



Invited summaries of research for scholar and practitioner advocates for, traditionally hidden college student populations

Current Hidden College Student Populations

May include those who have foster care or justice-involved experiences, who are survivors of sexual violence, who are recovering drug or alcohol addicts, who face housing insecurity, or who are considered Third Culture Kids

R is for Thursday

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National Conference for Engaged Scholarship on Hidden Student Populations

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The Scholar-Practitioner is a monthly publication of invited research summaries that target the research-to-practice gap for U.S. scholar and practitioner advocates for college students with experiences in foster care and other hidden college student populations.

This publication reinforces the work of the **National Conference for Engaged Scholarship on Hidden Student Populations (NCHP)** by providing a space to share research applications for practice. NCHP was the first research conference dedicated to this multidisciplinary area of study. The NCHP 3rd conference will be

Poverty in American Higher Education: The Relationship Between Housing Insecurity and Academic Attainment

Broton, K. M. (2021). Poverty in American Higher Education: The Relationship Between Housing Insecurity and Academic Attainment. *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success*, 1(2), 18–45. https://doi.org/10.33009/fsop_jpss129147

Research Summary

A substantial share of college students experience housing insecurity and too many students leave higher education before earning a credential. Both of these experiences are more common among students from low-income families who often lack adequate resources. Although an inverse relationship between housing insecurity and college academic success may be intuitive, this relationship has not been tested due to quantitative data limitations. In this paper, I use data from a statewide longitudinal study of students from low-income families to conduct the first empirical test of the relationship between housing insecurity early in college and later college achievement and attainment. Findings show that housing insecurity is a statistically significant predictor of academic success, net of background factors. Specifically, housing insecurity is associated with an approximately 10 percentage-point lower probability of later degree attainment or enrollment. In the short-term, housing insecurity is also associated with lower mean GPA, a lower probability of obtaining at least a 2.0 GPA, and a higher probability of enrolling part-time rather than full-time, indicating that housing insecurity affects students' college academic experiences in multiple ways. Efforts to promote college attainment should be expanded to consider students' housing security. There are likely several points in time and multiple ways that higher education institutions, nonprofit agencies, and policymakers can intervene to promote secure housing and college success.

Study Participants & Methods

The study follows 1,335 first-time full-time undergraduates from low-income families who enrolled in one of Wisconsin's 42 public colleges and universities shortly after graduating from high school. All of the students completed the FAFSA and qualified for a federal Pell Grant. The research team invited students

to complete a survey about their first-year college experiences and 24% reported that they were housing insecure, unable to pay their rent or utilities on time. I compared the academic outcomes of these students to those who did not report any housing challenges using advanced quantitative methods to answer the question, what is the relationship between experiences of housing insecurity early in college and later educational success, net of background factors? To better understand potential academic pathways to attainment or persistence, I also assess the relationship between housing insecurity and enrollment intensity and GPA in the short-term.

Findings & Implications

Overall, 18% of students had earned a degree and an additional 48% were still enrolled in college four years after initial entry for a 66% success rate. However, 70% of housing secure students were educationally successful compared to 54% of housing insecure students, a gap of 16 percentage points ($p < .001$).

This difference in educational success could arise from several correlated factors – such as income, prior experiences of poverty, prior academic achievement, concurrent food insecurity challenges, and discrimination associated with demographic characteristics like race/ethnicity – rather than housing insecurity challenges during college and so I account

for this in my analyses. Across multiple methods and samples, housing insecurity is associated with an 8 to 12 percentage-point reduction in the probability of later degree attainment or enrollment, net of individual background and college context ($p < .05$). The magnitude of this relationship indicates that housing insecurity is a serious problem that deserves attention from higher education leaders and policymakers.

In the short-term, housing insecurity is associated with a 0.30 lower mean GPA, and a 11.2 percentage-point lower probability of earning a 2.0 or higher GPA, which is often necessary to maintain financial aid eligibility ($p < .001$). Moreover, a change from housing secure to insecure status is associated with a 5.4 percentage-point increase in the probability of part-time, rather than full-time enrollment ($p < .05$), which slows credit accumulation and extends time to degree. This suggests that there are multiple intervention points to better support students and their housing needs so that they can reach their college goals.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that housing insecurity is an independent source of educational disadvantage among students from low-income families. Changes to policy and practice that include a consideration of students' housing security may improve

students' odds of college success. Policymakers and practitioners can either work to address the root causes of housing insecurity among undergraduates, including college unaffordability, or alleviate the experiences directly, such as by providing housing to students in need. While some higher education leaders and policymakers are already working to address students' housing challenges, drawing on moral values or their understanding of the public good, this study also provides empirical evidence for those seeking quantitative justification for local, state, and federal investments that promote housing security as an innovative approach to increasing college degree attainment.

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