

# Assessing Food Security at NIU

Authors: Lexie Williams, Dr. Kristen Borre, and Dr. Courtney Gallaher

Department of Public Health, College of Health and Human Sciences, Northern Illinois University



Northern Illinois University

## Introduction

### Background

- Previously, NIU was only able to provide support to students who were experiencing a food crisis on a case-by-case basis, as the student expressed their need.
- Huskie Food Pantry and Communiversy Gardens are the University's proactive attempts to keep students from ever reaching this crisis point, and an avenue by which the University hopes to help in reducing the number of students who are facing food insecurity.

### Literature Review

- 1,882 responses from 4 IL universities- 484 from NIU. Of the NIU students, 40.9% exhibited high food security, 22.1% marginal food security, 18.6% low food security, and 18.4% very low food security. This study found significant correlations between food insecurity and GPA, financial support level, race, and employment status.
- 3765 (2-year and 4-year) students- 22% had very low levels of food security that qualify them as hungry. Food insecurity was more prevalent among students of color and for first-generation students. Among food insecure students alone, 64% were housing insecure (had difficulty paying rent, mortgage, or utility bills), of which, 15% experienced homelessness. These students reported that hunger or housing problems had an impact on their education, specifically not buying required textbooks, missing classes, or dropping classes. Employment or having a meal plan did not eliminate the threat of food insecurity.
- Lack of data on NIU's population
  - Demographic makeup
  - Level of food insecurity
  - Coping strategies
  - Underutilization of current pantry

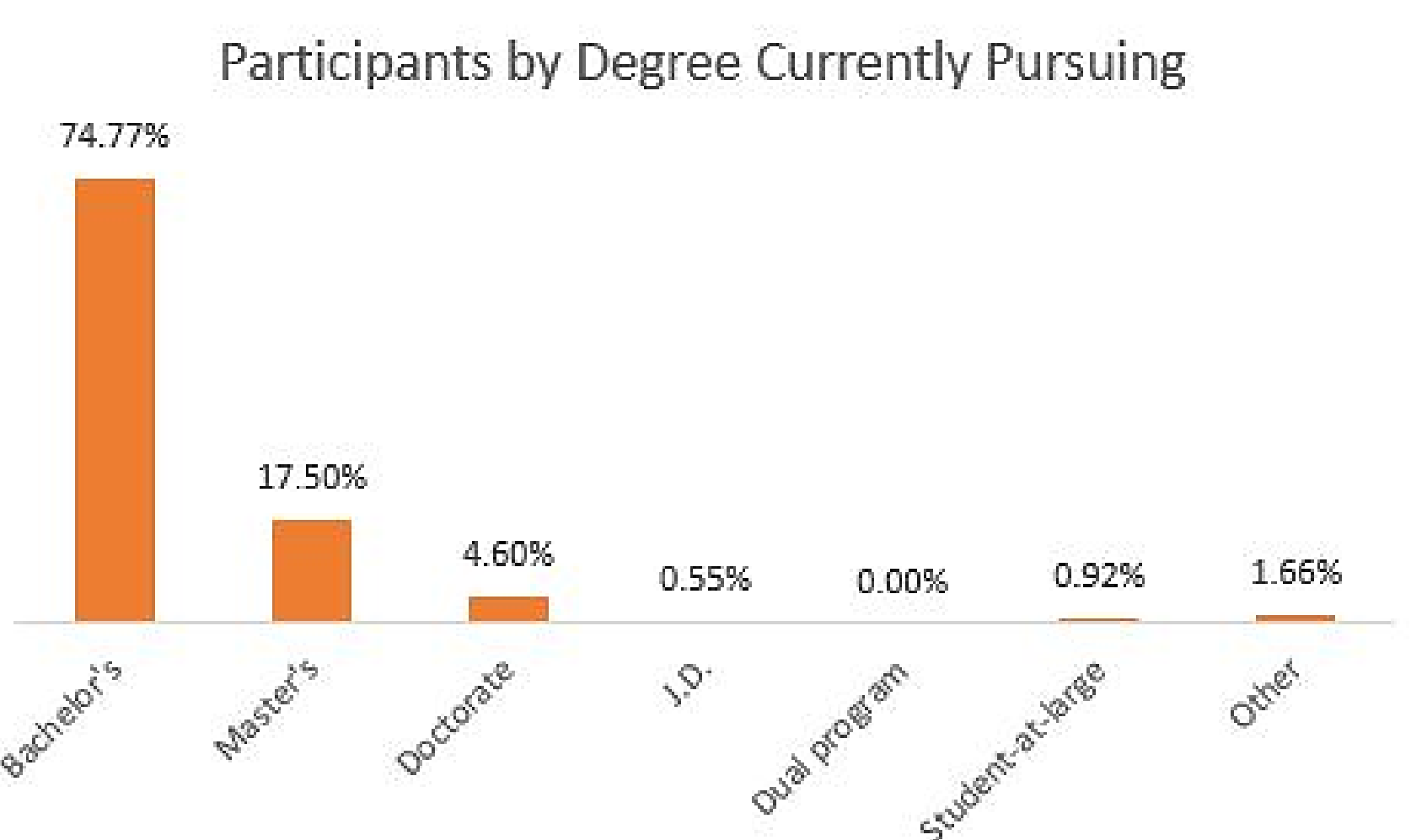
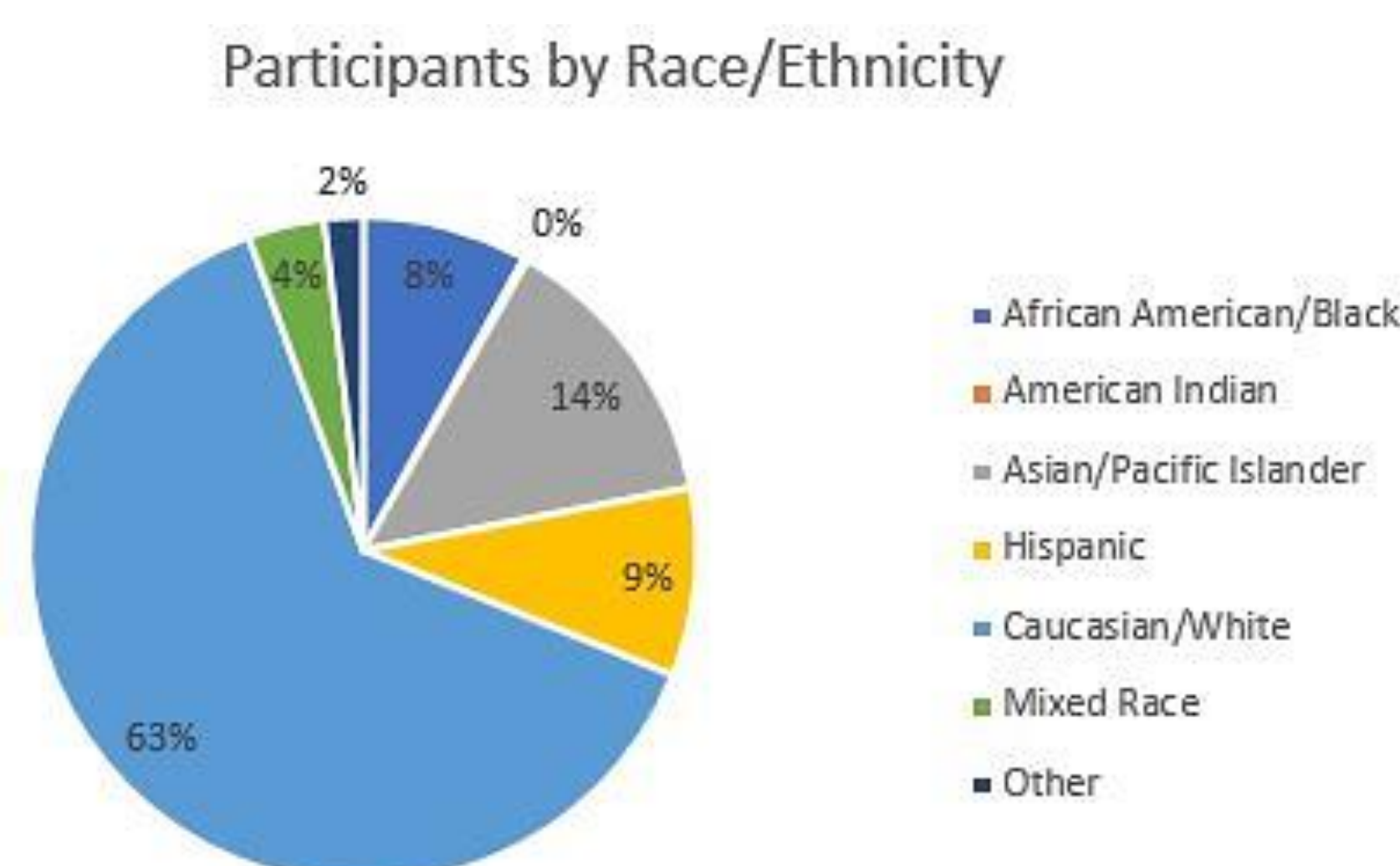
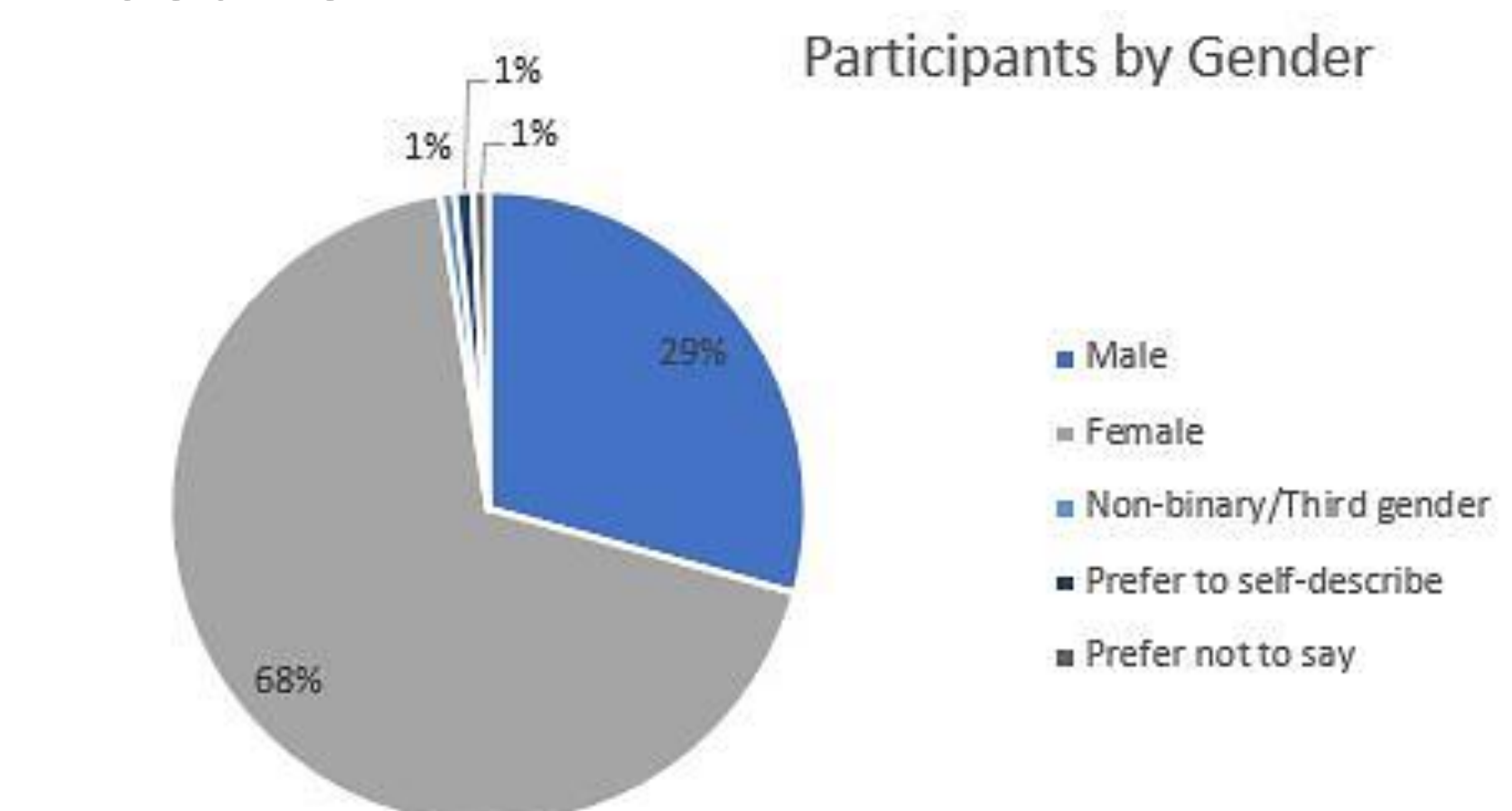
## Research Questions

- What does a food insecure student at NIU look like?
- How many food insecure students are there?
- How do students experience different levels of food insecurity?
- Do the students utilize the Huskie Food Pantry? Why or why not?
- What other external resources do the students utilize, what are their coping strategies, and why?

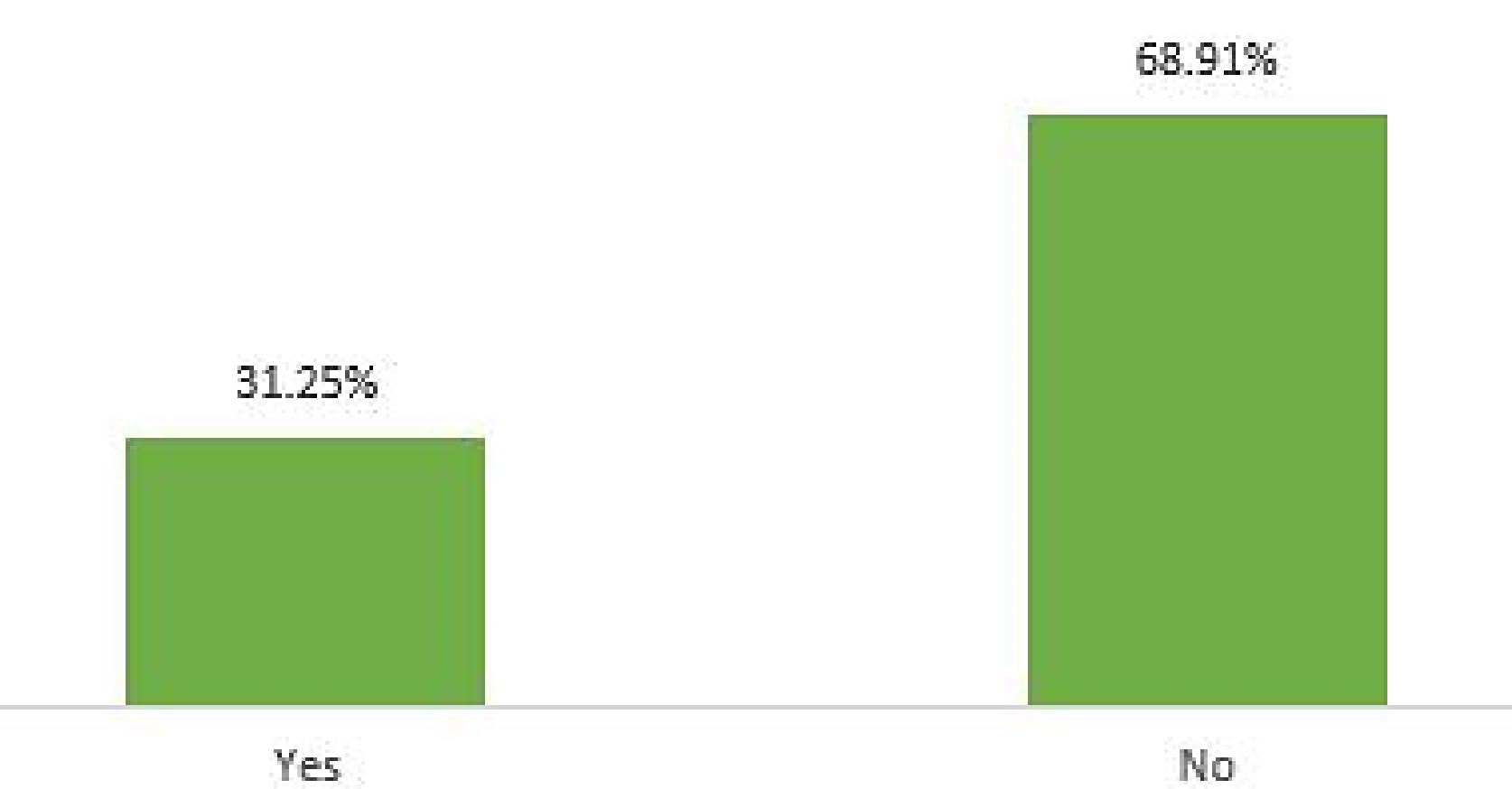
## Methods

- Observation of students at the Huskie Food Pantry
- Qualtrics survey program with ~53 questions sent through several campus-wide venues
- USDA food security module
- Hypotheses regarding level of financial support, employment, residence status and location, ability to prepare meals and cook, access to transportation, familiarity with food pantries and assistance programs, amount of time spent at NIU, race, and GPA
- Incentive- bags of groceries randomly drawn for 16 participants, worth \$50, \$75, or \$100

## Results

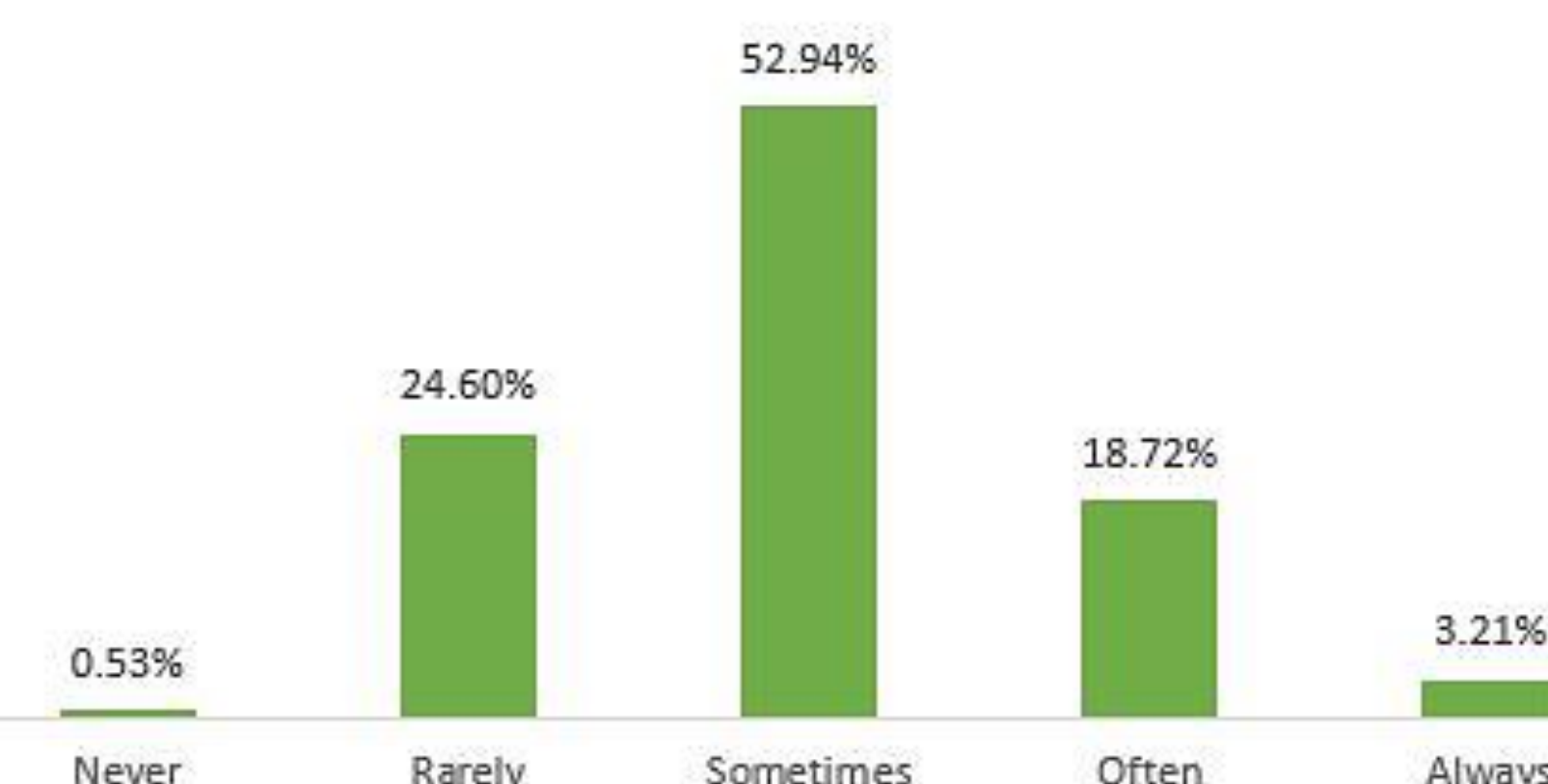


In the last 9 months, did you or other adults in the household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

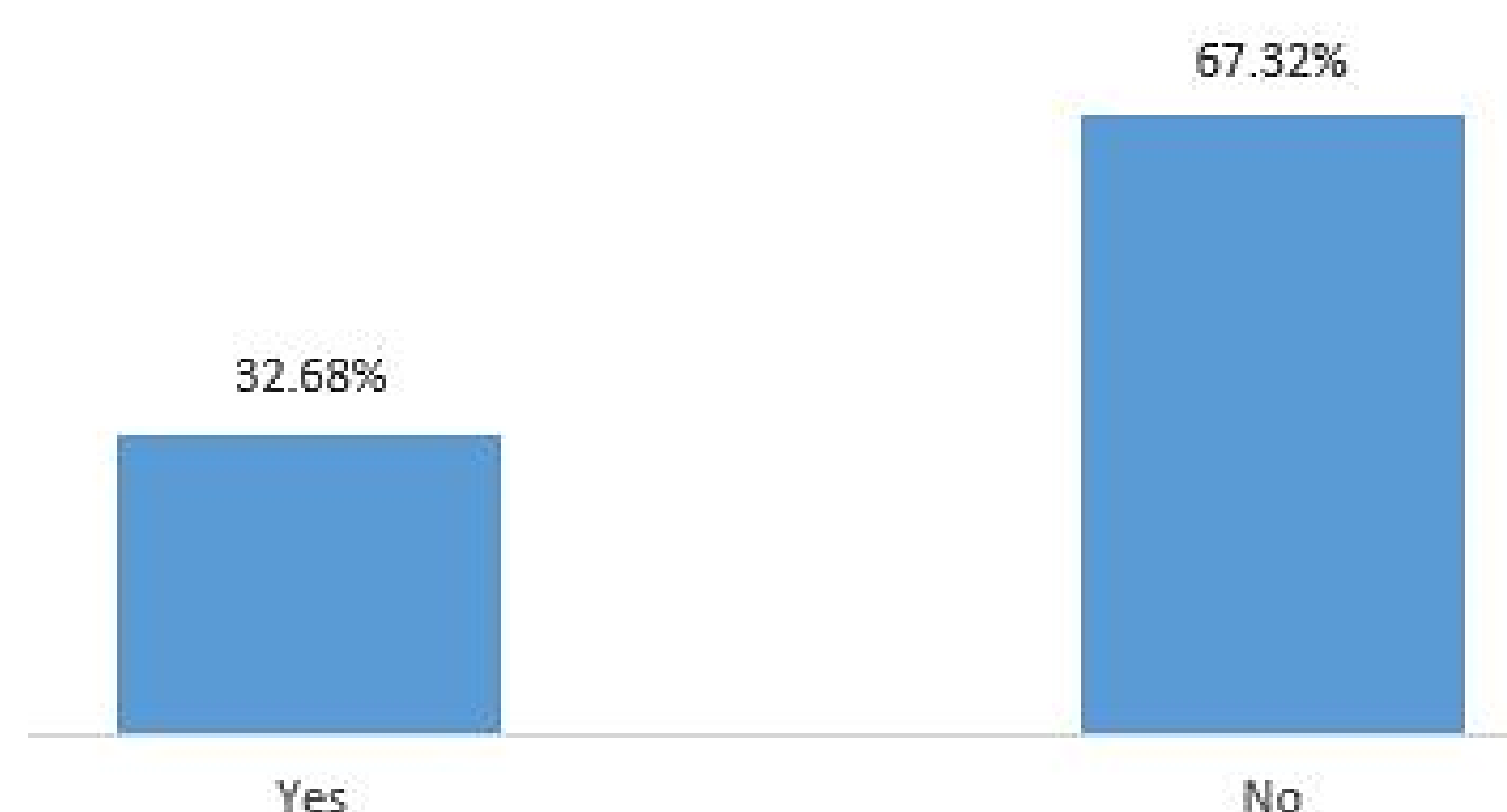


## Results

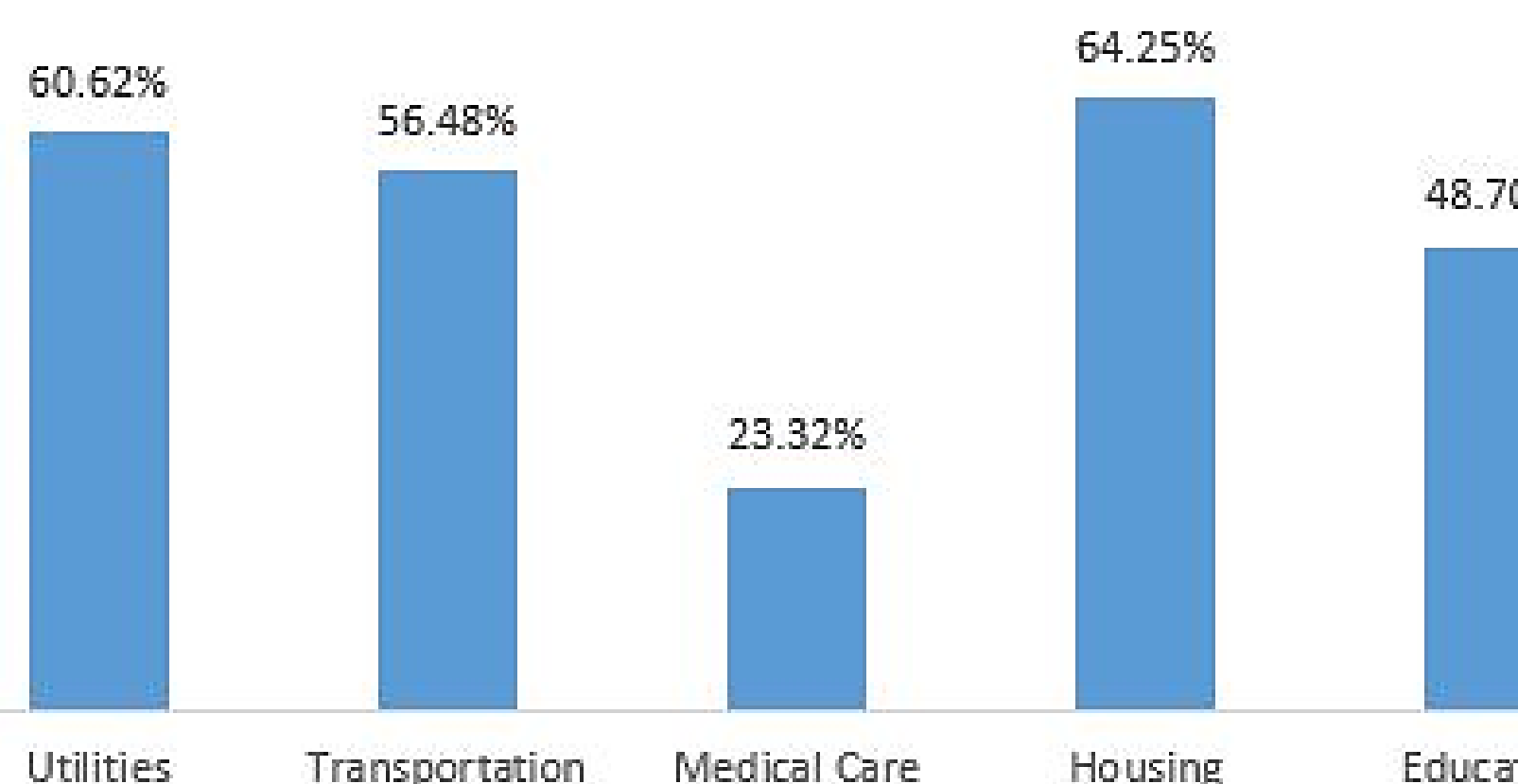
If you cut the size of your meals or skipped meals in the past 9 months due to lack of money, how often?



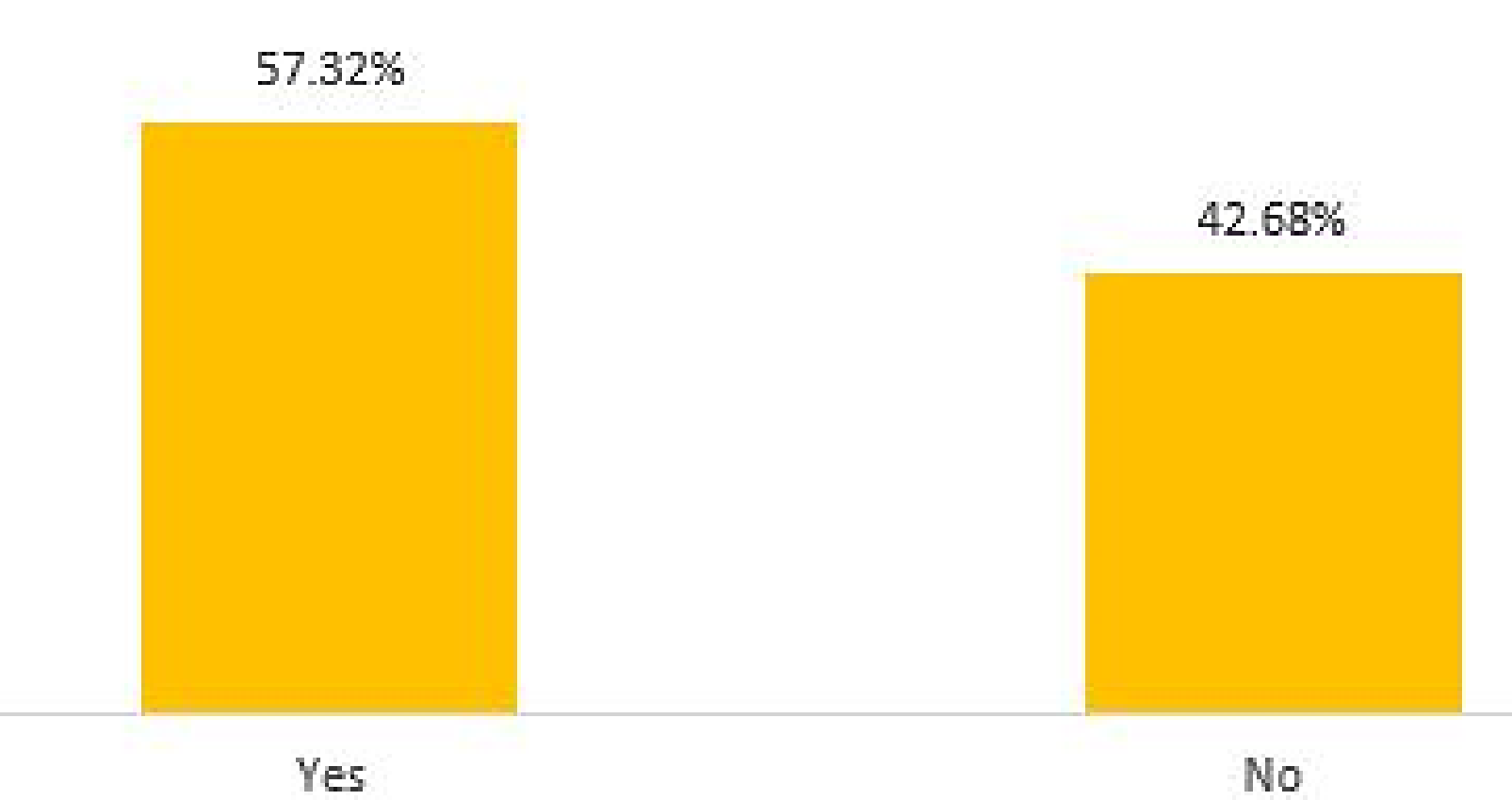
In the last 9 months, did you ever have to choose between buying food and paying for another major expense?



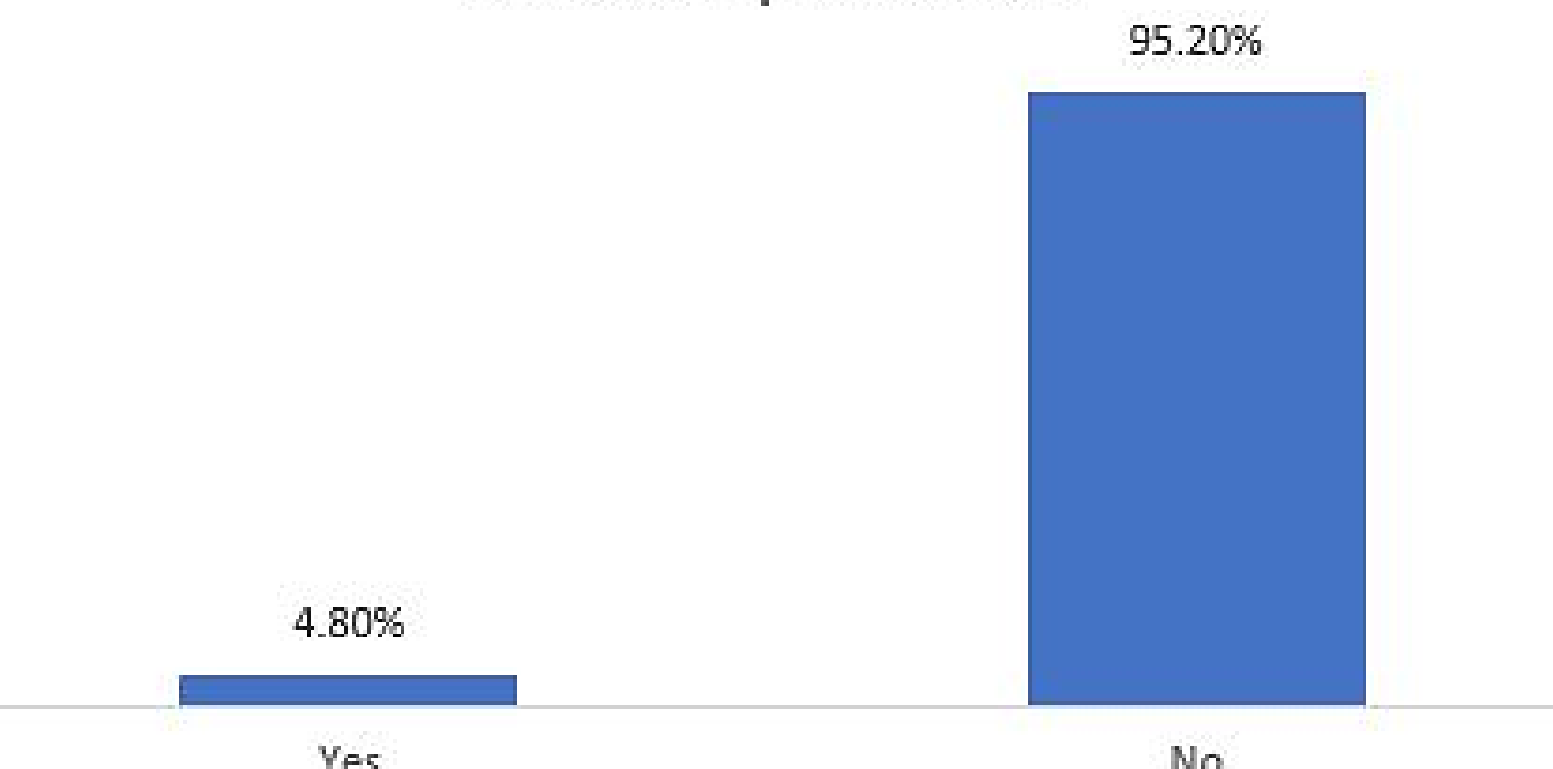
If you ever had to choose between buying food and paying for other major expenses, what did you pay for? Select all that apply.



Do you know of any food assistance programs available on NIU's campus or in the surrounding area (i.e. food pantries, soup kitchens, etc.)?



Are you currently enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or receiving food stamp benefits?



## Discussion

- Food insecurity can negatively affect academic performance due to poor cognition, health problems, stress, and class absenteeism
- Improving food security is an important issue for the university to address
- Student strategies for coping with food insecurity may interfere with their ability to study and be adequately engaged in the community
- NIU prides itself on fostering student academic success, but it may be significantly limited by food insecurity and hunger

## Conclusion

- Food insecurity is a problem among NIU students
- Costs of housing, utilities, transportation, and even education are major budget competitors with food
- Government programs, as well as community services, may be underused by students
- Findings support providing a weekly food pantry as a supplemental resource for students and to develop other methods for assisting both emergency food supplies and regular food supplementation for optimal nutrition of the student population
- Survey is still in progress- these are preliminary findings until the minimum sample size is achieved and the sample is representative of the student body
- Correlations will be run and tested for associations in the future

## Limitations

- Minority responses currently slightly underrepresented
- Some students may hesitate to share sensitive information on the internet

## Acknowledgments

Collaborators:  
Liz McKee (Huskie Food Pantry coordinator), Lisa Cumings (Registered Nurse Educator at Kishwaukee Hospital Community Wellness Department)

Funding Sources:  
Live Healthy DeKalb County, Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning (OSEEL), College of Liberal Arts and Sciences