# Single Stop

Supports for Success:
Homelessness and Housing Insecurity Among College Students

People who are housing insecure may struggle to pay their housing costs, move often, or live "doubled up" in overcrowded housing. Though federal definitions of youth homelessness vary, the U.S. Department of Education defines homeless youth as those who lack fixed, regular, and adequate housing, which includes youth who "couch-surf." College students face an increased risk for these challenges and their related stressors.

SCOPE OF HOUSING INSECURITY

In 2013, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) reported that a substantial number—58,000 college students—self-identified as homeless under this definition. This number is up more than 20 percent since 2009. While startling, this figure is almost certainly an underestimate as homeless youth tend to underreport their status, either because they expect it to be temporary or because they fear prejudice. Moreover, it does not capture college students over 23 who are too old to be considered "youth" and those who do not apply for federal financial aid.

A groundbreaking report released in December 2015, *Hungry to Learn*, further highlights the issue of housing insecurity among community college students. Through a survey of more than 4,000 students at 10 community colleges, more than half (52 percent) of community college students report struggling with housing insecurity. Within the past year, 13 percent experienced the most severe form of housing insecurity: absolute homelessness.
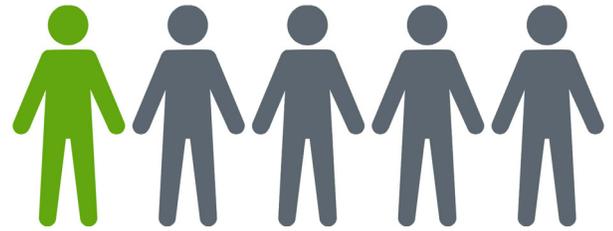
Among housing insecure students, fewer than **one in five** receives any housing-related public assistance.

Source: *Hungry to Learn*

WHY ARE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS?

According to a HUD Insights Report, living costs comprise the greatest fraction of the cost of attending community college. At public two-year colleges, these costs constitute 72 percent of the total cost of attendance and students pay more than $9,800 annually, on average, for room and board. College students are also disproportionately at risk for housing insecurity because they often lack the credentials required to rent an apartment, such as a credit score, rental history, someone to act as a guarantor, or the savings for a security deposit.

Further, many government programs designed to provide affordable housing options for low-income families explicitly exclude college students from receiving assistance. For example, programs such as the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) and Section 8 restrict access based on student status.

WHY DOES STUDENT HOUSING INSECURITY MATTER?

High rates of housing insecurity have far reaching implications for college students' academic success and well-being, as highlighted in qualitative studies conducted by researchers at the Wisconsin HOPE Lab. These studies indicate that students experience a significant amount of stress as a result of inadequate living situations. This stress increases the likelihood of experiencing a mental health issue and compromises students' ability to focus on school and complete their degrees.

Supports for Success:
Recommendations for Community Colleges

Institutions of higher education should create a tool for students to confidentially disclose their need for supportive services and assess the level of housing insecurity on their campuses.

Michigan State University created a web portal for previous or current foster youth to register for supportive services. This concept could be extended to allow all students facing housing insecurity and related financial stress to self-identify and request to be connected to the campus or community services they need to graduate. These services may include affordable housing, campus or community food pantries, child care assistance, and Single Stop offices, where available. Schools can also assess student need by conducting a survey to measure housing insecurity.

Institutional Single Points of Contact (SPOCs) should be present on campus to connect homeless students to the resources they need to succeed.

Many homeless youth have complex needs and require the assistance of specially trained college staff to make service referrals. Single Points of Contact (SPOCs), which are designated by law to assist K-12 students facing homelessness, are equally important at the postsecondary level. SPOCs help homeless youth navigate higher education and community services can play a critical role in supporting these students in their educational endeavors.

Institutions of higher education should implement strategies to assist students experiencing financial and/or housing crises.

Institutions can help students address emergency housing issues by reserving emergency housing slots on campus and by offering small-scale emergency grants to help students prevent an eviction.

Institutions of higher education should explore partnerships with local organizations to provide additional housing assistance to their students.

Community colleges can help students avoid homelessness by partnering with local organizations that provide students with free legal help regarding imminent eviction or issues with landlords. Partnering with entities like hotels can help institutions secure low-cost emergency housing for students. Schools may also consider developing a program with eligible community members to host college students experiencing homelessness, an approach championed by the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH). Coordinating with the local Continuum of Care can also help institutions connect students to appropriate homeless services within the community.

Colleges that offer on-campus housing should prioritize low-income students for resources and develop plans to support homeless youth during school breaks.

A subset of students may experience temporary homelessness when dorms close for holidays and summer breaks. In their *A Home for the Holidays* Initiative, youth housing experts and advocates have identified best practices in supporting these vulnerable youth during breaks from school, including, but not limited to: allocating a portion of Federal TRiO Student Support Service funding for temporary housing during breaks; and/or developing policies to provide priority year-round occupation housing for youth who would otherwise be homeless. More broadly, institutions should consider prioritizing lowest-cost, on-campus housing slots for higher-need students, such as those with an expected family contribution of zero.

Addressing Homelessness with Local Support

Tacoma Community College Housing Assistance Program: In September 2014, Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) and Tacoma Community College (TCC) launched an innovative pilot program to house up to 25 homeless TCC students and their children. Students receive housing assistance while they are in school for 3 years (or until graduation, if earlier). After one year, preliminary results indicate that 95% of participating students remained enrolled, as compared to only 24% of eligible applicants that the program could not serve. Other community colleges should consider partnering with local organizations to replicate this exemplary approach to serve students experiencing homelessness.

More Information

For additional information on best practices for supporting students experiencing homelessness:
National Center for Homeless Education

For more information on Single Points of Contact:
National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

For more information on *A Home for the Holidays* Initiative:
A Home for the Holidays Fact Sheet