Homelessness and Housing Insecurity in Higher Education: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Research, Policy, and Practice

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Executive Summary

HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING insecurity influence students attending postsecondary institutions across the United States. An emerging body of research demonstrates that housing insecurity likely affects a significant number of college students. Research at the University of Massachusetts Boston found that 5.4% of students experienced homelessness and 45% of participants reported housing insecurity (Silva et al., 2017). The California State University (CSU) system released a preliminary report of a systemwide study that found approximately 12% of CSU students experienced homelessness and housing insecurity (Crutchfield, 2016). The City University of New York reports that 40% of students experienced housing instability (Tsui et al., 2011). Community colleges may have even higher rates that range from 30% to 50% of students experiencing housing insecurity and 13% to 14% experiencing homelessness (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017; Wood, Harris, & Delgado, 2016).

Common notions of homelessness revolve around visibility. Persons in the middle class may encounter panhandling on the street. However, the less visible forms actually represent a larger portion of those who are homeless. The review of research unpacks the multiple forms of homelessness and how they influence students. An important aspect of understanding how students experience homelessness in higher education is breaking stereotypical presumptions. In doing so, the scope of the issue becomes more evident as well as increasing the urgency for addressing the issue.
This monograph explores how homelessness intersects most social issues that marginalize individuals and negatively influence postsecondary completion, including poverty, foster care, and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer/questioning, and others) discrimination. As becomes evident, students experiencing homelessness should be considered in conversations about equity and access. For these students, completing some form of degree or certification beyond high school is a vital step in achieving future stability.

Preview of Chapters

The first chapter provides the framing. Although homelessness and housing insecurity have been studied for some time, less is known about how these residential experiences influence educational engagement and retention. Over the past couple of decades, scholars have explored how housing insecurity affects students in preschool through high school. An emerging body of research exposes how college students experience homelessness and housing insecurity while pursuing a postsecondary degree or certificate. Given the limited research specifically related to higher education, we draw from research in multiple fields (e.g., education, social work, public policy, and psychology) to lay a foundation of knowledge that researchers can build upon. The structure of this manuscript reflects the need for research in many different areas. At the end of each chapter, we provide suggested research ideas and questions specifically related to the overarching ideas framing the chapter.

The second chapter provides an overview of research related to housing insecurity in higher education. Given the dearth of research specifically related to this topic in postsecondary institutions, we draw from research in K–12 institutions and social work that helps frame a discussion of how students with housing insecurity experience gaining access to college and persisting to graduation once enrolled.

The third chapter explains the federal and state policies related to housing insecurity in higher education. We begin with the most well-known policy related to homelessness and education—McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. However, McKinney-Vento primarily involves K–12 education and only
recently included stipulations for higher education that focus independent status on Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and increased access for TRIO and GEAR UP programs. Although federal policy specifically related to homelessness in college has yet to be passed, policies related to college access for low-income students frame the experiences of those without housing security.

The fourth chapter employs a trauma-informed care approach to understanding how housing insecurity affects students in postsecondary institutions and how those institutions may unknowingly embed unintended barriers. We begin by providing a discussion about trauma-informed care and how it has been used in the field of education. In particular, we propose a Trauma-Informed and Sensitive College Model that begins unpacking how postsecondary institutions can incorporate a trauma approach to support college students experiencing housing insecurity. We then describe how this approach helps explain the multilayered challenges that influence college students experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity.

The fifth chapter presents the Higher Education Housing Continuum as an approach to understand and study housing insecurity among students attending postsecondary institutions. We draw from the information shared in the first half of the manuscript to justify the need for a clear and inclusive definitional approach that can inform future research, practice, and policy. We include examples throughout the chapter to illustrate the need for a comprehensive understanding of housing insecurity.

The final chapter pulls together the ideas shared throughout the manuscript. We identify overarching themes that can be used to guide future research. In particular, we focus on ideas that will be necessary for policy and program development. Earning a college degree or certificate can be a pathway to housing stability. In the chapters that follow, we explore how students without residential security have educational interests and professional goals that parallel those of their peers. However, these students also believe that postsecondary education is their pathway to a stable home. For some of these students, a college degree holds the promise of housing security for the first time in their lives.
Additional Readings


A QUICK GOOGLE search of the term “poor college student” leads one to a Buzzfeed page extolling a list of the “25 things only broke college students understand” (https://www.buzzfeed.com/jessicamisener/this-textbook-costs-more-than-my-life) and a list of “poor college student memes” (https://me.me/t/poor-college-student). Such popular sources reinforce the problematic idea that being poor in college is a rite of passage and a temporary status rather than a problem that needs to be fixed. Ronald Hallett and Rashida Crutchfield, the authors of this monograph on Homelessness and Housing Insecurity in Higher Education: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Research, Policy, and Practice, offer the most up-to-date research and practice to help those in higher education understand the very real problem faced by college students who experience housing and food insecurity. At its core, this monograph helps the reader to understand how homeless and housing insecurity is a real problem that can negatively influence access to college and college student learning and performance and ways that we can further study these issues and offer assistance.

The authors expertly define key terms and explore the related literature on housing insecurity as it affects children throughout the education system, including in higher education. The monograph explains the existence of federal and state policies that intersect to frame the potential sources of support and barriers that students who experience homelessness and housing insecurity may face. One of the highlights of the monograph is the description of how trauma-informed care can be used as a lens to show how colleges and universities may unwittingly create barriers to student success and how to potentially provide better support to this population in the future.
Throughout the monograph, the authors offer various lenses to help inform future research, policy, and practice. This is an important monograph on a topic that is of growing importance to the field. As the authors point out, there is not much written directly about higher education on this topic and, as a result, they have had to pull related literature from other fields and disciplines to apply to the higher education context. This monograph fills a significant void in the literature.

This monograph is sure to be of interest to those who study topics related to college students, including those who study college access, learning, and outcomes. This monograph will also be of interest to institutional researchers, student affairs administrators, provosts, deans, and others with responsibilities related to serving different student populations in higher education. Further, high school administrators, teachers, school social workers, and guidance counselors who are supporting students as they prepare for their postsecondary futures may also benefit from a deeper understanding of homelessness in the higher education context. Researchers in the field, both senior level and graduate students, are also bound to learn a lot from this monograph that will be of use in future research. Most important, the monograph is geared toward those who find themselves on the frontlines of working with today’s college students, many of whom experience the hidden characteristics of housing insecurity.

One of the strengths of the monograph is that it explores how homelessness intersects with other social issues that marginalize individuals and negatively influence postsecondary completion, including poverty, foster care, and LGBTQ+ discrimination. It unpacks the multiple forms of homelessness and how they influence students, and it offers useful lenses to help practitioners, policymakers, and scholars make sense of the complexity of the issue. Ultimately, the purpose of this monograph is to delve into the research, literature, and issues associated with homelessness and housing insecurity in higher education to provide necessary visibility to an issue that has for too long gone without attention in ways that marginalize students who need federal, state, and institutional structures to support them in achieving higher education goals. This monograph helps readers work their way through the complexities of the issues and figure out practical next and future steps.