

College Living Environments and Stress: Commuters Versus On-Campus Residency

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Abstract:

Living environment is defined as an on-campus dormitory or an off-campus residence. How does the living environment effect the amount of stress reportedly experienced by college students based on living environment? My hypothesis is that college students who share an off-campus residence with 1+ roommates will report the highest amounts of stress; those who share an on campus residence with 1+ roommates will report medium levels of stress; and those who commute and live alone on or off campus by themselves will report the lowest levels of stress. Research has shown a correlation between one's living environment and stress. For this study, a questionnaire was distributed to participants asking the above information and to determine the causes of stress in the living situations and environments of on-campus and off-campus dwellers. The results show significance between living environment and levels of stress. This study may further the understanding of the relationship between living environments

and stress for by college students, and may help in reevaluating the treatment of and accommodations for students living on campus. Universities could gain more insight into the lives and lifestyles of commuting students and their experience of stress making it easier to empathize with their situations of commuting.



College students face many difficulties and struggles during their college career. Upon entering university, students are often presented with many challenges that can create stressful situations and possibly have a negative impact on students' success. One important contributing factor of student stress that has not been researched in depth is living situations in college students.

In many universities, students have the option to live on-campus in dormitories, or to commute from a private home or residence. Often when living on campus the students can choose to live by themselves, but more often than not they are placed with one or

more roommates. The initial selection process is usually done by those who are in charge of the residence halls selecting roommates they believe will live well together. After the freshman year, students sometimes have the privilege of choosing their own roommate.

Students who choose to commute to campus might drive anywhere from five to sixty minutes each way. This can be problematic for numerous reasons. Driving back and forth to school can be time consuming, tiresome, and expensive. Those who commute to campus also constantly have to work out schedules for traveling time and most always are watching their clocks. Not only have these issues been researched, but other factors as well have been put into consideration when concluding reasons for stress in college students.

Many researchers have studied different effects on students' health and academic performance. Different effects could be from outside stressors such as family, friends, or relationships. A number of previous research studies focused on the lone factor of on-campus housing, with the majority holding the belief that on-campus housing is the best choice for students. Turley and Wodtke (2010) discuss the issue of who benefits from living on college campuses. They come to the conclusion that, while there is no difference in grade point average (GPA) for on-campus or off-campus students, there is a difference in academic achievement and involvement (Wodtke 2010). This means that students are more likely to get involved in more activities on campus when actually living on the campus. This is most likely due to their not having to constantly plan their lives around their commute, and to how living closer to other school facilities makes it easier to commit to other activities. Turley and Wodtke also point out that it is easier for on-campus students to maintain a social life than those who commute, and therefore the on-campus students will most likely engage in more social activities (2010).

Students who choose to commute do so for many different reasons, such as family commitments, financial status, or because they may not be ready for such a large, life-changing event as moving away from home. It can be intimidating to many people to start a brand new life on their own away from home, so many choose to start school but still stay at home. The idea of a brand new lifestyle could lead to anxiety issues and could cause poor academic performance.

The idea that stress is caused by living situations for college students based on whether they commute or live on campus is not supported by many research studies or published material. However, many have studied different areas of the living situation such as roommates, availability of other facilities (such as gyms and cafeterias), and the social life within the housing communities. The largest area studied is how academic performance correlates with living situations. It is very important, however, that one looks at the difference between lives of on-campus students and commuter students and the different levels of stress each has.

McCorkle and Mason (2009) show how living in a residence hall is a great reward for the student but can be one of the worst experiences as well. Many stressors come with living in residence halls and having roommates. Many of these students are forced to

live their lives around complete strangers (McCorkle & Mason 2009), and are forced to adjust their own lifestyles to others they are not used to. Often students are forced to learn how to study in busy areas, eat less than appetizing food (which usually leads to eating out more often than usual), and to deal with unhealthy sleep patterns. There is a lot of change that is happening when a student moves into the residence hall life, and this can cause more stress for the individual in addition to the stress of their academics (McCorkle & Mason, 2009).

The need to get along with a roommate can be another large cause of stress. Those who commute either live alone or live with those they have already known for a given period of time. Researchers such as McCorkle and Mason (2009) have indicated that often one leans upon the other roommate in dorm life which leads to a larger social group. If the roommates get along, all is well, and, as reported by McCorkle and Mason (2009), if there is a mutual respect between the roommates, there is less stress and academic performance is higher. In this sense, commuters would have it easier than those who live with roommates because they are able to retreat from the school atmosphere. Commuters can easily be by themselves, if they wish, in the relaxation of their own place to work on their studies. It can be hard to concentrate when you have a loud roommate or a roommate who is constantly trying to get others to go out, have a good time and forget about their academics for a while.

This leads us to another issue that often leads to high stress within the living situations of college students. Cross, Zimmerman, and O'Grady (2009) studied the usage of alcohol in campus housing to obtain knowledge about how much and how often alcohol was an issue within these settings. This study hypothesized that students who lived with one or more roommates (often called suitemates) were more likely to consume alcohol more frequently than those with fewer roommates or who lived alone (Cross, Zimmerman, & O'Grady, 2009). Data supported this statement, but it was limited in reliability because it was only tested on one campus. However, McCorkle and Mason (2009) state that many who live in residence halls are more likely to partake in alcohol driven activities. This often leads to falling behind in school and to more stress on the college student.

Many researchers looked at the individual student's driven ability to succeed and its correlation to stress. McCorkle and Mason (2009) concluded that most students did not complain about their roommates. Students complained that they have a hard time with their own personal issues such as time management, life skills, and classroom and university expectations. As time goes on, however, these issues are worked out and less stress is reported.

In a study done on the effects of retention amongst college students and college residency, Schudde (2011) claims that living on campus is more beneficial than harmful. It is assumed that the student who lives on campus is more likely to be involved in positive activities such as club officer positions and sports than in partying or drinking. On-campus students have been known to have better relationships with professors due to their having more time to make the effort than those who commute and who, therefore, are usually not able to make scheduled office hours that professors provide. Often those who live on campus are more known amongst others and those who commute are less known

and often not considered high profile students (Schudde, 2011). Those who live on campus report higher self-efficacy or self-esteem and feel more successful than those who commute to college. Zajacova, Lynch, and Espenshade (2005) report that nontraditional students, who were commuters, dropped out for the reasons of stress, commitment issues, and not being sure of where they were heading in life. However, nontraditional commuter students did not report having better or worse academic standing than traditional on-campus students. Students with higher self-efficacy reported lower rates of anxiety and stress regardless of living on-campus or off-campus (Zajacova et al., 2005).

It seems that there is definitely a correlation between stress and living environment amongst college students. It seems that those who live on campus, regardless of the amount of roommates, have a high report of academic success. Stutzer and Frey (2004), in *Commuters and the Commuter Paradox*, state that those who commute are spending more time on the road than doing what they consider to be more important things, which can become burdening. They found that those who commute acquire a lower wellbeing in biological and mental health when the commute is done on a constant basis (Stutzer & Frey, 2004). However, the same researchers argue that, while commuters may be burdening themselves, they are helping out others such as family members by choosing to commute (Stutzer & Frey, 2004).

Past research has sufficient evidence to take a stand on either the side of the commuter or the on-campus college student. I am going to investigate how stress levels are indicated as high or low due to on-campus housing or commuting. Students will answer questionnaires based on their living situations and experiences along with his or her reported levels of stress. My hypothesis is that those who choose to commute and live with others tend to have more of a burden and will have higher stress than those who live on campus, but those who live on campus with more than one roommate may experience medium to higher level stress than those who live by themselves.

Methods

Participants

Participants of this study consisted of students from the Introductory Psychology courses of a regional state university in the Midwest. A total number of 30 students participated (26 Female, 4 Male) with ages falling in the 18-25 year range (22) or in the 26+ year range (8). The number of on-campus residency students is 6, and the number of commuter students is 22. Students were recruited for this study through an online research management computer program used by the university. Introductory Psychology students may use this research as a method to achieve their enrichment or extra credit points. Students are not required to use research as a method of achieving these points. Participants have the option to quit at any time without penalty.

Design

This study is a quasi-experimental between-subjects design. There are two independent variables, each with two levels. The first independent variable is the living situation (on-campus residency or commuter), and the second independent variable is the living

environment (1+ roommates or no roommates). The dependent variable being measured is stress. Data obtained will be measured and analyzed using a Factorial ANOVA test to show the differences in stress levels between living environment and living situations.

Measures

Each participant receives two questionnaires. The first is an environment and stress questionnaire that asks questions about the participant's living environment over the last year. The questionnaire consists of 3 separate parts. Part 1 consists of 14 questions regarding the participants living situations. The participant was asked to rank his or her feelings on his or her current living environment or situation on a scale from 0 (never) to 4 (very often). Part 2 asks the participant to name how many days per week they engage in a certain activity such as sleeping and smoking cigarettes. Part 3 asks the participant questions regarding their current and past school career and their current living environment such as class standing, credit hours taken, living on or off campus, alone or with a roommate.

The second questionnaire administered to the participants was the College Undergraduate Stress Scale (CUSS). The CUSS consists of 45 questions given to the participant. This questionnaire asks the participant to check next to any of the events listed that they have experienced in the past year. The events are rated on a scale from 20 to 97: the higher the score, the more stressful the event.

Procedures

The participants arrive at the given room number listed on the study site on sona-systems for their scheduled time. The participant was placed in a research room where the researcher gave instructions and also a copy of the informed consent document to the participant to keep. The researcher then gave the two questionnaires on paper with a pencil to fill out to the participant. When the student finished they then placed their answers into a sealed box where it remained for 24 hours before being analyzed by the researcher. This procedure took about 30 minutes for each participant to complete.

Results

Due to not obtaining enough participants for two variables (Off-campus and living alone = 2 participants, and on-campus and living alone = 0 participants), statistical tests were only run and analyzed for the variables of on-campus with 1+ roommates and off-campus with 1+ roommates residency. The variables that did not obtain enough data were not taken into account in any data analysis or report. As shown in Table 1, statistics were limited to the demographics. A small sample of 4 males and 26 females participated. The ages consisted of 22 18-25 year-olds and 8 being 26+ year-olds.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants

	Age		Gender	
	18-25 yrs.	26+ yrs.	Male	Female
On-Campus Alone	0	0	0	0
On-Campus 1+ Roommates	6	0	0	6
Off-Campus Alone	1	1	0	2
Off-Campus 1+ Roommate	15	7	4	18

The results were produced and analyzed by an independent samples *t* test (two tailed) at a significance level of .05. Each event checked off by the participant was totaled by the number assigned to that event for the total amount of stress in the CUSS (College Undergraduate Stress Scale). Scores were then averaged for both on-campus (1563.8) and off-campus (1036) residency. In the survey regarding living environment and situation administered to participants, scores were totaled in regards to positive and negative attitude based questions (7 of each to equal a total of 14 questions). The averages of both positive and negative attitude questions were both reported in regards to on-campus with 1+ roommates and off-campus with 1+ roommates.

In regards to the CUSS with both on- and off-campus residency with 1 or more roommates, the question was who reported a higher amount of stress. There was a significant interaction, $t(26)=2.94, p=.007$. A total of 22 off-campus with 1+ roommates ($M=1036.36, SD=367.02$) and a total number of 6 on-campus with 1+ roommates ($M=1563.83, SD=481.80$) participated. The results indicate that those who live on campus with 1 or more roommates have a higher level of stress than those who live off campus with 1 or more roommates (see Figure 1).

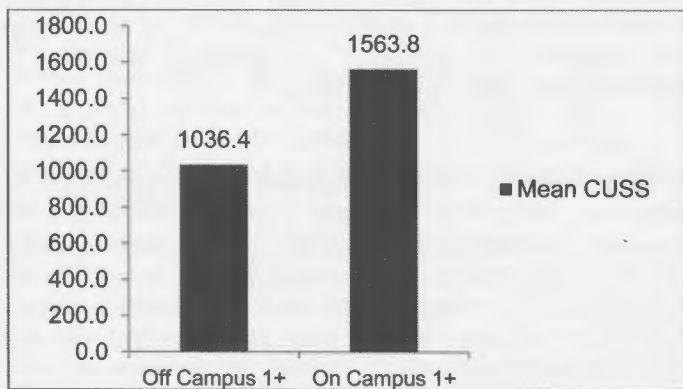


Figure 1. Students who live on campus with 1 or more roommate report a higher level of stress than students who live off campus with 1 or more roommate.

When running the statistics for both positive and negative attitudes toward living environment, there was no significance. The total positive environment *t*-test reported is, $t(26)=.454, p=.760$. The total negative environment *t*-test reported is, $t(26)=.788, p=.271$. A total number of 22 off-campus with 1+ roommates ($M=19.36, SD=4.43$) and a total number of 6 on-campus with 1+ roommates ($M=20.83, SD=2.99$) participated.

The total number of off-campus with 1+ roommates ($M=11.50, SD=6.39$) and a total number of 6 on-campus with 1+ roommates ($M=10.66, SD=7.68$) participated. Both reports indicate that there is no difference in positive or negative attitude in regards to living environment and situation between on-campus and off-campus residency with roommates (see Figure 2).

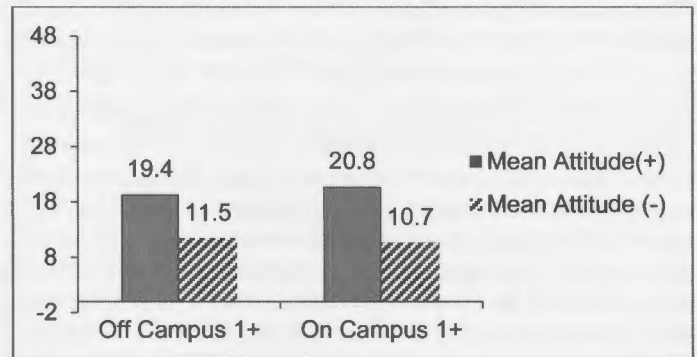


Figure 2. Students who live on campus with 1 or more roommate report a more positive attitude toward their living situation and environment than students who live off campus with 1 or more roommate.

Discussion

This study was designed to look for differences in stress levels and college students' attitude toward their own living environments and situations. On-campus and commuter students showed no significant difference in their attitudes toward their living situation and environment. However, the significant difference in stress levels indicated that those who live on-campus with one or more roommates report a higher level of stress. These findings support the opposite of the original hypothesis stated.

Reasons for those living on campus reporting higher levels of stress could be due to many different factors. The majority of the participants in the study report being college freshmen. These students could be experiencing living on their own for the first time. College freshmen often have to learn to be more independent and to balance a new lifestyle. Living with a roommate for the first time and having to compromise living styles in small areas can be quite a challenge. Those students who have never shared a room with someone in the past could experience difficulties in their new living situation.

Those who live off campus are still able to have the comfort of their own home and are able to escape from the college campus atmosphere. Those who commute to school do have to constantly plan their time around their commute, but are able to return to a familiar place where the only new stressor in their life is the commute and possibly new ways of learning and studying for college courses.

In the article titled "Combating the Stress of Residency: One school's approach," The University of South Florida looks at ways in which those who work with the residents on campus can help deal with stress during their time at college (Dabrow et al. 2006). The article states that often college students experience stress that involves personal and professional issues. Those who live on campus are constantly dealing with both in the same place, all of the time. The researchers also report that those who live on campus report a higher risk of stress-related issues and higher

rates of depression and suicide (Dabrow et al., 2006). This could be due to a change in the way students are presented and absorbing material in classes. Personal stressors are often reported, such as dealing with roommates who do not get along, isolation, and financial issues. Students who live on campus for the first time are still getting acquainted with new students and therefore have a smaller support system, especially if the student's family lives far away (Dabrow et al., 2006).

This study shows how those who live on campus need to make the transition into college as easily as possible. It is important for professors to understand that college is a life-changing event for not only on-campus students but off-campus students as well. There are many different aspects that could be looked into further when researching this topic in the future.

It would be important to find out who the roommates are that students are living with. Those who commute may be still living with parents, and therefore they might already be well adjusted and find it easier to deal with only the stressor of college classes and other demands that come with their academics. It would be important to know if those who commute live with a spouse, children, or roommates of the same age.

Another factor to look at is the students' past living situations: whom students have lived with, if they ever had to share a room, or the number of siblings could all be indicators of how they may deal with stress. If a student has had siblings or shared a room it could be easier to make the transition into living on campus with a roommate.

In the future, it would be important to look at class standing and stress levels. Threats to internal validity regarding this would be the fact that most participants reported being freshman students. External validity is challenged due to the small sample size in this study. Only a small amount of 30 participants took part of the study and only 28 were analyzed. This study was originally set to look at four separate groups: on-campus residents who live alone, on-campus residents who have 1 or more roommates, off-campus commuter students who live alone, and off-campus commuter students who live with one or more roommates. Due to limited data collection, the study was then redesigned and only analyzed

on- and off-campus students who live with one or more roommates.

It would be important to expand this study to larger universities that would be able to supply a more broad population to analyze all four groups. It has become evident that those who live on campus deal with many different stressors, mostly adjusting to their new lifestyle. Even though the original hypothesis was not supported for this study, results have raised numerous questions to be investigated further in the future.

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