

# Exploring Homelessness Among Students in Merced County, CA: Mental Health and Access to Resources

Digvijay Bokey<sup>1</sup>, Vishruth Bharath<sup>2</sup>, Gregory Brown<sup>3#</sup> and Dr. Bruce Metcalf<sup>4#</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The University of California, Merced

<sup>2</sup>The University of California, Santa Cruz

<sup>3</sup>Merced College

<sup>4</sup>Merced County Rescue Mission

#Advisor

## ABSTRACT

This comprehensive review paper aims to explore the effects homelessness has on students' mental health and access to resources in Merced County, CA. By conducting interviews and meticulously analyzing multiple articles, this study investigates the impact of community mapping, support groups, and their connections with community-based research. The findings reveal a myriad of distinct factors that may lead to the plight of homelessness, while simultaneously illuminating potential avenues for assisting homeless individuals. Furthermore, this review paper delves into the impact of homelessness on mental health and education, highlighting the complex issue of student homelessness and the significance of promoting social mobility within the community. This originally started as a university paper and has since been adapted for the requirements of this journal and expanded to include more topics.

## Introduction

### Area of Impact

The question studied in this paper is to what extent does homelessness impact a student's mental health and access to resources. Observations from professors who have worked with homeless students, conversations with adults who have been homeless in the past, and insights from experts on student homelessness have allowed this paper to best display the impact homelessness creates on a student's education and mental health. The goal of this project is to explore how a student's current living conditions can impact their academic ability, and take a closer look at success stories to understand how people can overcome this situation. By exploring the community in different ways, such as experiencing education hotspots including Merced College and UC Merced, and communicating with people who are strongly connected to the issue, we can better understand how these institutions aim to help homeless students and provide resources.

Previous research in this area, such as in the "2021 Merced County Annual Report" by the County of Merced highlights a focus on the homeless population and how they are currently being helped. There is also the "Guardian Scholars" program at UC Merced which has an entire section focused on homeless youth along with a section on their website that gives access to other research and resources (UC Merced, 2023). The area of impact of this research is giving homeless students more access to resources, whether it's tools that will allow them to complete their education or access to necessities such as food and water. These programs already exist but are not widely known. Additionally, this research aims to uncover how other issues which lead to homelessness can be overcome, such as addiction or lack of education.

Rationale

The community we partnered with to write this paper is the plethora of homeless students in Merced County. Merced County overall has a predominantly minority population and is on the lower end of the income scale. According to the United States Census Bureau (2021), Merced County tends to be poorer than most with an average household income of \$58,861 and has a predominantly Hispanic population (figure 1). Only 14.5% of Merced County has a bachelor's degree (figure 2) and over 21% of the community lives in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Based on these statistics, the community needs more college graduates which leads to a higher average household income. Proof of this is seen in the article titled “College Degrees Are Worth It – People with Bachelor’s Degrees Have Lower Poverty Rates” by Bricio Vasquez (2020) which states that “people with a bachelor’s degree earned \$30,468 more than those without” (Vasquez, 2020).

Understanding and helping homeless students will help give education to one of the most struggling parts of the community. From interviews with professors and previously homeless students, there are a lot of resources available to this community but a strong lack of knowledge. This paper aims to explore both the long-term effects of homelessness to understand how some people have escaped their situation, and how students who currently live in homelessness overcome educational barriers such as lack of access to educational resources. The community will be deeply integrated into the decision-making process as interviews and conversations will be directly used to guide this review paper. A great example of this is how the interview with Greg Brown directed this paper to take a closer look at success stories to understand that resources are not widely known, and other challenges such as addiction can correlate heavily with this issue (Brown, 2023).

Over the course of this research, two separate interviews were conducted, one with an academic partner and one with a community partner. The academic partner interviewed, Greg Brown, is a professor at Merced College who has taught and supported many previously homeless students in the past. The community partner interviewed is Bruce Metcalf, who runs a support group called Merced County Rescue Mission. In our research we also utilized mathematical models to generate predictive insights on how tools such as education and community mapping could potentially impact homelessness. We have attached graphs to visualize data regarding population, impact, and to help illustrate key concepts.

The importance of this research is allowing everyone to have equal opportunity and access to education. Merced is already at the lower end of the income spectrum and only has 14.5% of the population with a bachelor's degree (figure 2). Allowing a struggling part of the community to gain access to education will provide them with a better future, which is extremely important for the growth of Merced County.

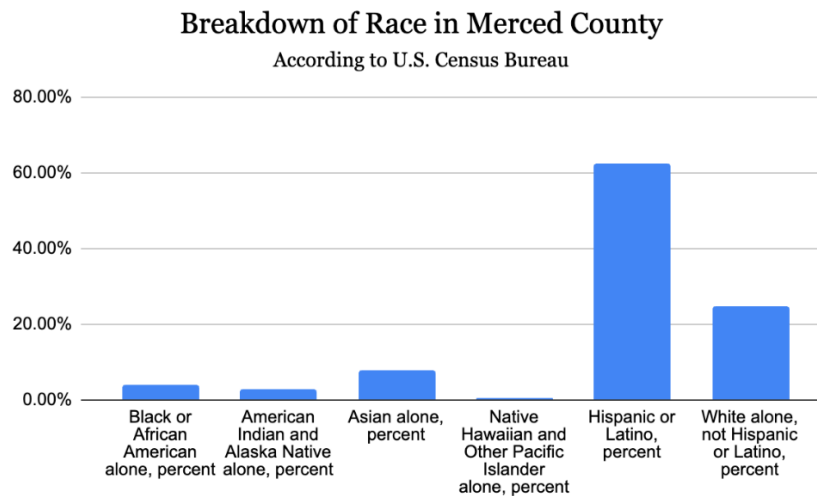
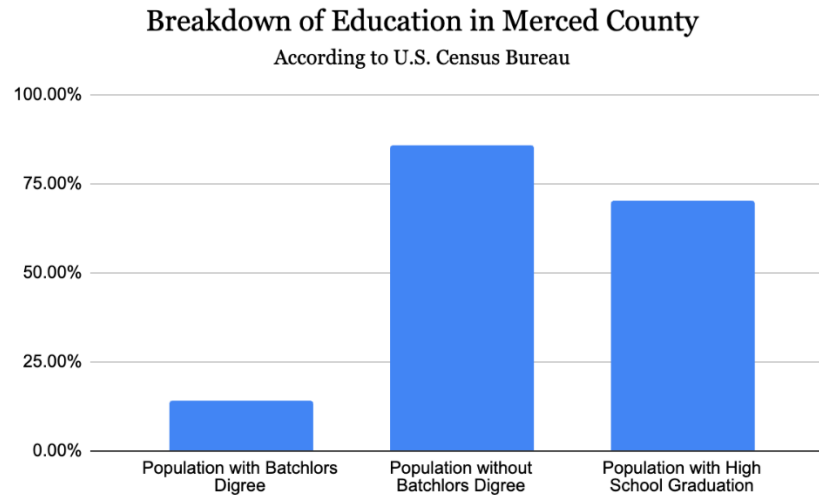


Figure 1. Breakdown of Race in Merced County.



**Figure 2.** Breakdown of Education in Merced County

## Methodology

We used a variety of methods during our research. This includes visiting educational hotspots, analyzing multiple articles, and visiting multiple support groups / halfway homes. During this project we also conducted a multitude of interviews, each offering valuable insights into the experiences of individuals affected by homelessness. In this section, we present detailed breakdowns for two of the selected interviewees, accompanied by comprehensive introductions and backgrounds for these individuals. By exploring their unique stories, we aim to shed light on the multifaceted nature of homelessness and provide a deeper understanding of its impact on the lives of those directly affected.

### Interview 1

#### *Introduction*

“It’s shameful” (Brown, 2023). We were interviewing Greg Brown, an English professor at Merced College, about the current state of the homeless and how it relates to mental health. Professor Brown, who has been teaching at a community college for over 12 years, has met and helped many students who suffer from being homeless. He himself went to Merced College and has witnessed and dealt with many issues related to homelessness and mental health. Now, as he got older and became a professor, he aims to help many of his students going through the same thing. We interviewed Professor Brown to further understand how large of an impact homelessness can have on a student's mental health, and how that can impact their ability to learn. Professor Brown told a story about how he had a student a couple of years ago who did not have a current place to live. This student was living in a “2-bedroom house and there was something like 15 other people living there. He was just out of high school and there were younger kids, siblings and cousins, that he was expected to watch and take care of every day” (Brown, 2023). This student was now leaving that house and was currently moving into a new apartment with his girlfriend. Ever since then Brown has been extremely careful of what situations students may be going through and tends to give most people the benefit of the doubt. Brown later stated that this student “sheepishly told me what had been going on, apologized for not doing his work and said he’d do better from then on. I let him turn in his work late” (Brown, 2023). Over the years since this incident, Brown has helped students who live in their cars, couch surf, or are even out on the street.

## *Analysis*

“Most of the stories I’ve heard have been after the fact- the success stories” (Brown, 2023). Brown went on to tell stories about people living in their car who went to college and can now afford their own place, students who used to be homeless on the street but have since found a house or stable living conditions. He also went on to say that he had many students that were struggling with homelessness while they took his class and didn't tell him until way later. The stories that changed the narrative, however, were the ones about addiction. “I’ve had a few students that have told me they were addicted to drugs and were living on the streets at one point but had turned things around and were doing better now, either living in halfway houses or living on their own” (Brown, 2023). From what Brown has seen, addiction is a common factor in a lot of the homeless students he had and is something that is extremely hard to overcome as they are two separate issues with consequences that heavily impact each other.

Brown then talked a bit about mental health, and the impact it has on academics. He started off by explaining how mental health was not important when he was growing up. “(W)hen I was in my first year of college the importance of mental health used to be really underplayed. In my experience it was like, ‘of course you’re stressed-you’re in college! Of course, you get sad sometimes- we all do!’” (Brown, 2023). He went on to talk about a girl who attempted suicide on his floor. She fortunately survived, but afterward “nobody ever said anything else about it. There was no “if you’re feeling suicidal, here’s a number to call” or anything from the school or the dorms. Mental health just wasn’t something people openly talked about” (Brown, 2023). Normalizing poor mental health, as Brown explained, was extremely common while he was younger. This type of mentality was also common in the homeless students that Brown had taught in his class. For example, the student who was living with 15 other people and is now moving homes was more worried about finishing his work than his current living situation. This would also heavily explain why so many students did not tell Brown what they were going through, because they normalized it.

Brown then explained how he has been increasing focus in his classroom, and overall, in Merced College, to focus more on mental health and the homeless. Over the last couple years, he noticed a massive shift in focus, and explained how the pandemic seemed to make a massive leap forward in the right direction. “I’ve especially noticed a difference in openness since the pandemic. During that time there was so much talk directed at teens about the importance of mental health, and I’ve found that a lot of my younger students are comfortable sharing what they’re dealing with. They’ll just say, “I have really bad anxiety” or “I have depression” or they’ll email me and let me know that they couldn’t make it to class because they were having a panic attack. I don’t remember hearing any of that before 2020” (Brown, 2023). He then said that Merced College had a program to help the homeless and people suffering from mental health issues, not only do they provide resources such as food and shelter but they also provide information about mental health services, financial aid, and housing. Brown, however, did notice a problem as he later stated when we asked him what resources are needed to better help homeless students. “There are some good resources for students, but I don’t think they’re widely known. After talking through all of this, I think that the Basic Needs program should be pushed more” (Brown, 2023).

## *Interview 2*

### *Introduction*

“Healing, Housing, Jobs, Life Change” (Metcalf, 2023). This is the goal of Merced County Rescue Mission, a program based in Merced that aims to help homeless individuals and others get their life back together. This project conducted an interview with the Executive Director and CEO, Bruce Metcalf.

Metcalf grew up in Japan and lived there until the end of high school. Both his parents were missionaries, and because of this, he took an interest in other cultures and even traveled around to places such as India and Sri Lanka. After high school, he went to college in Chicago, where he did jobs, such as running children's programs or

driving city buses. After college Metcalf became a pastor, and for 38 years he worked as the pastor of churches (Metcalf, 2023). Metcalf has also attended to the University of California, Berkeley to study Comparative Religion, and worked on a hospital board in Turlock for 28 years.

Later in his life, Metcalf started Merced County Rescue Mission. Merced County Rescue Mission is a program split into 8 different groups, all with the same goal, to get people to be self-sustaining and off the streets (Metcalf, 2023). They do this by providing people with jobs, helping veterans and addicts to turn away from drugs, and teaching people tools they need such as financial budgeting and proper techniques to manage stress or PTSD.

### *Helping the Homeless*

“We need to start getting over ourselves, and our lust for money, and start helping people” (Metcalf, 2023). Metcalf said that this is one of the biggest challenges to get over while helping people. Metcalf further explained that “people do not trust us, these are people who have been hurt and they do not think that people want to help them”. Due to this, Merced County Rescue Mission has people “going out every week building relationships” (Metcalf, 2023). The hope is that over time people will start to trust Merced County Rescue Mission and be ready to take advantage of the help offered to them. This is extremely important because a lot of times individuals that end up homeless want to turn their life around, but do not trust the help given to them. Unfortunately, because of this “it’s one person at a time and it’s a slow process because you are building relationships and trust” (Metcalf, 2023).

If someone does decide to join the program, they start at a house that fits their needs. Merced County Rescue Mission separates homes intended for homeless individuals who suffer from addiction, veterans, and families such as members with kids. The reason for this is because all these individuals have separate challenges to overcome, for example, a veteran suffering from PTSD will need different care from someone struggling with addiction. Metcalf later expressed how vital it was that “people do not just come to us and receive a free meal or shelter, they come to us to get through what they are struggling with and become self-sustaining” (Metcalf, 2023).

Merced County Rescue Mission also includes forms of collaboration in its program and does this in many ways. For Metcalf “collaboration and building relations with other organizations is extremely important” (Metcalf, 2023). Due to this, Metcalf works with Merced College, Mission Merced, UC Merced, and multiple different support groups. Additionally, Metcalf sets up meetings where various support groups can come together and communicate what works for them and what does not. The hope is that these groups can then implement what works into their own support groups. Metcalf states that “competition is bad, we don’t want to compete with these groups but collaborate and support them” (Metcalf, 2023).

## **Analysis**

During the process of exploring how homelessness impacts a student’s mental health and access to resources, there were numerous interviews and analyses of many different articles. The first interview was with Greg Brown, an English professor at Merced College. Professor Brown, who has been teaching at a community college for over 12 years, has met and helped many students who suffer from being homeless (Brown, 2023). The second interview conducted was with Bruce Metcalf. Metcalf runs a support group in Merced titled Merced County Rescue Mission. The goal of Merced County Rescue Mission is to help homeless individuals and others get their life back together (Metcalf, 2023). Using these interviews and readings, five key questions taken from Blanchard et al. (2009) were used to drive the conversation.

## Mutual Benefits for Academic and Community Partners

This project is mutually beneficial to both academic partners and community partners in many ways. To begin with, by nature, the topic of mental health in homeless students inherently establishes a strong connection between both academic and community partners. Academic partners, such as Professor Greg Brown, are already extremely connected to their students. Community partners, such as Bruce Metcalf, are invested in helping people on the streets who are also struggling with mental health. This project combines both these issues and aims to find methods to help both groups.

Throughout the course of this project, these involved individuals have been extremely connected with the research which has introduced them to ideas that could help their cause. A common theme found that would be mutually beneficial to both academic and community partners is the idea of community mapping. For Professor Brown, community mapping is a tool that can strongly help his students both inside and outside of the classroom. This is further corroborated by the article titled “Welcome Their Worlds: Rethinking Literacy Instruction through Mapping” where George Herrera, another English teacher, had students who were also “technically homeless, living in converted garages or small sheds behind other homes” (Dunsmore, 2013). This article went on to later state the same finding that Greg Brown had found: both teachers and parents of these students were “not aware of the community resources available to them” (Dunsmore, 2013). As the article showed, community mapping may be a great solution and even allow us to “integrate students’ worlds into the classroom” (Dunsmore, 2013).

During the interview with Bruce Metcalf (2023), he introduced a different type of community mapping. Metcalf (2023) introduced the idea of a navigation center, in which “anyone can go to understand all the resources near them, and even get help for a short amount of time” (Metcalf, 2023). Metcalf (2023) also explained the importance of not only creating resources for people who need them, but making sure they are aware of the resources already available.

After each interview was concluded, the research allowed everyone to become connected with the other perspective of the problem. After speaking with Metcalf about how Professor Brown (2023) had stated that “There are some good resources for students, but I don’t think they’re widely known” (Brown, 2023), Metcalf became aware of a new issue. Due to this realization, Metcalf (2023) discussed ways in which he could introduce homeless/underprivileged students to a portion of his program that aims to provide cheap and safe housing. Professor Brown (2023) also discussed the importance of resources near him, and different forms of community mapping. Professor Brown (2023) later communicated that due to the project, he was now going to make an effort to push the basic needs program more in his class and hopes to have people from student services come and talk about it in every classroom (Brown, 2023). The information about Merced County Rescue Mission was also relayed back to Professor Brown, with the hope that he can introduce this resource to students who may need it. This project was mutually beneficial for both of these individuals by introducing problems they may have previously been unaware of, allowing them to find solutions that could potentially help each other.

## Community Partners and Research at a University

“We don’t have to come up with the brainstorm on how we can help. Maybe guys like you [college/research students] can say ‘Hey have you ever thought of this’? I am very open to innovation and ideas that can help my community” (Metcalf, 2023). This is a quote from Bruce Metcalf (2023), one of the community partners interviewed. Metcalf has had education play an extremely important role in his life, as he attended the University of Chicago and also did some doctoral work at the University of California, Berkeley. Due to this, Metcalf has been exposed to the purpose and process of research at a university. Throughout the interview with him, it was clear education played a substantial role in his decision-making, as Metcalf (2023) also expressed, that he was “thrilled to have UC Merced students working with us” (Metcalf, 2023). Metcalf (2023) also discussed different types of ways college students can help the homeless, touching on topics such as community mapping or interactions with the people he aims to help.

From what is seen with Metcalf (2023) and other interviews, community partners sometimes heavily depend on research to guide and help their thinking. Community-based research introduces problems and solutions that these partners may have previously been unaware of. Metcalf (2023) set up his program, Merced County Rescue Mission, based on previous research in the field. Due to this, the program has a strong emphasis on building trust and creating long-lasting change (Metcalf, 2023). This research-based approach is crucial for community members like Metcalf (2023) to create effective support groups. Due to this approach, Metcalf (2023) manages to not only get people off the streets for a day but keep them out for life creating “Healing, Housing, Jobs, Life Change” (Metcalf, 2023). Metcalf (2023) also contributed to this point by expressing how important it is that we continue researching this topic and keep trying to find solutions. Community partners are also extremely eager to be a part of the research process, as Metcalf (2023) told us “I want Merced County Rescue mission to be a blueprint for other support groups” (Metcalf, 2023). A large benefit of research is its ability to get information to people who may need it, and introduce ideas from one group to another. As Metcalf (2023) expressed, he wants his knowledge and experiences to help other groups. Collaborating with research at a university may allow him to do just that, and create a greater impact than he already has.

Based on what we can see in Metcalf and other community partners, research at a university is extremely crucial in guiding change and help. Community partners not only understand many parts of research but also want to be involved in some way. Community-guided research is a perfect tool to involve community members in the process. This allows for other groups to learn the knowledge that Metcalf has, or even for Metcalf to implement new ideas into his own program.

### Academic Partners and Community-Based Organizations

From interviews with both Greg Brown (2023) and Bruce Metcalf (2023), it is evident that these individuals are closely connected. For support systems such as teachers or support groups to be effective, academic partners need to work with community-based organizations. This allows the individuals they aim to help gain access to proper and consistent support from both academic and community groups. Due to this, the academic partners interviewed had a strong knowledge of the purpose and process of community-based organizations.

Examples of this are seen throughout the interview with Professor Brown. From the start, it was evident that Brown was extremely connected to his students and wanted to help them. Brown told us stories in which he helped students suffering from homelessness, addiction, mental health, and a myriad of other struggles. What is important to understand, however, is how Brown chose to help these people. A great example would be a student in Brown’s class who was homeless and living in her car. Brown (2023) managed to catch up with her later and found out, “she got a job and was able to get her own place” (Brown, 2023). Brown (2023) had many more examples of this, connecting students who suffer from addiction to halfway homes, people struggling with mental health to proper support programs, and many more. What’s evident from all of this is Brown (2023) does not try to help these people himself, but instead aims to connect them to community-based organizations. In fact, when Brown (2023) was asked how to help homeless students, he simply replied “Merced College has a Basic Needs program to help students who are struggling with the necessities. Along with a food pantry, they provide information and resources about mental health services, financial aid, and housing” (Brown, 2023). Based on this, Brown (2023) and other academic partners clearly understand the purpose of community-based organizations and try to utilize them to help students effectively.

Another example of how academic partners rely on community-based organizations can be seen in the interview with Bruce Metcalf (2023). Metcalf (2023) talked about how he works closely with academic partners, and how these partners play a strong role in providing ideas for Merced County Rescue Mission. Based on what Metcalf discussed, academic partners not only strongly understand the purpose and process of community-based organizations, but often help build them. Metcalf (2023) also told us about a professor from UC Merced who “is on the board for the Continuum of Care. He comes to meetings with us” (Metcalf, 2023). This professor is a prime example of academic members not only utilizing community-based organizations but helping advance them to impact countless more lives.

Based on interviews with Greg Brown (2023) and Bruce Metcalf (2023), we can clearly see the effect academic partners have on community-based organizations. Academic partners not only understand these organizations, but are often a part of them. This allows professors, such as Brown, to properly connect them to students who need them. Community-based organizations also strongly benefit from this knowledge, as it allows them to be as effective as possible.

## Collaboration Between Community and Academic Partners

“We need to start getting over ourselves, and our lust for money, and start helping people” (Metcalf, 2023). This quote from Bruce Metcalf (2023) is one of many in which he talks about how important collaboration between different groups is to him. Metcalf (2023) stated that he thinks “collaborate is the magic word. We all need to be collaborating. If an agency is trying to do it on their own, they might not make it [very] far” (Metcalf, 2023). Metcalf (2023) makes collaboration a strong part of his program, not only working with students, but also working with academic partners such as professors from Merced College and Stanislaus State University. He collaborates with academic partners and uses their feedback to set up resources for students who may need it, such as nutrition centers, addiction help, care for veterans who may struggle with PTSD, and many more. Academic partners also collaborate with him by introducing these programs to their students, allowing Merced County Rescue Mission to be as effective as it can. They can also contact Metcalf about problems they notice with their own students, making Metcalf aware of an issue he previously may have not noticed.

Another example of how community and academic partners can collaborate can be seen in the article “Developing Systems Interventions in a School Setting: An Application of Community-Based Participatory Research for Mental Health” by Mulvaney-Day et al. (2009). In this project, community partners worked with academic partners from multiple schools. They then noticed various issues at these schools, which were common among all the students. Afterward, the community partners set up “several structured workshops with the multiple stakeholders participating in the project” (Mulvaney-Day et al, 2006). This increased collaboration between academic and community partners, allowing them to identify similar goals and solutions for issues. Due to this collaboration, many solutions were found, one school even introduced “focused attention on the reading and mathematics instruction for children for whom English was not their first language” (Mulvaney-Day et al, 2006).

Both the article and Metcalf understand the importance of collaboration between academic and community partners. This type of collaboration can introduce many different ideas and resources to both groups, further strengthening tools such as community mapping, and finding more effective solutions. This type of collaboration is extremely beneficial to both the academic and community partners, and the people they aim to help.

## Project Relevance

“College access is important, and college completion continues to be a powerful driver of social mobility” (Vasquez, 2020). This quote from the article “College Degrees Are Worth It – People with Bachelor’s Degrees Have Lower Poverty Rates” by Bricio Vasquez (2020) shows why education is extremely important to supporting a community such as Merced County. Education may be the most effective tool to counter poverty and increase social mobility. Understanding how homelessness impacts a student's mental health is essential in ensuring they finish their education, and in turn, makes them more likely to overcome their current situation.

Due to the importance that education has, this project is relevant to local community needs and concerns in many ways. To start with, it clarifies the struggles that homeless students may face. Understanding this struggle may help community and academic partners ensure that these students get the proper support, and ultimately a proper education. Merced County is already on the lower end of the income scale and has a high rate of poverty. According to the United States Census Bureau (2021), over 21% of Merced County live in poverty, and only 14.5% have a



bachelor's degree (figure 2). The main factor in providing help to this community and reducing poverty is access to education.

Understanding how homelessness impacts a student's mental health also allows us to provide social mobility within this community. Through tools such as community mapping, proper support groups, and strong awareness, we can help more homeless students finish their bachelor's degrees and end a cycle of generational poverty. Properly implementing this project and providing a struggling part of the community with education, will be extremely helpful in lowering poverty rates and increasing the average income. In fact, "people with a bachelor's degree earned \$30,468 more than those without" (Vasquez, 2020). Looking at the future it is extremely clear that college degrees are not only going to be extremely important, but almost a necessity. In today's world, "Obtaining a college education is more important now than it ever has been" (Vasquez, 2020).

## Conclusion

Throughout the course of this project, the importance of proper community-based research became evident, revealing its potential to guide the thinking of academic and community partners. The impact of community mapping, as highlighted in the articles we reviewed, was immediately apparent, prompting us to incorporate it into our project to the best of our ability. This exploration led us to discover various types of community mapping and how individuals like Greg Brown and Bruce Metcalf benefited from its application. Collaboration emerged as a crucial aspect, not just between academic and community partners, but within the community itself. Engaging in conversations with previously homeless individuals and those who work with them shed light on the intricate complexity of this issue. The aim to assist these individuals encompasses multiple challenges, including addiction, PTSD, depression, mental health, and more. Consequently, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Support groups dedicated to aiding the homeless require diverse approaches to address as many needs as possible.

In future research endeavors, we aspire to explore additional topics inspired by this project. One area of interest revolves around understanding the profound impact that a proper support group can have on homeless individuals. Our first question arises: What is the extent of influence that a well-structured support group can have on homeless individuals? Through our interview with Metcalf, we realized the importance of recognizing that not all forms of assistance yield the same results. We aim to delve deeper into this aspect and uncover the true magnitude of its impact.

Our interview with Brown also sparked a strong desire to gain a better understanding of how addiction and depression directly impact a student's living conditions. This insight stood out during the interview and shed light on an aspect we hadn't previously considered in depth. Thus, our second research question takes shape: How do addiction and depression directly affect a student's living conditions? A comprehensive understanding of how various factors contribute to homelessness, particularly among students, will enable us to provide more effective support for this vulnerable community.

Additionally, we wanted to address a question that emerged from both our interviews and the recurring theme of community mapping throughout our project. We aim to investigate how we can effectively implement community mapping strategies to raise awareness among the homeless about the resources available to them. Over the past few months, we have come to recognize the significance of community mapping and its potential to make a profound difference in the community by connecting individuals with nearby resources. Establishing well-designed information centers, such as the "navigation center" discussed by Metcalf, could be a game-changer. The primary objective of this paper was to ascertain the transformative potential of community mapping. Thus, our third research question materializes: How can community mapping be effectively implemented to enhance homeless individuals' awareness of nearby resources?

The outcomes of this project have unequivocally highlighted the strong impact of homelessness on a student's mental health and access to resources. The interviews and articles demonstrate the formidable challenges faced by individuals pursuing education without stable housing. This situation drastically limits their access to the internet,

computers, and even essential care. Education plays a pivotal role in promoting social mobility, making it even more crucial for communities affected by homelessness. We are committed to furthering our knowledge of homelessness and its effects on students and their mental well-being.

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