

## Measuring Housing Insecurity

With increasing depth, systemwide University of California (UC) student surveys have sought information about housing insecurity. In 2018 and prior, one question on systemwide surveys asked students about homelessness.<sup>i</sup> This inquiry was expanded to nine questions on the 2020 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) and the 2021 University of California Graduate Student Experience Survey (UCGSES) to gather more nuanced information.<sup>ii</sup> Results from these surveys inform UC reporting and research.<sup>iii</sup>

### DEFINING HOUSING INSECURITY

The questions used to measure homelessness or housing insecurity in UC student experience surveys are based on the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act definition of homelessness for children and youth: “individuals who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence.”<sup>iv</sup> The terms “homeless” and “housing insecure” overlap in literature, as well as in UC student experience survey results over time, particularly from 2016 to 2023. Housing insecurity generally refers to a range of circumstances that threaten adequate, safe, affordable and secure housing or cause the lack thereof, including homelessness. In other words, homelessness is an extreme form of housing insecurity.<sup>v</sup>

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) uses a specific definition of homelessness for its point-in-time, or PIT, counts, which are commonly referred to for estimates of homelessness. These counts differentiate between sheltered and unsheltered homelessness but do not include broader conditions of housing insecurity. A sheltered homeless individual according to HUD PIT counts resides in certain accommodations, such as emergency homeless or domestic violence shelters, hotels arranged by homeless assistance programs or residential programs for runaway youth. An unsheltered homeless individual sleeps in areas “not meant for human habitation,” such as vehicles, parks or transportation depots.<sup>vi</sup> Since the criteria used in UC surveys follow the McKinney-Vento definition, UC housing insecurity and homelessness statistics do not differentiate between sheltered and unsheltered students and may include those not considered homeless by HUD PIT counts.

### HOUSING INSECURITY VERSUS FOOD INSECURITY MEASUREMENTS

Measurements for housing insecurity and those for food insecurity bear important distinctions. The definition of food insecurity is standardized, with food security predominantly measured using a specific set of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) food security modules.<sup>vii</sup> The U.S. produces an annual estimate of food insecurity based on a nationally representative sample of respondents.<sup>viii</sup>

In contrast, definitions and methods of measuring housing insecurity are not standardized in the U.S., and no single survey set is used to produce nationally representative statistics. Instead, HUD uses PIT counts gathered at the community level and then compiled to estimate the national prevalence of homelessness. Additionally, methods that evaluate housing insecurity and homelessness do not commonly include how worried a respondent is about securing or affording their housing the way USDA food security modules ask respondents if they are worried about food supplies or affording nutritious food.<sup>ix</sup> This sense of worry is commonly factored into whether a person is considered food insecure but is not factored into whether a person is considered housing insecure.

Since 2018, the UCUES and UCGSES have used the six-item USDA food security module to produce UC

student food insecurity estimates, providing researchers with a level of comparability to national statistics.<sup>x</sup> Given that housing insecurity does not have a national standard, a measurement tool was created for UCUES and UCGSES in 2020 by UC researchers in alignment with the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness. Therefore, UC survey results on housing insecurity and homelessness have limited comparability longitudinally and when comparing across other institutions or to national figures.

### 2016 AND 2018 MODULES

In 2016 and 2018, the UCUES and Graduate Wellbeing Survey (GWBS) used the following question to estimate student housing insecurity rates. Students who reported 'yes' to any of these response options were considered homeless.

*Since attending UC, have you ever been homeless for any of the following lengths of time (check all that apply)? (Homeless means not having stable or reliable housing, e.g., living on the street, in vehicles, motels, campgrounds, single-occupancy facilities or couch surfing in other people's homes for temporary sleeping arrangements).*

Response options: 1) No; 2) Yes, during fall-spring academic year; 3) Yes, during summer when taking classes; 4) Yes, during summer when not taking classes and 5) Yes, during winter break.

### 2020 MODULE

From 2020 onward, the UCUES and UCGSES used the following question to estimate undergraduate and graduate student housing insecurity rates. Since 2020, the term "housing insecure" has been used instead of "homeless." Students who reported 'yes' to any of these response options were considered housing insecure.

Response Options: *In the last 12 months, have you ever lacked a safe, regular, and adequate nighttime place to stay and sleep for any of the following lengths of time?(Check all that apply): 1) No; 2) Yes, during fall academic term; 3) Yes, during winter academic term; 4) Yes, during winter break; 6) Yes, during spring academic term; 7) Yes, during spring break; 8) Yes, during summer when taking classes; 9) Yes, during summer when not taking classes; 10) Yes, during other academic holidays (such as Thanksgiving or MLK Day) and 10) Yes, but I cannot recall when it occurred.*

Additionally, more nuanced information on UC student housing insecurity is available. UCUES and UCGSES began using a nine-question module in 2020 to better understand students' living situations (such as where and with whom students live), housing stability, housing insecurity and certain effects on mental health and food insecurity (see Appendix I).<sup>xi</sup> The UC Office of the President's Basic Needs Dashboard provides students' responses to these nine questions under the *Living Situations*, *Housing Stability* and *Housing Insecurity* tabs.

### Appendix I

#### UCUES and UCGSES Housing Insecurity Modules

Questions 1 through 3 are under the *Living Situations* tab in UC's [Student Basic Needs Dashboard](#); questions 4, 7 and 8 are under the Housing Insecurity tab; and questions 5, 6 and 9 are under the *Housing Stability* tab.

Survey Instructions: The following questions are about your current and past living situations since entering the UC system. There are no right or wrong answers. Please choose the answer that best fits you.

Q1 Where are you living this term?

- Campus residence hall
- University-owned apartment, house, or duplex (on- or off-campus)
- Sorority or fraternity
- Co-op student housing
- Off-campus in an apartment
- Off-campus in a house
- Off-campus in a duplex
- No stable residence/Homeless
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

Q2 How far do you live from campus?

- On campus or < 1 mile
- 1 mile to 2 miles
- 3 miles to 10 miles
- 11 miles to 20 miles
- 21 miles or more

Q3 With whom do you live? Please select the option that best describes your living situation this term.

- I live alone
- I live with at least one other [University name] student
- I live with peers who are not [University name] students
- I live with at least one family member
- I am a single parent living with children
- I live with my spouse or domestic partner and children
- I live with my spouse or domestic partner without children
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

Q4 In the last 12 months, have you slept overnight in any of the following places because you didn't have a permanent home to return to? (Check all that apply)

- Temporarily staying with a relative, friend, or couch surfing until you found other housing
- Temporarily on campus in libraries, offices, or other non-residential university spaces
- Temporarily at a hotel, motel, Airbnb, HomeAway, or similar without a permanent home to return to (not on vacation or business travel)
- In transitional housing, an independent living program, a group home such as a halfway house, or a residential program
- At a homeless shelter
- Outdoor location such as street, sidewalk, or alley, bus or train stop, campground or woods, part, beach, or riverbed, under bridge or overpass (not for recreation or leisure)
- In a closed area/space with a roof not meant for human habitation such as car or truck, van, RV or camper, encampment or tent, abandoned building, or unconverted garage (not for recreation or leisure)
- In a space not originally intended for habitation (i.e., living room, closet, attic, basement, converted

- garage) in a house or apartment
- I have not slept in any of these places

Q5 Did you move in the last 12 months? [If "Yes" then Question Q6; otherwise Question Q7]

- Yes
- No

Q6 In the last 12 months, which of the following were reasons why you moved? (Check all that apply)

- Planned reasons (e.g., new roommates, starting/ending a lease)
- Unplanned reasons (e.g., family circumstances, relationship challenges or conflicts)
- Financial difficulties (e.g., couldn't afford housing or rent, rent increase, etc.)
- Other

Q7 In the last 12 months, have you ever lacked a safe, regular, and adequate nighttime place to stay and sleep for any of the following lengths of time? (Check all that apply)

Note: Not having a safe, adequate nighttime place to stay includes sleeping in vehicles, motels, campgrounds, homeless shelters, single-occupancy facilities, or couches in other people's homes because you had nowhere else to go.

- No
- Yes, during fall academic term
- Yes, during winter academic term [display only for quarter campuses]
- Yes, during winter break
- Yes, during spring academic term
- Yes, during spring break
- Yes, during summer when taking classes
- Yes, during summer when not taking classes
- Yes, during other academic holidays (such as Thanksgiving or MLK day)
- Yes, but I cannot recall when it occurred

Q8 In the last 12 months, were you ever at risk of not having a safe, regular, and adequate nighttime place to stay and sleep while you were on a UC housing waiting list?

- Yes
- No

Q9 In the last 12 months, how often did you experience each of the following because you were worried about paying for housing?

	Every month	Some months during the year	1 or 2 times in the year	Never
You experienced anxiety	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your experienced depression	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You skipped meals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You ate less nutritious meals and/or balanced meals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You had difficulty focusing on your studies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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- <sup>i</sup> The one-time Graduate Wellbeing Survey (GWBS) was administered in 2016 and asked one question about homelessness. Similarly, in 2018 and prior, the University of California’s Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), asked one question about homelessness.
- <sup>ii</sup> Since the UCUES and the UCGSES are administered in alternating years, the nine-question set was first used in the UCUES in 2020 and in the UCGSES in 2021.
- <sup>iii</sup> For a brief synopsis of UC food and housing insecurity measurements, see [Measuring food and housing insecurity \(ucop.edu\)](#)
- <sup>iv</sup> [42 USC CHAPTER 119, SUBCHAPTER VI, Part B: Education for Homeless Children and Youths \(house.gov\)](#)
- <sup>v</sup> [Improving Measures of Housing Insecurity \(urban.org\)](#)
- <sup>vi</sup> [HUD’s Homeless Assistance Programs: A Guide to Counting Unsheltered Homeless People](#)
- <sup>vii</sup> [USDA ERS - Survey Tools](#)
- <sup>viii</sup> [USDA ERS - Key Statistics & Graphics](#)
- <sup>ix</sup> [Improving Measures of Housing Insecurity \(urban.org\)](#)