

POINT PARK UNIVERSITY

*Examining Housing Insecurity Among
Pittsburgh Area College Students*

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INTRODUCTION

PITTSBURGH AREA HOUSING INSECURITY

This study was a two-part study that examined perceptions of housing security among students as well as academic leaders at nine area institutions of higher education in the Pittsburgh region. This study draws on the definition of housing insecurity as a broad set of challenges such as the inability to pay rent or utilities or the need to move frequently.

Phase one of the study utilized interviews and focus groups to reach administrators at nine Pittsburgh Council on Higher Education (PCHE) Schools including Carlow University, Carnegie Mellon University, Chatham University, Community College of Allegheny County, Duquesne University, LaRoche College, Point Park University, Robert Morris University, and the University of Pittsburgh.

Phase two of the study was a survey to students asking about their housing situation. Students at seven universities completed the survey including Carlow University, Chatham University, Community College of Allegheny County, Duquesne University, LaRoche College, Point Park University, and the University of Pittsburgh.



Numbers at a Glance

1,806 STUDENTS COMPLETED THE 42-QUESTION SURVEY REPRESENTING 3.5% OF THE STUDENT POPULATION AT THE PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS.



There were at least **251 reports** of students who have slept in non-traditional housing (e.g. hotels, couch surfing, shelters, campers, outdoors) within the last 30 days

There were at least **397 reports** of students having slept in non-traditional housing (e.g. hotels, couch surfing, shelters, campers, outdoors) within the last 12 months

7.4 % of students report to have “couch surfed” in the last 30 days; **10.1%** in the last 12 months

2.8% of students report to have slept either outdoors (parks, street, sidewalk, alley) or in structures not intended for human habitation (abandoned building, cars, unconverted garage) in the last 30 days; **5.5%** in the last 12 months

Nonwhite students and first-generation students are more likely to be helping to financially support siblings or parents and take out credit card debt to cover academic or living expenses

12.2% of students report to have lacked a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence since starting college

39.7% of students strongly agreed, agreed or were unsure if their current accommodation is “only temporary even if they wanted to stay”

6.2% reported to not be settled in their place of residence or know what to expect from living there (landlord, roommates, neighbors)

Only **25.7%** indicated they strongly agree in being confident about their ability to pay their housing cost/rent on time

Only **29.6%** indicated they strongly agreed in being satisfied with their current living situation

Students with disabilities were more likely to lack a fixed, regular, and adequate night time residence

Findings from Administrators

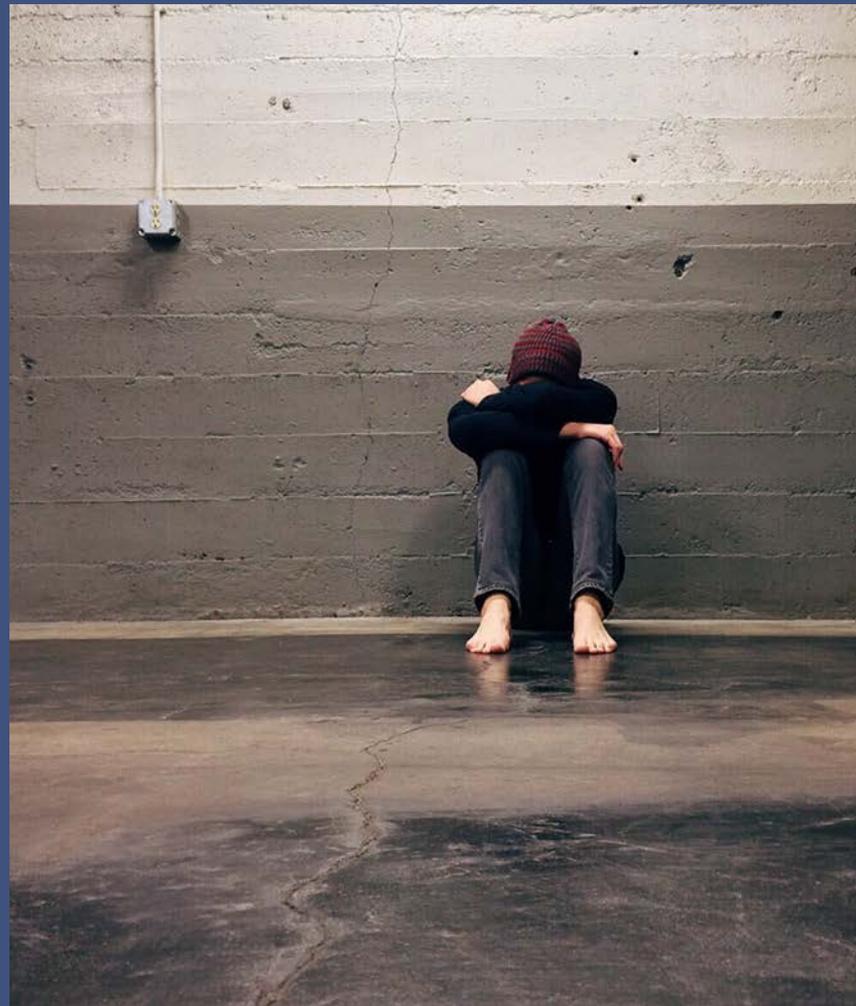
PITTSBURGH AREA HOUSING INSECURITY

Three themes emerged from the quantitative interviews that could guide a solutions-based approach

- Gaps in Institutional Structure
- Lack of Formal Processes and Policies
- Need for Training for Students, Staff, and Faculty

Administrators identified several basic needs on their respective campuses, including food insecurity, textbooks, hygiene products, child care, transportation, and legal assistance. They shared instances of assisting housing insecure and homeless students on their campuses.

Additionally, administrators indicated a desire for more institutional data regarding housing insecurity to further understand the scope of the problem in Pittsburgh. This lack of institutional data has manifested in gaps in institutional policies and processes. Most institutions handled instances of housing insecurity on a case by case basis. Institutions noted that students also lacked the information necessary to access these resources if needed. Trainings were mentioned as needed for students, staff and faculty on basic needs conversations. Adjuncts were noted as an important component to this conversation as well.



Three primary recommendations were discussed by the participating institutions for PCHE wide initiatives:

- Create a student assistance program comparable to employee assistance programs; this program would provide a central resource for students to utilize when needing support
- Implement a PCHE wide basic needs training program; this program would include training on housing insecurity and would also outline unified messaging for the institutions to help combat issues of stigma
- Develop campus and community partnerships to help address housing insecurity

Conclusion

This study, funded by the Eden Hall Foundation, was conducted by faculty and students in the Department of Community Engagement at Point Park University in the Spring and Fall of 2018. The study involved both administrators and students from PCHE institutions in the region. Administrators were invited to participate in focus groups that asked them their perception of housing insecurity and basic needs on their campus. Administrators at nine (of 10) PCHE schools attended the focus groups or interviews. The administrators also had the opportunity to discuss possible collaborations to help address basic needs among their universities. Three themes emerged from the qualitative interviews that could guide a solutions-based approach: Gaps in Institutional Structure, Lack of Formal Processes and Policies, and Need for Training for Students, Staff and Faculty. In addition to the qualitative discussion with regional administrators, students at seven participating institutions were given a 42-question survey asking about their housing situation which aimed to identify the need for housing insecurity support as well as correlations between housing security and other factors involving their education and happiness. A total of 2,448 students started the online survey, and 1,815 students completed the survey questions.

Results show that:

- 12.2% of students reported that they lacked a fixed, regular and adequate night-time residence at some point since starting college.
- 22.8% agreed or strongly agreed that their current accommodations are only temporary - even if they wanted to stay.
- 10.2% report to have couch surfed (staying temporary with friend or relative) within the last 12 months
- Only 53.9% of students report being confident in their ability to pay housing cost/rent on time
- There is a strong statistically significant positive correlation between satisfaction with housing and overall feeling of stability ($r=.603^{**}$, $p<.01$).
- 19.2% of students report using financial subsidies or community programs to help pay for housing costs
- 37.5% of students report taking out credit card debt to pay for housing costs
- Students also expressed a need for other basic need support including textbook support/ assistance (79% of students), followed by mental health support (47%), transportation assistance (45.8%), food support (43%), clothing support (23.6%) and childcare support (10.9%)

The results indicate a need for further study with additional institutions and the further exploration of PCHE-wide initiatives to address these basic needs demands in the region.



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