

# Student Housing Insecurity and Homelessness at San Francisco State University

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## *Introduction*

There is a student housing and homelessness crisis in U.S. higher education. Due to the rising cost of attendance, increased costs of living, and reduction in federal financial aid, students are pursuing postsecondary education while facing extreme financial burden (Vogt & Leek, 2018). Students experiencing housing insecurity face the inability to pay rent or utilities, may live in overcrowded conditions, or have only temporary housing (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2019, Hallett & Crutchfield, 2017). Students who meet the U.S Department of Education definition of homelessness, “lack a regular, fixed and adequate nighttime residence” and may live in spaces not fit for human habitation, such as cars and parks (Hallett & Crutchfield, 2017). It is well documented that students experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness are more likely to have mental and physical health issues (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). They are also more likely to have lower GPA and higher levels of academic concerns than their housing secure peers (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019).

Student housing insecurity and homelessness fits into a context of student “basic needs” that also includes food insecurity and mental health services. Efforts to address student basic needs have grown significantly over the past decade despite the pervasive narrative of the “starving student” and normalization of the suffering of college students. In 2017, SF State formally initiated its basic needs work as a part of the California State University (CSU) Basic Needs Initiatives. Overwhelmingly, basic needs efforts have prioritized the issue of food insecurity. However, with a growing crisis, it is imperative to focus on student housing insecurity and homelessness experienced at SF State to determine how best to address this issue.



## ***Methods***

In response to the need for more information about student housing insecurity and homelessness at SF State, in Fall 2018, Health Promotion & Wellness came together with the Health Equity Institute and Department of Health Education to conduct this assessment. It was designed to examine the scope of student housing insecurity and homelessness and to identify possible strategies to address the issue. Key methods included:

- Review of studies about SF State students, Academic Master Plan documents and Climate Survey
- Additional analysis of SFSU raw data from CSU Basic Needs Study
- Interviews of 28 SF State student leaders; 27 SF State faculty and staff; and 21 external stakeholders conducted by 13 MPH and 1 undergraduate student in Spring 2019.

All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed by the students. This interview data and the data from the other sources formed the basis of the findings and recommendations.

## ***Findings***

- 1)** A significant number of SF State students experience housing insecurity and homelessness. 17.7% of SF State students experienced homelessness in the past 9 months (Crutchfield & McGuire 2018).
- 2)** Housing insecurity compounds stress and forces students to make significant sacrifices that compromise their physical health and mental well-being.
- 3)** Housing insecurity and financial pressures undermine student success and academic achievement.
- 4)** Even students who live in on-campus housing face housing insecurity and challenges that compromise their well-being including the stress and hardship of high and increasing housing costs.



- 5)** Faculty, staff, students, and city officials are aware that housing insecurity is a significant issue affecting students at SF State, at the same time student housing insecurity is normalized and at times minimized.
- 6)** Prospective students, particularly those from outside the Bay Area, may be unaware of the challenge of finding affordable housing and the high cost of living and the advertised Cost of Attendance is inaccurate resulting in students feeling betrayed by the University.
- 7)** There is a lack of longitudinal data about housing insecurity and homelessness amongst SF State students and little data that explores any linkage between housing insecurity, homelessness, and student success.
- 8)** Some SF State on-campus housing and student wage policies and practices foster housing insecurity.
- 9)** Financial aid limitations such as insufficient awards and timing of distributions contribute to housing insecurity for students.
- 10)** SF State has not made clear its role in addressing student housing challenges, while the City sees the issue as the University's responsibility, and students are frustrated by the lack of action.
- 11)** Students are concerned about stigma or do not know where to go, preventing them from accessing resources or support to address their housing needs.
- 12)** Faculty and staff want to help students struggling with housing but are ill-equipped to do so.



## ***Recommendations***

- 1)** SF State should unify efforts to support student success and basic needs. SF State should create a plan to reduce student housing insecurity that balances prevention and crisis services.
- 2)** SF State should implement a campaign about student housing insecurity that aims to reduce stigma, increase awareness of available resources, and describes how the University plans to address the issue.
- 3)** SF State should regularly collect data about student housing status, needs, and experiences.
- 4)** SF State should change University student wage and on-campus housing policies and practices that foster housing insecurity amongst students.
- 5)** SF State should provide students more access to affordable housing both on and off-campus.
- 6)** SF State should advocate to increase resources for basic needs; expand affordable housing; and change financial aid and other policies that exacerbate the financial burdens of students and their families.
- 7)** SF State should provide a continuum of services including, a Single Point of Contact; Basic Needs Center; safe overnight parking; crisis housing; and increased access to emergency funds.



## ***Conclusion***

Housing insecurity and homelessness is currently one of the most pressing issues at SF State. The impact of this problem is felt by students, faculty, in campus culture, and in markers of student success. The causes of this crisis are complex, with some beyond the reach of the University. However, there is much SF State can do to ensure that all students have adequate, safe, and stable housing. It is time to implement solutions so that SF State can effectively attract, retain, and graduate students; while supporting their well-being along the way.

## ***References***

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Goldrick-Rab, S., Baker-Smith, C., Coca, V., Looker, E., & Williams, T. (2019, April) *College and University Basic Needs Insecurity: A National #RealCollege Survey Report*.

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