

THE MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY STUDENT PARENTS

PREPARED FOR THE JED FOUNDATION
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Ascend's Mission Statement

Ascend at the Aspen Institute is the national hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations that move children and their parents toward educational success and economic security.

Ascend at the Aspen Institute takes a two-generation approach to its work and a gender and racial equity lens to its analysis. Two-generation approaches provide opportunities for and meet the needs of children and the adults in their lives together. We believe that education, economic supports, social capital, and health and well-being are the core elements that create a legacy of opportunity that passes from one generation to the next.

Ascend's Vision Statement

We envision an America in which a legacy of economic security and educational success passes from one generation to the next.

The Jed Foundation's Mission Statement

JED is a nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation's teens and young adults. We're partnering with high schools and colleges to strengthen their mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention programs and systems. We're equipping teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge to help themselves and each other. We're encouraging community awareness, understanding and action for young adult mental health.

JED's Vision Statement

We envision a future where:

- Every high school and college has a comprehensive system that supports emotional health and reduces the risks of substance misuse and suicide.
- All teens and young adults are equipped to navigate mental health challenges, to seek and give help, and emotionally prepared to enter adulthood and fulfill their potential.
- Our communities support the emotional well-being and mental health of teens and young adults.
- Mental health is recognized as part of general health and wellness and is not associated with shame, secrecy or prejudice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A growing segment of the nontraditional student population is the student parent. Data estimates place the number of college students who are raising a child in the range of 26 to 34 percent. Yet this growing population of college students, while significant, is still relatively understudied.

Most of the information about the mental health of student parents is gathered from survey data. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice [#RealCollege Survey](#) found that parents reported experiencing moderately severe to severe levels of depression, anxiety, and severe anxiety. [The National Student Parent Survey](#) administered by Generation Hope reported that 20 percent felt to varying degrees that they were unwelcome on their campuses. Also, as chronicled in the 2018 Ascend at the Aspen Institute September Convening Report, participants of the September 2018 meeting shared feelings of “being an outsider and not being seen or understood by their school, work, or community” (Alexander, Arnold, & Williams, 2018, p. 5). In addition, “patterns of trauma surfaced through many of the stories” (p. 4).

In addition to the information obtained from the above survey data, inferences on the mental health of student parents can be made by exploring the research that examines the mental health challenges faced by the groups with which the student parent population intersects: college students and parents. However, any conclusions will be based on tangential associations conjectured from the data. Designing a study specifically on the mental health of student parents will provide a significant and important contribution to the research scholarship in education, psychology, social work, and public health, which so far has not fully explored the needs of this particular population of the college community.

A mixed-methods study, where both quantitative and qualitative data are collected in stages, would garner a bounty of information on the mental health challenges faced by student parents. Additionally, the study should incorporate a two-generation approach, where the child of the parenting student is also considered. The intersectionality of race and gender is another important factor to be counted in any future study examining the mental health of student parents. The social and practical realities of these intersecting social identities — race, gender, and student group — present specific and unique implications for the student parent college experience as well as any associated obstacles. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic should also be considered when developing a study exploring the mental health challenges experienced by student parents. The COVID-19 crisis has intensified the concerns, stressors, and obstacles faced by all students.

Finally, collaborating with organizations that have already begun collecting data on this population might be helpful. Potential partners include The Hope Center located in Philadelphia and Generation Hope located in Washington, DC. Likewise, partnering with a university would help with both recruitment and administration of the study. The City University of New York, with its large and diverse student body and range of services and programs specifically to help parenting students achieve academic success, would be an ideal partner for a collaborative study exploring the mental health challenges of student parents.



INTRODUCTION

The term student parent refers to undergraduate students with children under the age of 18 years. The purpose of this literature review is to present the JED team with a synthesis of the scholarship and an overview of the primary source materials relevant to the mental health challenges of this particular college community. The summary of work outlined below is based on the examination of materials provided to me by the team, as well as an academic investigation of the extant research on the subject matter. I found an abundance of studies on the mental health of college students in general. There is also ample research that explores the psychological stressors of parenthood as well as the mental well-being of single parents, and single mothers in particular. However, as Ascend at the Aspen Institute states in its [Postsecondary Success for Parents mental health brief](#), “Research at the intersection of parents and mental health, students and mental health, and the unique needs of parents who are also students is extremely limited” (2019, p. 1). Indeed, my own review found a dearth of scholarship that explores the mental health challenges experienced by student parents as the specific study population.

There is, however, ample descriptive information from survey data, which provides insight about the size and growth trends of this population. Statistics show that 26 percent of the undergraduate population — about 1 in 4 undergraduate students — are student parents, and this student community is growing (Crispin & Nikolaou, 2019; Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019). Considering the significant prevalence of student parents, institutions and policymakers are wise to explore the needs of this college community, as well as the challenges that might hinder their academic achievement, retention, and degree completion. In the following paragraphs I will provide an outline of the relevant existing literature that addresses the mental health challenges faced by student parents in particular.¹ Although there is a scarcity of literature on this particular college community, inferences can be made by exploring the research that examines the mental health challenges faced by the groups with which the student parent population intersects: college students and parents. Thus, I will also provide a summary of the literature available on those populations and synthesize it with the extant literature on student parents. I will then make recommendations for future research.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the population of college students will always be undergraduates.



METHODOLOGY

The strategy used to conduct this literature review is the “exhaustive coverage” method, which is done to be “as comprehensive as possible ... in order to ensure that all relevant studies ... are included in the review and, thus, conclusions are based on this all-inclusive knowledge base” (Paré et al., 2015, online). To that end, scholarship in the fields of education, psychology, mental health, social welfare, and social work were reviewed. A search was conducted of the existing literature for any studies, articles, or other published material on the subject matter, using the keywords, “student-parent,” “college parent,” “college student parent,” “parenting student,” and “mental health” in the queries. Catalogs from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Borough of Manhattan Community College, and The Graduate Center Library websites were explored. As part of the Graduate Center’s Inter-University Doctoral Consortium, the databases at Columbia, Fordham, The New School, NYU, Princeton, Rutgers, SUNY Stony Brook were also accessed (City University of New York Office of Library Services website, 2020, online). Among the major databanks searched were JSTOR, LexisNexis, PsycInfo, EBSCOhost, and WorldCat.

Suitability of the material to be included in this review was established by setting the basic standard that the work must be published in a peer-reviewed, ranked publication. Additionally, unless the investigation or paper introduced new methods, frameworks, or concepts, no study is older than 10 years. Because of the dearth in the literature on this particular college community, the conditions for inclusion were expanded beyond exploring the mental health challenges of the student parent population to include works that met one of more of the following criteria:

- Explores the mental health challenges of parenthood;
- Examines the mental well-being of college students;
- Studies the psychological health of single parents; or
- Researches the overall challenges (not particularly mental health) faced by college students, parenting students, and single parents in college.

The initial content analysis search resulted in hundreds of documents and links to journal articles, books, and other scholarship that matched the keyword query string. I first vetted each document by reading the abstracts and/or descriptions. I then read each of the remaining content pieces and then collated the results according to their relevance to our population of interest.

Additionally, I reviewed works provided to me by the JED team. I consulted these materials and then reviewed the reference sections in each in order to retrieve the primary sources. In total, more than 100 studies, articles, reports, and papers are cited or referenced in this literature review.² The following literature review is a synthesized summary of my search.

² A list of the of the relevant literature on the mental health of student parents and intersecting groups is attached as Appendix A.



THE STUDENT PARENT

The term student parent is not widely used in the literature. Other designations are: (a) students raising children, (b) students with children, and (c) parenting students (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). When referring to the population of students who are parents, the scholarship often uses nontraditional. This designation, however, does not refer solely to students who are parenting while in school, but rather a student who meets one or more of the seven categories that are considered to be outside of the traditional student profile (Choy, 2002). These categories are: (1) does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school; (2) attends school part time for at least part of the academic year; (3) works full time while enrolled; (4) is considered financially independent for purposes of financial aid; (5) has dependents other than a spouse; (6) is a single parent; or (7) does not have a high school diploma (Choy, 2002, p. 203). Fulfilling just one of the aforementioned criteria designates a student as at least “minimally traditional” (Horn, 1996; Pelletier, 2010).

A growing segment of the nontraditional student population is the student parent. Data estimates place the number of college students who are raising a child in the range of 26 to 34 percent (CLASP, 2017; Gault et al., 2014). A [secondary analysis](#) of the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics' [2011-2012 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study](#) by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) found that 4,822,748 college students are raising children — a figure representing 26 percent of the undergraduate student population (Gault et al., 2014; Gault, Reichlin, & Román, 2014). Yet this growing population of college students, while significant, is still relatively understudied (Crispin & Nikolaou, 2019; Gerrard & Roberts, 2006).



MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES OF STUDENT PARENTS

Several organizations are seeking to identify and address the needs of the parenting student population. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, based in Philadelphia and directed by prominent education sociologist Sara Goldrick-Rab, provides resources to nontraditional students. In 2015, the center created the [“#RealCollege Survey”](#) to help institutions assess students’ basic needs. The most recent version, administered in fall 2019, included questions about depression and anxiety, which were fielded to a subset of randomly selected respondents. A [report](#) of the survey findings, published in May 2020, stated that 167,000 students from 171 two-year institutions and 56 four-year institutions participated. Of the participants, 23,000 — or 16 percent — identified as parenting students and nearly 7,000 identified as single parents. The report states that “basic needs insecurity is associated with self-reports of poor physical health, symptoms of depression, and perceptions of higher stress” (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020, p. 30). Specifically, 30 percent of parenting students reported they were experiencing depression at the time they were surveyed, and 30 percent stated they were experiencing moderately severe to severe levels of depression. In addition, 27 percent were experiencing anxiety, with 13 percent experiencing severe anxiety. Furthermore, a quarter of respondents reported at least moderate depression or anxiety related to child care affordability, and 32 percent experienced at least moderate depression or anxiety associated with basic needs insecurity (Hope Center Web Appendices, 2020).

In addition, the [National Student Parent Survey](#) was administered in 2020 by Generation Hope, a DC-based community organization aimed at helping teen parents become college ready. The survey was sent to both past and present cohorts of the Generation Hope Scholar Program, which selects and sponsors local teen mothers and fathers who have “displayed achievement and a desire to attend college” (Generation Hope, 2020, online).

The data was collected during March and April 2020. In total, 259 student parents at more than 147 colleges and universities in the U.S. responded. The survey found that 40 percent of student parents felt disconnected from their college community, and less than one-third of respondents said they felt comfortable accessing mental health services on campus. (Generation Hope, 2020). Furthermore, 20 percent felt to varying degrees that they were unwelcome on their campuses. Research has found that a sense of belonging impacts mental well-being (Crocker et al., 1994). Participant responses indicated that school policies that considered their parental and household status were important factors that led to them feeling welcome, and more than one-third did not view their campuses as family friendly.

Belonging was also a theme mentioned in the findings of the 2018 Ascend at the Aspen Institute September Convening Report. Parents interviewed at the meeting held in September 2018 shared feelings of “being an outsider and not being seen or understood by their school, work, or community” (Alexander, Arnold, & Williams, 2018, p. 5). In addition, parents expressed feeling pressure and stress related to juggling the dual roles of parent and student, as well as guilt associated with the pressure of competing priorities when navigating their dual responsibilities. Participants also discussed difficulties negotiating the challenges of taking care of their own needs and the needs of their family. Furthermore, “patterns of trauma surfaced through many of the stories” (p. 4).

Overall, the scholarship on the particular needs and obstacles specific to the student parent population is scarce. While the dearth of this research makes exploring the mental health challenges being faced by this subset of the college community difficult, inferences can be made by reviewing the existing scholarship that examines the lived experiences and mental health of college students generally, as well as literature on the psychological challenges of parenthood. In its [mental health brief](#), Ascend at the Aspen Institute asks, “If becoming a parent and being a postsecondary student are each linked to potential threats to mental health, what does that mean for students who are also new parents?” (2019, p. 3). Clearly, it is important to also look at research that is centered on these intersecting populations. Doing so offers an idea of the potential challenges experienced by the specific student parent subset. Moreover, the literature also provides a blueprint for future scholarly investigation of this population. Below I provide an overview of some of the literature exploring the challenges experienced by these groups and how we can proceed with future research specific to the mental health of student parents.



MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES FACED BY THE COLLEGE STUDENT POPULATION

Almost 20 percent of the adult population in the United States lives with mental illness (SAMHSA, 2019). The rates for college students are higher — three out of five students report they experience anxiety, and two out of five students say they felt too depressed to function (Hibbs & Rostain, 2019; Roy, 2018; ACHA-NCHA II, 2019). During the college years young adults experience increased vulnerability for a wide range of mental health challenges (Chen et al., 2019).

In addition, suicide is the second highest cause of death for college students (Heron, 2019). Liu et al. (2018) conducted a secondary analysis of the spring 2015 [American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment \(ACHA-NCHA\)](#). The ACHA-NCHA is a national research survey organized by the American College Health Association (ACHA) “to assist college health service providers, health educators, counselors, and administrators in collecting data about their students’ habits and behaviors on the most prevalent health topics” (ACHA-NCHA, 2019, p. 1). By reviewing 67,308 surveys from 108 colleges, ACHA sought to identify the prevalence of mental health diagnoses and suicidal ideation and attempts among college students. Among the findings was that stress was strongly associated with a greater likelihood of suicide attempts and mental health diagnoses.

In addition, the [annual survey](#) of the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD) consistently reports an increase in the number of students believed to be living with severe psychological problems. AUCCCD is an organization comprised of leaders of counseling centers of colleges and universities from the United States and other countries. On its website it states that it “promotes college student mental health awareness through research, dissemination of key campus mental health issues and trends, and related training and education” (Rando et al., 2007).

In 2006, AUCCCD created a survey to gather demographic information from affiliate members and to understand what these members considered to be the most important issues and patterns being addressed at the counseling centers. In the group's [first survey](#), nearly all directors (97 percent) reported that the number of students with significant psychological problems is a growing concern in their center or on campus (Rando et al., 2007). Three years later, in the [first executive summary](#) released with the survey, the administrators listed anxiety and depression as the top two most frequently addressed issues (Barr et al., 2010). The [most recent results of this survey](#) — taken during the 2018-2019 year — found that “anxiety continues to be the most frequent concern among college counseling center clients” (LeViness et al., 2019, p. 1). The survey does not provide information on how many of the students seen are student parents or nontraditional students.

For many, the transition into college serves as a unique stressor (Hales, 2009). Becoming part of the college community has a significant impact on one's sense of identity. Group membership is associated with a sense of belonging, which in turn impacts the sense of self (Bettencourt et al., 1999; Brewer, 1991; Deaux, 1993; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Collective self-esteem is defined as the “extent to which individuals evaluate their social groups positively” (Bettencourt et al., p. 213) and has been found to be positively related to mental well-being (Crocker et al., 1994). The college experience is considered a pivotal marker during this stage of identity development.

In addition, college students are at an age when they are also particularly at risk for the onset of anxiety and depression (Beesdo, Knapp, & Pine, 2011). In fact, this phase represents a high-risk period for onset or episodes of mental disorders in general — 75 percent of all cases begin by age 24 (Kessler et al., 2005; Kim-Cohen et al., 2003). Moreover, emerging adulthood is a time of increased experimentation with substance use (Schulenberg et al., 2004; Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002; Tanner, 2015; Wood et al., 2017).

A recent study by Böke et al. (2019) explored coping mechanisms utilized by college students. The study collected data from 5,917 undergraduate students of “a large, urban university where the majority of the students live within close proximity of the central, downtown campus” (p. 91). Students reported substance use as a coping mechanism when stress was high.

For those who work with this population — as educators, school administrators, or campus counselors — these data are of particular concern. The levels of depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses experienced by college students impact their ability to function. These psychological struggles also affect their GPA and retention. The mental health challenges experienced by college students are numerous and severe. Within the last two decades, there has been an increase in the number of students experiencing depression, suicidality, and substance misuse (Chen et al., 2019). The increase has led researchers and mental health practitioners to declare it a mental health crisis (Xiao et al., 2017; Pinder-Amaker & Bell, 2012; Schwartz & Kaye, 2009).

As the research presented above has demonstrated, the many obstacles college students encounter during their time at the university can be contributing factors to their mental health challenges. When experienced in tandem with the stressors of raising children, these obstacles may become aggravated and exacerbated. The pressure, stress, and anxiety parents experience are well documented. Below is a review of the literature on the strains of parenthood and the compounded difficulties and distress they pose to those who are parenting while in college.



STRESSORS OF PARENTING

In general, the research has found that parenting is an overall positive experience (Deater-Deckard, 2006; Hayes & Watson, 2012). There are, however, unique challenges that come with parenthood, and all parents experience parenting stress to some degree (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990). Consequently, stress is considered to be a subjective experience — not everyone experiences the same stress, and all individuals react to stress differently (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). For some parents, some obstacles are more difficult to overcome. Deater-Deckard (1998) defines parenting stress as:

the aversive psychological reaction to the demands of being a parent... Parenting stress is experienced as negative feelings toward the self and toward the child or children, and by definition these negative feelings are directly attributable to the demands of parenthood (p. 315).

The difficulties and tensions arising from parenting is perceived to be more intense for those who have fewer coping skills, as well as for those who do not have a network of support, such as a partner or other friends or family who can provide emotional and practical help (Mash & Johnston, 1990).

Much of the literature on mental health and parenthood focuses on single parents. For purposes of this discussion, single parent households are those that have a sole adult living with at least one biological, step, or foster child under age 18 (Kramer, 2019). The amount of research focusing on the single parent is unsurprising to those who look at the data trends on this subset of the US population. At a rate of almost 25 percent, the U.S. has the highest number of single-parent households in the world (Kramer, 2019). This number has been steadily rising since 1968 (Livingston, 2018).

Single parents are likely to experience higher levels of stress as well as loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Baranowska-Rataj et al., 2014; Cairney et al., 2003; Jackson et al., 2000; Tein et al., 2000). These stressors of single parenting undoubtedly lead to declining mental health (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). In addition, single parents face social stigma, which then shapes their sense of being devalued in society (Crocker et al., 1998; Livingston, 2018). Indeed, stigma was specifically named by the authors of the [National Student Parent Survey Report](#) as a reason why they “did not achieve a statistically significant sample size” (Lewis & Haynes, 2020, p. 1). They explained that the survey yielded relatively few responses because “many students [are] reluctant to share their parenting status for fear of being treated differently or due to the persistent stigma around teen parenthood” (Id., p. 2). Further, 21 percent of respondents stated they were somewhat or very uncomfortable disclosing their parenting status to professors. Moreover, in the Ascend at the Aspen Institute September Convening Report, the authors report that “many parents shared that stigma and shame serve as both barriers and motivation on their post-secondary path” (Alexander, Arnold, & Williams, 2018, p. 9). In addition, the report quoted one parent who said that being a single parent is a “‘scarlet letter’” (Id., p. 5). This social stigma is faced most often by single mothers. In a study exploring attitudes toward single mothers and fathers, DeJean, McGeorge, & Carlson (2012) found that single mothers were seen more negatively than single fathers.

Single-parent families also face high rates of economic hardship. U.S. census data show that married parents are the most financially stable unit of all the family groups with children under the age of 18 (Vespa et al., 2013). The rates of poverty for single-parent families are significantly higher than for dual-parent households (Shenoy et al., 2016). Economic disadvantage is higher for single mothers than for single fathers (Vespa, 2013).

One path away from poverty is obtaining a university education. Pursuing a college degree is considered a determinant factor for upward mobility (Abowitz, 2004). In the [analysis](#) of U.S. census data on the economic standing of dual- versus single-family households, Vespa et al. (2013) list a college education as a factor for this advantaged economic position. In addition, single fathers fare better economically than single mothers, and “better educational attainment” is listed as a reason this difference exists (Vespa, 2013, p. 13). Single parenting, combined with the stressors that come with being a college student as well as the primary household provider, are compound factors that warrant exploration. For those who study mental health, single-parent college students are a population of considerable interest.



SINGLE PARENTING WHILE ATTENDING COLLEGE

Single-parenting students are an emerging subset of the larger college population, and the mental health challenges they face are unique (Huff & Thorpe, 1997; Shenoy et al., 2016). The data referenced above demonstrate that single parents are vulnerable to the strains that cause parenting stress generally, as well as to more distinctive burdens resulting from the compounded effects of being sole caregivers. These unique strains include economic hardship, social stigma, and increased loneliness.

In fact, a review of extant literature available on the psychological problems faced by student parents found that most of the research examines the experiences of single parents. This [research](#) focus is consistent with the student parent population data, which shows that single parents constitute the majority of students who are raising children (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). The previously cited 2014 IWPR [factsheet](#) shows that of the over 4.8 million student parents, 2,582,340 — or 54 percent — are single parents.

Several studies that name student parents, or single parents, as the study population explore the experiences of those at community colleges (Peterson, 2016; Ray et al., 2000). This finding also accords with the data, which show that 15 percent of community college students are single parents (AACC, 2019). Almost half of all the undergraduate students in the United States attend community colleges (AACC, 2014). In their study on The Mental Health Status of Single-Parent Community College Students in California, Shenoy, Lee, and Trieu (2016) address the gap in the literature for single-parent student mental health. They state:

Questions remain. For single-parenting students, what are the rates and severity of stress, depression, and other mental health conditions? What can college health professionals do to help ensure that such students are healthy and have the social support necessary to achieve academically and prepare for the workforce? (p. 152).

To answer the above, Shenoy et al. (2016) conducted a secondary analysis of spring 2013 data from the ACHA-NCHA, as well as an analysis of a supplemental questionnaire to the survey created by Health Services Association of California Community Colleges (HSACCC). One of the items on the supplemental questionnaire asked the binary-response question, “Are you currently a single parent, responsible for taking care of and financially supporting a dependent child (or children) under the age of 18?” (p. 153). Among the findings were that single-parenting students face a higher prevalence of mental health stressors than other community college students.

Most of the literature on single parents focuses on single mothers (Haleman, 2004; Yakaboski, 2010). Historically speaking, women have traditionally been tasked with being the primary family caregivers (Blair-Loy, 2001; Coser & Coser, 1974; Hays, 1996; Townsend, 2002). In the world of research, when studying parenting, the tacit study group is the mother (Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015; Stone, 2007). In fact, even when operationalizing studies that seek to examine views of parenting, the main population is mothers. For example, the Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire (IPAQ), created to “help researchers gain a better understanding of the predictors and consequences of holding intensive parenting beliefs,” uses mothers as its study population (Liss et al., 2013, p. 621).

The fact that single mothers are the principal focus of the scholarship exploring the single-parent student experience is also consistent with the data on the composition of the single-parent student population — in 2014, 22 percent of the nine million mother-only parent families in the United States were college students (Gault et al., 2014). In addition, a 2018 [analysis](#) of the U.S. Department of Education’s National Postsecondary Student Aid Study by IWPR found that 70 percent of student parents are mothers, and of those 62 percent are single (IWPR, 2018).

Research findings on the lived experiences of single mothers frequently report mental health impacts, even when the study is not specific to psychological well-being. For example, a qualitative study of 27 mothers recruited from an academic institution in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018, p. 135) explored student mothers’ experiences in college. The study named the lack of financial resources as a barrier to completing college. Mental health was not directly explored. Nevertheless, the researchers found that increased emotional support was a chief determinant of success in college.

In addition, in a qualitative study of 12 women who were student parents, Gerrard and Roberts (2006) sought to explore the consequences of financial hardship on their lives. Most participants responded that their economic situation impacted their mental well-being — they reported significant levels of stress and a diminished quality of life. The mothers also stated that the negative impact on their psychological well-being transferred over to their children.

Certainly, while the literature that looks specifically at the mental health challenges faced by student parents is scarce, inferences can be made about their psychological well-being by reviewing the scholarship of the groups that have overlapping statuses. The research on college students generally, parents, and single-parent students informs us of the significant mental health challenges faced by the student parent population. However, in order to truly understand the psychological issues and obstacles that student parents face, further research should be conducted.



FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR STUDYING THE MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY STUDENT PARENTS

Thus far, the overview of scholarship summarized in this paper has outlined the limited literature on the mental health challenges of student parents specifically, as well as the existing research that explores the experiences and challenges of college students in general, the stressors of parenthood, single parenting, and the experiences of students who are single parents. In addition, as cited above, national databases run by several university-affiliated organizations, as well as community-based organizations, are collecting data on the needs of student parents. However, as demonstrated, all of the scholarship, research, and data is limited to some degree as it relates to the topic of this literature review. Clearly, when considering the challenges faced by those who are both a college student and a parent, the psychological realities faced by student parents are significant. However, these conclusions are based mostly on descriptive statistics and tangential associations inferred from the data. In addition, any qualitative research is based on small sample sizes, which limits the potential for generalizability.

A mixed-methods study where both quantitative and qualitative data are collected in stages would garner a bounty of information on the mental health challenges faced by student parents. As a first phase, data collection using a survey designed to assess mental health can be administered. One such instrument could be the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES). As mentioned above, group membership is associated with the sense of belonging, which in turn impacts the sense of self and is considered fundamental to psychological well-being. The CSES was constructed to measure a person's memberships to ascribed groups, such as race, gender, and nationality, and has been used to assess well-being and adjustment (Bettencourt, 1999; Crocker et al., 1994; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992).

The scale is a 16-item instrument measuring four types of self-esteem associated with one's group: (1) membership esteem — how good or worthy a member of the group one is; (2) private collective self-esteem — how one personally evaluates their group (3) public collective self-esteem — how one believes others evaluate one's social groups; (4) importance to identity — how important one's group is to one's self concept (Luthanen & Crocker, 1992). All items are answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Bettencourt et al. (1999) used the CSES to examine if collective self-esteem influences adjustment to college.

A customized version of the CSES, modified to ask questions of the student parent population, can be used to further explore and examine findings from previous surveys. For example, the [2020 National Student Parent Survey](#) administered by Generation Hope, cited earlier, found feelings of not belonging to be a significant finding. The CSES can provide insight and unravel more about this particular discovery. Adjusting the survey to also include questions specifically about mental health would give insight into the mental well-being of student parents.

Knowing the scope of the issue is certainly helpful, but only through a deep examination of the issues students face via qualitative exploration and analyses will we gather the rich contextual information we need. Phase two of the study would be in-depth interviews of a sample of the survey respondents. Speaking to the participants of the study using semi-structured questions designed to allow them to expound on their survey replies will result in a richer understanding of the issues they face. In addition, doing so would help policymakers, school faculty, administrators, and counselors, as well as local organizations concerned with this population, use the information to devise programs and initiatives that will address the very specific needs mentioned by this college community.

An important factor to be included in this multi-staged, mixed-methods study specifically exploring the mental health of student parents is their children. Incorporating a two-generation approach to study this population will address some of the needs expressed by parents in studies exploring attitudes of parenting students. For example, Lindsay and Gillum (2018) conducted a qualitative study of 10 single mothers at "a university in the northern part of Texas" (p. 191). Among their findings was that the students wanted the university to consider both their individuality as students and their children. While mental health was not mentioned in the study, these findings are relevant, as the literature has established that parenting stress can be alleviated when supportive networks are present (Mash & Johnston, 1990). These findings related to child care, and a supportive infrastructure by the university is consistent with results from the National Student Parent Survey, cited previously. As mentioned above, respondents reported that school policies where parenting is supported are important to them, and one in three student parents did not view their campus as family friendly. Indeed, in a [paper](#) sponsored by Ascend at the Aspen Institute, Kim and Watamura (2015) strongly encourage the two-generation approach. They state:

Most commonly, programs that target parents are not coupled with programs that target children. Increasingly, this disconnect in services ... has been challenged as illogical and inefficient, and efforts to provide integrated and explicit two-generation interventions have been increasing (p. 5).

Factoring the children of the student parent into any analysis of their experiences and mental health challenges is important, particularly when considering that the stressors of parenting can impact the children. Adjustment to adulthood is directly related to experiences with parents (Creasey & Reese, 1996; Quittner, Glueckauf, & Jackson, 1990). A child's problem behaviors, temperament, emotional adjustment, and future substance use have been found to be associated with the parent-child relationship (Pesonen et al., 2008; VanderValk et al., 2007; Wills & Dishion, 2004; Zhang et al., 2008).

Parental depression, marital problems, and parenting practices have been found to be influences that impact a child's developmental process (Brody & Ge, 2001; Gross et al., 2008). A study by Neece, Green, and Baker (2012) explored the transactional effect of parenting stress on child behavior. By analyzing longitudinal data on 237 children, they found evidence of a relationship between parental stress and child behavioral problems across early and middle childhood.

Another factor to consider in future studies should be whether the child has a developmental issue. Research has found that parental stress increases when the child has a disability (Hayes & Watson, 2012; Watson et al., 2011). Research on the experiences of families of children with disabilities most commonly use parenting stress as the topic (Davis & Carter, 2008; Pisula, 2003). Moreover, the type of disability of the child is a factor in the levels of parenting stress. Hayes and Watson (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of studies comparing parenting stress in families of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to families with children who do not have ASD. They also compared families with a child who had ASD with families with a child who had a different type of disability. They found greater parenting stress among the families that had a child with ASD in both comparisons. Thus, when exploring the psychological well-being of student parents, it is important to incorporate the two-generation approach in order to include information regarding their children and any other environmental elements that might impact stress.

Moreover, any future study examining the mental health of student parents must consider the intersectionality of race and gender as complex and contributing factors to the challenges experienced by this college population. The social and practical realities of these intersecting social identities — race, gender, and student group — present specific and unique implications for the student parent college experience, as well as any associated obstacles. In fact, student parents are more likely to be Black, and Black women in particular are more likely to be parenting while in college (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Lewis & Haynes, 2020; Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019).

Additionally, while the [National Student Parent Survey](#) found that one-third of parents did not find their campuses to be family friendly, that number increases to 45 percent when disaggregating for Black parenting students (Lewis & Haynes, 2015). Furthermore, Black student parents hold more student debt than other parents, or nonparents, of every other race or ethnicity (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019). Lastly, Chen et al. (2019) found that racial-ethnic minority students may be at high risk of undetected mental illnesses. In addition, they found that Asian/Pacific Islander and multiracial students seem to have higher rates of negative mental health symptoms, including suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. Clearly, the statistics show that in most areas that have been found to impact the mental health of parenting students, race is a factor that must be considered in any and all future research studies.

The COVID-19 pandemic should be considered when developing a study exploring the mental health challenges students experience. Educational institutions were significantly impacted by this event, from having to abruptly pause classes to devising — mostly from the ground up — new pedagogical practices related to the logistical realities of distance learning. The services provided to students on college campuses were severely curtailed. Students who have relied on counseling services had to seek services via an online platform, if they could access those services at all (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020). In addition, the devastating economic impact inflicted by the compulsory quarantine drove many families into financial destruction. An already unstable housing situation was exacerbated, and the seclusion and separation forced by the crisis drove many to experience increased levels of isolation and depression. Moreover, student parents were forced to homeschool their children while having to complete their own studies. The tumultuous transition to online learning forced parents to become de facto teachers, multiplying their workload as caregivers (St. Armour, 2020). Essentially, the COVID-19 crisis intensified the concerns, stressors, and obstacles that all students, and undoubtedly the student parent population, face. No analysis of the student parent experience, much less the mental challenges faced by this population, can ignore the impact of the crisis.



POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

Finally, the JED team might benefit from collaborating with organizations that have already begun collecting data on this population. Potential partners include The Hope Center located in Philadelphia and Generation Hope located in Washington, DC. Each organization has collected and continues to gather data on the student parent population. Teaming up with either or both groups could help with recruiting participants for the study, as well as with the development and administration of the survey instrument.

Partnering with a university would also assist in recruiting students for the study. One such collaboration could be with The City University of New York (CUNY). CUNY is the nation's largest urban university, with over a quarter of a million students in 11 senior colleges and seven community colleges across the five boroughs of New York City (CUNY, 2020, online). The CUNY student body is diverse — 21 percent Asian, 25 percent Black, 31 percent Hispanic, 23 percent white (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2020). Almost half of the student body are first-generation students. While exact data on how many students are parenting while in college is not available, the latest available [CUNY student experience survey](#) reports that 12 percent of the 25,242 respondents support children (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2016).

CUNY has several programs and services that try to meet the needs of parenting students. There are child care services on 17 of its campuses (Willen, 2020). The CUNY Fatherhood Academy, which is housed in three of the community colleges, is "designed to promote responsible parenting and economic stability for unemployed and underemployed fathers ages 18-30, through education, employment, and personal development" (CUNY, 2020, online). The CUNY Parents task force aims to "identify resources for student-parents ... develop student-faculty policies ... and promote engagement with key stakeholders involved in promoting the success of student-parents" (CUNY Parents, 2018, online).

[The Family Empowerment Community College Pilot Program](#) is funded by the New York state government and is intended to “ensure that single parents are able to access higher education opportunities and help to move themselves and their children out of poverty” (NYS Justice Agenda, 2019, p. 19). The program provides on-campus child care; personalized advising, including tutoring; and career counseling. The pilot began in the fall of 2019 at four CUNY community colleges. With such a large and diverse student body and a range of services and programs aimed specifically to help parenting students achieve academic success, CUNY is an ideal partner for a collaborative study exploring the mental health challenges of student parents.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the literature on the experiences of college students, as well as parenthood, provide information on the range of challenges student parents face. Moreover, based on the research on the mental health issues that college students, parents generally, and single parents face, we can extrapolate that student parents face a wide array of mental health challenges. These include, among others, elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and substance misuse. Designing a study specifically focusing on student parents, and in particular their mental health, will significantly contribute to the research scholarship in education, psychology, social work, and public health, which so far has not fully explored the needs of this particular college population. Moreover, the study will help administrators, school counselors, faculty, and local organizations concerned with addressing the basic needs of the student parent community devise programs and policies aimed at addressing the challenges this group confronts.

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APPENDIX A

LIST OF RELEVANT LITERATURE ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENT PARENTS AND INTERSECTING GROUPS

Student Parents	College Students	Single Parents While in College
Ascend at the Aspen Institute September Convening Report. Alexander, J., Arnold, B., & Williams, D. (2019).	Report of the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey. Barr, V., Rando, R., Krylowicz, B., & Reetz, D. (2010).	Single mothers and the use of professionals for mental health care reasons. Cairney J., Boyle M. H., Lipman E. L., & Racine Y. (2004).
Mental Health Brief. Accelerating Postsecondary Success for Parents: Identifying and Addressing Mental Health Needs. Ascend at the Aspen Institute. (2019, April).	Development of collective self-esteem among students: Predicting adjustment to college. Bettencourt, B. A., Charlton, K., Eubanks, J., Kernahan, C., & Fuller, B. (1999).	Stress, social support and depression in single and married mothers. Cairney, J., Boyle, M., Offord, D. R., & Racine, Y. (2003).
Report Findings and Recommendations: Uncovering the Student Parent Experience and its Impact on College Success. Generation Hope. (2020).	Stress and Coping Patterns of University Students. Böke,, N. B., Mills, D. J., Mettler, J., & Heath, N. L. (2019).	Great expectations: Single mothers in higher education. Halemán, D. L. (2004).
Parenting While in College: Basic Needs Insecurity Among Students with Children. Goldrick-Rab, S., Welton, C. R., & Coca, V. (2020).	Psychiatric Symptoms and Diagnoses Among U.S. College Students: A Comparison by Race and Ethnicity. Chen, J. A., Stevens, C., Wong, S., & Liu, C. H. (2019).	The Invisible Village: An Exploration of Undergraduate Student Mothers' Experiences. Kensinger, C., & Minnick, D. J. (2018).
Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. Web Appendices to Parenting While in College: Basic Needs Insecurity Among Students with Children.	The Stressed Years of Their Lives: Helping Your Kid Survive and Thrive During Their College Years. Hibbs, B. J., & Rostain, A. (2019).	Exploring single-mother college students' perceptions of their college-related experiences and of campus services. Lindsay, T. N., & Gillum, N. L. (2018).
Two Open Windows: Infant and Parent Neurobiologic Change. Kim, P., & Watamura, S.E. (2015, June).	Report of the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey: 2019. LeViness, P., Gorman, K., Braun, L., Koenig, L., & Bershád, C. (2019).	Filial/family play therapy for single parents of young children attending community colleges. Ray, D., Bratton, S. C., & Brandt, M. A. (2010).

Student Parents	College Students	Single Parents While in College
<p>Generation Hope National Student-Parent Survey Results & Recommendations: Uncovering the Student-Parent Experience and Its Impact on College Success. Lewis, N. L., & Haynes, D. (2020).</p>	<p>The prevalence and predictors of mental health diagnoses and suicide among U.S. college students: Implications for addressing disparities in service use. Liu C. H., Stevens C., Wong, S. H. M., Yasui, M., & Chen, J. A. (2019).</p>	<p>The mental health status of single-parent community college students in California. Shenoy, D. P., Lee, C., & Trieu, S. L. (2016).</p>
	<p>Report of the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey. Mister, B. J., Reetz, D. R., Krylowicz, B., & Barr, V. (2012).</p>	<p>Going at it alone: Single-mother undergraduate's experiences. Yakaboski, T. (2010).</p>
	<p>A bioecological systems approach for navigating the college mental health crisis. Pinder-Amaker, S., & Bell, C. (2012).</p>	
	<p>Report of the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey. Rando, R., Barr, V., & Aros, C. (2007).</p>	
	<p>The rise of mental health on college campuses: Protecting the emotional health of our nation's college students. Roy, N. (2018).</p>	
	<p>The crisis in college and university mental health. Schwartz, V., & Kaye, J. (2009).</p>	
	<p>Are we in crisis? National mental health and treatment trends in college counseling centers. Xiao, H., Carney, D. M., Youn, S. J., Janis, R. A., Castonguay, L. G., Hayes, J. A., & Locke, B. D. (2017).</p>	



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