

RV Done With College Yet?: The College Housing Crisis

Higher education has always been a popular topic in my family's life. My father made it to middle school before having to leave school behind and focus on financially helping his family. My mother, on the other hand, was a single semester away from graduating college. However, the glorified stories of the United States were too tempting to ignore. My parent's decision to leave their life in Mexico behind was difficult but necessary. As a first-generation student, I grew up knowing that college was expected of me. What I didn't know was that over the span of 40 years, the cost of attending college has skyrocketed. Many students across the United States have resorted to living in cars, vans, and RVs to afford a degree.

In the 1980's the average cost to attend college in the United States was about \$10,231 per year (McGurran, 2022). This included the cost of tuition, fees, and living expenses such as rent and food. After adjusting for inflation, the United States has seen an increase of nearly 180% in the cost of attending a four-year university (Hanson, 2022). In 2022, college tuition alone had an average cost of \$10,740 for in-state students (Knueven & Wangman, 2022). This does not include anything but tuition. Therefore, students are left to pay exponentially more money while attending college than at any other time in history. When factoring in basic living expenses in places like California, it is estimated that the average college student spends nearly \$2,000 a month outside the cost of tuition (Mello, 2019). This, in turn, has left 42.8 million people with an average of over \$30,000 in federal student loan debt (Hanson, 2022b).

The housing crisis across the United States is a huge contributor to the rising costs of higher education. In the last 3 years, rent in the United States has increased by an average of 2.61% per year. The major issue is that in the last decade, rent increase has risen 270% faster than the average annual wage inflation (Hanson, 2022c) making it nearly impossible to attain a

comfortable quality of life. Similarly, aspiring homeowners, are struggling to find affordable homes and are unable to save for a decent down payment. In the 2022 State of Nation’s Housing Report, it was reported that more than 1 in 7 households paid over half of their income on housing (Hanson, 2022b).

The high cost of attending college has led to tens of thousands of students across California’s public university systems experiencing homelessness. The chart below is a breakdown of homeless students across California colleges (Osgood, 2022). From crashing on a friend's couch to living in cars and RVs many students are experiencing stressful situations all while attempting to complete their degree.

California Community Colleges	20% of students
University of California schools	5% of students
California State University institutions	10% of students

My spouse and I have personally experienced the harsh reality of the overwhelming increase in the cost of living. We have had to find unconventional ‘hacks’ to pursue higher education. When considering colleges, we quickly realized that it was going to cost us a lot of money that we did not have. Fearing a lifetime of student debt, we ultimately decided to purchase a used RV to get us through my time at Cal Poly and her time at Santa Barbara City College. We paid \$700 a month to rent a small piece of land in Atascadero (about 15 minutes from campus). There, we could park our RV and have access to running water and a sewer line.

Our living situation was not the worst but it is far from easy. RVs are drastically different from homes and apartments and require constant maintenance. When temperatures were 80-90°F outside, our RV would reach temperatures over 100°F forcing us to spend time outside in the shade or on campus. During winter months, it was not uncommon for our RV to be below 30°F. We had to keep our water running overnight to prevent the pipes from freezing. Rain was yet another stressor we couldn't escape. RV roofs are very prone to leaking, therefore I found myself needing to reseal parts of our roof multiple times a year.

At the time, this was the best option for us to afford college and we have no regrets. That being said, it is truly a shame that we as a country have resorted to this. Many of us go to school in hopes of opening doors that have been locked from us for generations. Every person deserves the right to knowledge and if we continue down this path, our country will end up missing out on diversity and extraordinary potential.

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