

## BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



### Season 2, Episode 16:

#### “Student Homelessness at Sac State and Beyond – an Educational Emergency.”

Produced by Moderator, Cathleen Williams; Panelists: Ryan McMurray and Ethan Goldenrath

Brief Description: “Listen in as two Sac State Students talk about their firsthand experience with homelessness and hear their perspectives on causes and solutions.”

**Musical intro lyrics:** Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we’re Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we’re Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, “Building Justice,” “Building Justice,” “Building Justice.” Building is to add on, or to do away with.

#### **Beginning of Conversation**

Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State University's Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice (CRISJ). We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world.

Your host for today is myself, Kathleen Williams. I'm active in the movement for unhoused people in Sacramento through the Sacramento Homeless Organizing Committee, which involves unhoused people in actions and analysis of the current crisis.

I'm also a member of CRISJ and we have two student guests here today to talk about homelessness at California State University, Sacramento, Ethan Gillum and Ryan McMurry.

1:10

Before we start, though, I want to give some background on student homelessness in California. The statistics are shocking. They're actually beyond shocking. One in ten Cal State students are homeless. That's 48,000 students. One in five community college students are homeless. There are 2 million students. 400,000 of them are homeless. And finally, at UC the University of California, there are 8000 homeless students. Far more students are housing insecure. It's estimated that 60% of community college students are housing insecure, if not homeless.

Focusing on the fact state we have a CARES office here. It's a campus program for assisting students. Their resources are limited. They don't even have a drop in center for housing emergencies.

2:18

Our first student who's going to share with us his experience as someone who became homeless is Ryan McMurry. He's a graduate student. He's part of CRISJ and he works with Sacramento self-help housing that provides temporary housing and support for homeless folks, including students, and helps them with all the documents and other kinds of logistical issues for homelessness.

Ethan Gillum, who is also going to share his insights, is finishing SEC State. He works with the Party for Socialism and Liberation and other activist organizations and charities that engage with the current crisis in housing. So thank you. First, we'll hear from Ryan. And the question I'm going to pose to these two students at the outset is what explains student homelessness? What explains the fact that over half a million students in California are actually homeless?

3:28

Um, yeah, I think it's, it's a combination of a few different things, but the biggest ones that jump out are the cost of living here in California is much higher than it is in a lot of other parts of the nation. And the rising cost of college tuition, you know, if you're going to, ah, you see, you're paying, you know, \$26,000 a year just for tuition. That doesn't include things like books and food and gas and all the things that you might need as a college student. And then, you know, of course, you also have like rising inflation. So prices that were already high are getting higher. And it kind of has created a perfect storm.

Those are very good points. Ryan, do you have any insight into both...well, into the causes or into the conditions that are creating this massive wave of homeless students.

I feel like we could solve this problem, but the actions that need to happen in order to solve the problem probably will not occur any time soon. Because, you know, now you're dealing with state and local governments and you have the opposing forces in in both of those arenas that seem to want to bicker with each other more than they want to actually address issues in the nation, which is unfortunate. I actually wound up specializing in political sociology, and I'm kind of wishing that I hadn't done that now because I, I, I find myself becoming more jaded and cynical by the day. I try and keep that to a minimum, though.

Well, I mean, to piggyback off of what much of Ryan has said, it's pretty on point. There's a lot of different factors that go into this. Things that come to mind in particular was right after the 2008 crisis and all the speculative real estate moguls, the banks that just allowed this whole thing to get carried away. And there was never really any consequence for these people other than parachuting and compensating them for their irresponsibility and fraud. And it goes on, too, because, I mean, the people who were in are in power currently, like Kamala Harris is or vice president. She used to be the attorney general in California. And it was on her desk to prosecute Steve Mnuchin, who used to be the treasurer of the United States for Trump. But she didn't prosecute him, even though he flagrantly committed frauds, illegal foreclosures---One of my family my family was affected by that. And it was by other factors and luck that we aren't homeless collectively. And, you know, but why what what are the reasons? There's regulatory capture lobbying is permitted. And Steve Mnuchin donated to both Republicans and Democrats for much of his career as a producer for films and and also like a banker for one West Bank. And so and for Goldman Sachs.

And so it's the people who are responsible for actually addressing these issues are in bed with the people, causing them and making money off of them. And the desperation that they take advantage of is it's very rarely do we get to see such a clear follow the money trail to someone with a conflict of interest. But this is one of these flagrant examples where it's just undeniably we don't have a government of action. We don't have a government by and for working people. I can't imagine how many homeless women I've talked to that fled domestic abuse situations and they can't afford to get housing right away and they have kids with them. It's just intolerable. And it's not just students, too. And I know I was actually looking at the ballot this morning and the person who's running for lieutenant governor, I forget her name, but she was proud to say that we are going to propose 30,000 new beds in a dormitory. So. The solution is we're going to expand private, you know, shoveling of taxpayer money to private costs or we're going to owe the tuition the student can put themselves in debt, can get faster loans, and so they can have stay at a dorm or maybe temporary housing situation versus a temporary problem. As soon as they're done with college, they're going to be in debt. They're going to have to figure out how to pay. Both these predatory middlemen of both health insurances and student loan middlemen, this these loan companies don't actually produce quality education. They don't incentivize or help the student become more practical, functioning members of society. They're just they're sucking up money in the middle from both government and faster and these private like shelling of money. And so there's clearly a pay to play way to go about it. And the people that are paying don't want to fix it because that's how they've been making money. It's a very parasitical relationship we have. And people kind of tolerate it for the sake of sensibility and bipartisanship and respect for democracy when we don't really have much of a democracy, when a handful of board of directors get to decide every aspect of your life. And that's. As as mechanical as I can make the conversation, I suppose. But that's my little insight from what little I know. It's just--it's a very overwhelming situation and. I think it's good in the sense that more people who used to be found sitting are seeing it and seeing how undeniably intolerable this problem is, and that the old way of voting blue, no matter who just isn't really working anymore.

9:36

So Ryan and Ethan, thank you for those solid insights that you've given, especially around the causes of the homeless crisis and the scale of it. You've moved on to talk about governance. You've brought forward the side of everyday people who are not fully represented and who are dealing with this housing crisis. And implicitly, you're calling for a solution. You're calling for a people's movement to enter the electoral arena and change that representation. Now I want to turn to whether there are any other themes we want our audience to tune into in understanding this issue of student homelessness.

10:17

I do want to sort of piggyback off of something that Ethan had said about democracy. We don't live in a democracy and we never have. The majority of Americans think that we do because politicians use words like democracy and liberty and freedom as buzzwords in all of their speeches and, you know, gets people fired up. Really, we're living in whether you want to call it oligarchy or a kleptocracy or a plutocracy. It's it's one of those three. They're all very similar. We're living in end stage capitalism.

And one of the consequences of that sort of system is that students, particularly students who have been who come from historically marginalized communities, suffer in ways like they can't afford housing. They have to choose between housing or paying tuition. And paying your tuition is going to get you to that degree that will allow you to, you know, make enough money to support yourself. So a lot of those students say, okay, well, I have to pay my tuition in order to get to where I want to go. So I'm going to have to put housing aside for the time being.

But to give credit to it, Ryan said to I think it's a very human, authentic thing to be infuriated and upset about this. The thing is, is like we're not some people asking for golden plated toilets or something luxurious or anything. We're asking for basic fundamental rights so that we can live. I mean, like what Ryan said, too, there's a lot of politicians that and I'm reading the ballots, so I'm seeing a lot of the platitudes and the family values. How can I have a family if I can't afford a place to live? How how much do I have to withhold finances that would be otherwise going into my local economies and small businesses or just towards a house? So I can support a family that gets diverted to all these middle men parasites, the insurance lobby, the loans. How many? Like every student I talk to is under loans in some capacity. And if they're not under loans, thankfully, and I'm not it's not like out of jealousy or resentment, I'm happy for them that they have some that they're lucky enough to have a family member that seems to help them out out of the situation. But the other and they're very aware of the obvious elephant in the room is that most students are never really going to pay off their debt unless they go into something that's particularly high paying in stem or it's an inelastic in demand sort of job. And that's a sort of gamble that every student is making and it's in the back of everyone's mind.

13:12

And then we ask ourselves, what about mental health? You know, I mean, the students mental health is always suffering on some level. And there's other physical manifestations that happen after your mental health crisis. You can get like physical ailments, anxiety that debilitating you from actually focusing and taking these classes seriously, managing your lifestyle quite basic. Like there's a lot of people, unfortunately, that lack basic hygiene in certain things because they let themselves go. And I can only imagine how much harder that is if you're a homeless student where you have to go to the food bank side to get some food to help out, or how easy is it for you to cook at all when you're homeless? Or How easy is it to find a place that you can pay for a shower or get free shower services, etc.? It's awful. And, you know, it's not like anyone's walking around with a sign on their chest saying, Oh, I'm homeless, you know, please, please be patient with me. You know, most people are ashamed of it and they hide it and there's a stigma about it. And an example I kind of want to bring up, too, is like when Kathleen, you and I were walking on campus and we're like, Oh, well, there are some places that have been that we've seen people that are homeless students sticking around, hanging around. And it was very difficult to actually find, said students, or see a car that was full of belongings. Such like that. It's very hard to actually get out and help these people.

Ryan We're very honored by the fact that you're able to share your experience.

But tell us, how did you enroll in Texas State in a demanding master's program and become houseless at the same time? What were the conditions and events? What were the experiences that led to that level of economic vulnerability, such that you joined the thousands and the tens of thousands of other students who had no place of their own to live.

15:13

Consumnes River college. I went there for two and a half years and then transferred to succeed in 2017, the fall semester of 2017. And so I had been living with my parents because I was only working part time and I couldn't afford rent on a part time salary. So I graduated Texas State with a Bachelors Degree in sociology in May of 2019. I started the master's program that fall. I was now paying my tuition all on my own. I don't qualify for Pell Grants or any of that anymore. As a graduate student still living with my parents in January of 2020, they both retired and they said California's too expensive. The tax you know, our tax liability is too high here. We're moving to North Carolina. And I said, okay, see you guys later. And they actually left in March of 20, 25 days before lockdown because of COVID. During between January and March, I was kind of like looking around to see if I could, you know, rent a room somewhere for, like \$600 just so I wouldn't have to sleep outside. I wound up getting in touch with a friend of mine who had an apartment up in Citrus Heights, and he was like, I'm actually going to be out of town for like three months. So do you want to just like house sit for me? I have a cat. You can take care of the cat. You can just kind of live there until I come back. And then if you're, you know, you don't have your own place to buy, then you can still stay there, just, you know, sleep on the couch. So I did that. You know, I house sat for my, my friend for like three months and then he came back and I lived on his couch for like another four months. I don't know if you have done long term couch surfing. Either one of you, but it is not optimal. It speaks to our friendship and the strength of it that we are actually still friends. Now, after me living in his on his couch for four months, having really no privacy.

And then at the end of that period of time, I was introduced to Daniel Munoz over at the Care's office. It's at State. She did an intake with me. They got me into a house, so I was a tenant for the first month or so and then they said, We think you'd be a great House leader. Would you like to do that position? I said, Yeah, I'd love to in the house later at a self-help house, in addition to being a case manager for them. I made it through and I wound up getting good grades. But it is it was really difficult. You know, I never really knew what was going to happen from day to day. You know, sometimes my friend would want to sit and watch TV really loudly when I was trying to study. So I'd have to, like, pack up all my things and drive over to campus, which, you know, from Citrus Heights, that's like a 20 minute drive drive over to campus. And, you know, at this point, everything's closed on campus because of COVID. So I'd sit in the parking garage and connect to wi fi and and do my my work in my car, not knowing what was going to happen. From day to day, I think was probably the worst part of it. Looking back now, I did what I had to do to to get things done. And, you know, now I'm on track to graduate here in December. But, you know, there were times when I was going through that. Should I quit school like this is terrible. I have a I have a bachelor's degree. I can get a good job. I wound up, you know, pushing through because I had already sunk so many thousands of dollars into this master's degree. I told myself, you know, you're in this for the long haul. You have to finish what you started. But, yeah, I mean, there were there were days there where I just I couldn't see a way out of it. And then when I had the intake interview with Danielle and she said, look, we we have a house for you to go to pack your things, you'll probably be moving within a week. I'm not usually a very emotional guy, but I like I broke down crying that day. It was just such a relief to know that, you know, I would have a place to stay with a door that shut. You know, that seems like a pretty low bar, but that's where I was at at the time.

19:38

Ryan, when you were unhoused, did you become aware that there were other houseless students and what kind of interaction or communication or community did you have with them? And also what services were available through fact, State Care's office and how did they help? Homeless students.

So first question, yes, I would see the same cars every time I went to the parking garage. I never really talked to other people. I just kind of sad and did my work. But I learned to recognize who was there and who was not on any given day. And I think we all kind of looked out for each other. When you're homeless, things can go really bad really quickly. So to have that kind of community, even though you're not interacting face to face, there's safety in numbers. So that that helped. As far as services that are available for students, you know, like Ethan had mentioned, now that we do have the food pantry. CARES's office is involved with that. During the pandemic, they gave out like emergency grants. If you were having trouble, you know, either paying your tuition or paying for rent or paying for food or clothing or whatever you needed, you could get like a one time payment. I think it was like \$600 if you applied and you know, they would ask you why you needed it and what your circumstances were. So that was good, too. Overall, they're they're not funded enough to help everyone.

There's not a lot of advertising for the CARES Office. I found out about it through a friend of mine who was also at the time the director of Project Rebound on campus, who they provide services for students who are formerly formerly incarcerated. So he knew Danielle and knew what the Cares office did and what they were about. And so I had been talking to him saying, Yeah, I'm trying to find a room to rent and I don't know how I'm going to make this work because I only have a set amount of money to spend. And he was like, Oh, well, here. Call Danielle. Tell her you know what's going on and she'll help you out. Yeah.

Having to balance all of that while pursuing your master's is a lot. It's a lot of stress. And I know what you said to you did what you had to do to get through it. And it's it's kind of something that like it's not really until you've articulated out loud or had that hindsight that it really like highlights, like, wow, you did all that and balance all that is the best that you could. And sometimes when you're in the midst of it, it's like it's almost like you self normalize it because you're just trying to get through it and you kind of adopt sort of like a stoic mentality. And I can only imagine, like other people that are also in that situation that, you know, it's sort of like a respect thing too. It's not like you're like what you're talking about with the parking lot. It's not like you walked up to another individual in their car that you noticed their every day. But, you know, it's like a sort of like an unsaid spoken rule. It's like, yeah, you're probably in the same situation as me. I'll keep I respect the space, but I'll look out for you. I'm sure you're looking out for me. And that's the sort of thing that's like this background subliminal thing. It's like it's a very isolating experience at times and it's great when you can recognize it, I mean. I had a very like small experience in that shoes when I was in Chicago and it was just yeah, like if it wasn't for a friend, you know. And it's very frustrating that, like, people's humanity get denied. And we would have a much more efficient system and would have a much more caring human face system if everyone that wanted to pursue it and go through with it had their basic

needs met, we would have a lot more things going our way. It makes sense to take care of our people.

It makes sense to want to bring up everybody up so that whatever their experience experiences, their expertise, their specializations are, they can make that contribution.

You know, people on campus now, especially with the pandemic, they know that the CARES Office exists. But I don't think as many people are aware of the services that they provide and what they do. So I think getting the word out about what the CARES Office does would help a lot. I also think that some people feel like the problem is too big and that they won't be able to make a difference. But that's not true. You know, one person can make a difference. So I think kind of altering that sort of perception that the problem of student homelessness is, you know, larger than life and is not going to be solvable on an individual level. When you get a lot of individuals together who are trying to tackle this issue, that's where change occurs.

24:58

Ryan, I've so appreciated what you've shared and the insights that you have. And as we close the program, maybe we should end with some thoughts about organizing students to take action and others to deal with the fact that thousands and thousands of students are living outside, living in their cars, living on couches, showering in the gym, just making do and trying to get good grades as they struggle with their personal circumstances, the hardship, even food being hard to get a hold of. And Ethan, as we close the program, we'd love to hear from you about your final thoughts on what we can do now to deal with student homelessness.

We all have local, locally elected representatives whose job it is to address issues like this. So, you know, calls, emails, letters, protests, direct action, all of that would go a long way towards at least waking our representatives up to the fact that this is a problem and it needs to change.

26:06

I like what Ryan said a lot, though. I think the first step is getting like getting other people that are in similar situations or they're one paycheck away from being in that situation and getting people to recognize they have more in common with homeless folk than they do with the millionaire and the fabulous forties or whatever person they glorify in media. And I think getting people to recognize that first and foremost and seeing it's a very. It's normalized, like the fact that it's like thousands upon thousands upon thousands of people that not only want to go to specialized work. And higher education. But like and there's also even more. Dozens upon dozens of thousands of people that are left behind and are not able to participate, they in creating independent wealth, not just for themselves, their hopes and dreams, but also the contribution it does with local economies like it's going to make. It makes more sense to take care of people, and it may help them do right by them. And getting people to identify with that is kind of that first step of identifying with a broader movement, a people's movement.

27:25

Thank you for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathy and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all.

**Music outro lyrics:**

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice,"  
"Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.