



# Who Are Undergraduates with Dependent Children?

An Updated Overview of Student-Parent Characteristics Using 2020 Data

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*The brief is a result of a collaborative effort across multiple organizations. In the spirit of this successful collaboration, the authors are listed in alphabetical order.*

**More than 3 million undergraduate students in the United States are parents, representing nearly one in five college students. Supporting student parents promotes their academic achievement and enhances their family well-being, supports college enrollment and completion goals, and can boost state economic health. This brief uses the latest available data to summarize key characteristics of undergraduate students with dependent children.**

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# Introduction

Students with dependent children—also known as student parents or parenting students<sup>1</sup>—are a diverse and highly motivated group with one thing in common: caring for children, whose needs affect the students’ life decisions and trajectories (Ryberg et al. 2024; Wilsey 2013). As a result, student parents may need greater support and flexibility at school than students who are not parents.

When student parents have what they need to succeed, it benefits others besides the students. Parenting students’ success also improves intergenerational family well-being and leads to higher lifetime education and earnings gains among their children (Anderson 2022; Reichlin Cruse, Milli, et al. 2019), helps colleges meet enrollment and completion goals (Anderson and Green 2022; Hensley, White, and Reichlin Cruse 2021), and bolsters state economic health (Hicks and Anderson 2024; Reichlin Cruse, Milli, et al. 2019).

For postsecondary education institutions, government agencies, and others to support parenting students effectively and produce overarching benefits, they need to understand who parenting students are and what resources they need.

This brief uses data from the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) to offer a profile of parenting students enrolled in public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit institutions at the baccalaureate, associate, and certificate levels during the 2019–20 academic year.

## Data Notes

We used the “dependent children” variable to identify student parents. In 2020 NPSAS, this variable is defined by whether a student has dependent children receiving more than half their support from the student. This may include children over age 18. The 2020 NPSAS identified the dependent children data item first from federal financial aid applications and then, if it was not available in the financial aid records, from the student survey.<sup>a</sup> We understand that many more students might be parenting and caregiving for children than would be identified using this narrowed definition. In addition, the 2020 NPSAS does not include high school students in college or persons in noncredit training programs.

The COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns occurred early in the 2020 NPSAS data collection period. Because parents were particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as they abruptly lost child care, employment, and educational continuity (Hicks 2021; Lin et al. 2022; Manze et al. 2021), students with dependent children were likely underrepresented in the survey portion of the NPSAS. This means that the 2020 data likely undercount student parents. In this brief, we report the numbers as they appear in the official data, despite these concerns. See <https://studentparentaction.org/resources/data-insights> for more detail.

<sup>a</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, “National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 2020 Undergraduate Students,” created August 13, 2024, accessed from PowerStats, <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/codebooks/by-subject/157-national-postsecondary-student-aid-study-2020-undergraduate-students>.

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<sup>1</sup> For more discussion about the terminology used to refer to this population, see Autumn R. Green, “Student Parents or Parenting Students? Why Terminology Matters,” *Women Change Worlds* blog, Wellesley Centers for Women, February 01, 2022, <https://www.wcwonline.org/WCW-Blog-Women-Change-Worlds/entry/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 mothers at the University of California, Berkeley, and is now a research assistant at the Urban Institute.

(We focus on undergraduates in US colleges, though a separate infographic, “[Graduate Student Parents](#),” is available.) Together, the data we provide can be used to inform changes to policy and practice that ensure all student parents have the tools they need to thrive in and benefit from postsecondary education.<sup>2</sup>

## Undergraduates with Children

### More than 3 million undergraduate students in the US are parenting

Eighteen percent—or about one in five—of all undergraduates in the US are student parents. That totals an estimated 3.14 million undergraduate student parents.

### The share of students who are parents has been decreasing

Though student parents represent a sizable population, the share of undergraduate students who are parents has decreased (Figure 1). From 1990 through 2012, the share of undergraduates who are student parents remained steady at about 25 percent. In 2012, at a time when college enrollments were strong in the wake of the Great Recession (Schmidt 2018), the number of student parents peaked even as the share increased only slightly. The share then declined to just over one in five undergraduates in 2016 and just under one in five undergraduates in 2020.

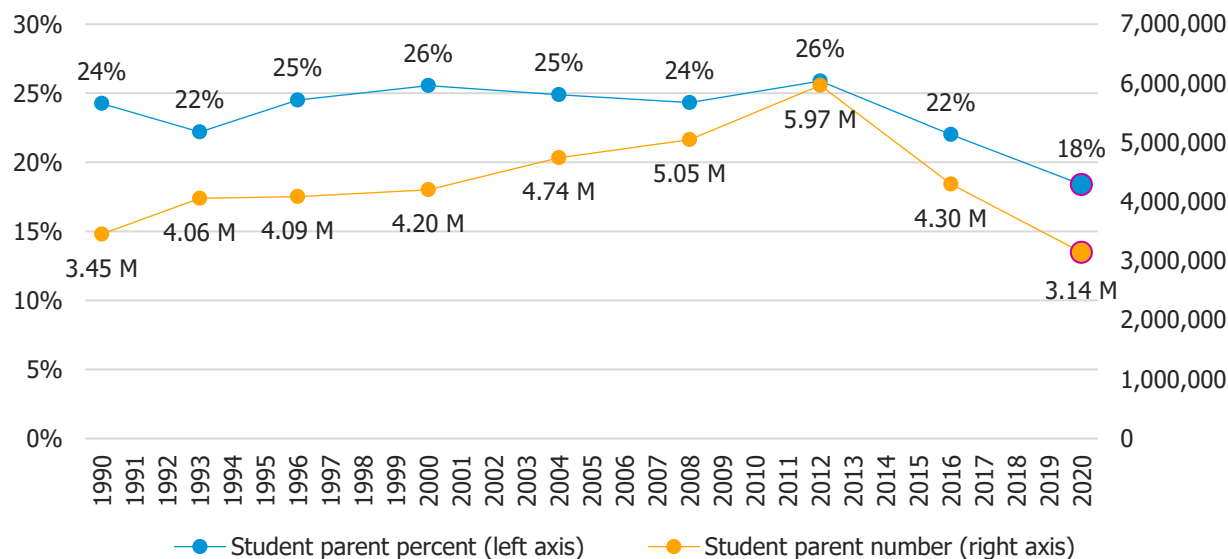
The lower number of parents enrolled in college does not reflect a lack of parents interested in advancing their education. Instead, the decrease in the representation of student parents in undergraduate programs might relate to changes in college access, including postsecondary education affordability (Cheslock and Riggs 2023; Gallup, Inc. and Lumina Foundation 2024). The reduction could also be related to demographic shifts, such as decreasing numbers of births, young adults having fewer children, and people having children later in life (Hamilton, Martin, and Osterman 2024). As noted, the 2020 numbers may be an undercount, and the 2024 NPSAS will be informative regarding the trends.

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<sup>2</sup> This publication updates analysis presented in Reichlin Cruse, Holtzman, and colleagues (2019), which summarized undergraduate student-parent characteristics based on the 2016 NPSAS.

FIGURE 1

**The portion of students who are parents has declined after remaining steady for many years**  
 Number and proportion of undergraduate students with dependent children, 1990–2020  
 (2020 values emphasized)



**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Studies, 1990–2020.

**Notes:** M = million. Because COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns coincided with data collection, 2020 data may undercount student parents. The variable used for this analysis was NUMDEPND in 1990, RDEPENDS in 1993, NDEPEND in 1996, NBDEPS in 2000, and DEPCHILD in 2004–20. Before 2004, the variable represented any dependent, child or adult.

## Undergraduates who are women and people of color are more likely to be parents

While 18 percent of all undergraduate students have dependent children, the rate varies for different populations of students (Figure 2). Among undergraduates,

- ✦ 24 percent of female students, 11 percent of male students, and 5 percent of students with other gender identities<sup>3</sup> are parents.
- ✦ 36 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN) students, 30 percent of Black students,<sup>4</sup> 27 percent of Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (NHPI) students, 18

<sup>3</sup> For brevity, this brief uses the term “other gender identities” to include persons coded in the 2020 NPSAS as “genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or a different identity,” which is a single category in the publicly available data. The survey question contained separate response options for transgender, male to female; transgender, female to male; genderqueer; gender nonconforming; and a different gender identity. The two transgender categories were recoded into male and female (e.g., respondents who selected “transgender, male-to-female” were set to female). The remaining category is a combination of genderqueer, gender nonconforming, and a different gender. These groups cannot be disentangled in the publicly available data.

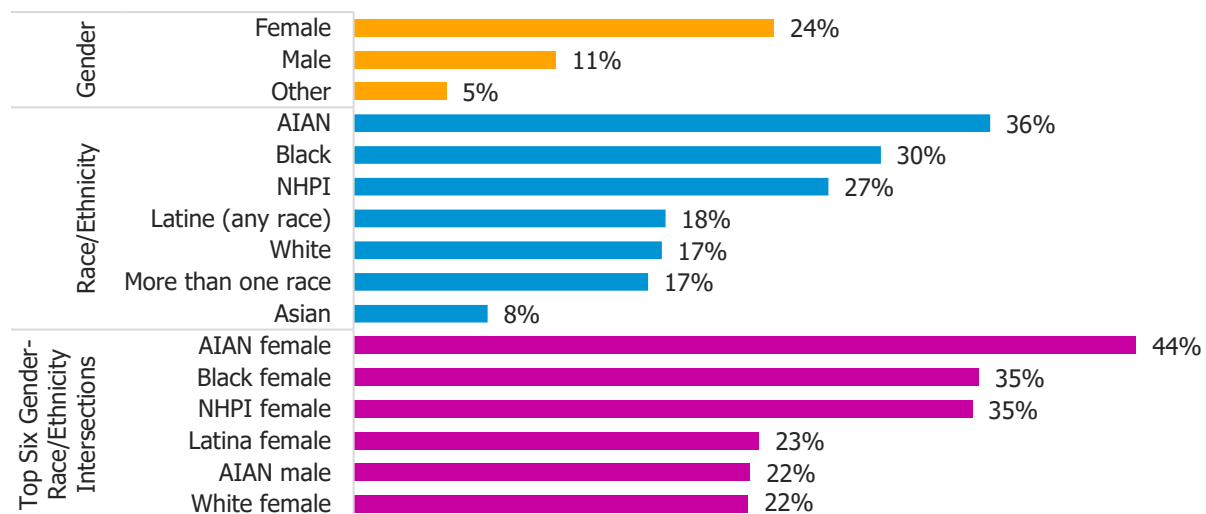
<sup>4</sup> This brief uses the term Black to describe people who have ancestry from sub-Saharan Africa. This might also include people who trace their ancestry through the Caribbean or other geographies. In the NPSAS survey, the label used for this group changes over time but is identified as “Black or African American” in the 2020 data. We use the word Black because we believe it to be more inclusive. The authors acknowledge this may not be the preferred identifier for every individual or group, and we remain committed to employing inclusive language whenever possible.

percent of Latine students,<sup>5</sup> 17 percent of white students, 17 percent of multiracial students, and 8 percent of Asian students are parents.

- ✳ The intersectional gender-racial/ethnic groups with the highest proportion of student parents are AIAN female students (44%), Black female students (35%), NHPI female students (35%), Latina female students (23%), AIAN male students (22%), and white female students (22%).

In sum, female undergraduates and students of color are more likely to be parents. As colleges and the broader postsecondary education system extend access across gender and racial/ethnic groups, the chances that students will bring child caregiving responsibilities to college increases. Broadening education access therefore requires not only opening the door to students from various backgrounds but also supporting those who balance school with parenting so they can persist and complete their education goals. Information about how to support these students appears in the conclusion.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Female students, students from American Indian or Alaska Native backgrounds, and students at the intersection of those groups are most likely to be parenting while in school**  
 Rate of parenting among undergraduate student groups, 2020



**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020.

**Notes:** AIAN = American Indian or Alaska Native; NHPI = Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. “Other” gender relates to the category “genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or a different identity.” The analysis can be recreated with the variables DEPCHILD, GENDER3, RACE, and RACESEX using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/uwtweg>; free account required).

<sup>5</sup> Latine students can be of any racial group. This brief uses the term Latine to describe people of Latin American background. In the NPSAS survey, the label used for this group changes over time but is identified as “Hispanic or Latino” in the 2020 data. We use the word Latine because we believe it to be more inclusive. The authors acknowledge this may not be the preferred identifier for every individual or group, and we remain committed to employing inclusive language whenever possible.

# Characteristics of Student Parents

## Student parents hold diverse identities

The previous section identified which groups of undergraduate students are most likely to be parents. This section describes the characteristics of undergraduate student parents themselves. (This means that percentages are now relative to all student parents rather than relative to all college students.<sup>6</sup>) As reflected in Figure 3, student parents bring a range of experiences and identities to their educational journeys.

Nearly three-quarters of parenting students (74%) are female compared with 54 percent of nonparenting undergrads. The majority of undergraduate student parents (55%) are students of color, a rate higher than the 51 percent of nonparenting undergrads of color. Student parents of color hold many racial/ethnic identities: 21 percent of student parents identify as Black, 20 percent as Latine, 7 percent as multiracial, 3 percent as Asian, 2 percent as AIAN, and 1 percent as NHPI.<sup>7</sup>

Undergraduate student parents are older than other undergraduates on average: 41 percent of student parents are in their 30s, with an average age of 34, while only 6 percent of nonparenting students are in their 30s, with an average age of 23. Nearly half of student parents are married (48%), though marriage rates are much higher for male student parents (71%) than female student parents (40%).<sup>8</sup>

Student parents are also more likely than nonparenting students to be first-generation college students (48% versus 27%)<sup>9</sup> and veterans (9% versus 2%) and to have income below the federal poverty level (35% versus 24%). They are similarly likely to be immigrants (15% for both groups).<sup>10</sup> A [separate infographic series](#) explores characteristics of different groups of student parents in more detail.

The diversity of student parents means that serving parents well helps colleges, college systems, and states meet the needs of multidimensionally diverse students. Intentionally serving student parents can also help colleges meet federal requirements under Title IX, which requires colleges to equitably serve female students, including those who are pregnant or postpartum (Green, Lee, and Anderson 2022), and the Civil Rights Act, which protects students' rights to education regardless of race.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For example, while the previous section reported what percentage of female undergraduates are parenting, this section reports what percentage of undergraduate student parents are female.

<sup>7</sup> These values do not add to the 55 percent figure reported for all students of color due to rounding.

<sup>8</sup> Because a minority of female student parents are married, several initiatives have identified single mother students as a focus population for supports (for example, ECMC Foundation's Single Mother Student Success Initiative: <https://www.ecmcfoundation.org/what-we-do/initiatives/single-mother-student-success-initiative>).

<sup>9</sup> First-generation college students do not have a parent who completed an associate's degree or higher.

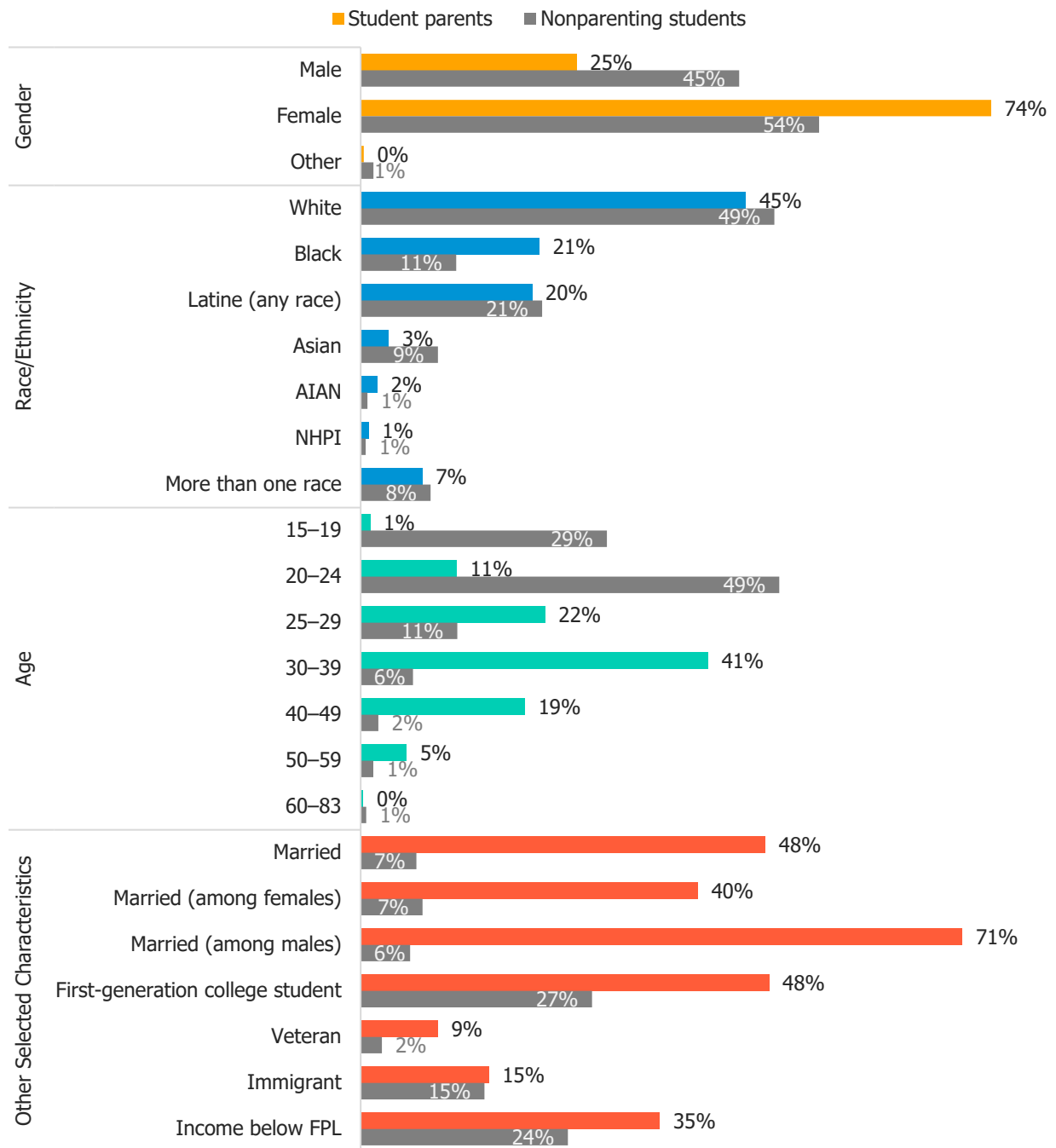
<sup>10</sup> Immigrant students might be foreign-born citizens, permanent residents, or foreign students with a visa.

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Lee, "Centering Student-Parents Can Help Foster Student Diversity," Education Trust blog, June 28, 2024, <https://edtrust.org/the-equity-line/student-parents-foster-student-diversity/>.

FIGURE 3

**Student parents are more likely than nonparenting students to be female, students of color, and older, and to have other intersectional identities**

Characteristics of undergraduate student parents, 2020



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020.

Notes: AIAN = American Indian or Alaska Native; FPL = federal poverty level; NHPI = Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. “Other” gender relates to the category “genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or a different identity.” First-generation college students do not have a parent who completed an associate’s degree or higher. Immigrant students might be foreign-born citizens, permanent residents, or foreign students with a visa. The analysis can be recreated with the variables DEPCHILD, GENDER3, RACE, AGE, SMARITAL, PAREduc, VETERAN, IMMIGRA, and PCTPOV using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/uwtweg>; free account required).

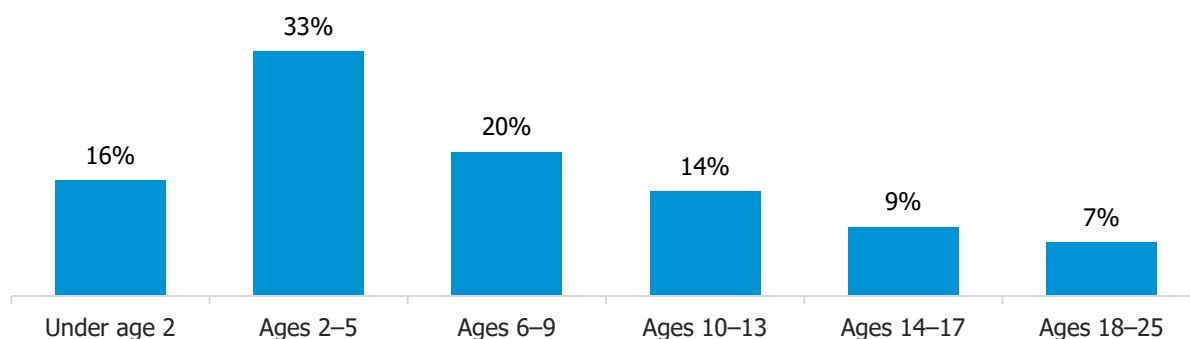
## More than half of students' children are school age or older

Child care is a common consideration in promoting educational access and attainment for parents. Students' children vary in age and therefore in child care needs. On average, student parents' youngest children are a little over 7 years old (Figure 4). Just under half (49%) of student parents have a youngest child under age 6—the age group that would likely be in the most need of regular daytime child care. Seven percent of student parents have a youngest child age 18 to 25 who is still dependent on them, signaling that parenting responsibilities do not end when a child turns 18.

FIGURE 4

### Nearly half of student parents have a child under age 6

Age of youngest child of undergraduate student parents, 2020



**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020.

**Notes:** Totals do not sum to 100 percent due to rounding. The analysis can be recreated with the variables DEPCHILD and DEPYNG using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/uwtweg>; free account required).

The majority of student parents have more than one child (55%). Of all student parents, about one-third (33%) have two children, 14 percent have three children, and 8 percent have four or more children. Having children of different ages and presumably different needs may multiply the considerations parenting students are juggling as they support their children and pursue their educational goals.

## Colleges Student Parents Attend

### Parenting students are more likely to attend community colleges and for-profit institutions

Student parents attend all types of postsecondary education institutions, but they are concentrated at community colleges and private for-profit schools (Figure 5).<sup>12</sup>

About half (51%) of all student parents attend community and technical colleges, higher than the 40 percent of nonparenting students attending these institutions. One in five student parents (20%) attend private for-profit colleges, much higher than the 1 in 20 nonparenting students (5%) who attend these institutions. For-profit colleges have been critiqued for providing lower

<sup>12</sup> Public colleges that are primarily sub-baccalaureate institutions but offer at least one four-year degree are considered community colleges for this analysis. This is based on the variable SECTOR3A in the NPSAS dataset.



economic payoffs relative to the cost of the education (Cellini and Turner 2018) and have lower graduation rates for four-year degrees (but not two-year degrees; NCES 2022). They also offer fewer services relevant to parenting students (Ryberg, Rosenberg, and Warren 2021).

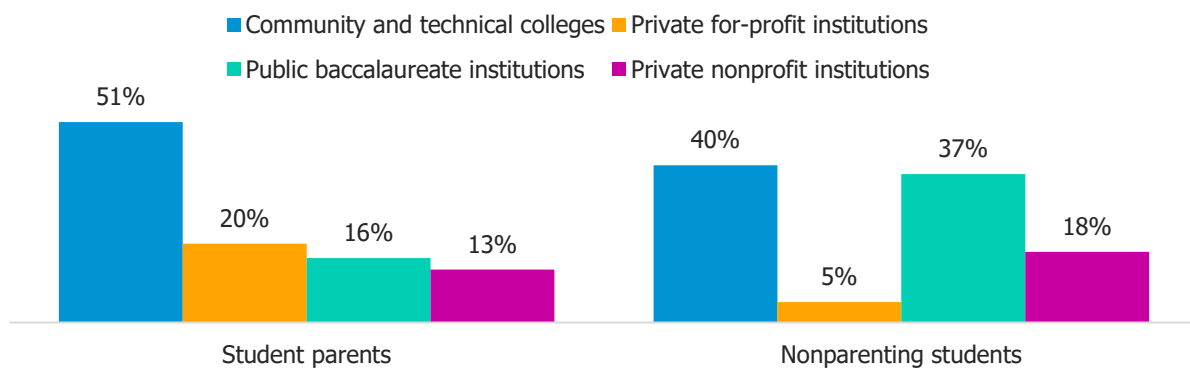
Even though undergraduate student parents are more likely to attend a community college or a for-profit school, a substantial share also attends other types of colleges: 16 percent of student parents attend public baccalaureate institutions, and 13 percent attend private nonprofit institutions. However, both rates are substantially lower than the rates of nonparenting students who attend public universities and private nonprofit colleges.

A separate brief, “Where Do Student Parents Attend College?,” explores the enrollment of student parents in different types of institutions in more detail.

FIGURE 5

### Student parents are more likely to attend community and technical colleges and for-profit institutions

Student parents and nonparenting students by type of college, 2020



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020.

Notes: Community and technical colleges are recategorized from an 11-sector detailed variable that coded colleges as public four-year non-doctorate-granting, primarily sub-baccalaureate institutions. These are often institutions that offer limited bachelor’s degree programs. The analysis can be recreated with the variables DEPCHILD and SECTOR11 using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/uwtweg>; free account required).

## Academics

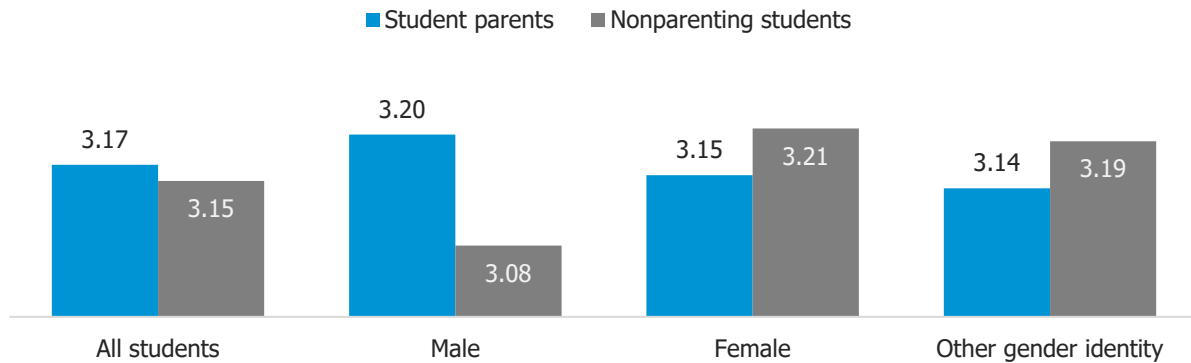
### GPAs of parenting students differ by gender, and student parents are overrepresented in health disciplines

On average, student parents earn comparable grades to nonparenting peers, with an average grade point average (GPA) of 3.17 compared with 3.15 among nonparenting students (Figure 6). However, differences emerge when grades are examined by gender. Male student parents earn significantly better grades than nonparenting male students (average GPA of 3.20 versus 3.08), while female student parents earn lower grades than nonparenting female students (average GPA of 3.15 versus 3.21). This could be attributable to gender differences in care for children, as mothers are more likely to have more caregiving responsibilities (Glynn 2018). Student parents who identify as genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or a different identity do not have significantly different grades between parents and nonparents.

FIGURE 6

**Student parents have comparable grades to nonparenting students, but male student parents' grades are higher than male nonparenting students' grades**

Grade point averages among all students and by gender identity, 2020



**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020.

**Notes:** “Other gender identity” relates to the category “genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or a different identity.” Differences in average GPA between student parents and nonparents are significant for male student parents and female student parents, but not for students overall or students with another gender identity. The analysis can be recreated with the variables GPA, DEPCHILD, and GENDER3 using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/uwtweg>; free account required).

Student parents are more likely to be concentrated in health care fields and are most underrepresented in social sciences and humanities and in sciences, math, and agriculture (Table 1). In fields with a large share of student parents, academic leaders could provide additional support for parents on campuses. In fields in which student parents are underrepresented, academic leaders could examine why parents are less likely to concentrate in that area.

TABLE 1

### Student parents are overrepresented in health care fields and underrepresented in social sciences and humanities

Major or field of study according to the 2020 Classification of Instructional Programs

	Student parents	Nonparenting students	Difference in representation
Health care fields	33%	15%	+17%
Business	16%	14%	+2%
Military technology and protective services	5%	3%	+2%
Manufacturing, construction, repair, and transportation	3%	2%	+1%
Other applied	13%	13%	0%
General studies and other	8%	8%	0%
Personal and consumer services	3%	3%	0%
Undecided	1%	1%	0%
Computer and information sciences	4%	6%	-3%
Engineering and engineering-related technologies/technicians	3%	7%	-4%
Biological and physical science, science technologies, math, and agriculture	4%	11%	-7%
Social sciences and humanities	8%	16%	-8%

**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020.

**Notes:** Totals do not sum to 100 percent and the “difference” column may not equal the gap between the other two columns due to rounding. The analysis can be recreated with the variables MAJORS2Y and DEPCHILD using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/uwtweg>; free account required).

## Enrollment Patterns

### Parenting students experience delayed enrollment and unstable pathways to degrees

Student parents experience more unstable pathways to degrees in four ways.<sup>13</sup> First, undergraduate student parents are more likely to delay college enrollment. Students who are currently parenting experience a longer gap between high school graduation and college enrollment, averaging 3.8 years compared with 1.0 years for nonparenting students. Second, student parents are more likely to have ever attended a community college (81%) than nonparents (58%). This relates to the finding that student parents are more likely than nonparenting students to have certificates and associate’s degrees and to transfer between institutions more times before achieving advanced degrees. Third, student parents are more likely to be enrolled part time across the year (47%) and less likely to be enrolled full time (53%), compared with nonparenting students (21% part time, 79% full time). Finally, student parents are more likely to reenroll to continue their education after having earned a prior degree or certificate than nonparents (46% for parents compared with 21% for nonparents). These delays in enrollment and degree attainment have implications for educational persistence, career advancement, income over the life course, and debt accumulation.

<sup>13</sup> Data reported in this section use the variables DELAYENR, EVER2PUB, ENRSTAT, DEGPR, and DEPCHILD from the 2020 NPSAS.

# Conclusion

## Data drive our understanding of student parents and helps the postsecondary education field support them

As illustrated in this brief, student parents are common in college settings, representing nearly one in five undergraduate students. Yet, they are often invisible to campus leadership and institutional policymakers. Historically, institution-level data collection on parenting students and targeted supports has been rare (Lewis and Polk 2021). The data presented in this brief provide an updated portrait of student parents across the country, which postsecondary education leaders can use to develop a better understanding of this population and support these students on their postsecondary education journeys.

Focus on student parents has been increasing in recent years—in part because improved data collection systems have generated more awareness of this population. A growing number of states have passed laws to track students' parenting status in college data systems, and several states have mandated other supports, such as liaisons or navigators, priority course registration, and resources for child care.<sup>14</sup>

Growing recognition of the student-parent population is a critical first step in supporting those actively pursuing postsecondary education to achieve their goals and promote intergenerational mobility for their children. Beyond simply recognizing this population, the postsecondary education community can also use the data presented in this brief to further advance efforts to support student parents.

The *Roadmap for Change to Support Pregnant and Parenting Students*, which inspired creation of the SPARK Collaborative (Anderson and Green 2022), can serve as a resource. The *Roadmap for Change* presents eight key outcomes colleges can work toward:

- ✳ Interested groups, including colleges, policymakers, researchers, and advocates, are aware of student-parent families and the conditions they face.
- ✳ Student-parent families experience less time poverty and have sufficient support as they pursue education.
- ✳ Postsecondary education is financially feasible for parents.
- ✳ Families' basic needs are met during and after education programs.
- ✳ Student parents enter and complete education programs and attain good, fulfilling jobs.
- ✳ Parenting students' children are supported.
- ✳ Colleges meet their goals by supporting student parents.
- ✳ Research and advocacy regarding student-parent services, policies, and investments are sufficient and effective.

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<sup>14</sup> Please see Besser Doorley, Elakbawy, and Dundar (2023) and Theresa Anderson, "Colleges Will Need New Data Collection Efforts to Identify Parenting Students after Changes to Financial Aid Forms," *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, August 12, 2024, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/colleges-will-need-new-data-collection-efforts-identify-parenting-students-after-changes>.

To help higher education strive toward these goals, the *Roadmap for Change* includes interim mile markers with suggested approaches and examples that can be readily pursued to support the success of this important student population. The data presented in this brief can help guide the way.

## Related Materials

Related resources are available at the [SPARK Collaborative website](#):

- ✦ Where Do Student Parents Attend College? A Snapshot of Student-Parent Attendance Patterns Using 2020 Data
- ✦ How Do Student Parents Make Ends Meet? A Profile of Student-Parents' Financial Characteristics Using 2020 Data
- ✦ An infographic series of student-parent characteristics
- ✦ Video guide to accessing the 2020 NPSAS data

## About the SPARK Collaborative

**Mission:** The Student-Parent Action through Research Knowledge (SPARK) Collaborative aims to collaboratively build evidence and make the case for policy change to support pregnant and parenting students so that they can meet their education and life goals.

**Vision:** We endeavor for pregnancy and parenting not to determine a person's ability to meet their goals. We also envision a future where all organizations and decisionmakers are coordinated and are working toward supporting parents in pursuing and achieving their goals.

**How we work:** We use data, research, lived expertise, and past learning to inform policy and practice solutions while developing future generations of leaders. SPARK provides shared data and other resources and manages a collaborative virtual space for organizations and individuals to connect and work together on research and action that advance opportunities for student parents and their families. SPARK is not owned by any single person or organization—it is made up of its members. The SPARK Collaborative is managed by a working board with representatives from the Urban Institute, the Pregnant Scholar, Child Trends, and parenting student fellows.

**Who we are:** The SPARK Collaborative is an association of individuals and organizations that build evidence and take action that supports pregnant and parenting students. We bring together teams with lived expertise as student parents, data expertise, policy expertise, legal expertise, and expertise in the [systems that affect student parents and their families](#) to holistically approach student parent issues. The SPARK Collaborative is stewarded by a working board comprising Theresa Anderson (Urban Institute), Jessica Lee (The Pregnant Scholar), Nina Owolabi (Skills and Training in Action Research [STAR] Fellow), Krystle Pale (STAR Fellow), Renee Ryberg (Child Trends), Kimberly Salazar (Urban Institute), and Kate Westaby (Urban Institute).

**How to get involved:** Anyone interested in supporting student parents or engaging in research that would inform effective approaches is welcome to join the SPARK Collaborative. Membership is free but members must agree to our shared values and register at [studentparentaction.org](http://studentparentaction.org).

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