

BLACK WOMEN HAVE MADE MAJOR GAINS IN HIGHER EDUCATION, BUT BLACK SINGLE MOTHERS STILL STRUGGLE TO ATTAIN DEGREES

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Two-thirds (65.7 percent) of Black women in higher education attended community college.
- About three-fourths (73.8 percent) of Black mothers who attended a community college are single mothers.
- Two-thirds of Black single mothers (66.3 percent) who attended a community college are first-generation students.
- Over two-thirds (69.4 percent) of Black single mother students did not earn a certificate or degree within six years of enrollment.
- Three-fourths (74.7 percent) of Black single mother students say that they could not come up with \$2,000 within the next month.

INTRODUCTION

Earning a college degree is a major pathway to economic mobility (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019; Tamborini, Kim, and Sakamoto, 2015). Although Black women enter college at higher rates than white, Hispanic, and Black men (for example, in 2020, Black women enrolled in college at a 40% rate, compared to 37% for White men, 31% for Black men, and 30% for Hispanic men) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), they still face barriers to degree completion, such as limited financial resources and mounting student debt (Huelsman, 2019).



Two-thirds (65.7 percent) of Black women and three-fourths (74.6 percent) of Black single mothers in higher education attended community college (IWPR analysis of 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data). Although most Black mothers in community college are single (73.8 percent), little is known about the educational experiences of this group.¹ Therefore, this fact sheet focuses on Black single mother community college students, a population of students that has been largely overlooked in research and policy. This fact sheet presents new analyses of postsecondary educational data (e.g., NPSAS² and Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS)³) on Black student mothers who are single. The analyses show that Black single mother students experience several barriers to degree attainment, including “time poverty” (or a struggle to balance work, school, and family), lack of access to quality, affordable childcare, and limited financial resources.

This fact sheet aims to provide college leaders, student parent advocates, and policymakers with data to better understand the landscape for Black single mother students on a national level and prompt considerations for racial and gender equity and investments in institutional resources and supportive services.

Black Single Mothers in Higher Education

Most Black Single Mother Students Enroll in Community Colleges.

Two-thirds (65.7 percent) of Black women in higher education attended community college (IWPR analysis of 2016 NPSAS data). Among those, about three-fourths (73.8 percent) are single mothers (IWPR analysis of 2016 NPSAS data). Black single mothers' high community college enrollment rates may be due to the perception that community colleges are more affordable, the belief that these institutions will provide more flexibility to meet their work and childrearing needs, and/or a lack of access to information on the broad array of college options (Patton, Copridge, and Sharp, 2022; Perkins, 2015).

Most Black Single Mothers in Community Colleges are First-generation College Students.

Two-thirds of Black single mothers (66.3 percent) who attended a community college are first-generation⁴ students (IWPR analysis of 2016 NPSAS data). Black single mothers' high likelihood of being first-generation reflects the systematic discrimination and exclusion that Black women have faced in higher education throughout history (Patton and Croom, 2016). First-generation college students face increased financial pressure as they are less likely to receive financial support from parents, disproportionately come from ethnic and racial minority backgrounds, have lower levels of academic preparation, and can find it challenging to navigate the college system for the first time, which can lead to them feeling socially isolated and affect their ability to complete their degrees (Engle and Tinto, 2008). These challenges demonstrate how the intersecting identities of Black single mothers shape their college experience (Mason, 2010).

Barriers to Educational Success for Black Single Mothers

According to IWPR analysis of 2017 BPS data, over two-thirds, (69.4 percent) of Black single mothers did not earn a certificate or degree within six years of enrollment. Additionally, almost half (43 percent) of Black single mothers have some college credit but no degree, which shows that, overall, they have low attainment rates (Hensley, White, and Reichlin Cruse, 2021). Research suggests that Black single mothers experience barriers to college success such as limited financial resources, lack of access to quality affordable childcare, and the challenge of balancing work, school, and family responsibilities by themselves (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Malik and Hagler, 2016; Reichlin Cruse and White, 2021). These hurdles can result in Black single mothers enrolling in fewer courses or even interrupt their continued enrollment, which ultimately affects the time it takes them to complete their degrees (Juszkiewicz, 2016). If Black single mother students cannot find quality, affordable childcare and lack the financial resources to pay for school and provide for their families, balancing their many responsibilities becomes ever more challenging, making their pathway to degree completion difficult.

Black Single Mother Students Have Limited Financial Resources.

While many student parents receive financial aid and scholarships, obtain public assistance, and apply for emergency aid, these resources are not always available or sufficient to meet their needs (Contreras-Mendez and Reichlin Cruse, 2021). For instance, it is difficult for student parents to receive public assistance, as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA, also known as welfare reform), which President Bill Clinton signed into law in 1996, removed education as an eligibility criterion for benefits. Single mothers have since found it difficult to both work and go to school, all the while meeting the stringent requirements to receive welfare benefits (Johnson, 2010). For example, most states prevent the entire family from receiving benefits if a parent does not meet work requirements, which makes it difficult for single mothers to enroll in college programs (Congressional Research Service, 2016; 2023).

Black Single Mother Students Lack Access to Quality, Affordable Childcare.

Childcare worker shortages, rising costs of care, lack of care at nontraditional hours, and the inability to access licensed care all contribute to a mounting childcare crisis that has disproportionately impacted Black mothers (Smith and Reeves, 2021). Of Black single-mother students, four out of five (78.7 percent) had children 12 years old or younger (IWPR analysis of 2016 NPSAS data). Unfortunately, campus childcare has declined by nearly 25 percent over the last two decades (Reichlin Cruse, Richburg-Hayes, Hare, and Contreras Mendes, 2021), leaving Black single mother students with fewer options to have their needs met in an already resource-starved student service area. The high percentage of Black single mothers with young children who require care demonstrates a heightened need for access to reliable, high-quality, affordable childcare.

Black Single Mother Students Struggle to Balance Work, School, and Family.

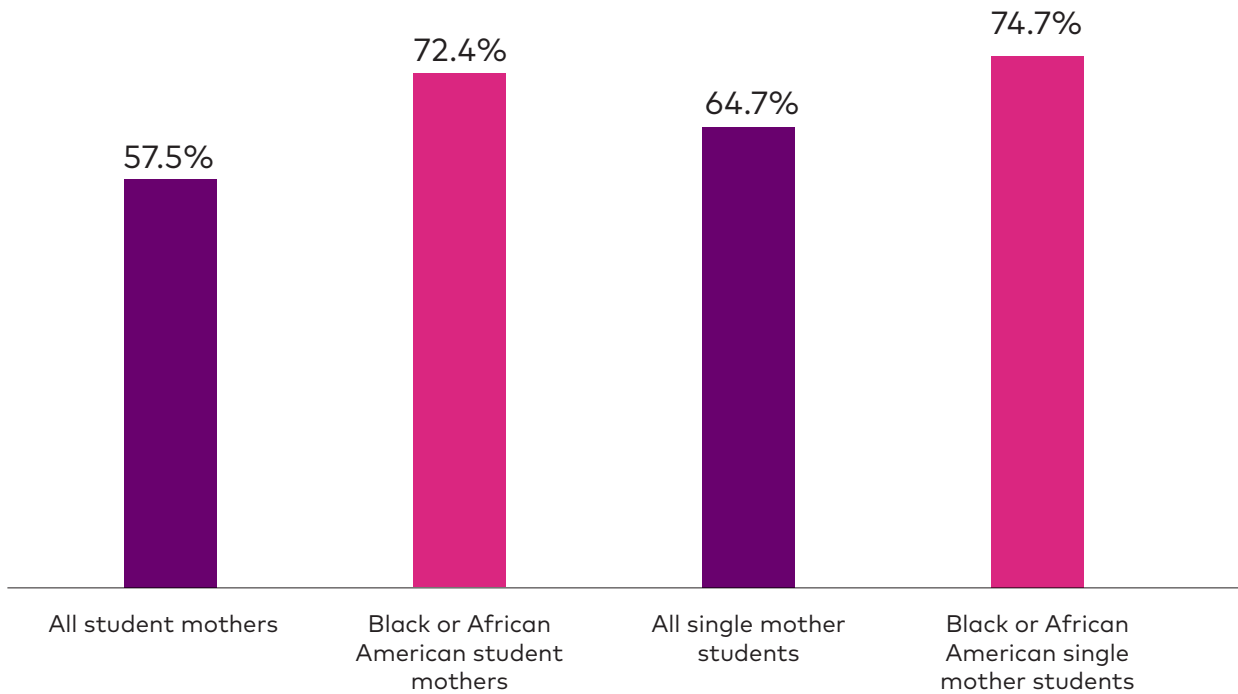
Student parents, generally, experience "time poverty," namely, they do not have enough time to complete their everyday responsibilities (Contreras-Mendez and Reichlin Cruse, 2021). Single mothers who are full-time college students spend nine hours per day, on average, caring for their children and doing housework (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2018). In addition to childrearing and housework, Black single mother

students typically must work more hours to make ends meet because as parents they incur higher costs of living than traditional college students and have limited financial resources. Almost three-fourths of Black single mothers (71.7%) work between 21 and 40 hours per week (IWPR analysis of 2016 NPSAS data), which exacerbates their time poverty. Working over 20 hours per week in college increases the likelihood of dropping out and can also reduce time for school and socialization (Choi, 2018).

Black Single Mother Students Carry a Heavy Financial Burden.

Research shows that Black student parents hold more student debt than other student parents and nonparents of any other racial or ethnic background (Reichlin Cruse, Holtzman, and Gault, 2019). Black student mothers (and fathers) are also more likely to struggle to repay their loans than other student parents (Dundar, Tighe, and Turner, 2023). IWPR analysis of 2016 NPSAS data shows that three-fourths (74.7%) of Black single mothers say that they probably or certainly could not come up with \$2,000 in the next month compared to 57.5% of all student mothers (IWPR analysis of 2016 NPSAS data; see Figure 1). Limited financial resources coupled with a heavy student debt load make completing a college degree challenging for Black single-mother students.

FIGURE 1. Share of Student Mothers Who Probably or Certainly Could Not Come Up with \$2,000.



Source: IWPR analysis of 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Equity-Focused Policies Are Necessary to Promote the Educational Attainment of Black Single Mothers

Attaining a college degree is key in promoting social and economic mobility. Although Black women have historically succeeded in higher education due to their own fortitude (Patton, Copridge, and Sharp, 2022), it is time for higher education leaders and policymakers to provide structural supports and services to attain college degrees. Removing barriers to degree attainment for Black single mothers will be particularly crucial in helping them provide for themselves and their families. Advancing equity in attainment for Black single mothers in college will also require centering their voices and experiences in higher education, so that college administrators and state and federal policymakers develop a keen understanding of the barriers impacting their educational attainment. IWPR's forthcoming report on Black single mother students' experiences in community college (based on results of a qualitative study that is currently underway) will include specific policy recommendations for how lawmakers and higher education leaders can help this student population achieve equity in degree attainment.

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Notes

¹ Single includes those who are widowed, divorced, or not married.

² IWPR analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. < <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/>>.

2016 data was the most recent available at the time of this writing.

³ IWPR analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study. < <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/bps/>>.

2017 data was the most recent available at the time of this writing.

⁴ We are defining first-generation as students whose parents had no college degree.

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