

University Village Albany
Village Residents' Association
Affordability Committee

Summer 2013 survey report

Poverty at UC Berkeley
*Academic families struggling
to achieve a living wage;
reliant on food stamps*

July 2013, Albany, CA

ucberkeleyvra.org

Poverty at UC Berkeley

46% of families surveyed relying on food assistance programs.

Albany, CA—19th July 2013

Everyone who chooses to pursue postgraduate study or postdoctoral research at UC Berkeley knows that they are making a sacrifice.

They have eschewed well-paid work in the private sector, and instead chosen to give their lives to research that will benefit the international community. UC Berkeley is a prestigious school, and it attracts top scientists and humanitarians from across the world who come to the US pursuing unique opportunities.

As a state school, UC Berkeley is also particularly well-placed to maintain an inclusive environment for talented undergraduates in challenging circumstances. Students with disabilities who need help from their parents, and young single parents who need to know that they will have support, are attracted to the school because of its public mission.

It is therefore heartbreaking to see families like these at UC Berkeley experiencing severe financial hardship.

The university offers family housing on state-owned property about three miles north of campus. In doing so, it might perhaps aim to make up for the relatively low level of financial support it is able to offer its students and researchers compared to other competitive universities. Yet the rents in University Village are not affordable for the campus's underpaid students and staff. This year the university chose to raise those rent rates even further.

In May-July, a resident-led initiative—the Village Residents Association's Affordability Committee—surveyed 158 of the 900 village households in three languages, finding respondents in-person and through on-line channels.

The results were far more disturbing than we expected.

77% said UC Berkeley's family housing is less affordable than other universities'.
80% said that this issue affects their decision to continue studying at UC Berkeley.

International families need support

80% of the residents surveyed have children.

More than 50% of respondents have to support their family on only one income. This is in large part due to the fact that so many of the students and researchers living in the village have moved to Berkeley from another state or another country. Spouses face a hard time finding work, especially if they are resident in the US on a spouse visa, which does not confer the right to work. In 46% of households surveyed, only one of the adults, and sometimes none at all, were eligible to work in the United States.

This year's rent increase will be an estimated \$300,000 extra revenue to the university, at the expense of its own hardworking student families.

UC Berkeley should be proud that it is able to attract so many scholars from different parts of the world. But with such a high cost of living and such paltry financial support from the university, it seems that these scholars are being lured into a financial trap.

Better off elsewhere

There is a clear need for affordable housing to support families at UC Berkeley. These households are making major sacrifices for the honour of researching at the country's best public university. Although University Village presents itself as an affordable housing solution, the rents of \$1,298 to \$1,999 are beyond the limits of affordability for most families. 45% of those surveyed felt that it was not affordable for the area.

Even more worryingly for the UC, 77% felt that it was not affordable in relation to housing available at other universities. Families at UC Berkeley know that they would have been better off at another university. 80% of those surveyed said that the availability of affordable housing affects their decision to continue studying at UC Berkeley.

At a time when the UC is struggling to remain competitive, this is a serious problem that must be addressed.

Of the households surveyed in UC Berkeley's family housing, **39% survive on less than \$20,000 a year.** Most of those are single-parent, only child families, for whom **the living wage is \$48,288** in Alameda county, according to MIT's online living wage calculator.

A living wage is the exception at UC Berkeley

The financial sacrifice that families must undertake in order to participate in academic life at this unique institution must not be underestimated. 47% of residents surveyed do not receive a stipend, and 32% do not have their full fees covered by a scholarship or grant, putting further pressure on their finances.

22% of households in University Village have nobody bringing in a paycheck or stipend.

61% of households surveyed must survive on less than \$30,000 dollars a year. 39% are managing on less than \$20,000.

Unsurprisingly, 77% of respondents feel that they do not earn enough to support their family. Evidence from MIT's living wage calculator supports this; it suggests that in Alameda county, the living wage for a family of two adults and one child—the most common household arrangement across all income groups in the families surveyed—is \$44,312. At least 72% of households surveyed in the village fall below this minimum level required to support a family.

Many people will come to UC Berkeley rightly expecting that such a prestigious institution will be able to offer unparalleled opportunities. Yet the university cannot even offer a living wage to the majority of families.

Academic families relying on debt to survive

This financial burden translates into a toxic cycle of debt. 45% of respondents supplement their income with student loans, and 43% rely on credit cards to make ends meet. Only 11% are able to put money towards a savings account.

How can a family save for their child's education when they themselves are mired in debt?

We have a systemic problem on our hands where young families are disproportionately affected and destabilized as an institution seeks to balance its budget on their backs. This is not a passing moment in the lives of these families. Debt is the legacy of poverty and it will accompany them for years as they struggle under its weight.

Food poverty

46% of households surveyed in UC Berkeley's family housing rely on food assistance programs in order to feed their families. Since so many of the families in the village come from abroad, the number who require extra assistance feeding their children is likely to be much higher than this number, which only includes those eligible to receive such support from the state.

The university's budget allocations rely on the assumption that children will not be fed by their parents.

The state is not saving money by forcing UC Berkeley's hardworking parents to survive on far less than the living wage. Academic families are reliant on sources of state support that were created for the poorest in society. Anecdotal evidence of a serious domestic violence problem indicates the strain that the university is putting families under by expecting them to live on handouts.

These are difficult times for everyone, and the UC's funding struggle is well known. It is also well known that universities across the country rely on the underpaid labour of graduate students in order to function.

UC Berkeley is perhaps unique, if it not only runs off the backs of students; it runs off the backs of their children.

The Village Residents Association is a non-profit initiative that aims to improve the quality of life for families living in University Village.

The Affordability Committee is a branch of the VRA, run by a multilingual team of students and families to ease the financial strain of academic life.

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