

Understanding the Experiences of Parenting Students & Their Families



Parenting students work hard every day to pursue their goals, often juggling work, classes, and caregiving responsibilities. Public systems and programs can provide critical support, but frequently create additional hurdles for parenting students and their families—especially those with low incomes. In 2022, the Center for the Study of Social Policy and Project SPARC conducted research to better understand the barriers experienced by parenting students participating in CalWORKs, California’s cash assistance program for families with children.

This fact sheet highlights findings from the research on who parenting students are and their experiences navigating public systems. Often sole caregivers, parenting students are extremely driven to achieve their career and academic goals—frequently seeing their educational pursuits as a step toward creating a better life for their children. But the lack of holistic supports, including inadequate or inaccessible supports to help meet basic needs, are significant barriers for parenting students as they work toward their educational certificates and degrees.

“Students always say, ‘I want to do this for my kids, [and] ‘I want to make things better for my kids’... [but] the things that our students have to overcome just to go to school, they shouldn't have to in this country.”

—LILY, A CALWORKS ADVISOR AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN THE BAY AREA

Understanding the Experiences of Parenting Students & Their Families

While parenting students participating in CalWORKs may have access to supports for child care, transportation, or housing, they often still struggle to afford necessities and manage their competing responsibilities as they pursue higher education and juggle CalWORKs requirements.

MEET ADRIANA, A MOM OF THREE AND A STUDENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA:



“ I can't afford to live in California without stressing about money constantly... I'm grateful, don't get me wrong... I just worry about the little one. I mean, she's as tall as me. When she grows, it's just like, 'We have to get you clothes again.' [and] it's an issue. So, when expenses come up, [CalWORKs] is not enough... So, I got a job as well. But the demand of the job, school, and the two children... I quit

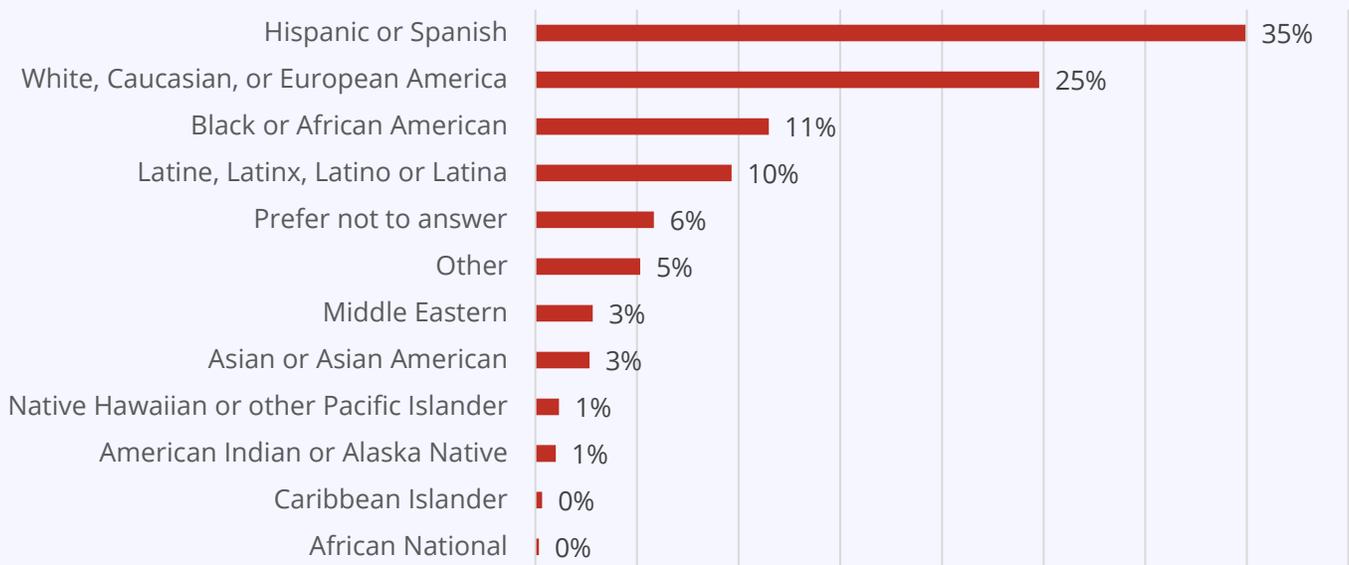
after like three days, which was a really hard blow to my self-esteem, because I could always keep a job in the past... It is hard to get it all together and coordinate. My calendar is full of commitments that I have to make, because if [I don't], then I will lose participation in a program, or another program won't fund me. Or if I don't send out that letter in time, then my rent's not coming... That fear, it keeps you up at night. That fear of insecurity, and of what could happen. And it's just not me, it's others that I'm responsible for. It's a lot.”

Understanding the Experiences of Parenting Students & Their Families

Who are parenting students?

Our survey of 688 parenting CalWORKs students, fielded in July 2022, found that parenting students are diverse and experience common struggles.

SURVEY REPRESENTS A DIVERSE GROUP OF PARENTING STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN CALWORKS



When asked, "How do you identify by race/ethnicity?"

n=601

Many parenting students are multilingual.



43%

of parenting students in the survey report speaking a language other than English at home.



74%

of parenting students in the survey who report speaking another language at home report that they speak Spanish.



Understanding the Experiences of Parenting Students & Their Families

The vast majority of parenting students in CalWORKs identify as female.

Public systems create barriers for all parenting students, despite their gender, that make it more difficult to pursue their goals—though these barriers may be experienced in different ways.



91%

of parenting students in the survey report identifying as female.



Most parenting CalWORKs students are sole caregivers—meaning they alone are responsible for managing their households, including everything between finding child care, to paying bills, to making family dinners. Being a sole caregiver is already difficult, and is made even more challenging for those who are in school and working.



74%

of parenting students report that they “provide all care responsibilities” and do not share caregiving responsibilities with anyone.



3 in 4

That means almost three in four parenting CalWORKs students are on their own to take care of their children.



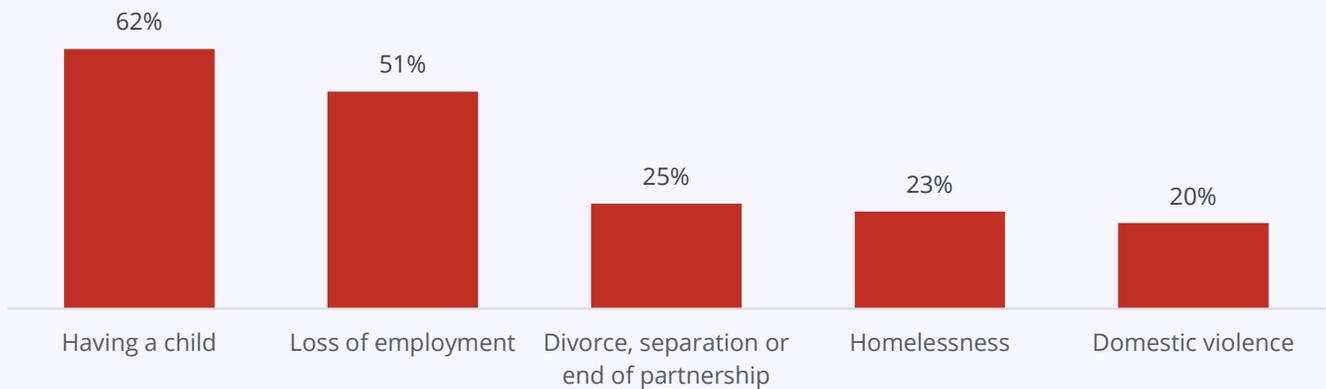
Understanding the Experiences of Parenting Students & Their Families



Parenting students have often experienced significant adversity but are driven to continue their education to improve their employment prospects and provide a better life for their children and families.

CalWORKs cash assistance supports parenting students and families during difficult transitions. Most families enroll in CalWORKs because of the birth of a child or loss of a job.

TOP FIVE REASONS PARENTING STUDENTS ENROLL IN CALWORKS



When asked, "Please select any of the following that contributed to why you enrolled in CalWORKs: (check all that apply)"

n=651

Parents enroll in community college because they want to better support their families, utilize their lived experience to help their communities, and find jobs that match their interests.



49%

of parenting CalWORKs students say they enrolled in community college to find employment in a new field or sector.

PARENTING STUDENTS' RESPONSES ON WHY THEY ENROLLED IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

- “ I really want to set an example for my son [and] provide a better life for him.”
- “ I want to help people [like me] who are suffering from abuse to not be stuck anymore.”
- “ I want to discover what [jobs] I'd be happy with that I can sustain myself and my family on.”

Understanding the Experiences of Parenting Students & Their Families

As they continue their education, however, parenting CalWORKs students too often face significant hurdles.

Many parenting students struggle to meet their families' basic needs. Even parenting students who are enrolled in CalWORKs and receiving cash assistance may struggle to afford necessities, both because cash benefit levels are low and other supports for which they are eligible can be difficult to access. But the systems are frequently difficult to navigate and riddled with time-consuming administrative barriers, leading to many parenting students reporting that the supports are inaccessible. When it is difficult for families to afford housing, transportation or child care, it can directly impact parenting students' mental health as well as their performance in college.

Parenting students often report that CalWORKs benefit levels are inadequate for their families' needs.

“Benefit amount is basic. It's just barely [enough to] meet the basic stuff. The prices and everything have really gone up. I'm not saying it's not helpful... but [the cash aid is] really basic for that.”

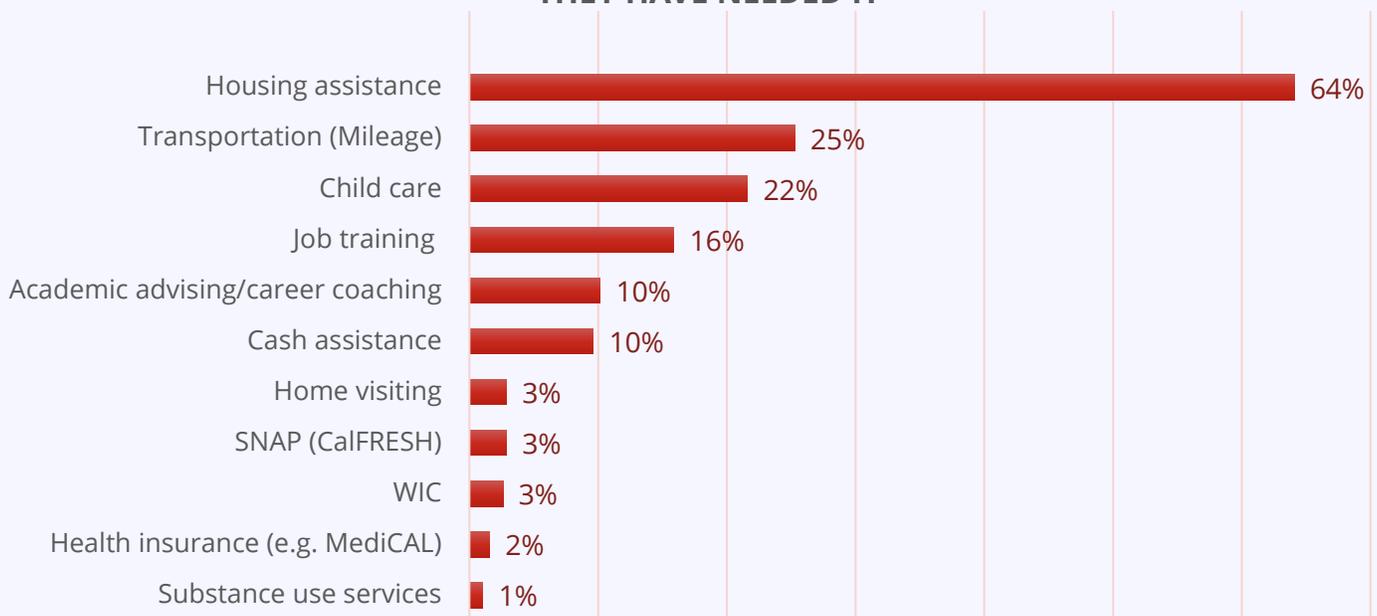
— MARJAN, A MOM OF TWO AND A STUDENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



Understanding the Experiences of Parenting Students & Their Families

Despite being connected to CalWORKs, parenting students often report being unable to access supports, which is a result of complex and time-consuming administrative barriers in public systems.

PARENTING STUDENTS REPORT THAT SUPPORTS FOR HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION, AND CHILD CARE HAVE BEEN INACCESSIBLE WHEN THEY HAVE NEEDED IT



Understanding the Experiences of Parenting Students & Their Families

As parenting students balance their competing responsibilities and navigate systems that are not designed to work well for them, they often experience increased stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges that make it difficult to continue their education—especially sole caregivers.

“ You're in survival mode all the time... you're always thinking, 'Okay, if this happens, we got to do this.' Especially being a single parent because who am I going to fall back on? I always tell my kids, 'You could fall back on me... I'm always going to be here for you,' because I don't have that. I turn around, there's just my shadow. I got to depend on myself.”

—MELISSA, A MOM OF THREE AND A STUDENT IN INLAND EMPIRE

Altogether, these struggles make it more difficult for parenting students to focus on their education, often leading parents to drop courses or take a leave from school.



45%

have dropped a course in the last year because of child care challenges.



28%

have dropped a course in the last year because of housing challenges.



26%

have taken a leave from school because of mental health challenges.

Understanding the Experiences of Parenting Students & Their Families

Many parenting students are so focused on surviving day-to-day that they are unsure how they will achieve their longer-term goals, such as transferring to a four-year institution after graduation.



58%

of parenting students report that they anticipate transferring to a four-year institution after graduation.



28%

of parenting students report that they are not sure yet whether they will transfer to a four-year institution after graduation.

“ I honestly have no idea [what to expect when I transfer]. My classmates who are transferring to a different university have the same consensus. We're all lost, but we're doing it.”

— GRACE, A MOM AND A STUDENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



Understanding the Experiences of Parenting Students & Their Families



WHAT'S NEEDED NEXT

So they can pursue their education and career goals, parenting students need administrative barriers to existing supports to be removed, and they need supports to be expanded.

“ I realized I was feeling burnt out. All the paperwork I have to do every month with CalWORKs. You have to do your student activity, you got to fill out the log for daycare. You need to do your transportation log, all the homework. It was a lot coming at me.”

— JESSICA, A MOM TO A YOUNG DAUGHTER AND A STUDENT IN CENTRAL COAST

About the Research

In 2022, the CalWORKs Association's Project SPARC—a cohort of parenting CalWORKs students from California community colleges—partnered with the Center for the Study of Social Policy to co-design research to better understand the barriers experienced by parenting students participating in CalWORKs. In the spring and summer of 2022, SPARC and CSSP conducted in-depth interviews with 40 parenting CalWORKs students and 20 community college CalWORKs staff, as well as fielded a survey of 688 parenting CalWORKs students. Data in this series of briefs are products of the research. The research found that while parenting CalWORKs students are highly motivated, they too often struggle to achieve their goals because public systems are not designed to meet families' needs and create barriers to their success.

*Copyright, the Center for the Study of Social Policy.
Permission to reprint is not required, provided that proper citation of CSSP is used.*

Suggested Citation:

Kaverman, Ellie. "Understanding the Experiences of Parenting Students and Their Families." Center for the Study of Social Policy and California Community Colleges CalWORKs Association, April 2023. Available at: <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Understanding-the-Experiences-of-Parenting-Students-and-Their-Families.pdf>

