

Living in Washington, DC: Housing, Food, and Transportation (2021)

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After having landed an internship in Washington, DC, the next task is to decide where to live, and how to budget properly to survive and thrive in what is arguably one of the most expensive, urban areas of the US. In this resource, students will find tips for securing suitable, safe and affordable housing, reliable transportation; and creating a budget (see also the separate resource, “Sample Budget Worksheet”).

Housing

DC rents are typically higher than what most college students are accustomed to paying. Finding safe, affordable and suitable short-term housing can be a challenge for someone who has never traveled to DC. Students can conduct solo searches for housing by looking at long-term hotel or short-term rentals/sublets on sites like **AirBnB** (<https://www.airbnb.com/>), **Craigslist** (<https://washingtondc.craigslist.org/d/housing/search/hhh>), or **Intern Housing Hub** (<https://www.internhousinghub.com/housing/Washington-D.C.>). Just use caution and be aware of scams. For example, the properties may be in unsafe areas or may not be habitable. Virginia Tech provides some helpful tips for avoiding such scams (see <https://dc.offcampus.vt.edu/avoid-scams-and-fraud>). Students who will be living in DC during the summer should also check with local universities about summer housing. **Local universities (American University, Catholic University, Georgetown University, George Mason University, George Washington University, Howard University, University of Maryland, College Park)** also make dorm space available during the summer term. Go to the university website and look for “summer housing” to find information about availability. Just make sure that the location offers convenient transportation options for safe travel to and from the internship. For example, **Catholic University** (<http://przbyla.catholic.edu/conferences/housing/summer-intern/non-cua-student/rates.html>) offers single-occupancy rooms at \$42.00 per night per person on a first-come, first served basis.¹

Alumni connections are another great way to find affordable housing. Recently one woman posted in her local alumni chapter’s Facebook group that her home would be available for free to an alum who could take care of the family cat while they were away for the summer. Living with friends, or **family relatives** is another (obvious) way to save on housing costs. Not many students will be as fortunate as Carlos Molina, a young college student from Healdsburg, CA who spent a week interning in the DC office of Representative Don Clausen (R-CA) and living as a guest of the Congressman and his wife in their home!² Yet generous people remain. In 1989,

¹ The price is current as of June 18, 2021. The stay should be a minimum of 30 consecutive nights, and the rooms are subject to a 14.95% DC occupancy tax. Linens are not included, but a linen pack, which includes a pillow, blanket, two top sheets, pillowcase and towels, is available for rent (\$60 for the entire stay).

² Untitled. 1968. *Healdsburg Tribute, Enterprise and Scimitar*, August 15, accessed June 19, 2021, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc?a=d&d=HTES19680815.2.82&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-%252522congressional+internship%252522-----1>.

when I was offered an unpaid congressional internship, I worried about having to decline the offer unless I was able to find affordable housing. Knowing of my predicament, a former supervisor offered her spare bedroom and only charged me \$100 for the entire 9 week stay. I had a chance to pay it forward in 2014, when my cousin told me her sister-in-law needed a place to stay during her summer internship in DC. The moral of this story: Make the offer or make the ask!

Eating in DC

Eating In

Food, whether at the grocery store or in restaurants, tends to cost more in DC. It is generally cheaper to cook or meal-prep at home. Many DC residents often depend on grocery delivery services such as **Peapod, Amazon Prime, Instacart**. Major grocery providers that are easily accessible to DC residents include **Whole Foods, Giant, Safeway, Walmart, Harris Teeter, Trader Joe's, Aldi, Target**. Popular meal delivery services include UberEats, Grubhub, Doordash, Caviar.

Eating Out

In a 2019 article, “Washington Is the Most Exciting Food City in America,” Kate Krader wrote that “the city has a restaurant scene that mirrors its World Series-winning Nationals—a group of underdogs who are fun to watch as they raise their city to championship levels.”³ There is tremendous diversity in the cuisine available in this region at a variety of price points. The *Washingtonian* magazine publishes a list of best budget restaurants in the DC, Maryland and Virginia area (see <https://washington.org/visit-dc/affordable-budget-friendly-cheap-dining-in-washington-dc>). Budget-conscious interns can also take advantage of happy hour specials, periodic Restaurant Week deals, request lunch portions (and prices), or make a meal out of an affordable appetizer or several side dishes.

The restaurants in the Dirksen Senate Office Building and Longworth House Office Building offer some affordable meal options in addition to the opportunity to see senators and representatives dining casually. The American Grill in the basement hallway between the Hart and Dirksen Senate office buildings has daily breakfast specials that can be stretched to last for two meals. These and other restaurants in the House and Senate office buildings are also great places to hang out to people-watch or network. There is also a café in the Supreme Court where many of the justices are known to eat meals. One group of visiting students were happily surprised when Chief Justice Roberts sat at the next table and visited with them while he ate his lunch.

Receptions and Meetings with Meals

Under non-COVID conditions, it's common for think tanks, advocacy organizations and other groups to host meetings that include some type of refreshment. Look for breakfast briefings to get coffee and breakfast carbs. Lunch briefings will often yield a box sandwich lunch, occasionally a hot buffet or plated meal. Evening receptions will also offer lots of food and

³ Krader, Kate. 2019. “Washington Is the Most Exciting Food City in America,” *Bloomberg*, December 17. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-17/washington-d-c-not-nyc-or-l-a-is-the-top-food-city-in-america>.

beverage options. If you linger towards the end and come prepared with some zip-top bags or food containers, you can leave with the leftovers that would otherwise be trashed. After one reception that APSA hosted for their congressional fellows, I walked away with a box of cheese, crackers, fruits, and raw vegetables that became ingredients for several dishes (pasta, meatballs, soup). One of my students left a reception with a bag of sliced ham. Unfortunately, by the time he had walked the few blocks to his apartment, he had finished snacking on the meat. (“I should have gotten more!” he laughed when he told me the story.)

Transportation

There are many options for getting around Washington, DC. The District Department of Transportation (DDOT) provides a [page \(https://ddot.dc.gov/page/getting-around-2\)](https://ddot.dc.gov/page/getting-around-2) with information about all options for local transportation. Migo (<https://www.getmigo.com/coverage/us/district-of-columbia/washington-dc/>) provides rankings of the best on-demand transportation apps for DC.

WMATA U-Pass (<https://www.wmata.com/fares/Student-Programs.cfm/>): The Washington Metropolitan Area Transportation Authority (WMATA) created a program to provide university students with affordable public transportation. Universities contract with WMATA to provide their students with a “U Pass” that allows students to travel on the bus or metrorail for \$1 a day. The pass expires at the end of the term.

Scooters: DDOT has a [list \(https://ddot.dc.gov/page/dockless-vehicle-permits-district\)](https://ddot.dc.gov/page/dockless-vehicle-permits-district) of the companies licensed to provide “dockless vehicles” (scooters) in DC.

Bicycles: DC is a bike-friendly city with dedicated bike lanes throughout the city, and Capital Bikeshare that provides access to 500 bicycle stations in the DC metro area. DDOT provides information about bicycle laws and other resources (maps, parking: <https://ddot.dc.gov/page/bicycle-program>).

Carsharing: For information about companies licensed to provide on-street carsharing in DC see <https://ddot.dc.gov/node/480212>. Zipcars are available in convenient locations around town, giving students options for driving out of town. For instance, it’s possible to rent a Zipcar to go to the Shenandoah Mountains for a weekend trip.

Bringing a car to DC

It can be costly and perhaps inconvenient to bring a car to DC, unless the housing and/or internship are located outside DC. The primary concerns when bringing a personal vehicle to DC are the cost and availability of parking. According to SpotHero.Com, the monthly cost of garage parking ranges from \$150-\$411 at commercial garages around DC.⁴ Street parking in certain areas of DC is limited to 2 hours without a residential permit, but students may be eligible to obtain a Reciprocity Parking Permit (<https://dmv.dc.gov/node/1118916>). Some congressional offices may offer free parking for interns, but this varies by office.

⁴ Based on data accessed April 29, 2021.

Gas stations can be difficult to locate in DC. GasBuddy.com provides a list of top 10 lowest gas prices and best gas stations in DC. AAA reports state average gas prices on their website: <https://gasprices.aaa.com/state-gas-price-averages/>.

Traffic congestion: DC traffic is subject to many challenges such as sudden street closures to accommodate presidential (or other dignitary/VIP) motorcades, accidents, bike lanes, and one-way streets. According to StreetLight Data, a data analytics company [I \(https://inrix.pdmdev.co/scorecard-city/?city=Washington%20DC&index=89\)](https://inrix.pdmdev.co/scorecard-city/?city=Washington%20DC&index=89), Washington, DC is the 12th most congested city in the U.S. with about 29 hours lost in congestion in 2020. Drive times in DC vary depending on the time of day, so an eight-mile drive without traffic might take 20 minutes, but 45 minutes with traffic. In Northern Virginia, the state has instituted congestion pricing on its toll roads to allow drivers to pay a toll to avoid congested roads.⁵

Budgeting & Finances

According to [Expatistan \(https://www.expatistan.com/cost-of-living/index/north-america\)](https://www.expatistan.com/cost-of-living/index/north-america), the cost of living in Washington, DC makes it the 4th most expensive city in the United States behind Mountain View, CA, New York City, and San Francisco. Use the sample budget worksheet in section 13.6 to help plan your income and expenses during your DC internship.

Cost of Living

Students can use a cost of living calculator to compare their existing costs with expected costs in Washington, DC. For example, BestPlaces.Net's calculator (<https://www.bestplaces.net/cost-of-living/>) includes an estimate of cost differences for food and groceries, and miscellaneous expenditures like restaurant meals, prepared food, dry cleaning, cosmetics, and haircuts.

Sales Tax

Sales taxes in DC range from 6% on tickets to theaters and entertainment venues, to 10.25% on baseball tickets at Nationals Park and events at the Capital One Arena. There is also an 8% tax on soft drinks and a 10% tax on restaurant meals.⁶

⁵ Schaper, David. 2017. "Are \$40 Toll Roads The Future?" *NPR*, December 12, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/12/570248568/are-40-toll-roads-the-future>.

⁶ Office of the Chief Financial Officer. "DC sales and use tax", accessed June 19, 2021, <https://cfo.dc.gov/page/tax-rates-and-revenues-sales-and-use-taxes-alcoholic-beverage-taxes-and-tobacco-taxes>.