

Poverty among Los Angeles community college students reaching crisis levels

Glenn Mulwray
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One in every five of the Los Angeles Community College District's (LACCD) 230,000 students are homeless and nearly two thirds can't afford regular meals. These are the results of a fall 2016 survey of LACCD's nine campuses conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison and released earlier this year. More than 6,000 students took part in the survey and reported crisis levels of social neglect related to the high cost of living in Los Angeles.

In regard to housing, 19 percent of those surveyed are or were recently homeless. Eight percent had been thrown out of family homes; 4 percent had been evicted from rental housing; 3 percent were living in shelters; 6 percent had resorted to living in abandoned buildings, cars or other locations not meant for habitation; and 11 percent did not know where they would be sleeping on a night-to-night basis.

Since 1980, median real rent for an apartment in Los Angeles has increased by 55 percent to \$2,511, while income levels increased only 13 percent in that time. Nationally, the decade with the greatest rent-wage discrepancy was 2000-2010, when rents increased 12 percent while incomes actually declined 7 percent. These are some of the most striking indications of the destruction of living standards resulting from the 2008 global recession.

As of 2017, Los Angeles has the highest rent burden of any city in the country, with the average tenant paying 48.7 percent of their income to rent. The city's large and overwhelmingly working class black and Latino communities spend an astronomical 63 percent of average household income on rent.

Recent Los Angeles City College graduate, Andre Medina, reported, "When I started at LACC a few years ago I moved into a studio across from campus for about \$800 per month. A new tenant I spoke with last

week is now paying \$1,200 for a similar unit. Living near campus has become impossibly expensive."

The Los Angeles County Housing Authority is responsible for the disbursement of Section 8 vouchers, the federal government's housing assistant program. As of April this year the Housing Authority had a waiting list of 40,000 people, with an average wait of 11 years before receiving a voucher. Because of the backlog they have stopped accepting new names for the waiting list.

The Trump administration plans to cut \$6 billion from the 2018 budget of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which would include a \$974 million reduction in funding for Section 8 vouchers.

According to various studies, homelessness in Los Angeles County has reached epidemic proportions, with estimates in the range of 47,000-58,000 homeless on any given night. (See: "Homelessness sharply increases in Los Angeles County")

The housing crisis forces residents to make difficult budgetary choices, and is a significant cause of food insecurity. Fifty-nine percent of those surveyed reported being unable to afford enough food, 65 percent couldn't eat balanced meals, 52 percent skipped meals to save money, 50 percent ate less than they felt they should, and 42 percent reported being regularly hungry.

According to Rachael Garcia, another recent graduate from LACC, "When I first moved into LA to be closer to LACC, I moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Hollywood. I shared a bedroom with my boyfriend for \$1,200 a month. Food was a constant issue. I had to cook for every meal including bringing my lunch to school, which is a really difficult demand on your time when you're juggling school and a full-time job, considering how long it takes using public

transportation in LA. When I didn't have time to cook, the only option was getting a taco or something at a fast food restaurant and it's just not enough food. You get used to being hungry, really.

“Once I went into the pizzeria by school and my card got declined because my financial aid was late. The guy behind the counter commented how often he's been seeing that happen with students lately. Last semester I didn't see a dime of my financial aid until the school year was already over! I was lucky that my dad was able to help out with some money to get by, but I can't imagine what I would have done otherwise, which is the situation many of my friends are in that don't have family to help out.”

The recent study of LACCD students is entirely in line with other recent studies, including a 2016 study from the University of California that concluded four in 10 UC students cannot afford to get enough to eat, while a 2015 study from the California State University system revealed that 21 percent of CSU students experienced food insecurity.

Despite the growing levels of poverty among college and university students revealed by these studies, this year school officials moved to raise tuitions in both UC and CSU university systems. The UC regents approved a 2.5 percent tuition increase, the first increase in six years, while the CSU Board of Trustees moved to raise tuitions by 5 percent.

Shifting the financial burden of running the school systems onto the backs of the students has been the deliberate policy of California's Democratic Party leadership. In response to the 2008 recession, the state slashed nearly one third of its support to the CSU system while more than doubling its tuition, to \$5,472, between 2006 and 2011.

The shifting of the burden to the students is reflected even more drastically in the punishing funding cuts Democratic Governor Jerry Brown has inflicted on the state's community colleges. In the years 2007 to 2013, a combined \$1.5 billion was sliced from the budgets of the community college districts, this despite a near doubling of tuition over the last decade.



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