

Imagining 'Home': Undergraduate Housing Insecurity in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For full text, please visit https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate_honors_theses/bg257g39h

Introduction

Home is not only a physical structure that provides shelter; it is also a place with deep social and interpersonal meanings. These meanings come from various social processes that construct a sense of home that depends on a person's security, sense of belonging, and community (Butler & Hamnett, 2012; Manzo, 2003; Pitkanen, 2017; van Lanen, 2020). Past studies have emphasized the importance of a holistic understanding of what home means to individuals when assessing conflicts and other social issues related to the domestic sphere, going beyond the security implied by the existence of a physical structure.

The COVID-19 pandemic created an environment where many people were forced to shelter in place, no matter where they were. Understanding how people imagine their home is necessary to understanding their experience of the pandemic, as people with different housing situations were affected by the pandemic in different ways. Students specifically were in a unique situation in terms of housing for the pandemic, with many universities closing student residences. An underdeveloped area of research in the field of housing insecurity is how these college students imagine their home when they are attending school. While undergraduate students are not a monolith, home is a difficult concept to define as there are many factors that change a student's connections

to place while attending school (McAndrew, 1998; Turley, 2006). This can manifest in ways like homesickness or planning to return to their familial home after college. Traditional undergraduate students are typically thought to leave their family homes to go to college, leaving a question of where they might consider their home to be, if it is one place. Additionally, there are many non-traditional college students who are often overlooked when discussing undergraduates in higher education (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). These students' conceptions of home may differ from traditional students, necessitating further research into how they imagine 'home.'

The transition from a parental home to a home of one's own is a moment of insecurity in the best of times. But insecurity becomes far more intense in a time of pandemic in an already expensive college town with little rental stock. Housing insecurity encompasses many kinds of problems that people might run into with their housing situations including affordability, quality, safety, and loss (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). These different metrics create a broad definition where people may not be aware that they qualify as housing insecure because they have a physical shelter. Furthermore, past research has shown that homelessness and housing insecurity have a wide range of detrimental effects across different populations (Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Seastres et al.,

2020); however, the current research does not adequately address the unique needs of college students experiencing housing insecurity. There have been some preliminary studies at various universities in the United States that attempt to collect data about the rate of housing insecurity at these institutions to inform university housing policy (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2017; Tsui et al., 2011). These studies have shown high rates of housing insecurity among college students, mainly exhibited by students not being able to afford rent, prompting a need for more discussion around the topic, especially on how to best support housing insecure students. Additionally, many of these studies use a purely quantitative approach to data collection, leaving a large gap in our understanding of how housing insecure populations imagine their home, and how this conception of home influences their housing struggles.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of home was used in a variety of ways. Across the United States, 'stay-at-home' policies were enacted to slow the spread of the virus through physical distancing. These policies often assumed that people had a home to remain in, as well as imagining the home to be a mostly positive space, which is not always true (Bullinger et al., 2021; Kaukinen, 2020). Through assuming a stable home that everybody could safely stay in, marginalized groups were further pushed to the fringes of society and policy spaces, making them more vulnerable to both housing insecurity and COVID-19 itself. While there has been some research highlighting cases where home might not be a safe place during the pandemic, there is little literature that critically examines how home is imagined when looking at these experiences. Fujita et al. (2020) studied the effects of the pandemic and stay-at-home orders on unhoused people in Japan; however, similar studies on the US do not currently exist. This study also did not address how these people

might have an imagined view of home outside of what is culturally expected, and how that worked in the context of stay-at-home policies. Beyond just housing, the negative effects of the pandemic were not felt equally, with marginalized and disadvantaged populations bearing the brunt of the hardships of the pandemic (Chen & Krieger, 2021; Henning Smith et al., 2020; Michèle et al., 2021). The pandemic can be seen as a period of crisis, which puts stress on already-strained resources and populations, leading to a worsening of economic and housing conditions.

The pandemic also caused a lot of changes for college students as in-person learning shifted to be entirely remote. CU Boulder closed the dorms in March 2020 and told students to return home if they could (From the Chancellor – COVID-19 Update, 2020). For those without a stable home off-campus, or others with circumstances that did not allow them to travel home at that point in time, the campus policies directly impacted their housing security. There has been very little information given publicly to support those students throughout the duration of the pandemic, and not much is known about the marginalized groups that might have been disproportionately affected by the campus' COVID-19 policies. Additionally, Boulder was already a city that does not have easily accessible affordable housing (Fluri et al., 2020), meaning many students might have started from a place of insecurity before the pandemic happened. The present study aimed to do two things:

1. Investigate how students at CU Boulder imagine their home in a transitional period of their lives when in college.
2. Assess how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected housing insecurity among undergraduate students at CU Boulder.

I used mixed qualitative and quantitative methods in this study through semi-structured interviews and surveys. The interviews provided

qualitative data as to how students handle the transition to college in terms of home-making, as well as specific experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. To supplement this qualitative data, I used a survey to better understand the scope of housing insecurity during the pandemic at CU Boulder and examine how different demographic variables might affect these experiences. I hypothesized that the COVID-19 pandemic worsened already existing housing insecurity by hurting the economic situation of many students.

Furthermore, the policies created in response to the pandemic employed an idea of 'home' that does not align with the actual experiences of students, further exacerbating housing insecurity. My work adds to the growing geographic scholarship on the idea of home beyond a physical structure by demonstrating how students imagine a place to be their home through relationships and community, especially in times of crisis.

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