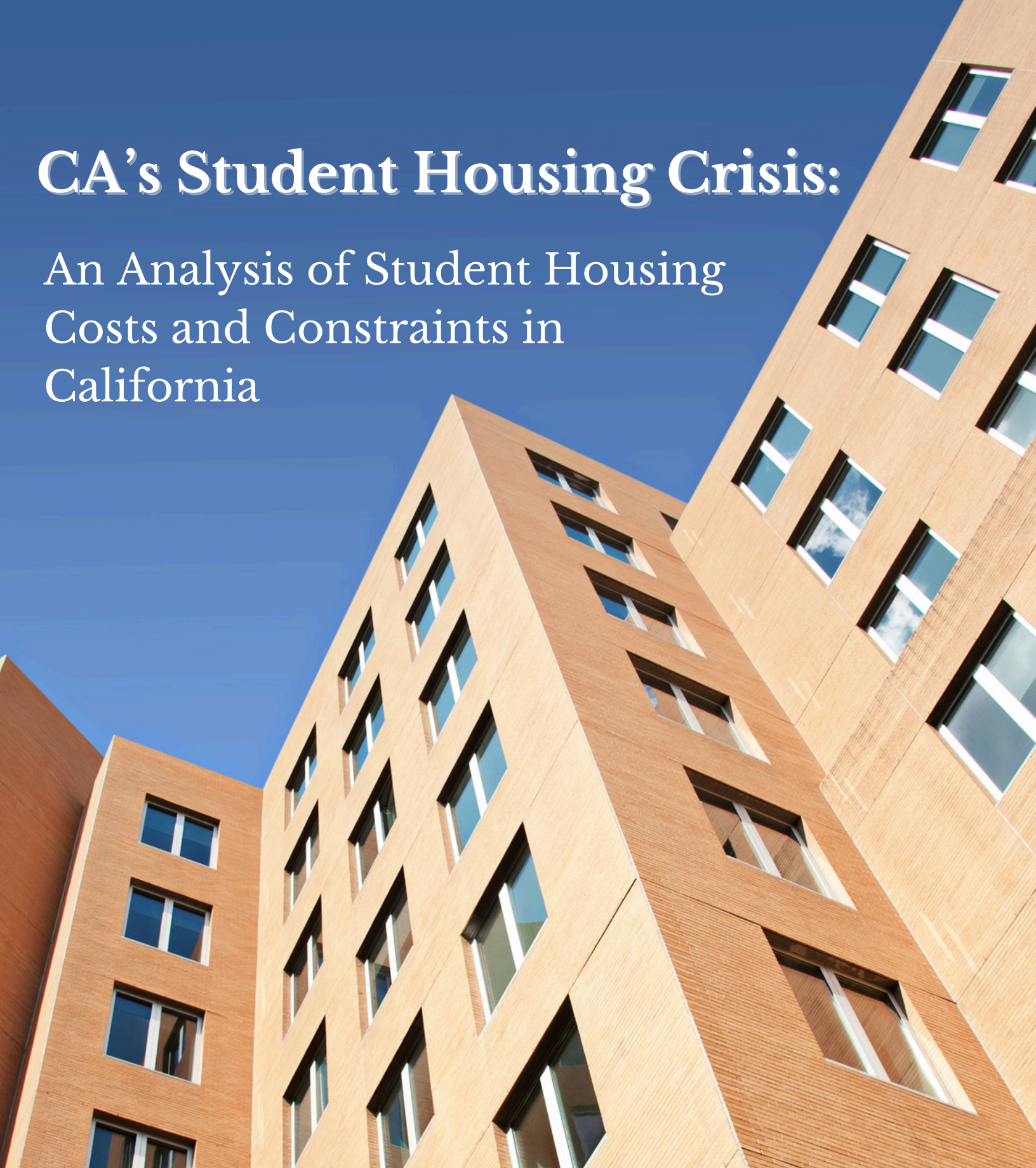


CA's Student Housing Crisis:

An Analysis of Student Housing Costs and Constraints in California



Student
HOMES
COALITION

April 2025

Table of Contents

Executive Summary -----	2
Background-----	4
On-Campus Housing Development-----	6
Off-Campus Housing Development-----	10
Further Discussion on Deregulation-----	15
Zoning in College Communities-----	18
Statewide Student Housing Costs-----	22
Recommendations-----	27
Conclusion-----	29
Bibliography-----	30

Executive Summary

Housing is becoming increasingly inaccessible and unaffordable for students in California. A majority of higher education students in California are rent-burdened and thousands of students experience homelessness each year. Public universities across the state provide a limited number of on-campus beds, forcing the vast majority of students to compete for housing off-campus. The Student HOMES Coalition's Student Housing Crisis Report aims to establish the true cost of living in campus communities and understand why those costs remain so high, despite a growing recognition of the need for more student housing.

Only 15% of the land in walking distance to California's largest public colleges and universities is designated for multi-family housing.

Nearly half is zoned for single-family.

While existing research demonstrates that restrictive zoning and regulatory hurdles are largely to blame for the statewide housing shortage, previous research has not thoroughly considered the role that these policies play in driving the student housing crisis. To fill this gap, this study analyzed the area within 1.5 miles of California's largest UC, CSU, and CCC campuses. It found that only 15% of land around those colleges and universities is designated for multi-family residential development, while nearly half is designated for single-family development. The relatively limited opportunities for multi-family housing in campus communities constrains new development, forcing students to commute longer distances and pay more for housing.

To gain a better understanding of the housing costs currently faced by students, this study examined the on and off-campus housing costs for each UC and CSU campus, as well as the 14 CCCs with on-campus housing. It found that students across California pay over \$10,700 each academic year for housing on average. At CCCs, the cost of housing was over seven times greater than tuition. At CSUs, housing costs were nearly twice tuition. At UCs, housing and tuition were roughly equal. When food and other necessary expenses are considered, this study determined that the cost of living is significantly greater than the cost of learning for nearly all students at public institutions of higher education in California.

Students pay over \$10,700 each academic year for housing.

At CSUs, the cost of housing is twice the cost of tuition.

At CCCs, the cost of housing is seven times the cost of tuition.

This study provides several recommendations for lowering the high cost of student housing in California. To alleviate constrained housing markets around colleges and universities, this study recommends upzoning to allow for more multi-family development in campus communities, including on commercial parcels. Policymakers should create new streamlined pathways to lower the costs of student housing development and ensure that desperately needed housing is not delayed by onerous regulations and lawsuits. State funding sources will be necessary to provide deed-restricted affordable units for students with acute financial needs. Finally, policymakers should put additional protections in place to ensure that landlords do not discriminate against students in rental markets. The scope of the student housing crisis is immense, but by taking these steps, policymakers can begin to reduce the significant barrier to higher education that housing costs represent in California.

Background

The housing shortage is the main contributing factor to the broader cost of living crisis in California. The state has become unaffordable for millions of residents, including its 2.3 million college students.¹ New construction has not kept up with demand, causing housing costs to increase across the board. Both single-family home prices and rents have skyrocketed, putting the California dream out of reach for the state's growing population. The housing affordability crisis is particularly acute for renters. California has one of the largest renting populations in the country, and is one of the least affordable states for tenants. 44% of Californians rent, over half of whom are cost-burdened by housing.² Unaffordable rents have also contributed to the state's growing homelessness crisis, as hundreds of thousands have been forced onto the streets or into emergency housing facilities. California has more unhoused residents than any other state in the nation, and the situation becomes more dire every year. The unhoused population grew by 8% from 2022 to 2023, far out-pacing the state's population growth.³

California's higher education students are one of the groups most affected by the housing crisis. According to a Student Aid Commission Survey, students paid an average of \$2,000 a month in non-tuition expenses such as rent and food in the 2018-2019 school year. Housing costs are the largest non-tuition cost of attendance for students in California, representing over half the cost of attending a UC or CSU in 2019.⁴ Due to high housing costs, a majority of California college students experience rent burden and housing insecurity.⁵

1. Public Policy Institute of California: [California's Higher Education System](#)

2. Public Policy Institute of California: [California's Renters](#)

3. CalMatters: [Exclusive: California's Homeless Population Grew Again this Year, Especially in These Counties](#)

4. Public Policy Institute California: [Higher Education in California: Making College Affordable](#)

5. California Student Aid Commission: [Food and Housing Basic Needs Survey 2023](#)

There are some campus communities under particular strain. At UC Santa Cruz, for example, four in five students face unaffordable rent, and nearly half pay more than 70% of their income on rent.⁶ Not every student can afford the high rents around college campuses, and thus thousands are housing insecure or homeless. According to a 2020 report from UCLA, 20% of California community college students, 11% of CSU students, and 4% of UC students experience homelessness in a given academic year.⁷ Homelessness has an immediate and dire impact on students' academic and personal wellbeing, as housing insecurity has been linked to increased levels of depression, anxiety, and physical health issues.⁸ At the same time, students who experience homelessness also experience significantly higher dropout rates due to financial distress, which can have a lifelong impact on financial security.⁹

While the UC, CSU, and CCC systems have made significant efforts to house students on-campus in recent years, the vast majority of California's college students rely on a limited number of off-campus housing units.¹⁰ As a result, students create excess demand in the rental markets surrounding campuses, which drives up costs for the broader community. The average cost of living near a UC campus, for example, increased by 54% between 2014 and 2022.¹¹ Without an abundance of on-campus student housing and private rental units near colleges, California's public and private institutions will remain inaccessible for many students. Policy choices at the campus, local, and state levels have all contributed to the lack of student housing. Public colleges and universities often struggle to meet regulatory standards for publicly funded housing, resulting in lower rates of construction. Campus neighborhoods are not immune to the state-wide challenges that prevent the development of multi-family housing. High building costs, restrictive zoning, and regulatory hurdles have also limited the supply of housing around colleges and universities and driven up rent prices for students and faculty.

6. UC Santa Cruz Institute for Social Transformation: [No Place Like Home Report](#)

7. The Center for the Transformation of Schools: [Dismantling Student Homelessness in California](#)

8. Basic Needs Initiative: [Study of Students' Basic Needs](#)

9. The Center for the Transformation of Schools: [Dismantling Student Homelessness in California](#)

10. California Legislative Analyst's Office: [The 2023-2024 Budget: Student Housing](#)

11. Los Angeles Times: [A 4.0 Student Beat All the Odds. But He Can't Afford a UC Campus](#)

On-Campus Housing Development

The student housing crisis exists in part because of the lack of available on-campus units. As of 2020, just 18% of higher education students lived on-campus and the competition for university housing has led to a significant increase in the cost of attendance at public universities.¹² In California, the UC system leads the way among the public higher education systems with housing for approximately one third of its student body.¹³ The CSU lags behind the UC significantly with beds for just 14% of their population, while only 14 out of the 116 community college campuses maintain any housing facilities.¹⁴ Despite the dire need for more student and faculty housing, colleges and universities in California face significant barriers to development.

Delays to Development

While public colleges in California have a wider degree of authority over their land use decisions than private developers, housing projects can still be delayed as a result of processes like CEQA litigation and Coastal Commission review. Even when student housing is approved, universities and colleges can be forced to make extensive changes to the proposed development. Navigating the regulatory framework can significantly raise costs and delay projects, causing the rate of new student housing construction to fall significantly behind the rate of population growth at public institutions.¹⁵

The California Environmental Quality Act, or CEQA, is frequently weaponized to prevent the development of multi-family housing across the state, including student housing. Signed in 1970, the law was intended to protect California's environment against encroachment from both public and private development.¹⁶

12. Bipartisan Policy Institute: [Housing Insecurity and Homelessness Among College Students](#)

13. New York Times: [Berkeley vs. Berkeley is a Fight Over the California Dream](#)

14. California Community Colleges: [College Dormitories and Housing](#)

15. The Wall Street Journal: [UC Berkeley Enrollment Case Fuels Wider Battle for Student Housing](#)

16. CalMatters: [How Environmental Law Is Misused to Stop Housing](#)

CEQA's broad mandate for residents to bring lawsuits has prevented the development of countless projects and contributed to the state's broader housing shortage. So-called NIMBY ("Not In My Backyard") advocates have used the law to challenge the development of multi-family housing, often designated for low-income residents or students, on the grounds that it will alter their neighborhoods' ambiance, or "environment."¹⁷ By allowing for lawsuits under an extremely broad understanding of environmental protection, CEQA can be used to bring legal challenges against nearly any project. As a result, housing projects are delayed, costs are increased, and there is an overall chilling effect on development across the state.

While there is a limited CEQA exemption for on-campus university and college developments, the law can still be leveraged to prevent the construction of student housing. At UC Berkeley, for example, NIMBY activists sued to prevent a new dorm from being constructed on a plot of land several blocks away from campus.¹⁸ CEQA and similar regulations that provide avenues for community members and officials to prevent the development of new housing in their neighborhoods contribute to the overall shortage of units in California.

CEQA does not stand alone in delaying the development of student housing. The California Coastal Commission, established in 1972, added another layer of oversight to development in the "Coastal Zone" with the intention of preserving the state's shoreline environment. Due to the increased scrutiny of construction in the Coastal Zone, development in the area has lagged significantly behind the need for housing. The project adjustments required by the Coastal Commission during discretionary approval combined with supply regulation make developing in the Coastal Zone more arduous and costly than in the rest of the state, and student housing is no exception.¹⁹

17. CalMatters: [How Environmental Law Is Misused to Stop Housing](#)

18. New York Times: [Berkeley vs. Berkeley is a Fight Over the California Dream](#)

19. The Journal of Urban Economics: [The Effect of the California Coastal Commission on Housing Prices](#)

The Coastal Commission mandate to shape development in its jurisdiction is broad, resulting in regulations that prevent the upzoning of coastal land, mandate coastal access on private property, require extensive development mitigation, and establish conditions of approval down to building color.²⁰ As a result, the Coastal Zone is wealthier and less dense than the rest of the state, making the area a hostile environment for the development of multi-family or student housing.²¹

While regulation to protect the Coastal Zone is necessary to prevent environmental degradation that could result from private development, coastal review is redundant for public projects like university and college housing. In order to access public funding, California's colleges and universities are already subject to a higher standard of review than private housing developments. Moreover, campuses have to conduct environmental impact reports (EIRs) as a part of their long range development plans (LRDPs).²² Even so, the Coastal Commission has been allowed to apply strict development standards to university and college housing projects. Campuses in the Coastal Zone, particularly UC Santa Barbara, have faced setbacks in providing more campus facilities and student housing due to the Coastal Commission. In one case, the Coastal Commission denied an request from UC Santa Barbara to adopt a lower parking ratio, and instead required the college to provide hundreds of parking spaces to ensure that no students would use the public parking available nearby.²³ These requirements led to a substantial increase in cost and delayed project timelines, redirecting scarce housing funds away from constructing more units for students.

Accessing Funding

For student housing developers, navigating the complex regulatory framework and discretionary review is only half the battle. Public and nonprofit developers, such as

20. New York Times: [In California, Coastal Commission Wields Vast Power](#)

21. Times of San Diego: [California Housing Crisis Prompts Efforts to Weaken Coastal Commission's Power](#)

22. University of California Office of the President: [Environmental Issues and CEQA Compliance](#).

23. California Coastal Commission: [Notice of Impending Development - University of California at Santa Barbara](#)

universities and colleges, rely on state funds to finance student and faculty housing projects. This is especially true for housing designed to serve students with the most acute needs, as state subsidies are often needed to build affordable units.

Public funding, however, comes with strings attached. As detailed by the Turner Center, projects receiving state dollars must comply with stricter development standards than privately funded projects.²⁴ Not only does this mean high compliance costs, these developments also face with long approval processes, redundant or contradictory reviews, and expensive design standards. The public funding process for affordable student housing is often arduous and inefficient, resulting in the development of fewer units as money is spent on compliance costs rather than funding more affordable units.

The challenges to accessing public funding for student housing projects continue to increase as state money dissipates. In the 2023-2024 State Budget, the Governor delayed two programs that would have granted hundreds of millions of dollars for student housing: the California Student Housing Revolving Loan Program and the Higher Education Student Housing Grant Program.²⁵ The delay of student housing funding became an indefinite suspension in the 2024-2025 Budget, leaving the future of higher education housing construction uncertain.²⁶ Some colleges have been able to consider public-private partnership or local bonds for funding, but campuses outside large urban areas have no such alternative.²⁷ Given that affordable student housing relies on public funding, these budget cuts will make higher education even less accessible for lower income students. As UC, CSU, and CCC populations continue to grow, the lack of university and college housing development will result in more competition for scarce units and further increase the cost of attendance.

24. Turner Center for Housing Innovation: [The Costs of Affordable Housing Production: Insights from California's 9% Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program](#)

25. Legislative Analyst's Office: [The 2023-24 Budget: Student Housing](#)

26. Legislative Analyst's Office: [The 2024-25 California Spending Plan: Higher Education](#)

27. Cal Matters: [California's Fund to Build Student Housing Runs Dry](#)

Off-Campus Housing Development

With on-campus housing at many universities and colleges increasingly limited and unaffordable, most students must enter the private rental market. The neighborhoods surrounding universities and colleges face increased demand for housing due to the concentrated population of students and faculty. Even as rental prices have skyrocketed, the policies regulating development around campuses have remained largely stagnant. Similar to university and college housing, private development near universities faces substantial red tape and barriers to approval. Restrictive land use policy and local anti-housing activism have significantly limited multi-family development, further contributing to the student housing crisis.

Housing Regulations

Private multi-housing development faces similar regulations and restrictions to on-campus university development. Though the costs of land, labor, and materials also contribute to unaffordability, non-construction expenses have substantially increased as a share of development costs since 1980.²⁸ Housing projects that do not receive state funding must be financially viable or else they will not be built, and thus regulations that come with high compliance costs result in less housing. Previous analysis has shown that regulations that limit the profitability of developments and infuse uncertainty into the approval process, result in poor rates of construction and higher rents.²⁹ Complex regulations and discretionary review make it incredibly difficult to predict the final costs and construction timeline for a project, having an overall chilling effect on private development. Without assurances that projects will be approved and profitable, developers have no incentive to build multi-family housing. As a result, the

28. National Bureau of Economic Policy: [Man Made Scarcity Drives Up Housing Prices](#)

29. Urban Land Markets: [Government Land Use Interventions: An Economic Analysis](#)

growth of the housing supply has fallen far behind the rising demand, contributing to increased competition for housing and higher rents.

Examining a variety of different measures, Gyoruko and Molloy (2015) also find that regulations that restrict development lead to housing shortages.³⁰ The preponderance of evidence shows that stringent regulations lead to inefficient land use and under-development, both of which contribute to increased costs. Comparing data from metropolitan areas across the country, Mayer and Somerville (2000) find that regions with more regulation have significantly slower rates of construction. Moreover, they find that delaying the approval process for a proposed project by just 4.5 months led to 45% less new construction.³¹ These results are striking. Overregulation and permitting delays create significant barriers to housing, representing a major roadblock in addressing California's housing shortage.

Just as with on-campus housing developed by universities and colleges, environmental regulations play a significant role in determining the off-campus housing supply in California. CEQA establishes a complex system of review for private development, and opens projects up to lawsuits on environmental grounds. Despite the good intention of the law to mitigate ecological impact of development, NIMBY activists have weaponized CEQA to block the construction of sustainable housing styles. Ironically, infill development and transit-oriented, multi-family projects are the top targets of CEQA lawsuits.³² While originally passed as a tool for environmental conservation, CEQA is more often used as a tool of exclusion, allowing homeowners to prevent the development of multi-family housing in their neighborhoods.

NIMBY activism goes beyond CEQA. Concerns over neighborhood character and construction have led to all manner of local restrictions and regulations on the housing type and design standards, put in place to keep renters out of single-family

30. National Bureau of Economic Research: Regulation and Housing Supply

31. Regional Science and Urban Economics: Land use regulation and new construction

32. Hastings Environmental Law Journal: California Environmental Quality Act and California's Housing Crisis

neighborhoods. Discretionary review and local restrictions have dire consequences for housing affordability in California. Mast (2020) finds that higher levels of NIMBY activism in areas with significant homeownership rates results in fewer multi-family housing developments, limiting the housing supply and increasing rental prices.³³

Regulation and discretionary review for private development have contributed to the housing crisis in California from multiple angles. Delays in project approval create uncertainty for developers, disincentivizing construction, while compliance with California's extensive state and local regulations drives up costs. At the same time, local control over housing policy and discretionary review allow for NIMBY community members to block new housing in their neighborhoods, most often targeting multi-family and affordable housing styles. While some regulations are well-intentioned and even necessary for preserving public safety, arbitrary and restrictive housing policies have been used as tools of exclusion, contributing to an affordability crisis across California.

Restrictive Local Zoning and Land Use Policies

Other major contributing factors to the housing shortage in California are restrictive zoning and land use policies. In most of the state, local laws determine the type of project that can be built on a given piece of land. Density limits, lot size requirements, height maximums, and single-family zoning all affect the rental housing supply and price. Policies that limit housing such as those listed above are particularly problematic around college campuses. While universities and colleges tend to increase the population density of an area by attracting thousands of students and faculty renters, zoning and land-use policies for these areas are often the same as for the rest of the city. Construction in neighborhoods near campuses has failed to meet the demand for housing due to local restrictions, which has increased competition for existing units and driven up prices for students and staff.

Broadly, zoning policy is largely determinative of housing prices. Glaeser and Gyourko's 2003 analysis found that differences in housing prices across regions was not determined solely by variations in construction costs, but instead are a result of restrictive zoning policies.³⁴ They find that price increases in California are significantly higher than new construction costs, indicating that land-use and zoning policies are contributing to the state's housing crisis. While the hard costs of construction and land have increased, they are not solely responsible for rising housing costs. Restrictive zoning leads to the ineffective use of land, creating scarcity and increasing rents.

Single-family zoning alone is a powerful tool for preventing the development of new housing. By limiting the land eligible for multi-family housing, local governments are able to exclude renters from their communities. A lack of multi-family housing supply, particularly in population-dense areas such as those near colleges and universities, increases competition for existing rental units and raises prices. When there is no multi-family housing available to students, they are often forced to rent homes in single-family neighborhoods. Not only does this contribute to housing scarcity in the broader community, it also creates an inefficient use of space, as students are better suited to denser styles of housing.

In both single-family and multi-family zones, density restrictions limit housing supply in California. Gyourko, Saiz, and Summers (2008) find that communities with density restrictions and local control of land use policy have higher housing prices and less construction.³⁵ Similarly, Geshko and DeSalvo (2012) find that minimum lot size regulations and density limitations expand urban sprawl. Zoning laws that prohibit dense multi-family housing, then, create inefficiencies and discourage sustainable types of development.³⁶ These consequences are even more pronounced in the context of housing near colleges and universities. Proximity to campus is a necessity for most

34. FRBNY Economic Policy Review: [The Impact of Building Restrictions on Housing Affordability](#)

35. Urban Studies: [A New Measure of the Local Regulatory Environment for Housing Markets](#)

36. Journal of Regional Science: [The Effect of Land-Use Controls on the Spatial Size of U.S. Urbanized Areas](#)

students, and therefore policies that limit density and cause sprawl put undue pressure on rental markets near universities and colleges.

Beyond explicit density restrictions, local governments can impose height restrictions to limit the development of high capacity multi-family housing. The logic behind these restrictions is simple; homeowners and local elected officials want to maintain the single-family, suburban feel of their neighborhood. Restrictions imposed in the name of neighborhood character, however, can have dire consequences for affordability. Similar to density and lot-size restrictions, height restrictions reduce housing supply, increase costs, and contribute to urban sprawl (Bertaud and Brueckner 2005). By imposing a de-facto limit on the number of units that a parcel of land can hold, height limits act as limits on housing density. In high demand areas, such as those around universities and colleges, housing restrictions prevent new development from meeting the demand for housing, resulting in increased prices for all renters – regardless of association with the university or college.

Further Discussion on Deregulation

While the general consensus in the literature is that deregulating the housing market will increase the supply of available units and decrease prices, some advocates warn that new development leads to gentrification and displacement. Others argue that new high end units make neighborhoods more expensive, raising costs for existing residents. Much research has been done to test the validity of these critiques of upzoning, the majority of which finds that they do not hold water. New housing construction, even when high end, relieves pressure on the rental market and slows rent growth.

There is no doubt that new construction has often received the blame for displacement of long-time residents and gentrification. Asquith et al (2023) test this claim directly and find that housing development does not inherently lead to displacement in lower-income areas because in-migrating tenants are more likely to move into new housing instead of displace residents from existing housing. Additionally, when gentrification and new construction are correlated, it is likely because developers are more likely to build in areas that are already gentrifying, not because new development causes gentrification.³⁸ Developers tend to build where there is an opportunity for profit, and thus it is areas with already rising rents that attract new construction to a neighborhood in the first place. This relationship is particularly pronounced in areas surrounding colleges and universities, as expanding student populations bring excess demand into the market. Universities and colleges continue to increase enrollment, but the area in close proximity to campus where students can live remains the same. As long as university campuses exist, their student populations will demand private rental housing.

38. Upjohn Institute: [Local Effects of Large New Apartment Buildings in Low-Income Areas](#)

Building enough units to sustain both the university community and the local residents of campus neighborhoods is the best way to ensure that California's schools can grow without contributing to displacement.

Similar to the concerns over gentrification and displacement, skeptics of deregulation argue that new construction, especially at the high-end of the rental market, will increase prices for all renters. Recent research, however, finds that the opposite is true. Using data from 52,000 tenants of multi-family buildings, Mast (2020) finds that new high-income or luxury housing can have positive effects on affordability for middle and low-income households, even in the short run. The analysis reveals that housing development at high-income levels reduces pressure on rental markets by promoting migration into housing at suitable income levels and thus reducing pressure on middle-income markets.³⁹ Asquith, Mast, and Reed (2019) corroborate Mast's finding, showing that new development decreases rents by 5-7% for existing housing in the surrounding neighborhood by creating new options for renters.⁴⁰ As explained by Been, Ellen, and O'Reagan (2018), construction of new housing has been shown to slow the rate of rent increases in the rest of the market, as high-income renters no longer compete with low and middle-income renters for existing units.⁴¹ New housing developments also increase supply at the low-end of markets over time, as rental units depreciate in value and add to the supply of affordable housing.⁴²

While many criticisms of deregulation are well-intentioned, the evidence clearly shows that promoting development is the best way to address California's housing affordability crisis. Reducing red-tape, up-zoning land, and reducing the costs of construction will all help increase the supply of housing and reduce rents across the states. The neighborhoods surrounding colleges and universities provide a unique opportunity for reform.

39. Urban Economics: [The Effect of New Market-Rate Housing Construction on the Low-Income Housing Market](#)

40. UpJohn Institute for Employment Research: [The Local Effects of New Housing in Low-Income Areas](#)

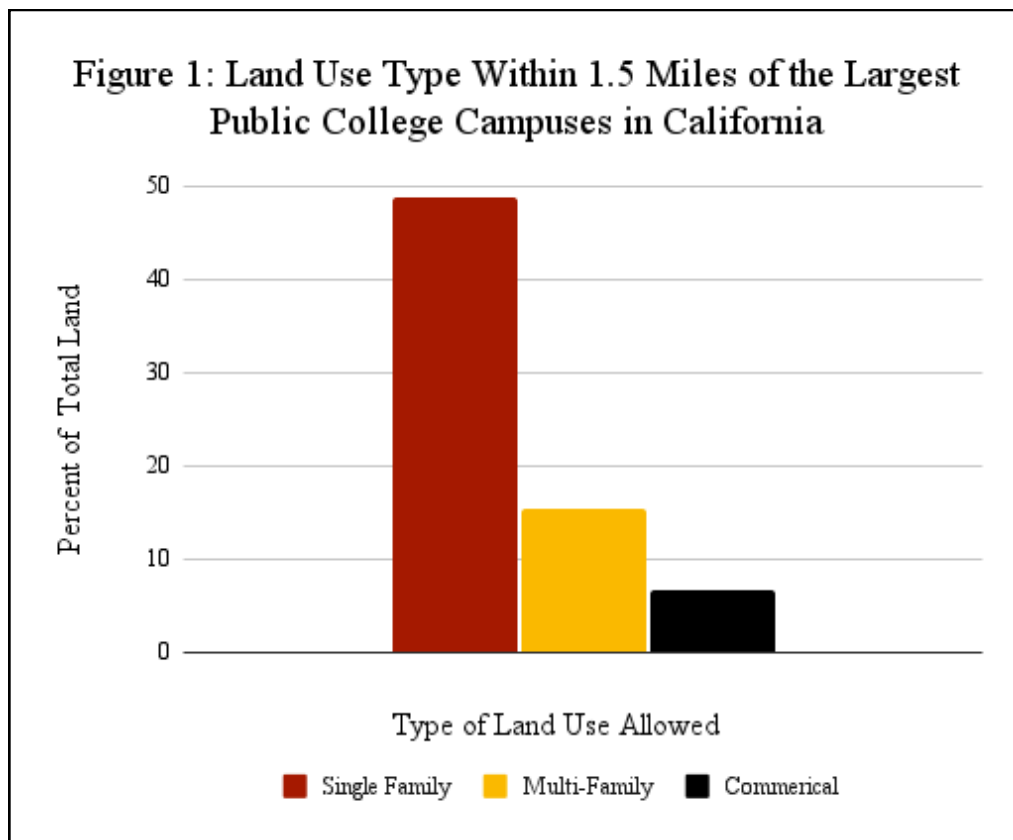
41. NYU Furman Center: [Supply Skepticism: Housing Supply and Affordability](#)

42. American Economic Review: [Are Private Markets and Filtering a Viable Source of Low-Income Housing?](#)

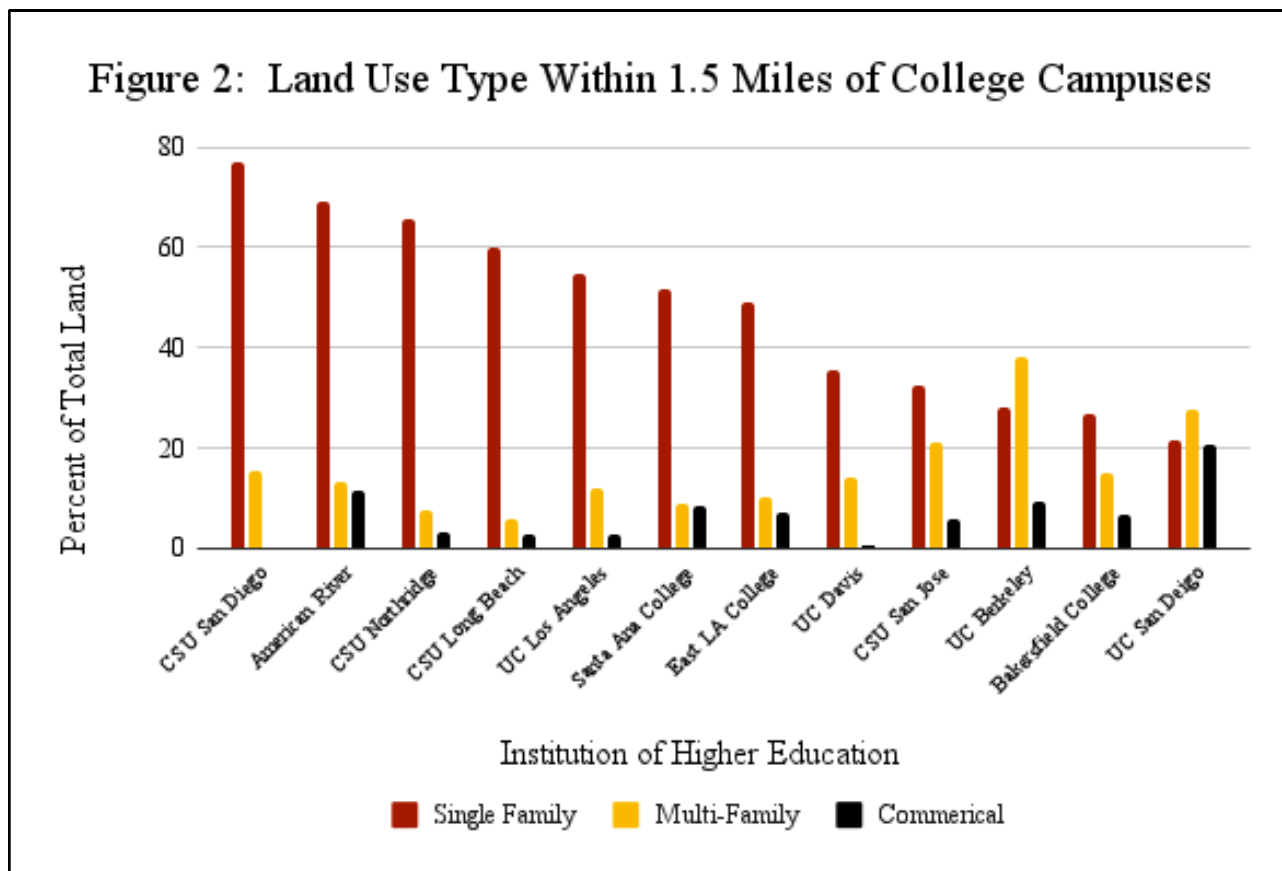
Students are particularly well suited to live in dense, multi-family housing developments that maximize the use of space near campuses. Housing affordability is a key element to the accessibility of higher education. New construction is essential to ensure that housing around California's colleges and universities remains accessible for community members and students alike. Yet, the current landscape of zoning policies around college campuses prioritizes single family zoning and prevents the necessary multi-family development from taking place.

Zoning in College Communities

To better understand the regulatory framework for student housing development in California, this study analyzes land use restrictions around a sample of the state's largest public higher education institutions. The analysis includes all of the non-campus land within 1.5 miles of the approximate center of campus. Since campuses vary somewhat in size, the amount of non-campus land in the 1.5 mile radius circle ranges from 2,247 acres to 4,452 acres. This study records the amount of single family, multi-family, and commercial land in the circle based on the jurisdiction's general plan. For the few jurisdictions where general plan maps were not easily accessible, it uses zoning designations to identify single-family, multi-family, and commercially zoned land.



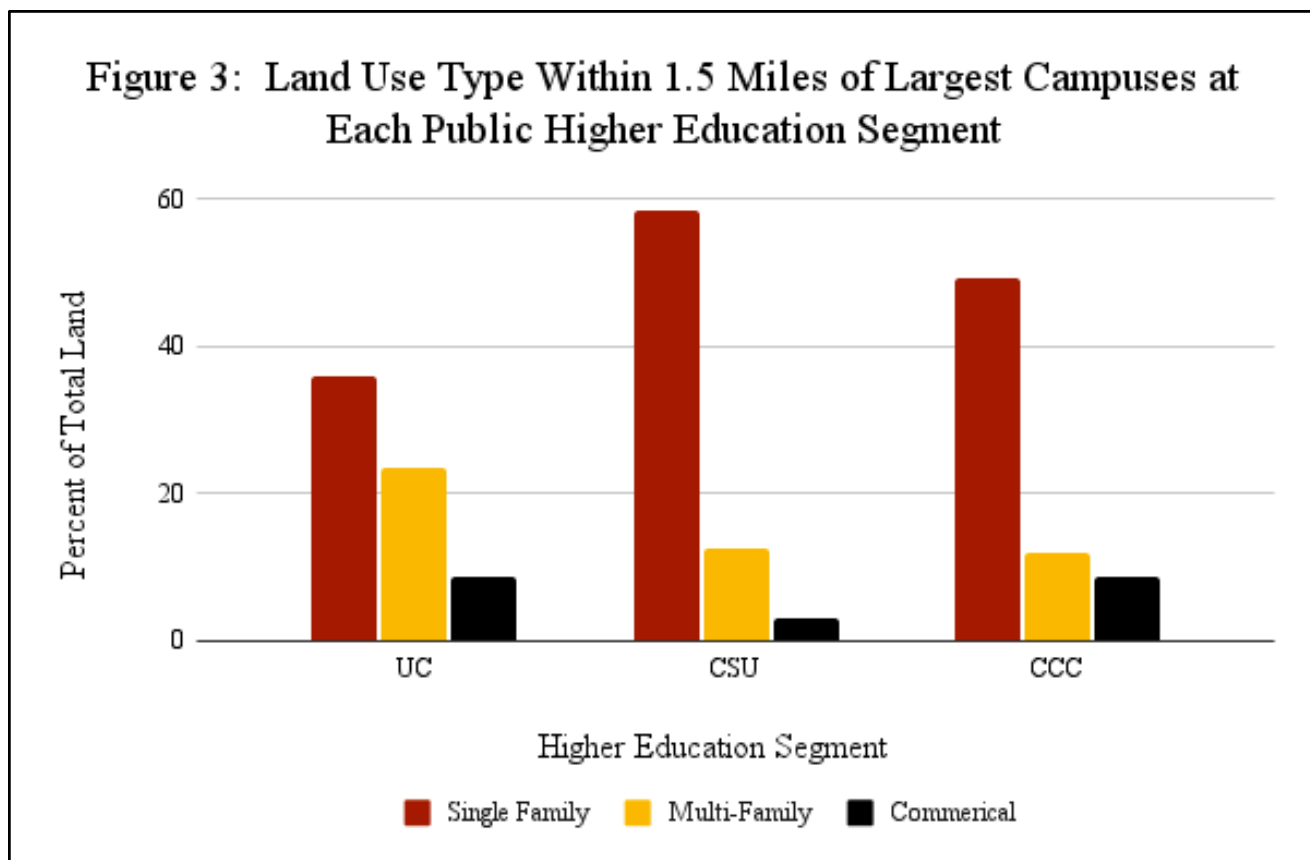
As shown in Figure 1, only approximately 15% of the land surrounding California's largest higher education institutions is designated by a city or county general plan for multi-family residential development. Nearly half is designated for single-family development, and approximately 6% is designated for commercial development. The 12 schools examined in this study were UCLA, UCSD, UC Davis and UC Berkeley, Cal State Long Beach, San Diego State, Cal State Northridge, and San Jose State, and East LA College, American River College, Bakersfield College, and Santa Ana College.



As shown in Figure 2, only four colleges have more than 20% of the land with 1.5 miles a multi-family housing as allowable use in their jurisdiction's general plan. The campuses in the sample are the four largest in each segment, with the exception of San Jose State, which is the fifth largest CSU campus and was included because general plan data for Cal State Fullerton, the largest CSU campus, was not available at a scale commensurate with this analysis.

Of the sampled campuses, the CCCs have the least multi-family designated land around their campuses of the three segments, with only 12% of land within a 1.5 mile radius of the center of each campus designated for multi-family development. 13% of the land surrounding the sampled CSU campuses is designated for multi-family development, as is 23% of the land surrounding the four largest UC campuses.

As shown in Figure, 3, the CSUs have the most single-family-designated land around their campuses at 58%, followed by the CCCs at 49% and the UCs at 36%. 9% of the land around both the UCs and CCCs is designated for commercial use, while only 3% of land around the CSUs is designated for commercial use. Mixed-use land with a general plan designation allowing for multi-family residential development was counted in the multi-family category. As a result, the commercial areas considered in this study, like single-family land, remain closed off to new housing development around campuses.



CSU Northridge has the least multi-family-designated land in its immediate vicinity, with only 7% designated by the Northridge Community Plan for multi-family residential use. UC Berkeley has the highest proportion of multi-family land, at 38%. CSU Northridge also has the highest proportion of single-family land within a 1.5 mile radius of the center of campus, at 77%, and UC San Diego has the lowest, at 21%. UC San Diego had the highest proportion of commercial land surrounding campus, at 21%, while UCLA and CSU Long Beach only have 3% of the land near campus designated for commercial use, tied for the lowest.

While land use adjacent to higher education institutions in California varies, the relatively small amount of land designated for multi-family development likely contributes to the student housing shortage. Single family homes are more expensive to rent than apartments and are often not on the rental market in the first place. Increasing the amount of land available for multi-family development could make more units available for students.

On many campuses, commercial land provides a path to increasing the amount of multi-family housing available to students, faculty, and other campus community residents. At UCSD, for instance, allowing multi-family development on commercial land would almost double the amount of land available for off-campus apartments. At the four CCCs in the sample, it would increase the cumulative amount of multi-family land near campus by 75%. Land use reforms allowing multi-family development on commercial-designated land have the potential to significantly alleviate the student housing crisis in California.

Student Housing Costs

Overview

The insufficient existing supply of on-campus housing, along with the limited ability of universities and developers to build new housing, results in astronomical student housing costs across the state. On average, students across California pay over \$10,700 each academic year for housing. On and off-campus housing options are often comparable in cost, but off-campus rents vary dramatically depending on the campus community. The price of living near UC Merced, for example, is less than half the cost of living near UC Berkeley or UC Santa Cruz, despite similar on-campus housing costs. Housing costs in campus communities outpace those in the state at large. In 2025, the average cost of a two-bedroom apartment around a UC or a CSU was \$2,622 – nearly \$200 more than the statewide average fair market rent.⁴³ Students are also less equipped to meet the rising cost of housing. Working a job at minimum wage for 20 hours a week, a student would just barely be able to cover their portion of rent on a shared apartment, leaving other academic and living needs unmet.

On-Campus Housing Costs

The cost of on-campus housing was collected for each UC and CSU, as well as the fourteen CCCs with housing available.⁴⁴ Figures 4-6 show the cost of on-campus housing at each segment for an academic year, which typically spans nine months. Information on the cost of an on-campus housing is based on the cost of a bed in a “double,” or a unit shared with one other student. In cases where a college or university had multiple housing options within the double category, an average cost was calculated.

43. National Low Income Housing Coalition: [California](#)

44. California Community Colleges: [College Dormitories and Housing](#)

Options explicitly labeled as “luxury” units were not included. Where a distinction was made, the cost was based on the cost of a “residence hall” rather than the typically more expensive “apartment” style option. Finally, almost every college or university in California requires their on-campus residents to purchase a meal plan. These additional costs are not reflected in the data collected, and as such, the actual cost of living on-campus is likely underestimated.

Off-Campus Housing Costs

The cost of off-campus housing was collected for each UC, CSU, and the fourteen CCCs with on-campus housing available. To allow for comparison to on-campus housing costs, off-campus housing costs were based on half of the cost of a two-bedroom apartment. These costs are shown below in Figures 4-6. Data on the price of off-campus housing were collected from the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) FY 2025 Small Area Fair Market Rent estimations, and were based on the zip code in which a college or university is located.⁴⁵ While students may often be forced to live outside of the immediate vicinity of their college or university, the zip code which includes the university is the closest available estimate of the actual housing costs faced by students. Moreover, the estimated housing costs were commiserate with a 2024 analysis of off-campus housing costs created by the University of California Office of the President (UCOP) which used an average of costs in zip-codes within a five-mile radius of each UC.⁴⁶ The cost of off-campus student housing may be cheaper if students are willing or able to house more than one person in each bedroom. On the other hand, it may also be more expensive if the considerable cost of security deposits, utilities, and 12-month leases are taken into account.

45. Department of Housing and Urban Development: FY 2025 Small Area Fair Market Rent

46. University of California: Typical Housing Costs Near UC Campuses

Figure 4: Housing Costs in the UC System
2024-2025 Academic Year

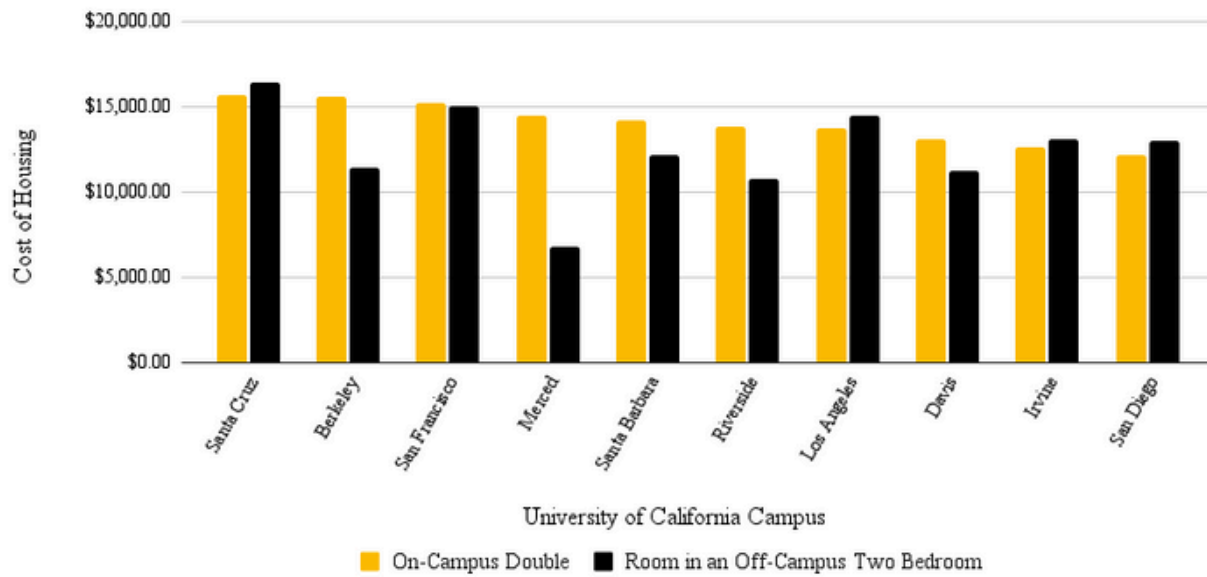
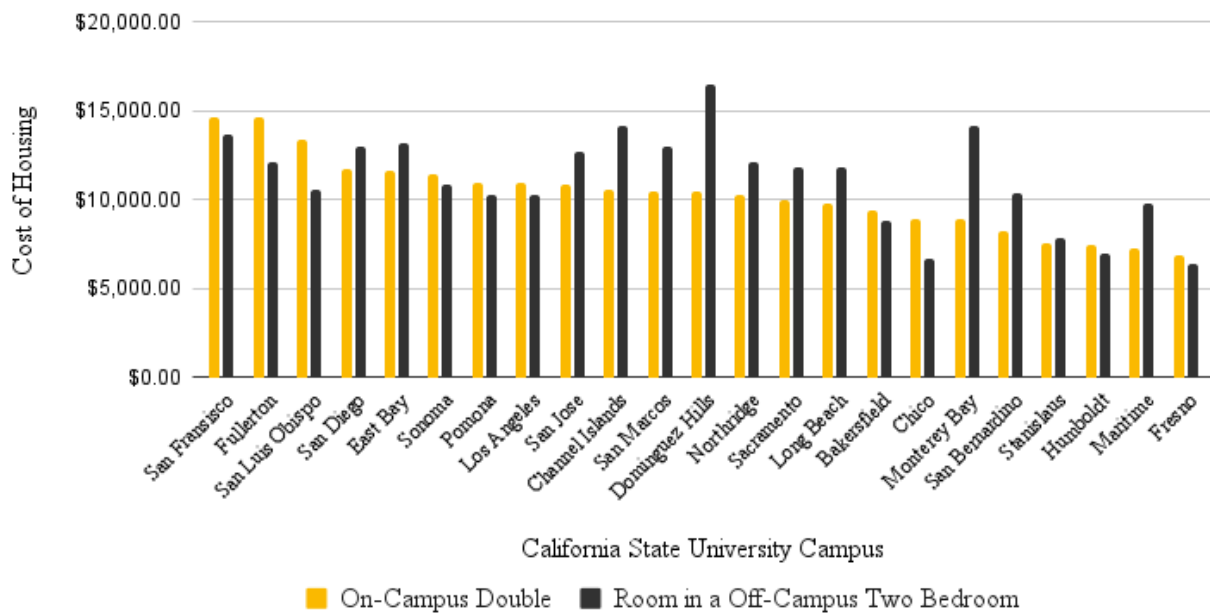
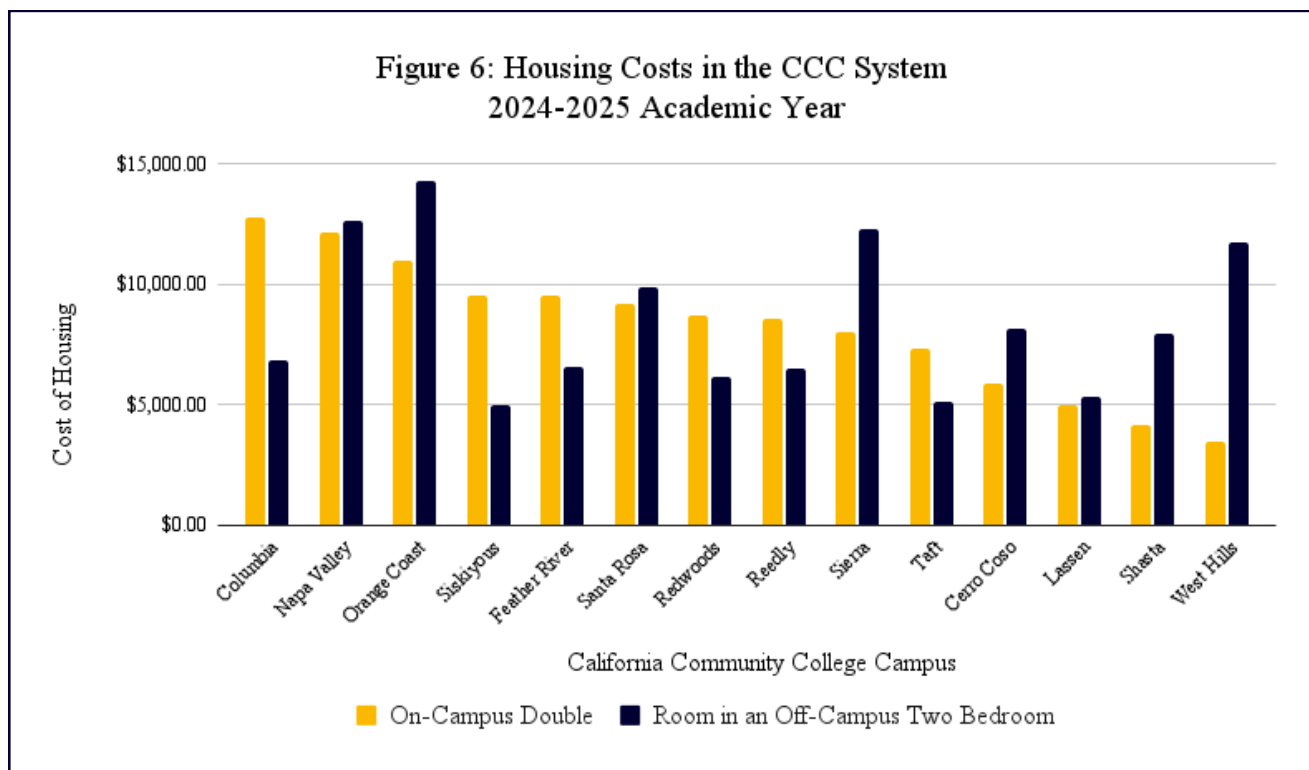


Figure 5: Housing Costs in the CSU System
2024-2025 Academic Year





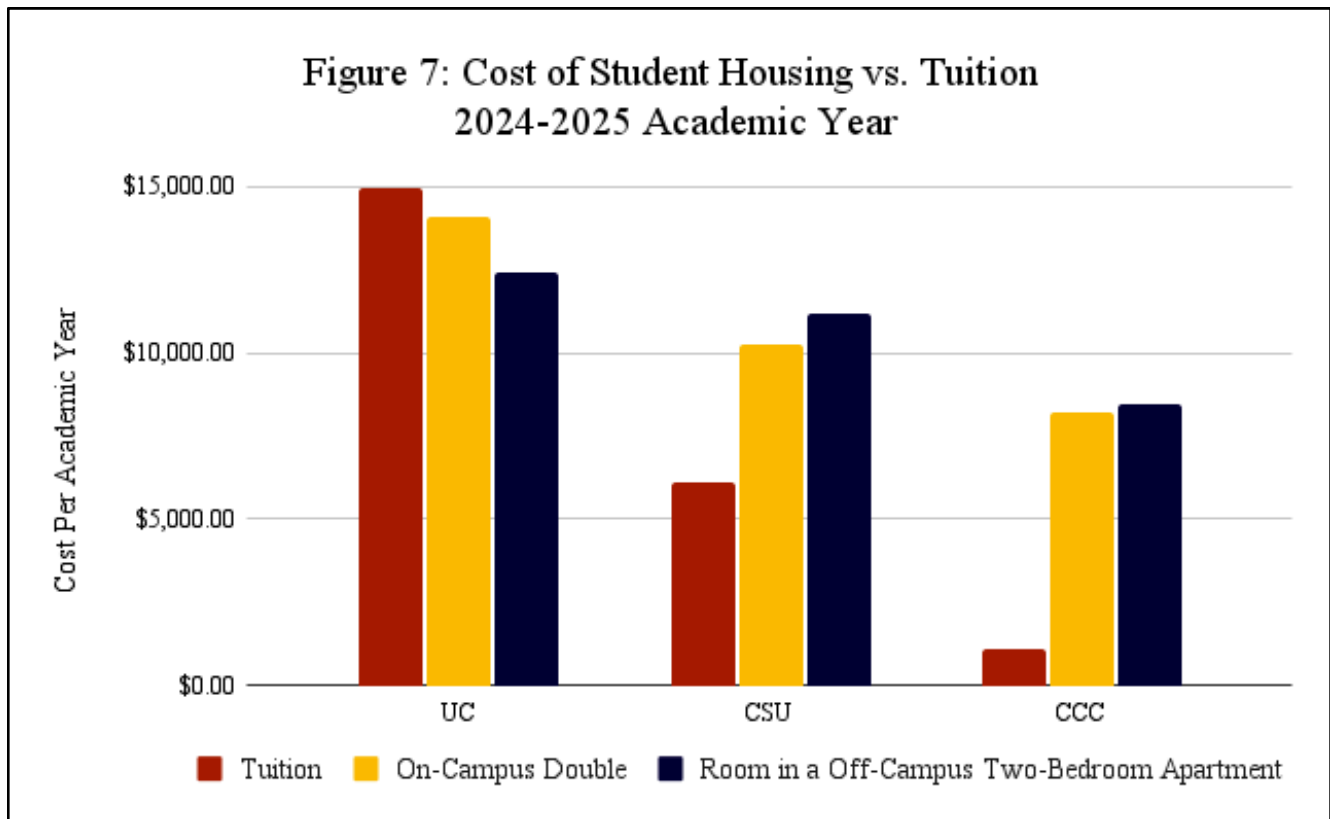
Findings

The cost of student housing today represents the largest barrier to higher education in California. As shown in Figure 7, this fact is most apparent for CCCs, where the cost of living on or off-campus is over seven times greater than the cost of tuition.⁴⁷ At CSUs, the cost of student housing is nearly twice the cost of tuition.⁴⁸ For UCs, student housing costs are more comparable to tuition, with an average cost of \$14,065 to live on-campus and \$12,436 off-campus, compared to an annual tuition of \$14,943.⁴⁹ When food and other necessary expenses are considered, the cost of living is significantly greater than the cost of learning for nearly all students in California.

47. California Community Colleges: [Pay for College](#)

48. The California State University: [Costs](#)

49. University of California: [Tuition and Cost of Attendance](#)



While the cost of student housing is substantial across the state, it varies dramatically based on the college community a student is living in. The cost of living around UC Merced, for example, is less than half the cost of living around UC San Francisco or UC Santa Cruz. Moreover, whereas the cost of living on-campus remains relatively stable across campuses, the cost of off-campus housing varies dramatically. Off-campus housing costs around the nine UC campuses, for example, range by \$9,630, compared to a range of just \$3,521 for on-campus housing at those same universities.

Universities may be to shield students from market pressures to some extent, but off-campus, students face the full force of the California housing crisis. With many universities unwilling or unable to house more students, additional off-campus options are needed in campus communities to decrease the exorbitant costs of student housing.

Recommendations

Upzoning

By making more land available for development around college campuses, upzoning can relieve pressure on student housing markets. With single-family zoning currently stifling new development for students, staff, and faculty, a shift to more multi-family zoning is required. City and state officials should work to increase density and height limits on parcels of land adjacent to college campuses. Moreover, allowing for mixed-use and residential development on land currently zoned for commercial use would provide additional avenues for new construction. These measures will not only help create the housing that students desperately need, they will also reduce competition and thereby costs for housing in the communities surrounding California's colleges and universities.

Streamlining Development

In the case of land already zoned for multifamily housing near college campuses, discretionary permitting processes can still increase costs and cause delays without added benefits to student health and safety. This is especially true for public and non-profit developers, such as institutions of higher education, as their projects are often subject to redundant reviews and contradictory standards, including those imposed by the California Coastal Commission and through the California Environmental Quality Act. Higher levels of regulation restrict housing supply and raise rents, including in the rental markets around colleges and universities. Policy changes that streamline development can reverse the negative effects of over-regulation while preserving safety standards and promoting student welfare by lowering rents.

Funding Affordable Housing

While decreasing barriers to development will help to lower student housing costs writ large, state funding is needed to provide the bulk of housing units for students with the most acute needs. Continuing programs such as the Higher Education Student Housing Grant Program and securing new sources of ongoing funds for affordable student housing development are important avenues for mitigating the student housing crisis. In line with the recommendations outlined by the California Interagency Council on Homelessness' 2024 Action Plan, rental assistance and rapid re-housing services should be provided to students at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness.⁵⁰ Steps should also be taken to ensure that students have access to existing affordable housing built in the vicinity of their colleges and universities, as state and federal regulations often limit student eligibility. By allowing students to qualify for affordable units in campus communities through eligibility for existing financial aid programs, like Cal Grant and Pell Grant, the state can ensure that low-income students are not excluded from affordable housing solutions.

Protecting Tenants

Expanding tenant protections is an essential part of addressing the student housing crisis. Due to limited housing options and lack of legal resources, student renters are particularly vulnerable to predatory leasing practices. Students at California's colleges and universities are forced to compete for scarce housing within walking distance from campus, and as such, often have to accept unfair lease terms in order to secure housing. Moreover, student renters are often limited in their options by landlords that ban applicants from using a co-signer. Common sense reforms to tenancy law can ensure that students have equitable access to existing rental housing, while preventing landlords from taking advantage of young renters.

50. California Interagency Council on Homelessness: Action Plan for Preventing and Ending Homelessness in California 2025-2027

Conclusion

The student housing crisis has made higher education unattainable for many Californians. High building costs, restrictive zoning, and regulatory hurdles have limited the supply of housing around colleges and universities and driven up rent prices for students and faculty. The California Legislature has already begun to address the student housing affordability crisis by promoting both on and off-campus housing development while protecting tenants. SB 886 and SB 312 streamlined the approval process for university housing projects, while SB 1227 and AB 3116 created a student housing density bonus for areas surrounding university campuses. Recent laws that established new protections for tenants, such as AB 2493 and AB 2801, have promoted equitable access to existing housing markets for students.

Prior legislation has begun to address the underlying causes of the student housing crisis, but there is more work to be done. By continuing to pursue policies that will create student housing abundance, the California state legislature can make substantial headway with solving the student housing crisis, and in so doing, make higher education more attainable for all in California.

Bibliography

- Asquith, Brian J, Evan Mast, and Davin Reed. 2019. “Supply Shock vs Demand Shock: The Local Effects of New Housing in Low-Income Areas.” Upjohn Institute for Economic Research. https://research.upjohn.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1334&context=up_workingpapers.
- Basic Needs Initiative. 2018. “Study of Student Basic Needs.” The California State University. https://www.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/basic-needs-initiative/Documents/BasicNeedsStudy_phaseII_withAccessibilityComments.pdf
- Been, Vicki, Ingrid Gould Ellen, Katherine O’Regan, NYU Furman Center, and NYU Wagner School and NYU School of Law. 2018. “Supply Skepticism: Housing Supply and Affordability.” https://furmancenter.org/files/Supply_Skepticism_-_Final.pdf.
- Bertaud, Alain, and Jan K. Brueckner. 2004. “Analyzing Building-height Restrictions: Predicted Impacts and Welfare Costs.” *Regional Science and Urban Economics* 35 (2): 109–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.regsciurbeco.2004.02.004>.
- Bishop, Joseph P., et. al. 2020. “State of Crisis: Dismantling Student Homelessness in California.” The Center for the Transformation of Schools. <https://transformschoools.ucla.edu/research/state-of-crisis/>.
- Brueckner, Jan K. 2009. “Government Land Use Interventions: An Economic Analysis.” *Urban Land Markets*. 3–23. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8862-9_1.
- Butler, Natalie and Francis Torres. 2023. “Housing Insecurity and Homelessness Among College Students.” Bipartisan Policy Center. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/housing-insecurity- and-homelessness-among-college-students/>.
- California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. “College Dormitories and Housing.” n.d. <https://www.cccco.edu/Students/Support-Services/College-Dormitories-and-Housing>.
- California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. “Pay For College.” n.d. <https://www.cccco.edu/Students/Pay-for-College>.

- “California’s Higher Education System.” 2025. Public Policy Institute of California. February 24, 2025. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-higher-education-system/>.
- California Interagency Council on Homelessness. “Action Plan for Preventing and Ending Homelessness in California 2025-2027.” December, 2024. https://www.bcsd.ca.gov/calich/documents/action_plan.pdf
- California State University. “Costs” n.d. <https://www.calstate.edu/csu-system/about-the-csu/facts-about-the-csu/Pages/student-costs.aspx>.
- “California’s Renters.” 2024. Public Policy Institute of California. <https://www.ppic.org/blog/californias-renters/>.
- Christopher, Ben. 2023. “California Housing Crisis Prompts Efforts to Weaken Coastal Commission's Power.” Times of San Diego. <https://timesofsandiego.com/politics/2023/07/08/california-housing-crisis-prompts-efforts-to-weaken-coastal-commissions-power/>.
- “Food and Housing Survey: Understanding Students’ Basic Needs.” 2023. California Student Aid Commission. https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/food_and_housing_basic_needs_survey_2023.pdf?1700100691&utm_medium=email&utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=California+Democrats+gather+to+pick+favorites+-+and+party&utm_campaign=WhatMatters.
- Frech, H.E., and Ronald N. Lafferty. 1984. “The Effect of the California Coastal Commission on Housing Prices.” *Journal of Urban Economics* 16 (1): 105–23. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0094-1190\(84\)90053-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0094-1190(84)90053-6).
- Glaeser, Edward L., and Joseph Gyourko. 2003. “The Impact of Building Restrictions on Housing Affordability.” *FRBNY Economic Policy Review*. <https://www.newyorkfed.org/medialibrary/media/research/epr/03v09n2/0306glae.pdf>.
- Geshkov, Marin V., and Joseph S. DeSalvo. 2012. “The Effect of Land-Use Controls on the Spatial Size of U.S. Urbanized Areas.” *Journal of Regional Science* 52 (4): 648–75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9787.2012.00763.x>.
- Gyourko, Joseph and Raven Molloy. 2015. “Regulation and Housing Supply.” National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w20536>.

- Gyourko, Joseph, and Albert Saiz and Anita Summers. 2008. “A New Measure of the Local Regulatory Environment for Housing Markets: The Wharton Residential Land Use Regulatory Index.” *Urban Studies* 45 (3): 693–729. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43197779>.
- Hernandez, Jennifer. 2018. “California Environmental Quality Act and California’s Housing Crisis.” *Hastings Environmental Law Journal*. Volume 24, Number 1. [.com/files/Uploads/Documents/Articles/121317_HELJ_Jennifer_Hernandez.pdf](https://www.hastingselj.com/files/Uploads/Documents/Articles/121317_HELJ_Jennifer_Hernandez.pdf).
- Hubler, Shawn, Conor Dougherty, and Sophie Kasakove. 2022. “UC Berkeley Battles With Town Over Student Housing.” *The New York Times*, March 11, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/10/us/uc-berkeley-student-housing.html>.
- HUD Economic and Market Analysis Division. 2025. “FY2025 Advisory Small Area FMR Lookup System -- Select Geography.” https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/fmr/fmrs/FY2025_code/select_Geography_sa.odn.
- Greenberg, Miriam, et. al. “No Place Like Homes: Affordable Housing in Crisis, Santa Cruz County, California.” UC Santa Cruz Institute for Social Transformation. August, 2023. https://transform.ucsc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/No_Place_Like_Home_Report_2021.pdf.
- Johnson, Hans, et. al. “Higher Education in California: Making College Affordable.” 2023. Public Policy Institute of California. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/higher-education-in-california-making-college-affordable/>.
- Kendall, Marisa. 2024. “Exclusive: California’s Homeless Population Grew Again This Year, Especially in These Counties.” *CalMatters*, September 11, 2024. <https://calmatters.org/housing/homelessness/2024/09/pit-count-analysis-2024/>.
- Mai-Duc, Christine, and Stephen Reiss. 2022. “UC Berkeley Enrollment Case Fuels Wider Battle for Student Housing.” *WSJ*, March 15, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/uc-berkeley-enrollment-case-fuels-wider-battle-for-student-housing-11647259200>.
- Mast, Evan. 2020. “Warding off Development: Local Control, Housing Supply, and NIMBYs.” Upjohn Research. https://research.upjohn.org/up_workingpapers/330/.
- Mast, Evan. 2021. “JUE Insight: The Effect of New Market-rate Housing Construction on the Low-income Housing Market.” *Journal of Urban Economics* 133 (July): 103383. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jue.2021.103383>.

- Mayer, Christopher J, and C.Tsuriel Somerville. 2000. “Land Use Regulation and New Construction.” *Regional Science and Urban Economics*. 30 (6): 639–62. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0166-0462\(00\)00055-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0166-0462(00)00055-7).
- “Out of Reach: California | National Low Income Housing Coalition.” n.d. National Low Income Housing Coalition. <https://nlihc.org/oor/state/ca>.
- Steinhauer, Jennifer. 2008. “In California, Coastal Commission Wields Vast Power.” *The New York Times*, February 23, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/23/us/23clemente.html>.
- Rosenthal, Stuart S. 2014. “Are Private Markets and Filtering a Viable Source of Low-Income Housing? Estimates From a ‘Repeat Income’ Model.” *American Economic Review* 104 (2): 687–706. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.104.2.687>.
- “The 2023-24 Budget: Student Housing.” 2023. March 9, 2023. <https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4733>.
- UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools. 2024. “State of Crisis - UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools.” UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools - UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools. August 24, 2024. <https://transformschoools.ucla.edu/research/state-of-crisis/>.
- UCOP. “Environmental Issues and CEQA Compliance.” <https://www.ucop.edu/facilities-manual/manual/volume-2/vol-2-chapter-5.html>.
- UCOP. 2024. “TYPICAL HOUSING COSTS NEAR UC CAMPUSES.” UCOP Student Financial Support. <https://www.ucop.edu/enrollment-services/data-and-reporting/student-budget-tables/typical-housing-costs-near-uc-campuses-2024.pdf>.
- University of California. “Tuition & Cost of Attendance” UC Admissions. <https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/tuition-financial-aid/tuition-cost-of-attendance/>.
- Walters, Dan. 2023. “How Environmental Law Is Misused to Stop Housing.” *CalMatters*, January 5, 2023. <https://calmatters.org/commentary/2023/01/how-environmental-law-is-misused-to-stop-housing/>.
- Watanabe, Teresa. 2023. “A 4.0 Student Beat All The Odds. But He Can’t Afford a UC Campus - Los Angeles Times.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-04-25/high-college-tuition-is-pushing-students-from-uc-to-community-colleges>.



Student HOMES
COALITION