Los Angeles County families with young children are struggling to pay for basic needs

October 2024

The RAPID-California Voices Project is a multi-year, statewide survey of households with children under age 6 that aims to amplify parent voices, better understand the needs of families, and advance data- and parent-informed policies and programs across California. RAPID surveys are designed to listen to parents about their economic and emotional well-being in order to understand the experiences of families with young children.

In this fact sheet, we lay out what we've learned from parents with children under age 6 in Los Angeles (LA) County—the most-populated county in California and home to 27% of the state's population—about family economic and emotional well-being. The data presented below were gathered between November 2022 and May 2024.

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"Even though I am a hardworking parent, having to accept jobs overnight to be able to attend to my children during the day is very challenging. I'm constantly sleep deprived and am barely meeting all our expenses."
Parent in Lancaster, CA

The majority of LA County parents with young children have difficulty meeting basic needs

Economic well-being is critical to families' ability to access essentials, like food and housing, and other resources that support the healthy, positive development of children.

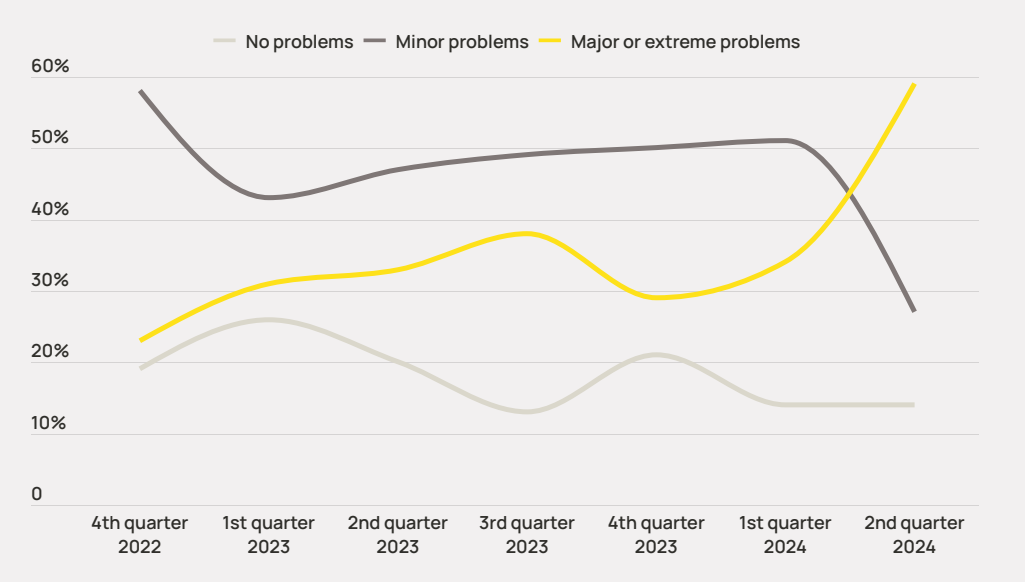
When we asked parents in LA County about their overall economic well-being, four in five (81%) described their family as experiencing some financial problems, and 60% described their financial problems as being "major" or "extreme."

"The biggest challenges we are facing right now are financial burdens. Utilities have gone up, as well as food."
Parent in Los Angeles, CA

We also asked families with young children about their experiences of material hardship, defined as difficulty affording basic needs like food, housing, utilities, child care, healthcare, and activities that support health and well-being. In May 2024, 71% of LA County parents reported material hardship in at least one area of basic need.

"[My biggest challenge is] money. We're drowning in debt."
Parent in Los Angeles, CA

Los Angeles County parents reporting financial problems, overall



"Our biggest concern now is that our financial income is too low and sometimes not enough to live on." **Parent in Palmdale, CA**

To understand the financial hardships that families are experiencing, we asked parents about changes to their household income over the past month. More than half of LA County parents (59%) reported that their household income had decreased in the past month.

Many LA County families with young children face difficulty accessing food

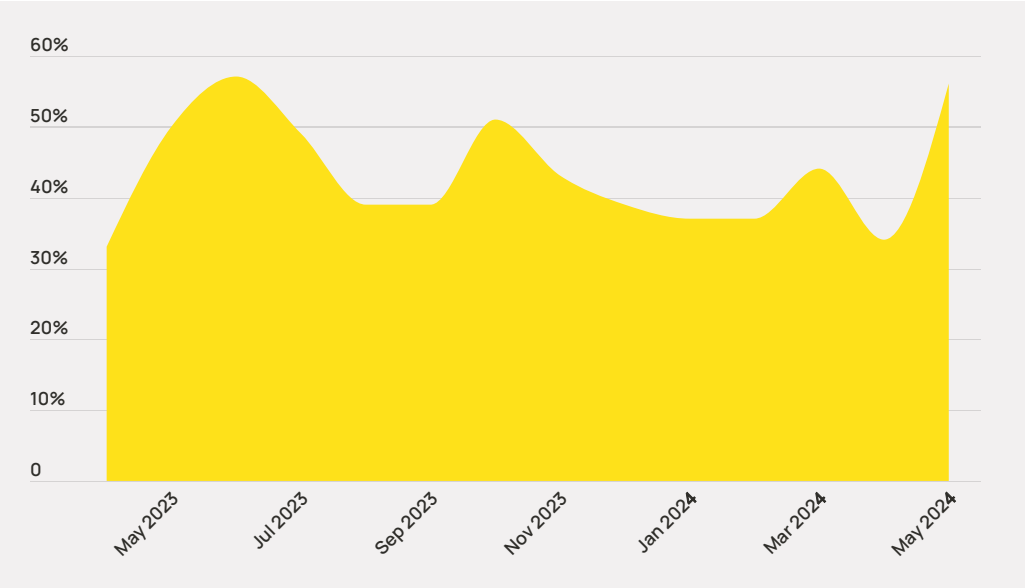
"[My biggest challenge is] financial responsibilities living in an extremely expensive state." **Parent in Los Angeles, CA**

Regular access to healthy, nutritious foods is essential to positive early childhood development. Data from RAPID's national survey have found that many families are worried about food access and parents frequently raise concerns about the high cost of food, difficulty affording food, and concerns about food programs ending.

"My biggest concern is not being able to pay rent, and if I do pay it, I won't have enough for food." **Parent in Los Angeles, CA**

We asked LA County parents about their experiences of hunger and food insecurity and found high and sustained rates of food insecurity.

Los Angeles County parents reporting food insecurity, overall



"Right now, my biggest challenges, I would say, would be being able to provide good healthy meals for my children because food is extremely expensive and currently my income does not allow me to buy sometimes certain things because they are out of my price range." **Parent in Sun Valley, CA**

"Biggest challenge is providing/ having enough money for food." **Parent in Sun Valley, CA**

In May 2024, more than half (56%) reported food insecurity. RAPID survey data shows that food insecurity for LA County families increased as pandemic-era benefits, such as the expanded CalFresh food stamp program, were rolled back.

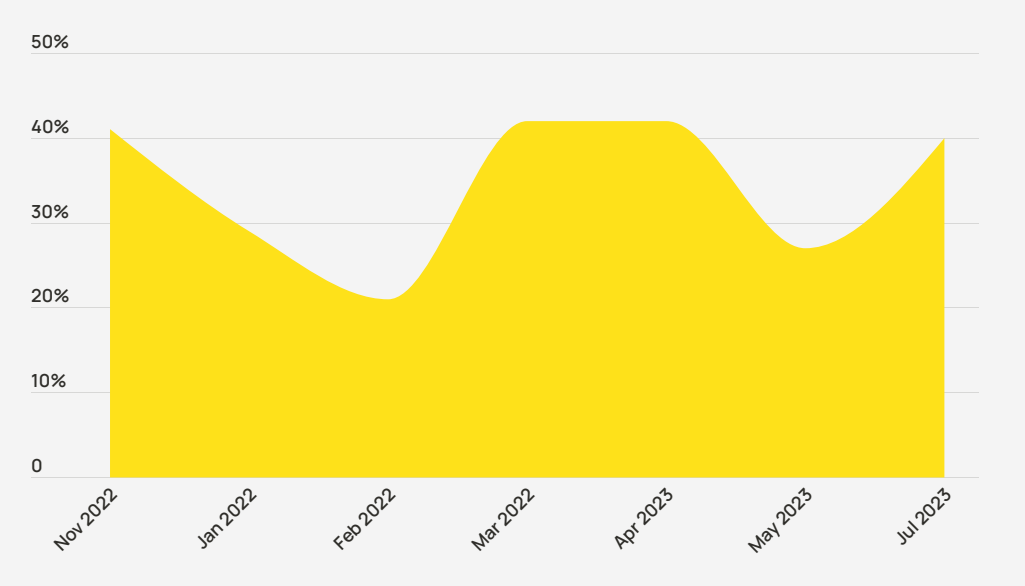
"We have found a food pantry to provide us with food and necessities." **Parent in Canyon Country, CA**

Many LA County parents with young children are concerned about underemployment

RAPID surveys include questions about parents' employment and work environment. The majority of LA County parents (90%) are employed in either full-time or part-time work. However, many LA County parents report not working the amount they would like to: 40% work less than they would like to and 29% work more than they would like to.

"[My biggest challenge is] bad eating habits due to no or little time to cook healthy meals. Or eating bad due to sleep deprivation and using food/too much coffee for energy." **Parent in Pacoima, CA**

Los Angeles County parents reporting working less than they would like to, overall



"Right now, the most that helps me is daycare. Because otherwise, I wouldn't have anyone to take care of my son, and I wouldn't be able to provide for my family." **Parent in Sun Valley, CA**

"What's helping me the most is having stable child care that permits me being able to work so I can pay for our basic needs." **Parent in North Hollywood, CA**

RAPID surveys also include open-ended questions to give parents space to provide additional information and share their experiences in more detail.

When we looked at LA County parents' responses to questions about their biggest challenges or concerns as well as what is helping them, we found that many parents mentioned relying on child care to access employment opportunities that support their family's well-being. Data from RAPID's national survey show the need for additional government support with child care (e.g., subsidies, increased pay) is a topic that parents across the country are raising with increasing frequency and is a trend that seems likely to continue going forward.

"Without child care, I am finding it challenging to get more working hours. Due to transportation, I am limited to what choices I have." **Parent in Porter Ranch, CA**

Most LA County parents with young children are experiencing significant stress

"Not able to afford my child's needs and need to work more hours. I need a more stable job." **Parent in Canoga Park, CA**

To better understand the experiences of parents of young children, in November 2022, we started asking LA County parents about their emotional well-being.

Parents report how much they agree, disagree, or feel neutral toward the statement: "Since the COVID-19 pandemic, being a parent is manageable, and any problems are easily solved."

"The kindergarten provides extra care when I work overtime, which relieves a lot of stress and allows us to balance work and family time." **Parent in Los Angeles, CA**

In May 2024, the vast majority of LA County parents (91%) reported strongly or somewhat disagreeing with the statement and reported experiencing parenting stress.

"My family is my biggest support system. If I do need help, they'll be there. Thanks to my two jobs, I'm OK." **Parent in Granada Hills, CA**

Research shows that parents' own emotional well-being affects their children's emotional well-being and development. The national RAPID survey has consistently found evidence of a chain reaction of hardship. That is, as parents' experiences of material hardship increase, they also experience more emotional distress (higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness), which, in turn, is associated with parents reporting increased emotional distress among their young children.

"Knowing my son is in good hands for the main part of my work day and not having to pay more for his daycare is a HUGE weight off my shoulders." Parent in Valley Village, CA

Conclusion

LA County parents with young children are struggling to find economic stability, food security, and emotional well-being, all of which are essential for providing supportive, responsive caregiving to young children. Research shows that families reported lower material hardship, including food insecurity, when pandemic-era support benefits were in place. Given the high rates of material hardship and reports of stress among parents of young children in LA County, as well as the barriers parents reported to accessing food and employment, there is a pressing need to ensure parents and families of young children receive early and necessary support so that all children and families can thrive.

"Finding enough time to spend with my children seems hard. After getting home from work, it seems like there is no downtime. constantly having to do something (clean, cook, check homework, etc.)." **Parent in Sylmar, CA**

"I'm currently going to school and watching the kids. I have a hard time balancing between school and kids." **Parent in North Hills, CA**

About the RAPID State Survey

The RAPID Survey Project is based in the Stanford Center on Early Childhood, under the direction of Philip Fisher, PhD, Director of the Center.

This set of analyses on RAPID-California Voices Project data data is based on responses collected from 1,375 Los Angeles County parents between November 8, 2022 and May 29, 2024. These parents represent a range of voices: 16% are Black/African American, 44% are Latinx, and 56% live below 200% of the federal poverty line. Proportions/percentages are calculated based on the item-level response rates, not out of the total sample size. The data for these analyses are not weighted.

RAPID partners with cities, counties, and states to gather essential and ongoing information and caregiver voices, provide timely and relevant data to inform local policies and programs, and develop the capacity of local organizations to employ rapid-cycle survey methods and enhance the impact of their work on behalf of child, families and the child care workforce.

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