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Parenting in a Pandemic: Understanding the Challenges Faced by California Community College Students and Actionable Recommendations for Policy

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**PARENTING IN A PANDEMIC:  
Understanding the Challenges Faced by California Community College Students  
and Actionable Recommendations for Policy**

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**ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented numerous challenges to students across the United States, particularly those who are parents enrolled in community colleges. California's community college system serves a diverse student population, including a significant number of non-traditional, working adults who are also parents. These students have faced unprecedented challenges due to the pandemic, including the difficulties of balancing childcare responsibilities with academic and professional obligations. This paper summarizes the preliminary findings of a study that intends to contribute to the crucial conversation around childcare needs among community college students. The focus of this study was understanding the experiences of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) mothers with young children and the impact of COVID-19 on their educational experiences in community colleges across the state of California.

**Keywords:** student parents, community college, basic needs, BIPOC community college students

**INTRODUCTION**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education has been profound, reshaping the experiences and challenges of students across the United States. Among the most affected are non-traditional students, particularly those who juggle parenting and academic responsibilities in community colleges. With the generous support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, this research article seeks to delve into the experiences of students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). The following study presents preliminary findings that shed light on the pressing childcare needs of California community college students, thereby contributing to an increasingly vital discourse in our educational landscape.

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California's community college system serves a diverse student population, including a significant number of non-traditional, working adults who are also parents. Figure 1 displays an infographic illustration of the proportion of parenting students. According to Reed et al. (2021), one in ten students in the California Community College system is a parent who applied for financial aid in the 2018-2019 academic year. Another report, coming from the UC Davis Wheelhouse from Huerta et al. (2021) also indicated that within that same academic year, among the parents who intended to enroll in a California community college, approximately 80% of them were women. Furthermore, the study found that the demographic makeup of California community college student parents mirrors the non-parent population, with the exception of African American/Black students making up almost double the proportion of parent students (13%) compared to non-parent students (7%).

*Figure 1.* Proportion of Student Parents in the California Community College System Who Applied for Financial Aid in 2018-2019 Academic Year (1 in 10)



There is limited research focusing on parenting students in community colleges. Numerous challenges have been identified that impact the data that is available to delve deeply into parenting students' experiences. Most community colleges do not collect demographic data that identifies parenting students (Huerta, Salazar, Lopez, Torres, Badajos, & Lopez Matias, 2022). Furthermore, even if parenting students are identified, the ages of their children are rarely known. As has been well documented, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequities across our educational institutions' systems of support and parenting students were disproportionately negatively impacted (Cruse, Contreras Mendez, & Holtzman, 2020). This study addresses the gap in research focusing on BIPOC community college mothers with children under the age of 5 who were enrolled during the pandemic. Specifically, the study collected the demographic characteristics of this population of students and identified students' self-reported familial and community college sources of support during the pandemic. In addition, the study explored the effect of childcare responsibilities on students' mental health as well as on the parenting students' enrollment status during COVID-19.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was designed with two frameworks in mind, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework. While this article focuses on quantitative demographic data and not the qualitative data that makes more direct connections to the frameworks, it is important to note that the foundational elements of this work, including the research design, were informed by these frameworks. The ecological systems theory provides an important structural framework for analyzing and understanding how various contexts interact with and influence community college student parents and their children.

In this case, the authors place BIPOC mothers in the center of the system to understand how various systems impacted access to childcare opportunities and early childhood education for their children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors sought to understand the interactions between the different systems as they related to respondents' childcare needs and persistence in their community college

settings. This included examining the different support structures that assisted mothers with their childcare needs. The support structures encompassed those in the microsystem (e.g., family, friends, community college) as well as spanned the myriad of variables that reside in the mesosystem (e.g., number of hours worked remotely and in person during the pandemic) and the exosystem (e.g., community social services). This ecological framework acknowledges that individuals, in this case, community college students who are parents, do not exist in a vacuum but are impacted by numerous systems outside of their control. For example, survey questions included asking, “Did you receive any public assistance to subsidize your childcare costs?” and “Do you currently use any family/friend support in your childcare needs?” to capture the complexity of our participants’ worlds.

The authors also center their work on Yosso’s (2005) concept of community wealth. Community cultural wealth identifies six types of capital that students possess: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. Aspirational capital refers to the “ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (p.77). Linguistic capital includes all the skills that accompany being able to communicate in more than one language. Familial capital acknowledges the cultural knowledge that is often nurtured among family members and includes a sense of community history, cultural intuition and memory. Social capital recognizes the networks of community and people resources, including the emotional and instrumental support “to navigate through society’s institutions” (p. 79). Navigational capital refers to “skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (p. 80). Resistance culture refers to the skills and knowledge that are developed through oppositional behavior that addresses issues of inequality.

As was mentioned, previously, the survey questions used in this study were designed to understand how BIPOC mothers used their community cultural wealth to address childcare needs during the COVID-19 pandemic within the context of their ecological systems. The authors are informed by culturally sustaining pedagogical practices (Coulter & Jimenez-Silva, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017) to draw implications and recommendations for how community colleges can draw from BIPOC mothers’ strengths to inform policies related to early childhood education and childcare opportunities to support these students throughout their academic trajectories.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the lives of students worldwide, forcing educational institutions to rapidly transition to virtual teaching and serving students through an online platform. For mothers who identify as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), who are enrolled in California community colleges, this sudden shift has compounded the challenges associated with balancing academic responsibilities, familial obligations, and childcare. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979) and Yosso’s concept of community wealth (2005) to select the literature sections below, this literature review aims to provide a deeper understanding of how various community and institutional factors influence these mothers’ experiences during and after the pandemic. Additionally, this review informs the current study’s research questions centered on the experiences of BIPOC mothers within the California Community College system as they relate to their academic, personal, and familial responsibilities.

### *National and California Community College Demographics*

The Community College Research Center (CCRC, 2023) reports that 8.9 million students enrolled in community colleges across the U.S. during the 2020-21 academic year, which represented 41% of all U.S. undergraduate students. Table 1 presents the percentage distribution of race/ethnicities for Fall 2021

enrollment data nationwide, as reported by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2023), and specifically for the California Community College system, sourced from the statewide reporting system, Data Mart, maintained by the California Community College State Chancellor's Office. The California Community College Resource Center (CCRC, 2023) found that in fall 2021, 850,000 fewer students enrolled in community colleges nationally as compared to the fall of 2019. Furthermore, enrollment declines were significant amongst various ethnic groups as follows: Native American (-15%), Black (-14%), White (-13%), Hispanic (-12%), and Asian (-11%).

**Table 1:** Race and Ethnic Composition of Community College Students in the U.S. and California for Fall 2021

Race/Ethnicity	U.S. CC Percent	CA CC Percent
White	45%	24%
Latinx/Hispanic	27%	48%
African American/Black	12%	5%
Asian/Pacific Islander	6%	14%
Two or more races	4%	4%
Other or unknown	4%	4%
Native American	1%	.3%

Note. The percentages represent the distribution of individuals by race/ethnicity.

Table 2 displays the gender composition of undergraduate students in the United States and California Community Colleges for Fall 2021, based on data from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2023) and the California Community College Chancellor's Office data system, Data Mart. Highlighting the gender composition of community college students both within the United States and California allows for a comparative analysis, revealing similarities between the demographic distributions. The percentages depicted in Table 2 indicate that the gender demographics within the California Community College system closely mirror those of the broader U.S. community college population. Furthermore, by presenting this data, we illuminate the representative nature of California Community Colleges within the larger context of national community college demographics, providing valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers alike.

**Table 2:** Gender Composition of Community College Students in the U.S. and California for Fall 2021

Gender	U.S. CC Percent	CA CC Percent
Female	59%	56%
Male	41%	43%

Note. The percentages represent the distribution of individuals by gender. California Community Colleges remaining percentages are allocated to 1% unknown and .3% non-binary.

Table 3 presents age composition among community college students in California and the United States for Fall 2021. The data, sourced from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), allows for a comprehensive snapshot of community college students both nationally and within California. California's community colleges age categories closely align with the national distribution. While both California and the national statistics allocate over a quarter to serving individuals aged 20 to 24, both at 27%, California sees a lower proportion of students aged 19 or less, at 32% compared to the national rate of 42%. Conversely, California's community colleges enroll a higher percentage of students aged 25 to 29, 30 to 34, and 50 or older when compared to the national proportions.

**Table 3:** Age Composition of U.S. and California Community College Students in Fall 2021

Age	U.S. CC Percent	CA CC Percent
19 or less	42%	32%
20 to 24	27%	27%
25 to 29	11%	12%
30 to 34	7%	8%
35 to 39	5%	6%
40 to 49	5%	7%
50 or older	3%	8%

Note. The percentages represent the distribution of individuals by age. Remaining percentages for both state and national rates are for ages unknown.

The most current data available which systematically examined the average household income is based on 2015-16 data analyzed by CCRC (2023) and it differentiated between dependent and independent students. Overall, 37% of community college students had household incomes under \$20,000 (23% for dependent students and 47% for independent students), 30% of students reported household incomes between \$20,000 and \$49,999 (38% for dependent and 31% for independent), and 33% of students indicated incomes of \$50,000 and higher (49% dependent and 22% independent).

### *Parenting Students in Community College*

More than 1 out of 5 community college students report that they are parents, which translates into almost 4 million students that are pursuing a postsecondary degree while they are raising children. Of these parenting students, 70% are mothers (Cruse, Holtzman, Gault, Croom, & Polk, 2019). Additionally, the median age for student parents is 33 with 60% of student parents 30 years or older and 25% between 24-29 (Cruse et al., 2020).

Most student parents are people of color with 2 out of 5 Black women, slightly more than 1 out of 3 Native American/Pacific Islander women, and 1 out of every 4 Latinas enrolled in college reporting that they are also raising children (Cruse et al., 2019). Although there is a substantial return on investment in

community colleges for single mothers with increased earnings of \$8,000 more per year with a two-year degree compared to a high school diploma, only 28% of first-time, student parents in two-year institutions graduate with a degree or certificate within six years (Cruse et al., 2019).

Student parents are more likely to enroll in community colleges disproportionately compared to other types of postsecondary institutions with 42% of all student parents attending public, 2-year institutions (Cruse et al., 2019). According to the American Association of Community Colleges, 47% of parenting students between 18-24 years of age attend community colleges while 15% attend public four-year colleges, and 16% attend private for-profit institutions. In comparison, 31% of non-parenting students between 18-24 years of age attend public, two-year colleges; 37% attend public four-years; and 5% attend private for-profit colleges/universities (Ryberg, Rosenberg, & Warren, 2021).

Many challenges exist for parenting students, especially for single mothers pursuing a postsecondary degree. Challenges include institutions lacking the financial resources to fully support parenting students (Cox & Sallee, 2018) and limited childcare centers on campus to serve the needs of all parenting students (Huerta et al., 2021). Slightly more than half of all student parents (53%) have children between the ages of 0 to 5 years of age while 47% have children 6 years or older (Cruse et al., 2020).

*Lack of Access to Childcare* – The biggest obstacle that parenting students have identified in terms of their academic pursuits is childcare, especially for those who have young children (under the age of 5) (Carrillo, Harknett, Logan, Luhr & Schneider, 2017). Nationally, between 33% and 53% of student parents report that they count on family friends and neighbors for childcare for children under 5 (Malik, Hamm, Schochet, Novoa, Workman & Jessen-Howard, 2018). Further, Spaulding et al. (2016) found that 50% of low-income student parents have family help with childcare. Even though there is a high need for childcare, childcare facilities on college campuses have been declining with community colleges having decreased the number of childcare facilities by 8% (Eckerson et al., 2016; Gault, 2016).

Thus, even though the number of student parents attending postsecondary institutions, including community colleges, has increased, the number of childcare facilities to meet the needs of student parents has declined (Gault, 2016). Even if a childcare facility exists on a college or university campus, the Institute for Women's Policy reported that 95% of childcare centers on campus have waitlists (Miller, 2010). Access to the childcare center on campus is a variable that needs to be considered beyond whether a college campus has a childcare center.

Even when parents are able to access childcare centers, there are affordability issues, especially for low-income families, given that the cost of childcare is \$7,000 - \$8,000 per year (Williams et al., 2022). According to the "Price of Care: 2021 Child Care Affordability Analysis" by Child Care Aware of America, the average annual child care cost for a 4-year-old in California is \$12,740. Student parents would need to "work anywhere from 30 to 90 hours per week to cover child care and tuition costs at a public college or university in the U.S." (Williams et al., 2022, p.13).

*Living in Poverty* – Almost 9 in 10 single mother students live in or near poverty compared to 68% of student parents (Cruse et al., 2020). Additionally, 68% of student parents in community colleges reported housing insecurity between 2019 and 2020 while 17% reported being homeless and 53% reported food insecurity (Baker-Smith, Coca, Goldrick-Rab, Looker, Richardson, & Williams, 2020). Also, almost 60% of student parents reported working at least 20 hours per week while 33% of these students reported working 40 hours or more in addition to being students (Cruse et al., 2020). During COVID-19, it was estimated that 36% of all student parents including 45% of student mothers who worked did not have

access to paid sick leave. It was also estimated that 1 in 5 student parents earned less than \$10 per hour while 52% earned between \$10 and \$19 per hour (Cruse et al., 2020).

*Basic Needs for Student Parents* – For community college students, reliable transportation has been cited as a basic need and should be examined in addition to food and housing insecurity (Baugus, 2020). For all student parents, Generation Hope (2020) found that 21% of student parents reported that transportation to and from campus was difficult or very difficult. However, there is a dearth of research examining the availability of reliable transportation for student parents and for such parents attending two-year public institutions.

Student parents within the California Community College system are reported as attempting and accumulating fewer credits per term, along with being less likely to enroll full-time (Reed, Grosz, Kurlaender, & Cooper, 2021). Generation Hope (2020) found that “more than 60% of their respondents missed between 1 and 5+ days of class in their last semester due to lack of child care.” Additionally, this study found that 3% of student parents shared that their campuses had a policy that would allow them to take their child/children to class with them. Students who are also parents and those who have lost work since March 2020 are also much more likely to cancel their plans for continuing their community college enrollment (Amour, 2020). Lastly, when looking at academic outcomes, parent students are less likely to earn a degree or certificate (Reed, Grosz, Kurlaender, & Cooper, 2021). Given the significant barriers that have been outlined above, it is critical to support this student population in their academic journeys.

## **THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CONTEXT**

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the inequities already present in our country’s post-secondary institutions. Many colleges and universities turned to remote instruction beginning in March of 2020 (Manze, Rauh, Smith-Faust, and Watnick, 2021). During the 2020-21 academic year, numerous institutions of higher education returned to various forms of in-person instruction on campuses and continued to offer remote or included hybrid offerings. In Smalley’s (2020) study, data from the College Crisis Initiative regarding Fall 2020 academic instruction plans among approximately 3,000 colleges, community colleges, and universities in the United States were analyzed. The results indicated that 44% of institutions offered fully or primarily online instruction, 27% offered fully or primarily in-person instruction, 21% utilized a hybrid model, and the remaining institutions employed an “Other” type of instruction. As stated previously, the COVID-19 pandemic magnified a number of challenges to many already underserved populations. While online instruction provided a great range of options for many parenting students, parent students reported mixed experiences with online classes (Althus, 2021).

Alon et al. (2021) report that whereas recent recessions in the U.S. usually had a disproportionate impact on men’s employment, leading some to call them “manceSSIONS,” the pandemic recession of 2020 could be called a “shecession” given the disproportionate impact on women. More specifically, they found that women working from home during the pandemic spent more work time also providing childcare and experienced greater productivity reductions than men. Similarly, we can infer that parenting students’ time spent in online courses was impacted by their childcare responsibilities at home.

The closures of schools and many childcare centers added to the already heavy loads of responsibilities of parenting students, causing many of the students mental distress (Althus, 2021). Brooks et al. (2020), in an early review of the literature focusing on the impact of the quarantine, reported that symptoms experienced by many individuals included anger, confusion, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Stressors that impacted individuals’ mental health included infection fears, frustration, boredom, inadequate supplies, and financial loss. Working specifically with community college students, Parham



(2020) reported that 75% of this population of students reported an increase in stress, anxiety, and loneliness. Several studies have found that women experienced more severe levels of anxiety and depression than men (Panchal, Saunders, Rudowitz, & Cox, 2023; Villalobos & Rodriguez, 2021). Furthermore, Goldrick-Rab, Welton, and Coca (2020) in their survey of college students documented that 30 percent of student parents reported experiencing symptoms of moderate to severe depression.

Understanding the experiences of BIPOC mothers in community colleges during the COVID-19 pandemic is essential for shaping policy and institutional support mechanisms. This literature review serves as a backdrop for the current study, which aims to investigate the experiences of BIPOC mothers of young children enrolled in California Community Colleges as they pertained to their childcare needs and what resources (familial, institutional, and community) these mothers accessed.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the demographic characteristics of students who self-identify as mothers of color who were enrolled in California community colleges during COVID-19?
2. What familial and community college support do mothers of color who were attending California community colleges report accessing during COVID-19? How did this support differ for single mothers as compared to non-single mothers?

## METHODS

### *Sample*

The California Community College system is the largest community college system in the U.S. with 116 colleges, and now an online college, and enrolls 20% of all U.S. community college students (CCCCO, 2020). Authors solicited participation in the state-wide survey among the colleges through a variety of methods, including social media, direct emails, listservs, and personal networks. The student target population was BIPOC females and non-binary individuals who identified as mothers with at least one child who was 5 years or younger during spring 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Additionally, these individuals were asked to identify which California community college they were enrolled in during the 2019-2020 academic year or after the start of the pandemic and as well as their ethnicity.

In an effort to filter out students beyond the target population, respondents were asked a set of preliminary questions to identify if they would qualify for the study. Survey respondents who self-identified as meeting the three qualifying criteria in the pre-survey – 1) females and non-binary individuals who identified as mothers of young children, 2) people of color, and 3) attended a California community college – were given access to the full survey to complete. Any individual who did not meet all three of these criteria were not given access to complete the survey and were excluded from the analysis.

The survey addressed the constructs of basic needs including food, housing, transportation, and childcare insecurities as they were experienced by BIPOC student parents with young children who were enrolled in a California community college during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors used a stratified sample to ensure representation from all three geographical regions of California – northern, central and southern. Authors actively recruited institutions to participate from all three geographical regions. Such participation included a commitment from Institutional Research offices to distribute the survey to their students.

The survey instrument was available through an online platform (Qualtrics), and anonymous links to access the survey were disseminated in a variety of methods. Survey links were disseminated for some institutions through a local dissemination plan, such as an institution-wide email, while simultaneously, authors posted the anonymous survey link across social media platforms. Anonymous survey links were available from September 5, 2022 to August 7, 2023. Marketing efforts to promote student participation in the survey included providing links to student surveys via social media outlets, commonly used Community College listservs, and word of mouth. For some institutions, local efforts included posting flyers and sending out personalized emails to students to encourage participation. Due to the dissemination methods for the student survey, the total number of California community college students the survey was sent out to is unknown, and therefore a response rate could not be calculated.

Among the 116 California community colleges, 14 institutions committed to full participation in the in-depth component of the study. These included a total of 5 institutions from southern California, 5 institutions from central California, and 4 institutions from northern California. In exchange for their participation, the authors will provide an individualized report to these institutions and/or their community college districts.

### *Internal Validity*

Cognitive interviews were conducted prior to data collection as a method to ensure survey quality and to strengthen internal validity (Willis & Artino, 2013). Six cognitive interviews were conducted by Authors 3 and 4 on drafts of the survey protocol to ensure that questions were interpreted in a similar fashion, strengthening internal validity. Individuals who met the pre-survey criteria – females and non-binary individuals who identified as mothers of color with young children at the start of COVID-19 who attended a community college – were recruited for the cognitive interviews. Recruitment efforts for these individuals were similar to the recruitment process used for the final survey which included advertising on social media platforms.

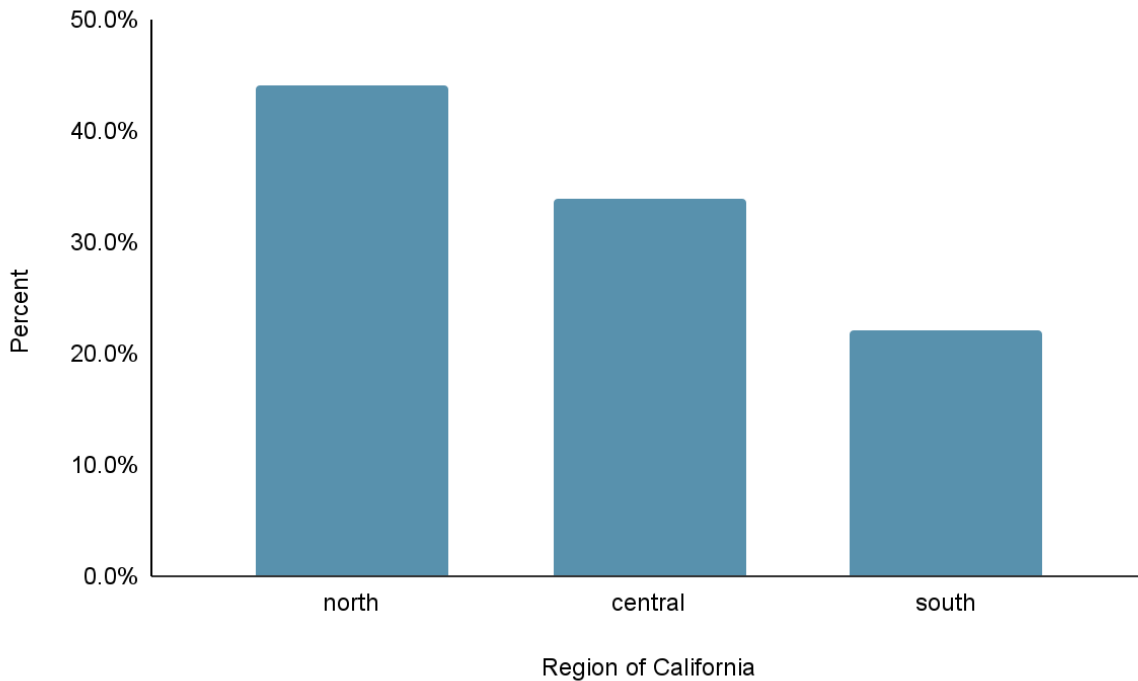
For each cognitive interview, participants shared their screen via Zoom while they completed the survey. The authors took notes on how the participant reacted to each question and the participant's physical demeanor including facial expressions and body posture, as well as the amount of time it took to answer each question. The authors asked the participants how they interpreted the question and why they responded in the way they did. In addition, the authors recorded any additional information shared by the cognitive interview participant. This information was then used to refine survey questions including eliminating questions that were confusing, adding questions for greater clarity, and/or adjusting questions to capture the information of interest.

Each cognitive interview took 90-120 minutes to complete. A financial incentive was provided for each individual who participated in the cognitive interview. Data from individuals who completed the cognitive interview were not included in the final analysis.

## **RESULTS**

Students from all 116 California community colleges were represented in the final analytic sample which was composed of 2,711 respondents. As displayed in figure 2 below, for the final analytic sample, 44.1% of respondents reported attending southern California two-year colleges, 33.9% of respondents reported attending central California two-year colleges, and 22.0% reported attending institutions in northern California.

Figure 2. Distribution of Respondents by College Location in California (N=2711)



Initially, there were 4,539 respondents who completed the pre-survey. However, only respondents who met the criteria as mothers of color with young children who attended a California community college anytime between 2019 and 2022 were included in the final analytic sample. After this filtering process, there were a total of 2,711 survey responses. Among the demographic questions of the survey, participants were asked to respond to the question, “Do you consider yourself a single mother?” Table 4 below provides a breakdown of responses among the final analytic sample. Of those respondents, 4 out of 10 respondents (40.2%) identified as single mothers.

**Table 4:** Proportion of Single Mothers Among Survey Participants (n = 2633)

Response	Percent
No	54.4%
Yes	41.4%
I prefer not to answer	5.1%

*Ethnicity* – Table 5 displays the distribution among survey participants. Almost half of the respondents (46.3%) identified as Latinx/Hispanic while more than a quarter (26.2%) identified as African American/Black. Additionally, 11.8% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 5.3% as Native American/Alaskan Native, 3.9% as Middle Eastern and 6.5% as two or more ethnicities.

**Table 5:** Ethnic and Racial Distribution Among Survey Participants (n = 2633)

Race/Ethnicity	Percent
Latinx/Hispanic	46.3%
African American/Black	26.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	11.8%
Two or more ethnicities	6.5%
Native American/Alaskan Native	5.3%
Middle Eastern	3.9%

Note. The percentages represent the distribution of individuals by race/ethnicity.

*Age* – Table 6 displays the age distribution statistics of all survey respondents. Age was somewhat normally distributed with slight skewness towards the higher values. The minimum respondent was 18 years of age while the oldest was 66 years of age. Additionally, 50% of respondents were between the ages of 26 and 35 years of age while 95% were between 21 and 44 years of age.

**Table 6:** Age Distribution Statistics of Survey Respondents (n=2693)

Statistical Measure	Age (Years)
Mean	31
Median	30
Standard Deviation	7.1

*Number of Children* – Table 7 below displays responses among survey participants related to the number of children (individuals under the age of 18) that currently live in their household. More than half (54.7%) of respondents reported having at least one child younger than 18 years of age while 26.7% reported having 2 children and 11.4% with 3 children under 18 years of age. Less than 1 in 10 (7.2%) reported having 4 or more children under the age of 18. Additionally, 68.2% of respondents reported that they had at least one child under 8 years old with almost 1 in 4 of those respondents (24.2%) reporting that they had at least 2 children under 8 years of age.

**Table 7**

Distribution of Respondents by Number of Children Under 18 Years of Age (N = 2688)

Number of children under 18	Percent
At least one child under 18	54.7%
Two children under 18	26.7%
Three children under 18	11.4%
Four or more children under 18	7.2%

*Household Income* – More than 1 in 5 (23.2%) of respondents reported annual household incomes less than \$20,000 with an additional 18.5% reporting incomes between \$20,001 and \$40,000, 14.4% reporting incomes between \$40,001 and \$60,000, and 13.5% reporting incomes between \$60,001 and \$90,000. This means that 6 in 10, or 60.8%, of respondents reported annual household incomes of \$60,000 or less.

*Hours Worked Per Week* – One out of four, or 24.9%, of respondents reported working more than 30 hours per week while 30.6% reported working 11-30 hours per week. Additionally, 29.4% of respondents reported not working outside of the home with 41.2% of such respondents reporting that they were not looking for work while 58.8% stated that they were looking for work.

*Reliable Transportation* – As displayed in Table 8, almost 3 out of 4, or 74.8%, of respondents reported having reliable transportation most or all of the time with 1 in 5, or 21.5%, reporting that “sometimes” they have reliable transportation or access to reliable transportation. However, there was a significant difference when disaggregating by single vs. non-single mothers on how often respondents reported having reliable transportation or access to reliable transportation. Of those respondents (3.7%) who reported that they do not have reliable transportation at all, 72.3% were single mothers while 23.8% were not single mothers ( $\chi^2(12, N=2711) = 2424.538, p < .001$  (Table 7).

**Table 8:** Availability of reliable transportation among respondents (N=2711)

Description	Percent
Reliable transportation most/all of the time	74.8%
Reliable transportation sometimes	21.5%
No reliable transportation	3.8%

**Table 9:** Differences in reliable transportation availability between single and non-single mothers (n=101)

Description	Percent
Single mothers with no reliable transportation	72.3%*
Non-single mothers with no reliable transportation	23.8%

\* $p < .001$

Note. Percentages calculated from the 3.7% of respondents without reliable transportation

*Meeting Childcare Needs* – Almost half, or 48.5% of respondents reported that they utilize family and/or friend support for their childcare needs. Additionally, 43.2% of respondents reported that they receive some form of public assistance to help subsidize their childcare expenses. Moreover, a significantly higher proportion of single mothers (33.9%) reported that they receive some form of public assistance compared to non-single mothers (25.5%), ( $\chi^2(6, N=2711) = 153.654, p < .001$ ). Finally, slightly more than half, or 50.7%, reported that they received emergency aid money from their California community college during or after COVID.

*Anxiety Related to Childcare Needs* – Almost 1 in 6, or 16.7%, of mothers reported that their level of anxiety related to childcare issues is 6-10 on a scale from 0 to 10 with 10 being the highest level of anxiety possible. Additionally, 32.7% of respondents reported that their anxiety level was between 8-10 on the same scale. Single mothers reported a significantly higher level of anxiety related to childcare ( $M=6.68, SD=2.75$ ) compared to non-single mothers ( $M=5.44, SD=2.84$ ),  $t(1672)=8.90, p < .001$ .

*Withdrawing From Classes Related to Childcare Needs* – Of those respondents who reported on whether they had withdrawn or dropped any of their classes because of childcare issues between the Spring 2020 semester and 2023, 42.7% of respondents responded in the affirmative that they had withdrawn or dropped classes for this reason. A significantly higher proportion of single mothers (47.5%) reported withdrawing or dropping any classes because of childcare issues compared to non-single mothers (39.1%),  $\chi^2(2, N=1759) = 13.054, p < .01$ .

*Enrolling in Fewer Classes Due to Childcare Needs* – Survey participants were asked to indicate if they had enrolled in fewer classes/units because of childcare issues anytime after spring 2020. Table 10 below displays the proportion of students that indicated enrolling in fewer classes due to childcare needs. Among those who responded, 44.3% of respondents reported enrolling in fewer classes or units because of childcare needs during the same time. More than half, or 55.7%, of single mothers reported that they enrolled in fewer classes because of childcare needs compared to 35.6% of non-single mothers,  $\chi^2(2, N=1732) = 92.296, p < .001$ .

**Table 10:** Survey responses to “Did you enroll in fewer classes/units because of childcare issues between spring 2020 and now?” (n = 1813)

Response	Percent
No	48.5%
Yes	44.3%
I’m not sure	7.1%

*Concentration Interrupted* – Moreover, 3 out of 4, or 75.0%, of respondents, agreed or strongly agreed that they could not concentrate on their studies due to childcare responsibilities. Again, a significantly higher proportion of single mothers (88.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that childcare responsibilities interrupted their concentration compared to non-single mothers (64.6%),  $\chi^2(1, N=1279) = 97.036, p < .001$ .

*Support From Community Colleges* – Slightly more than half (54.6%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their community college provided them with the support that they needed to continue their education. More single mothers (62.3%) agreed or strongly agreed compared to non-single mothers (49.8%) and this difference was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, N=993) = 14.732, p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION AND LESSONS

California community colleges, which serve students from diverse demographics and socio-economic backgrounds, have seen their challenges heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study sheds light on how these institutions have adapted to meet the childcare needs of their students of color who are mothers with young children. Below is a discussion about the compelling preliminary data that has emerged from this study which has revealed a complex tapestry of the needs of community college students who are parents. This study has shed light on the stressors that have exacerbated the community college experience for single mothers, who not only are more inclined to seek public aid but also report higher levels of anxiety associated with the basic need for childcare.

The pandemic has served as a crucible of sorts, testing the resilience, adaptability, and resources of community college students who are parents, particularly mothers of color. This study, supported by the

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, illuminated several key facets of this complex landscape that demand attention from policymakers and educators alike. California's community colleges serve a remarkably diverse population. Among the representative sample in this study, Latinx/Hispanic and African/American Black students make up 46.2% and 26.1%, respectively, underlining the diversity of experiences and challenges within this demographic. Economic vulnerability was a recurring theme; a significant portion of respondents reported annual incomes below \$40,000, shedding light on the financial stressors that many of these student parents face.

It is important to note that the sample surveyed in this study is representative of California community college students, which closely mirror those of community college students at the national level. Moreover, the distribution of institutions participating in this study is reflective of the entire state and our sample is geographically distributed across north, central, and southern regions. This study specifically focused on BIPOC mothers in community colleges, aiming to provide insights into their unique challenges and experiences within the broader context of higher education.

Given the high cost of living in California and that California has the world's 5th largest economy, it is especially important to understand the challenges for student parents within the country's largest community college system given its direct impact on California's workforce. California's living wage salary is \$43.44 for a single adult with one child which is equivalent to an annual household income of \$90,355. Almost three-quarters, or 74.3%, of respondents reported annual household incomes of \$90,000 or less which means that more than 7 out of 10 respondents and their households are not earning a living wage in California.

One striking finding from the study is the high percentage (40.2%) of respondents identifying as single mothers. This subset of the California community college student population faces amplified challenges, especially as they tend to rely more on public assistance and experience higher levels of childcare-related anxiety. This aligns with findings from other scholars (Altaus, 2021; Parham 2020). They are also more likely to seek familial support, echoing Yosso's (2005) concept of community wealth and the critical role of the familial capital in navigating life's challenges.

With many of these students already balancing work commitments of over 30 hours a week alongside their academic pursuits, the availability of reliable childcare becomes not just a convenience but a necessity. The study found that 48.5% of respondents relied on family and friends for childcare, highlighting the essential role of social capital in student parent's lives. Yet, the level of anxiety surrounding childcare issues remains high, affecting academic decisions and outcomes. Nearly one-third of respondents had to drop or withdraw from classes due to childcare concerns.

A cloud of uncertainty hangs over these student parents when it comes to institutional support. Almost 30% of respondents were unsure if they received any form of COVID-19-related aid from their community colleges. This indicates not just a gap in the distribution of resources but also in communication and information dissemination, which needs to be addressed. These preliminary findings serve as starting points for both institutions and districts to begin considering as they expand their basic needs services to students.

The challenges brought into focus by this study call for immediate and targeted policy interventions at both a local and state level. The reliance on public and familial support for childcare among those in the lower income brackets highlights the need for more robust, publicly funded childcare programs. Furthermore, there is a pressing need to disseminate information more effectively, especially related to available aid during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The intersectionality of challenges faced by mothers of color in California's community colleges, from economic pressures to childcare responsibilities, suggests a compelling need for multifaceted policy solutions. While our study has limitations, such as non-response bias, it offers valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and social work professionals. The next logical step would include longitudinal studies and in-depth qualitative studies to deepen our understanding of these issues and better inform future policies and institutional support structures.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the California community colleges extended limited emergency aid, but awareness about these resources was lacking, necessitating improved communication and policy adaptation. Mothers of color predominantly relied on familial and social support for childcare, but also leaned into available public assistance— indicating the importance of making such resources accessible and known. The reliance on familial and social networks suggests that there is untapped community cultural wealth. This can influence how we shape early childhood education policies to be more inclusive and effective. An example of such policies can include utilizing public subsidies to compensate family members that support childcare needs.

By shining a light on the complexities faced by this vulnerable student demographic, we hope to spur meaningful conversations and actionable recommendations that can bring about real and sustained improvement in the educational experiences and outcomes of California community college students who are mothers of color.

## LIMITATIONS

This study, while offering valuable insights into the experiences of BIPOC mothers in California community colleges during the COVID-19 pandemic, is subject to several limitations.

*Generalizability:* The sample, drawn from the California Community College system, may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across different geographic locations or educational settings. Therefore, findings may have limited generalizability to community colleges outside of California or to four-year institutions.

*Bias:* Given the nature of the survey-based research, non-response bias is a potential limitation. The views and experiences of those who chose not to participate or who were unreachable may differ from those who responded, potentially skewing the results. In addition, the reliance of self-reported data can introduce bias, as respondents may have differing interpretations of questions or may respond in socially desirable manners. Non-response bias is important to consider given that student parents facing greater hardship (like those without internet access or those overwhelmed by childcare and work) are underrepresented in survey responses, potentially skewing results. Self-reporting bias is also worth pointing out, considering the possibility that respondents might interpret questions differently or respond in a socially desirable way. This bias could lead to over or under-reporting of issues like stress or satisfaction with community college resources.

Despite these inherent biases, the consistency of our findings with external research underlines their strength and relevance. The demographic parallels and socioeconomic challenges identified in our study closely align with those reported by Cruse et al. (2020), validating the representativeness of our sample despite the potential for non-response and self-reporting biases. This alignment suggests that the results of this study are not only robust but may also be reflective of broader trends among student parents in community colleges, particularly in California.



*Dataset:* It is crucial to acknowledge the limitations inherent in our dataset. Firstly, the cross-sectional nature of the data offers only a snapshot of participants' experiences at a specific point in time. Additionally, 35.5% of responses are missing in the childcare-related anxiety section. This observation suggests that this particular inquiry may evoke discomfort or sensitivity among respondents, potentially hindering their willingness to provide a response. It is noteworthy that the missingness rate in the childcare-related anxiety section of the survey tool surpasses that of other inquiries. Notably, questions regarding academic behaviors, such as withdrawing from classes, enrolling in fewer courses, experiencing difficulties concentrating in class, and assessing college support, had missingness rates ranging from 38% to 50%. It's important to mention that the standalone question with the highest missingness rate, as opposed to being part of a Likert scale, was the question concerning childcare-related anxiety. These limitations warrant careful consideration in interpreting and contextualizing the findings of this study.

Despite these limitations, the preliminary findings to this study contribute significantly to the understanding of the challenges faced by BPOC mothers in community colleges. The results highlight the necessity for policy reforms and targeted institutional support specifically designed to address the needs of this demographic student population. Future research could build on this work by employing longitudinal and qualitative methodologies to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of these challenges and their impact on student educational outcomes. This is especially important given that the student-centered funding formula (SCFF), which is the method in which California community colleges receive apportionment funding, takes educational outcomes into account.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This article highlights the crucial need for targeted support for students who are parents in California's community colleges, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic which exacerbated existing challenges such as balancing academic, employment, and childcare responsibilities. The study suggests implementing childcare programs and educational supports, particularly for single mothers and low-income families, as a substantial portion of these students were uncertain about accessing pandemic-related aid. By prioritizing childcare as a fundamental basic need, we seek to enrich the educational landscape for this crucial yet often overlooked demographic.

Key implications from the study include enhancing access to affordable, quality childcare and creating flexible academic work schedules to help parent students manage their multiple responsibilities. The findings advocate for expanded childcare subsidies, partnerships with local childcare providers, and flexible scheduling options to alleviate the pressures of childcare on academic performance. Additionally, the study underscores the need for comprehensive support services such as mental health counseling and financial aid navigation, suggesting that community colleges expand these services to meet the specific needs of parent students more effectively.

In response to these insights, the recommendations propose leveraging existing financial resources, refining analytics to better track and support various subsets of parent-students, and linking accountability metrics to financial incentives.

- 1. Leverage Annual Compendium for Funding Parent-Students** (California Community College Chancellor's Office 2023-24 Compendium of Allocations & Resources, 2023): Given the heightened challenges faced by parent-students during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial for community colleges to effectively utilize the annual Compendium of Allocations and Resources from the Chancellor's Office. This compendium can serve as a resource and tool in pinpointing the categorical funding options that can be best mobilized each year to aid parent-students in balancing childcare, academics, and work

responsibilities. We encourage institutions, specifically departments that offer student support programs, to identify potential categorical funding opportunities that they can tap into to best support their parent-student population. By providing this support, institutions are fostering an environment where students can thrive in their academic journeys.

**2. Data Indicators Focused on Parent-Students:** In light of the distinct challenges that the pandemic has posed for parent-students, it has intensified the need for more nuanced data tracking for community college student subsets. Community colleges should refine their data analytics to not only identify parent-students but also categorize them into subgroups such as single parents and number of children, along with children's ages. This disaggregated data can better inform targeted interventions and can be crucial in evaluating student outcomes, particularly in the era of COVID-19. By identifying student parents as a *special population*, such as veteran students or foster youth, data can be disaggregated further by additional critical variables, such as race/ethnicity, gender, single-parent status, and socioeconomic status, in order to incentivize colleges to deliver targeted support. Such detailed, disaggregated data can offer invaluable insights into student experiences and enable more effective program development.

**3. Tie Accountability Metrics to Financial Incentives:** Policymakers need to incorporate more accountability measures to ensure that parent-students receive the necessary support needed for their academic success. If policymakers are serious about recognizing childcare as an essential basic need for student success, accountability mechanisms must be integrated into funding models. A practical way to do this is by tying these measures to the Student Centered Funding Formula's supplemental funding component (California Community College Chancellor's Office Student-Centered Funding Formula, n.d.). This component currently considers students eligible for College Promise Grants, Pell Grants, or those covered under AB 540. By putting childcare on the agenda as a fundamental basic need for parent-students in California's community colleges, policy makers, both at the local and state level, can pave the way for more effective resource allocation and policy development, especially in the challenging context posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of BIPOC mothers who are students in California's community college system. The literature reviewed and the resulting policy implications underscore a pressing need for targeted support in areas such as childcare, academic flexibility, and mental health services. By implementing the recommendations proposed—leveraging existing funding options, refining data analytics, and incorporating accountability metrics—there is a strong potential to improve the quality of life and educational outcomes for this critical demographic.

As policymakers and stakeholders consider these recommendations, it is vital to continue rigorous research and evaluation, ideally via longitudinal studies that consider both quantitative and qualitative data. Only through a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach can we fully understand the evolving challenges and opportunities facing parent-students in California's community colleges, thereby facilitating their academic and personal success in these post-pandemic times.

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