

Mental Health Outcomes for California Community College Students Experiencing Unmet Basic Needs

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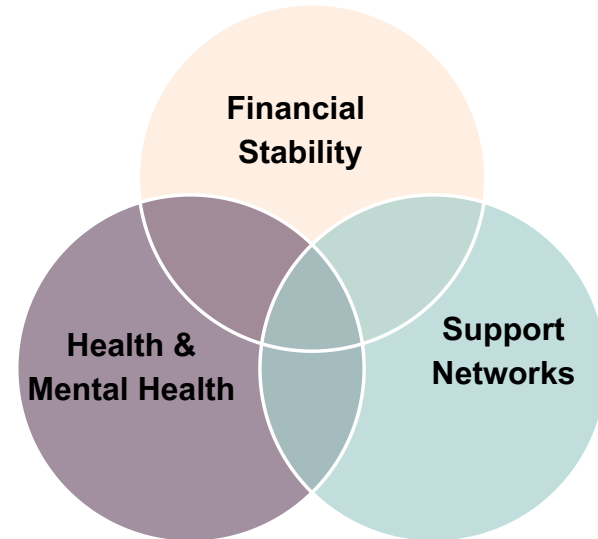
INTRODUCTION

In this brief, we examine findings from fourteen California community colleges (CCCs) that completed the Healthy Minds Study (HMS) survey in Spring 2022. We present findings on student mental health as it relates to basic needs such as financial security, food security, and social connections. Our findings illustrate the overlapping elements of the student experience and support the importance of coordinated and collaborative action to support student well-being.

BACKGROUND

The CCC system is working to shift the burden of organizational navigation from students to the institution through the Social Determinants of Educational Success framework put forth by the CCC Chancellor's Office (BOG Learning Session, 2021). The framework focuses on upstream solutions to assuage the development of basic needs insecurities in the first place in three areas: financial stability, support networks, and physical and mental health (Ruan-O'Shaughnessy et al., 2022). This framework is supported at the institutional level by the Guided Pathways, which seeks to remove systematic obstacles students encounter, implement institutional change, re-evaluate the foundational understanding of a student-centered approach, and provide holistic resources to support students academically and non-academically (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2024).

This work is made possible by the passing of AB 132 in 2021-2022, which legislated CCCs to establish a single point of contact for basic needs, supported by ongoing funding of \$30 million and one-time funding of \$100 million to address food and housing insecurity (Ruan-O'Shaughnessy et al., 2022). Institutions are encouraged to act holistically and allocate funding to complement or enhance existing resources (Ruan-O'Shaughnessy et al., 2022). Thus, designing basic needs services and operations in partnership or collaboration with student health centers is an opportunity to create a truly integrated student-centered ecosystem that responds to the overlapping needs of CCC students.



The Social Determinants of Educational Success Framework

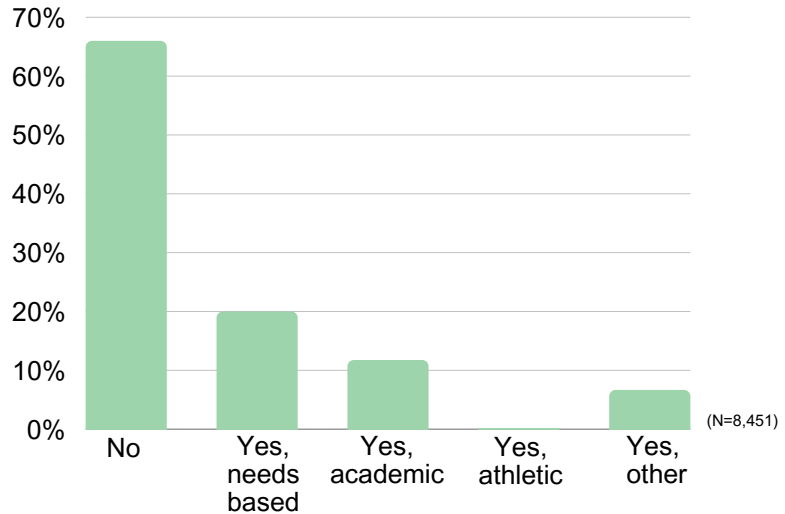
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NEW SURVEY FINDINGS FROM THE HEALTHY MINDS STUDY

Financial Stability

First-generation college students have diverse challenges to overcome while attending college, one of which is financial stability, as they typically come from low-income households. Of the CCC students surveyed (N=8,793), 75% are first-generation college students. However, only 20% of students received a needs-based scholarship from their school, and 66% did not receive any type of scholarship from their institution (Figure 1).

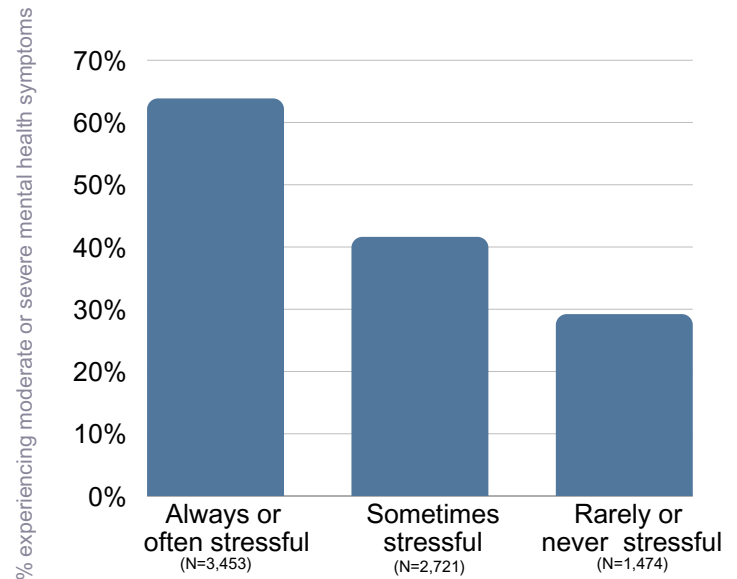
Figure 1: Institutional Scholarship Funding



Did you receive scholarship funding from your institution?

Almost half of students (45%) describe their current financial situation as always or often stressful. Consistent with the broader literature, our findings show that mental health symptoms are worse for students who struggle with financial insecurity. For example, among students with a stressful financial situation, 64% also report moderate or severe symptoms of depression or anxiety, compared to 29% of students who do not report a stressful financial situation (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Mental Health Symptoms by Financial Insecurity

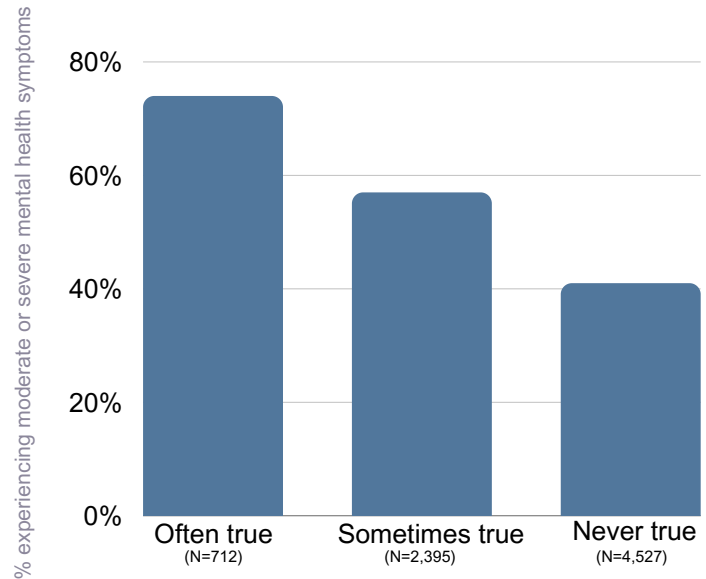


How would you describe your financial situation right now?

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Moreover, 40% of all students report often or sometimes being worried about running out of money to buy more food in the past 12 months. Of students who are food insecure, 74% report moderate or severe symptoms of depression or anxiety compared to 41% of students who are food secure (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Mental Health Symptoms by Food Insecurity

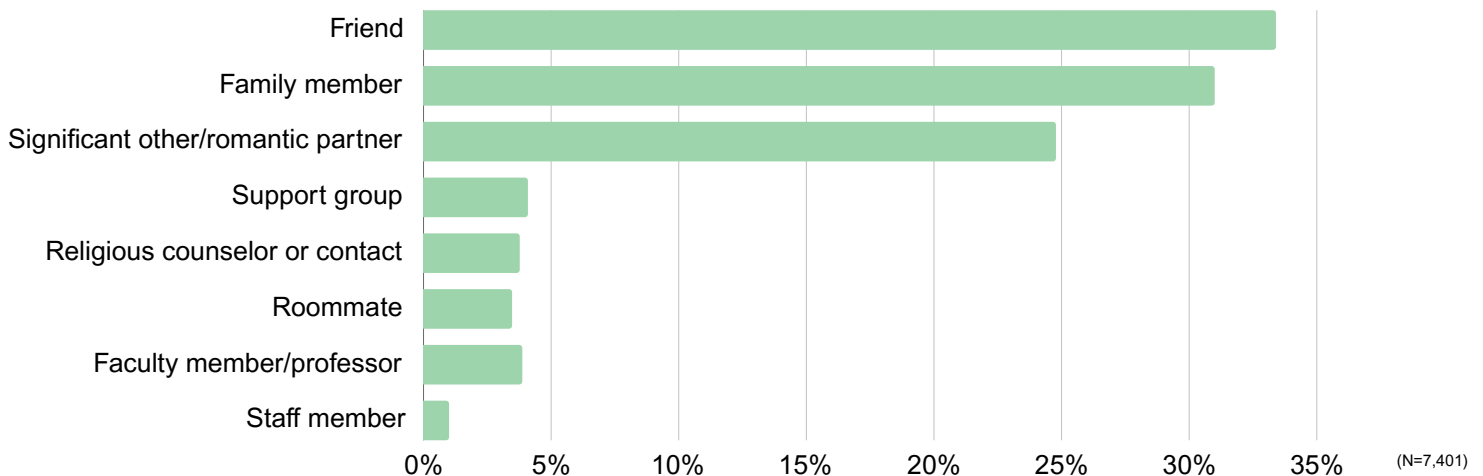


Within the past 12 months I worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.

Support Networks

The HMS provides unique insight into the social networks students leverage for their mental health support. For instance, when asked whom they received support from for their mental or emotional health, 33% of students received support from a friend, 31% from a family member, 4% from a faculty member or professor, and 1% received support from a staff member (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Sources of Mental or Emotional Support in the Past 12 Months

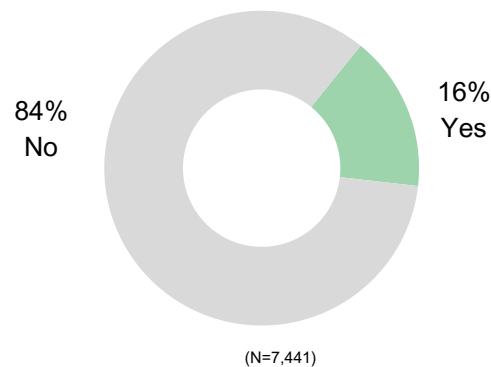


In the past 12 months, have you received support for your mental or emotional health from any of the following sources?

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Sixteen percent reported speaking to academic personnel regarding mental health problems affecting academic performance during the school year (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Percentage of All Students Who Spoke with Academic Personnel Regarding their Mental Health

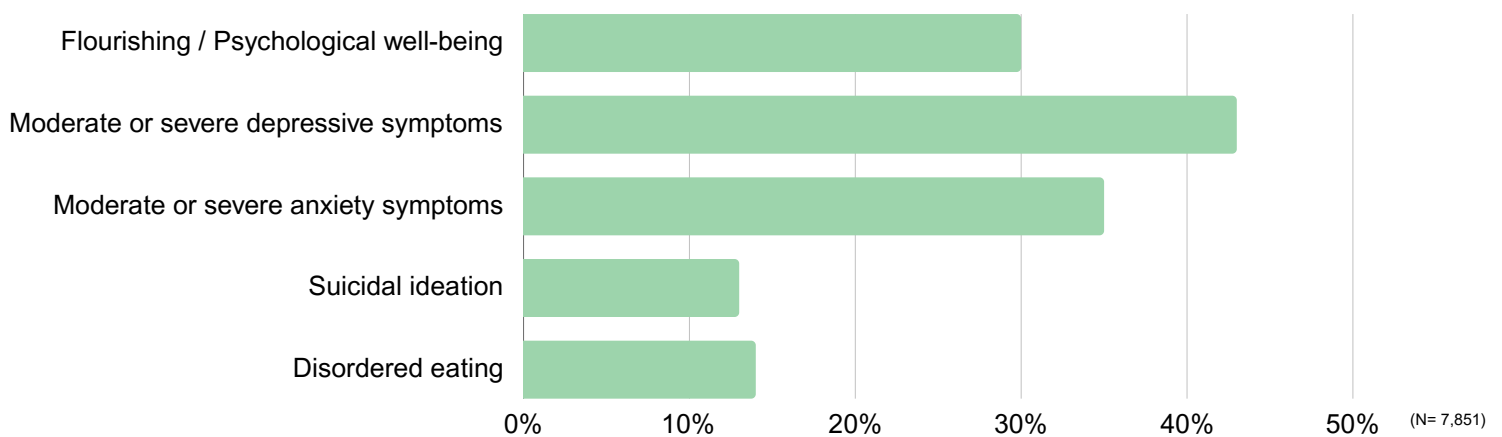


During this school year have you talked with any academic personnel about your mental health problems that were affecting your academic performance?

Health & Mental Health

Among all students, only 30% report flourishing (an overall measure of psychological well-being), while 43% of students report symptoms of depression, 35% report symptoms of anxiety, 13% report suicidal ideation, and 14% report symptoms of disordered eating (Figure 6).

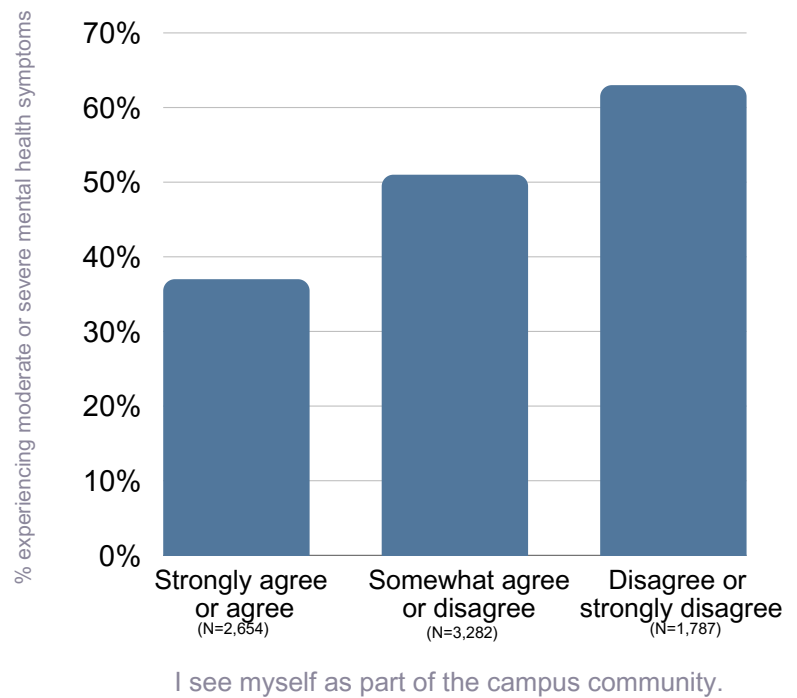
Figure 6: Prevalence of Mental Health Symptoms Among All Students



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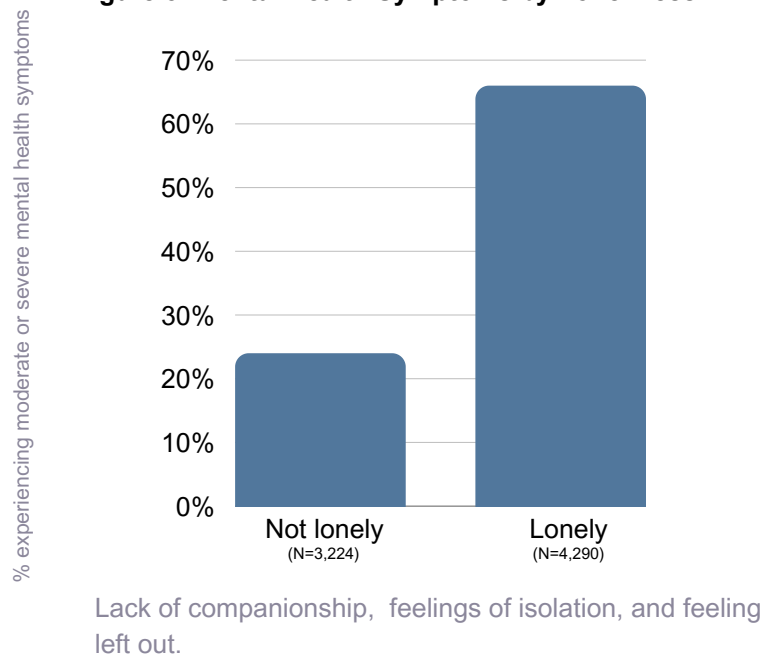
When asked about sense of belonging, only 34% of students perceive themselves as part of the campus community. Among students who don't feel part of their campus community, 63% report moderate or severe mental health symptoms compared to 37% of those who do feel a sense of belonging on campus (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Mental Health Symptoms by Sense of Belonging



Also, 57% of students report loneliness—experiencing a lack of companionship, isolation, or feeling left out. The most striking finding is the prevalence of students with moderate or severe mental health symptoms among those experiencing loneliness: 66% compared to 26% among those who are not lonely (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Mental Health Symptoms by Loneliness

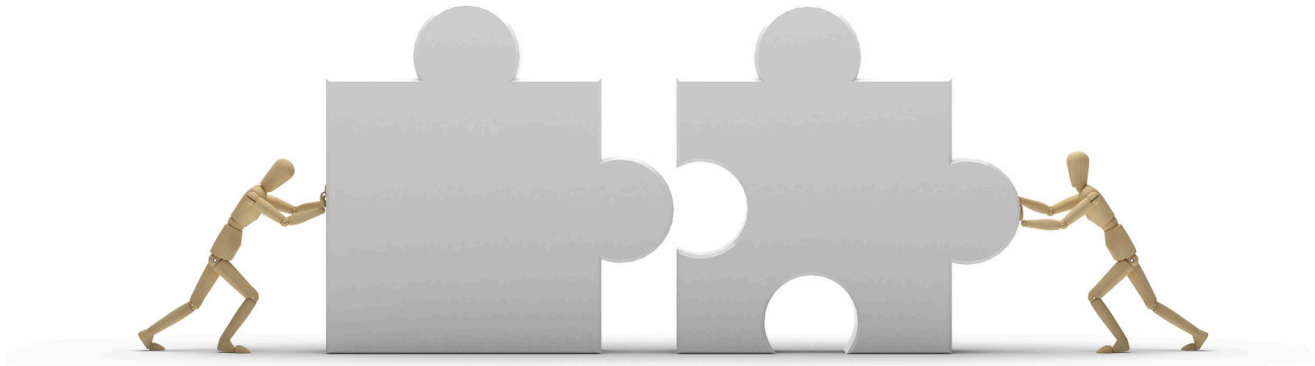


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PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Our data highlights not only the co-occurrence of unmet basic needs and mental health symptoms but also that mental health symptoms are more severe for students with unmet basic needs. These data are also supported by recent research that describes a connection between food and financial insecurity, and poor mental health outcomes. Food and financial insecurity are associated with greater odds of experiencing depression, anxiety, and loneliness, as well as poor physical health and low GPA (Leung et al., 2021; Oh et al., 2022; Pourmotabbed et al., 2020). Moreover, students experiencing multiple insecurities (food, financial, and housing) are 4.65 times more likely to experience depression or anxiety compared to their peers not experiencing any of these insecurities (Leung et al., 2021).

One way to shift burden is by recognizing and responding to the relationship between basic needs and mental health among college students. As part of the overarching goal to shift student burden, institutions have an opportunity to develop an integrated and holistic effort to address basic needs and mental health in an equitable manner. For example, combining basic needs and mental health screening tools will help reach a wider segment of the student population more efficiently in order to identify students with high needs; it also presents a more collaborative approach between the basic needs program and student health services. Community colleges should also consider replicating a mental health navigator program, a workforce development program where community college students are trained to provide support to their peers in transitioning from campus-based mental health services to community-based mental health services and other basic needs.



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