

State's public colleges see rise in hunger, homelessness



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2014

Randi Marenburg (left) helped a student at a food pantry at UMass Boston.

By **Michael Levenson** | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 25, 2017

The state's colleges and universities are reporting that hunger and homelessness among students have increased over the past year, an alarming new disclosure that makes clear that many low-income students have far more to worry about than just exams and extracurricular activities.

The findings, released Tuesday, come from a survey of administrators at the 29 state colleges and universities, 24 of which operate their own food pantries or have

Forty-five percent of the colleges reported a rise in student homelessness over the last year. Thirty-eight percent saw an increase in students living with “food insecurity,” roughly defined as a lack of consistent access to food. And 34 percent saw a rise in students being served by food pantries.

“Quite frankly, it’s heartbreaking to know the kind of challenges they’re facing, and they still come to school, and they still try to succeed,” said Patricia A. Gentile, president of North Shore Community College in Danvers, which has a higher percentage of students experiencing hunger than its peers nationally.

Get **Fast Forward** in your inbox:

Forget yesterday's news. Get what you need today in this early-morning email.

[Sign Up](#)

The results were included in a report presented to the state Board of Higher Education, which is weighing how to respond. The next step may be to survey students, not just administrators.

“The larger picture here is we should do everything we can within our power to support those students who are demonstrating an extraordinary commitment to their studies,” said Fernando M. Reimers, a board member and professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “They need a little helping hand.”

Most colleges reported they have students living in shelters, cars, or “couch surfing,” and some described students living in 24-hour businesses such as Dunkin’ Donuts and McDonald’s, or outside in warmer weather.

All told, 1,020 students at Massachusetts’ public colleges and universities are homeless or at risk of homelessness, according to federal data. State colleges and universities serve more than 290,000 students.

The administrators ^{Comments} blamed the problem of hunger and homelessness on lack of family support, student debt, the rising cost of living, and insufficient financial aid, among other reasons.

Last November, North Shore Community College surveyed its students about hunger and homelessness, after noticing that many were taking fewer courses per semester because of financial — not academic — pressures.

The results indicate that 32 percent of the 6,500 students at North Shore Community College are “hungry,” compared with 20 percent of community college students nationwide. Nineteen percent are homeless, compared with 13 percent of community college students nationally.



JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE

Bunker Hill Community College and the Greater Boston Food Bank have teamed up to give out food to those in need.

“That was disturbing to know that our students face a disproportionate challenge to staying in school and completing their education due to hunger and homelessness ”

When the survey asked North Shore Community College students to describe where they live, the responses included: “shelter for 3 years with kids;” “in my car,” and, “I live with friends and family — whoever has room for me at the time.”

Gentile emphasized that average age of a student on her campus is 27, meaning many are mothers and fathers, and not the typical 19-year-old who might attend a private four-year college.

She said the college has sought to raise awareness of a campus fund that provides low-income students with \$7 vouchers for the college cafeteria.

At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, meanwhile, administrators said the school may create supply closets with toiletries and other household items for needy students.

“
An estimated 1,020 students at Massachusetts’ public colleges and universities are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Salem State University said its students and alumni are holding a “Grilled Cheese for Giving” event to raise money for the campus food pantry.

Christopher Aguirre, a 20-year-old student at Bunker Hill Community College in Charlestown, is among those who have confronted homelessness and hunger while working toward a degree. He told the Board of Higher Education his story Tuesday, bringing at least one member to tears.

According to a copy of his testimony, Aguirre was working full time as a bank teller and living in Revere when his rent increased and he could no longer afford the bills.

Determined to attend college, he applied to Bunker Hill and started sleeping between Terminals B and C at Logan Airport in July 2015.

In September of that year, just as he was preparing to start classes, he landed a job at a bookstore in the airport, he said, and was able to afford one meal per day.

He continued to sleep in the airport until December 2015, he said, until he managed to find housing through a shelter program.

At Bunker Hill, he said, he qualified for the dean's list, and saved money through scholarships and federal financial aid grants. He said he expects to graduate this year, and is preparing to transfer to a four-year college. He hopes to become a molecular biologist.

He credited his success to his professor and advisers as well as to Single Stop USA, a program at Bunker Hill that connects students to a mobile food pantry, financial aid, legal assistance, and other essential services.

Aguirre urged the board to work urgently to help other students like him.

“While housing and food insecurity may be most visible on the sidewalk, it strikes far too many of this state's young men and women who understand that their education can lead them to success,” he told the board. “That benefits not only them, but the Commonwealth as a whole.”

Michael Levenson can be reached at michael.levenson@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mlevenson](https://twitter.com/mlevenson).

SHOW 49 COMMENTS

Stay updated, right in your news feed.

Like 440K

Most Popular In Metro



Worcester man allegedly assaulted Muslim airline worker

The man allegedly cursed Islam and shouted “Trump is here now. He will get rid of all of you.” [MORE...](#)



Seven people were rushed to area hospitals for non-life threatening injuries in the Somerville fire. [Comments](#) [MORE...](#)



Baker vetoes 'fiscally irresponsible' pay raises

In his letter to the Legislature, Governor Baker said the bill places an “unplanned, additional burden” on the state’s current fiscal 2017 budget. [MORE...](#)



Could certain opioids lead to amnesia?

Fourteen unusual cases of memory loss in Massachusetts among drug users may represent a new syndrome. [MORE...](#)



DNA points to serial killer in N.H.

Robert “Bob” Evans died in a California prison where he was serving sentence for murdering his wife in that state in 2002. [MORE...](#)



Full-time scientist, part-time Patriots cheerleader

Theresa Oei takes her work seriously, both off and on the field. [MORE...](#)



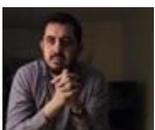
Seeing hope in Trump, local anti-abortion advocates head to D.C. rally

Just days into the new administration, the anti-abortion movement has logged progress on two of its four top agenda items. [MORE...](#)



Walsh rails against Trump, calls immigration actions 'direct attack'

“If people want to live here, they’ll live here,” Mayor Walsh said as he railed against the president’s immigration policies. [MORE...](#)



Resettled, now unsettled: Muslim refugees reel from Trump's order

Local refugees and immigrants from countries whose nationals would be



Salem finalizes plans for memorial where ‘witches’ were executed

The Proctor’s Ledge memorial will be a place for reflecting on the horrors of the Salem Witch Trials. [MORE...](#)



President Trump vows to take aggressive steps on immigration

Trump says he will expand immigration jails, sanction nations that refuse to take back their citizens, and seek to strip federal funding from sanctuary cities. [MORE...](#)



Should Framingham become a city? Voters will decide

Town residents will vote in April whether the state’s 14th largest community should have a strong mayor and city council. [MORE...](#)



Drug dealers allegedly used Cape Cod home of Kennedy relatives

Police seized more than 200 grams of fentanyl worth about \$40,000 hidden on beaches near a Hyannisport home owned by the Shrivvers. [MORE...](#)



What would it take to use City Hall as a refuge for immigrants?

Mayor Walsh on Wednesday offered the halls of government as a refuge for those fearing deportation. [MORE...](#)

Mayor was at Tobin School when shooting erupted outside

The shots sparked fear among students, some as young as 5, and brought calls for security cameras. [MORE...](#)



Age 10 and on TV, he’s cooking

Sam Brock of Concord will be one of 40 contestants on Fox’s “MasterChef

Comments

Tiny arctic birds battered by storm rescued on Cape Cod

Nearly two-dozen dovekies arrived on land as a result of this week's powerful Nor'easter. [MORE...](#)



You're not in Kansas anymore. This 'Wiz' is set in Roxbury.

If art is a commentary on modern life, then the issues on the minds of students at Boston Arts Academy include fears about getting into college, police brutality, and urban development. [MORE...](#)

Harold Hayes, survivor of secret World War II odyssey, dies at 94

His was a story of dodging German attacks, enduring blizzards and horrific privations, and walking 600 miles to safety. [MORE...](#)

© 2017 BOSTON GLOBE MEDIA PARTNERS, LLC
