



# **Housing Instability at CUNY: Results from a Survey of CUNY Undergraduate Students**



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**A Report from:  
The Campaign for a Healthy CUNY**

by

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*“One of the saddest moments that I have experienced recently occurred at a Council of Presidents meeting when some presidents indicated to me and other members of the chancellery that more and more students appear on their campuses hungry. They have not had breakfast or may have missed a meal the night before. In light of the difficult economic times facing very low income students, I have asked the Office of Student Affairs to develop ... programs to focus on issues of hunger, nutrition and homelessness.”*

Chancellor Matthew Goldstein, CUNY Board of Trustees Meeting, April 27, 2009

## **Introduction**

In this series of reports, we present the results of a survey conducted among CUNY undergraduate students in summer and fall of 2010 examining food insecurity, housing instability, and a range of mental health issues. The motivation for the survey was concern on the part of the CUNY administration, reflected in Chancellor Goldstein’s comments above, about student hunger, homelessness, and psychological well-being in light of the economic recession. Following Chancellor Goldstein’s comments, the Office of Student Affairs created a committee co-chaired by Hunter College Distinguished Professor of Public Health Nicholas Freudenberg and Director of CUNY Mental Health and Wellness Services Luis Manzo. The formation of this committee was an important early step in the Healthy CUNY Initiative, an effort sponsored by the CUNY School of Public Health at Hunter College and the CUNY Chancellor’s Office, to promote health and well-being CUNY- students, faculty and staff. The committee of CUNY faculty, students and staff (listed in the Acknowledgements) met several times in 2009 and 2010 to design the survey and plan initiatives to better meet the food, housing, and psychological needs of CUNY students. The survey was conducted with support and advice from the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, the Baruch College Survey Research Center, and trained CUNY students who served as data collectors.

For each of the key topics covered by the survey—food insecurity, housing instability, and psychological well-being—we have developed a policy brief describing and interpreting the survey data. In this brief, we define housing instability, describe the magnitude of the problem among CUNY undergraduate students, identify subpopulations that experience higher levels of housing instability, and present data that compares the experiences of housing instability among CUNY undergraduates to the experiences of residents of New York City and other college students. We also describe the kinds of services that CUNY and other agencies provide to address the problem of housing instability, and the degree to which students are using these services and programs to help meet their housing needs.

## **Survey Design and Methodology**

The findings in this report come from a survey that was conducted in the summer and fall of 2010 with two samples of CUNY undergraduate students. The survey questions, developed by the previously mentioned committee, asked students about their experiences with food insecurity, housing instability, and psychological problems in the last 12 months. The survey also asked students to describe their basic demographic and academic characteristics. We used the same survey tool with the two samples, which were recruited in different ways to enable us to get

more complete assessments of the food, housing, and psychological needs of CUNY undergraduates. The first round of the survey, labeled the CUNY Representative Sample, was carried out by Baruch College Survey Research (BCSR) on behalf of the Healthy CUNY investigators. BCSR staff administered the survey via Internet or telephone to a sample of 1,086 CUNY undergraduate students recruited to match all CUNY undergraduates by gender, age, race/ethnicity, cumulative grade point average, college, type of college, and class standing. The sample included respondents from all 17 CUNY community college and four-year schools where undergraduates are enrolled. The participating campuses were: Baruch College, Borough of Manhattan Community College (CC), Bronx CC, Brooklyn College, City College, College of Staten Island, Hostos CC, Hunter College, John Jay College, Kingsborough CC, LaGuardia CC, Medgar Evers College, NYC Tech, Queens College, Queensborough CC, and York College.

BCSR's data collection and data management activities were as follows. A total of 6,883 randomly sampled students were invited to participate in the survey by email, of whom 1,086 responded, a response rate of 15.7%. To ensure that the resulting sample was representative of the CUNY undergraduate population as a whole, the data were weighted by key demographic variables. Of the 1,086 respondents, 620 (57%) completed the survey online and 466 (43%) completed the survey by telephone. The telephone interview option was added for those who did not respond to the online option within two weeks and for those whose email addresses were determined to be invalid. The questionnaire was available in English only. All telephone interviews were conducted by trained interviewers in the BCSR computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) facility.

The second round of the survey, labeled as the CUNY Targeted Sample, was administered by trained CUNY students, who distributed and collected the surveys in person to students on the eight campuses with the highest rates of students receiving public assistance. This sample includes 1,114 students from Borough of Manhattan, Bronx, Hostos, Kingsborough, La Guardia, and Queensborough Community Colleges, and John Jay and Medgar Evers Colleges, both of which are four-year schools. While this sample was not representative of all CUNY students, it allowed us to compare higher need campuses with all campuses and to ascertain whether the needs of students who were reached by face-to-face encounters were significantly different than those of students were reached by telephone or online. Table 1 at the end of this report provides descriptive data for the two samples.

In this report, we present findings only from the CUNY Representative Sample unless otherwise noted. In analyzing the data from this sample, we began with analyses that describe the sample demographics. We then explored differences in the outcomes (food insecurity, housing instability, and measures of mental health) by key variables, such as race, age, and income. Predictors of these outcomes will be examined in future analyses. In Box 1 in the Appendix we describe the limitations of our survey.

## Defining Housing Instability

While there is no standard definition of housing instability, researchers have measured the concept in several ways, including assessments of difficulty paying rent, undergoing frequent moves, living in overcrowded conditions or doubling up with friends or relatives, and spending more than 50% of household income on housing.<sup>1</sup> In order to assess housing instability among CUNY undergraduates, we asked 12 questions about housing-related experiences in the past year. These experiences were:

1. Not having enough money to pay rent
2. Experiencing a rent increase that made it difficult to pay rent
3. Being required to appear in housing court
4. Leaving because of feeling unsafe in the household
5. Being threatened with foreclosure
6. Being thrown out by someone in the household
7. Being evicted by a landlord
8. Trying but not being able to get into a shelter
9. Being removed from a shelter
10. Losing housing as a result of fire or other building problems
11. Losing housing as a result of a foreclosure
12. Losing housing as a result of a Workfare requirement

We defined a student as “housing instable” if they reported that they had experienced one or more of these problems in the last year.

## Findings

### *Prevalence of Housing Instability*

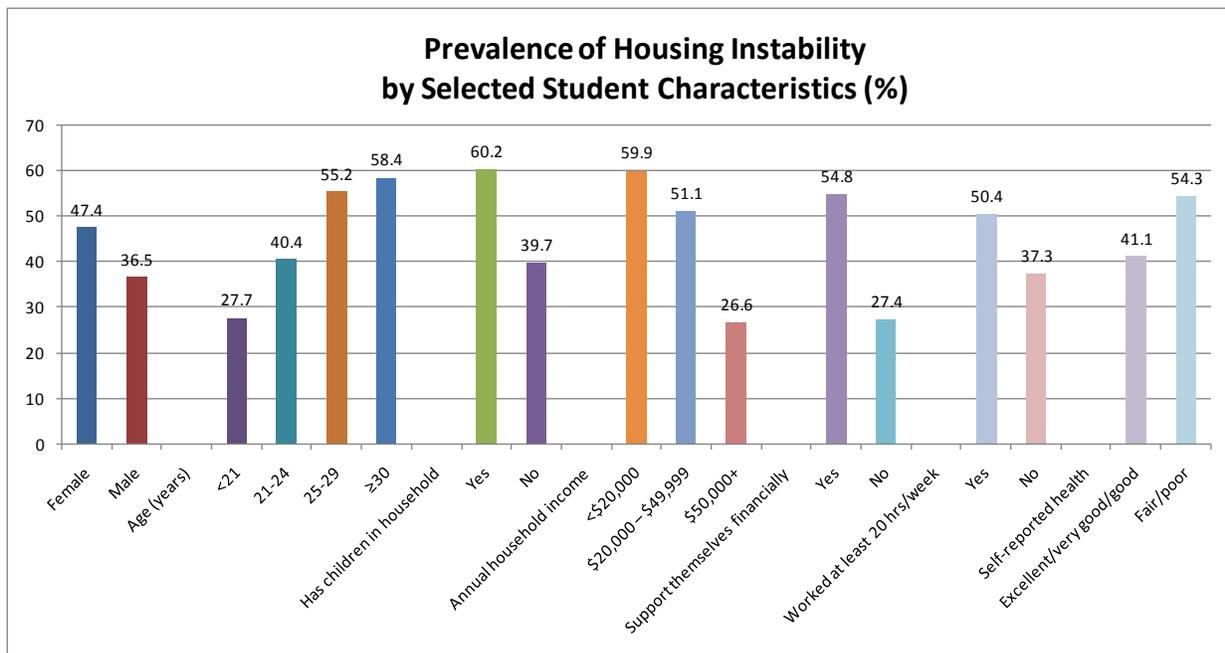
Based on this definition, the survey showed that:

- Overall, 41.7% of CUNY students in the sample, about two in five, reported that they were housing instable. Based on an estimated enrollment of 250,000 undergraduate students in the Spring 2010 semester, this suggests that more than 100,000 CUNY students experienced some level of housing instability in the last year.<sup>1</sup>
- The most common housing-related problems that CUNY students experienced were not having enough money to pay rent (28.6%) and experiencing a rent increase that made it difficult to pay rent (27.7%). No other housing problems described in the list above had a prevalence of over 5%.
- In addition, 22.7% of respondents reported that they knew of other CUNY students, not including themselves, who had housing-related problems including not having a home, lacking a long term residence, or being at risk of losing housing. This suggests that many CUNY students are unaware of the extent of the problem of housing instability among their peers.

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<sup>1</sup> See Box 1 in the Appendix for a discussion of the limitations of this estimate.

- Some populations of CUNY students had significantly higher rates of housing instability than others. For example, women were more likely to have at least one housing problem than men (47.4% vs. 36.5%). Students over the age of 25 were two times as likely to experience housing related problems as students under 21. Students raising children were significantly more likely to have housing problems as compared with those who were not (60.2% vs. 39.7%). Students reporting household incomes of less than \$50,000 a year were more than twice as likely to report housing instability as those with annual household incomes of \$50,000 or more. Students who support themselves financially were twice as likely to report housing instability as those not supporting themselves. Students working more than 20 hours per week had a higher rate of housing instability than those who did not work (50.4% vs. 37.3%). Finally, students who reported that their health was fair or poor were more likely to report housing instability than those who rated their health as excellent or good (54.3% vs. 41.1%).
- Almost a quarter of CUNY students (24.3%) reported both food insecurity and housing instability. CUNY students over the age of 21 and those earning federal work study were more likely to report both problems than young students and those not getting work study support.



### *CUNY Student Use of Housing-Related Programs and Services*

Students reported using some housing-related services and programs offered through the local shelter system, and the city, state and federal governments. The survey found that:

- 1.2% of students currently live in a shelter.
- 10.5% of students currently live in public housing.
- Only 5.5% of students reported currently receiving a rent supplement including a Section 8 certificate (a federal assistance program for low-income renters and homeowners), Jiggetts (assistance for some people with children who receive public assistance), and the

Family Eviction Prevention Supplement (or FEPS, a New York City program for families receiving public assistance), or help from the First-Time Homebuyer Program.

## Comparisons

To better interpret the meaning of these findings on housing instability, we compare the prevalence of housing problems among CUNY students to rates for relevant national and New York City populations. A nationally representative sample of low-income families living under 200% of the poverty line in 1999 found that 23.6% of families reported having had difficulties paying their rent, mortgage, or utilities in the past year.<sup>2</sup> Among CUNY students, 28.6% reported that not having enough money to pay rent had been a problem for them in the past year. Though these measures are slightly different, these data suggest that CUNY students may be marginally more housing unstable than low-income families nationally. By combining 2010 data on the number of people staying in shelters in New York City from the Coalition for the Homeless with census data on the New York City's population as a whole, we find that the percent of CUNY students living in shelters at the time of our survey was almost 3 times higher than the percent of New York City residents living in shelters (1.2% vs. 0.5%).<sup>2,3</sup> Finally, by combining 2010 data from the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and the U.S. Census, we find that the percent of CUNY students living in public housing is about 5 times higher than the percent of all New Yorkers living in public housing (10.5% vs. 2.2%).<sup>3,4</sup>

## Next Steps

These data suggest that many CUNY students experience housing instability and that existing programs are not adequately addressing students' housing needs. Currently, some CUNY campuses offer access to dormitories or other types of housing, as well as housing referral services and information. CUNY community colleges also now offer Single Stop services, which provide legal assistance in applying for housing programs and rent assistance, support in applying to city housing lotteries, and referrals to shelters in extreme cases. However, additional action is needed to ensure that CUNY students have the housing stability they need to productively pursue an education. In light of the findings from this survey, the Healthy CUNY Initiative is working to develop specific recommendations to reduce housing instability among CUNY students in the next academic year. If you have suggestions for addressing the needs described in this report or feedback on the survey, please send them to:

[healthcunysurvey@gmail.com](mailto:healthcunysurvey@gmail.com). We look forward to your comments and ideas.

## References

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## Appendix

<b>Table 1: Comparison of Sample Characteristics</b>		
	<b>Representative Sample % (n)</b>	<b>Targeted Sample % (n)</b>
<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	n=1086	n=1114
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	58.7% (637)	62.6% (683)
Male	41.3% (449)	37.4% (408)
<b>Age (years)</b>		
<21	26.0% (282)	45.6% (493)
21-24	39.7% (431)	30.6% (331)
25-29	17.9% (194)	10.9% (118)
≥30	16.4% (178)	12.9% (139)
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
African-American/Black (non-Hispanic)	24.2% (260)	30.6% (335)
Hispanic	29.5% (318)	37.2% (407)
White (non-Hispanic)	20.0% (215)	10.7% (117)
Asian (non-Hispanic)	17.3% (186)	11.2% (123)
Other (non-Hispanic)	9.1% (98)	10.2% (112)
<b>US Born</b>		
Yes	58.1% (626)	57.4% (622)
No	41.9% (452)	42.6% (461)
<b>Has child(ren) in household</b>		
Yes	15.0% (161)	22.6% (247)
No	85.0% (917)	77.4% (847)
<b>Annual household income</b>		
<\$20,000	26.4% (272)	25.9% (268)
\$20,000 – \$49,999	27.3% (281)	22.4% (232)
\$50,000+	21.1% (217)	12.2% (126)
Not Sure	25.2% (260)	39.6% (410)
<b>Type of campus</b>		
Community College <sup>1</sup>	36.1% (390)	67.1% (735)
4-year College <sup>2</sup>	63.9% (692)	32.9% (361)
<b>Student Status (Spring 2010)</b>		
Full-time (12+ credits)	65.5% (704)	55.6% (603)
Part-time (<12 credits)	32.9% (354)	44.3% (480)
<b>Problem Outcomes in last year</b>		
Food insecurity	39.1% (410)*	45.4% (475)
Housing instability	42.7% (464)*	48.3% (538)
Both food insecurity and housing instability	24.3% (255)*	31.1% (325)
Psychological problems that interfere with school or work	50.4% (439)*	56.8% (447)
Depressive symptoms	19.3% (187)*	27.6% (195)

\*Data on problem outcomes not weighted here to enable direct comparison to Targeted Sample.

### **Box 1: Limitations of this Study**

Our study has several limitations. It is possible that our sample is biased, with students with the problems under study choosing to respond to the survey at higher rates than those unaffected. This would over-estimate the true prevalence of the outcomes of concern. It is also possible that students experiencing food insecurity or housing instability would be less likely to have working email addresses or telephones or would choose not to disclose possibly stigmatizing problems, either of which could lead to an under-representation in our sample and thus an underestimate of the true prevalence of these conditions. The low response rate, 15.7%, is a cause for concern, although we did weight the resulting sample on several key demographic measures to ensure that it resembled the population of CUNY undergraduates as a whole on these characteristics.

A comparison of the rates of outcomes of concern between the representative and the targeted sample (last row in the table in the Appendix) shows statistically significant higher rates of the six outcomes of concern in the targeted sample. Since the targeted sample includes higher proportions of low income and Black and Latino students, groups with higher rates of food insecurity and housing instability in the population as a whole, this finding is not unexpected. However, the fact that two independent survey methods each showed high rates of problems provides some reassurance that these findings reflect a valid cause of concern. Whatever the limitations of the surveys, these data are the most complete available on the prevalence of these problems among CUNY students. Whether they over- or under-estimate the true prevalence of these problems, they indicate a clear need for action to ensure that all CUNY students can meet the basic needs of food and shelter that are a prerequisite for academic success.

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