

# Student Parents Combine Studying, Working, and Public Programs to Support Their Families While in School

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Millions of parents enroll in higher education to pursue an economically secure future for their families. When student parents graduate, they reap economic benefits for their families and for society alike. But many student parents struggle financially while in school, putting their graduation—and those economic gains—at risk.

In this brief, we use novel, nationally representative data to investigate patterns of employment and use of public programs to shed light on how parenting students support themselves and their families while in school. We find that many student parents struggle financially on their path to graduation and its promised economic security, despite working—largely full-time. We also find that many student parents use public human service and workforce programs.<sup>1</sup> The most commonly utilized supports include free or reduced-price school lunch for students' children, Medicaid for health care needs, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for working parents, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Student parents' utilization of programs varies by their work and marital status.

We conclude with policy and practice recommendations for higher education and public program administrators, and for policymakers to improve parenting students' experiences with public programs.

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*I juggle the demands of single parenthood, two jobs, and a challenging degree program. I am constantly overwhelmed, but I keep going because I believe education is the key to a better future for my family. Still, I often wonder how much more I could achieve—how much more I could focus on my studies—if I had access to reliable food assistance, affordable child care, and genuine understanding from the systems that claim to support students like me.*  
***Student parents are not seeking handouts. We are working tirelessly to break cycles, build brighter futures, and set powerful examples for our children.”***

— **Fatou Sy**, single mother pursuing a bachelor’s degree in cybersecurity at Austin Community College, and a member of this project team

## Introduction

Millions of parents enroll in higher education<sup>2</sup> to pursue a more economically secure future for themselves and their families. When they graduate, those dreams are frequently realized: Single mothers who graduate with an associate degree earn more than \$250,000 more over their lifetimes than their peers without degrees, and single mothers who graduate with a bachelor’s degree earn \$625,000 more than single mother high school graduates. Further, every single mother who graduates with an associate or bachelor’s degree contributes \$71,400-\$220,000 more to taxes over their lifetime and saves the nation \$25,600-\$40,000 in reduced spending on public programs over their lifetimes.

Unfortunately, many student parents<sup>3</sup> do not make it to graduation to reap these rewards. Despite earning grades on par with or better than their peers without children, just 17 percent of first-time undergraduate student parents graduate with an associate or bachelor’s degree within six years, compared to more than half of their peers without children (author’s calculation based on Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study Postsecondary Education Transcript Study). Student parents cite the high costs of postsecondary education and parenting as significant barriers to their educational success. Indeed, parenting students face higher living expenses—including child care and housing—than their classmates without children and less than 10

## Who are student parents?

In the 2019-2020 school year, 3.1 million undergraduate students were parents caring for dependent children. Parenting students make up 18 percent of undergraduate students (or about one in five).<sup>a</sup>

Student parents are incredibly diverse, featuring a range of genders, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and ages. Nearly three quarters of parenting students are female (74%). Students of color make up the majority of parenting students, and Indigenous and Black students are most likely to be parents. Parenting students tend to be older than their peers without children, with an average age of 34.

Many student parents enter higher education at a social and financial disadvantage: About half (48%) of student parents are first-generation college students and more than one third (35%) live below the poverty line.

<sup>a</sup> This description of student parents draws on existing analyses of the latest nationally representative data on students enrolled in higher education during the 2019-2020 school year, from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS). These data differ from those presented in the rest of the brief because they are based on different timepoints and data collection methods. For more information, see Appendix 1.

percent receive support from their families when paying for college. And, when students face basic needs insecurities like food or housing insecurity, they are less likely to graduate.

When students start college but do not graduate with a credential, they do not gain the same benefits as they would from graduating—and they may be worse off financially than they started if they leave school with student loan debt.

In this brief, we investigate how parenting students meet their basic needs and support themselves and their families while in school, focusing in particular on employment and public human service and workforce programs (“public programs”).<sup>a</sup> Specifically, we look to answer the following questions

1. What are student parents’ work patterns?
2. How do student parents use public benefits programs?
3. How do student parents combine school, work, and public programs?

We then discuss implications of our findings for both higher education and public program administrators.

## Methods

The new analyses presented in this brief are based on the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) and the American Community Survey Supplemental Poverty Measures Research Files (ACS SPM Research Files). We focus on undergraduate and graduate college students who live with their own child(ren) under age 18. The main text focuses on undergraduate students. Parallel information for parents enrolled in graduate/professional programs can be found in Appendix 2. All analyses are weighted to be representative at the national or state levels. See Appendix 1 for full details on the methodology.

# What Are Student Parents’ Work Patterns?

**More than three quarters of undergraduate student parents are employed, most of them full-time.**

The vast majority of undergraduate student parents are employed (see Figure 1). Seventy-seven percent of undergraduate student parents reported working in the past week. Generally, student parents tend to work full-time: 65 percent of all undergraduate student parents reported regularly working at least 30 hours per week.<sup>b</sup> These trends of high work intensity parallel recent

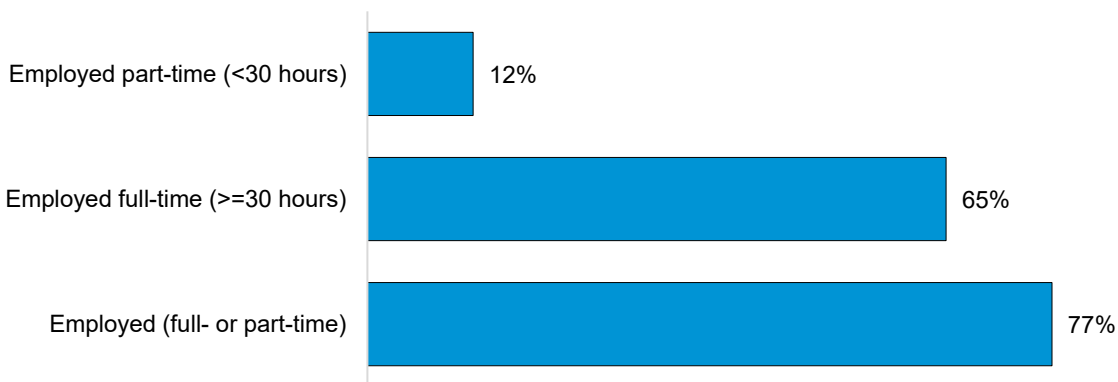
<sup>a</sup> Student parents may also rely on financial aid, credit cards, or family support to support themselves while in school, but that information is not available in the data used for this brief.

<sup>b</sup> There is no national definition of full-time work, and employers can define it themselves. However, the Internal Revenue Service and the Affordable Care Act consider 30 hours/week to be full-time. When using an alternative definition of 40 hours per week, we find that 53 percent of student parents were employed full-time and 23 percent part-time. The ACS does not ask about intensity of school enrollment, so we do not know whether students are enrolled in school part-time or full-time.

survey results from student parents across the country, which found that, in Fall 2024, **63 percent of surveyed employed student caregivers** considered themselves as “a worker that goes to school” rather than “a student who works.” For parallel information on graduate students, please see Appendix 2.

FIGURE 1

**More than three quarters of undergraduate student parents work, most full-time**  
Percent of undergraduate student parents working, by work intensity



**Source:** American Community Survey 2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org).

**Notes:** Student parents are defined as parents who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 and are enrolled in undergraduate college programs. Full-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working 30 or more hours per week over the past year. Part-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working less than 30 hours per week over the past year.

## The vast majority of student parents work or have a spouse who works.

We also examined student parents’ spouses to more fully understand what resources are available to support their persistence in higher education. Specifically, we examined whether student parents are married and, if so, whether their spouse works.<sup>c</sup>

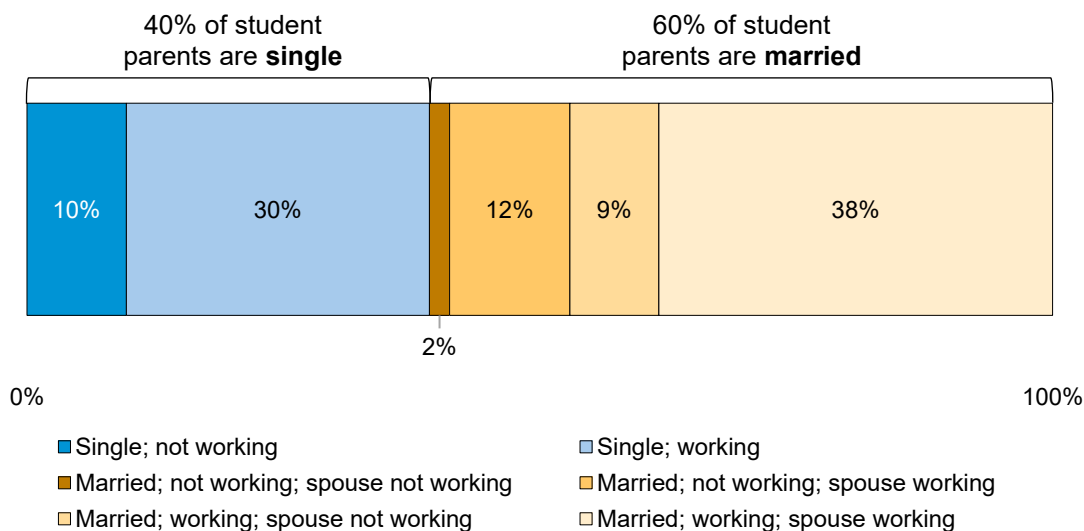
We found that about 60 percent of student parents are married (see Figure 2). The largest two groups of student parents live in households that maximize available parents’ work: 38 percent of student parents are married and both they and their spouse work; an additional 30 percent are working single parents. In about 20 percent of households, student parents are married and either they or their spouse works (but not both). Taken together, the vast majority of student parents (88%) work or have a spouse who works.

<sup>c</sup> In this brief, we focus on married and unmarried student parents due to data limitations in identifying cohabitation. The ACS only allows identification of cohabitating couples if one of the cohabitating people is the head of household. For consistency, all unmarried cohabiting couples are considered single in this analysis. We recognize this as a limitation.

FIGURE 2

## The vast majority of student parents are employed or have a spouse who works

Percent of undergraduate student parents in different family work arrangements



**Source:** American Community Survey 2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org).

**Notes:** Student parents are defined as parents who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 and are enrolled in undergraduate college programs. Full-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working 30 or more hours per week over the past year. Part-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working less than 30 hours per week over the past year. The ACS only allows identification of cohabitating couples if one of the cohabitating people is the head of household. For consistency, all unmarried cohabitating couples are considered single in this analysis.

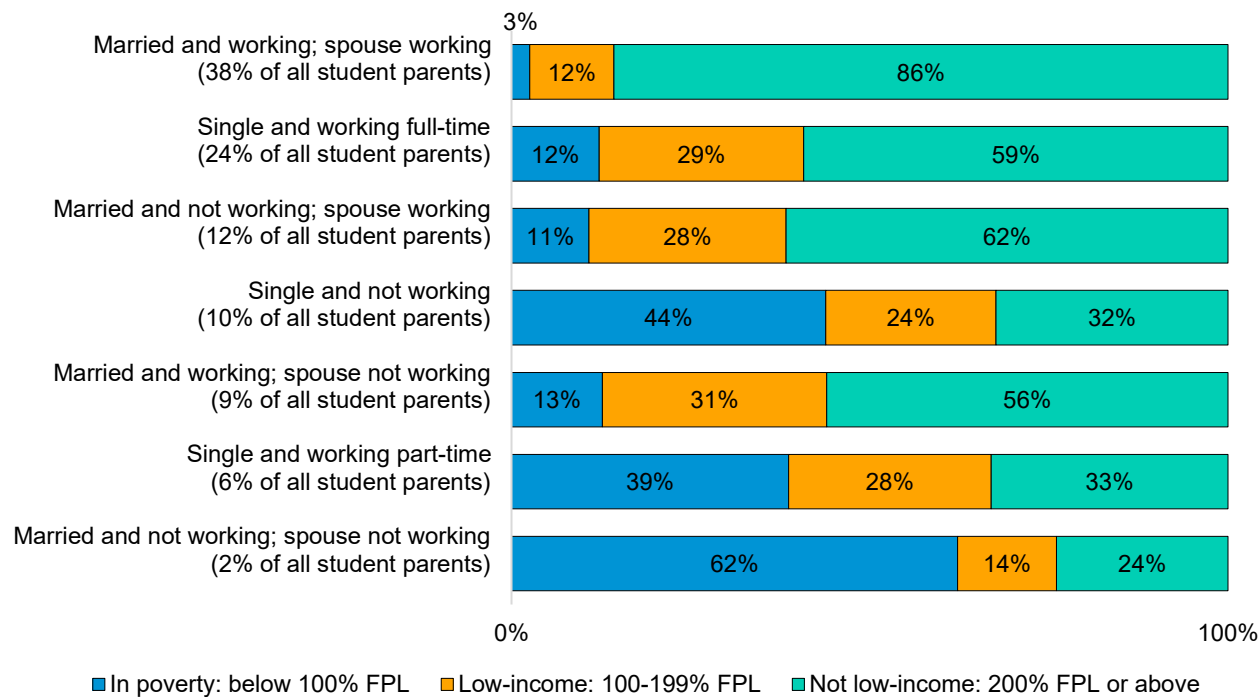
## Despite working, many student parents live in poverty or in households with low incomes.

Even though the vast majority of student parents and/or their spouses work, many of these families have insufficient incomes to make ends meet and live in poverty (income less than \$30,900 for a family of four with two adults and two children in 2023) or in households with low incomes, defined as those below 200 percent of the federal poverty line (FPL; income less than \$61,800). Fourteen percent of all student parents live in poverty and 36 percent have incomes less than twice the poverty line. Student parents who are single and not working full-time—along with those who are married and neither spouse is working—are especially likely to live in poverty or households with low incomes (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

### Many student parents live in poverty or in households with low incomes

Percent of undergraduate student parents with incomes below the poverty line or below 200 percent of the poverty line, by family work arrangements



**Source:** American Community Survey 2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org).

**Notes:** Student parents are defined as parents who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 and are enrolled in undergraduate college programs. Full-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working 30 or more hours per week over the past year. Part-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working less than 30 hours per week over the past year. The ACS only allows identification of cohabitating couples if one of the cohabitating people is the head of household. For consistency, all unmarried cohabiting couples are considered single in this analysis.

## How Do Student Parents Utilize Public Human Service and Workforce Programs?

Many undergraduate student parents live in households that utilize public programs, the most common of which are school lunch for their children, Medicaid, EITC, and SNAP.

We took an inclusive approach to examining public program usage that goes beyond what the field has traditionally considered to be financial supports that help with college access. We

examined whether anyone who lives in households with student parents uses any of the following public programs, which include supports for parents, their children, and (potentially) other household members: National School Lunch Program (school lunch); Medicaid; the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP or Food Stamps); Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); housing subsidies; welfare/cash assistance; or energy subsidies. Unfortunately, data on child care subsidies and financial aid for education are not available in the data used in this analysis, so they are not examined here.

The most common public programs used by households with student parents are free or reduced-price school lunch (for K-12 student children of student parents), Medicaid, EITC, and SNAP (see Figure 4).

Just over half of student parents (53%) live in households that participate in school lunch, a program that operates differently than the other programs examined here due to community eligibility. Families' eligibility for school lunch may be based on either their own household income or [community eligibility](#), a provision that schools or districts may adopt to offer free meals to all enrolled students in areas with high levels of poverty.

## A Quick Primer on Public Human Service and Workforce Programs

Throughout this brief, we use “public programs” to refer to a wide range of government economic supports, including cash or near-cash benefits and in-kind supports. This brief specifically examines the following programs:

**National School Lunch Program (school lunch):** [This program](#) provides low- or no-cost lunches to children through their school or residential child care institution. Children are eligible if they are from families with low incomes, if their school or school district is in a low-income area and participates in the Community Eligibility Provision, or if their [state has adopted universal free school meals](#).

**Medicaid:** [Medicaid](#) provides health insurance coverage to eligible adults with low incomes, children, pregnant women, elderly adults, and people with disabilities. Forty states and the District of Columbia have [adopted Medicaid expansion](#), which extends eligibility to adults with incomes up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level.

**The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC):** The [EITC](#) provides support to working parents and caregivers in the form of a refundable tax credit. Recipients must have earned income and file taxes to be eligible to receive the EITC.

**Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly “food stamps”):** [SNAP](#) provides monthly benefits to purchase food for families and individuals with low incomes.

**Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC):** [WIC](#) provides free healthy foods, breastfeeding support, nutrition education, and connections to community resources for pregnant, recently pregnant, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children under age 5.

**Housing subsidies:** [Housing subsidies](#) provide support to people with low incomes to make housing costs more affordable; they are typically offered by federal, state, and local programs. Housing assistance tends to come in the form of vouchers to individuals or families or public housing.

**Welfare:** Welfare programs provide cash assistance to families with low incomes. Respondents were specifically asked to report on “any public assistance or welfare payments from the state or local welfare office.” These could include payments from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or other programs.

**Energy subsidies:** [Energy subsidies](#) provide assistance to reduce the cost of energy payments, including home energy bills, energy crises, weatherization, and minor energy-related repairs.



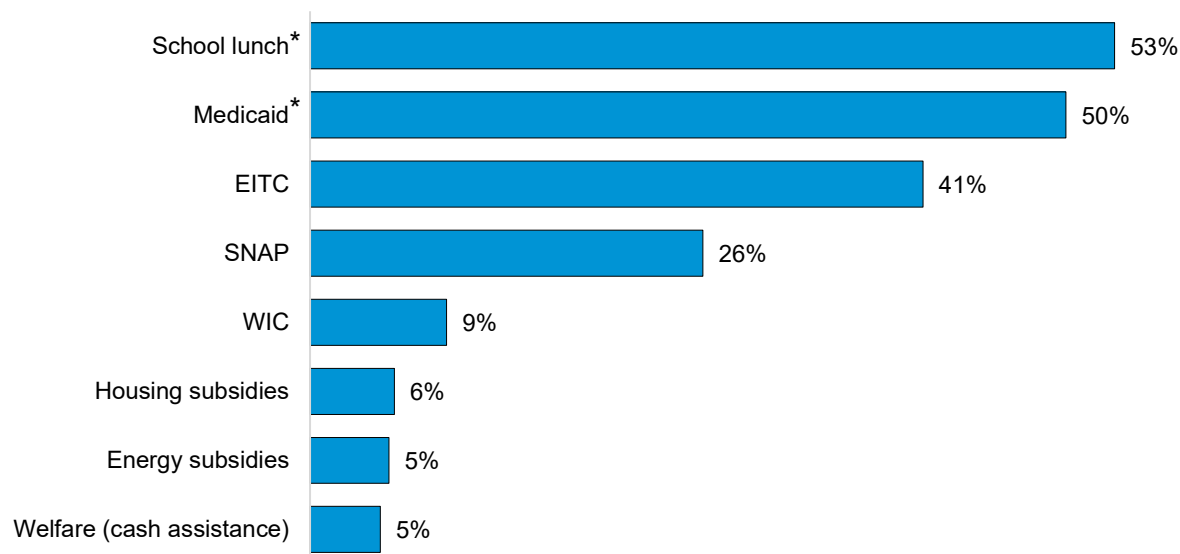
Fifty percent of student parents live in households in which someone relies on Medicaid to cover their health care needs. Thirty percent of student parents themselves have Medicaid and 47 percent live with children who are covered by Medicaid.<sup>d</sup> Medicaid is a very common health insurance option for children in the United States; nationally, about 36 percent of all U.S. children under age 19 are covered by Medicaid.

About four in 10 student parents live in households that are estimated to receive the EITC, a tax credit for low- and moderate-income workers. One in four live in households in which someone receives SNAP. Less than 10 percent of student parents are estimated to utilize WIC, housing subsidies, welfare/cash assistance, or energy subsidies.

FIGURE 4

**The most common public programs used in households with student parents are school lunch (for K-12 students), Medicaid, the EITC, and SNAP**

Percent of undergraduate student parents living in households estimated to utilize public programs, by program



**Sources:** American Community Survey 2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org) and U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Supplemental Poverty Measure Research Files, Filedate: April 16, 2025, Accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/supplemental-poverty-measure/acs-research-files.html>

**Notes:** Student parents are defined as parents who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 and are enrolled in undergraduate college programs. Data for Medicaid and welfare (defined as "any public assistance or welfare payments from the state or local welfare office") come from the ACS. The ACS SPM Research File contains data on additional public programs that have been imputed based on the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC), including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing subsidies, National School Lunch Program (school lunch), energy subsidies, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants (WIC), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Data on financial aid and childcare subsidies are not available in these data.

\* We will not be including school lunch and Medicaid in the figures moving forward.

<sup>d</sup> These two numbers are not mutually exclusive. A parent could receive Medicaid even as their child(ren) also receive it. Additionally, another adult in the household could receive Medicaid. This estimate of parenting students enrolled in Medicaid may be higher than pre-pandemic or current numbers. In early 2023, after a temporary [policy of continuous enrollment](#) due to the COVID-19 public health emergency, states began a lengthy process of disenrolling individuals from Medicaid who were no longer eligible or who did not complete the renewal process.



When looking at overall participation across programs, we examined the EITC, SNAP, WIC, housing subsidies, welfare/cash assistance, and energy subsidies. We did not include Medicaid or school lunch in our examination across programs because they work in fundamentally different ways than the other programs. Medicaid provides in-kind medical benefits that a recipient may or may not ever use, unlike the other programs. For school lunch, the children of student parents may be eligible for school lunch based on their family's income, based on their community's income if their locale has adopted the Community Eligibility Provision, or based on the state in which they live, as [multiple states had adopted universal free school meals](#) by 2023.

Half (51%) of undergraduate student parents are estimated to live in households in which someone utilizes at least one of the following public programs: the EITC, SNAP, WIC, housing subsidies, welfare/cash assistance, and energy subsidies.

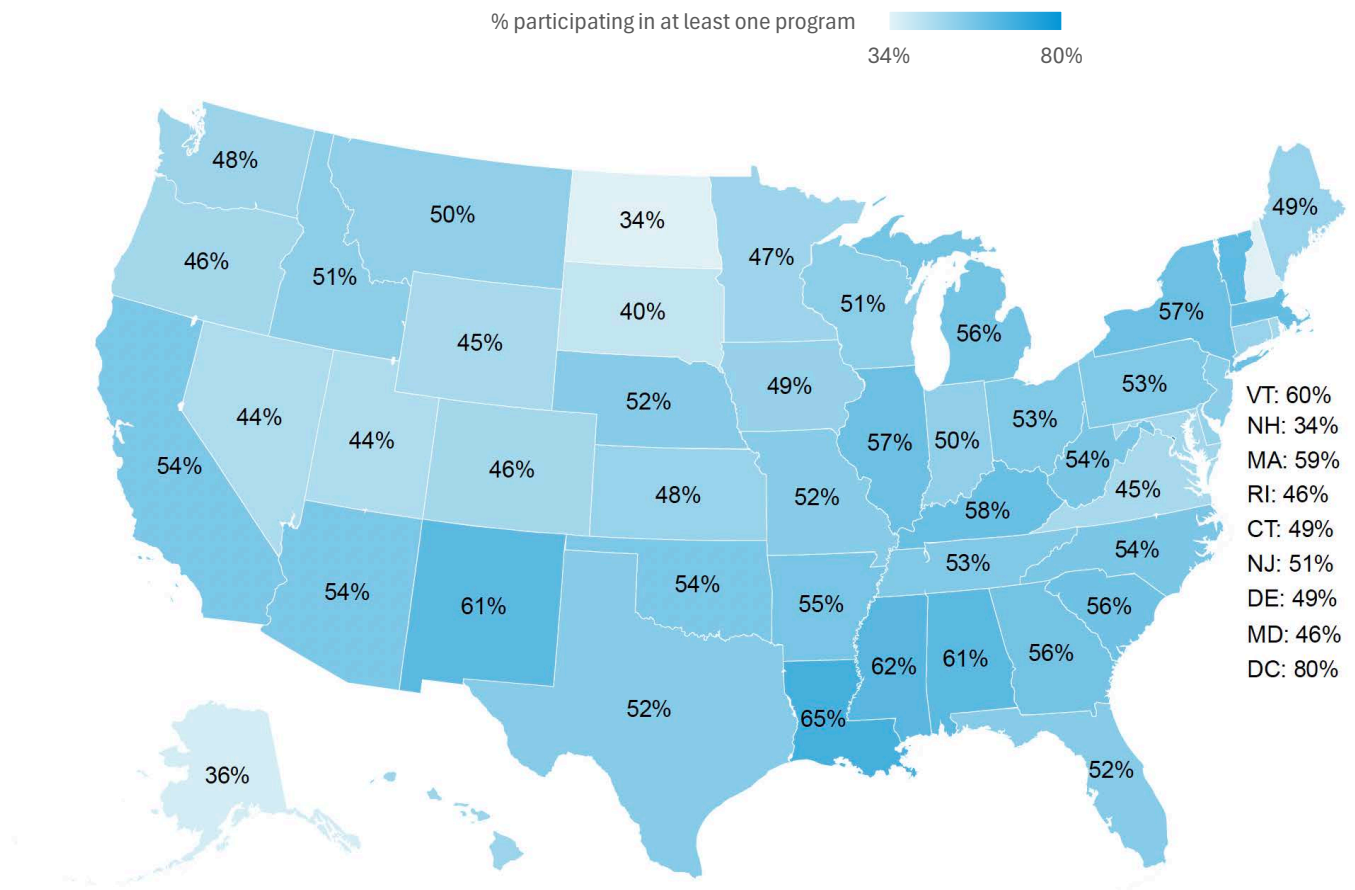
## **Student parents' utilization of public programs varies by state.**

In our analysis, student parents' participation in public programs varied across states, from 34 percent participating in at least one public program in New Hampshire and North Dakota, to 80 percent participating in the District of Columbia. The large variation in uptake of programs between states could point to a number of different factors, including differences in levels of student need, variation in eligibility rules between states, varied approaches to outreach, and different application processes and levels of burden that students in different states face when attempting to access programs. See the [supplementary state-level data tables document](#) for additional state-level data.

FIGURE 5

**The percent of student parents participating in public programs varies by state, from 34 percent to 80 percent**

Percent of student parents participating in at least one public program, by state



**Sources:** American Community Survey 2021-2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org) and U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Supplemental Poverty Measure Research Files, Filedate: April 16, 2025, Accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/supplemental-poverty-measure/acs-research-files.html>

**Notes:** Student parents are defined as parents who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 and are enrolled in undergraduate college programs. Public programs include welfare (defined as "any public assistance or welfare payments from the state or local welfare office"), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing subsidies, energy subsidies, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants (WIC), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Data for welfare come from the ACS. The ACS SPM Research File contains data on additional benefits programs that have been imputed based on the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC), including SNAP, housing subsidies, energy subsidies, WIC, and the EITC. Data on financial aid and childcare subsidies are not available in these data.

# How Do Student Parents Combine School, Work, and Public Programs?

**The likelihood that student parents will utilize public programs varies by marital and work status.**

Among the largest group of student parents—those who are married with both spouses working—77 percent do not use any of the public programs we examined: the EITC, SNAP, WIC, housing subsidies, welfare/cash assistance, and energy subsidies. When this group of student parents do use these programs, they tend to use only one. Among married student parents with only one spouse working, about half live in households that utilize at least one public program.

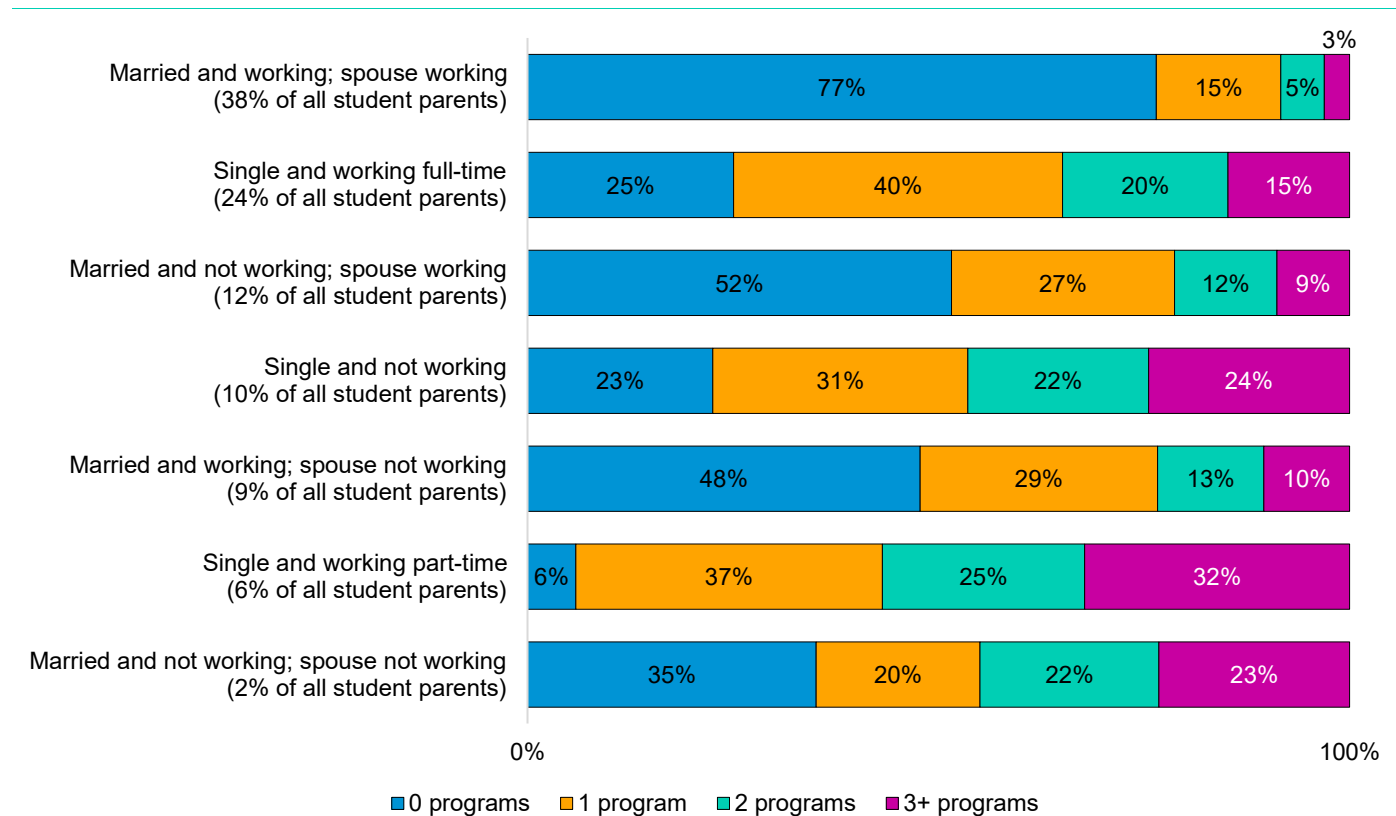
Single student parents are generally more likely to live in households that utilize public programs—particularly when they work part-time. Among single student parents who work full-time (the most common work arrangement for single student parents), three quarters utilize at least one program: 40 percent utilize one program, 20 percent utilize two, and 15 percent utilize three or more. Among single student parents who work part-time, however, more than 9 in 10 (94%) utilize at least one program—a higher percentage than among student parents who do not work.

These patterns of program participation among single student parents likely reflect greater levels of need among this group. The higher levels of program participation among single student parents who work part-time, however, could reflect work requirements for certain programs, such as the EITC and SNAP.

FIGURE 6

## Student parents' program use varies by family work arrangements

Percent of student parents participating in public programs, by number of programs and family work arrangements



**Sources:** American Community Survey 2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org) and U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Supplemental Poverty Measure Research Files, Filedate: April 16, 2025, Accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/supplemental-poverty-measure/acs-research-files.html>

**Notes:** Student parents are defined as parents who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 and are enrolled in undergraduate college programs. Full-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working 30 or more hours per week over the past year. Part-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working less than 30 hours per week over the past year. The ACS only allows identification of cohabitating couples if one of the cohabitating people is the head of household. For consistency, all unmarried cohabitating couples are considered single in this analysis. Public programs include welfare (defined as "any public assistance or welfare payments from the state or local welfare office"), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing subsidies, energy subsidies, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants (WIC), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Data for welfare come from the ACS. The ACS SPM Research File contains data on additional public programs that have been imputed based on the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC), including SNAP, housing subsidies, energy subsidies, WIC, and the EITC. Data on financial aid and childcare subsidies are not available in these data.

# Implications

Many student parents struggle financially on their path to graduation and its promise of long-term economic security, despite working—largely full-time—while going to school. As a result, many parents navigating higher education to pursue long-term economic stability use public programs as temporary supports to make ends meet.

Existing evidence suggests that many families have difficulties accessing public programs via traditional application processes. For example, 39 percent of potentially eligible single student parents do not report receiving SNAP benefits.

However, the most-commonly used programs identified by this study—school lunch and the EITC—have more generous income eligibility limits and operate differently than the other programs examined.

- ✳ Eligibility for school lunch works differently than for the other programs we examined. Student parents' children may be eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch based on a) their own income, b) their community's average income in areas participating in the community eligibility provision, or c) the state in which they live (as multiple states have adopted universal school meals). The community eligibility provision and universal school meals likely contribute to this program's frequent uptake among student parents.
- ✳ Tax credits like the EITC are processed differently than the other programs. Eligible workers can claim the EITC when they file taxes. It does not require a separate application and is based on a process that the vast majority of workers already go through every year.

Although they take different approaches, both school lunch and the EITC serve as alternative examples of program enrollment processes that reduce administrative barriers and burdens for participants. Administrative burdens may be particularly challenging for student parents who experience time poverty, meaning there are not enough hours in the day to care for their children, work to support their families, and devote attention to their studies—all while navigating complex public program application processes. Community or universal eligibility or credits through the tax system can serve as models to ensure that student parents learn about and enroll in programs for which they are eligible.

As the complex network of public programs available to student parents continues to evolve, we offer the following policy and practice recommendations to increase student parents' access to existing programs and enhance the resources available to them as they work toward graduation and long-term economic sustainability.

**1. Higher education administrators should help student parents learn about and access public programs beyond school lunch and the EITC.** In a social safety net notoriously difficult to navigate, higher education can play a role in connecting students to existing services. We see three potential options to efficiently connect students with multiple existing benefits—and support them on the way to graduation:

- ✱ **Use existing data to connect students to programs.** Institutions of higher education can use existing data—from financial aid applications, student information systems, or integrated data systems—to identify students likely eligible for benefits and help link them to public benefits providers. These data can be used to target services to the student parents who are most likely to need support, including (based on this study) single parents—particularly those working part-time or not working. For more information on this strategy, see [A Practical Guide to Using Data to Connect Postsecondary Students with Public Programs](#)
- ✱ **Provide navigation services.** Navigation services take an individualized approach, in which a trained navigator helps student parents determine which program(s) they may be eligible for and apply for those programs. Navigators, commonly located in advising or student support services, may be most effective when they have strong working relationships with local departments of social services and are trained in the unique needs of student parents.
- ✱ **Set up one-stop centers.** One-stop centers offer students guidance on a wide range of potential supports, both on-campus and off-campus. They are typically dedicated physical locations on campus and may house navigation services for students.<sup>°</sup> These centers may be most effective when staff are trained in the unique needs of student parents and well-informed about the programs for which these students may qualify.

## **2. Human service agencies should improve student parents' access to public programs by improving policies, program guidance, and communication, and by partnering with institutions.**

State and county human services agencies tend to operate public programs that are less frequently accessed by parenting students (e.g., SNAP, WIC, housing and energy subsidies, and welfare/cash assistance); these agencies are integral to ensuring that people pursuing education can access the supports for which they are eligible. Human services agencies have significant opportunities to remove restrictions on education in public benefit programs. They could also partner with institutions to offer on-site screening and application assistance for students and ensure that guidance on determining student eligibility for public benefit programs is clearly communicated to caseworkers. Such guidance should include verification requirements and be made publicly available on websites and in materials that communicate eligibility for programs.

The program delivery models of school lunch and the EITC can serve as model alternatives to current administration practices for other public programs that are less utilized by parenting students. Several strategies—including community eligibility, the incorporation of programs into the tax process, and categorical and presumptive eligibility—may expand the reach of public programs to eligible student parents and reduce the burden placed on them.

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<sup>°</sup> A [recent evaluation of one-stop centers](#) run by Single Stop across 10 colleges from 2020-2024 found significant challenges with implementing the centers and that relatively few students used the center or were connected to resources.

### 3. State and federal policymakers should reconsider work requirements for parenting students.

A large majority of student parents work while going to school and many receive additional support from public programs to make ends meet. Yet these students still struggle to graduate with a credential in a timely manner. [One of the largest hurdles in student parents' path](#) is time poverty—the lack of sufficient hours in the day to get everything done.

Many of the public programs examined in this brief do not count—or do not fully count—education toward work requirements. Work requirements that exclude education thus [exclude student parents](#) from receiving certain programs in certain states and add additional responsibilities to student parents' already full plates. [Working significant hours while in school](#) is associated with a more challenging path to graduation.

Further, work requirements tend to require cumbersome processes to document work status that increase the burden of the application process—requiring time not available to time-strapped student parents.

And, if student parents don't make it to graduation, they won't earn the economic payoffs of a higher education credential. Work requirements for student parents may have unintended consequences and prevent students from reaching self-sufficiency with college degrees.

If parenting students could count their schooling toward meeting work or community engagement requirements while enrolled in school, they may be able to graduate faster and more quickly transition off of public programs as their income increases, ultimately resulting in lower participation in public programs—both in the immediate aftermath of graduation and over their lifetime.

## Learn More

### Two companion briefs provide strategies.

[Supporting Parenting Students through College—Basic Needs Partnerships](#) by Theresa Anderson, Renee Ryberg, Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, Kimberly Salazar, Shaquita Christian, and Fatou Sy

[Improving Collaboration between Colleges and Public Programs](#) by Kimberly Salazar, Theresa Anderson, and Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield

These briefs and more can be found at SPARK's [Meeting Student Parents' Basic Needs](#) page.



## About SPARK Collaborative

The SPARK Collaborative is a multi-organization collaborative initiative. It aims to build evidence and make the case for policy change to support pregnant and parenting students and their families through data, research, lived/living expertise, and past learning, while developing future generations of leaders.

## Acknowledgements

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> These are sometimes called “public benefits” or “human services,” “safety net,” or “work support” programs. They are often administered by state or county human services or workforce agencies using some mix of federal and state funds.

<sup>2</sup> We use the terms “higher education,” “college,” and “postsecondary education” interchangeably to reflect all education and training beyond high school.

<sup>3</sup> In this brief, we use the terms “student parents” and “parenting students” interchangeably. For more discussion about the terminology used to refer to this population, see Autumn R. Green, “[Student Parents or Parenting Students? Why Terminology Matters](#).” This blog post was informed by the [Student-Parent Families at the Center](#) project, including insights shared by Kimberly Salazar, who was then a student mother at the University of California, Berkeley, and is now a research assistant at the Urban Institute.

# Appendix 1. Methodology

The new analyses presented in this brief are based on the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) and the American Community Survey Supplemental Poverty Measures Research Files (ACS SPM Research Files). The American Community Survey provides both nationally and state-representative information, self-reported on income, work, education, and receipt of public benefits. The Supplemental Poverty Measure Research Files contain additional information on receipt of additional public benefits programs, based on imputations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

We focused our analyses on parents enrolled in undergraduate college programs who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 (biological, step-, or adopted children). The ACS asks about school enrollment in the past three months in “school which leads to a ... college degree,” so respondents may not include vocational programs or certificate programs, depending on how they interpreted this question.

To assess family work arrangements, we combined information from the ACS on employment and marital status. We defined full-time work as working for pay in the past week and usually working 30 or more hours per week over the past year, and part-time work as working for pay in the past week and usually working less than 30 hours per week over the past year. We separated marital status categories into married (married with spouse present or married with spouse absent) or single (separated, divorced, widowed, never married/single). We did not consider whether couples were cohabiting because the ACS only allows identification of cohabitating couples if one of the cohabitating people is the head of household. Thus, for consistency, all unmarried cohabiting couples are considered single in this analysis.

The ACS asks respondents about receipt of a handful of public programs, including Medicaid, Social Security, Supplementary Security Income (SSI), and welfare (“any public assistance or welfare payments from the state or local welfare office”). We exclude Social Security and SSI—which support those with disabilities, retirees, or survivors—from our analyses because very few student parents reported accessing them in the data. To match the unit of analysis for variables derived from the ACS SPM Research File (see below), we aggregated these variables to the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) resource unit level. We refer to these groups interchangeably as “families” or “households” throughout the text.

The ACS SPM Research File contains data on additional public programs that have been imputed at the SPM resource unit level based on the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC), including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing subsidies, National School Lunch Program (school lunch), energy subsidies, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Because these data are based on self-reported receipt of public programs, they likely underestimate the true number of people receiving benefits (Meyer et al., 2015). Therefore, our estimates of how many student parents use public programs are likely conservative. These imputations are only calculated for individuals living in households and exclude people living in group quarters, which include college dorms. That is not particularly

concerning for this population, however, as less than 1 percent of student parents live on campus (authors' calculation based on 2020 NPSAS).

Analyses are weighted to be representative at the national and state levels. National estimates are based on 2023 ACS and ACS SPM Research File data. To improve precision for some smaller populations, state estimates are based on pooled 2021-2023 ACS and ACS SPM Research File data.

In our introduction, we drew on published statistics to describe the population of student parents. These statistics were calculated based on the 2019-2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), which is the best national source of data on parenting students. In the rest of the brief, we drew on data from the American Community Survey, which contains more detailed information on public benefits programs. The table below explains differences between the two data sources.

**APPENDIX TABLE 1**  
**Differences between NPSAS and ACS when analyzing student parents**

	<b>NPSAS</b>	<b>ACS SPM</b>
<b>Most recent year available</b>	2019-20 academic year	2023
<b>Data collection format</b>	Student survey and administrative data collection	Household survey
<b>Sampling frame</b>	Students enrolled in postsecondary institutions with federal financial aid programs	Households in the United States; our analytic sample excludes individuals living in group quarters, including college dormitories.
<b>Definition of student</b>	"Undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at any time between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020, in institutions that can participate in federal financial aid programs."	Student status is based on answers to two questions. In the first, respondents are asked whether the person attended school or college in the last 3 months. They are instructed to include only "schooling which leads to a college degree" or schooling that would be accepted for college credit. In the second question, respondents are asked what grade level they were attending, with the option of "College undergraduate years (freshman to senior)" being considered undergraduate studies and "Graduate or professional school beyond a bachelor's degree (for example: MA or PhD program, or medical or law

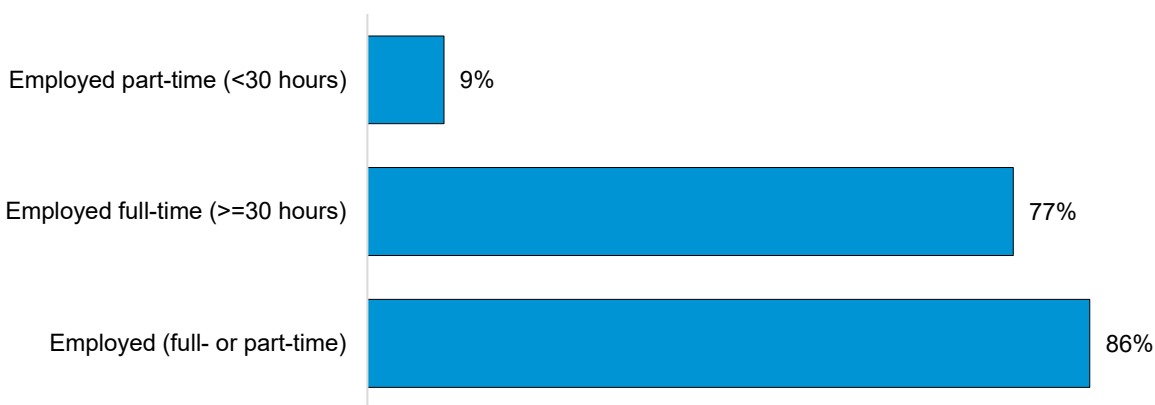
	NPSAS	ACS SPM
		school) being considered graduate studies.
		Vocational, technical, or business school are not considered school by the Census Bureau, but this definition is not provided to survey respondents, so it is up to the survey respondent to respond how they see fit.
Definition of parent	Has at least one dependent child; child could be over age 18 but needs to be receiving more than half their support from the parent	Lives with at least one of their own (biological, step, or adopted) children under age 18
Estimated number of undergraduate student parents	3.1 million undergraduate student parents enrolled at any point in the 2019-2020 school year	2.1 million undergraduate student parents enrolled in the past 3 months in 2023

**Sources:** American Community Survey 2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org); National Center for Education Statistics. Nd. "National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS)," In *NCES Handbook of Survey Methods*.

## Appendix 2. Graduate Student Figures

APPENDIX FIGURE 1

Percent of graduate student parents working, by work intensity



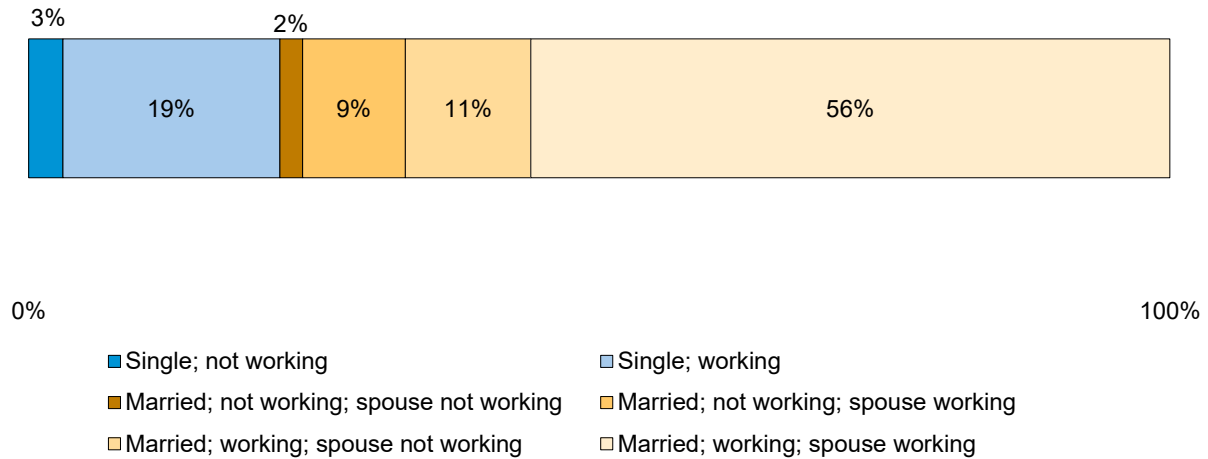
**Sources:** American Community Survey 2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org) and U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Supplemental Poverty Measure Research Files, Filedate: April 16, 2025, Accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/supplemental-poverty-measure/acs-research-files.html>

**Notes:** Graduate student parents are defined as parents who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 and are enrolled in graduate/professional programs. Full-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working 30 or more hours per week over the past year. Part-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working less than 30 hours per week over the past year.



## APPENDIX FIGURE 2

### Percent of graduate student parents in different family work arrangements

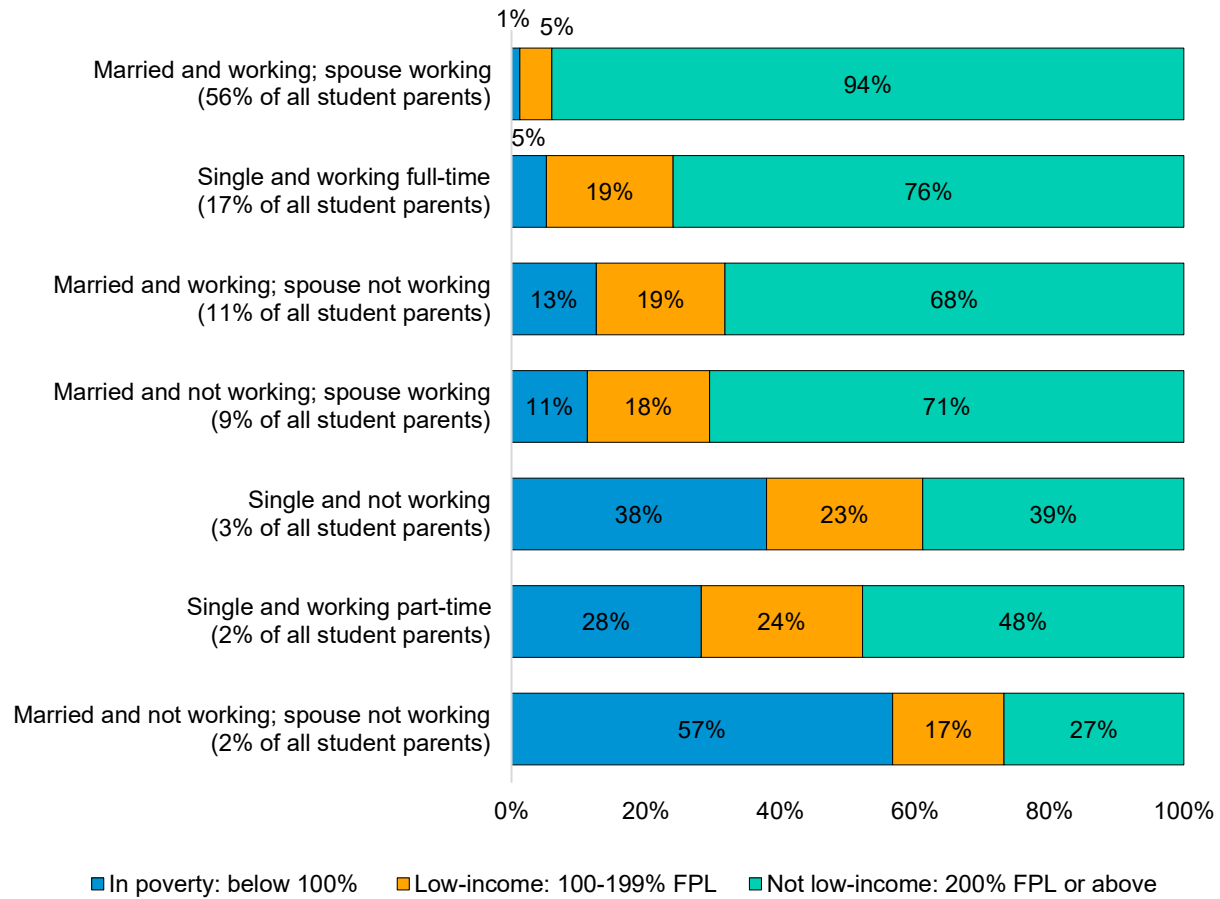


**Source:** American Community Survey 2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org).

**Notes:** Graduate student parents are defined as parents who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 and are enrolled in graduate/professional programs. Full-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working 30 or more hours per week over the past year. Part-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working less than 30 hours per week over the past year. The ACS only allows identification of cohabitating couples if one of the cohabitating people is the head of household. For consistency, all unmarried cohabitating couples are considered single in this analysis.

### APPENDIX FIGURE 3

#### Percent of graduate student parents with incomes below the poverty line or below 200% of the poverty line, by family work arrangements

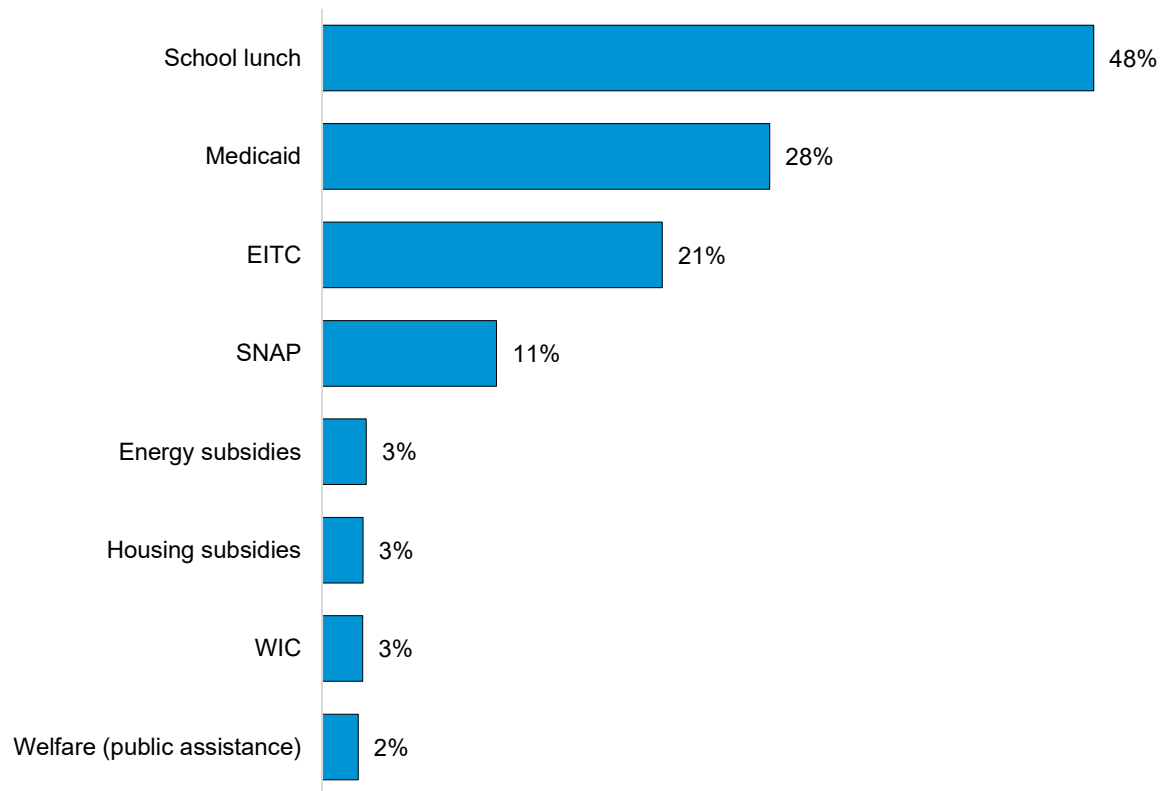


**Source:** American Community Survey 2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org).

**Notes:** Graduate student parents are defined as parents who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 and are enrolled in graduate/professional programs. Full-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working 30 or more hours per week over the past year. Part-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working less than 30 hours per week over the past year. The ACS only allows identification of cohabitating couples if one of the cohabitating people is the head of household. For consistency, all unmarried cohabitating couples are considered single in this analysis.

#### APPENDIX FIGURE 4

#### Percent of graduate student parents participating in public programs

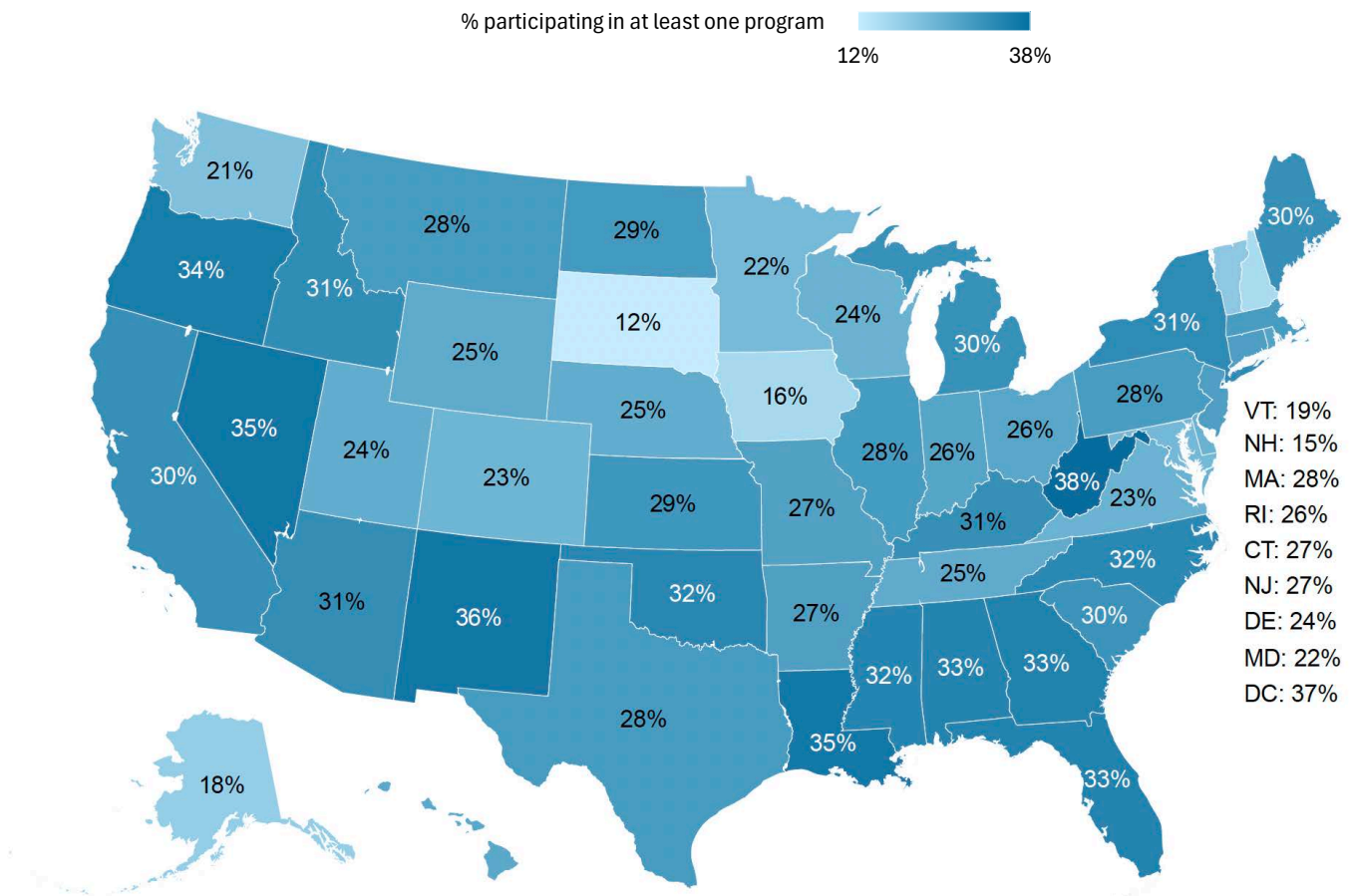


**Sources:** American Community Survey 2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org) and U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Supplemental Poverty Measure Research Files, Filedate: April 16, 2025, Accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/supplemental-poverty-measure/acs-research-files.html>

**Notes:** Graduate student parents are defined as parents who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 and are enrolled in graduate/professional programs. Data for Medicaid and welfare (defined as "any public assistance or welfare payments from the state or local welfare office") come from the ACS. The ACS SPM Research File contains data on additional public programs that have been imputed based on the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC), including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing subsidies, National School Lunch Program (school lunch), energy subsidies, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants (WIC), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Data on financial aid and childcare subsidies are not available in these data.

## APPENDIX FIGURE 5

### Percent of graduate student parents participating in at least one public program, by state

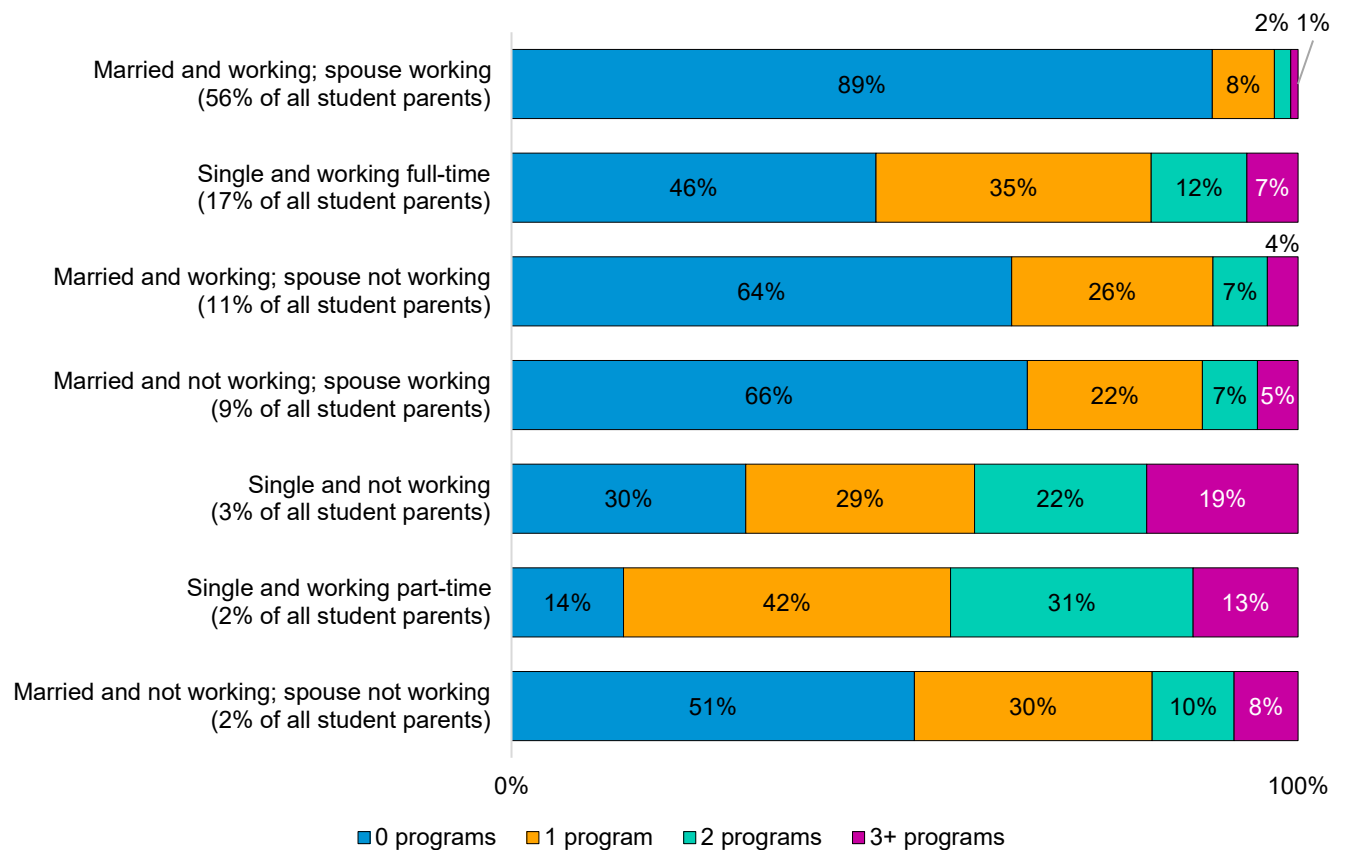


**Sources:** American Community Survey 2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org) and U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Supplemental Poverty Measure Research Files, Filedate: April 16, 2025, Accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/supplemental-poverty-measure/acs-research-files.html>

**Notes:** Graduate student parents are defined as parents who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 and are enrolled in graduate/professional programs. Public programs include welfare (defined as "any public assistance or welfare payments from the state or local welfare office"), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing subsidies, energy subsidies, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants (WIC), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Data for welfare come from the ACS. The ACS SPM Research File contains data on additional public programs that have been imputed based on the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC), including SNAP, housing subsidies, energy subsidies, WIC, and the EITC. Data on financial aid and childcare subsidies are not available in these data.

# APPENDIX FIGURE 6

## Percent of graduate student parents participating in public benefits programs, by number of programs and family work arrangements



**Sources:** American Community Survey 2023, accessed through IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org) and U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Supplemental Poverty Measure Research Files, Filedate: April 16, 2025, Accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/supplemental-poverty-measure/acs-research-files.html>

**Notes:** Graduate student parents are defined as parents who live with their own child(ren) under age 18 and are enrolled in graduate/professional programs. Full-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working 30 or more hours per week over the past year. Part-time work is defined as working for pay in the past week and usually working less than 30 hours per week over the past year. Public programs include welfare (defined as "any public assistance or welfare payments from the state or local welfare office"), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing subsidies, energy subsidies, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants (WIC), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Data for welfare come from the ACS. The ACS SPM Research File contains data on additional public programs that have been imputed based on the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC), including SNAP, housing subsidies, energy subsidies, WIC, and the EITC. Data on financial aid and childcare subsidies are not available in these data.