville School district was eligible for the same program, we were particularly interested in measures that assessed direct experiences with hunger or food insecurity above and beyond income and/or poverty. By asking students directly, “Did you worry that food at home would run out before your family got money to buy more,” or, “Have your meals been smaller because your family didn’t have enough money to buy food,” we get a more complete picture of food insecurity as experienced by students. Overall, five separate questions on food security were developed from the USDA food security module and combined to make a food security scale ranging from zero to ten. Based on this scale, students were categorized as having no food insecurity to high food insecurity. As seen in Figure 2, the majority (57%) of students experienced some level of food insecurity. Moreover, nearly half of all students reported experiencing hunger at least a few times in the past week.

Figure 2. Student Food Insecurity
Owl Creek 5th-7th Grade Students

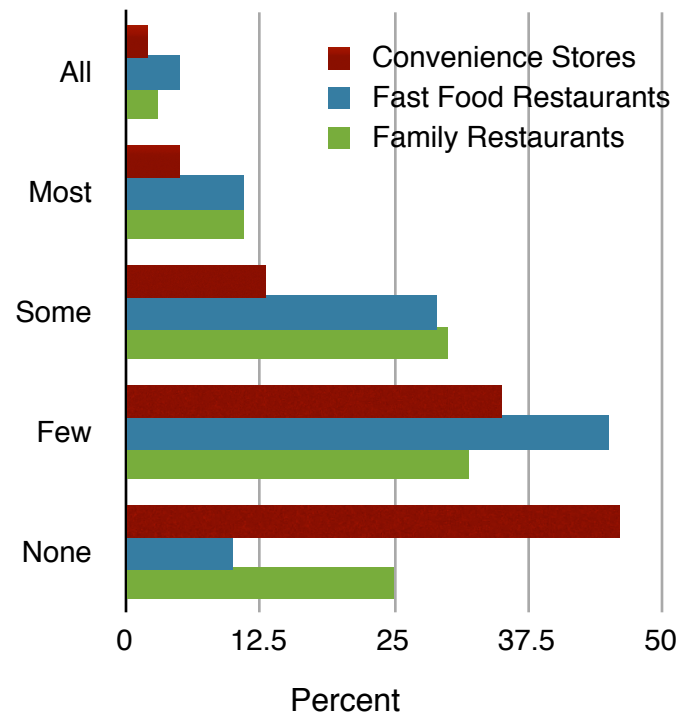


Source: Owl Creek Survey: Nutrition, Food Insecurity, and Health Among 5th-7th Grade Students (2013).

While food insecurity clearly is a health risk and a challenge for schools and families, just as important but for a different set of reasons, we also were interested in how much students reported “eating out”. As seen in Figure 3, while a sizable number of students did not report eating out at convenience stores/gas stations, nearly 20 percent reported eating meals their most, some, or all of the time.

Likewise, a larger percentage of students reported eating their meals at fast food restaurants; 16 percent of students said they ate most or all of their meals at fast food places. This finding is extremely important to understanding health and nutrition issues among adolescents. Obviously if students are eating unhealthy when they eat out, trying to change their diet, or health/nutrition by altering policy that impacts students by what is in the cafeteria, seems to be an uphill battle. Student’s health and nutrition is obviously impacted greatly by what happens at home. Clearly, an important part of healthy development is directly related to food security as well as an increase in the availability of healthy foods and snacks outside of the school setting. It is not just how much food, but what kind of food students have access to.

Figure 3. Where Students “Eat Out”
Owl Creek 5th-7th Grade Students



Source: Owl Creek Survey: Nutrition, Food Insecurity, and Health Among 5th-7th Grade Students (2013).