

101: SINGLE MOMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Who are Single Moms in Higher Ed?

4 Million 

Student parents make up roughly one-fifth of the postsecondary student population

43%

of student parents are single mothers¹

1.7 Million

Nearly 10% of all U.S. undergraduate students are single mothers²

Racial/Ethnic Demographics of Single Mother Students³

31%

are Black

23%

are American Indian/ Alaska Native

17%

are women of more than one race

16%

are Hispanic

13%

are white

7%

are Asian/ Pacific Islander

Financial Insecurity⁴

1.8X

Single mothers with a high school diploma in the U.S. are 1.8 times more likely to live in poverty than when they hold an associate degree

3X

Single mothers with a high school diploma in the U.S. are 3 times more likely to live in poverty than when they hold a bachelor's degree

88%

of single-mother students have incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level

62%

of single-mother students work 20 hours or more per week

54%

of single-mother students are enrolled in school full-time or a combination of full- and part-time

Student Mothers Report Difficulty in Meeting their Basic Needs⁵

51%

Emergencies



28%

Transportation



33%

Clothing



27%

Housing



25%

Child Care



21%

Food



Postsecondary Access and Attainment

28%

of single mothers have some college education, but no credential⁶

44%

of single mothers attend public two-year institutions⁷

21%

of all women enrolled in community college are single mothers⁸

59%

of single mothers report that student loans allowed them to attend and complete college⁹

Economic Impact of Postsecondary Attainment¹⁰

Single moms with postsecondary education earn more over their lifetime than single moms with only a high school education. Individual Additional Lifetime Earnings of Single Moms:

\$256,000

Associate degree

vs.

\$625,000

Bachelor's degree

Single Moms with Postsecondary Education Contribute More in Taxes

Individual Additional Lifetime Tax Contributions by Credential



\$71,000

Associate degree

vs.

\$220,000

Bachelor's degree

Endnotes

¹ Institute for Women's Policy Research. "Parents in College: By the Numbers." August 2020.

² Institute for Women's Policy Research. "Investing in Single Mothers' Higher Education: National and State Estimates of the Costs and Benefits of Single Mothers' Educational Attainment to Individuals, Families, and Society." December 2019.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dundar, Afet, Tighe, Lauren, and Turner, Jennifer. "Underwater: Student Mothers and Fathers Struggle to Support their Families and Pay Off College Loans." Institute for Women's Policy Research. April 2023.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Institute for Women's Policy Research. "Single Mothers in College: Growing Enrollment, Financial Challenges, and the Benefits of Attainment." September 2017.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Institute for Women's Policy Research. "Investing in Single Mothers' Higher Education: National and State Estimates of the Costs and Benefits of Single Mothers' Educational Attainment to Individuals, Families, and Society." December 2019.