



# SERU COVID-19 SURVEY

## **Undergraduate Student Caregivers' Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Financial Hardships, Food and Housing Insecurity, Mental Health, and Academic Obstacles**

Krista M. Soria, Molly McAndrew, Bonnie Horgos, Igor Chirikov, & Daniel Jones-White

**The COVID-19 pandemic has created significant hardships for student caregivers enrolled at large, public research universities**, according to the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium survey of 30,593 undergraduate students conducted May through July 2020 at nine universities. In the survey, 6% of respondents ( $n = 1,767$ ) identified as caregivers for children, 11% of respondents ( $n = 3,236$ ) identified as caregivers for other adults (age 18 and over), and 3% ( $n = 874$ ) cared for both children and adults during the pandemic. Students who were caregivers for children may have been parents caring for their own children or family members (e.g., siblings). Students who were caregivers for adults may have been caring for their family members (e.g., parents, partners, spouses) or others.

The results indicated that **the pandemic has heightened caregivers' financial hardships**; specifically, students who were caregivers were more likely to experience the loss or reduction in family members' income, loss or reduction of wages from off-campus and on-campus employment, and unexpected increases in living expenses or technology expenses compared to their peers who were not caregivers.

Students who were **caregivers were also more likely to experience food insecurity and housing insecurity** compared to their peers who were not caregivers. Additionally, students who were **caregivers were also more likely to screen positive for generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder** than their peers who were not caregivers. Finally, students who were **caregivers were also more likely to lack access to an appropriate study environment and were less likely to be able attend scheduled online classes during the transition to remote learning**.

## Financial Hardships

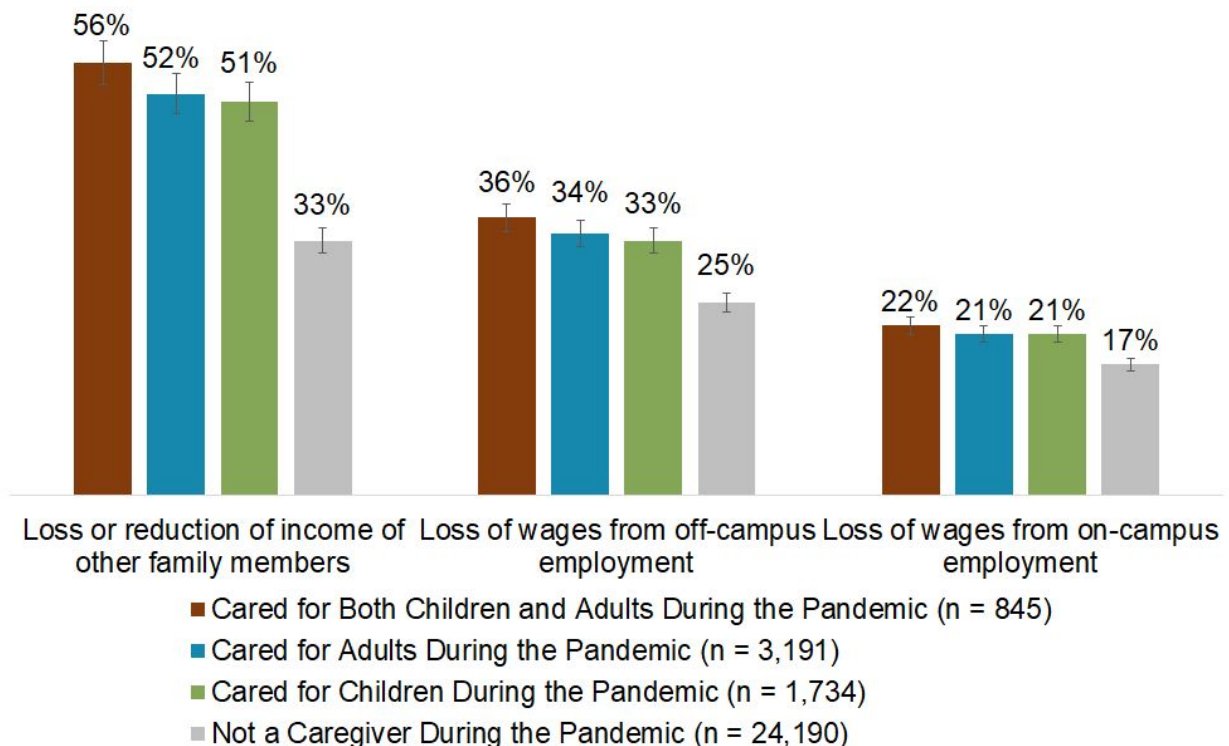
We asked students which financial hardships, if any, they have experienced during the pandemic. Student caregivers for both children and adults reported significantly ( $p < .05$ ) higher rates of reduced wages and incomes, including the loss or reduction in family income, compared to students who were not caregivers (Figure 1).

Specifically, the results suggest that students who were caregivers to *both* adults and children—or either adults *or* children—during the pandemic were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to experience the loss or reduction of family members' income (51% to 56%) compared to their peers who were not caregivers (33%).

Furthermore, the results also suggest that students who were caregivers to *both* adults and children—or either adults *or* children—during the pandemic were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to experience the loss of wages from off-campus employment (33% to 36%) compared to their peers who were not caregivers (25%). Finally, students who were caregivers to *both* adults and children—or either adults *or* children—during the pandemic were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to experience the loss of wages from on-campus employment (21% to 22%) compared to their peers who were not caregivers (17%).

**Figure 1**

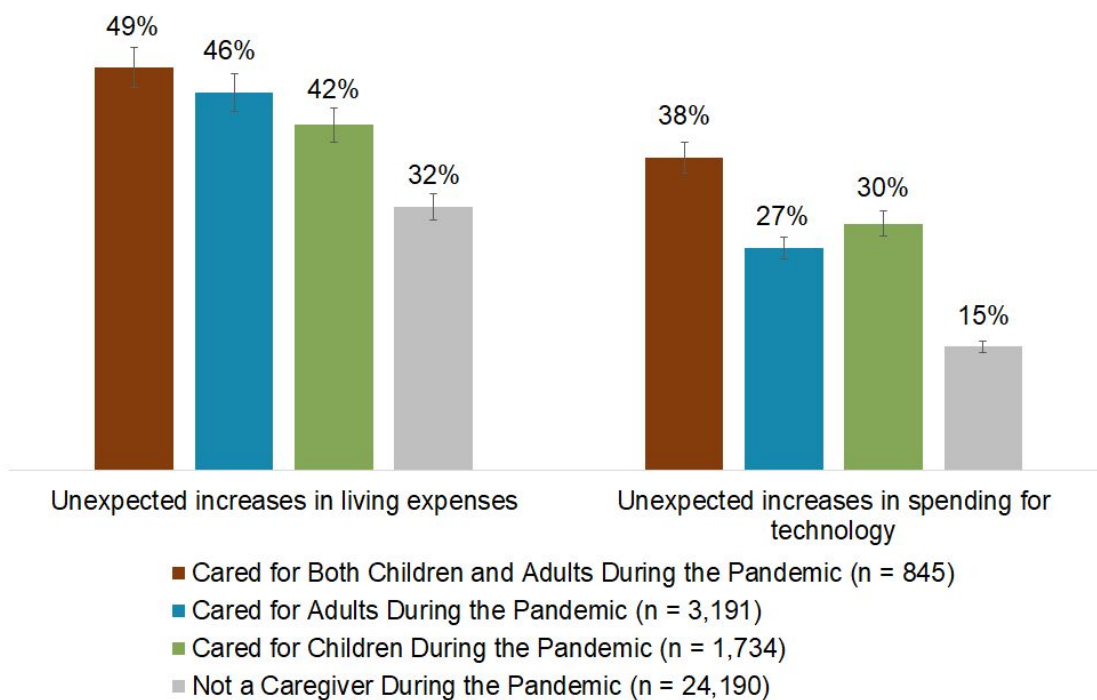
*Reduction of Income from the COVID-19 Pandemic, by Caregiving Status*



Students who were caregivers during the pandemic were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to report experiencing unexpected increases in living expenses (42% to 49%) compared to their peers who were not caregivers (32%) and significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to report experiencing unexpected increases in spending for technology (27% to 38%) compared to their peers who were not caregivers (15%) (Figure 2). We can also see that there is variation among different types of caregivers; for instance, child caregivers were more likely than adult caregivers to report unexpected increases in technology spending, perhaps because they needed to purchase technology for children to attend remote education as well.

**Figure 2**

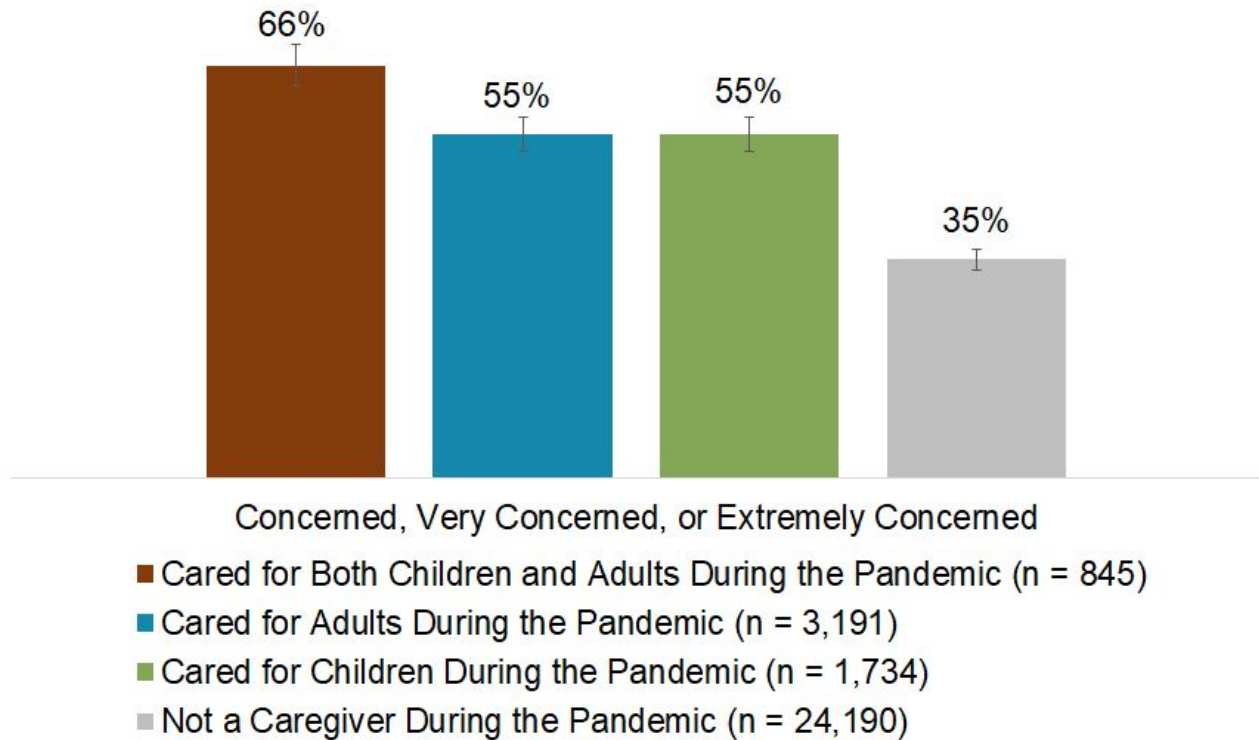
*Increased Expenses from the COVID-19 Pandemic, by Caregiving Status*



Students who were caregivers were also significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to be concerned, very concerned, or extremely concerned about their ability to afford their education (55% to 66%) compared to their peers who were not caregivers (35%) (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Students' Concerns About Their Ability to Pay Tuition in Fall 2020, by Caregiving Status*



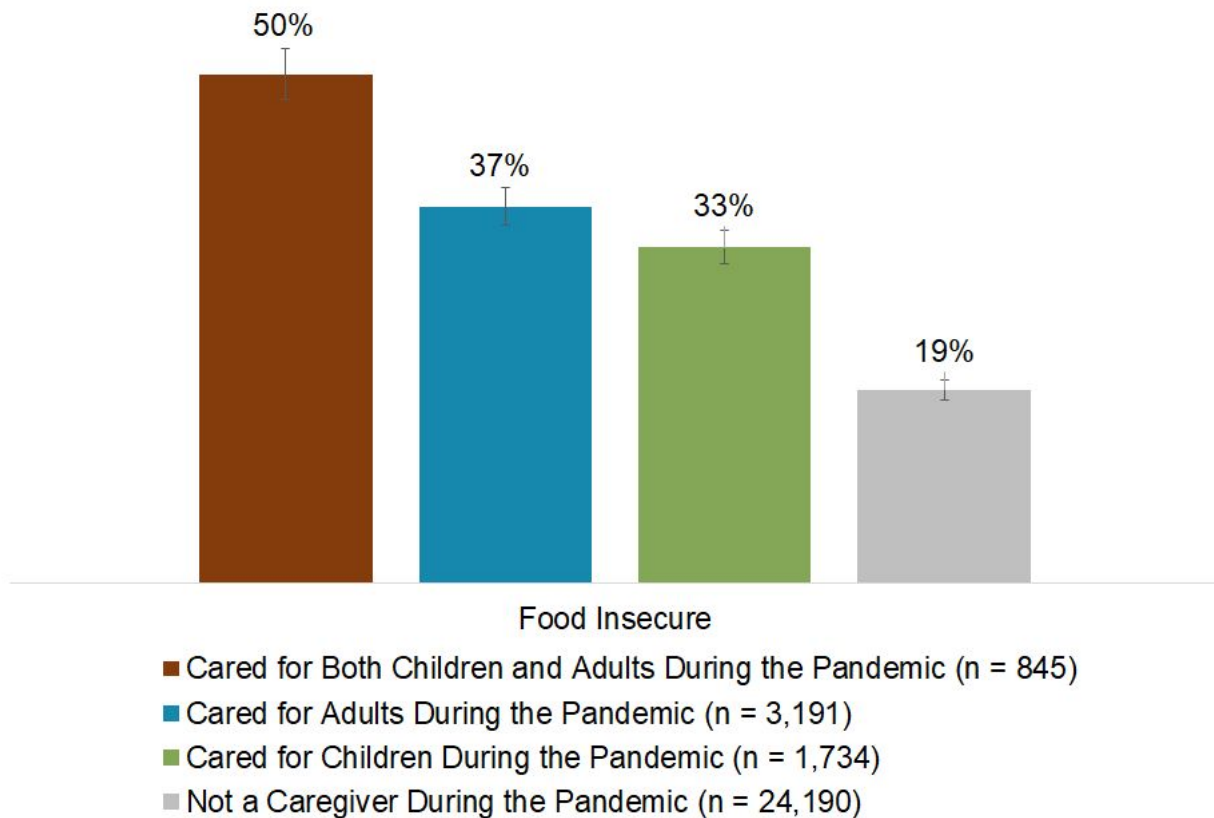
## Food Insecurity

We used a two-item food insecurity screen to identify students' food insecurity (Hager et al., 2010). We asked students how often they worried whether their food would run out before they got money to buy more and how often the food that they bought did not last, and they did not have money to get more food. A response of "often true" or "sometimes true" to either statement indicates a positive screen for food insecurity.

The results suggest that students who were caregivers during the pandemic were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to experience food insecurity compared to students who were not caregivers. As shown in Figure 4, 19% of students who were not caregivers during the pandemic experienced food insecurity, compared to 33% of students who were caregivers to children and 37% of students who were caregivers to adults. Notably, half (50%) of students who cared for *both* adults and children during the pandemic experienced food insecurity.

**Figure 4**

*Students' Food Insecurity During the Pandemic, by Caregiving Status*



## Housing Insecurity

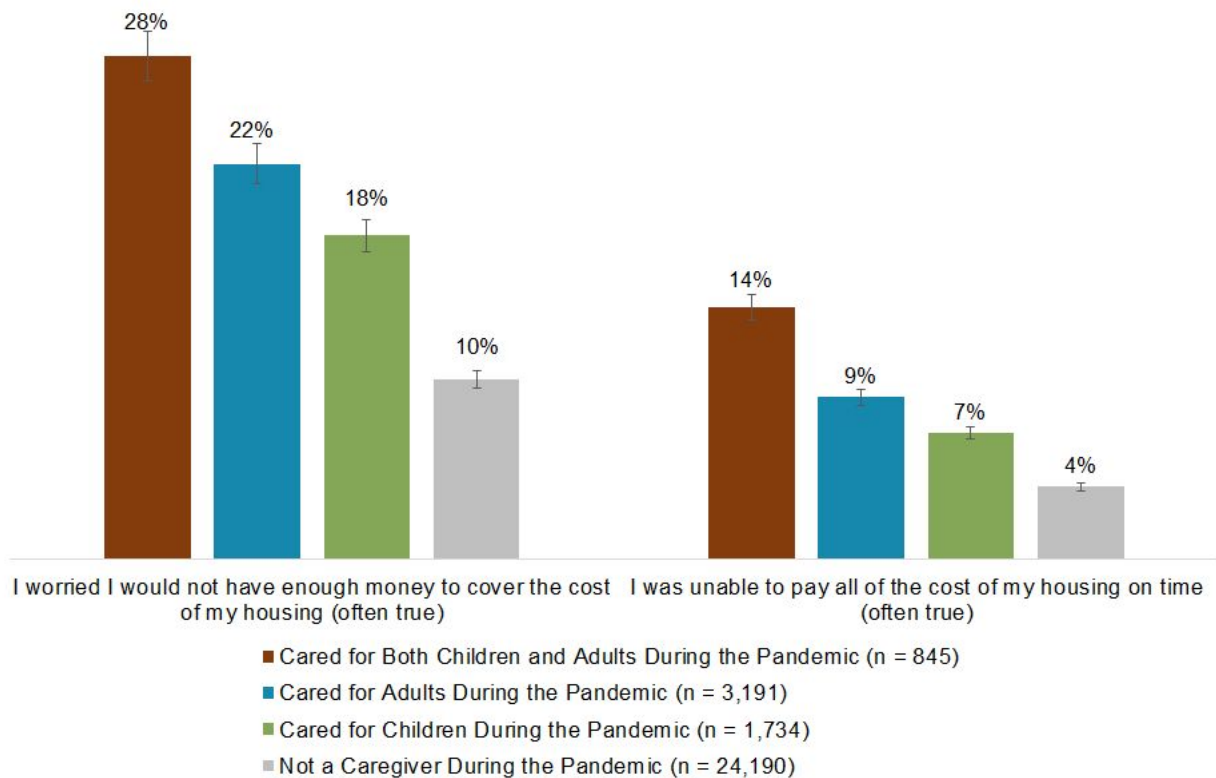
We asked students two items to measure their housing insecurity during the pandemic (“I worried I would not have enough money to cover the cost of my housing” and “I was unable to pay all of the cost of my housing on time”). Students responded whether those items were “often true,” “sometimes true,” or “never true” for them during the pandemic.

The results suggest that students who were caregivers during the pandemic were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to experience housing insecurity compared to students who were not caregivers (Figure 5). As in previous analyses, we also see the situation is comparably worse among students who were caregivers to *both* children and adults during the pandemic.

Notably, students who were caregivers were over twice (18% to 28%) as likely to indicate that it was “often true” that they worried that they would not have enough money to cover the cost of their housing compared to students who were not caregivers (10%). Students who were caregivers were over twice (7% to 14%) as likely to indicate that it was “often true” that they were unable to pay all of the cost of their housing on time compared to students who were not caregivers (4%).

**Figure 5**

*Students' Housing Insecurity During the Pandemic*



## Mental Health

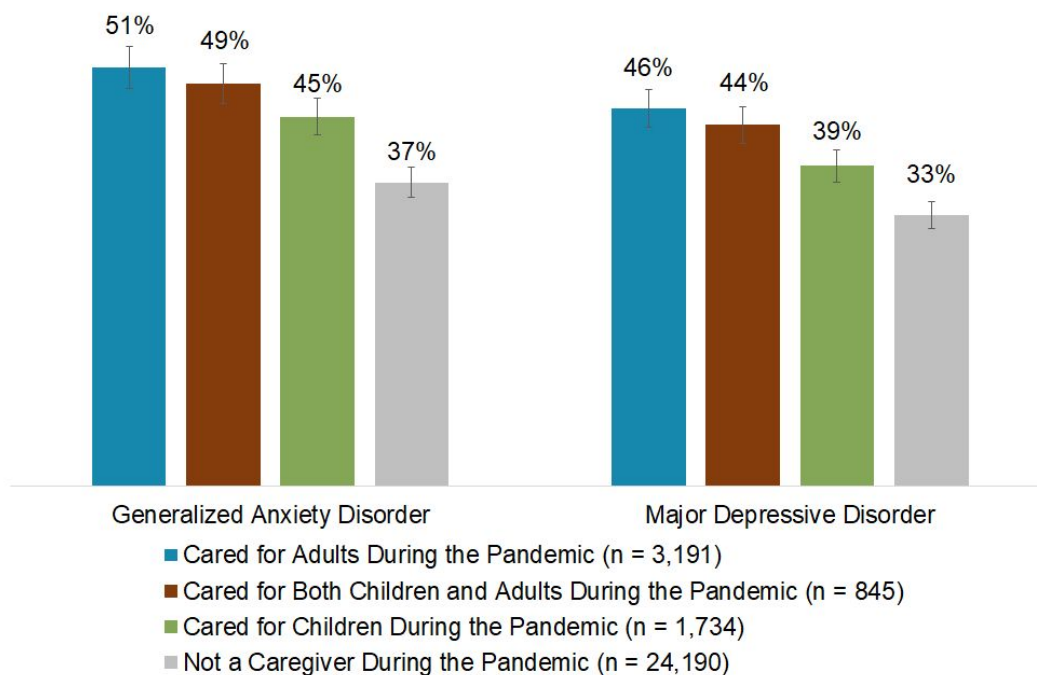
We used the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 ([PHQ-2](#)) two-item scale to screen for major depressive disorder symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2003) and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-2 ([GAD-2](#)) two-item scale to screen students for generalized anxiety disorder symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2007). The PHQ-2 asks two questions about the frequency of depressed mood and anhedonia (lost interest in activities or lack of pleasure) over the past two weeks while the GAD-2 asks two questions about the frequency of anxiety over the past two weeks. Each question is scaled from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). The responses to two questions in each scale are summed and, if the score for PHQ-2  $\geq 3$  (out of 6), major depressive disorder is likely. If the score for GAD-2 is  $\geq 3$  (out of 6), generalized anxiety disorder is likely.

Based on these screening tools, we found that 51% of caregivers for adults, 49% of caregivers for both adults and children, 45% of caregivers for children, and 37% of students who were not caregivers screened positive for generalized anxiety disorder (Figure 6). Students who were caregivers were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to screen positive for generalized anxiety disorder compared to students who were not caregivers.

Furthermore, 46% of caregivers for adults, 44% of caregivers for both adults and children, 39% of caregivers for children, and 33% of students who were not caregivers screened positive for major depressive disorder (Figure 6). Students who were caregivers were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to screen positive for major depressive disorder compared to students who were not caregivers.

**Figure 6**

*Students Screened Positive for Mental Health Disorders During the Pandemic, by Caregiving Status*



## Obstacles to Remote Learning

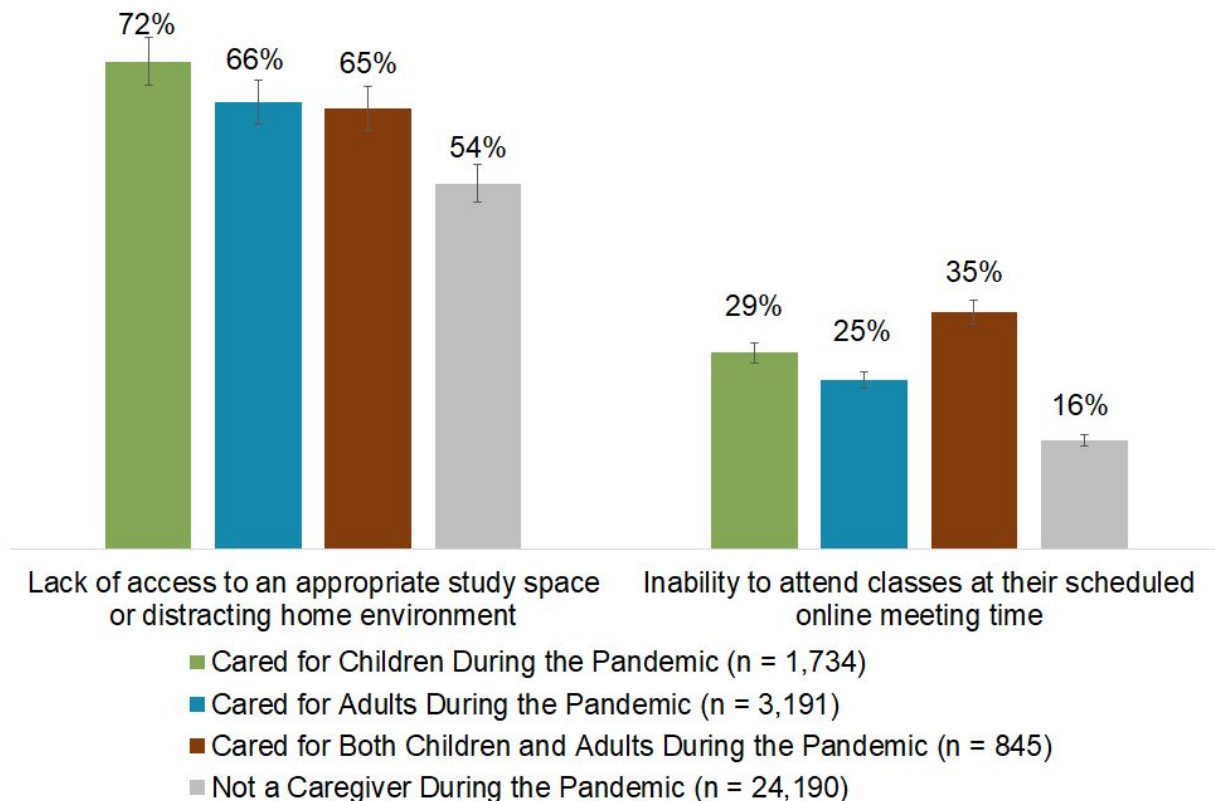
In addition to some of the disparities in students' financial hardships, food and housing insecurity, and mental health by their caregiving status, we also observed that students who were caregivers during the pandemic experienced greater academic obstacles in the transition to remote learning in the spring 2020 semester.

Students who were caregivers were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to indicate that they lacked access to an appropriate study space amid a distracting home environment and that they were unable to attend classes at their scheduled online meeting times (Figure 7).

Notably, nearly three-quarters of students who were caregivers to children lacked access to an appropriate study space or experienced a distracting home environment (Figure 7). Additionally, students who cared for *both* children and adults during the pandemic were over twice as likely as students who were not caregivers to be unable to attend classes at their scheduled meeting times.

**Figure 7**

*Students' Obstacles to Transitioning to Remote Learning*





## Conclusions

Many student caregivers already possess limited financial resources while enrolled in higher education (Augustine et al., 2018; Trujillo et al., 2016). Students who are serving as caregivers for both children and adults often rely upon part-time employment or other family members' incomes to make ends meet (Augustine et al., 2018; Trujillo et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the pandemic appears to have further widened the gaps between students who are caregivers to adults and/or children and students who are not caregivers.

While many students are experiencing financial hardships as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Soria et al., 2020), student caregivers for both children and adults represent a particularly vulnerable population. Not only did these populations report significant increases in living and technology expenses caused by the pandemic, but many also indicated a reduction in personal or family income. Additionally, we believe the economic conditions associated with the pandemic has led students who are caregivers to experience significantly higher levels of concern over whether they can afford to continue their education. Furthermore, the results of our analyses suggest that students who are caregivers experience higher rates of food and housing insecurity, which may be economic consequences of the pandemic, increases in living/technology expenses, and reduced family/personal income as well.

The economic pressures experienced by caregivers may also lead to increases in mental health disorders such as major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder, which we also observed to be much higher among students who are caregivers when compared against students who are not caregivers. Finally, the results of our study suggest that students who are caregivers were much more likely to experience distracting home environments and were unable to attend classes during their scheduled online times (perhaps due to their caregiving responsibilities).

## Recommendations

The results of our study suggest student caregivers experienced significantly more challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, student caregivers experienced more financial difficulties, food and housing insecurities, and challenges adapting to online learning. Below, we offer some recommendations for institutions.

### ***Eliminate Financial Barriers, Food Insecurity, and Housing Insecurity***

Higher education leaders should actively work to reduce the financial barriers for student caregivers. We encourage financial aid officers to share information on existing scholarships or grants available to student caregivers and discuss what, if any, additional funding options exist to relieve their financial burdens. Institutional leaders may be able to identify some student caregivers via the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form; however, students' caregiving responsibilities may not be reflected on the FAFSA unless those responsibilities are documented. Therefore, we recommend that campuses partner with campus childcare providers, student parent resource centers, or human resources offices—or ask students such information in institutional surveys—to better identify all of the students who may be caregivers during the pandemic.

Additionally, to assist caregivers who are experiencing the lost income or wages associated with employment positions, university career centers should work with student caregivers to find alternative positions, such as on-campus or off-campus employment opportunities, to offset increased living expenses for these individuals. We also recommend that career development centers open access to provide job-seeking resources to students' family members who have also lost employment positions.

It is also important to expand students' access to highly nutritious, low-cost, or free food. We recommend that campuses expand the hours and availability of food pantries to help students combat food insecurity and have more regular access to free food. During the pandemic, we also encourage colleges and universities to offer free no-touch pick-up options (e.g., "grab and go" or pick-up windows) and free food delivery to students who live on campus or near campus.

To help students who may be away from campus during the fall 2020 semester (which may impact those students who are caring for others during the pandemic), we encourage campuses to partner with national grocery store chains or restaurants to offer discounted items or meals to students. We also encourage institutions to continue offering emergency grant funding or lobbying the federal government to offer additional federal funding packages to support students in critical need.

### ***Expand Mental Health Resources***

Furthermore, we recommend that campuses work to connect qualifying students to resources in their local communities or provide assistance with completing state or federal applications for assistance (such as the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). Similarly, to address students' housing insecurity, we recommend that colleges increase the availability of low-cost family housing near campuses or on campuses and work more actively to connect students with governmental economic assistance programs (e.g., local government assistance to pay rent or housing costs during the pandemic).

Colleges and universities should also plan to allocate more resources for a potential increase in students' requests for mental health services, including counseling or therapeutic services, this upcoming fall 2020 semester. In order to accommodate the needs of students who are caregivers, counseling centers may need to create more appointment times, increase their counseling staff, or network with third-party vendors to expand available mental health services to students at a variety of different hours during the day. Busy caregivers may also benefit from opportunities to connect with other caregivers in support groups or via group counseling as well.

It is also important for colleges and universities to note the additional burdens that student caregivers face on a mental health level, particularly those who are caring for adults. It is well documented that those who are caregivers of individuals with a chronic illness are at greater risk of mental health issues (Chang et al., 2010). While student caregivers may have faced these impacts before COVID-19, the pandemic has undoubtedly furthered these pre-existing disparities for certain students. Again, these students may benefit from additional support such as group counseling.

### **Promote Academic Success**

Student caregivers will need enhanced flexibility from their professors and institutions in this time of great uncertainty. Since caregivers may not be able to afford additional help for their dependents or need to find additional work to contribute to their household income, faculty should accommodate students by offering asynchronous opportunities for engagement. Additionally, we recommend that university leaders seek to expand childcare services or provide more funding to help students who are caring for children to better manage the additional expenses associated with daycare. Universities could provide other resources to student parents, such as by connecting student parents with other student parents to form “childcare pods” and informal study groups; or offer back-up childcare services.

## About the SERU COVID-19 Survey

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium administered a special survey on the impact of COVID-19 on student experience at nine U.S. public research universities. The SERU COVID-19 Survey assesses five areas to better understand undergraduates, graduates, and professional students’ experiences during the global pandemic: 1) students’ transition to remote instruction, 2) the financial impact of COVID-19 on students, 3) students’ health and wellbeing during the pandemic, 4) students’ belonging and engagement, and 5) students’ future plans. You can access the full survey instrument [here](#).

## Sample

The survey was a census survey administered from May 18 to July 20, 2020 to undergraduate students at large, public research universities. The report uses data from 30,593 undergraduate students. The response rate was 14-41% at the respective institutions. More information about the demographic composition of the samples is available [here](#).

## Methodology

All of the items we report in this research brief are categorical; therefore, we utilized Pearson’s chi-square test to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the expected and observed frequencies of students’ responses. We utilized the common probability level of  $p < .05$ , which serves as an a priori statement of the probability of an event occurring as extreme or more extreme than the one observed if the null hypothesis is true.

## About the SERU Consortium

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium is an academic and policy research collaboration based at Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California – Berkeley (CSHE) working in partnership with the University of Minnesota and partner institutions. More information is available at <https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru>.

## Contact Information

Krista M. Soria, PhD, Assistant Director for Research and Strategic Partnerships, SERU Consortium, and Director for Student Affairs Assessment, University of Minnesota.  
[ksoria@umn.edu](mailto:ksoria@umn.edu)

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<https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru-covid-survey-reports>

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