



Balancing School, Work, and Family: Low-Income Parents' Participation in Education and Training

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October 2014

Highlights about Low-Income Parents' Participation in Education and Training

- About 1.8 million (nearly 1 in 10) low-income parents participated in education and training; about half worked at the same time.
- Over half of low-income parents in education and training were single mothers; nearly 70 percent had children age 5 or under.
- Two-thirds of low-income working parents not in education and training were working full time while raising families.
- Nearly one-third of low-income parents not working or in education and training, and nearly one-quarter who were only working, lacked a high school diploma or General Educational Development certification (GED).
- Over half of low-income parents who were not engaged in education and training (both working and not working) had two or more children, and a majority have children age 5 or under.

A key policy concern is how to best help low-income individuals gain the skills and credentials they need to find a job that provides a family-sustaining wage. One emerging area of interest is the recognition of certain barriers, such as family obligations and access to reliable child care, that can make it difficult for low-income parents to participate and succeed in education and training. This brief uses the most recent available panel data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation, which allows us to examine the education and training participation of low-income parents and understand their personal and family characteristics. The brief first focuses on low-income parents who engage in education and

training activities. It then examines low-income parents who work but do not engage in education and training and those who neither work nor engage in education and training. Throughout the brief, we highlight some of the challenges these groups of low-income parents may face in seeking education and training based on their characteristics and work patterns. The brief concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for policymakers and practitioners making decisions about workforce development and child care to better support low-income parents as they pursue education and training while balancing their family and work responsibilities.

Helping Low-Income Parents Move up the Economic Ladder through Education and Training

Education and training programs provide opportunities for individuals to improve their skills and credentials and thus take advantage of employment opportunities that offer higher wages and better benefits. In fact, anywhere from one- to two-thirds of future jobs may require some education and training beyond high school (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl 2013; Richards and Terkanian 2013). Recent focus on the importance of workforce development programs in supporting upward mobility and self-sufficiency has led to increased interest in examining the challenges individuals can face in accessing, persisting in, and completing education and training programs.

Low-income parents may face many challenges in participating in education and training, but little attention has been given to their particular needs (Nelson, Froehner, and Gault 2013). As with all parents, low-income parents in education and training have to balance the time and resources needed to succeed in a program with those dedicated to their family or employment. But low-income parents can experience greater barriers to succeeding in education and training than higher-income parents because they often have fewer financial resources, less education, and lower skill levels. Supporting low-income parents in their ability to get ahead can be particularly important; their success affects not only their well-being, but also their children's well-being and development (Davis-Kean 2005; Douglas-Hall and Chau 2007; Haveman and Wolfe 1995; Smith, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov 1997). One way to support low-income parents as they pursue education and training is to help them access and keep child care, which helps them balance school and other obligations (often work).

Little is known about the low-income parents who may benefit from further education and training but face the challenge of ensuring they have adequate child care to do so. To explore this issue, we first look at what insights national data can provide about the magnitude of the problem. Currently, there is no national estimate of the number of low-income parents who may need education and training or who want to enroll in education and training, much less the proportion facing child care barriers that prevent them from enrolling in or completing such activities. National data do allow for insights into some aspects of this issue, especially about the characteristics of low-income parents who participate in education and training activities and those who do not but could benefit from those activities.

This brief is part of a larger Urban Institute project Bridging the Gap: Understanding the Intersection between Workforce Development and Child Care, supported by the Ford Foundation, that examines the intersection between workforce development and child care. This brief uses the most recent data available from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), covering late 2008 to early 2009, to better understand low-income parents and their participation in education and training activities by asking the following:

1. Who are the low-income parents participating in education and training?
2. What are the characteristics of low-income parents who are not participating in education and training, including those who work and those who do not?
3. What factors should the child care and workforce development systems consider when providing services to low-income parents?

Though the data cannot provide a complete understanding of the complex challenges low-income parents may have in participating in education and training, the analysis does offer a picture of these parents, their families, and their patterns of participation in education and training. From this picture, this brief offers insights to help policymakers and practitioners develop and implement policies and programs serving low-income parents as they pursue education and training to improve their and their families' well-being.

Understanding the Data

BOX 1

Parents of Interest in the Survey of Income and Program Participation

This analysis uses the second wave of the Survey of Income and Program Participation 2008 panel, which covers December 2008 to March 2009, to identify a nationally representative weighted sample of slightly over 50 million parents in the United States who

- are ages 18–50 (inclusive of those ages 20–50 who may be in secondary education); and
- have at least one dependent child under age 12.

The sample represents about 21 million parents whose families are at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level or receive public assistance. We exclude teen parents under age 18 and those parents ages 18–19 in secondary education (who might be attending regular high school) from the analysis because they generally have different policies and programs that may assist them in pursuing education and training activities.

Using data from the 2008 panel of the SIPP (see box 1), this brief examines the characteristics of low-income parents ages 18–50 who participate in education and training. The data provide a nationally representative picture of the activities of parents in late 2008 into early 2009; this is the most recent data available from the SIPP. For the purposes of this brief, “low-income” is defined as either having household income at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level or as receiving public assistance such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

Although the data offer a national perspective on education and training participation of low-income parents at one point in time, there are three limitations in interpreting the results of the analysis.

First, the SIPP data were collected in the midst of the Great Recession at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009, a period of significant employment losses. During this time, there were increases in enrollment in community colleges and training services provided through the public workforce system, and the number of low-income parents participating in education and training may not be indicative of today’s numbers (though enrollment levels in community colleges where many low-income individuals attend are similar in 2008 and 2012).¹ However, there is no reason to believe the basic characteristics of the parents or the families are much different from those today.

Second, some individuals, such as traditional college students, may have low incomes because they have been participating in full-time education and training over a longer period of time. However, because we are looking at a sample of low-income parents, we expect that only a subset of the youngest parents may be similar to a traditional-age college student.

Finally, as discussed in box 2, the distinctions between education and training are not always clear. Consequently, we do not differentiate between education and training in our analysis.

BOX 2

Education and Training Activities Covered in the SIPP

In our analysis of the SIPP, **postsecondary education** is considered enrollment at college or a vocational, technical, or business school beyond the high school level but below the graduate school level. **Training** is defined as enrollment in a program intended to help train for a new job or learn new skills for a current job. **Adult education** is enrollment in education resulting in a high school (secondary) credential for individuals age 20 and older and may include adult basic education and preparation for the GED test.

The distinctions between education and training in the SIPP data can be unclear, depending how a respondent to the SIPP understood the questions. Thus, we group education and training together in our analysis.

A Brief Picture of Low-Income Parents

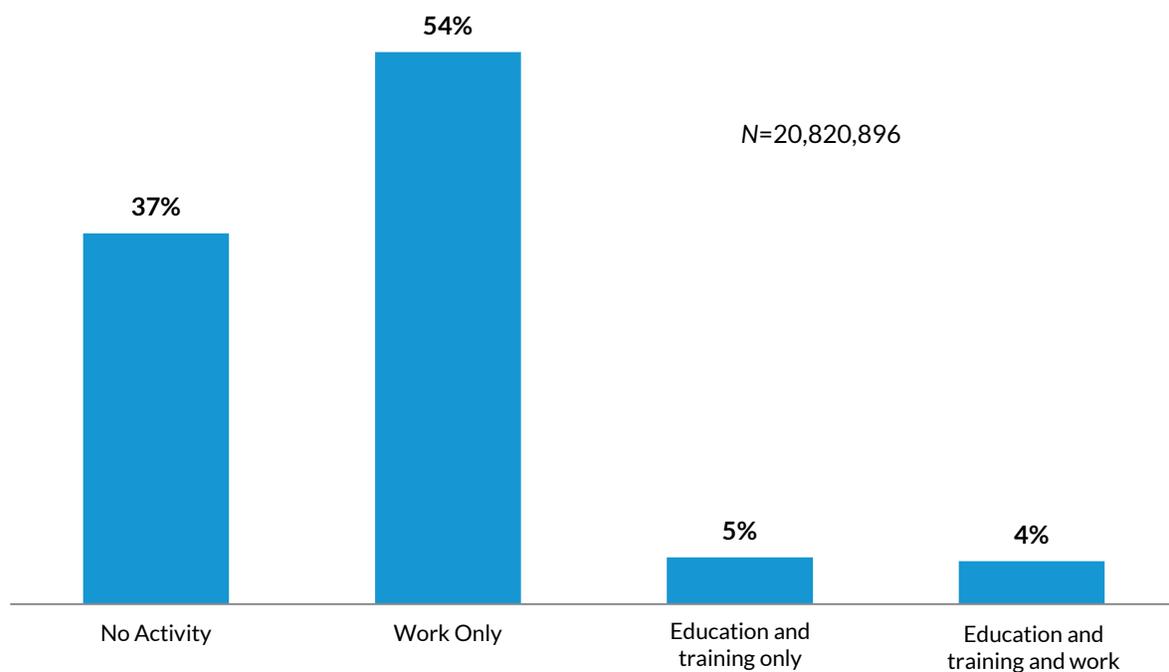
In late 2008 into early 2009, there were just over 50 million parents ages 18–50 with children under age 12. Nearly 21 million of these parents, or about two in five, were low-income. As shown in figure 1, of these low-income parents,

- almost 1 in 10 (1.8 million) were enrolled in some form of education and training;
- more than half (54 percent, or 11 million) worked but were not in education and training; and
- slightly over one-third (37 percent, or 7.6 million) were not working or in education and training.

Each section below provides more detailed information on each of these groups of low-income parents in turn.

FIGURE 1

Low-Income Parents' Work and Education and Training Patterns



Source: Authors' calculations from the SIPP 2008 panel.

Low-Income Parents Participating in Education and Training

This section examines low-income parents who do engage in education and training activities. We address several questions about low-income parents' enrollment in education and training activities, whether they couple these activities with work, and their personal and family characteristics.

What Levels of Education and Training Do Low-Income Parents Participate in?

The vast majority (93 percent) of low-income parents in education and training activities were enrolled in postsecondary programs (i.e., schooling beyond high school). Most postsecondary education and training occurs at colleges and universities, but it also occurs at private nonprofit and for-profit training providers. A smaller group of low-income parents ages 20 and older, 7 percent, were in adult education, which provides secondary education such as adult basic education and GED preparation for those who did not obtain a high school diploma. Very few of those in adult education, less than 5 percent, participated in postsecondary education as well. As discussed below, many low-income parents lack a high school credential, which is often a requirement for enrolling in postsecondary education and training activities and getting a job.

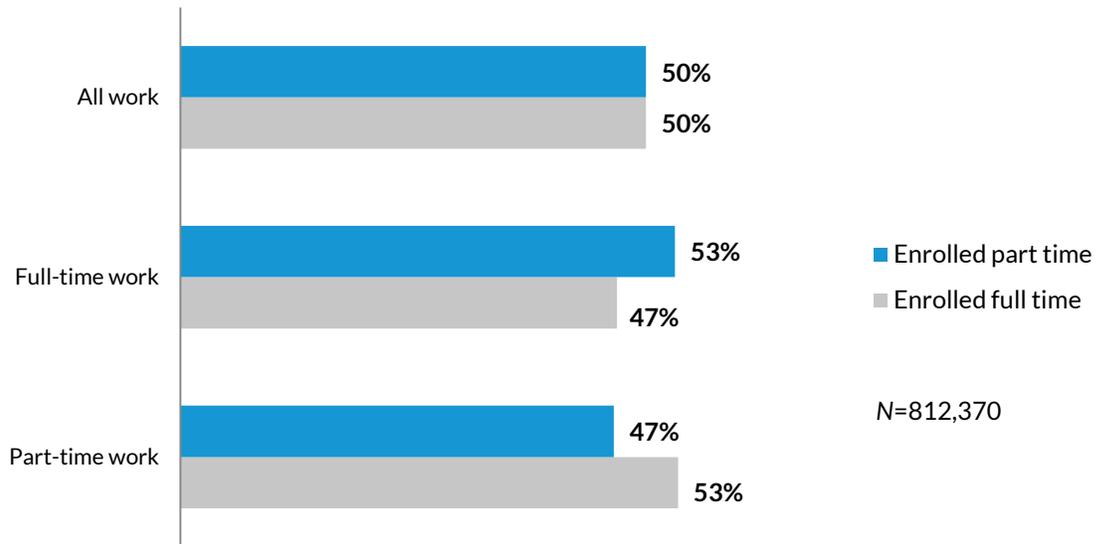
How Do Low-Income Parents Combine Education and Training Activities and Work?

Many people work while they are in education and training activities because they need to earn enough money to pay for college or a training program, but low-income parents may also need to financially support their families. Federal and state student financial aid can support their participation, but that support may not be enough to cover their school, family, and other expenses. Some limited financial support may be available for participation in training programs through the public workforce system.

Slightly less than half (48 percent) of lower-income parents enrolled in education and training combined it with work. Low-income parents' enrollment in education and training activities was evenly split between full-time and part-time enrollment in late 2008 and early 2009.¹ Figure 2 shows that 53 percent of low-income parents who worked part time enrolled full time in education activities. More than half, or 53 percent, of low-income parents who worked full time also enrolled part time in education activities. One-quarter of all working low-income parents engage in both full-time employment and education. This is important because research shows that the more intensely students participate in education activities, the more likely they are to complete their program (Crosta 2014).

FIGURE 2

Low-Income Parents Work Status by Intensity of Enrollment in Education



Source: Authors' calculations from the SIPP 2008 panel.

Note: Full-time and part-time enrollment is only captured for respondents who indicated they were in education activities.

What Is the Highest Level of Education of Low-Income Parents in Education and Training Activities?

Eligibility for postsecondary education and training often requires that students have at least a high school diploma or a GED. Thus, most low-income parents who are engaged in education and training activities, 89 percent, have at least a high school credential. More than half (63 percent) reported at least some college education; this is not surprising given that many of these parents were actually enrolled in postsecondary education. About one-quarter of low-income parents in education and training had a high school credential but no college education. And 1 in 10 low-income parents in education and training activities did not have a high school credential. Under traditional education and training programs, these parents may need to be in education and training activities longer to help them earn the secondary and postsecondary credentials they need to succeed in the workforce. However, some policymakers and practitioners are experimenting with allowing students without a high school diploma to pursue secondary and postsecondary credentials concurrently (Wachen, Jenkins, and Van Noy 2011).

Who Are the Low-Income Parents Participating in Education and Training Activities?

The national data provide some key facts about the low-income parents who participate in education and training (see table 1). For example, the data provide important insights into the family structure of low-income families who participate in education and training, which has implications for child care:

- Four out of five (82 percent) low-income parents participating in education and training were mothers (compared with 62 percent of all low-income parents).
- Fully 6 in 10 were single parents and over half (51 percent) were single mothers.
- Almost 70 percent had at least one young child, with their youngest not yet school age (ages 0–5).
- Slightly less than half (48 percent) had two or more children (compared with 56 percent of all low-income parents).
- Two-thirds (67 percent) were ages 26–50 (not traditional-age students).

Low-income single mothers engaged in education and training activities at far higher rates than all low-income parents: 15 percent of low-income single mothers, about 6 percentage points more than all low-income parents, participated in education and training activities in late 2008 and early 2009 (figure 3). More than half (53 percent) of low-income parents worked while engaged in education and training activities, about 4 percentage points more than all low-income parents in education and training. By contrast, over twice as many low-income married mothers did not work or were not enrolled in any education and training activities as compared with low-income single mothers. This may be because low-income married parents had a spouse who was supporting the family and the other parent chose to stay home with their children or had no other options for child care. Single parents may also have had partners who provided support to the family, allowing the parent to not work or engage in education and training.

Nearly 70 percent of low-income parents in education and training had children who were not yet school age: 42 percent had at least one child that was very young (under age 3), and another 27 percent had a youngest child who was ages 3–5 (see table 1). Nearly half of low-income parents also had more than one child. These data suggest that at least a subset of low-income parents were able to find a way to provide care for their children in order to be able to participate in education and training. But the data do not tell us about the nature, quality, and variability of those arrangements, which can affect program retention and outcomes for children.

TABLE 1.

Low-Income Parents by Selected Parent and Family Characteristics, Work Patterns, and Public Assistance Receipt

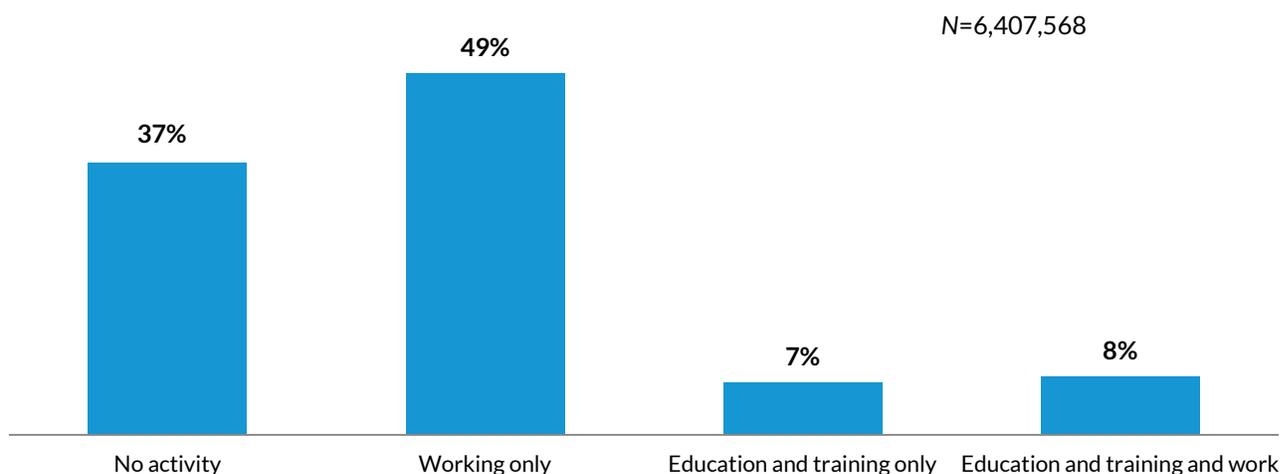
	Percentage of all low-income parents	Percentage of low-income parents in education and training	Percentage of low-income parents who work (no education and training)	Percentage of low-income parents who do not work and are not in education and training
Parent characteristics				
Mothers	62	82	50	76
Ages 26–50	82	67	86	80
Black	16	26	15	15
Hispanic	34	25	34	36
Less than high school education	26	11	24	32
Family characteristics				
Single parent	40	59	37	39
Single mother	31	51	27	31
Youngest child ages 0–5	67	69	65	71
Two or more children	56	48	58	56
Work patterns				
Working	59	48	100	N/A
Working full time	66	52	67	N/A
Public assistance receipt				
Receiving any public assistance	35	48	27	44
Receiving TANF	3	9	1	4
<i>N</i>	20,820,896	1,838,345	11,356,144	7,626,407

Source: Authors' calculations from the SIPP 2008 panel.

Note: NA is not applicable.

FIGURE 3.

Low-Income Single Mothers



Source: Authors' calculations from the SIPP 2008 panel.

In addition to data on family structure, the SIPP data provide other insights into the characteristics of low-income parents:

- About one-quarter were black and another quarter were Hispanic.
- Nearly half (48 percent) received public assistance.

Many low-income parents of color were engaged in education and training. Low-income black parents were overrepresented in their levels of participation in education and training activities at 26 percent, but low-income Hispanic parents are underrepresented in participating in education and training activities (see table 1). It is unclear why these differences in participation exist, but language or other barriers may lead to these choices.

Nearly half of all low-income parents in education and training were receiving TANF, SNAP, or SSI (or a combination of these), with about 9 percent receiving TANF. Some of these parents may be participating in education and training as a part of their requirements for receiving assistance, especially those receiving TANF.

Low-Income Parents Who Don't Participate in Education and Training

One important question is whether some low-income parents may benefit from education and training activities but do not participate because they do not have the means or time (especially if they are working or raising young children), do not have access to services that would allow them to participate, or have other barriers. Though it is not possible to identify those parents who would participate in education and training if they had access to child care, it is useful to analyze the SIPP data to look at the characteristics of those who do not engage in education and training. Data on two groups of parents are presented—those who are working and those who do not engage in either work or education and training.

Who Are the Low-Income Parents Who Are Working and Not Participating in Any Education and Training?

More than half (54 percent) of all low-income parents, over 11 million, were working in late 2008 and early 2009 but were not enrolled in any education and training activities. These parents' characteristics suggest that a significant proportion could benefit from education and training, but they may face certain challenges to participating with the already full plate of work and family responsibilities.

For a significant number of low-income working parents surveyed in late 2008 and early 2009, a lack of postsecondary credentials could be a major barrier to obtaining better-paying work. Nearly one-quarter (24 percent) of low-income working parents did not have a high school diploma (see table 1). Another third (32 percent) had a high school diploma or GED but no college education. In total, more than half had a high school diploma or GED or less, suggesting that education and training opportunities could help them improve their competitiveness in the job market. The remaining low-income working parents either had some college education (33 percent) or a college degree (11 percent).²

Low-income parents' work patterns could make it challenging for them to participate in education and training. Two-thirds of low-income working parents worked full time (35 or more hours or more per week); the remaining third worked part time. If low-income working parents work full time as they raise children, it may not leave much time for education and training activities. Many low-income working parents are also struggling financially. Even though these parents were working, 27 percent of them were receiving some public assistance. Thus, they may have difficulty affording some education and training programs.

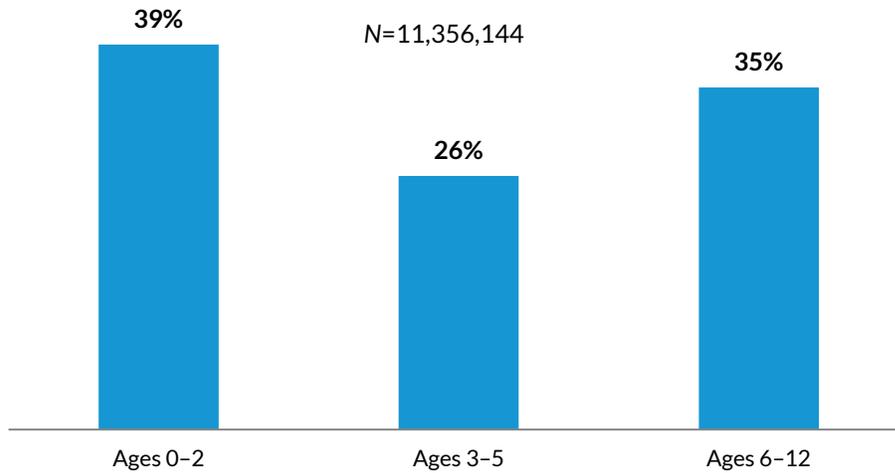
Finally, family issues could play a role in pursuing education and training. For example, of the families who were working and not in education and training,

- there were equal proportions of mothers and fathers;
- a large majority (86 percent) were older than traditional-age students (ages 26–50);

- slightly more than one-third (37 percent) of low-income working parents were single;
- almost two-thirds had a child age 5 or younger (figure 4); and
- most (58 percent) had more than one child (figure 5).

FIGURE 4

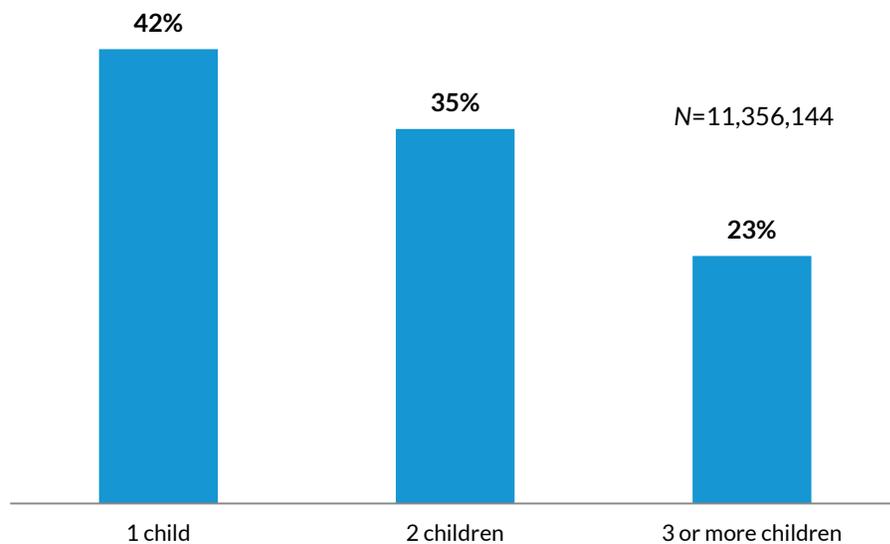
Age of Youngest Child for Low-Income Working Parents



Source: Authors' calculations from the SIPP 2008 panel.

FIGURE 5

Number of Children for Low-Income Working Parents



Source: Authors' calculations from the SIPP 2008 panel.

These family factors may play a role in parents' interest in and ability to participate in education and training because they may need access to child care, whether through a family member or formal child care arrangements. This may be even more difficult if child care is needed in the evening or sporadically throughout the week when classes meet.

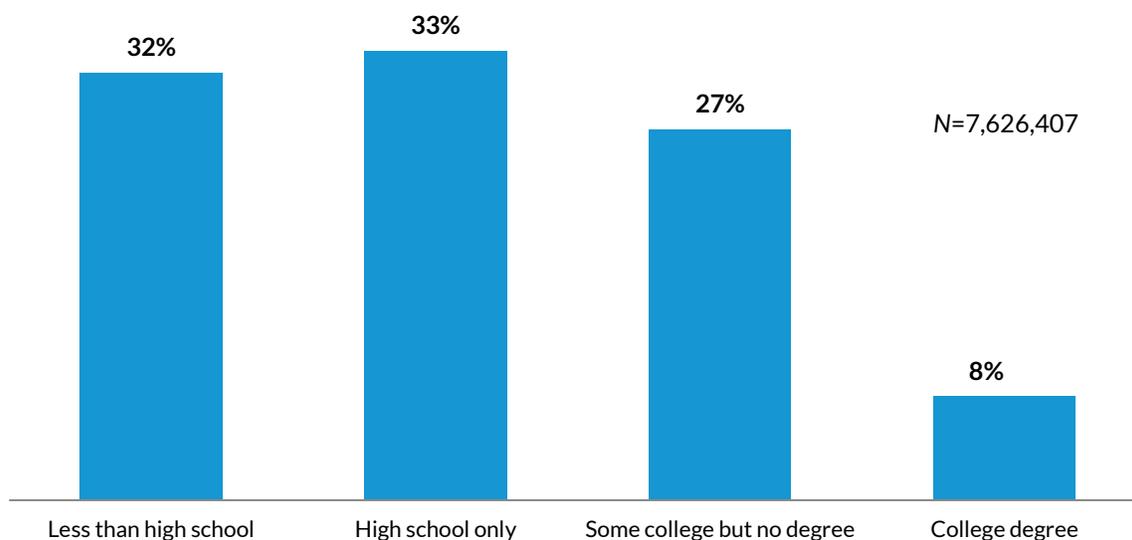
Who Are the Low-Income Parents Who Do Not Engage in Any Work or Education and Training Activities?

Over one-third of low-income parents (about 7.6 million) did not participate in any work or any education and training activity. Though it is impossible to determine whether these low-income parents wanted to participate in education and training or faced child care barriers, an understanding of some of these parents' characteristics provides some insights into both the potential need for education and training and some of the possible challenges they face in pursuing education and training.

Many low-income parents who did not engage in work, education, or training had low education levels. As shown in figure 6, nearly one-third (32 percent) did not have a high school diploma or GED; another third (33 percent) had only a high school degree or GED. Twenty-seven percent had some college education, and only 8 percent had completed a college degree. This suggests that many low-income parents not currently participating in education and training would benefit from activities to improve their ability to compete in the job market. Those who had some college education and were pursuing a degree could benefit from assistance, through financial aid and child care, in completing their degree.³

FIGURE 6

Education Levels of Low-Income Parents Not Engaged in Work or Education and Training



Source: Authors' calculations from the SIPP 2008 panel.

As with low-income working parents, family may play a role in low-income parents not engaging in education and training. For example, of low-income parents who do not engage in either work or education and training,

- over three-quarters (76 percent) were mothers;
- most (80 percent) were older than traditional-age students (ages 26–50);
- about two out of five (39 percent) were single parents;
- almost three-quarters (71 percent) of these parents had children younger than school age; and
- over half (56 percent) had two or more children.

These facts suggest that child care barriers may be an issue facing these families if they are interested in education and training.

Disability may limit low-income parents' ability to participate in work or education and training. About 18 percent of low-income parents not engaged in work or education and training activities had a disability that limited the kind and amount of work they could do. Because nearly one in five of these parents have a disability, it may be important to consider how education and training providers recruit, support, and advise students with disabilities.

Nearly half (44 percent) of low-income parents who do not engage in any work or education and training were receiving public assistance (TANF, SNAP or SSI); 4 percent received TANF. For some parents, the same barriers to work (such as health limitations or a child with disabilities) that led these parents to public assistance may be barriers to education and training. However, other parents on public assistance have been able to access education and training (48 percent of all low-income parents in education and training) and it is important to understand these differences.

Conclusions

This brief examines low-income parents' education and training activities using nationally representative survey data from late 2008 and early 2009. Our findings have important implications for how child care and workforce development systems serve low-income parents and will help policymakers better identify the child care needs of parents trying to improve their education and skills.

Nationally, there were 21 million low-income parents. Nearly 1 in 10 of these parents participated in education and training, slightly over half were working, and slightly over one-third were neither in education and training nor employed.

Fully 1.8 million low-income parents were enrolled in education and training activities. In examining this group of low-income parents, we found the following:

- **About half of the low-income parents engaged in education and training were combining these activities with work—sometimes full-time work, sometimes part time.** This underscores the importance of considering the parent’s overall schedule of work and education and training when thinking about their child care needs.
- **The vast majority were engaged in postsecondary education and training; fewer parents, 7 percent, were pursuing a high school credential.** Low-income parents already pursuing additional education and training have higher education levels than those who are not in education and training; nearly 90 percent of low-income parents in education and training activities had their high school diploma or GED.
- **Most low-income parents in education and training were single mothers, and almost 70 percent had children age 5 or younger.** Child care needs are likely important in shaping their ability to participate in and successfully complete education and training activities.
- **Nearly half of low-income parents in education and training were receiving public assistance.** Public benefits may be helping a significant group of low-income parents access education and training opportunities as they try to improve their job opportunities.

Of low-income parents who were not engaged in education and training—including 11 million who were working and 7.6 million who were neither working nor in education and training—we found the following:

- **Two-thirds of low-income working parents were working full time while raising families, leaving little time to participate in education and training.** Promising strategies for designing education and training programs that better adjust for work and family schedules could help low-income working parents access and successfully complete programs.
- **Nearly one-third of the low-income parents neither working nor in education and training activities, and nearly one-quarter of low-income working parents who were not in education and training activities, lacked a high school diploma or GED. Another one-third of each group only had a high school diploma or GED.** Education and training providers must develop more-effective strategies to address these low-income parents’ low education levels and potentially their college readiness (once they have a high school diploma). Low education levels also mean that child care systems may have to consider parents who need to be in education and training for a significant time, with varying schedules and hours, to complete their schooling.
- **Many of the low-income parents who were not in education and training had children younger than school-age.** Three out of four low-income parents who were neither working nor in education and training, and two-thirds of those who were working, had children age 5 or younger; this makes reliable child care an important factor in supporting these parents’ efforts to enroll in education and training.

- **Over half of low-income parents who were not engaged in education and training (both working and not) had two or more children.** Having more than one child could be a barrier to participating in education and training activities because of the complexities of arranging care for more than one child, especially if they are young.
- **Half of low-income working parents and one-quarter of those neither working nor in education and training were fathers.** It may be important for workforce and child care professionals to consider how to address the education and training and child care needs of families where the father could benefit from additional education and training to find better-paying work.

These findings highlight the significant demands low-income families enrolled in education and training face as they juggle jobs, education and training activities, and child-rearing responsibilities. They also point to the need for policymakers and practitioners to consider the child care needs of low-income parents seeking to improve their skills and credentials to find jobs that will support their families. They also demonstrate that child care, education and workforce policies, and strategies to support low-income families in their efforts to advance must both recognize the myriad paths and combinations of education and training activities that families may pursue and be flexible in the ways they support families. New exploratory research emerging from this project will offer promising strategies and perspectives from leaders in state and local workforce development (including education) and child care systems to help these systems work together to address this important issue for low-income parents.

Note

1. “Table 303.30. Total Fall Enrollment in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, by Level and Control of Institution, Attendance Status, and Sex of Student: Selected Years, 1970 through 2012,” Digest of Education Statistics, US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, accessed October 3, 2014, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_303.30.asp.

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