

A LONGITUDINAL EVALUATION OF A HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHER PROGRAM

Homelessness and Housing Insecurity Among Community College Students

April 30, 2024 | Executive Summary

Housing insecurity and homelessness among American community college students are widespread problems that reduce the odds of college attainment and undermine students' health and well-being. In 2014 Tacoma Community College and the Tacoma Housing Authority launched the College Housing Assistance Program (CHAP) to address this challenge by offering housing choice vouchers to local community college students experiencing or at serious risk of experiencing homelessness. If students could successfully navigate the application process and local housing market, the vouchers offered a short-term subsidy to reduce their rent and hopefully promote degree completion. Over the next several years, CHAP received national and regional awards and became a model for affordable college housing programs. This evaluation examines its effects on students before the housing authority ended the program in 2022.

Evaluation

We conducted a comprehensive, independently funded program evaluation over a seven-year period (2017–2023) to examine how this housing and education program might affect students and the colleges and communities that support them, using a social determinants of education framework. We leveraged state and college administrative data and student surveys to estimate the program's effects across six domains: academic performance and attainment, housing stability, employment and earnings, use of public benefits, health and use of publicly funded health services, and interactions with the criminal justice system.

The study sample included 422 individuals who applied to the program from fall 2017 through spring 2019. There were three enrollment cycles per year (October, January, and April), and Tacoma Community College uses the quarter system, so this corresponded to fall, winter, and spring terms. CHAP served two

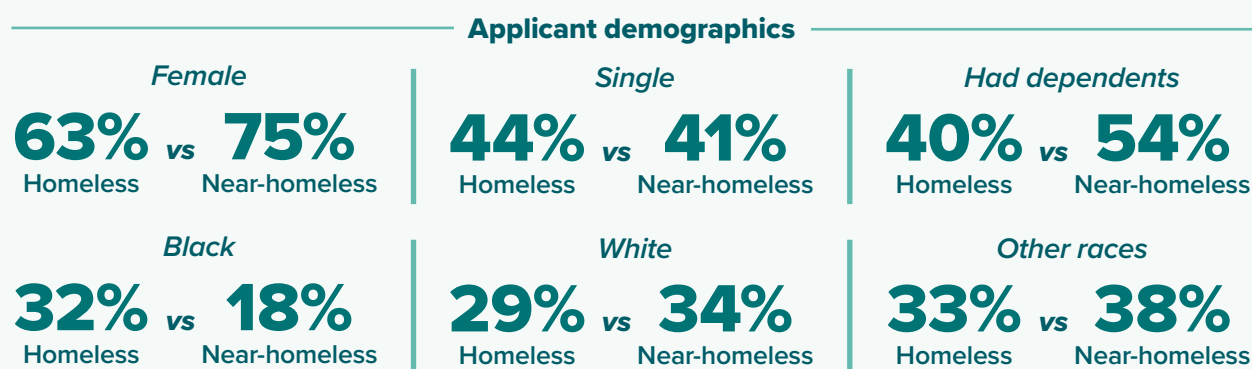
Social determinants of education framework



groups of students (homeless and near-homeless), and the evaluation team used these same categories. The program defined “homeless students” as students who were living in a shelter or participating in a program for homeless individuals at the time they applied. The program defined “near-homeless” students as students who were couch surfing, facing eviction, escaping domestic violence, and/or enduring other threats to their education. We report outcomes over time for both groups, and for the second group we compare the outcomes for program participants to a comparable group of non-participants, leveraging a lottery used to determine program participation among near-homeless students. The COVID-19 pandemic occurred during the evaluation period, and the full report discusses the potential implications.



Students applying to the program attributed their housing challenges to being new to town and/or experiencing a family crisis, loss of income, or medical expenses. Individuals who were homeless when they applied to the program tended to be single women with an average age of 30. Almost half did not file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and those who did were not expected to contribute much to college expenses (just under \$1,500 per year). Less than a quarter had a college-educated parent, and 40 percent had dependents of their own. Thirty-two percent of homeless applicants were Black, 29 percent were white, and 33 percent were another race such as Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American.



Students who were near-homeless when they applied differed from the homeless applicants in several ways. They were an average of three years older and more likely to be female (75% vs. 63%). More than a third (34%) were white and just 18 percent were Black (vs. 32% for homeless students). They were much more likely than homeless students to have a high school diploma (47% vs. 29%), be married or divorced (22% vs. 8%), and have dependents (54% vs. 40%) and more likely to have filed a FAFSA (66% vs 52%).

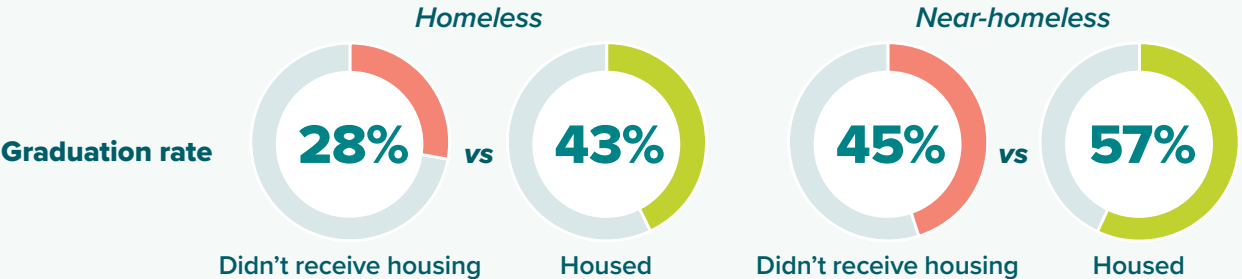
Key Finding 1



Ultimately, only one in four students admitted to the program leased up with a housing choice voucher. Like most low-income people trying to use vouchers on the private housing market, students struggled to complete necessary paperwork, search for housing, identify landlords willing to rent to them, and provide the funds (e.g., security deposits) required to lease up. While these challenges are not unique to this program—and may constrain potential impacts—they could be addressed by housing authorities, colleges, and/or community partners. In addition, CHAP also offered some support that went beyond housing, including support with navigating other social service programs, although the college had limited staffing available to help with this.

As with many housing and education programs, CHAP also struggled to serve students equitably. Female students were much more likely than male students to lease up: 82 percent of housed students were female, compared to 64 percent of vouchered but unhoused students. Students with children were also more likely to lease up: 71 percent of housed students had dependents, compared to 40 percent of vouchered but unhoused students. Students who were housed had much higher GPAs than those who were not: the average GPA for students who leased up was 2.88 compared to 2.25 for vouchered but unhoused students.

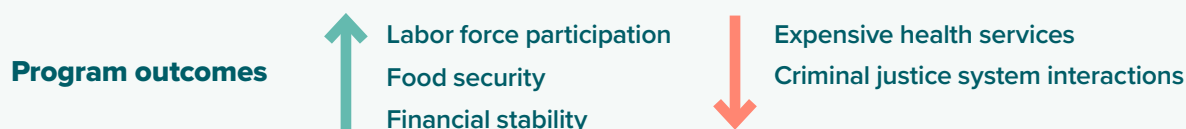
Key Finding 2



The students who managed to lease up did well in college and experienced other positive outcomes: two-thirds completed a credential, transferred to university, and/or remained enrolled on track to a degree—despite an intervening pandemic. Even with a narrowed focus on graduation, the students in

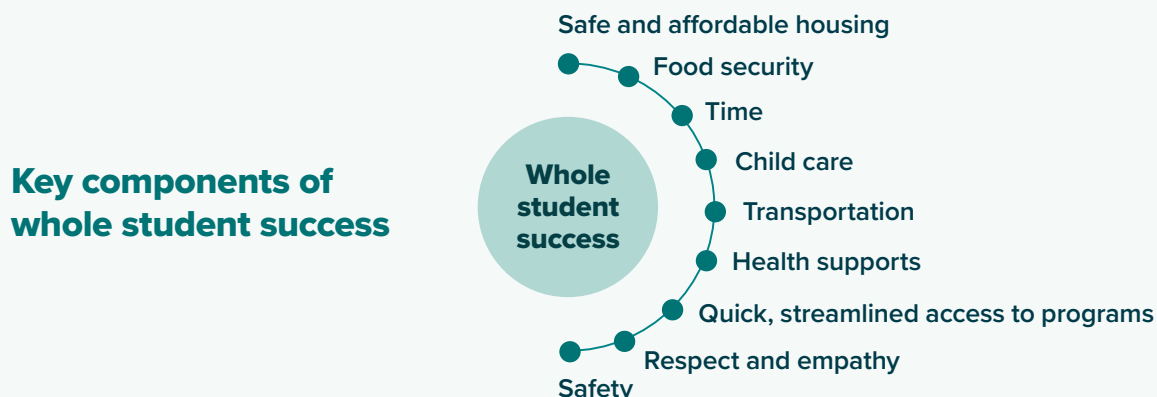
this program completed at much higher rates than the national average. For example, while the average three-year completion rate for community college students is 35 percent, the average rate for homeless students is 8 to 12 percentage points lower. In CHAP, homeless participants graduated at 28 percent, and that rate was 43 percent if they were housed. Meanwhile, 45 percent of near-homeless participants graduated, and that rate was 57 percent if they were housed. However, we could not confirm that the program caused those improvements for near-homeless students, and there is some indication that students stayed enrolled in Tacoma Community College—perhaps rather than graduating or transferring—to retain their housing.

Key Finding 3



The program boosted students’ rates of labor force participation and increased the likelihood that they also received support from public assistance to bring more financial stability to their homes. Moreover, it substantially increased the probability that students were food secure. The use of expensive health services, such as the emergency room, declined over time among homeless students, while for near-homeless students we did not detect a clear pattern of program reductions in use of those services and even estimated an increase in inpatient hospital admission. Finally, very few program participants interacted with the criminal justice system, although rates were higher in later years of the evaluation (during the pandemic). The rate of felonies, arrests, and charges were much lower for homeless students who leased up, but the lack of clear impacts for near-homeless students raises questions about whether that was due to the program.

Implications



This evaluation sheds new light on how higher education and housing professionals might address homelessness and housing insecurity among community college students. It should contribute to a broader conversation about the many ways that housing and education are health and social goods, not solely economic goods. In addition, students are humans first and this evaluation demonstrates why colleges should do their part to support the whole student—including their basic needs—to facilitate success.

CHAP's challenges are common in the world of subsidized housing and are also common among basic needs security programs at community colleges. It is difficult to connect structurally disadvantaged and stigmatized populations with critical support, and especially difficult to help them successfully obtain housing on the private market. It is also hard to provide sufficient navigational support to students attending under-resourced community colleges unless new dedicated funds are explicitly provided.

It is also clear that programs such as CHAP are only as strong as the relationship between the partners—in this case, Tacoma Community College and the Tacoma Housing Authority. Close collaboration is essential. This program appears to have had an influence on greater ability to secure public support during a period of need for its participants. We hope that this evaluation contributes to the development of even more effective programs to support students with affordable housing during college. Partnerships will only succeed in meeting students' needs if they have the proper staffing and infrastructure to help participants. Navigational assistance is needed throughout every stage of a housing voucher program, and without it the people who most need support are often left behind. Additional staffing and resources would likely enhance program outcomes.

Even without optimal implementation, CHAP improved self-sufficiency and economic mobility for many participants. The program clearly induced increases in labor force participation, use of critical public benefits programs, and food security. While the evidence is inconclusive when it comes to the program's intended improvements in college attainment, the overall trends are positive. These are promising results, and we hope that they contribute to the development of even more effective programs to support students' basic needs.

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