

# US: Homelessness, housing insecurity top list of college student stressors as new year begins

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This year's RealCollege survey, the largest annual assessment of basic needs security among college students in the United States, reveals that a staggering number of youth are experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity and homelessness every day.

The survey, completed in fall 2018 and published in April 2019 by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, interviewed nearly 86,000 students from 123 different two-year and four-year post-secondary institutions across the US and found that 45 percent of respondents reported being food insecure during the 30 days prior to taking the survey.

The breakdown of responses to the survey questions, known as the "Percentage Endorsing Statements," provides a sobering view of the conditions facing today's youth.

- 33 percent of four-year college students and 38 percent of two-year students agreed with the statement: "I ate less than I felt I should because there was not enough money for food."

- 44 percent of four-year students and 51 percent of two-year students "worry whether my food will run out before I have money to buy more."

- 8 percent of four-year students and 12 percent of two-year students "did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food."

Over half of the respondents said they were housing insecure over the previous year and 17 percent said they had been homeless. Housing insecurity includes a broad set of challenges, such as the inability to pay rent or utilities, or the need to move frequently. The study considers homelessness as a situation in which a person does not have a stable place to live. Students were identified as homeless if they responded affirmatively to a question asking if they had been homeless or they identified living conditions that are considered signs of

homelessness.

Sixty percent of survey respondents at two-year institutions and 48 percent at four-year institutions experienced housing insecurity. The most commonly reported challenge is experiencing a rent or mortgage increase that made it difficult to pay, affecting 30 percent of students at two-year institutions and 25 percent at four-year institutions. Eight percent of survey respondents at two-year institutions and 6 percent at four-year institutions left their household because they felt unsafe. Rates of student homelessness range from 10 percent to 32 percent at two-year institutions and 8 percent to 28 percent at four-year institutions.

The report highlights, "food and housing insecurity undermine academic success. Housing insecurity and homelessness have a particularly strong, statistically significant relationship with college completion rates, persistence, and credit attainment. Researchers also associate basic needs insecurity with self-reports of poor physical health, symptoms of depression, and higher perceived stress."

Similar to the previous studies, the current research shows that working or receiving financial aid does not alleviate the stress of finding adequate housing. As the authors explain, "Students who experience basic needs insecurity are overwhelmingly part of the labor force. For example, the majority of students who experience food insecurity, 68 percent, housing insecurity, 69 percent, and homelessness, 67 percent, are employed. Also, among working students, those who experience basic needs insecurity work more hours than other students."

Students who are forced to work while they go to school often come from families that are themselves suffering from poverty and are less likely to be able to help financially.

Likewise, most students eligible for a Pell Grant, a subsidy from the federal government for low-income students, are, in fact, more likely to be housing and food insecure.

A Pell Grant normally comes to about \$2,000 per year, or \$1,000 per semester, and is available for families with an income of \$30,000 or less. Despite the fact that this income level indicates the family is on the cusp of poverty, the families may still be expected to contribute up to \$5,140 for the school year. This Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is money the student earns through working, or whatever money the parents can spare.

In addition, 88 percent of students who received Pell Grants in 2012 graduated with an average balance of \$31,200 in student loans, compared to 53 percent of those who did not have a Pell Grant and borrowed \$4,750 less, or about \$26,000. Student loan debt in the US stood at a staggering \$1.56 trillion in 2018.

Many campuses have been forced to try to address this issue on their own. Nearly every campus in the country now has a food pantry for students in need. Wayne State University (WSU), located in Detroit, for example, has something called the Helping Individuals Go Higher (HIGH) Program, which began in 2013 “with a goal to help homeless, precariously housed and financially challenged students to persist in their goal to earn a degree from Wayne State University.” The campus programs and resources on the WSU website include two counselors from the Department of Health and Human Services, a campus food pantry, the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY), more than a dozen area shelters, two soup kitchens, several social service agencies and homeless advocacy groups.

The report paints a stark picture of reality for young people in the most “advanced” capitalist country in the world. Thousands of young people are working two or three jobs while trying to get an education. Despite their best efforts they cannot make ends meet. They go hungry. They stay in shelters or with friends when they cannot afford a proper home. Millions then leave school burdened with tens of thousands of dollars of debt, which will keep them in poverty and shackled to the banks, for most of their lives.

The latest HOPE Lab survey is the most widespread study of homelessness among 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. As the authors of the report acknowledge, “Data describing the scope and dimensions of this problem, particularly at the college level, remain sparse. The GAO report noted that there are only 31 quality studies of campus food insecurity, very few of which involve multiple colleges. Among existing multi-institutional studies, four draw on data from the #RealCollege survey.” The reality is that the crisis of housing and food insecurity among students is even more severe than this survey reveals.

*The author also recommends:*

*From Couch to Curb*  
film launch highlights youth homelessness in Australia  
[14 August 2019]



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