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There is nothing she would rather do than teach. But after supplementing her career with tutoring and proofreading, the university lecturer decided to go to remarkable lengths to make her career financially viable.

She first opted for her side gig during a particularly rough patch, several years ago, when her course load was suddenly cut in half and her income plunged, putting her on the brink of eviction. “In my mind I was like, I’ve had one-night stands, how bad can it be?” she said. “And it wasn’t that bad.”

The wry but weary-sounding middle-aged woman, who lives in a large US city and asked to remain anonymous to protect her reputation, is an adjunct instructor, meaning she is not a full-time faculty member at any one institution and strings together a living by teaching individual courses, in her case at multiple colleges.

“I feel committed to being the person who’s there to help millennials, the next generation, go on to become critical thinkers,” she said. “And I’m really good at it, and I really like it. And it’s heartbreaking to me it doesn’t pay what I feel it should.”

Sex work is one of the more unusual ways that adjuncts have avoided living in poverty, and perhaps even homelessness. A quarter of part-time college academics (many of whom are adjuncts, though it’s not uncommon for adjuncts to work 40 hours a week or more) are said to be enrolled in public assistance programs such as Medicaid.

They resort to food banks and Goodwill, and there is even an adjuncts’ cookbook that shows how to turn items like beef scraps, chicken bones and orange peel into meals. And then there are those who are either on the streets or teetering on the edge of losing stable housing. The Guardian has spoken to several such academics, including an adjunct living in a “shack” north of Miami, and another sleeping in her car in Silicon Valley.

The adjunct who turned to sex work makes several thousand dollars per course, and teaches about six per semester. She estimates that she puts in 60 hours a week. But she struggles to make ends meet after paying \$1,500 in monthly rent and with student loans that, including interest, amount to a few hundred thousand dollars. Her income from teaching comes to \$40,000 a year. That’s significantly more than most adjuncts: a 2014 survey found that the median income for adjuncts is only \$22,041 a year, whereas for full-time faculty it is \$47,500.

'We take a kind of vow of poverty'

Recent reports have revealed the extent of poverty among professors, but the issue is longstanding. Several years ago, it was thrust into the headlines in dramatic fashion when Mary-Faith Cerasoli, an adjunct professor of Romance languages in her 50s, revealed she was homeless and protested outside the New York state education department.

"We take a kind of vow of poverty to continue practicing our profession," Debra Leigh Scott, who is working on a documentary about adjuncts, said in an email. "We do it because we are dedicated to scholarship, to learning, to our students and to our disciplines."

Adjuncting has grown as funding for public universities has fallen by more than a quarter between 1990 and 2009. Private institutions also recognize the allure of part-time professors: generally they are cheaper than full-time staff, don't receive benefits or support for their personal research, and their hours can be carefully limited so they do not teach enough to qualify for health insurance.

This is why adjuncts have been called "the fast-food workers of the academic world": among labor experts adjuncting is defined as "precarious employment", a growing category that includes temping and sharing-economy gigs such as driving for Uber. An American Sociological Association taskforce focusing on precarious academic jobs, meanwhile, has suggested that "faculty employment is no longer a stable middle-class career".



Adjunct English professor Ellen James-Penney and her husband live in a car with their two dogs. They have developed a system. 'Keep nothing on the dash, nothing on the floor - you can't look like you're homeless, you can't dress like you're homeless.' Photograph: Talia Herman for the Guardian

ing can take many forms, and a second job is one way adjuncts 'he professor who turned to sex work said it helps her keep her do," she said, adding that for her it is preferable to, say, a six-ing all day. "I don't want it to come across as, 'Oh, I had no l my life is.'"

Advertising online, she makes about \$200 an hour for sex work. She sees clients only a handful of times during the semester, and more often during the summer, when classes end and she receives no income.

"I'm terrified that a student is going to come walking in," she said. And the financial concerns have not ceased. "I constantly have tension in my neck from gritting my teeth all night."

To keep their homes, some adjuncts are forced to compromise on their living space.

Caprice Lawless, 65, a teacher of English composition and a campaigner for better working conditions for adjuncts, resides in an 1100 sq ft brick house near Boulder, Colorado. She bought it following a divorce two decades ago. But because her \$18,000 income from teaching almost full time is so meager, she has remortgaged the property several times, and has had to rent her home to three other female housemates.

“I live paycheck to paycheck and I’m deeply in debt,” she said, including from car repairs and a hospitalization for food poisoning.

Like every other adjunct, she says, she opted for the role thinking it would be a path to full-time work. She is so dependent on her job to maintain her living situation that when her mother died this summer, she didn’t take time off in part because she has no bereavement leave. She turned up for work at 8am the next day, taught in a blur and, despite the cane she has used since a hip replacement, fell over in the parking lot.

If she were to lose her home her only hope, she says, would be government-subsidized housing.

“Most of my colleagues are unjustifiably ashamed,” she said. “They take this personally, as if they’ve failed, and I’m always telling them, ‘you haven’t failed, the system has failed you.’”

A precarious situation

Even more desperate are those adjuncts in substandard living spaces who cannot afford to fix them. Mindy Percival, 61, a lecturer with a doctorate from Columbia, teaches history at a state college in Florida and, in her words, lives in “a shack” which is “in the woods in middle of nowhere”.



Lecturer Mindy Percival's mobile home in Stuart, Florida. Her oven, shower and water heater don't work. Photograph: Courtesy of Mindy Percival

The mobile home she inhabits, located in the town of Stuart, north of Miami, was donated to her about eight years ago. It looks tidy on the outside, but inside there are holes in the floor and the paneling is peeling off the walls. She has no washing machine, and the oven, shower and water heater don't work. “I’m on the verge of homelessness, constantly on the verge,” she said.

Percival once had a tenure-track job but left to care for her elderly mother, not expecting it

would be impossible to find a similar position. Now, two weeks after being paid, “I might have a can with \$5 in change in it.” Her 18-year-old car broke down after Hurricane Irma, and she is driven to school by a former student, paying \$20 a day for gas.

“I am trying to get out so terribly hard,” she said.

Homelessness is a genuine prospect for adjuncts. When Ellen Tara James-Penney finishes work, teaching English composition and critical thinking at San Jose State University in Silicon Valley, her husband, Jim, picks her up. They have dinner and drive to a local church, where Jim pitches a tent by the car and sleeps there with one of their rescue dogs. In the car, James-Penney puts the car seats down and sleeps with another dog. She grades papers using a headlamp.

Over the years, she said, they have developed a system. “Keep nothing on the dash, nothing on the floor - you can’t look like you’re homeless, you can’t dress like you’re homeless. Don’t park anywhere too long so the cops don’t stop you.”

James-Penney, 54, has struggled with homelessness since 2007, when she began studying for her bachelor’s degree. Jim, 64, used to be a trucker but cannot work owing to a herniated disk. Ellen made \$28,000 last year, a chunk of which goes to debt repayments. The remainder is not enough to afford Silicon Valley rent.

At night, instead of a toilet they must use cups or plastic bags and baby wipes. To get clean, they find restrooms and “we have what we call the sink-shower”, James-Penney said. The couple keep their belongings in the back of the car and a roof container. All the while they deal with the consequences of ageing - James-Penney has osteoporosis - in a space too small to even stand up.

James-Penney does not hide her situation from her class. If her students complain about the homeless people who can sometimes be seen on campus, she will say: “You’re looking at someone who is homeless.”

“That generally stops any kind of sound in the room,” she says. “I tell them, your parents could very well be one paycheck away, one illness away, from homelessness, so it is not something to be ashamed of.”



Ellen James-Penney teaching an English class at San Jose State University in California. She tells her students, ‘you’re looking at someone who is homeless’.

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change their lot by unionizing, and have done so at dozens of are notching successes; some have seen annual pay increases

Photograph: Talia Herman for the Guardian
According to Julie Schmid, executive director of the American Association of University Professors.

Schools are often opposed to such efforts and say unions will result in higher costs for students. And for certain adjuncts, any gains will come too late.

Mary-Faith Cerasoli, 56, the homeless adjunct who captured the public's attention with her protest in New York three years ago, said that in the aftermath little changed in terms of her living situation. Two generous people, a retiree and then a nurse, offered her temporary accommodation, but she subsequently ended up in a tent pitched at a campground and, after that, a broken sailboat docked in the Hudson river.

But there was, however, one shift. All the moving around made it hard for her to make teaching commitments, and in any case the pay remained terrible, so she gave it up. She currently lives in a subsidized room in a shared house in a wealthy county north of New York.

For Rebecca Snow, 51, another adjunct who quit teaching after a succession of appalling living situations, there is a sense of having been freed, even though finances continue to be stressful.



Author Rebecca Snow, now retired from adjuncting, has moved to a small apartment just north of Spokane, Washington. Photograph: Rajah Bose for the Guardian
composition at a community college in the Denver area in 2005, a homes she could afford meant she had to move every year or worse of bedbugs, another when raw sewage flowed into her apartment to properly fix the pipes.

Sometimes her teenage son would have to stay with her ex-husband when she couldn't provide a stable home. Snow even published a poem about adjuncts' housing difficulties.

In the end she left the profession when the housing and job insecurity became too much, and her bills too daunting. Today she lives in a quiet apartment above the garage of a friend's home, located 15 miles outside Spokane, Washington. She has a view of a lake and forested hills and, with one novel under her belt, is working on a second.

Teaching was the fantasy, she said, but life on the brink of homelessness was the reality.

"I realized I hung on to the dream for too long."

Do you have an experience of homelessness to share with the Guardian? Get in touch
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