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*Student Homelessness &
Housing Insecurity:
Queens College Research Study*

Urban Studies 371: Service Learning Project

***Student Homelessness & Housing Insecurity:
Queens College Research Study***

**Queens College, City University of New York
Urban Studies Department
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview & Importance

In a periodical published in October 2017, the University of Colorado Denver (UCD) addressed imperative questions surrounding student homelessness and housing/food insecurity. There are more issues at hand other than just getting a student to attend college, but the struggles faced in order for them to graduate. It is the definition used in UCD's survey which we adopted to define what it meant to experience homelessness as a student – "Anyone who does not have a stable, secure, and a non-temporary place to sleep, reside, or store their belongings." The perception of what homelessness looks like on college campuses is typically limited to those living on the streets. However, having to sleep on a friend's couch, can constitute facing a homeless experience. Being housing or food insecure can have a massive effect on academic achievement; worrying about having a roof over your head tends to take precedence over finishing a paper or studying for a test.

Almost a decade ago, a study conducted by The City University of New York in 2010 on student homelessness found that 41.7 percent – or 2 in 5 – of the 1,086 students surveyed were housing unstable. While this was a broader study aimed at housing insecurities, our study focused solely on student homelessness. Our survey defines homelessness as lacking a stable, secure and non-temporary space to sleep, reside, and store your belongings whereas housing insecurity includes this as well as being rent or mortgaged challenged and other situations regarding housing challenges.

Before we started our own research here at Queens College, Professor Scott Larson virtually connected three members of our team, to Coby Wikselaar, a research student at the University of Colorado Denver. As a Harding Fellow in Student Hunger and Homelessness at UCD, Coby identifies and examines ways of expanding services, conducts research, and engages in advocacy that can alleviate hunger and homelessness on their campus. University of Colorado Denver's research on housing insecurity study served as a basis and laid the foundation for our research process. Through the preliminary analysis of their study and survey, our class created a survey to study homelessness at Queens College on a micro level.

Although our research findings provide just a snapshot of the student experience here at Queens College, it simultaneously raises awareness of the crucial and highly under addressed issue of student homelessness. With a limited budget and time, a grasp of the prevalence, impact, and resources that are available to Queens College students that experience homelessness and housing was the objective of this service-learning project. Our goal was to contribute to the growing body of knowledge surrounding student homelessness through sharing our project's research and resources with hopes that other departments become encouraged to study this issue. Expanding on our study to examine this issue on a macro level at Queens College is essential to raise the importance school administrations and decision/policy makers to implement or refine special services and programs.

METHODOLOGY & LIMITATIONS

Part A: Overview of the Process

The methodology for the Student Homelessness and Housing Insecurity Survey included:

1. We began our research by doing some background on related studies.
 - As a class, we examined research that was done CUNY wide, read excerpts from *Ending Homelessness* by Donald Burnes and David DiLeo, and we analyzed a survey that students created at University of Colorado Denver.
2. From this, we constructed a seven-question preliminary survey where we aimed to figure out how many students have been or are homeless.
3. A collective decision was made to focus our research on Queens College students who took Urban Studies classes this Spring 2018 semester due to the limited time and budget.

Part B: Survey Findings

We attempted a census of all students taking Urban Studies classes, however, we were only able to survey about 37% of all these students giving us about 440 responses. We went out and administered the survey in person from 4/9/18 to 4/20/18 and then analyzed the results using excel.

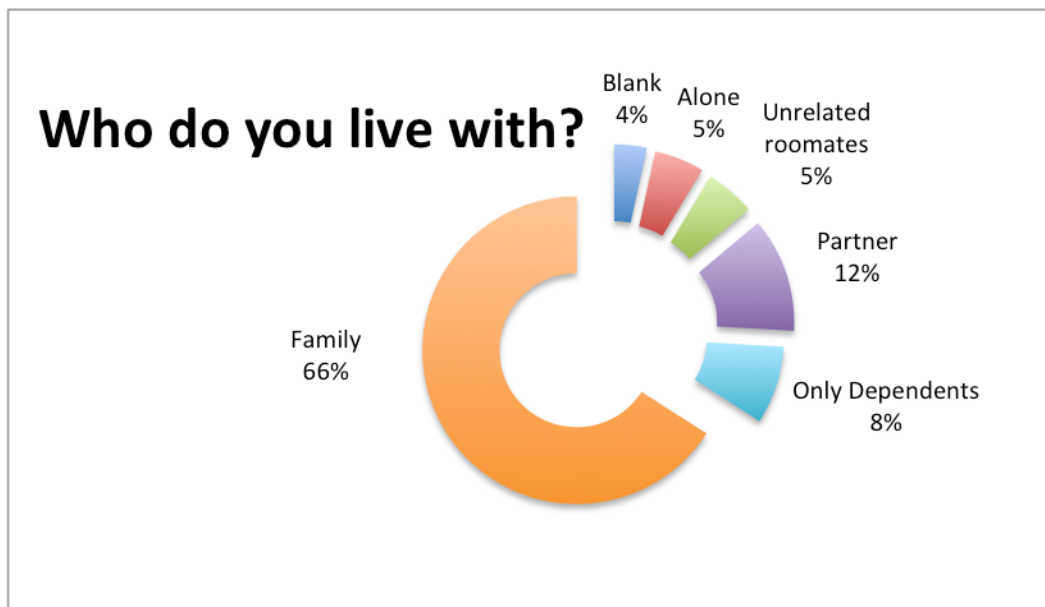


Figure 1 – Results from responses to survey question #1

Has your housing situation caused you to take time off school?

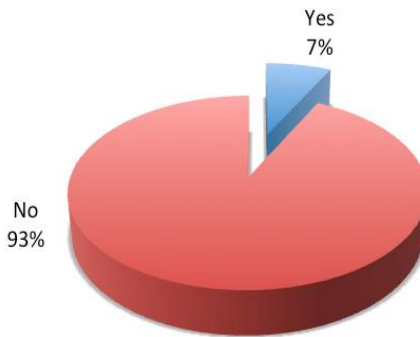


Figure 2 – Results from responses to survey question #2

We found that 4% of surveyed students are or were homeless, with 2% in each category (Figure 3). In addition, we found that 25% of the students who have experienced homelessness have experienced it more than once and that the average time they spent homeless was about 5.4 months; life as a student was negatively impacted 65% of the time. For example, a student at Queens College who took the Student Homelessness and Housing Insecurity survey stated: “My experience as a student during his time was virtually a non-factor. I could not put myself to attend classes as I would normally... My academics surely suffered during my event of homelessness.” Another Queens College student stated: “I was a college student and I had a young son that I had to care for and my husband had to work and it was a challenge because I had to look for a place and I still had to fulfill my other obligations - my educational obligations, studying, meeting deadlines for research assignments and homework assignments, and that was very hard for me to do.”

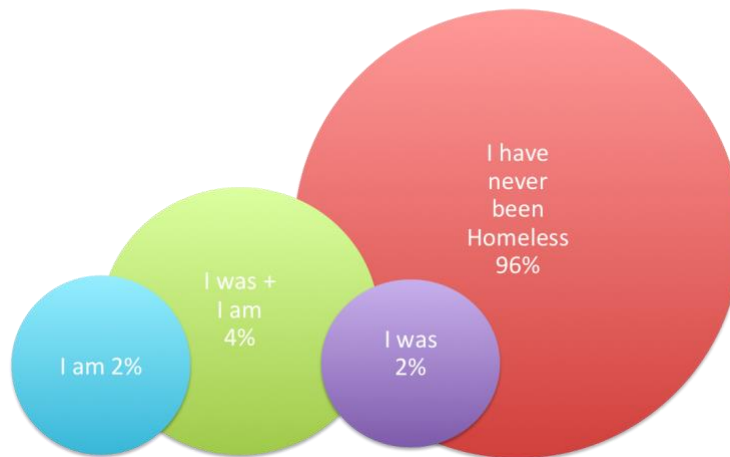
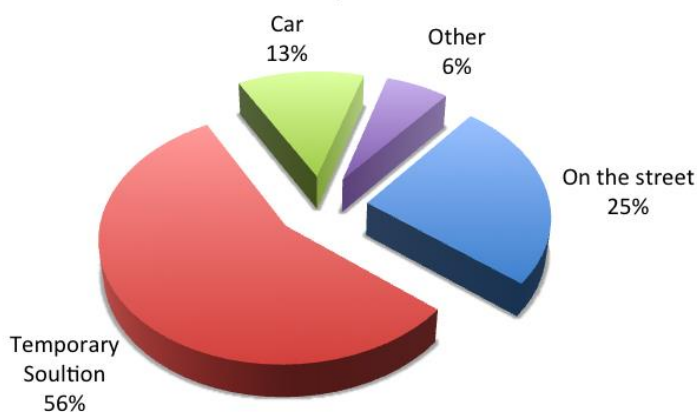


Figure 3 – Results from responses to survey question #3

When homeless, where did you sleep?



Of the students who've experienced homelessness, 56% found a temporary living solution, 25% lived on the street, 13% lived in their car, and 6% found other solutions.

Figure 4 – Results from responses to survey question #5

Limitations and Future Research

Based on our survey results, perception may have been a limitation. Students' definition and idea of what homelessness means should be taken into consideration and studied as well. The various meanings, stereotypes, misconceptions and even stigmas one may have revolving homelessness can surely impact their answer questionnaires. Potential researchers need to ensure that the population they are studying understands a clear definition of each of these issues/categories. Although the survey defined homelessness prior to questions pertaining to it, it is possible students did not understand or did not want to label their experience(s) as such.

Most importantly, we would recommend that the next study secure more resources, including time and funding, as lack of resources was our major limitation. Because of a tight budget and only a semester's worth of time to create, conduct, and report research, we were only able to address student homelessness specifically within the Urban Studies department. The next study examining this issue should be Queens College wide, if not CUNY wide, in order to get a better handle and vast scope of the issue. For this future research at Queens College, it is recommended to work with the Office of Regulatory Compliance, as they would have an interest in the results and findings. As well, we did not address any other issues except for homelessness in our study. Possible next steps include examining student homelessness campus wide, housing insecurity, and informal housing.

While their study was helpful to our research, University of Colorado Denver's survey weaknesses such as leading questions within their survey and that it was not relevant to students in New York City. Thus, analyzing and critiquing the University of Colorado Denver study would be of great benefit for those interested in doing future work in this area of research.

STUDENTS' HOMELESSNESS EXPERIENCES

In an attempt to collect qualitative data, our survey asked that if any student wished to voluntarily share their story or knew of a student who would, to contact Professor Larson via e-mail which we provided. Personal life stories from experiences on student homelessness are not common perhaps because it is ideal to study this issue quantitatively. However, they can certainly create a richer and more in-depth discernment especially for those who've never experienced similar life events. As well they reveal the necessity of college institutions to provide services and resources to students facing these unpredictable obstacles.

"A week after I turned 18 my mother kicked me out. I already started my first semester of college at a local community college and it was too late to drop my classes. I was able to move in with my dad, but I was commuting 72 miles each way daily in order to go to school. I ended up having a falling out with my dad over disagreements on what I wanted to do with my life. Towards the tail end of my first semester I was couch-surfing, living in my car, and working as a waiter. I would wake up, work out, shower at the gym I had a membership at and then go to class. I would then go to work where I used to do my calculus homework on the same slips I used to take people's food orders on. I was completely self-supportive and maintained this way of living for about 8 and a half months. During this time, I stayed with ex-girlfriend, friends, or if I couldn't do that I slept in my car. I tried to get my own place in Los Angeles, but I couldn't afford to or have the credit to do so. But, I knew I wanted to finish my degree, so I started to look around the country for cheaper programs. I found Queens College worked 70 hours a week over the summer prior to moving to New York and paid everything out of pocket. Once I got here I was able to get into the dorms and that was the first time I had a place to put my things besides my car for about a year ...finishing two degrees and a minor in 3 years while I was supporting myself. I will be graduating in May 2018." - Student One

"In 1980, I lived on Jamaica Avenue and 146 Street Jamaica, New York. I was a student at LaGuardia Community College at the time. A fire broke out on the second floor of the three-story building around 3am in the morning. My husband, son and I had tried to go down the stairs, but we were overcome by smoke when we opened the door. We went to the window and yelled for help. The firemen had to rescue us by bringing us down the ladder. I was so afraid for our lives. That is when we became homeless because we could not go back into the apartment due to the damage. We were put in a homeless shelter and the conditions was something we were not accustomed to. We had a room with no cooking facilities and we had to share the bathroom with numerous people that we did not know. I had to balance looking for a place, studying and caring for our son because my husband worked full time. I remember walking up and down Hillside Avenue from Sutphin Boulevard to 169th Street and went into every real estate office on that strip inquiring about an apartment. We were homeless and stayed in the shelter for about a month, but it seemed like an eternity." - Student Two

“During my Junior year in high school, I faced a period of homeless after Superstorm Sandy displaced me and my family for several months. The main level of my home was destroyed by flood waters from Jamaica Bay which is directly across the street from my home. When my family and I evacuated our home, we did not expect the storm would render us without a place to fully call ours for the months ahead. In its entirety after the storm, the streets, homes, and businesses of the Rockaways resembled a dark, desolate, and decaying place that no one may ever live in again. My experience as a student during his time was virtually a nonfactor. I could not put myself to attend classes as I would normally because my school was displaced also, the commute from the shelter at Queens College to the new high school was over an hour and a half long each way. When there was hope that we would be moved to a hotel, a space to finally call our home, I would stay back from school with my family only to hear disappointing news. The school understood the struggles many families were going through and tried their best to keep spirits up and make courses more manageable. It was hard to assign homework to a student who was potentially going home to a place with no electricity. Somehow, I survived my 11th grade year. We finally moved back to our home school in the early winter of 2013, a sense of normalcy for most people still living in Rockaway as their homes were being salvaged/repared. My academics surely suffered during my event of homelessness.” - Student Three

“To be honest I can’t explain how it happened or when it happened, because for as long as I can remember I’ve had to think about where I will be living next month. As a full-time college student who makes a minimum wage living, renting my own apartment has never really been an option. I have always been able to crash at a friends or family members house and for that I’m grateful. However, between work and school, it is difficult for me to have a one-track mind when completing assignments or studying, because the most important thing I have to think about it where I’m going to stay for the next few months. It takes away from my school work and achieving my goal of graduating on time.” - Student Four

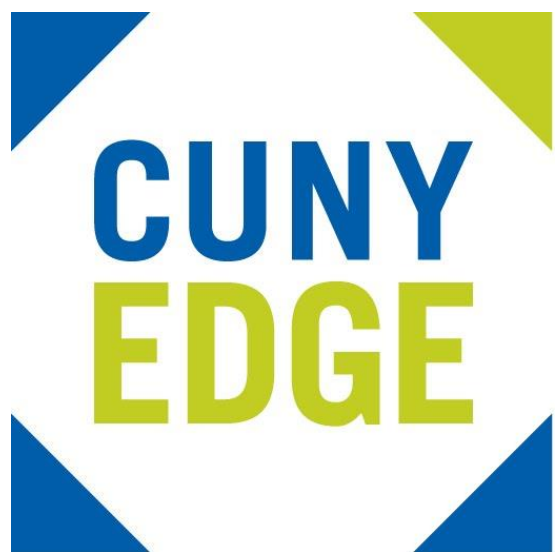
“It’s wild how much your personal life can affect your school life. Not having a permanent place to call home has definitely had an impact on my grades and drive when it comes to assignments. Sometimes, questioning where you are going to sleep and keep your stuff, trumps an important test or paper. That’s just the way life is.” - Student Five

“I try my best to keep up with everything. Most of the time, when things are going well at home, I can focus on my studies. Whenever I do get kicked out of my house for an extended period time though, that all changes. Distractions get the best of me and it’s hard to avoid. A permanent place to live would definitely give me a clear head and leave me with the time to succeed in school, the way that I should be.” - Student Six

Video Link

Members of our team created a video of Queens College students sharing their homeless experiences. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-Y4MaajEzM&t=71s>

CRITIQUE OF CURRENT RESOURCES & RECOMMENDATIONS



EDUCATE • DEVELOP • GRADUATE • EMPOWER

CUNY EDGE

For the students who are receiving services from government entities outside of school, the CUNY EDGE Program formerly known as The College Opportunity to Prepare for Employment (COPE) has created educational and social support systems for the most vulnerable student populations at all Senior and Junior level colleges across the CUNY system. The program is a “partnership between the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the University” (Cuny.edu). Students receiving social services are not of a binary, rather they are facing very unique individual circumstances that range from street homeless to housing insecurity/ rent burdened families. Without receiving these services, students within this social class are the most vulnerable and would otherwise face major roadblocks in achieving academic mobility and success.

Students who are matriculated, whether undergraduate, graduate, or professional level and receive cash assistance from the NYC Department of Social Services are eligible to access the on-campus services available through this program. CUNY EDGE advertises its mission as the missing link to ensuring that students whose families are receiving public benefits are able to graduate on-time and find employment. The program on the Queens College campus offers the following services: one on one counseling services, small grants for courses supplements, group meeting sessions, career planning, program planning, and much more. Separately, the EDGE program is connected to most if not all social services related programs on the Queens College campus. In addition to creating a friendly and supportive environment, the program assists with ensuring each student is in compliance with HRA workfare requirements to keep aid in the home.

It is imperative that the CUNY EDGE Program at Queens College expands its reach to ensure that all eligible students on campus can receive the vital services they need to be successful students. Often students are faced with the real-life decisions like child-care, sick parents, or even lack of financial aid that keeps them from attending and finishing school on a continuous basis. This program assists with making college a reality for those students. In that sediment it is

also important that the college increases the budget, awareness, and staffing for this program so the students whom are likely to be currently or have experienced periods of homelessness can have equal access to college as do their non-homeless peers. Although the program serves a proxy to HRA/DSS, it is important that students feel respected and that they are not apportioned to simply fulfilling a work/academic mandate put in place by government.

The Carroll and Milton Petrie Student Emergency Grant Fund

The Carroll and Milton Petrie Student Emergency Grant Fund has been available at Queens College for 9 years and was put into place in order to help students who have overdue utility bills, shut off notices, rent in arrears, those at risk for eviction, medical bills, housing assistance for the homeless etc. For those that this grant does help, it is a phenomenal thing that most likely gives the student a solid ground to stand on in order to complete their studies and graduate. However, there are many obstacles one can face when applying for the emergency grant, such as it can only be used as a last resort when all other options are exhausted. This means, that a student must apply for financial aid, student loans, etc. prior to trying to get the help they so desperately need. It takes extensive time and effort to apply for all of these programs and typically those who need them do not have extra hours in the day to worry about the paperwork. A statement also has to be written when being considered, and that can also deter a student from getting the help they need. A personal statement of any kind can be difficult for people to write, let alone share with strangers even though it is necessary, as those accepted is decided on a case to case basis. It may pose as a difficult hurdle to those who prefer privacy when attempting to seek help through services provided to students.

This grant is not the only form of assistance to those struggling with homelessness/housing insecurity on the Queens College Campus that has copious amounts of red tape for a student seeking aid to go through. This creates a form of resistance coming from the exact place that is supposed to be welcoming and helpful, forming a line of difficult work a student must complete in order to get help. Finding a place to live or struggling with getting one's hands on necessities while also being a student is challenging enough, without adding a mountain to climb over when attempting to use resources that's intention is to make life easier.



Single Stop

The Single Stop program is offered to seven junior colleges in the CUNY system but only one senior college of them. And this study will hopefully alert administrators that this program should be expanded to sing at colleges to serve the needs that they have entered in sure that they are the best students they can be regardless of their social issues at home. I research clearly highlights the link between students were able Who are not able to do well when facing homelessness or has it in security. Issues as simple as finding a child care provider is it a timing factor on whether someone goes to school one semester or chooses to take the semester off. This does not make education equally accessible and inclusive. CUNY needs to prioritize the expansion of this program to all their senior colleges.

Queens College should have access to the single stop services that were implemented across the junior colleges between 2009 to 2015. Statistics from this time frame shows that the program was able to service almost 80,000 students which is four times the number of students that are enrolled here at Queens College currently. Queens College adopting a program similar to the Single Stop program, if not the Single Stop program itself, would greatly benefit students in need of the services provided and can certainly decrease retention rates on campus.

CONCLUSION & TEAM PHOTO

Being proactive, asking the right questions, and getting a sense of how many students suffer under the weight of homelessness or housing insecurity is a small step in the right direction to solving this problem. All of the services in the world, even if well-funded, will not make immense progress or impact to those in need if students are not aware that they exist, and if those providing the services do not know how many students actually need help.



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