

Meeting Basic Needs is a Challenge 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 meeting their basic needs, including securing housing, child care, transportation, and taking care of their physical and mental health. The high costs of meeting basic needs and inadequate and inaccessible government assistance creates barriers for parenting students as they pursue their educational certificates and degrees.

“

If I didn't have to worry about [my family's] basic needs... then I would be in a better frame of mind to pursue my goals.”

— DEREK, A FATHER TO A YOUNG SON AND A STUDENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Meeting Basic Needs is a Challenge for Parenting Students

The daily struggle to meet basic needs makes it difficult for parenting students to achieve their goals for themselves and their families.

In our interviews and survey of parenting students participating in CalWORKs, most reported difficulty meeting one or more basic needs—including housing, child care, mental health, and transportation. For many parenting students, these struggles to meet basic needs can compound each other.

For example, some parenting students explained that because stable housing is unaffordable, they are unhoused or live in a motel room with their children, which in turn makes it more difficult to cook food they can purchase with their CalFresh, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), benefits—leading to food insufficiency. Others shared how they have difficulty finding a child care provider they trust or a health care provider who takes Medi-Cal, and ultimately have to travel long distances for care—straining their transportation budgets as they pay more for public transportation or gas and upkeep on their cars. As these challenges compound, it makes it more difficult for parenting students to pursue their goals for themselves and their families.



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Difficulty meeting basic needs directly impacts parenting students' progress in school. Parents report that child care, housing, health, and transportation challenges lead them to drop courses or leave school entirely.

Child care

“If I had child care, I would be much more readily available in school, and I would do well.”

— DEREK, A FATHER TO A YOUNG SON AND A STUDENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



45%

of parenting students report having dropped a course because of child care challenges.

Housing



24%

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

We define “unhoused” to include staying at a shelter, staying with friends or family temporarily, and/or living on the streets.



28%

of parenting students report having dropped a course because of housing challenges.

“[Parenting students] have to take less school because they don't have a place to live... You have to have a place 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 YOUNG DAUGHTER AND A STUDENT IN INLAND EMPIRE

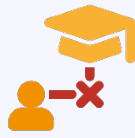
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Mental and physical health



26%

of parenting students report having taken a leave from school because of mental health challenges.



22%

of parenting students report having taken a leave from school because of physical health challenges.

“ I am the breadwinner, so mixing that with a full-time load of class was extra difficult. Making sure that my son gets the programs that he needs for his disability... I have a disability [too]. All my life, I didn't know it was a disability for me until a doctor diagnosed me... That was a challenge as well, trying to get the right specialist.”

— ISAIAH, A FATHER TO A YOUNG SON AND A STUDENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Transportation



“ I tried in 2017 to go to college and I just did not make it, so I withdrew all my classes the first semester. This time around, I stuck it through and it was a lot better... [Back then], I was taking the bus to get to school. I had a night class that my husband would have to take the bus to meet me at the bus stop just so I could get home... We have a car now, so I'm able to get to school by myself. If it's an hour class, the commute isn't taking three hours. Because you take the bus, you wait an hour, you go for your hour and a half [of class], and then you come back and there's another hour.”

— CLARISA, A MOM OF TWO AND STUDENT IN SOUTHERN SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY

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Parenting students' challenges meeting basic needs are a result of inadequate supports and services for families with low incomes.

Some parenting students report that the CalWORKs' cash assistance, while helpful, is not enough to cover the costs of meeting their basic needs.



33%

of parenting students report that the CalWORKs cash benefit was "not enough" to meet their family's monthly needs.



50%

of parenting students report that the CalWORKs cash benefit was enough to meet "some" but not all of their family's monthly needs.

ONLY 16 PERCENT OF PARENTING STUDENTS SAY THE CALWORKS CASH BENEFIT MEETS "ALL" OF THEIR FAMILY'S MONTHLY NEEDS.

“I don't know what I would be doing without [the cash aid] just because I am struggling. If it wasn't for [the cash aid], I feel like I wouldn't have a place to live... I feel like it's not enough, but I'm thankful for what we do get.”

— AMBER, MOM OF THREE AND A STUDENT IN CENTRAL COAST

Other supports for parenting students exist but are difficult to access. Some benefits, such as housing assistance, have long wait lists, while others, such as child care and transportation, are riddled with administrative barriers that can make it difficult to sign up for.



64%

of parenting students report that they could not access housing assistance when they needed it during the last year.



25%

of parenting students report that they could not access transportation assistance when they needed it during the last year.



22%

of parenting students report that they could not access child care assistance when they needed it during the last year.

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Supports are difficult to access in part because public systems are difficult to navigate.

Parents describe time-consuming paperwork to apply for and maintain critical assistance, and confusing rules and regulations.

“ The thing is the government, if you apply for one program, they have every single information about you. Why can't they share? Why do have to go through those huge paperwork every single time for every single department? ... It's time consuming. I have my kids, I have to be there for them, for their schooling, for my work, for my studies and everything. But unfortunately, that system is really time taking. If you miss one thing, it goes back to the zero. You have to start all over. It's really frustrating for people like us.”

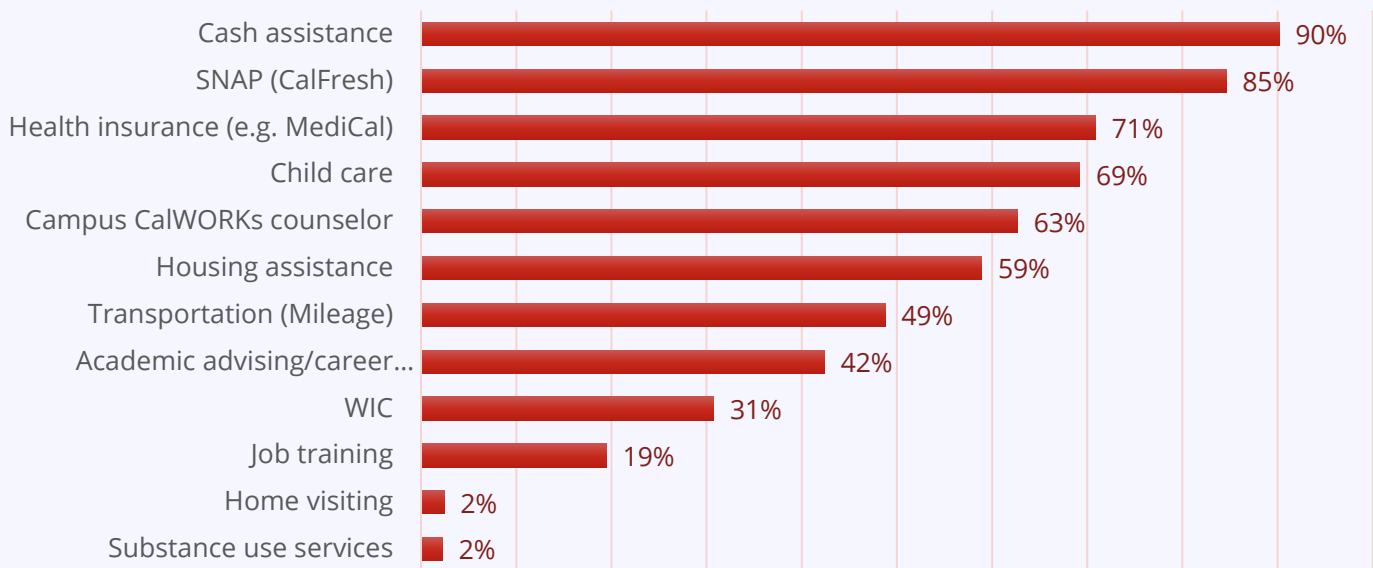
— MARJAN, A MOM OF TWO AND STUDENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



Meeting Basic Needs is a Challenge for Parenting Students

When looking to the future, many parents hope to one day transfer to a four-year institution, but many are uncertain whether they will have the support necessary to do so.

PARENTING STUDENTS WHO PLAN TO TRANSFER TO A FOUR-YEAR REPORT THEY NEED CONTINUED AND EXPANDED SUPPORT FOR BASIC NEEDS



n=611

When asked, "If you plan to transfer to a four-year institution after graduating from community college, what supports do you think you will need in order to pursue your goals? (Select all that apply)"



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WHAT'S NEEDED NEXT

Parenting students need expanded supports for meeting their families' basic needs so they can pursue their education and career goals.

“Students always say, ‘I want to make things better for my kids...’ And so when you are living in a shelter or in your car, the shame that comes with that, the stress that comes with that, it's overwhelming and impacts the family... the things that our students have to overcome just to go to school, they shouldn't have to in this country, not with the resources... And it's just because of systems.”

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

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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