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1 in 10 Cal State students is homeless, study finds

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About one in 10 of [California State University](#)'s 460,000 students is homeless, and one in five doesn't have steady access to enough food, according to the initial findings of [a study](#) launched to better understand and address an issue that remains largely undocumented at the nation's public universities.

"This is a gasp, when you think about it," Cal State Chancellor Timothy P. White said Monday at a conference in Long Beach, where more than 150 administrators, researchers, students and advocacy groups gathered to exchange ideas, case studies and their personal experiences with the issue.

White, who commissioned the study, emphasized the need for Cal State, the largest public university system in the nation, to tackle the issue systematically across its 23 campuses.

"We're going to find solutions that we can take to scale," he said. "Getting this right is something that we just simply have to do."

Homelessness in higher education is difficult to study and measure accurately, and experts praised Cal State for trying to quantify the scope of an issue with limited data.

Across the country, the number of students who experience food insecurity largely is undocumented and unknown, and the number of homeless students tends to be underreported in national surveys, said Clare Cady, who led [Oregon State University](#)'s program to support homeless students and is now addressing the issue on a national level with the antipoverty nonprofit Single Stop.

Students with unstable housing conditions are not required to say so, and many are reluctant to seek help because of the shame associated with homelessness, said Rashida Crutchfield, an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at Cal State Long Beach, who led the first phase of the study.

Crutchfield, who launched her research in April 2015, interviewed 92 students and conducted four focus groups at urban and rural campuses. She and her team also sent out surveys, reviewed existing resources and asked university staff, faculty and administrators for their impressions of the level of homelessness on their campuses.

Many students and faculty members, she said, were unaware that the definition of homelessness extended beyond living on the street. Some students who couch surfed or lived in their cars, for example, did not consider themselves homeless.

Initial findings indicated that an estimated 8% to 12% of Cal State's students are homeless, and 21% to 24% are food insecure, she said.

Crutchfield and her team talked to professors who gave students money and kept food in their desks for those who confided their struggles. "A lot of these conversations took place inside our office with the door shut," one university staffer told Crutchfield.

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On Monday, Crutchfield talked about meeting Cassandra, a student she identified only by her first name, who said her studies were often on the "back burner" because "you can't really concentrate on school and put in any effort when you're trying to look for where to stay and how you're going to make ends meet."

In the first phase of the research project, Crutchfield identified 11 campuses that already offered some form of a food pantry or homeless support program. Five of these schools have been particularly proactive, she said.

Fresno State, for example, launched a "cupboard" last fall that tracks leftover food from catered campus events — and developed an app that notifies students when food is available. The university also created, among other initiatives, a center that provides free groceries, toothpaste and other basic supplies.

At Cal State Long Beach, a campus-wide intervention program offers students emergency grants, hotel vouchers, meal assistance and counseling. The initiative also has secured jobs on campus for nine students so far, to help them reach more stable living conditions.

Their work and ideas will be shared at the conference this week with representatives from other campuses, the UC system and nonprofits.

The study will continue over the next two years, Crutchfield said, with the goal of collecting more concrete data, confirming the scope of the problem and finding ways to launch intervention support programs on each campus.

"We have much, much more work to do," she said.

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