

The Facts on Student Parents in Higher Education

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Overview

[One in five](#) undergraduate students and about [one in four](#) graduate students are parents. This amounts to over 4 million college students with children in the United States. Student parents face [higher expenses](#) than their peers, namely for child care and housing and typically work full or part time while enrolled in school. Supporting parenting students through degree completion is a key strategy to protect federal and state investments in higher education and meet workforce needs.

Key Challenges

- **Lack of institutional support and resources designed for student parents:** Many higher education institutions do not collect data on parenting status and are unaware of [how many student parents are enrolled](#). This can leave campuses unequipped to support student parents or proactively connect them to services like help finding and affording child care
- **Financial aid:** Parenting students face higher non-tuition costs than other students, making them likely to borrow more in student loans
- **Child care access and affordability:** Half of undergraduate student parents have at least one child under 6, but many [struggle to find affordable, quality child care](#) options. Only an [estimated 1%](#) of eligible families are supported by the federal Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program and an estimated [13% of eligible student parent families](#) receive Child Care and Development Fund subsidies
- **Basic needs insecurity:** Parenting students face [high risk of homelessness](#) and experience food insecurity at higher rates than non-parenting students (28.7% vs. 21.2%, 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey data). Parenting students face more than double the rates of food insecurity than the general population ([13.5%](#)).

Policy Goals

- **Collect Data on Student Parents:** Policies that encourage or mandate data collection to understand parental status can lead to higher education institutions designing a more family-friendly higher education environment through policies and resources to support parents. Some states, for example, [Texas](#) and [Oregon](#), have mandated higher education institutions to collect data on parental status.
- **Restore and Protect the Pell Grant's Purchasing Power:** Policymakers should increase the maximum Pell Grant award to better reflect the full cost of attending college, including tuition, fees, housing, books, and other essential living expenses. Nearly 75 percent of undergraduate student parents work in addition to school. About half are enrolled part time and need financial aid programs that are accessible to students who may take one or two classes each semester.
- **Strengthen federal investments in food and basic needs security:** Student parents are more likely than the general public to face food insecurity. [Addressing essential needs](#) for parenting students and their children through programs like SNAP and Medicaid can help them on the path to degree completion, ultimately becoming more economically independent. Anti-poverty programs also contribute to positive health, education, and economic outcomes for their children.
- **Ensure child care affordability and access for student parents:** Increasing funding for child care programs including CCAMPIS, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, and Head Start can all support parenting students' access to affordable, quality child care that enables them to work and succeed in school. Offering guidance to states encouraging the prioritization of student parents within Child Care and Development Fund subsidy programs and clarifying education and training as an allowable eligibility activity could also strengthen access to child care assistance.
- **Require that student parents are notified of resources:** Policies that ensure student parents are notified by their institution of resources like child care services, leave of absence policies, and other accommodations can help student parents complete their credentials while prioritizing their families. Student parents who wish to have additional children can benefit from knowing what leave options and accommodations are available to them.