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Housing and Food Insecurity at Portland State University

A report by:

The Portland State University Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative

Authors:

Greg Townley, Katricia Stewart, Jacen Greene, and Marta Petteni



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Interviews and Storytelling by Stefanie Knowlton

For questions about this report, please contact:
Greg Townley (gtownley@pdx.edu)

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Find Help

This report addresses a difficult topic and many of the personal stories include traumatic experiences including assault and identity-based violence. If you have experienced similar events or are currently struggling with these experiences, know that you are not alone. Help is available.

Crisis Support 24/7

- RAINN offers support to survivors of sexual assault at 800-656-HOPE or www.rainn.org.
- National Domestic Violence Hotline offers support to survivors at 800-799-7233, text LOVEIS to 866-331-9474 or www.thehotline.org.
- Trans Lifeline is a trans-led organization that connects trans people to community, support, and resources to survive and thrive at 877-565-8860 or translifeline.org.
- The Trevor Project offers support to LGBTQ youth who are in crisis at 866-488-7386, text Start to 678-678, or www.thetrevorproject.org.
- Lifeline offers crisis support to all at 800-273-8255 or suicidepreventionlifeline.org.

Portland State University Resources

- PSU resource centers offer support to a wide range of students at www.pdx.edu/student-life/resource-centers
- Students can contact PSU's Center for Student Health and Counseling (SHAC) at <https://www.pdx.edu/health-counseling/> and 503-725-2800.
- Employees can make an appointment with an Employee Assistance Counselor at <https://www.pdx.edu/human-resources/employee-assistance-program-eap> and 503-639-3009 or 800-433-2320.
- Resources for healing and coping for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) can be found on SHAC's website at https://www.pdx.edu/health-counseling/sites/g/files/znlldhr771/files/2020-06/CS_Healing%26Coping_v06.08.2020.pdf
- Resources for anyone experiencing homelessness, housing insecurity, and food insecurity are listed on our website at pdx.edu/homelessness/find-help.

Community Resources

- The Multnomah County Mental Health Call Center offers support at 503-988-4888.
- Find information on housing and emergency resources at <http://ahomeforeveryone.net/get-help>.
- For emergency assistance with basic needs, call 211 or 1-866-698-6155, text your zip code to 898211 (TXT211), email help@211info.org, or go to www.211info.org.

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from Portland State University's first housing and food insecurity survey of students and employees. It was conducted by The Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative (HRAC), a center formed to help address homelessness and its negative impact on individuals, families, and communities, with an emphasis on communities of color. Reducing homelessness in the PSU community was one of the foundational goals of the center, and this survey is an important step in that work.

The survey was administered in the fall of 2019, and all students and employees enrolled or employed at PSU at that time were invited to participate. The survey was based on a growing body of research examining basic needs insecurity among college students (e.g., Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). It is one of the first campus surveys in the country to also explore these factors among university employees.

This report examines the rates of housing insecurity, homelessness, and food insecurity among students and employees disaggregated by race and additional factors to shed light on the most vulnerable members of our community. We also explored employment and financial situation, types of assistance received (e.g., SNAP benefits, Medicaid, food pantry use), health (e.g., sleep and stress), and social connectedness. Due to the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and its widespread impacts, we also conducted a follow-up survey of 166 vulnerable students in order to understand how the pandemic impacted their basic needs security, academic performance, finances, and various aspects of their health and well-being.

The report examines the rates of:



Housing Insecurity



Homelessness



Food Insecurity

Key Findings

A total of 3,511 students (15% of all students) and 1,017 employees (28% of all employees) participated in the initial survey, and findings revealed the following:

PSU Students

- **44.6%** experienced housing insecurity in the 12 months prior to completing the survey
- **16.1%** experienced homelessness in the 12 months prior to completing the survey
- **47%** experienced food insecurity in the 30 days prior to completing the survey
- **BIPOC** (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students experienced high rates of basic needs insecurity. In particular, Native American students were almost twice as likely as White students to experience homelessness. They also had the highest rates of food insecurity (66.4%).

PSU Employees

- **22.7%** experienced housing insecurity in the 12 months prior to completing the survey
- **5.6%** experienced homelessness in the 12 months prior to completing the survey
- **16.5%** experienced food insecurity in the 30 days prior to completing the survey
- **BIPOC** employees experienced high rates of basic needs insecurity. In particular, Black employees were more than twice as likely as White employees to experience housing insecurity, homelessness, and food insecurity.

In addition to BIPOC students and employees, LGBTQ+ students and employees also reported high rates of housing insecurity, homelessness, and food insecurity, as did students and employees with disabilities and medical conditions. Transfer students, first generation students, and current or former foster youth also reported high rates of basic needs insecurity.

Among employees, staff experienced higher rates of housing insecurity, homelessness, and food insecurity than faculty or administrators. Non-tenure-track faculty had higher rates of basic needs insecurity than tenure-track faculty; and adjunct professors or instructors had higher rates of basic needs insecurity than full-time professors or instructors.

Among both students and employees, rates of financial stress, physical and mental health interference, insufficient sleep, and loneliness were higher among those who experienced housing insecurity, homelessness, and food insecurity. Students and employees with basic needs insecurity also reported lower rates of monthly pay and higher rates of public assistance use.

COVID-19 Findings

We conducted a follow-up survey of 166 students on their basic needs insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings should not be compared with the initial survey due to the substantial differences in the samples. Instead, these findings reveal how the pandemic impacted a small subset of participants:

- **64.5%** experienced housing insecurity during the pandemic
- **20.5%** experienced homelessness during the pandemic
- **55.4%** experienced food insecurity during the pandemic
- **BIPOC** students experienced higher rates of basic needs insecurity during the pandemic than White students

Additionally, we found that 32.5% of students surveyed had to leave their housing during the pandemic, with BIPOC students twice as likely as White students to have to leave housing. Over a third of the students we surveyed reported being laid off or fired from a job because of the pandemic. Of those who lost their jobs or had reduced hours, 90% experienced housing insecurity, homelessness, or food insecurity. Rates of social isolation and mental health concerns were high for the entire sample, but particularly among students who experienced basic needs insecurity during the pandemic.



Conclusions and Next Steps

The findings from this report highlight the following:

- (1) The complexity of factors that may contribute to basic needs insecurity among university students and employees
- (2) The impact of basic needs insecurity on multiple life domains, including education, employment, physical and mental health, and community connection
- (3) The importance of PSU administrators working closely with student and employee groups to identify and implement solutions that effectively meet the needs of campus community members, especially those at higher risk of experiencing basic needs insecurity due to systemic and historical racism and discrimination. This work is all the more pressing given the economic, health, and social vulnerabilities that students and employees will face both during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Introduction

Defining Key Terminology

Before outlining the current state of knowledge regarding basic needs insecurity in higher education, it is first important to provide definitions for the primary categories of needs insecurity we examine in this report. We will return to these definitions and expand upon them to include descriptions of our measurement tools in later sections of the report.

Housing insecurity has been defined multiple ways by different government agencies and researchers, but generally it refers to a range of issues that compromise one's housing stability, including a lack of affordability, safety, quality, and consistency in housing.

Similarly, *homelessness* is defined in different ways depending on the federal agency and focal population involved. Traditional classifications rely on the definition from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which focuses on people living unsheltered, in emergency shelter, and in transitional housing. In line with other research on basic needs insecurity in higher education, we use an expanded definition of homelessness based on the one outlined by the U.S. Department of Education in the McKinney-Vento Act of 1987. This definition includes individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including those living in “doubled up” situations with family or friends because of necessity, not by choice. This approach matches the local definition used by A Home For Everyone, the multi-jurisdictional governance structure within Multnomah County that addresses homelessness (Zapata et al., 2019).

Finally, *food insecurity* is defined as “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food” (USDA, 2019). This occurs with either: (1) *low food security*, where households report reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet, but little to no indication of reduced food intake; or (2) *very low food security*, where households report multiple indicators of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake (USDA, 2019).

Research on Basic Needs Insecurity Among College and University Students

Over the last decade, a large body of research has emerged that highlights the importance of studying and addressing basic needs insecurity among college students. Thanks to the pioneering efforts of Crutchfield and Maguire (e.g., 2017, 2018) in their work with the California State University System, and Goldrick-Rab and colleagues (e.g., 2018, 2019) with the Hope Center at Temple University, there is an expanding understanding and awareness of the critical role of housing and food security on the academic, occupational, social, and health outcomes of students. An exhaustive overview of this work is beyond the scope of this report, but below we briefly review some of the key research findings in this area.

Housing Insecurity and Homelessness

A recent review of the extant research and nationally representative survey studies of college students found that nearly 10% of U.S. undergraduate students are experiencing homelessness or are self-supporting and at risk of homelessness (Broton, 2020). Further, this review found that 45% of college students experience some form of housing insecurity. This aligns with other national research on student housing insecurity and homelessness that suggests roughly 16% of students at four-year institutions have experienced homelessness in the last year and 35% have experienced housing insecurity in the last year (e.g., Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Research also suggests that graduate students experience homelessness and housing insecurity at similar rates as undergraduates (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019).

Food Insecurity

As many as 33% of students at four-year institutions across the country experienced food insecurity, according to a national survey conducted by the Hope Center at 171 two-year institutions and 56 four-year institutions in 2019. Further, 36% of students from four-year institutions worried about running out of food, and 38% of students could not afford to eat balanced meals (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Graduate students have been found to experience similar rates of food insecurity as undergraduates (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019).

The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) also notes that having a low income (defined as being at or below 130% of the federal poverty line) is the most common risk factor for food insecurity among college students, and roughly 39% of undergraduate students in 2016 were considered low income (US Government Accountability Office, 2018). Further, the majority of low-income students also experience at least one additional risk factor for food insecurity, such as being a single parent or having a disability (US Government Accountability Office, 2018).

Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurity

Across the body of research on basic needs insecurity, it is clear that some students are at a greater risk of housing insecurity, homelessness, and food insecurity than others. In particular, there are racial and ethnic disparities, with Black and Indigenous students experiencing the highest rates of housing and food insecurity—particularly in comparison with their White peers (e.g., Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). Students who are transgender have higher rates of homelessness and housing insecurity compared to students who do not identify as transgender; and gay, lesbian, or bisexual students have higher rates of homelessness and housing insecurity than their heterosexual peers (e.g., Baker-Smith et al., 2020).

In addition, former foster youth, students formerly convicted of a crime, parenting students, and students with disabilities are also at a greater risk of ba-

sic needs insecurity (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). And, of course, intersectionality matters: research suggests that students with a greater number of overlapping marginalized identities (e.g., race, gender identity, and sexual orientation) have higher likelihoods of food and housing insecurity, regardless of whether each individual factor is a predictor of basic needs insecurity on its own (Haskett, Kotter-Grühn, & Majumder, 2020).

Research on Basic Needs Insecurity Among College and University Employees

Research on basic needs insecurity among college employees is scarce, but a recent survey of contingent and adjunct faculty at both two-year and four-year institutions found that nearly a quarter relied on public assistance, and 40% had difficulty covering basic household expenses (American Federation of Teachers, 2020). Almost one-third of respondents earned \$25,000 or less a year, placing them below the federal poverty threshold for a family of four. Further, only 16% of adjunct professors surveyed reported being able to cover their core monthly expenses (American Federation of Teachers, 2020).

To our knowledge, our report is the first comprehensive study of housing insecurity, homelessness, and food insecurity to include both students and employees.

Methodology

Methodology

Research Method

The Office of Institutional Research and Planning at Portland State University provided the email addresses of all 23,362 students and 3,590 employees enrolled or employed at PSU at the time of the survey (Fall 2019). In cases where individuals were both students and employees, they were included with the sample that represented their primary role. For example, a full-time PSU employee taking evening classes part-time was included with the employee sample instead of the student sample. Due to informed consent requirements, students under the age of 18 were not able to be included in the study.

An email invitation to participate in the study was sent to students and employees beginning the second week of the fall term, with reminders sent at the same time each week for the following three weeks. Interested participants clicked the link provided in the email, which sent them to a Qualtrics survey with a full explanation of the study and informed consent information. After completing the survey, participants had the option to enter a drawing for a \$100 Visa gift card (20 gift cards were awarded to students, 10 to employees). Participants also had the option to provide their contact information for follow-up interviews or focus groups about their experiences with housing and food insecurity. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to complete this part of our planned research, and we decided instead to conduct an online survey of students' experiences with basic needs insecurity during the pandemic. Please refer to the COVID-19 section of this report to learn more about the methodology, sample, and results of this follow-up survey.

Measure

Our survey was primarily based on procedures and instruments recommended or developed by (1) Crutchfield and Maguire (2017) in their work with the California State University System; and (2) Goldrick-Rab and colleagues (2018) in their national research with

the Hope Center at Temple University. We also consulted with other colleges and universities conducting similar research (e.g., Haskett and colleagues, 2018; Wilking, Roll, & Kornbluh, 2020) when developing our survey and methodology. In addition to asking about student and employee experiences with housing insecurity, homelessness, and food insecurity, we also asked questions about their employment and financial situation, types of assistance received (e.g., SNAP benefits, Medicaid, food pantry use), health (e.g., sleep and stress), and social connectedness. Because our study was one of the first to assess basic needs insecurity among employees in addition to students, we adapted student questions and created new questions to fit the unique context of employees' experiences. After creating the survey, we pilot tested it among both students and employees and made modifications based on their suggestions.

Response Rates

Because the focus of our report was on housing insecurity and homelessness, participants had to complete at least the housing and homelessness questions of the survey to be included in the study. A total of 3,511 students (15% of the 23,262 students invited to take the survey) completed at least the housing and homelessness questions, while 3,272 (14%) completed the entire survey. This response rate is higher than those reported by the Hope Center in their national surveys, which are typically in the range of 8 to 10% (e.g., Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019), and is close to the 12.8% figure reported by the Hope Center in their 2020 report of Oregon Community Colleges.

A total of 1,017 employees (28.3% of the 3,590 employees invited to take the survey) completed at least the housing and homelessness questions, and 964 (26.9%) completed the entire survey.

The number of students or employees who responded to each question is noted throughout the tables and figures in the results section of the report.

Sample and Comparisons to the University

The student and employee samples were generally representative of the PSU campus community at the time of the survey (see Appendix A and B for full sample descriptions and select comparisons with PSU population). Percentages of racial and ethnic groups were similar to campus totals, although White participants were overrepresented in both the student and employee samples; and Asian or Asian American and Native American participants were represented slightly higher in the student sample. Relative to the broader campus community, the percentage of men in our study was much lower in both the student sample (26.8% compared to 44.1% among all students) and the employee sample (31.7% compared to 41.6% among all employees). This is in line with previous research indicating that men often have lower response rates on surveys (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003).

Our student sample had a slightly higher percentage of graduate students and full-time students compared to their percentages in the full PSU student population. The employee sample had a higher percentage of staff and administrators compared to campus totals. This is likely due to the fact that respondents could select more than one employment category in our survey, whereas the university rates reflected only their primary role. For example, in our survey, employees could identify as both faculty and administrators, while in the university rates they would be identified as either faculty or administrator, but not both.

Given our high response rates and similar demographic data pertaining to student and employee characteristics when compared to the university, we feel confident that the results presented in the next section are generally representative of the broader Portland State community. However, it is also important to recognize that our campus community is dynamic and diverse, and the perspectives of many of its most vulnerable members may not be adequately reflected in our findings. We recommend ongoing research using a range of methodologies and outreach approaches.

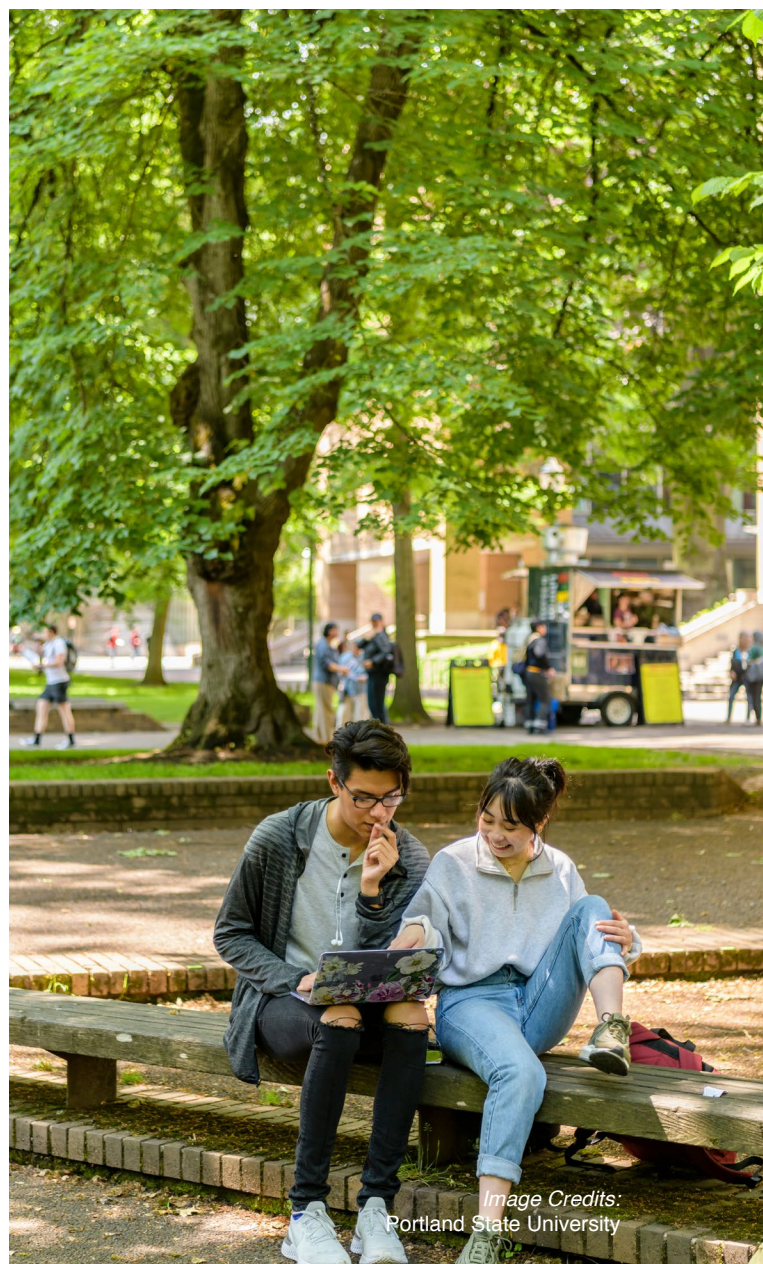


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