

Study reveals mass homelessness, hunger among California State University students

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The California State University (CSU) system released a study last month that documented the rise of hunger and homelessness among the student body. The study, which can be accessed [here](#), reported that of the 474,600 students spread across 23 campuses, 8 to 12 percent are homeless, and 21 to 24 percent go hungry.

If anything these figures, scandalous as they are, are an underestimation. The CSU system is the first public university to study this issue, which has gone largely unreported in the corporate media. Due to the stigma attached to identifying oneself as homeless and hungry, many students do not report their problems to the right authorities and do not know where to turn. The term “starving student” has almost normalized the trend.

In many of the schools, there exists no support for students in either housing or food. Less than half of the CSU schools offer food and housing programs, and only 15 percent are actively reaching out to students in need.

The study, which is only in its preliminary stages and will be conducted over two years, questioned 92 students and four focus groups at different campuses about their food and housing situations. College staff and faculty were also asked about their awareness of homelessness and hunger among students. The study notes that no research was done to examine the retention rates among impoverished students who go on to graduate.

Students were asked their degree of the food insecurity, ranging from having enough money for food, skipping meals, or being unable to eat balanced meals. They were also asked how often they worried about these things, ranging from “always,” “sometimes,” “rarely” or “never.” In a random sample of 4,945 CSU Long Beach students, 21 percent and 12 percent stated they had issues with stable housing and hunger, respectively.

Students were also asked the “places you may have slept at night if you did not have a stable place to live in the past 12 months.” The list of responses included

temporarily living with friends, relative or other people that that were not parents and “couch surfing.” At least 46 percent of respondents experienced this while many others reported living in a car, tent, park, bus or train station, abandoned building, motel, camper, shelter or transitional housing or an independent living program.

Not surprisingly, students who experience hunger and homelessness to whatever degree reported increased stress and trouble studying while managing their college and personal life. As one student, Yvette, told the study, “I feel like once I get my bachelor’s under my belt, I can just keep moving forward. Inside I think I’m falling apart.”

Another student, Nikki, told the study she felt the campus staff did not understand her housing needs. She spoke with a residential life staff member about having nowhere to go once the dorms closed and was told it would not be “fair” to others if she were allowed to stay in the dorms.

A staff member also told the study how sympathetic teachers react to hungry and homeless students on a case-by-case basis, often relying on their own funds to help: “A lot of these conversations take place inside our office with the door shut. I’ve seen over and over again the staff members take their own personal money and many times hundreds of dollars, try to eliminate the food crisis or you know, whatever they can do. It’s not really talked about.”

Nationally, the number of students facing hunger and homelessness is unknown and is largely unreported or underestimated. It is significant that the preliminary study done at CSU found “middle income students who had not previously experienced poverty as also experiencing basic need issues due to the high cost of living in California.”

The US Department of Education estimated that 56,588 students nationally and about 10,000 students in California identified as “independent homeless youth” on their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

in 2013-14. No doubt, this a gross underestimation since many students are either unaware of the designation or do not want to identify as homeless, or become homeless afterwards.

Many students, of course, do not know where to turn to or if help is available at their school. Due to state budget cuts and years of underfunding, school programs that would offer free meals or housing are often the “best kept secret” on campus and are not widely known. The study also noted that roughly 2 million students in California reside in households that qualify for food stamps in 2014.

The cause of widespread hunger and homelessness among student youth is not difficult to determine. The authors of the study were forced to admit only the most obvious: lack of affordable housing and “prohibitive” food stamp requirements.

California is indeed one of the most expensive places to live in the United States. Combined with that is also the long-term decline of jobs that provided decent wages in the state and nationwide. Students going to college now can only find part-time, temporary work, which hardly keeps up with the cost of living.

The Obama administration in close collaboration with Democratic Governor Jerry Brown have together slashed billions from higher education and social services like food stamps and homeless shelters. Individual schools are now required to meet the flood of demand with barebones and inadequate programs, if they exist at all.

Adding insult to injury, student youth are asked not only to study and pass their classes, but to hold down a job to cover tuition and other costs that are not covered by grants, scholarships and student loans. It is an outrage that so many cannot, and many more do not know, where their next meal is coming from or where they will spend the night. All of this in the richest state in the richest country in the world.



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