

Homeless And In College: 17.5 Percent Of CSCU Students Surveyed Have No Permanent Home



Daisia Walker

Homeless Student at Capital Community College

Daisia Walker talks about being a homeless student at Capital Community College.



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Daisia Kai Walker, a student at Capital Community College, worries a lot lately about where she'll be next week or next year. She's staying with a friend now, but she has no secure home and isn't sure where she'll wind up.

"It's tough," Walker, 21, said recently. "You're always hungry and you can't sleep and you're constantly thinking. You start to think about what you are doing and why you're here. I have a lot of anxiety."

A recent study prepared by the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness for the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities found that 17.5 percent of 3 CSCU students surveyed reported housing

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Mary Ann Haley, deputy director of the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, said the researchers considered any student who moved three times or more in 60 days to have an insecure housing situation.

“You wouldn’t necessarily hear a young person saying, ‘I’m housing insecure,’” Haley said. “Young people are much less likely to access shelter or other housing services out there in the community. They could be sleeping at a friend’s house or in a car for a day, then with another friend, and then something happens and they can no longer stay there.”

After a falling out with her family, Walker went to live with an older friend in April, but after several months, she needed to move out. An acquaintance in one of her classes offered to let her stay with her in an apartment, but Walker isn’t sure how long she can stay and has had trouble sleeping.

“I’m grateful for my friend because I wouldn’t have any other place to live,” she said, but she wants her own space.

Lesley Mara, director of workforce development and strategic services with CSCU, said the 17.5 percent figure was high enough “to be a call to action.”

While the researchers warned that because of the limited number of students sampled the results cannot be extrapolated to the full 85,000 students in the CSCU system, Mara said, “It confirms what we know to be true. We know that our students juggle a lot of these challenges ... it’s pretty hard to handle anything about life if you don’t know where you’re going to sleep. I certainly think it’s a number that would cause anybody concern.”

If a student is facing housing issues, Mara added, chances are they also facing difficulties with basic needs: food, transportation, medical services, child care.

“We do think that these barriers exist in the community college group, more than they do in the average student population,” she said.

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A lot of times, if they are sleeping on a friend’s couch, even if it’s a different couch every two weeks, they don’t perceive themselves as homeless.

— T.J. Barber, director of student activities at Manchester Community College

To address the problem and help more students stay in school, community college leaders are working to establish a single point of contact where students can go and get connected to whatever services or help they need

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student activities, serves as that contact for students

Barber, who oversees the college's food pantry operation, said he thinks the percentage of students with housing insecurity may even be higher than 17.5 percent. During the past academic year, he said, "at any given time we had 20-plus students that we were dealing with who were homeless. The fact that 20 had sought out our office to get food or whatever, there have to be hundreds more."

"A lot of times, if they are sleeping on a friend's couch, even if it's a different couch every two weeks, they don't perceive themselves as homeless," Barber said.

Matthew Ray, 47, was one of those students who came to see Barber and Gordon Plouffe, who heads the food pantry at Manchester Community College.

After what he called "a situation at home with my brother," Ray could no longer live at home and wound up homeless in the midst of final exams in May 2017.

He stayed with his sister until finals were over and then with the help of Plouffe went to stay at the Stewart B. McKinney Men's Emergency Shelter in [Hartford](#).

He wound up staying there for seven or eight months. "It was impossible to study there," Ray said. "It was too noisy, too negative."

Shelter rules required him to be in by 7 p.m. Ray said, but sometimes he had to study or had a class that ran late.

Sometimes he could get permission to get in at a later time, Ray said, but sometimes he couldn't. At those times, he'd find an abandoned porch where he would study and sleep out.

"I figured my education was more worth it," than getting an indoor bed at the shelter, he said.

"I've had many things taken from me in life," Ray said. "Once you grab an education, it can never be taken from you. It's not like a car or a house."

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Sometimes the adversity you face, it shows you the character you have. From being in that shelter, it only motivated me even more.

— Matthew Ray, a student at Manchester Community College who was previously homeless.

He's had a variety of jobs in supermarkets, restaurants and other places, but he's studying drug and alcohol in that area.

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“I’m feeling like Superman,” he said. “Sometimes the adversity you face, it shows you the character you have. From being in that shelter, it only motivated me even more.”

Like many college students who have experienced homelessness, Walker spent part of her childhood in foster care.

Walker was a star athlete at East Windsor High School, named an all-state athlete in the long jump and winning many awards in other track and field events.

She said that now it helps to focus on her goals rather than on her worries. She is in a three-month program to becoming a certified nurse aide so that she can get a job to help pay for her expenses. But her aim is to get an associate’s degree in criminal justice, a bachelor’s in criminology and a law degree. She’d like to help get clients off death row.

“As long as I’m constantly thinking, about ‘Oh, I want to be a lawyer and I’m going to get there and I’m going to do it,’ then my mind is there,” Walker said. “I don’t feel like this will forever be my life, but I feel like you have to go through the hard times before you get to the good times. I believe in God, so he’ll get me there.”

She spends much of her day strolling through Bushnell Park, at Hartford Public Library or at Capital Community College. She’s even spent a few nights in Bushnell Park.

Recently, Walker settled into a booth in Capital’s cafeteria late on a Friday afternoon. The cafeteria was closed and almost no one was there. Walker hadn’t eaten all day and was hungry. She works as a security guard on weekends, but doesn’t have much money to buy more than snacks from vending machines.

“I’ve been eating chips and things that I never thought I would eat to be honest,” Walker said. “It’s not healthy at all; it’s hard.”

But Walker sipped her water and focused on her studies. She was preparing for a class at 6 p.m.

“If I don’t go to school, that’s going to kill me — not being homeless,” Walker said.

What sustains her? “Air and opportunity,” Walker replied.

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