

From Surfing Waves to Surfing Couches



Cliff erosion and high demand exacerbate housing insecurity in the coastal community

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*Disclaimer: Some last names have been omitted to preserve contributors' privacy.

When University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) undergraduate student Noah went abroad in the fall of his junior year, his house already had 13 people living in a 10-person lease. When he came back to campus, his friend Ryusei, who was subleasing from him, had nowhere to go. He began living in a tent in the backyard for the price of \$250 a month.

Unfortunately, stories like this are not uncommon. Across the U.S, 36% of college students report being housing insecure and 9% identify as homeless. For community college students, rates are even higher. According to the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, homelessness rates range between 12% and 18% for students at two-year institutions. As the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates unemployment, these numbers will likely continue to rise.

Ryusei lived in the tent for winter and spring of 2019. "I would say 70% of the reason was to stick with my housemates, and 30% was to save money," he said. He set up his tent on a deck behind a back guest house and slept in his 4Runner when the weather was really poor.

In Isla Vista, where many UCSB and Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) students live, the cost of living is 49% higher than the national average and, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 67.3% of the population lives in poverty.

With student enrolment on the rise, and cliff erosion cutting back on housing options, housing insecurity is increasing along with prices and demand for living spaces. When students cannot succeed in packing leases or couch surfing, many resort to living in their cars.



Some students resort to sleeping in their cars

Cassie Roach is program manager and senior case manager for the Santa Barbara Safe Parking Program, which provides 24 secure overnight parking lots throughout the county for individuals living in their vehicles. According to Roach, UCSB and SBCC students make up 10% of the organization's client population.

GreySun, a UCSB undergraduate student, pays \$150 a month to live in his truck in the driveway of a friend's property. He has access to the home's communal spaces, bathroom, and kitchen, but sleeps in his car with his dog at night.

"I decided to do this because rent here is too expensive and my housing situation was kind of up in the air to begin with," GreySun said. "So I decided to take the initiative and build out my truck."

Housing insecurity has surged to the forefront of campus and state consciousness with the Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) strikes which began at the University of California, Santa Cruz in December of 2019. Solidarity strikes and protest actions have since spread to every UC campus except UC San Francisco.

The first strike at UCSB took place February 27th and was attended by over 1,000 students, faculty and staff. The strikes are focused on increasing the "cost of living" component of graduate student wages. In areas such as Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz, where housing prices are much higher than the rest of the state, many university-paid graduate students report wages too low to afford basic food and housing.

Maya, a UCSB graduate student, was motivated to strike due to her high rent burden. She lives in subsidized university housing, but still spends 45% of her monthly income on rent. According to Maya, many of her peers spend 50% or more of their income on rent each month. The U.S. Census Bureau considers individuals and families "rent burdened" if they spend more than 30% of their income on housing.

Maya is very concerned about her housing future. "Sadly, this university housing is very limited and only guaranteed for first-year grad students," she said.

The issue is not new. Derek, who is now a professor for the University of California system, graduated from UCSB in 1980 and remembers living in his car for a couple weeks during his time as an undergrad. “I was probably not very proactive in finding a place ahead, and then when I tried at the last minute, there was nothing available,” he said. According to Derek, he showered in the campus recreation center and avoided police who might cite him for sleeping in his vehicle.

In 1976, the Isla Vista Housing Cooperative was formed by a group of students at UCSB to address rising housing costs. Today, the cooperative has five buildings and students and professors of Santa Barbara County institutions are eligible to apply. Shared doubles start at \$525 a month. For a pricing comparison reference, one UCSB student, Asher, pays \$800 a month to live in a triple in Isla Vista.



This Isla Vista room houses three students

UCSB does offer resources for students who are housing insecure. The Financial Crisis Response Team helps connect students with short and long-term housing solutions. According to the team, “Students may be eligible if they are couch surfing, behind on rent, living in a car, not listed on their lease, living in overcrowded housing, moved three or more times in the past year, received an eviction notice, or many other scenarios.”

These resources include providing students with transitional housing within 24 to 48 hours of an emergency and offering housing vouchers and rental assistance grants. The Community Financial Fund offers single year grants of up to \$400 per student to undergraduate students. Associated Students also offers students interest-free emergency loans between \$200 and \$600.

In Isla Vista, where the average single bedroom costs \$1370 a month, housing insecurity has become the new normal for many students. When Dean, a UCSB undergraduate student, and his housemates let a friend move into their garage to lower their rent burden, keeping the extra roommate a secret became part of their everyday lives.

“We’d move his mattress in and out of the garage when word came of our landlord coming by,” Dean said. When their landlord became suspicious about the extra tenant, he and Dean actually shared a bed for a few weeks. He laughs about it now, but describes frequently resorting to sleeping in his hammock to get a good night’s rest in the cramped living situation.

Many students have no other options than to take what they can get when it comes to housing. Even with high rent prices, most Isla Vista properties are rented for the subsequent school year by January. Additionally, many students are not aware of their rights as tenants.



Cliff erosion has not dissuaded new development projects

The Isla Vista Tenants Union (IVTU) works with local renters to inform them about their rights and offer dispute settlement services. Their Self Help Legal Center offers free casework help and legal advice. Students are also able to visit the Legal Resource Center to get advice from an attorney.

Alex Young, the Chair of IVTU, attributes the local housing crisis to high demand and low supply. “Isla Vista has an extremely low vacancy rate...and a very low rate of owner-occupied properties. This breeds bad relationships and rising costs for tenants,” Young said.

Governor Gavin Newsom’s State of the State address in January highlighted rising housing insecurity and homelessness as a critical social issue facing California. In January, Newsom introduced a \$1 billion budget proposal to address homelessness in the state, but the proposal includes no student-specific measures. Meanwhile, the UC Board of Regents has proposed potential tuition hikes to be imposed next fall.

As for students, many are not optimistic about positive change. “I am personally terrified about my housing options for next year,” Maya said.