



“I KNOW WHAT’S AT STAKE”

How Homelessness Impacts College
Success in New York City

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YOUNG  INVINCIBLES



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New York City is in the midst of an educational crisis: the increasing share of students experiencing homelessness. Today, one out of every ten students enrolled in New York City’s public schools lacks a reliable, safe place to sleep at night.¹ The city’s youth homelessness crisis does not, of course, end with high school. As young people enter into college, the challenge of homelessness remains far too common. A 2019 survey of 22,000 City University of New York (CUNY) undergraduates found that 14 percent had experienced homelessness while enrolled in classes.² More than half (55 percent) of the survey’s respondents experienced some form of housing insecurity over the last year.³

While the struggles of student homelessness in New York City remain acute, they are not unique to the city. Schools and universities across the United States are grappling with the country’s growing homelessness crisis — in rural and urban communities alike. Nationwide, the rate of K-12 student homelessness has nearly doubled over the last decade.⁴ Across New York State, nearly 150,000 P-12 students experience homelessness while enrolled in school — a number that has grown steadily over the past decade.⁵ And while numbers on student homelessness across all New York colleges remain limited, nationwide, college students are experiencing homelessness at alarming rates: 14 percent of four-year college students and 18 percent of community-college students experience homelessness in a given year.⁶

Both research and students’ experiences underscore how homelessness can rob young people of educational opportunity, and with it, a stronger likelihood of long-term economic stability. While longitudinal data on homeless students’ educational persistence is limited, studies have found that students who experience homelessness are more likely to miss more school⁷ and experience high stress.⁸ These conditions mean students are often forced to make the unfair choice between meeting their basic needs and fully participating in school.

Conversations with young people highlight the daily challenges of navigating college without a stable place to sleep at night — from homeless shelter rules that limit students’ ability to participate in on-campus activities, to the persistent stigma surrounding homelessness that compounds the message to students that they don’t belong and won’t succeed in college.

To better understand the many ways homelessness impacts New York City’s young adults and their plans for the future, Young Invincibles (YI) conducted focus groups with young people in eight drop-in centers and youth shelters in New York City. These discussions centered on how experiences of homelessness, and the issues accompanying it, impact young people’s ability to enter and complete a postsecondary pathway of their choosing — whether entering college, a high-quality job training program, or a meaningful career path. YI also interviewed researchers, policymakers, agency officials, program staff, and young adults to further investigate how the interplay of New York’s systems — from higher education



institutions to public housing programs — create opportunities and barriers for young adults experiencing homelessness. We also reviewed existing research on how housing insecurity and homelessness impacts a person’s ability to complete a postsecondary education.

Our conversations across New York City show that, despite the daily challenges these young adults face, many are considering their future options — often without sufficient support from family, P-12 and college staff, and broader community resources. Prevailing notions that homeless young adults are “too occupied” with their immediate struggles to plan ahead oversimplify the reality: many of the young adults we spoke with were exploring ways to stabilize their future while navigating their immediate concerns. Assuming these young adults are too occupied to think about college and careers ignores the fact that many are already exploring their options — whether that’s completing their high-school equivalency (HSE) with the hopes of entering a college program or balancing college coursework with their other obligations. Many spoke clearly about their plans for their future and their interests, while noting that colleges and universities don’t seem interested in supporting their educational goals.

Ignoring the role of stable housing in college completion not only undermines public investment in higher education, it also carries long-term consequences for a generation of students who face increasing pressure to earn postsecondary credential — just to survive.



SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Smoothing the Transition to Postsecondary Education by Increasing Academic Counseling and Supports

- Sustain the New York City Department of Education’s (NYC DOE) Pathways to Graduation (P2G) program
- Increase the Age of Eligibility for NYC DOE Alternative Pathways Program from 21 to 24
- Increase Capacity of NYC DOE Student-Tracking Systems to Flag Students in Temporary Housing for Critical Supports
- Increase Support of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth
- Ensure NYC DOE Anti-Bias Training Includes Content Related to Serving Students in Temporary Housing

Increasing Financial Aid and Simplifying Processes

- Increase Aid Available to Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (UHY) through the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) and Stop TAP from Penalizing UHY for Applying as Independent Students
- Streamline State Financial-Aid Verification and Approval Process
- Eliminate Barriers to Accessing Transcripts

Promoting Greater Awareness of Homelessness on College Campuses and Providing Critical Wraparound Supports

- **Increase Housing Supports for College Students**
 - Create On-Campus Liaisons Who Identify and Support Students Experiencing Homelessness
 - Ensure Students Experiencing Homelessness Receive Priority Enrollment in CUNY Campus Housing, and Maintain Housing through Breaks
 - Create On-Campus Housing Community for Students Experiencing Homelessness
 - Address LGBTQ+ Homelessness
- **Expand Wraparound Supports That Serve Housing-Insecure Students**
 - Increase State Investment in Campus Food Pantries to Improve and Better Market Services to Students
 - Invest in Single Stop Program on College Campuses
 - Expand Students’ Access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) by Allowing College Coursework to Count as Work Requirements
 - Invest in Campus Childcare
 - Simplify and Expand Emergency Aid to Students Experiencing Homelessness
 - Create More Paid Internships in Areas of Study and Ensure Set-Asides for Homeless Students
 - Expand CUNY ASAP and ACE Programs and Target Marketing to Students Experiencing Homelessness