

Housing is a Barrier for Parenting Students



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 brief highlights findings from the research on parenting students’ experiences with housing. Housing is foundational for all families. Without it, parenting students cannot focus on their long-term plans. But many families report not having stable housing or being unhoused for long periods, making it impossible to achieve economic security. The lack of affordable housing and the lack of housing assistance are significant barriers as parenting students work toward their education and career goals.

“ You have to have a place [to live] in order for your kids to go to school, in order for you to go to school. You can't go to school if your kids aren't in school and in a stable home.”

— ALYSSA, A MOM TO A SIX-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER AND A STUDENT IN INLAND EMPIRE

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Affordable housing is extremely difficult to find in California, and many families have experienced being unhoused in the past year. Families were considered unhoused if they were unable to secure adequate housing, leading to staying at a shelter, staying with friends or family, or on the streets.



24%

of parenting students report that they have been unhoused within the last year.

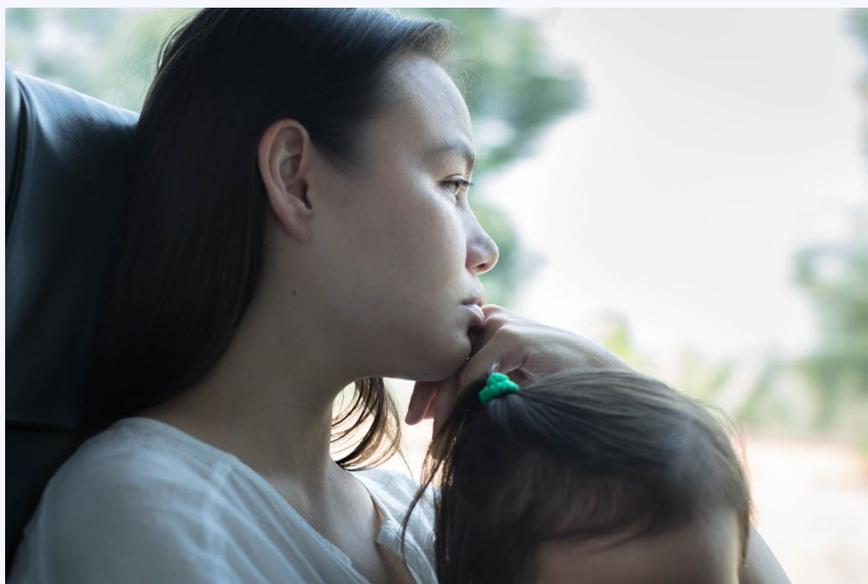


1 in 4

That's nearly one in of every four parenting CalWORKs students who have been unhoused within the last year.

“Typically, every semester I have one or two parents that are sleeping in their car... [Being unhoused] is not uncommon.”

— LINDA, A CALWORKS ADVISOR AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



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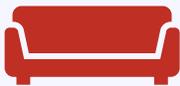


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When asked about current housing arrangements, many parents also reported being in unstable housing arrangements or being unhoused.

Overall, when asked about current housing arrangements, 51% of parenting students report that they rent on their own, 23% rent with others, 11% live with family permanently, and 3% own a home.

A large share of parenting students report that they currently live in temporary or short-term housing arrangements, including 7% who report living with family temporarily or couch surfing, 2% in a shelter, 2% on the streets, and 1% in transitional housing.



7%

report currently couch surfing or temporarily living with family.



2%

report currently living on the streets.



2%

report currently living in a shelter or temporary housing.



1%

report currently living in transitional housing.



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Those who live with family or rent with others are considered “securely housed” by the traditional definition but would often still prefer to live independently. However, they simply cannot afford to live independently.

Many rent a single room for their family in a home—occupying a bedroom or living room and sharing a kitchen, bathroom, and other facilities with roommates.

“When I was living [at my grandparents’ home], it was my grandparents, my mom in one room, and me and my daughter in another. Almost everybody is multi-generational [here] because [housing] is such a problem. Nobody can afford to live on their own... if you’re not fortunate to have a family member that owns a home who can give you a room, that’s a big problem.”

— JESSICA, A MOM OF A THREE-YEAR-OLD AND A STUDENT IN CENTRAL COAST



23%
of parenting students report that they and their children currently rent with others.



11%
of parenting students report that they and their children currently live with family on a permanent basis.

For those who do rent an apartment or house on their own, many report that most of their income goes toward housing. Parents frequently spend nearly all their monthly CalWORKs cash assistance on rent.

Raven was almost ready to buy her own home when she lost her job during the pandemic. Now, as she goes back to school to get a better job, she finds herself paying penalties to take money out of her retirement account just so she can put a roof over her families’ head: “I only get like \$659 a month [for cash aid], but my rent is a \$1,010. So, I’m constantly having to dig into my savings to cover rent and utilities... But [this] was the only thing available in a safe neighborhood... There’s no income I keep for ourselves. It all goes directly to rent.”

— RAVEN, A MOM OF AN ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD AND A STUDENT IN SOUTHERN SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY

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Many parenting students are living temporarily in hotels, either paying out-of-pocket or using hotel vouchers available through CalWORKs. This assistance is critical for families but is not a long-term housing solution.

Some families live in hotels or motels because they can't save up enough to cover the start-up costs of renting, such as security deposits and beds and other basic furniture, and others because the regular costs of rent and utilities are too high. The hotel vouchers available through CalWORKs are an enormous help, but they can only be used for short periods: up to 16 days per year for most families, or 32 days for domestic violence survivors. Living in a hotel or motel is better than many alternatives, but it is nonetheless difficult for families, as it makes everyday life more challenging, from preparing food to commuting to their children's school or child care providers.



“ CalWORKs gives me hotel vouchers, so I've been in and out of hotels using that... I actually applied for Section 8 two years ago. But, it's a 10 year wait list [and] I haven't moved up the list... So it's been about a year since I've [been living in hotels] ... Sometimes I have to pay for it by myself, sometimes they pay for it... But it's not stable housing at all.”

— WHITNEY, A MOM OF A TWO-MONTH-OLD AND A STUDENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

“ We ended up in a motel. Saving up for an apartment was not achievable. The hotel rates were outrageous, and we were at a pretty cheap hotel. The [hotel] discounted a lot, and it was still expensive. I would contact apartments, and we would never have enough. We barely had enough to survive... With the hotel if you don't pay, you'll get kicked out. You can't save up [to rent an apartment] ... All that money's going towards the [hotel], and you get stuck.”

— MIRANDA, A MOM OF TWO AND A STUDENT IN CENTRAL COAST

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Despite the clear need, three in four parenting CalWORKs students are not receiving housing assistance.



75%

of parenting CalWORKs students report that they are not currently receiving any housing assistance, including a Section 8 voucher, public housing, rent controlled building, income restricted housing (LIHTC), rental assistance from a community organization, or transitional housing.

“The Section 8 is really hard to get into... And even low-income housing that I've seen, it's the same thing. You're waiting for years, it's hard to even get your name on the waiting list. And sometimes you're on the wait list, and then they're like, 'Okay, you didn't qualify.'”

— SELENA, A MOM OF THREE AND A STUDENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



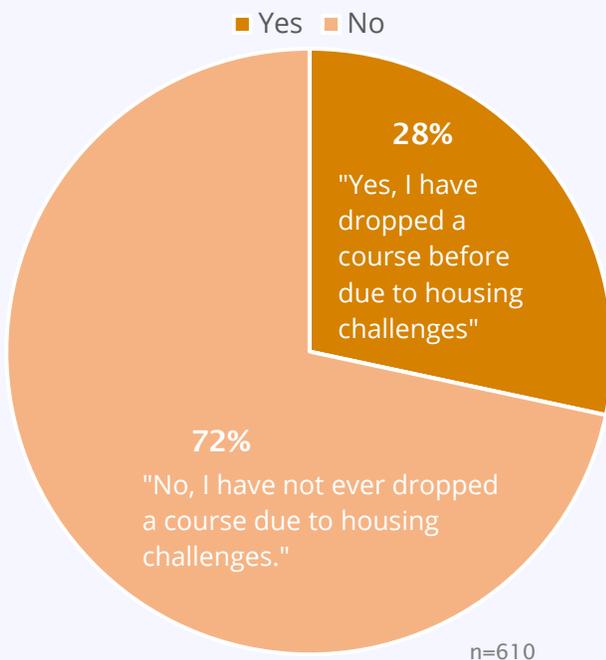
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Housing instability can have a ripple effect on families' lives, making it significantly more difficult for parenting students to stay in school and finish their education and career plans.

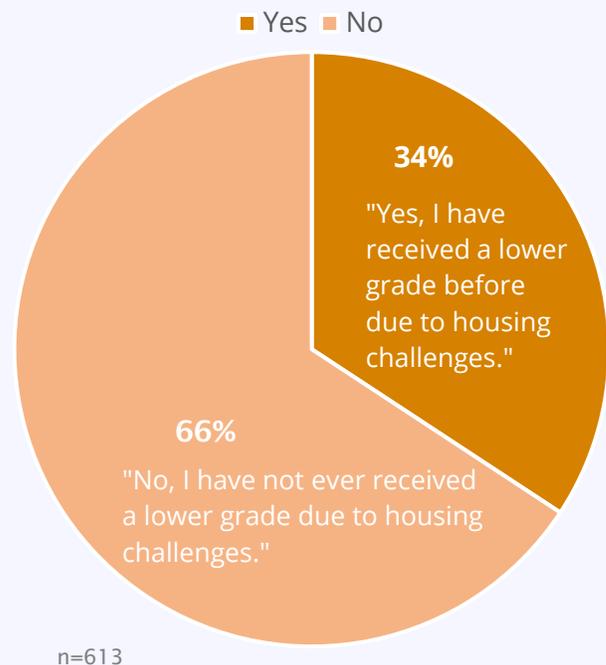
MORE THAN A QUARTER OF PARENTING CALWORKS STUDENTS REPORT HAVING DROPPED A COURSE BECAUSE OF HOUSING CHALLENGES



When asked, "Have you ever dropped a course due to housing challenges?"



A THIRD OF PARENTING CALWORKS STUDENTS REPORT HAVING RECEIVED A LOWER GRADE IN A COURSE DUE TO HOUSING CHALLENGES



When asked, "Have you ever received a lower grade in a course due to housing challenges?"

“Your housing is your foundation. So, if you're on a wobbly foundation, then everything's wobbly.”

– KEISHA, A CALWORKS ADVISOR AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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WHAT'S NEEDED NEXT

Parenting students need access to more affordable and stable housing, as well as expanded assistance so they can pursue their goals.

“ I signed up for classes in the fall. But then we got kicked out of our house and I didn't know what was going on, so I had to drop them all. Then the following semester, we got into the transitional housing... When we got into that, I signed up for classes during the spring... So, things started working out better after that.”

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

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 from across California. 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.

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