

Public Systems Create & Compound Mental Health Challenges 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 how public systems too often cause and exacerbate stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges for parenting students and their families. While parenting students persevere in order to support their children and pursue their goals, these systemic problems slow their progress and undermine their health and well-being over the long term.

MEET KATY, A MOM OF TWO AND A STUDENT IN THE BAY AREA:

Katy lives with her two daughters in the Bay Area and is working toward a career in the legal field. She and her daughters are domestic violence survivors, and she shared that her goal is to ensure that her children are “safe and happy.” On top of her caregiving responsibilities and studies, Katy works 20 hours a week and spends time and energy trying to meet requirements to maintain her CalWORKs cash assistance. The competing responsibilities take a toll. **As Katy explained, “I actually do counseling, and my counselor tells me all the time, ‘Something’s got to give. You’ve got to stop being stressed out,’ but yeah, it’s just what I have to do right now.”**

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Parents report that administrative requirements in CalWORKs and other economic supports exacerbate stress, anxiety, and depression, as they come on top of their other responsibilities as parents and students.

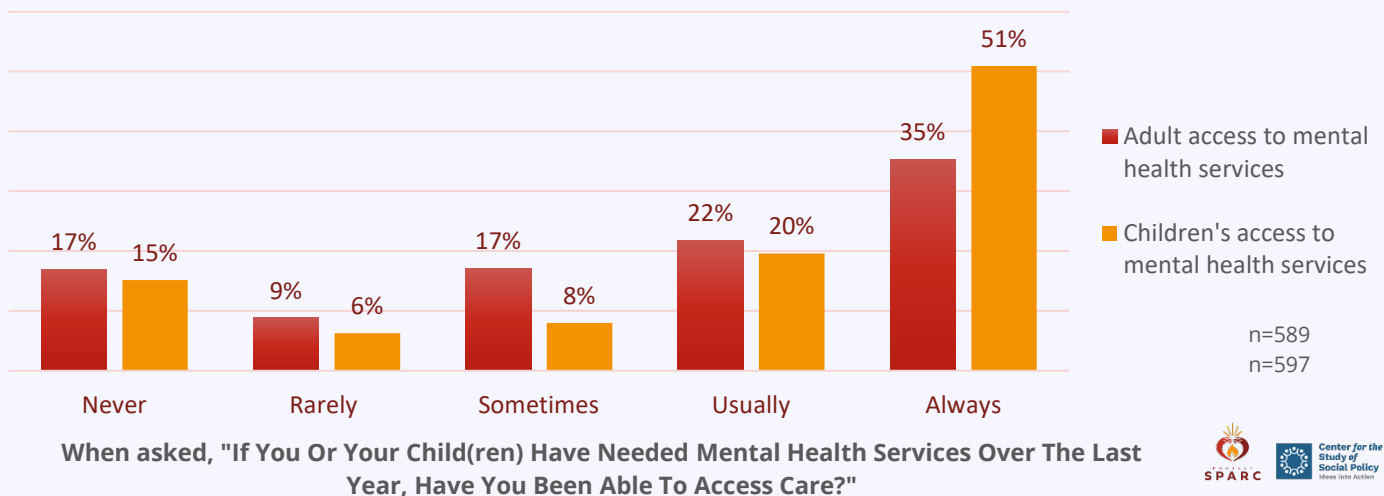
“ Trying to maintain a good GPA with the work study, and then all the requirements for CalWORKs and other programs that I'm in, it's a lot to handle. Sometimes, I just want to take a nap all day... It obviously takes a toll on [my mental health]. It's a lot of work, a lot of stress. I feel like there's a lot of weight on my shoulders.”

—JACKIE, A MOM OF TWO AND A STUDENT IN THE BAY AREA



Nearly all families participating in CalWORKs have health insurance through Medi-Cal, but many struggle to access mental health services.

BARRIERS PERSIST FOR APPROXIMATELY A QUARTER OF PARENTING STUDENTS & A FIFTH OF THEIR CHILDREN WHO "NEVER" OR "RARELY" RECEIVED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES WHEN NEEDED



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For families who have experienced trauma—from domestic violence to the loss of a parent—the need for mental health services is especially acute.

For some, intervening public systems such as immigration were the cause of initial trauma, and the failure of public systems to adequately support individuals and families experiencing trauma exacerbated their mental health challenges.

“ My husband was deported, so it just flipped our world upside down... It's emotionally draining. It is. We all have our good days and bad. My middle one's really suffering with anxiety. She misses her dad. "Mommy, I miss my dad. And the day is too long. I want to be with you." So, I had to get her a therapist.”

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

“ When I look at my son, his father's currently incarcerated, and what the father did, he no longer has contact with us... And that breaks my heart, because he knows his dad, he was in home with the dad, and now there's no home with dad, and he's a Black young boy, and just keeping his head straight, pushing him towards school, and getting him the help he needs, [while] making sure that my head and emotions are kept in check, looking forward to finishing school and looking at that career goal... If I fail, if I do not have myself together, he's not going to be together.”

— RAVEN, A MOM TO A YOUNG SON AND STUDENT IN SOUTHERN SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY

“ This year I turn 32... I went back to school this year. I was in school before. I went through domestic violence. Before that, I lost a partner, my boyfriend. He was murdered. I wasn't able to finish school around that time, so it dropped my GPA. Almost eight years after not going to school, I'm coming back into school. It's definitely... it's a little harder.”

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

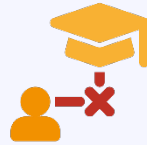
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Ultimately, mental health challenges like stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma can make it more difficult for parenting students to pursue their education and career goals.



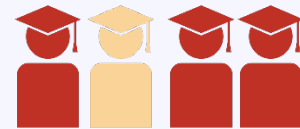
27%

of parenting students report having dropped a course before because of mental health challenges.



26%

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



1 in 4

That means one in four parenting CalWORKs students have had their education plans disrupted because of mental health challenges.

“ I push and push and push... I don't remember the last time I slept for six hours straight. When I do that a lot, my body [is] just like, 'Nope.' So, at that point, I'm [not] even be able to think anymore... I'll open my class note, but my eyes will be blank, I just won't see anything.”

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



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WHAT'S NEEDED NEXT

Parenting students need to be able to access mental health services when they need them, and for as long as they need them. Policymakers should improve access to mental health services, and reduce the stressors and administrative burdens associated with government assistance, so that they do not exacerbate mental health challenges in the first place.

“ I’ve been going to the gym after work. I pick up my daughter, drop her off at home with my cousin... then I’ll go to the gym for an hour. I go and focus on myself and clear my mind and think about everything I have to get done. And then once I get home, it’s like, okay, back to [it], I upload assignments and do this or that, whatever I need to do for the county... it’s just, it’s a lot.”

— GABRIELA, A MOM TO A YOUNG DAUGHTER AND 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 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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