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CalWORKs Participation Among California's College Students

CARA TAN, JENNIFER HOGG, JOHANNA LACOE, AND JESSE ROTHSTEIN

California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs), California's version of the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, provides cash assistance to low-income families with children. CalWORKs provides parents with cash assistance for expenses such as food, housing, utilities, or medical care, and may be particularly helpful for parenting college students, who temporarily forgo earnings to invest in their education. We find that in the 2022–23 academic year, 57,400 California Community College (CCC) students and 1,200 University of California (UC) students either received CalWORKs benefits or had a household member who received benefits.¹ Student participants received an average of \$256 per person, per month.

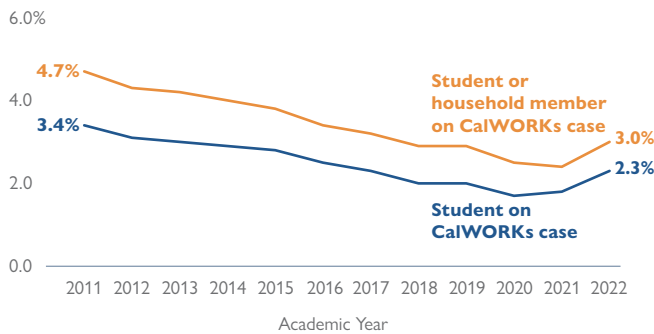
Participation Trends

This data point presents student participation rates in CalWORKs, which we define as *either* appearing on a CalWORKs case themselves, or living in the same household as someone who appears on a CalWORKs case (e.g., a college student whose child participates in CalWORKs). We visually differentiate these two categories in the figures.

CCC students: In 2022–23, about 57,400 students (3% of all CCC students) participated in CalWORKs or lived in a CalWORKs household. The CCC participation rate has declined over time, from a high of 4.7% in 2011–12 ([Figure 1](#)),² mirroring declines in the general population's participation during this time period.³ Parenting students, who are the most common group of CCC CalWORKs participants, represent 9.2% of all CCC students.⁴

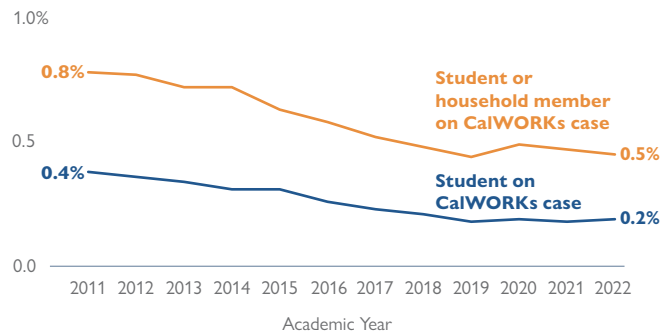
UC students: In 2022–23, about 1,100 undergraduate students (0.5%) and fewer than 100 graduate students (0.08%) participated in CalWORKs or lived in a CalWORKs household. Participation has trended somewhat downward for UC students, though less so than for CCC students ([Figure 2](#)). Parenting students make up about 0.7% of the UC undergraduate population and 2.4% of UC graduate students.⁵

FIGURE 1. CalWORKs participation rates among California community college students, 2011–12 to 2022–23



Source: Data for Figure 1 was provided to CPL by the California Community College Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS).

FIGURE 2. CalWORKs participation rates among University of California undergraduate students, 2011–12 to 2022–23



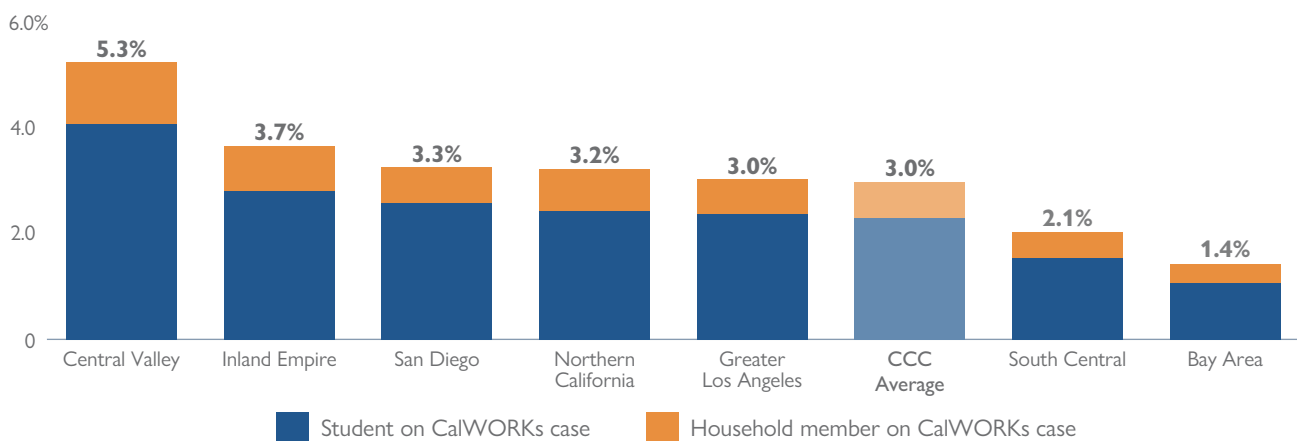
Source: Data for Figure 2 was provided to CPL by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and the University of California Office of the President (UCOP).

Regional and Demographic Patterns

Rates of CalWORKs participation differed across community college regions, UC campuses, and by student subgroups. This variation reflects, in part, differential rates of parenting students and financial resources across these subgroups.

California community college regions: CalWORKs participation was highest among CCC students in the Central Valley (5.3% of all enrolled students), followed by the Inland Empire (3.7% of students), and San Diego (3.3% of students) (Figure 3). CalWORKs participation rates for individual CCC campuses are included in Appendix B.

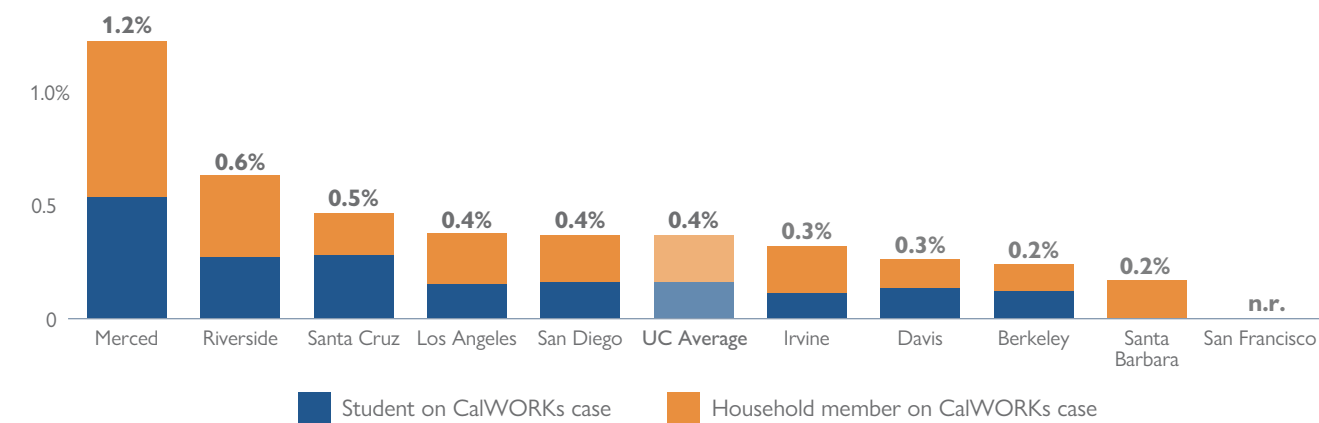
FIGURE 3. CalWORKs participation rates by CCC region, 2022–23



Source: Data for Figure 3 was provided to CPL by CCCCCO and CDSS.

UC Campuses: CalWORKs participation was more common at UC Merced than other UC campuses, with 1.2% of students participating (combining undergraduates and graduate students), followed by UC Riverside (0.6%) and UC Santa Cruz (0.5%) (Figure 4).

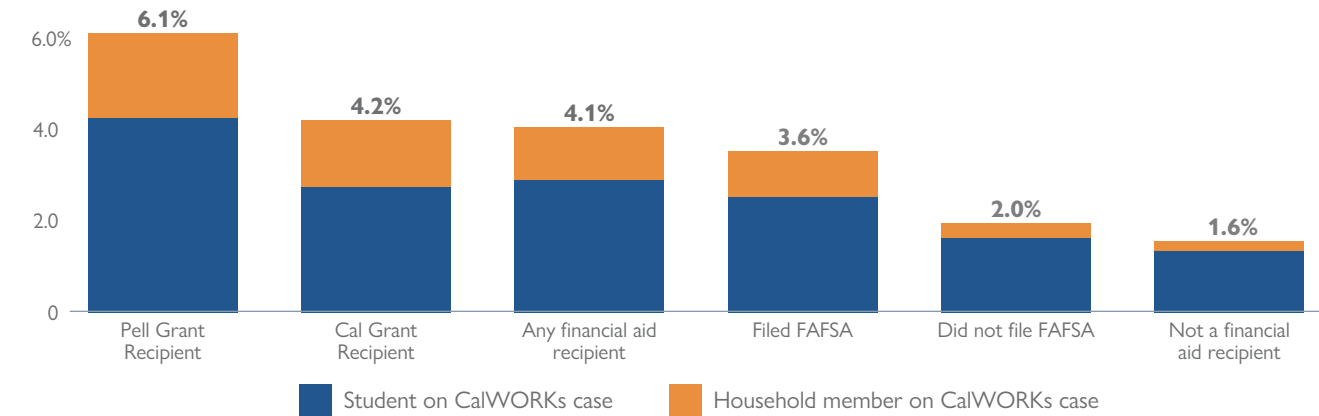
FIGURE 4. CalWORKs participation rates by UC campus, 2022–23



Source: Data for Figure 4 was provided to CPL by CDSS and UCOP.
Note: This graph combines UC undergraduates and graduate students due to small cell sizes.
N.r. indicates that very few students at UC San Francisco or their household members participate in CalWORKs, and very few students at UC Santa Barbara are on a CalWORKs case. Specific values are suppressed to protect student privacy.

Student aid: CalWORKs participation was higher among UC and CCC students who received financial aid compared to those who didn't, and especially among students who received Pell Grants (Figure 5). About 6% of Pell Grant recipients in both systems participated in CalWORKs.

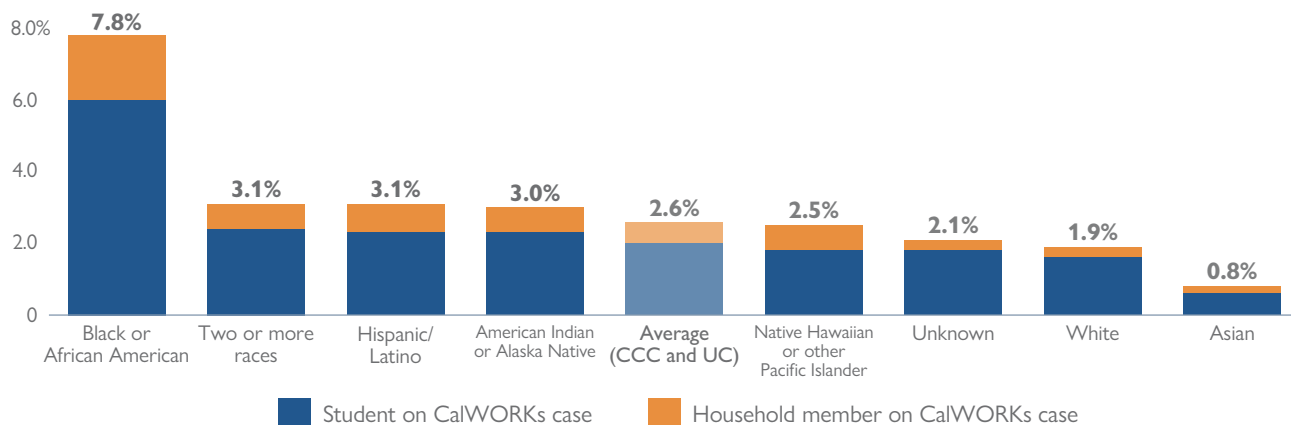
FIGURE 5. CalWORKs participation rates by financial aid status of UC and CCC students, 2022–23



Source: Data for Figure 5 was provided to CPL by CCCCO, UCOP, CDSS, and the California Student Aid Commission.
Note: Among community college students, “Any financial aid recipient” represents all students who received any type of community college financial aid, including aid awarded by the federal or state government, and aid awarded by the colleges. Among UC students, this group represents all students who received aid through any of the following: the Blue and Gold Opportunity plan, Cal Grants, Pell Grants, Federal SEOG grants, UC grants, other gift aid or financial assistance from UC, veterans’ specific assistance, work study, Chaffee grant, or either a federal or other type of loan.

Racial and ethnic groups: CalWORKs participation was more than twice as high among students identifying as Black/African American as compared to other student groups, likely reflecting underlying economic disparities. Participation rates were also somewhat above average for students identifying as two or more races, Hispanic/Latino students, and American Indian or Alaska Native students (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6. CalWORKs participation rates by racial and ethnic groups of UC and CCC students, 2022–23

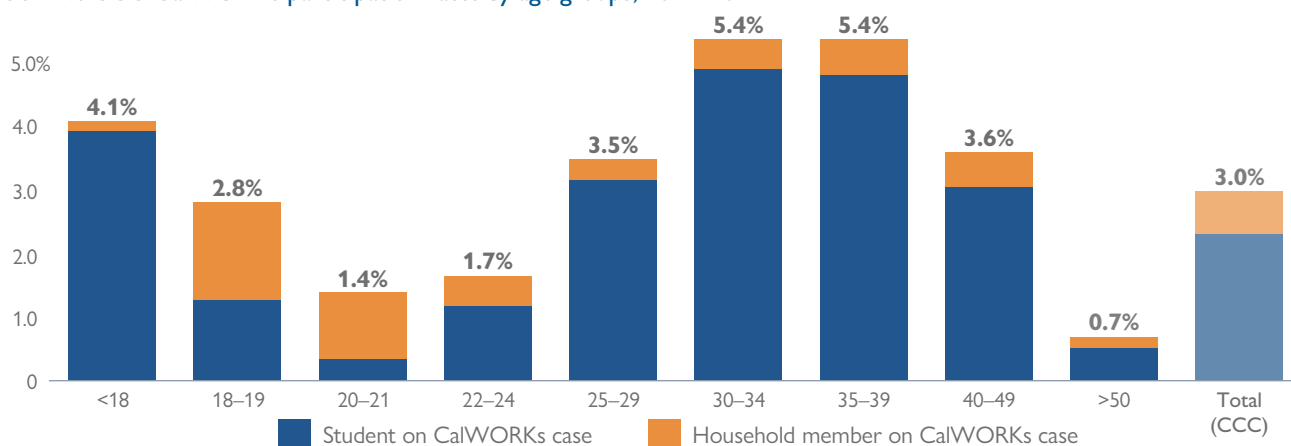


Source: Data for Figure 6 was provided to CPL by CCCCCO, UCOP, and CDSS.

Note: For both community college and UC students, we rely on the racial and ethnic subgroups that are reported in each segment's administrative data, which are based on student self-report.

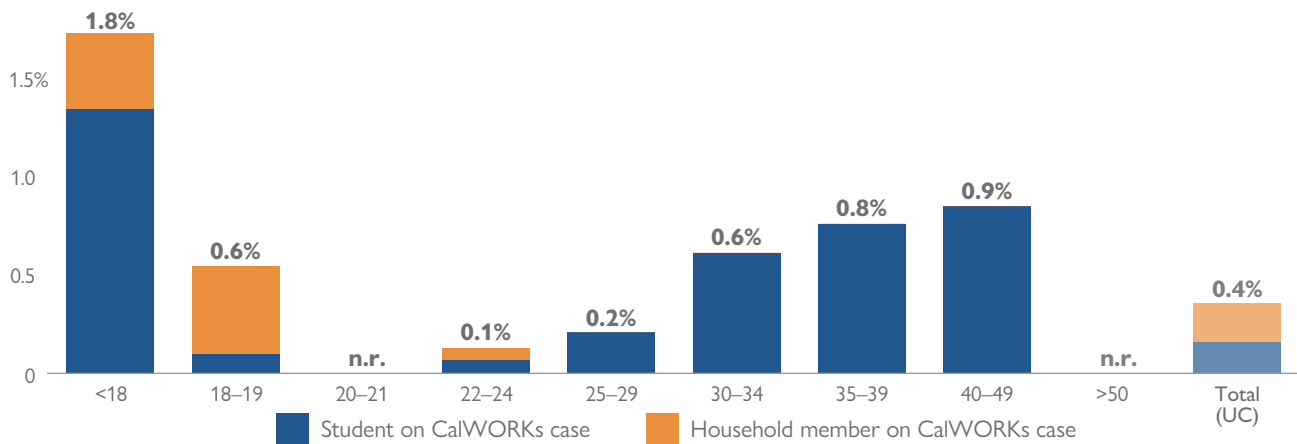
Age groups: CalWORKs participation varied considerably across age cohorts at the CCCs (Figure 7) and UCs (Figure 8). Traditional-aged college students (ages 18 to 21) had lower participation rates in both segments. Students in their 30s had the highest participation rates at the CCCs, and at the UCs, participation was highest among students under 18 years old. Students under 18 (including dual enrollment students) are largely benefiting from CalWORKs as children, not as parenting students.

FIGURE 7. CCC CalWORKs participation rates by age groups, 2022–23



Source: Data for Figure 7 was provided to CPL by CCCCCO, and CDSS.

FIGURE 8. UC CalWORKs participation rates by age groups, 2022–23



Source: Data for Figure 8 was provided to CPL by UCOP and CDSS.

Note: This graph combines UC undergraduates and graduate students due to small cell sizes.

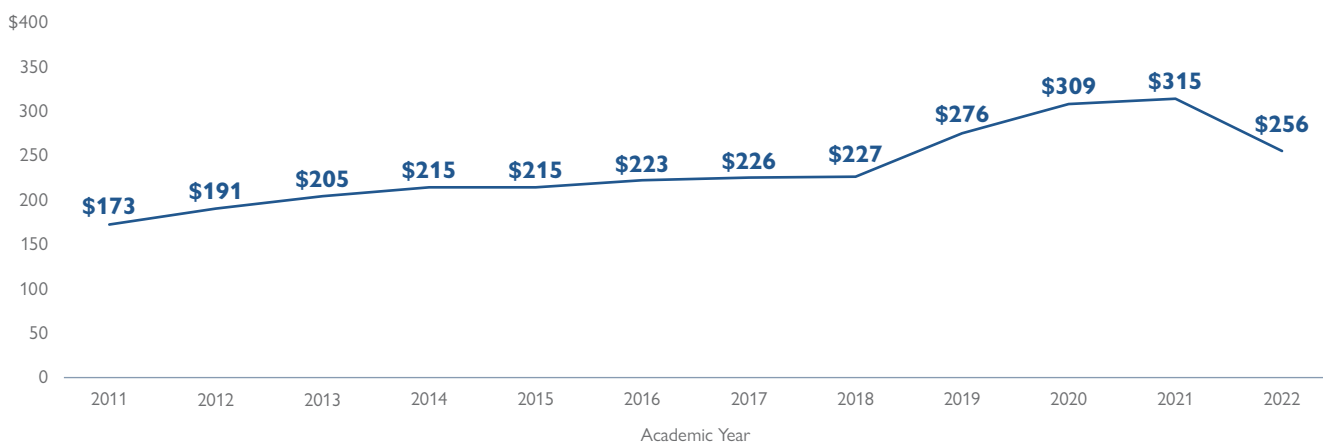
N.r. indicates that very few students in these age groups at the UCs participate in CalWORKs. Specific values are suppressed to protect student privacy.

How much cash assistance do CalWORKs participants receive each month?

In Academic Year (AY) 2022–23, CCC and UC CalWORKs participants received an average of \$256 per person, per month (Figure 9). Per-person monthly payments peaked at \$315 in AY 2021–22, during the pandemic, after steady increases since AY 2011–12.⁶

The aid payment schedule is determined at the state level, and during the pandemic years, the maximum amounts people could receive increased more than in prior years in California.⁷ This may account for the increase in average payments during the pandemic years. By 2023, many temporary pandemic-era policies (including changes in how CalWORKs benefits were calculated) had ended, possibly contributing to the average amount decreasing in 2022–23.⁸

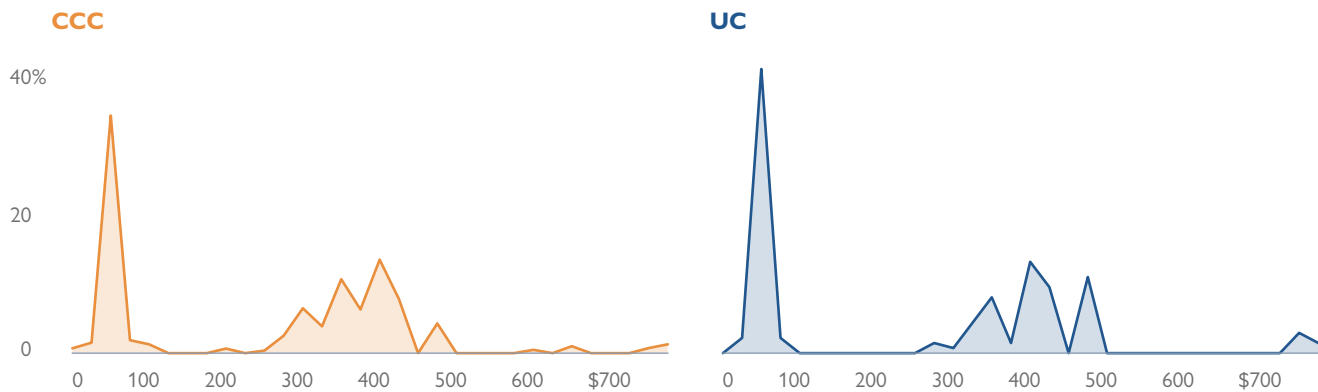
FIGURE 9. Average CalWORKs per capita monthly benefits for UC and CCC students, 2011–12 through 2022–23



Source: Data for Figure 9 was provided to CPL by CCCCO, UCOP, and CDSS.

Average payments do not appear to differ systematically between the two systems (Figure 10). In the most recent year of data available (2022–23), the distribution of per-person monthly CalWORKs payments is bi-modal, with most students either receiving less than \$100 per month or over \$300 per month. Nearly all CalWORKs participating students (91%) also participate in CalFresh, which provides an additional **\$123 per person, per month for CCC students** and \$161 for UC students, on average.

FIGURE 10. Distribution of Per Capita Monthly Benefits, 2022–23



Source: Data for Figure 10 was provided to CPL by CCCCO, UCOP, and CDSS.

CalWORKs Eligibility

Adults must be parents or pregnant to be eligible for CalWORKs. They must also be U.S. citizens and residents of California, and unemployed or underemployed and have a low income. In addition, individuals receiving CalWORKs cash aid must participate in a Welfare-to-Work activity, which can include attending school, searching for a job, or working, and there are also lifetime time limits for how long people can receive CalWORKs.

A subset of parenting students — those who meet employment, income, and citizenship criteria, and successfully apply and enroll — receive CalWORKs benefits, which help them support their household financially while attending school.

Some college students are not eligible for CalWORKs themselves, but live with someone who is. This could be their child(ren), a spouse, or another family member. “Child-only cases,” in which the child(ren) qualifies but the parent does not, are quite common; about half of all CalWORKs cases in California include only children.⁹ However, their parent(s) receive the cash aid on their behalf, and therefore benefit from the CalWORKs program.

There are some students who enroll in college before turning 18, often but not always, these are students who are dual enrolled in high school and college. These college students may participate in CalWORKs themselves as children, not parents.

This data point does not attempt to estimate how many students are eligible for the program. The data collected by institutions of higher education are currently insufficient to accurately estimate eligibility because it requires a detailed understanding of household composition and each individual household member’s potential eligibility.¹⁰ The individual-level eligibility criteria are much stricter and more specific than those for CalFresh, which means it’s important to have data on each household member to make accurate eligibility estimates.¹¹

Conclusion

College students participation in CalWORKs is quite rare — about 3% of CCC students and 0.5% of UC students. For the more than 58,000 Californians (most of whom are parenting students) who participate in CalWORKs, they are better able to afford their expenses during college. Students who participate receive about \$250 per month in CalWORKs benefits, on average.

For students who may be eligible but are not participating, this support has the potential to increase their ability to focus on school and invest in their children. However, current data limitations make it challenging to accurately estimate who is likely eligible (but not participating) in order to target outreach to them.

Acknowledgements

We are especially grateful to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, the University of California Office of the President, the California Department of Social Services, and the California Student Aid Commission for their partnership in making this research possible. The findings reported herein were performed with the permission of each of these partners. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the authors and should not be considered as representing the policy of the collaborating department, agency, or any department or agency of the California government.

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This research is conducted through the new [California College Data and Policy Project \(CCDPP\)](#). The Project is a joint initiative of the California Policy Lab and the Center for Studies in Higher Education. The CCDPP will generate new insights and research on what works to better support California students and their families as they transition through the education system.

Endnotes

- 1 The California State University Chancellor's Office recently joined this project, and future estimates will include students in this segment.
- 2 An additional 3,500 community college students received CalWORKs-funded services during Academic Year (AY) 2022–23, but did not receive cash aid.
- 3 Legislative Analyst's Office. (2025). *Trends in CalWORKs: Participant Characteristics*. Retrieved from <https://lao.ca.gov/reports/2025/5057/Trends-in-CalWORKs-Participant-Characteristics-061626.pdf>.
- 4 These estimates are based on students who self-report being parents on financial aid applications or participate in programs intended for student parents in the community college data. They may be an undercount insofar as some student parents meet neither of those criteria.
- 5 *ibid*
- 6 These estimates adjust for household size. For example, if a CalWORKs case includes two people and provides \$498 per month, the per-person monthly benefit is \$249 per month.
- 7 "About CalWORKs: CalWORKs Maximum Aid Payment (MAP) Levels." Accessed September 10, 2025. <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/calworks-summary/program-overview/about-calworks>
- 8 Shantz, K., Giannarelli, L., Dehry, I., Knowles, S., & Minton, S. (2022). State TANF policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Urban Institute. OPRE Report (21-233).
- 9 There are separate eligibility requirements for children, and children can qualify even if their parents do not. Namely, a child must be "deprived" by having at least one parent who is absent, incarcerated, deceased, disabled, or unemployed. <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/calworks-summary/program-services-utilization/caseload-dynamics>
- 10 The GAINS Act, signed into law in 2024, will require that campuses at all public colleges and universities in California collect student parent data. This data may still be insufficient to accurately estimate CalWORKs eligibility, as income eligibility depends on the size of one's "Assistance Unit," or the members of a household who are each individually eligible to receive cash aid.
- 11 For example, the children of parenting students can individually be eligible for CalWORKs if they have been deprived of parental support through the absence or death of either parent.



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Appendix A: Data

Previously, data limitations have hampered efforts to measure how many college students are participating. To better measure student participation in public benefits, including CalWORKs, the California Policy Lab (CPL) has partnered with the California Community College Chancellor's Office, the University of California (UC) Office of the President, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), and the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC). This collaboration enabled the creation of a linked database of the following de-identified, individual-level datasets which made this analysis possible:

- **CCC Chancellor's Office** records for students enrolled in a California community college from academic year (AY) 2011–12 through spring 2023 (AY 2022–23), including information on student demographics, enrollment details, certificate or degree attainment, and financial aid awards. Our sample includes all students regardless of whether they were enrolled in credit or noncredit courses, so long as they were enrolled in a term within the academic year being analyzed.
- **UCOP** records for all UC students enrolled from AY 2011–12 through AY 2022–23, including student demographics, enrollment, degree attainment, and financial aid awards. Student attributes in each year correspond to data from the latest term in which they were enrolled. For example, if a student was enrolled in UC Berkeley in the fall and UC Davis in the spring, we only include them in the UC Davis counts for that year.
- **CDSS** records of monthly participation in CalWORKs and CalFresh between 2011 to 2023. These data include demographic information, dates of CalWORKs and CalFresh participation, benefit amount, and quarterly earnings data. To analyze student CalWORKs participation rates, CalWORKs monthly participation data was aggregated to the academic year level. Students are considered to be CalWORKs participants if they received CalWORKs benefits (at any point) during an academic year in which they were also enrolled in college. Students are considered indirect beneficiaries of CalWORKs if they appear on a CalFresh case with someone on a CalWORKs case, who received CalWORKs benefits (at any point) during an academic year in which the student was also enrolled in college.
- **CSAC** records on Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms submitted from 2011–12 to 2022–23. This includes demographic characteristics, income, household composition, employment, FAFSA submission status and date, GPA verification, expected family contribution, whether the student was offered a Cal Grant, and information about where and when the grant was used.

Appendix B: CalWORKs Participation Rates by Community College

TABLE B1. CalWORKs Participation Among California Community College Students by College, 2022–23 Academic Year

COLLEGE	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN CALWORKS	% OF STUDENT BODY PARTICIPATING IN CALWORKS
All Students	1,950,788	384	2.2
Allan Hancock College	17,859	1,519	4.2
American River College	35,787	1149	7.5
Antelope Valley College	15,417	2,267	5.8
Bakersfield College	38,768	515	11.3
Barstow Community College	4,571	132	2.0
Berkeley City College	6,616	451	3.4
Butte College	13,283	200	1.4
Cabrillo College	14,304	-	-
Calbright College	2,477	-	-
Canada College	6,249	991	3.4
Cerritos Community College	29,254	247	3.7
Cerro Coso Community College	6,676	168	1.1
Chabot College	15,453	835	2.9
Chaffey College	28,797	317	2.1
Citrus College	15,231	336	0.9
City College of San Francisco	38,734	189	2.1
Clovis Community College	8,819	-	-
Coastline Community College	11,583	103	2.5
College of Alameda	4,155	-	-
College of Marin - Kentfield	7,656	-	-
College of San Mateo	9,703	357	1.0
College Of The Canyons	35,773	443	2.7
College of the Desert	16,332	220	3.4
College of the Redwoods	6,422	957	5.7

COLLEGE	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN CALWORKS	% OF STUDENT BODY PARTICIPATING IN CALWORKS
College Of The Sequoias	16,883	-	-
College of the Siskiyous	2,612	-	-
Columbia College	3,478	621	11.2
Compton College	5,569	155	1.9
Contra Costa College	8,262	104	4.7
Copper Mountain College	2,190	537	3.4
Cosumnes River College	15,869	113	1.7
Crafton Hills College	6,716	242	1.5
Cuesta College	16,112	639	7.3
Cuyamaca College	8,700	360	2.2
Cypress College	16,111	-	-
De Anza College	24,613	199	0.9
Diablo Valley College	21,651	1,714	3.7
East Los Angeles College	46,727	1,028	3.5
El Camino College	29,339	113	1.1
Evergreen Valley College	10,726	-	-
Feather River College	2,417	157	1.7
Folsom Lake College	9,247	-	-
Foothill College	22,228	1,972	6.2
Fresno City College	31,801	438	1.9
Fullerton College	23,146	116	1.5
Gavilan College	7,868	1,326	6.4
Glendale Community College	20,779	144	1.0
Golden West College	14,080	438	2.9
Grossmont College	15,313	137	1.2
Hartnell Community College	11,129	498	4.3
Imperial Valley College	11,525	131	0.7
Irvine Valley College	17,502	-	-

COLLEGE	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN CALWORKS	% OF STUDENT BODY PARTICIPATING IN CALWORKS
Lake Tahoe Community College	8,310	458	4.1
Laney College	11,102	-	-
Las Positas College	8,910	-	-
Lassen College	2,977	1,402	4.2
Long Beach City College	33,002	1,109	5.2
Los Angeles City College	21,163	357	3.7
Los Angeles Harbor College	9,693	650	5.2
Los Angeles Mission College	12,620	534	2.6
Los Angeles Pierce College	20,932	722	9.9
Los Angeles Southwest College	7,272	1,359	8.7
Los Angeles Trade - Technical College	15,669	1,097	5.4
Los Angeles Valley College	20,389	307	3.1
Los Medanos College	10,058	239	4.5
Madera Community College	5,339	191	2.9
Mendocino College	6,581	646	4.0
Merced Community College	16,018	189	2.7
Merritt College	6,941	152	0.8
Miracosta College	20,069	-	-
Mission College	8,883	1,004	4.2
Modesto Junior College	24,068	108	1.1
Monterey Peninsula College	9,888	109	0.7
Moorpark College	16,371	298	2.7
Moreno Valley College	11,196	1,240	1.9
Mt. San Antonio College	64,376	696	3.0
Mt. San Jacinto College	23,510	-	-
Napa Valley College	6,242	167	1.4
Norco College	12,112	193	1.3
North Orange Continuing Education	15,387	-	-

COLLEGE	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN CALWORKS	% OF STUDENT BODY PARTICIPATING IN CALWORKS
Ohlone College	15,694	136	0.7
Orange Coast College	20,217	135	1.7
Oxnard College	7,872	104	1.8
Palo Verde College	5,695	195	0.7
Palomar College	26,672	635	2.0
Pasadena City College	31,834	440	8.6
Porterville College	5,089	591	6.0
Reedley College	9,796	664	2.5
Rio Hondo College	26,081	574	2.4
Riverside City College	24,114	482	2.4
Sacramento City College	20,195	223	0.7
Saddleback College	32,453	581	3.8
San Bernardino Valley College	15,416	275	2.2
San Diego City College	12,586	1,889	8.9
San Diego College of Continuing Education	21,187	186	0.9
San Diego Mesa College	21,330	-	-
San Diego Miramar College	14,778	981	4.3
San Joaquin Delta College	22,956	175	1.7
San Jose City College	10,540	1,052	2.0
Santa Ana College	53,796	-	-
Santa Barbara City College	24,135	766	2.2
Santa Monica College	35,082	283	0.9
Santa Rosa Junior College	30,332	298	1.2
Santiago Canyon College	25,566	421	3.4
Shasta College	12,294	298	1.3
Sierra College	23,094	-	-
Skyline College	11,046	208	1.8
Solano Community College	11,735	513	2.1

COLLEGE	TOTAL STUDENT COUNT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN CALWORKS	% OF STUDENT BODY PARTICIPATING IN CALWORKS
Southwestern College	24,349	205	2.9
Taft College	7,155	134	1.1
Ventura College	12,757	1,292	7.1
Victor Valley College	18,210	185	5.4
West Hills College - Coalinga	3,437	271	5.1
West Hills College - Lemoore	5,321	740	6.2
West Los Angeles College	11,855	-	-
West Valley College	10,827	131	2.9
Woodland Community College	4,509	230	3.3
Yuba College	6,952	384	2.2

Source: Data for Table B1 was provided to CPL by CCCCCO and CDSS.

Note: Values for colleges with fewer than 100 CalWORKs participants are suppressed (indicated with a - sign) to protect student privacy. Participation includes students who live in the same household as someone on a CalWORKs case.