

# Homelessness in Higher Education (2012): The Evergreen State College

In May 2012, students at the Evergreen State College conducted the second annual survey of homelessness on campus. While separate from the County’s Homeless Census, this independent survey offers a snapshot of homelessness within higher education. College administrators, parents, and the public at large are often unaware of the high number of homeless students in post-secondary schools across the United States.



The institution of higher education provides low-income people access to unique resources such as scholarships and student loans, which for many can mean the difference between housing and homelessness. Unfortunately, recent State budget-cuts to education have increased tuition to such a degree that financial aid is now insufficient to cover the expense of a college education; even with grants and loans combined, many full-time students struggle to meet their basic needs, including food and housing. The high rate of unemployment in the current bank-facilitated economic crisis has led to a shortage of the part-time jobs that historically made college education affordable for students lacking additional resources. Many people, including a mass of recently laid-off workers, are turning to higher education in the hopes of gaining re/entry into the workforce, but without sufficient public funding, college is no longer an option. With no education and no job, unable to meet their own basic needs, let alone the needs of their families, many more people may soon be facing the grim realities of homelessness.

**11% of student respondents reported that they are currently experiencing homelessness.**

**Methodology:** Student researchers with Evergreen’s *Civic Intelligence Research & Action Laboratory (CIRAL)* conducted this voluntary response survey over the course of two days via a poll booth in Red Square with a modified version of the County’s Homeless Census questionnaire and a ballot box.

**15% of students self-identified as at risk of becoming homeless.**

Of 318 total student respondents, 35 (11%) reported that they are currently homeless; 49 (15.4%) of non-homeless students reported that they have been homeless at some point during their college career, and 15.1% (43/283) of non-homeless student respondents self-identified as at risk of becoming homeless.

A second campus demographic, easily observed but difficult to survey for their fear of persecution, is that of Olympia’s greater homeless population. Resources lacking elsewhere, including 24-hour public restrooms, healthy/affordable food, warm/dry welcoming spaces, and a culture of diversity and tolerance, appear to have made the Evergreen State College a de facto resource center for the poor—a role consistent with Evergreen’s history of service to the community but, nonetheless, one outside of its official responsibility.

### **Student Research Group Recommendations:**

- ✓ Mitigate homelessness by repealing State budget cuts to education.
- ✓ Utilize national best practice alternatives to the criminalization of homelessness.
- ✓ Institutionalize tolerance for the life-sustaining activities of homeless individuals; i.e. sleeping, eating, and other bodily functions.
- ✓ Establish a resource center with 24-hour public restrooms in downtown Olympia.
- ✓ Allocate resources to provide for the basic needs of homeless students; i.e. food, shelter, and medical care.
- ✓ Designate a “Safe-Lot” at Evergreen for car-camping homeless students.
- ✓ Provide a safe camping area for homeless students who live in the thousand-acre Evergreen State College forest.

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