

# Experiences with Housing Insecurity Among African American Women in Community College

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*This study sought to understand the extent to which external factors and the presence of insecurity predicts housing insecurities for African American women in community colleges. Data were derived from the Community College Success Measure's Stressful Life Events Scale. Findings indicated the presence of food insecurity and challenges with transportation are strong predictors of housing insecurity for African-American women in community colleges. This brief provides recommendations for community college leaders in addressing the needs of African American women facing housing insecurities.*

Keywords: housing insecurity; African American women; community college

African Americans continue to be overrepresented in the U.S. homeless population at 41%, a 5% increase since 2016 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2017). From a national sample of community college students' stressful life events, slightly less than one-third (32.8%) of students reported experiencing housing insecurities (Wood, Harris, & Delgado, 2016). It is important to identify which students on community college campuses are suffering from housing insecurity to sufficiently address their needs. When examining by gender, women experience housing insecurity at 33.9%

and men at 31.8% rates (Wood et al., 2016). African American women indicated higher challenges with housing insecurities than their female student counterparts at 40% (Wood et al., 2016). African American women in college represent nearly double the population of their male peers and are more likely to begin their careers in community colleges; however, little empirical literature exists about their experience in community college (Aud et al., 2012; Lewis & Middleton, 2003; Walpole, Chambers, & Goss, 2014; Wirt et al., 2005). This may be due to the myth that all African American women in college are thriving

and therefore do not need institutional level support. African American people are experiencing housing insecurities at increasing rates (HUD, 2016, 2017), so it is necessary to determine the causes, effects and implications for the community college context.

African American women in college report stressors related to the overall campus climate as well as household responsibilities. In a qualitative study, African American women in college described experiences of “being oppressed; working harder than others to be successful; constantly having to prove oneself to others; not being able to complain; fighting negative stereotypes; and fighting battles against racism and discrimination” (Jackson, 1998, p. 361). Academia presents demands and challenges that create stress during the college experience and the confluence of racism adds additional stressors (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). African American women attending community college often juggle academics with the responsibilities of being the primary breadwinner, role model to younger siblings, and caregiver to their spouse or partner (Ntiri, 2001). African American women are also more likely than Black men to remain active in their community while attending college (Ntiri, 2001). There is a critical need to address the challenges African American women are facing in the community college.

There are systemic external factors that influence students’ likelihood of experiencing housing insecurities in college. In the college context, rising costs of tuition and recent policy changes

associated with financial aid have created barriers for students to meet many of their basic needs, such as daily meals, a stable place to live, and reliable transportation (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2013; Crutchfield, Chambers, & Duffield, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2016). A nationwide survey of community college students found students who experience housing insecurity often face additional challenges, including working low wage jobs, low quality jobs, and getting less sleep (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015). These compounding challenges lead to housing insecurity.

The impact of housing insecurity on students affects their psychological and physical well-being as well as their academic success. Individuals with housing insecurity were two times as likely to report prolonged periods of poor mental health and delayed visits to the doctor (Stahre, VanEenwky, Siegel, & Njai, 2015). In a qualitative study exploring how students are affected by the homelessness experience during community college, results found students’ emotional health and persistence were negatively impacted (Hallett & Freas, 2017). Additionally, students experiencing housing insecurity were overrepresented in developmental courses (Wood et al., 2016). The impact of homelessness on college students’ mental, physical, and academic well-being is evident. Bearing this in mind, this study sought to understand the impact and predictive nature of external factors of housing insecurity for African American women in the community college.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study is Harris and Wood's (2016) Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model. The SEO model is made up of three components which include inputs, socio-ecological domains, and outcomes. The inputs are the background and societal characteristics that students bring with them as they enter the institution. Background characteristics are age, status (full-time/part-time), primary language, veteran status, citizenship status, and ability differences. The societal factors consist of stereotypes, economic conditions, criminalization, mass incarceration and common discourse concerning their identity group (Harris & Wood, 2016). The second component consists of factors the students face when they enter the institution, including non-cognitive, academic, environment, and campus ethos. The last component of the SEO model is student success. Student success is defined as persistence, retention, achievement, degree/certificate attainment, or transfer (Harris & Wood, 2016). Given the sociopolitical context in which African American women enter community college it is important to consider the effects of background characteristics, societal factors, and non-cognitive domains on student success when examining what predicts housing insecurity for African American women.

## Methods

This report employs data from the Community College Success Measure

(CCSM; Harris & Wood, 2014). The CCSM is an institutional-level needs assessment tool used by community colleges to better understand challenges underserved students face, particularly students of color. This 124-item instrument has been used by nearly 90 community colleges throughout the nation to inform institutional interventions for students, faculty, and staff to redress equity. This study focused on the revised stressful life event scales. From a sample of more than 7,000 diverse men and women in the community colleges the data were delimited to African American women ( $n=343$ ).

The outcome variable employed was housing insecurity. Results were derived from student responses to the question: "Please indicate if any of the following are challenges you have faced in the past two years?" Answers are reported in a Yes/No dichotomy. Based on the conceptual model and theoretical framework, six independent variables were analyzed including stable employment, relationship challenges, legal concerns, health concerns, transportation to and from class, and hunger to determine which variables predicted housing insecurity.

## Results

Table 1 represents descriptive statistics of the sample including age, financial background, and academic outcomes as well as insecurities or challenges. To find which factors would predict housing insecurities for African American women in community colleges a logistic regression was conducted. The sample size was 343 African American

women attending community college in the United States with 143 students (41.7%) reporting they faced challenges with housing.

Table 1

*Descriptives-African American Women in Community College*

	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Age</b>		
<18 to 24	208	61
25 to 38	63	29
39 to 66	35	10
<b>Dependents</b>		
Yes	206	60
No	137	40
<b>Income</b>		
(<10,000)	151	44
(10,001-40,000)	144	42
(>40,001)	48	14
<b>Enrollment</b>		
1-5 credits	167	49
6+	176	51
<b>College Credits Earned</b>		
0-29	185	54
30-61+	158	46
<b>High School GPA</b>		
2.0-2.9	198	57
3.0-4.0	149	43
<b>Insecurities/Challenges</b>		
Hunger Stress	45	13
Transportation Stress	157	46
Legal Stress	40	12
Relationship Stress	140	41
Employ Stress	141	41
Health Stress	119	34
Stable Place of Living	143	42
Total	343	100

Table 2 presents the standardized and unstandardized betas, odds ratios (OR), standard errors, and R<sup>2</sup> information for the model. Based on the Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup>, the model for African American women accounted for 42% of the variance in predicting housing insecurity.

The results of the logistic regression indicated two significant predictors, which were hunger and transportation. Of the two, having challenges with transportation was a more powerful predictor with an odds ratio of 7.93. Students who reported having challenges with transportation to and from class have 693% greater odds of having housing insecurity ( $p < .01$ ) than students who do not struggle with hunger. Reporting struggles with hunger was a significant predictor of housing insecurity with an odds ratio of 3.76. African American women struggling with hunger have 275% greater odds of having housing insecurities ( $p < .01$ ) than those who do not report issues with hunger.

### Discussion and Implications

Literature focusing on African American women and students impacted by homelessness highlight the invisibility of these students' needs (Gupton

2015; Patton, Harris, Ranero-Ramirez, Villacampa, & Lui, 2014; Walpole et al., 2014). Embodying the intersection of being both African American and homeless creates a hyper-invisibility due to the lack of response by the institution to the problems that Black women face affecting housing insecurity. Given the rise in housing insecurity for African American people, campuses need to be more vigilant in identifying students in need (HUD, 2017). To address unmet needs, campuses need to know who is facing these issues. Unfortunately, campuses are not asking and tracking when students are faced with housing insecurity. Having a systematic method of identifying these students is a first step in making support accessible and available to students.

One way to systematically identify students who are struggling is to integrate a needs assessment into the enrollment or registration process. This assessment can identify students who are struggling in areas known to burden college students, such as issues with accessing food, transportation, employment, and housing. When a challenge is indicated, a directory of resources created in collaboration with community organization should be made available. Research shows African

Table 2

*Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis for Predictors of Housing Insecurities for African American Women (N=343)*

Source	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	Wald $\chi^2$	<i>p</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI OR
Hunger	1.32	0.45	8.49	0.004	3.76	[1.54, 9.16]
Transportation	2.07	0.3	47.25	0.001	7.93	[4.39,14.30]
R <sup>2</sup> =41.5						

American students succeed when there is an intentional connection between campus and the Black community (Rosales & Person, 2003). In addition to the resource list, students should be given the option of receiving a phone call or making an appointment to discuss the suggested resources. Leading equity scholars emphasize the importance of hand-to-hand references for marginalized students. This means when referring students to a campus service, providing the name of a contact and/or offer to connect them personally or physically accompany the student to visit the resource. This creates a sense of personal connection, which is imperative for African American women who value interpersonal relationships (Rosales & Person, 2003).

To create an accessible and inviting campus climate in which African American women will feel comfortable to use services, colleges must account for African American women's overall experience in a society. African women have historically been placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy in which their ways of being are deemed unsound. Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* explains the inherency of discourse in the African American female tradition as an act of meaning making and buffering of societal oppressions (Collins, 2002). When campuses lack safe space for dialogue, they eliminate a vital tool for African American women's success.

African American women in community college are faced with an array of external challenges that have implications for increasing the likelihood of experiencing housing insecurity. Many

African American women in college are also balancing the responsibilities of caring for family members, and being the primary breadwinner and dedicated community member (Rosales & Person, 2003), thus creating challenges with hunger and transportation. These compounding responsibilities can have lasting effects on mental health, physical well-being, and academic success. When addressing the issue of housing insecurity for African American women a holistic approach needs to be taken—an approach that considers the implications of being a Black woman in America. Identifying students in need and then partnering them with community organizations with on-campus support is critical to these students' success. On campus support should include spaces for African American women to engage in dialogue with one another to provide validation, share resources, and feel a sense of belonging. When African American women feel a sense of belonging they are more likely to seek assistance when in need. Colleges should plan for the increasing number of marginalized students experiencing housing insecurities, keeping in mind the external factors affecting African American women.

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