

One in eight community college students in the United States are homeless

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31 March 2017

A new study by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab has revealed that about half of community college students in the United States, which make up 46 percent college students in the country, do not have consistent housing and that 13 percent are homeless. In absolute terms, this means at least one million people trying to receive postsecondary education do not have a roof over their heads.

These results confirm and expand upon previous studies that have looked at college student homelessness, including earlier work by the HOPE Lab and studies done by the College and University Food Bank Alliance.

This estimate is an order of magnitude higher than the official homeless statistic of the US, which is 0.5 percent of the population, and more than twice the rate of youth aged 10-19 which face homelessness at least once during a year, which is just under five percent. It is also more than 29 times the official student homelessness rate recorded by the Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA), which is the only federal body that collects data on homeless students.

In order to clarify the disparity between the official statistics and the HOPE Lab survey, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to the Wisconsin HOPE Lab founder, Sara Goldrick-Rab. She noted that “The FAFSA is notorious for undercounting homeless students. First, students have to fill out the FAFSA, which many do not. Furthermore, since a homeless student counts as being financially independent, and thus is eligible for more money, FAFSA requires that they fill out a large amount of paperwork, essentially to prove that they are homeless. Since we just asked the students themselves, we captured a much better picture of the problem.

“Even our results, however, are undercounting the problem. Since it’s a voluntary survey, we are going to

miss some people. We also do not count things like couch surfing as being homeless because that’s often considered something which college students just ‘do’. As a result, we include that in our housing insecurity statistics, which includes about half of all community college students.”

The latest HOPE Lab survey is the most widespread study of homelessness amongst college students and, according to the research done by the authors, is likely the only study that looks specifically at the plight of community college students.

One of the few comparable studies was done by the California State University (CSU) system, which included more students but only looked at California schools and achieved its estimates based on interviews with CSU staff, faculty and administrators rather than asking the students directly.

In contrast, the Wisconsin HOPE Lab sent a survey to more than 750,000 students across the country with a monetary incentive to garner participation. The final survey response was 33,934 students, making it the largest national study which focuses on food and housing insecurity among college students to date. While the nature of the study does not immediately lend itself to broad generalizations, the agreement between this study and all other studies looking at hunger and homelessness on US campuses suggests that the data collected do represent trends throughout all 50 states.

One thread which supports this hypothesis is that housing insecurity, which includes the inability to regularly pay utilities or rent or the need to move frequently as well as those without a permanent place to live, is not a problem isolated to urban or high-poverty community colleges but a largely uniform problem across the areas studied. Rural and urban

community college students are equally likely to be housing insecure, but homelessness is actually higher for those students living in cities (15 percent) than those living in suburbs (14 percent), rural areas (11 percent) and small towns (9 percent).

Moreover, the data collected show that housing insecurity is unrelated to things like eligibility for Pell Grants or immigration status.

Of students ineligible for Pell Grants, 12 percent were homeless, compared to 16 percent for those who did receive a Pell Grant. The difference in homeless rates between US citizens and permanent residents was less than one percent. And while students who are African American or Hispanic both were overrepresented among homeless undergraduates in the study, the largest single racial category among homeless community college students in the study is non-Hispanic white.

Even the cost of attendance, which includes tuition as well as food, room and board, books, supplies and transportation, does not greatly affect the rates of housing insecurity. The community colleges studied with the lowest cost of attendance (\$11,934 per year) had a housing insecurity rate of 50 percent while the most expensive colleges (\$26,563 per year) had a housing insecurity rate of 46 percent.

The one factor that the study did find that impacts the homelessness rate is whether or not a given student was a former foster youth. Almost 30 percent of community college students among this demographic who were surveyed are homeless.

Similar to the previous studies, which looked primarily at the levels of hunger amongst college students, the current research shows that working or receiving financial aid does not alleviate the stress of finding adequate housing.

More than 40 percent of homeless students have a job, and more than half of those work between 20 and 40 hours per week. One-third of homeless students are receiving student loans. And, in another indicator of the financial distress among these students, one-sixth of homeless students are getting through college through credit card loans.

There is also little federal assistance for homeless students. To quote the report, “among students experiencing housing insecurity or even homelessness, less than 13 percent received any form of assistance

with housing costs, and only about six percent got assistance with utilities. Even though 28 percent of students in this study have children, and of those 63 percent were food insecure and almost 13 percent were homeless, barely five percent received any child care assistance. Instead, the most common forms of support these students received were tax refunds (likely from the Earned Income Tax Credit) and Medicaid or public health insurance (e.g., via the Affordable Care Act).”



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