SPARK Collaborative

BRIEF
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Supporting Parenting Students through College–Basic Needs Partnerships

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Helping parents complete college degrees pays off—for the parents, their children, and taxpayers. The over 4 million student parents, who make up about 1 in 5 undergrads and 1 in 4 graduate students, have high grades but low completion rates.

Student parents face serious challenges meeting basic needs like food, housing, and child care, which jeopardize their ability to graduate and secure family-supporting jobs. Public human service and workforce programs[1]—including food, housing, child care, health care, and cash assistance—are designed to fill these gaps.

This brief highlights the importance of supporting parents in postsecondary education, the barriers student parents face in meeting basic needs, and how stronger partnerships between colleges and agencies that provide public programs can improve access to vital resources. New and renewed efforts in this space can help student parents stay enrolled and succeed.

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> ***The current system creates an impossible choice: education or family survival.*** *When you're juggling full-time studies with parental responsibilities, traditional employment becomes incredibly challenging. As a student parent, I've experienced firsthand how our current benefits system falls short of supporting those pursuing education while raising children. Programs like SNAP, Medicaid, unemployment assistance, TANF, and child support are essential lifelines, yet they often fail to adequately serve the unique needs of student parents."*
>
> — **Shaquita Christian,** mother of a 6-year-old boy, pursuing a bachelor's degree in criminal justice at Virginia State University, and a member of this project team

Why Support Parents in College?

Earning postsecondary credentials pays off.

Adults with college[2] degrees earn more and are more likely to succeed in today's job market:

- The job market reflects the value of credentials: 60 percent of the fastest-growing occupations over the next decade will require some postsecondary credentials. In comparison, all jobs projected to decline require no postsecondary credentials.[3]
- Adults with an associate's degree earned 18 percent more on average and those with a bachelor's degree earned 66 percent more, relative to those with only a high school diploma. These gains hold across most groups and areas of study.

For student parents[4]—nearly 1 in 5 undergraduates—the benefits are more far-reaching:

- When a mother earns a degree, her earnings increase by an average of $9,200 per year (28 percent higher).[5]
- Her children are more likely to attend and complete college and earn more.

College graduation also benefits society and the economy:

- At the end of 2024, 41 states had an active postsecondary attainment goal. With demographic shifts, colleges will need to attract parents to meet state goals.
- Investing in student parents benefits taxpayers through higher tax contributions and lower public benefit costs. For example, supportive student-parent programming returns $5.35 for every $1.00 invested.
- College graduates also live longer and participate more in civic activities—further boosting economic and social well-being.

Despite earning similar or better grades, student parents are much less likely to complete college. Only 17 percent earn a degree within six years, compared to 50 percent of nonparents. Even after accounting for demographics, student parents are 55 percent less likely to complete.

Student parents face overlapping challenges: time constraints, limited child care, and lack of family-friendly college supports. Most critically, they face intense short-term financial pressure to meet their families' basic needs.

Is Basic Needs Insecurity a Major Issue for Student Parents?

Yes, and it has grown following an earlier decline.

Unmet basic needs—such as food, housing, or health care—create immediate hardship for individuals and families, and can lead to long-term health and mental health challenges and make them less likely to graduate. When these preventable issues block access to education, the consequences resonate widely to lost economic potential and missed opportunities for intergenerational mobility.

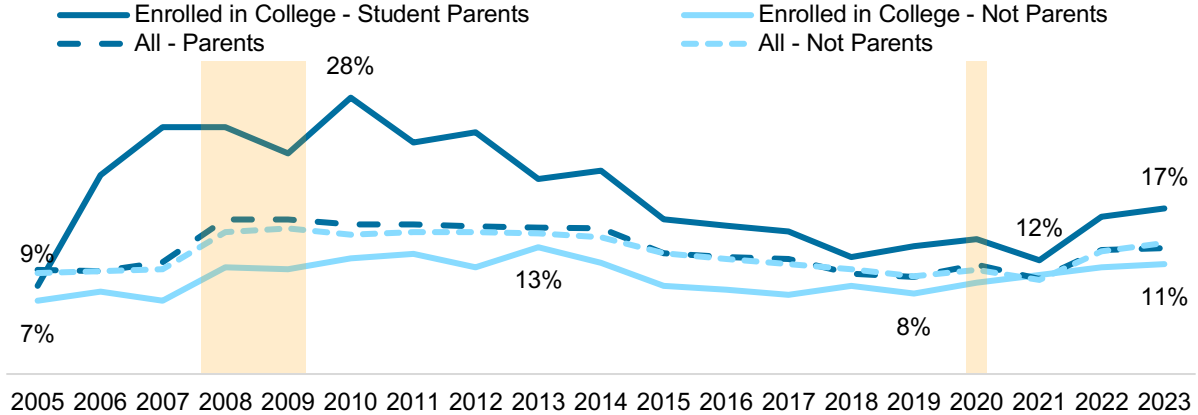
Student parents experience high rates of basic needs insecurity that interfere with college success. While rates vary by data source, the story remains consistent:

- A 2020 nationally representative study from the U.S. Department of Education found that nearly 1 in 3 student parents experienced food insecurity.
- National survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau show food insecurity growing in recent years among all adults, but especially student parents (see Figure 1).
- Recent surveys from Trellis Strategies and The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs show that over half of student parents were food-insecure, nearly two thirds were housing insecure, over 10 percent were homeless, and nearly 1 in 5 missed three or more days of class due to child care gaps.
- Other research from the SPARK Collaborative shows that student parents struggle to afford child care and face higher housing costs than other students.

FIGURE 1

Food insecurity has climbed in recent years

Adult low or very low food security, by parenting and college enrollment status, 2005-2023 (selected years labeled)



Note: Shaded areas represent economic recessions.

Source: Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, accessed and analyzed through the IPUMS Survey Documentation and Analysis Tool from the University of California-Berkeley.

These challenges are not marginal—they represent a major reason why student parents stop out or drop out before earning a credential.

How Can Colleges and Public Agencies Support Student Success?

Agency connections are cost effective.

Public programs—administered by human service and workforce agencies—already exist to help families meet their basic needs while they work and pursue economic mobility,[6] but student parents often have a hard time accessing these supports.

Student parents face policy-level eligibility barriers, such as work requirements that do not count education or training enrollment or other rules that explicitly exclude or deprioritize students. Student parents also face informational barriers and may not know about, or know how to access, supports in their area. Many student parents also fear stigma from accepting help.

Once student parents learn about programs, determine they are eligible, and apply, they may face barriers based on the program's implementation. Students may also face high administrative burden. For example, many frontline workers make benefits eligibility decisions but are not adequately trained in how to treat education or training. Navigating multiple agencies and their processes while juggling work, school, and family can be overwhelming.

Partnerships between postsecondary education and public agencies can help alleviate these barriers. These partnerships can also be efficient, helping each organization achieve its goals:

- **Postsecondary institutions** can connect students with pre-existing supports, which may enhance student enrollment, retention, and completion of valuable programs.
- **Agencies that administer public programs** can target resources to individuals and families who are temporarily using those supports to pursue economic mobility, which makes them less likely to rely on public programs in the future.

Collaboration through responsible data sharing is an efficient way to make connections between higher education and public agencies:

- Colleges already have information helpful for understanding parenting status, income, household indicators, and potential public program eligibility.
- With support from higher education systems and states, colleges can use these data to identify students who may be eligible for public programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Medicaid, and child care subsidies.
- With student consent, this information can also facilitate pre-filled benefit applications, expedite eligibility determinations, reduce incomplete applications, reduce churn from administrative burden, and enable more targeted, proactive outreach by college staff or agency partners.
- Over time, colleges and benefits agencies can gain deeper insights into student needs and eligibility, program access and participation, and academic and workforce outcomes, which can inform better future connections and supports.

Learn More

Two companion briefs provide strategies.

Improving Collaboration between Colleges and Public Programs by Kimberly Salazar, Theresa Anderson, and Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield

Student Parents Combine Studying, Working, and Public Programs to Survive Higher Education by Renee Ryberg and Christina Padilla

These briefs and more can be found at SPARK's Meeting Student Parents' Basic Needs page.

About the 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.

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Endnotes

[1] 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.

[2] We use the terms "college" and "postsecondary education" interchangeably to reflect all education and training beyond high school.

[3] Growth and decline are based on projections of employment change, numeric.

[4] 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.

[5] The original research study focused on student mothers because the data source only tracked the children of women in the original survey. Similar statistics are not available for student fathers. Dollar values are updated for inflation from the original brief, from 2014 dollars to 2025 dollars.

[6] These programs have limitations, even for those who qualify. Housing and child care programs can have long wait lists, food assistance does not adequately cover the cost of meals, cash assistance does not come close to lifting families out of poverty in any state, and providers may not accept Medicaid. Nonetheless, accessing these programs is better than not having any support at all.