

THE IMPACTS OF THE HBCU HOUSING ISSUES ON STUDENT HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

Rising enrollment and aging infrastructure have led to significant housing shortages at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Both incoming and returning students face increasing difficulty in securing adequate housing, which threatens institutional reputation, student retention, and financial sustainability. To explore solutions to these challenges, this study presents a literature review of 30 studies on collegiate housing management and student housing experiences. The review reveals a notable lack of focused research on housing management within the HBCU context, despite the unique challenges these institutions face. This study identifies three dimensions of student health affected by housing challenges: mental, physical, and academic. Housing issues are further categorized into two primary areas of concern: affordability and process inefficiencies. These findings highlight the need for targeted capital investment, public-private partnerships, and policy reforms to enhance housing stability and institutional resilience. Overall, this study integrates insights from higher education, public policy, and strategic management, offering an interdisciplinary framework for addressing student housing insecurity in higher education. This study fills a critical gap by focusing specifically on HBCU housing, a topic underrepresented in existing literature.

Keywords: Institutional Strategy, Higher Education Infrastructure, Student Housing Insecurity

INTRODUCTION

As student admissions continue to rise, the demand for adequate housing becomes increasingly urgent. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) face unique challenges in this regard, with students encountering issues such as inadequate maintenance, flooding, and high housing costs. For instance, Fisk University has resorted to using shipping containers to accommodate its expanding student population (*HBCUs Are Getting Creative to Meet Growing Student Housing Demand*, 2023). Although campus housing is generally more affordable than off-campus alternatives (Cheskis-Gold & Danahy, 2012), the quality at some HBCUs falls short of expectations, leaving students dissatisfied and feeling shortchanged.

The body of research specifically addressing housing issues at HBCUs is limited. However, insights can be drawn from studies at non-HBCU institutions to inform potential improvements (Ong, Petrova, & Spieler, 2013). Many HBCU students struggle with the affordability of both on-campus and off-campus housing. On-campus living, despite its shortcomings, often proves more convenient, offering easier access to food and essential services compared to unaffordable off-campus apartments or low-income housing (Sackett, Goldrick-Rab, & Broton, 2016). This study contributes to the literature by addressing the limited focus on HBCU housing and identifying how these unique institutional challenges affect student health and academic outcomes.

Shifting housing priorities to provide rising sophomores with more options aims to enhance their on-campus experience, potentially fostering a stronger community among younger students. However, this shift may result in dissatisfaction among upperclassmen who previously enjoyed more housing. Broton and Goldrick-Rab (2013) recommend several strategies to address housing instability among college students, including collecting data on the educational status of housing-assistance participants, integrating housing-stability assessments into national surveys, and re-envisioning colleges as hubs for housing support.

Addressing housing instability requires a multifaceted approach involving institutional support, community partnerships, and robust social-support systems. By understanding the unique challenges these students face and implementing targeted interventions, educational institutions can help promote stability, belonging, and success among this vulnerable population. While Elsayed (2023) focuses on on-campus housing, it is crucial to compare these findings with the experiences of students living off-campus. Off-campus housing, while offering greater independence, also presents challenges such as isolation and a lack of immediate support services. Research indicates that students living off campus may engage in higher levels of risky behaviors due to reduced supervision; however, it can also provide a more conducive environment for those who prefer solitude and quiet study spaces. Additionally, Elsayed notes that the demand for campus housing has surged due to rising enrollment and the limited availability of affordable options, emphasizing the need for institutions to expand housing capacity and improve living conditions.

A national survey by *Temple University's Hope Center* revealed that 43 percent of students at four-year colleges experienced housing insecurity, with 14 percent facing homelessness, highlighting the severe shortage of stable housing options for students nationwide (Budd, 2024). Economic factors driving this crisis include the rising costs of tuition, fees, and room and board, which have increased by 32 percent over the past two decades—outpacing inflation and significantly burdening students financially (Green, n.d.). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this situation, increasing demand for on-campus housing as students sought normalcy after prolonged periods of online learning.

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Throughout this paper, we will explore how HBCU housing issues affect students' health, detailing the specific challenges these students face. This paper synthesizes findings from academic journals and identifies critical gaps in existing research related to housing at HBCUs.

METHOD: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review included a systematic search for articles published between 2000 and 2024 using Google Scholar, ProQuest, and EBSCOhost databases. Search terms included “*campus housing shortage*,” “*HBCU housing issues*,” “*college housing issues*,” and “*campus housing affecting student health*.” A total of 30 relevant articles were identified, while those referring to international institutions were excluded. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included to ensure academic credibility, and reports lacking empirical data or institutional context were omitted.

Once the articles were gathered, they were organized by topic and summarized according to relevance to HBCU housing and student health outcomes. Thematic analysis was conducted by identifying recurring patterns, concepts, and findings across studies, which were then grouped into broader categories. Two primary themes emerged from this process: (1) the impact of housing challenges on mental, physical, and academic health, and (2) institutional housing issues related to affordability and process inefficiencies. Table 1 provides a summary of the articles reviewed.

RESULTS

Only one academic article among those reviewed addressed HBCUs, highlighting a significant research gap in this area. Of the 30 studies examined, approximately 97 percent focused on predominantly white institutions (PWIs), while only about 3 percent focused on HBCUs. Our literature review identified two primary themes concerning housing issues and their impact on student health. The first theme involves significant concerns regarding students’ mental, physical, and academic well-being. While a diverse range of articles discussed these aspects of student health, the overwhelming majority examined them within PWI contexts. The second theme relates to institutional housing challenges, including affordability, selection processes, and living conditions. Similarly, most studies concentrated on PWIs rather than HBCUs, underscoring the need for more targeted research addressing housing issues within the HBCU environment.

Discussion of Student Health

Mental Health

Housing insecurity significantly impacts African American college students’ mental health. Students experiencing unstable housing often face heightened stress, anxiety, and social isolation, which can affect academic focus and overall well-being (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Darden, 2023; Kornbluh, 2024). Poor dormitory conditions, including mold or infestations, exacerbate mental and physical stress (Badmus, 2022).

Financial stress, often linked to housing instability, reduces students’ cognitive resources and contributes to mental health challenges (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2013; Cruz, n.d.; Dawoud, 2023). Self-esteem, self-efficacy, and perceived social support are important protective factors, with satisfaction in student housing positively influencing these outcomes (Hasan & Fatima, 2018). Housing insecurity among HBCU students compounds these issues, affecting mental, physical, and academic health (The Inconsistencies of Housing and Shelter for HBCU Students, n.d.;

Weissman, 2022). Chronic stress from poor or overcrowded housing is associated with higher rates of social isolation, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Kornbluh, 2024; Söderpalm, 2017).

Table 1. Summary of Literature Review Findings

Article	Source	Context		Student Health			Housing Issues	
		PWI	HBCU	Mental	Physical	Academic	Afford-ability	Process
Bailey et al., 2020	Wiley Online				X			
Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2013	ProQuest	X		X			X	
Budd, 2024	EBSCOhost	X		X			X	
Cheskis-Gold & Danahy, 2012	Google Scholar	X						
Cruz, 2018	ProQuest	X		X				
Dawoud, 2023	ProQuest	X			X			
Elsayed, 2023	Wiley Online	X		X		X		
Gallus, 2022	Google Scholar	X					X	X
Ghani & Suleiman, 2016	Google Scholar	X				X		
Green, 2003	ProQuest		X				X	
Hallett, 2010	Sage Journals	X					X	
Hasan & Fatima, 2018	ProQuest	X		X		X		
Hendrix, 2023	ProQuest	X						
Johnson et al., 2009	ProQuest	X			X			
Kornbluh et al., 2024	Google Scholar	X		X				
Long, 2014	Google Scholar	X				X		
López Turley & Wodtke, 2010	Sage Journals	X				X		
Maribojoc, 2023	ProQuest	X					X	
Mendoza, 2018	ProQuest	X						
Moore et al., 2019	Google Scholar	X						
Navarez, 2017	ProQuest	X			X			
Ong et al., 2013	Google Scholar	X						
(Sackett et al., 2016)	Google Scholar	X					X	
Söderpalm, 2017	Google Scholar	X		X		X		

Physical Health

Substandard housing at HBCUs such as mold, pests, and structural problems poses serious physical health risks, including respiratory issues, skin rashes, and allergic reactions (CDC, n.d.; Black Students at HBCUs Live in Horrific Conditions: What Can Be Done, n.d.). Student protests at several HBCUs highlight the urgent need for safer housing (Weissman, 2022).

Financial underfunding of HBCUs contributes to deteriorating infrastructure, underscoring the need for renovations and new housing to safeguard student health (Badmus, 2022; Peebles, 2023). On-campus students often enjoy better physical health due to safer living conditions and access to campus facilities, whereas off-campus students may face nutritional challenges, higher obesity risk, and alcohol misuse (Bailey et al., 2020). Students struggling with housing instability often experience unmet basic needs, worsening physical and mental health (Dawoud, 2023).

Research highlighted by Bailey et al. (2020) indicates that students living off-campus face unique nutritional challenges primarily due to their exclusion from school meal plans. A cross-sectional study found that off-campus students exhibited significantly lower consumption of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products compared to those living on-campus. Additionally, these students were more likely to have overweight or obesity and consumed more alcohol than their on-campus or with-parents counterparts (Bailey et al., 2020). Living conditions affect physical health but the stress of not being financially stable can harm students physically. The thematic analysis of interviews conducted by Dawoud (n.d.), revealed that students facing housing instability often struggle with unmet basic needs, leading to a cascade of negative health outcomes. For instance, students who reported chronic mental health issues and an inability to afford therapy exemplify how unmet safety and physiological needs can worsen physical and mental health (Dawoud, n.d.). The stress of managing living expenses and the lack of stable housing contribute to a decline in physical health, as these students are unable to prioritize their well-being over immediate survival needs.

Academic Health

Housing instability negatively affects academic performance by increasing stress, reducing study time, and requiring students to work long hours to meet housing costs (Budd, 2024; Darden, 2023). Stable on-campus housing provides proximity to academic resources, structured living, and engagement with faculty and peers, supporting academic success (López Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Kowalski, 2022).

Students with unstable housing are more likely to experience absenteeism, lower grades, and decreased retention, particularly at HBCUs with overcrowded or unsafe dormitories (Green, n.d.; Mendoza, 2018). Housing insecurity affects a substantial portion of students, with 37% of four-year and 46% of two-year institution students experiencing some form of housing insecurity (Mendoza, 2018). Expanding and improving housing options, along with sustainable funding, is critical to enhancing student well-being and academic outcomes (McCray, 2023).

Quality housing is linked to better academic outcomes and personal development. A positive living environment enhances comfort, convenience, and life satisfaction, contributing to improved academic productivity and social stability. Conversely, inadequate housing can lead to stress, health problems, and hinder academic performance (Ghani & Suleiman, 2016). For female

expatriate students, these challenges are often more pronounced due to additional stressors related to cultural and academic adjustment Green (2003)

Discussion of Housing Issues

Housing Issues

- **Operational Inefficiencies:**

- Timing of financial aid disbursements can delay students' ability to pay upfront housing costs like security deposits (Sackett et al., 2016).
- NSU housing selection prioritizes rising sophomores, then juniors and seniors, aiming to address prior concerns about seniors living off campus.
- NCAT requires a \$175 housing fee and application; seniors may still need off-campus housing with no fee refund if housing is unavailable.

- **Affordability:**

- 42% of CUNY students reported housing insecurity within the past year (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2013).
- Tuition, fees, room, and board have increased 32% over two decades; room and board costs have risen faster than tuition (Budd, 2024).
- Over half of off-campus students live below the poverty level, struggling to find affordable housing (Sackett et al., 2016).
- Affordable housing reduces financial strain, improves focus on academics, and fosters community development (Green, 2003; Maribojoc, 2023).
- Investments in affordable housing can provide modest but stable financial returns for institutions (Wood & Schuch, 2021).

- **Living Conditions:**

- Mold, dampness, and pest infestations negatively impact health, comfort, and **student residential satisfaction (SRS)** (Johnson et al., 2009; Navarez, 2017).
- On-campus housing supports higher student involvement and academic outcomes (Navarez, 2017).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our literature review only included universities in the United States. For example, a relevant article at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria revealed that on-campus students had better academic performance compared to their off-campus counterparts (Owolabi, n.d.). The reduced commute time and immediate access to libraries and study groups contribute significantly to this disparity

(Owolabi, n.d.). Including international institutions may give a broader assessment of the issues in future studies.

Future studies could include a survey aimed at capturing the perspective of students to get a better understanding of the impact the housing issues have on the three aspects of student health. This methodological approach would provide insight into the magnitude of the impact. Also, focus groups could provide more insight into the unique experiences that students have with housing issues and how they overcame those challenges in support of their health.

CONCLUSION

As student enrollment continues to rise, adequate housing at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is increasingly urgent. Many institutions face challenges such as mold, flooding, and high housing costs. While on-campus housing is generally more affordable than off-campus alternatives, quality issues contribute to student dissatisfaction and can negatively impact mental and physical health, as well as academic performance. Innovative temporary solutions, like Fisk University's use of shipping containers, illustrate the severity of these challenges.

This study highlights a critical gap in research on HBCU housing but draws on broader findings from non-HBCU institutions to inform potential improvements. Affordable and quality housing supports student well-being, academic success, and social engagement. Policy recommendations include expanding housing options, securing funding for renovations and new construction, and strengthening institutional and community support systems to address housing instability.

By examining the unique housing challenges faced by HBCU students, this study contributes to advancing knowledge on student well-being, equity, and access to higher education. Future empirical work can build on these findings to evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions and guide evidence-based policies for improving housing conditions and student outcomes.

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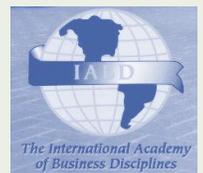
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