

College Students Who Are Parents

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Students who are parents face unique challenges when pursuing their degree. Not only do they have to juggle student demands, but also continue to raise their family. There is limited research, however, on student parents pursuing higher education at four-year institutions. Research on student parents is often difficult and underreported by institutions which makes it a challenging and unique area that deserves more attention (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010).

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) (2018) found that more than one in five college students (22%) of all undergraduate students are parents. This exploratory study focuses on three distinct aspects of these students' lives: (a) financial well-being and behaviors; (b) food insecurity; and (c) academic outcomes.

A non-random sample of 300 students between the ages of 18 and 29, currently enrolled at a four-year institution, and with at least one minor child was collected by Qualtrics. These students represented 234 different colleges/universities in thirty-nine states as well as six foreign countries. 78.7% were female, with 21.3% male, with a mean age of 24.58 years (SD = 3.09). Just under half were married (41.6%), with 44.6% single/never married; 9.5% were cohabiting. Nearly half were employed fulltime (45.9%), with 18.4% employed 26 – 39 hours per week, and 11.5% employed less than 25 hours per week. Number of financially dependent children ranged from one to seven, with a mean of 2.58 (SD = 1.75).

To determine financial well-being, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's Financial Well-Being Scale (<https://www.consumerfinance.gov/data-research/research-reports/financial-well-being-scale/>) was used. Respondent's in this study had a mean financial well-being score of 48.74 (SD = 10.07). Respondents participated in the following public benefits in the previous 12 months: WIC (34.1%); TANF (8.5%); SNAP (40.3%); Head Start (17.4%); Medicaid (46.6%); free/reduced school lunches (34.1%); Earned Income Tax Credit (34.4%); and housing assistance (17%). Forty-three percent said they took out additional student loans to pay for both tuition and family expenses.

This study used USDA's U.S. Household Food Security Survey Model (<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/survey-tools/>) to determine the respondent's household food security. Findings show that the sample had high food insecurity (17.7% ranked high food security, 10.9% marginal food security, 29.8% low food security, and 41.7% very low food security). An example of low food security is that the size of meals were reduced or skipped because there wasn't enough money for food.

Their academics were also affected in various ways that were related to being a parent. About 61% did not buy a textbook or other class resources, 56.4% missed a class, 67.5% dropped a class, 55.4% took few classes than they wanted to, and 63.3% took a semester off. About 64% indicated that being a parent made earning their degree either extremely difficult (19.7%) or somewhat difficult (43.9%).

With such a large population of the student body being parents, it is important for colleges/universities to take their unique situations into account when developing curriculum and student services. Results from

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this study show that college students who are parents face unique challenges related to financial well-being, food insecurity, and academic performance. Educational program and institutional policies should be developed with student parents in mind to assist them in making informed decisions regarding various aspects of their personal and academic lives.