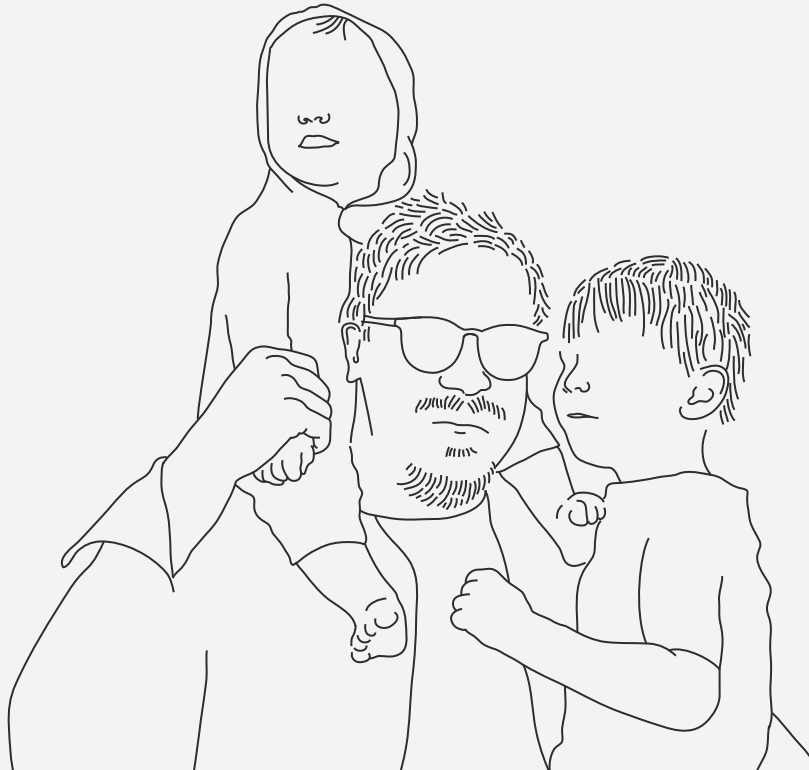


California families with infants and toddlers face economic strain and emotional stress

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These data were gathered from California families with infants and toddlers across the state between November 2022 and September 2024.

Since 2022, RAPID has been asking California parents of young children about their family's economic circumstances, well-being, use of child care, and more. This multi-year, statewide survey aims to better understand the experiences of California families with children under age 6, lift up parent voices, and promote data-informed policies and programs that support families. In this fact sheet, we share what we've learned specifically about the experiences and well-being of California families with infants and toddlers (defined as birth through age 3).



Stanford
Center on Early Childhood

“My biggest challenges and concerns right now are that I will not have enough money for bills and food. I have a toddler son and am currently pregnant with a baby on the way.”
Parent in San Diego County

“CalFresh benefits [state-subsidized food program] are a tremendous help to us. We may have worries about making ends meet in other areas and we may have to say no to ‘wants’, but one thing we never have to worry about is money for food. We can get quality food for ourselves and our children and never go hungry, thanks to CalFresh.” Parent in Humboldt County

“Not having the funds each month to make our savings account grow due to the home mortgage, bills, and high cost of living in CA [is my biggest concern]. There are two incomes in the family with two college educated parents, yet, when we struggle to raise three children and want to seek public assistance, we cannot because we do not qualify due to income.”
Parent in Ventura County

We focus on these early years because they are a critical period in children’s and families’ lives that builds the lifelong foundation for physical health, emotional well-being, and positive development.

The survey includes questions designed to better understand the economic circumstances of families with young children. This includes asking parents about experiences of material hardship. RAPID measures material hardship as difficulty in the last month affording basic needs, such as food, housing, utilities, child care, healthcare, and activities that support well-being (e.g., counseling). Consistent access to basic needs contributes to the stable home environments and the economic well-being that supports healthy development of young children and their families.

A third of California families with infants and toddlers 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. To understand family economic well-being, we ask California parents with young children about experiences of material hardship. In our September 2024 analysis, 35% of California families with infants and toddlers report difficulty affording at least one area of basic need.

“Securing a job, working while taking care of a newborn, paying unpaid bills and rent [are my biggest challenges].”
Parent in Los Angeles County

More than two in three (68%) California parents of infants and toddlers report feeling moderate-to-extreme stress about paying for basic needs. This high rate of hardship is concerning, as parents’ economic stress can interfere with the ability to provide responsive caregiving during a critical period of bonding and child and family development.

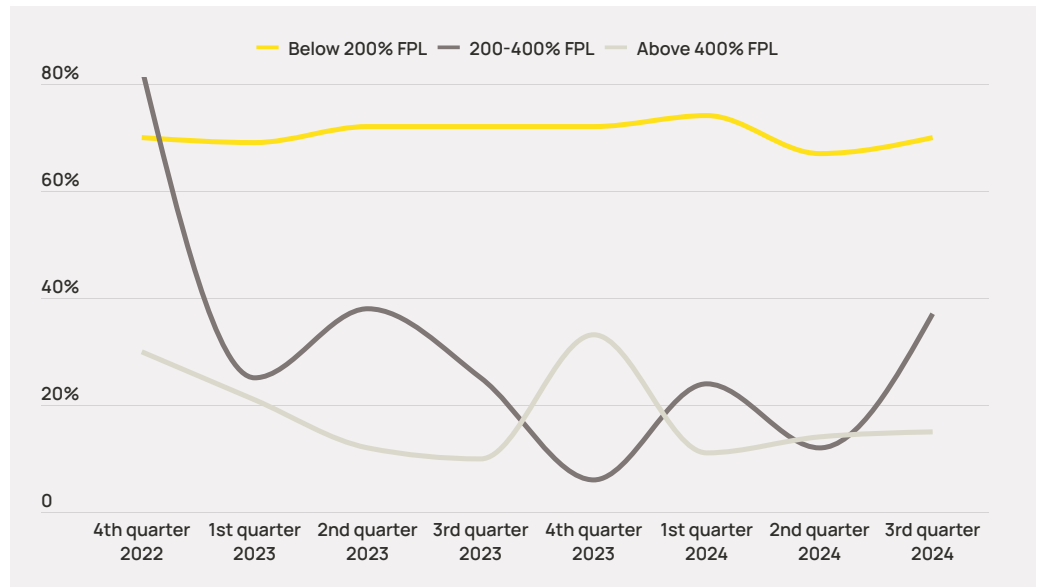
“I have stress and anxiety about the ability to maintain steady employment while also caring for the family.”
Parent in San Francisco County

Furthermore, in other analyses, RAPID data has consistently shown a chain reaction of hardship. That is, as parents’ experiences of hardship increase, they are also more likely to report emotional distress (higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness), which, in turn, is associated with an increase in emotional distress in their young children.

“My partner is having a hard time getting a job that pays well enough to sustain. We would rather not live paycheck to paycheck and it causes an almost continuous anxiety when it’s time to pay rent.”
Parent in Los Angeles County

Among California parents of infants and toddlers, we see the very highest rates of material hardship in lower-income families (70%). The most prevalent categories of material hardship among lower-income families are housing, utilities, and food.

California parents’ reporting material hardship, by federal poverty level (FPL)



“Being a single mom [is my biggest challenge]. The pressure. Lonely feeling. Thoughts or doubts if I’m doing it right. Teaching him right, how to be a good human, and feeling like I don’t spend enough time with him.” Parent in San Bernardino County

“[My biggest challenge is] overcoming postpartum anxiety and depression.” Parent in San Bernardino County

“Right now, my biggest challenge is balancing the responsibilities of taking care of my almost 1-year-old child while preparing for the arrival of a new baby. The strain from the family separation also weighs on me, and I am trying to manage my time effectively while also addressing the needs of myself and my two children.” Parent in Riverside County

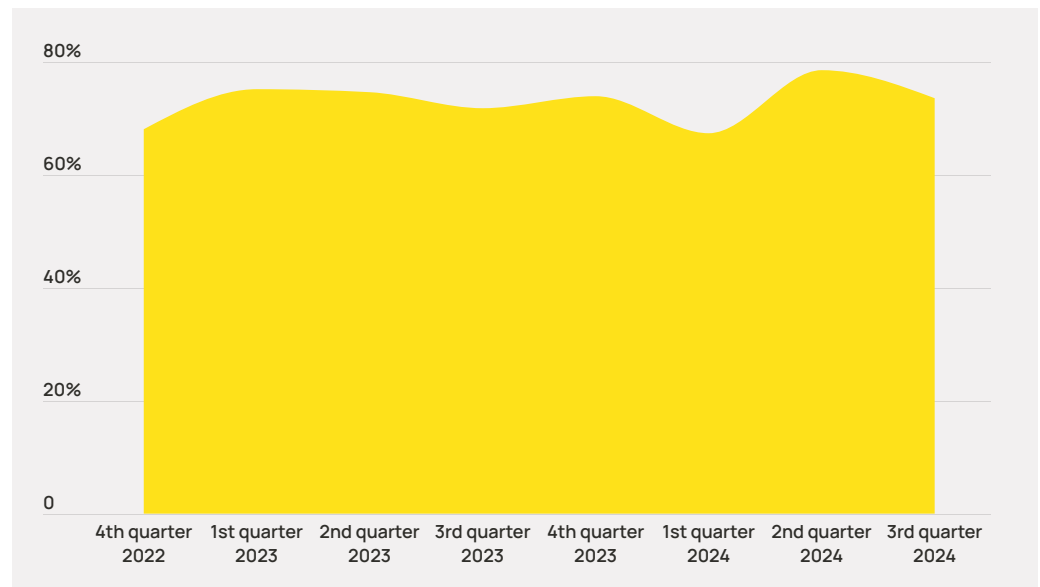
The majority of California parents with infant and toddlers experience emotional distress

RAPID also asks parents of young children about their levels of emotional distress. We measure emotional distress as a composite of four experiences: stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness.* More than two in three (67%) California parents of infants and toddlers reported experiencing emotional distress in September 2024.

Among parents who report experiencing emotional distress, stress is the most prevalent symptom (50%), followed by anxiety (45%), loneliness (42%), and depression (36%).

Additionally, we see these high rates of emotional distress across all income levels with 72% of parents in lower-income households, 68% of parents in higher-income households, and 62% of parents in middle-income households experiencing some form of emotional distress.

California parents’ reporting emotional distress, overall



“Balancing a newborn and a toddler [is my biggest concern].”
Parent in Santa Clara County

To understand parents’ experiences, we also ask parents how often in the past week they feel hopeful about the future. About one in four (24%) California parents of infants and toddlers say they rarely or seldom feel hopeful about the future. Lower-income parents of infants and toddlers were the most likely to report rarely or seldom feeling hopeful (36%), as compared to middle- and higher-income parents (8% and 26%, respectively).

“Right now, the biggest support for me comes from my family and friends. They offer emotional support and practical help, such as taking care of my child, spending time with me, and providing encouragement. Their care and assistance make me feel less alone.”
Parent in San Riverside County

* RAPID measures anxiety by asking parents how often they felt “nervous, anxious, or on edge” or couldn’t control worrying. RAPID measures depression by asking how often parents had “little interest or pleasure in doing things” or felt “down, depressed, or hopeless.” RAPID measures loneliness and stress by asking how often parents felt lonely or stressed.

Many California families with infants and toddlers have social support, but more can be done to help parents with very young children

“My mom has been helping me with my newborn and cooking meals.”
Parent in San Riverside County

Emotional support is a powerful buffer against the negative effects of material hardship on family emotional well-being. To understand families’ access to support, we ask: “In the last week, when you felt overwhelmed or stressed as a parent, did you get the support you needed?” Many California parents of infants and toddlers in all income levels report getting the support they need when feeling overwhelmed or stressed. More than half (54%) of California parents of infants and toddlers say they

“Learning how to care for a newborn [is my biggest challenge].”
Parent in Los Angeles County

“Family’s love and support
[is helping me most].”
Parent in San Bernardino County

are somewhat or moderately supported, and one in five (21%) parents are extremely supported.

However, 25% of California parents of infants and toddlers report feeling only slightly or not at all supported.

A substantial percentage of parents (80%) also say they could benefit from additional parenting resources and supports on how best to promote their child’s development.

“My parents and neighbors help
me take care of my children
while my wife and I work.”
Parent in Los Angeles County

Conclusion

Given the high rates of material hardship and emotional distress parents of infants and toddlers in California are reporting, there is a need to ensure parents and families of young children receive early and necessary support. Emotional well-being and economic stability are essential for providing supportive, responsive caregiving, which is core to the positive and healthy development of young children.

RAPID data has shown that there are actions that can successfully address families' experiences of material hardship and reduce the challenges parents of young children are experiencing. Economic supports like the expanded Child Tax Credit payments and other pandemic-era federal relief programs protected families from both material hardship and the negative impacts of material hardship on family emotional well-being.

Together with the insights parents shared in their responses to RAPID's open-ended questions, these data can inform policies and programs to better support our country's youngest children and their families.

About the RAPID State Surveys

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 data is based on responses collected from 2,516 parents between November 8, 2022, and September 30, 2024, who are taking care of children between the ages of 0-3 years old. These caregivers represent a range of voices: 14.3% are Black, 41.5% are Latinx, and 50.3% live below 200% of the federal poverty level. 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.