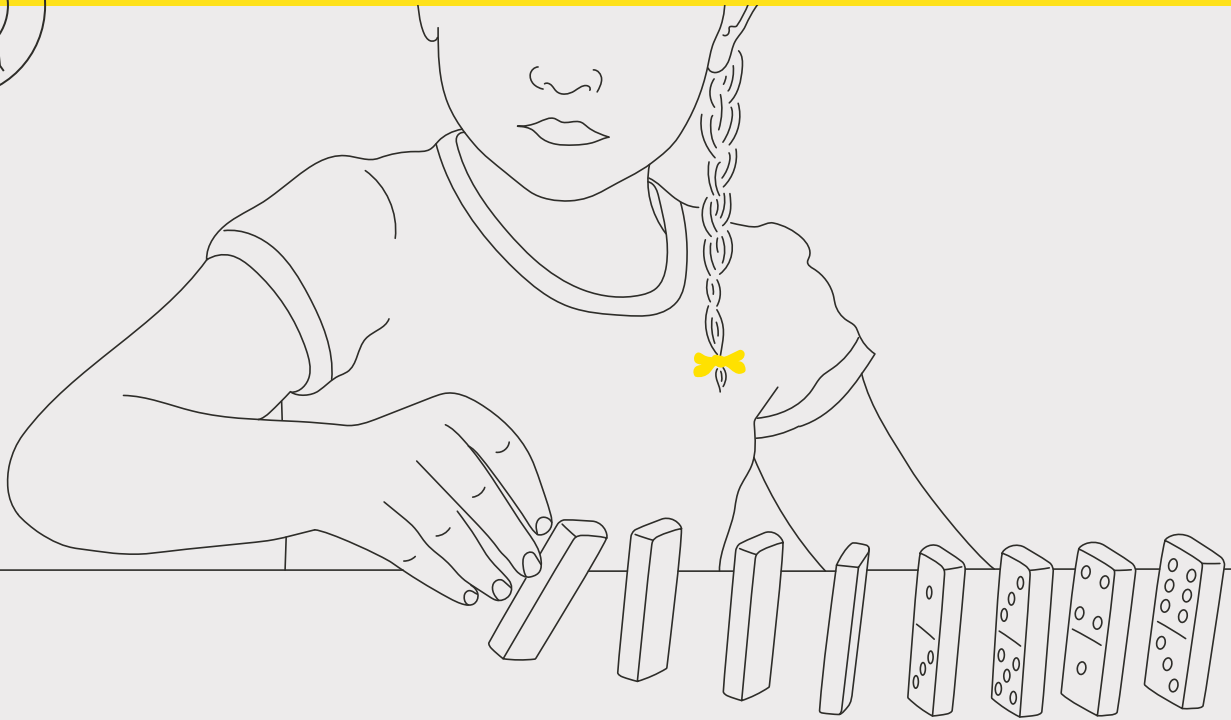


This updated version, originally released on June 27, 2025, includes a data note on the multi-year trend line figure.

Five years of parent voices show how difficult it is for families with young children to meet basic needs and how this is associated with emotional distress in parents and children



November 2025



designbysoapbox.com

RAPID measures material hardship as difficulty within the past month meeting basic needs like food, housing, utilities, child care, and healthcare. Consistent access to basic needs is key to a stable home environment, and the stability created by economic well-being supports the healthy development of young children and their families

Since the launch of the RAPID survey in April 2020, we have asked parents of young children questions designed to better understand the contexts in which young children are developing. The survey aims to understand families' overall well-being and economic situations, including their experiences of material hardship.



Stanford
Center on Early Childhood

“The cost of food and essentials.
Cost of groceries is killing families.
And things like diapers, toilet
paper, etc., are too expensive.”
Parent in Pennsylvania

In May 2025, the federal government proposed reducing or eliminating funding for critical programs and services, like Medicaid, SNAP, WIC, housing and energy assistance, and child care and early learning supports, that many families with young children rely on to help meet their basic needs. These proposed policy changes are happening against the backdrop of the increased cost of essential items that support basic needs.

“[My biggest concerns right
now are the] cost of child care,
quality of education, lack of
nearby family support, and safety
of living in our neighborhood.”
Parent in Washington, D.C.

This fact sheet uses data collected between April 2020 and April 2025 from parents across the country with children under age 6 to document what we’ve learned about families’ experiences and their economic and emotional well-being.

Access to basic needs has remained a serious challenge for families with children under age 6 throughout the RAPID project and is getting more severe, making it especially urgent to address now

“Income and housing [are my biggest
concerns]. We’re currently homeless.”
Parent in Maine

Having access to essentials, like food, housing, and other resources is critical to supporting the healthy development of young children and their families. Because of this, RAPID asks families about their ability to meet basic needs.

In April 2025, more than two in five (41%) families with young children reported difficulty in the past month meeting one or more of their basic needs. Among these families,

“Currently keeping up with utility and rent costs. Both have rapidly increased within the last few months making it very difficult to pay as my fiancé was laid off for a few weeks.”

Parent in Kentucky

“Our electricity went up in cost and we went from around \$200 to around \$600 a month which is an insane increase. That’s like having another mortgage payment or two car payments added.”

Parent in Illinois

utilities (26%), food (24%), healthcare (20%), housing (17%), and child care (11%) were particularly difficult to afford.

Data from the five years of RAPID surveys consistently show material hardship is prevalent in families with young children. Additionally, the percentage of families experiencing material hardship in April 2025 is one of the highest levels recorded since RAPID began collecting data in 2020.

From April 2020 to April 2025, more than one in three (35%) families, on average, reported experiencing material hardship in one or more basic needs. On average over the past five years, utilities (22%), food (18%), housing (17%), healthcare (10%), and child care (9%) were the most common material needs that parents reported difficulty affording.

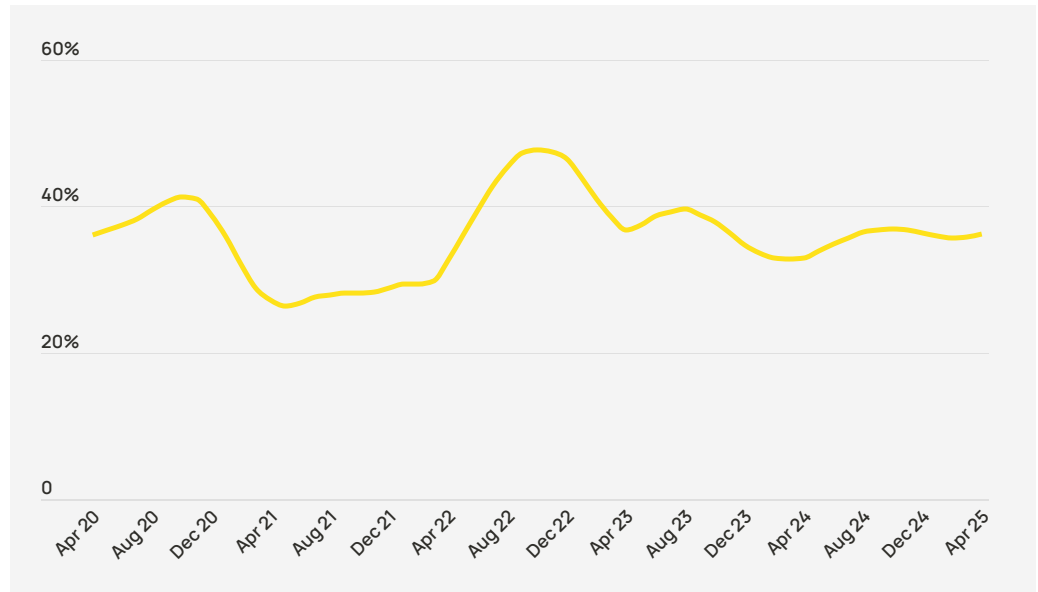
The persistently high levels of material hardship (averaging 35%) over the five-year period show that many families struggle to meet basic needs, which makes it difficult to provide essential caregiving for their young children. The six-percentage point increase in April 2025 (41%) underscores that these challenges have not diminished and are more urgent to address than ever.

In responses to open-ended questions, parents write about their challenges and concerns reliably accessing food and household goods, housing, and child care for their family.

“Cost of living in Hawaii. Food, electricity and gas have gone up exponentially.” Parent in Hawaii

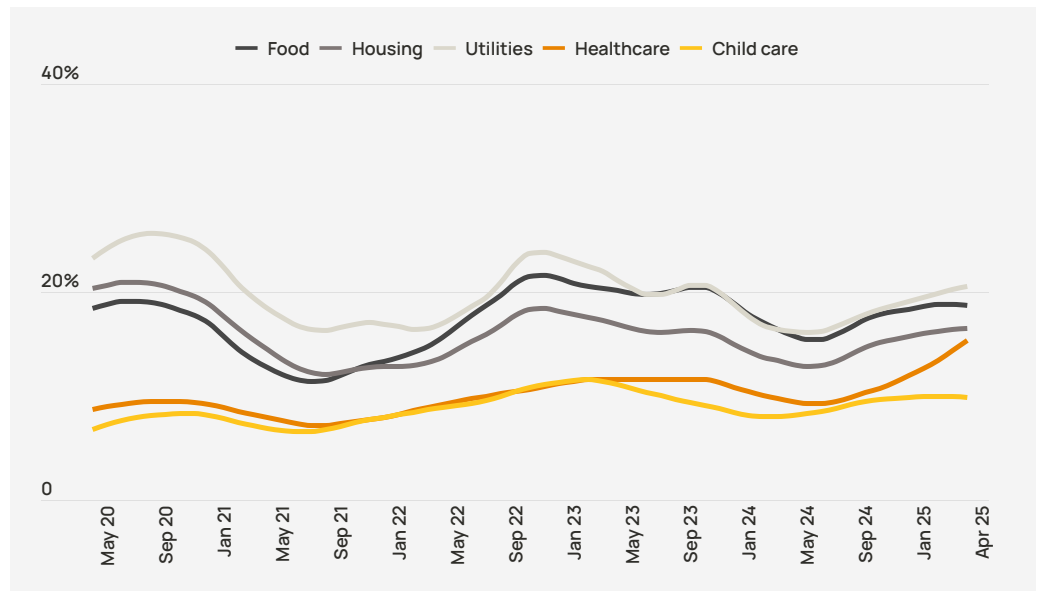
“We have a couple food banks that will help us out every other month with shampoo and any kind of home necessities we might need like toilet paper, toothpaste, toothbrushes.” Parent in Missouri

Parents reporting one or more material hardship, overall



Data note: We apply a common smoothing method to plot a trend line that approximates the overall pattern of the data while reducing short-term fluctuations. As such, the trend line provides an overall view of the data and is not intended to match the specific numbers cited in the narrative.

Percentage of parents reporting material hardship by source, overall



Data note: We apply a common smoothing method to plot a trend line that approximates the overall pattern of the data while reducing short-term fluctuations. As such, the trend line provides an overall view of the data and is not intended to match the specific numbers cited in the narrative.

“I don’t have money to pay next month’s rent, which makes me a little anxious. I hope to find a stable job to support the family expenses.”
Parent in California

The majority of parents of children under age 6 experience emotional distress

RAPID surveys ask parents about their own emotional well-being, which we measure as a composite of four emotional distress experiences: stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness.*

“The stress weighs me down every day. I feel overwhelmed, anxious, depressed. My sleep is horrible. I’m scattered and forgetful. I feel like I can’t do anything well.”
Parent in Wisconsin

In April 2025, more than two in three (71%) parents of young children reported experiencing emotional distress. Of these parents, stress (58%) was the most prevalent experience, followed by anxiety (49%), loneliness (46%), and depression (43%).

This is consistent with data from five years of the RAPID survey, which show, on average, 83% of parents of children under age 6 reported experiencing emotional distress. Of these parents, stress (62%), loneliness (61%), anxiety (59%), and depression (44%) were common experiences.

“Being present for our children and also providing to make ends meet for our home [is my biggest concern right now]. It is becoming overwhelming. Too many changes and not enough support.” Parent in Michigan

In responses to open-ended questions, parents tell us that increased costs and financial debts make them feel stressed, and force them to make difficult choices between paying for food or housing.

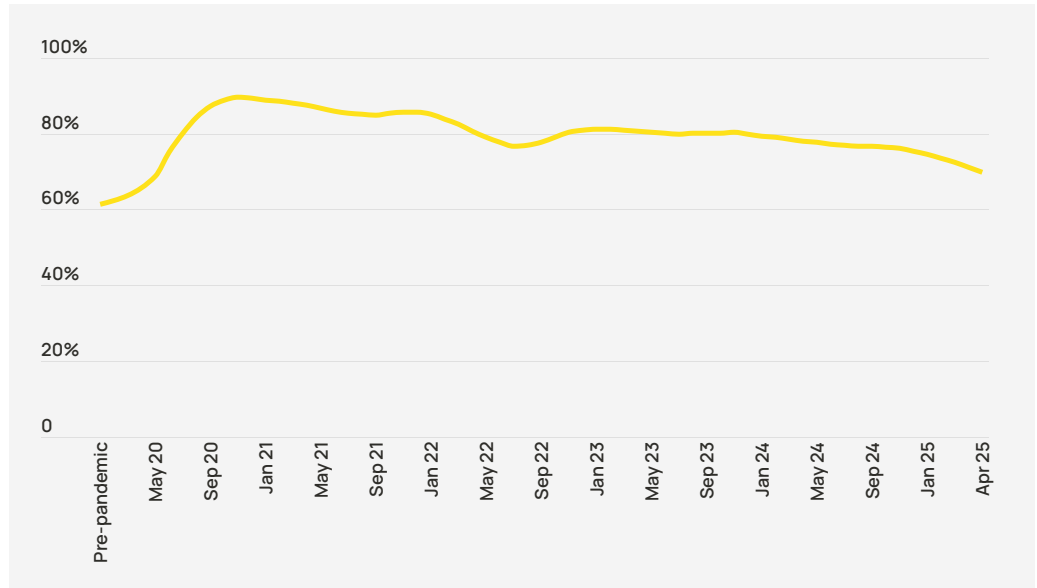
* RAPID measures anxiety by asking parents to select how often they have been bothered by “feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge” or “not being able to stop or control worrying” in the past week. RAPID measures depression by asking parents to select how often they have been bothered by “little interest or pleasure in doing things” or “feeling down, depressed, or hopeless” in the past week. RAPID measures loneliness by asking parents to select how often they felt lonely in the past month. RAPID measures stress by asking parents to select how often they felt stress in the past month.

“The increases in goods are putting a strain on everyday life. I’m also worried about paying off credit card debt. I do stay up nights worrying about this.” Parent in Louisiana

RAPID analysis of data from April 2020 to April 2025 show that as parents’ experiences of material hardship increase, so do experiences of emotional distress; feeling financial stress and being uncertain about meeting basic needs subsequently increases parents’ emotional distress.

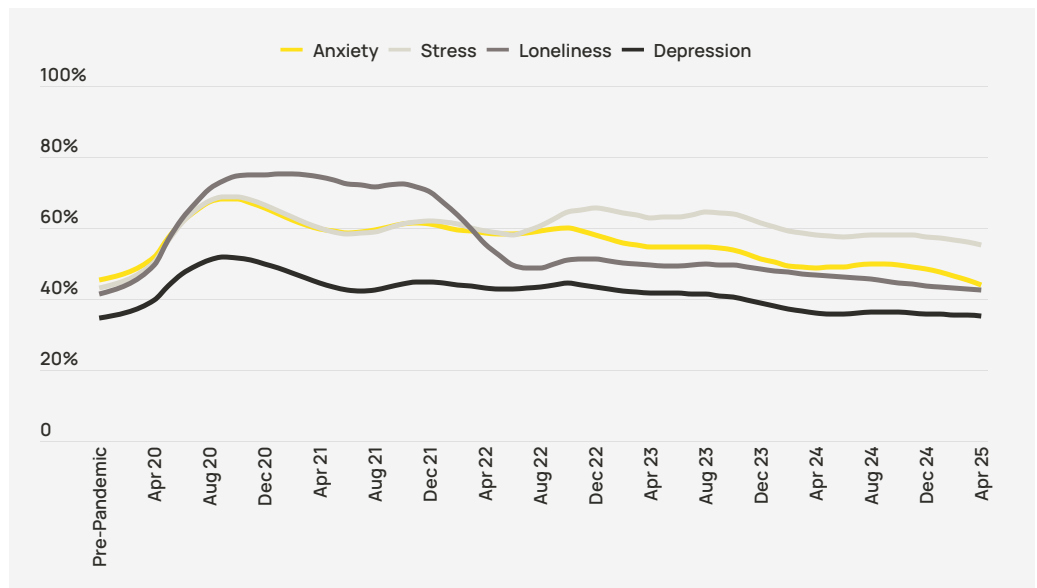
“My credit card bill is overdue and I can’t pay it on time. My family’s income is not enough to cover my daily expenses and I am under a lot of stress which has caused me to suffer from insomnia and sleepless nights.” Parent in California

Parents reporting emotional distress, overall



Data note: We apply a common smoothing method to plot a trend line that approximates the overall pattern of the data while reducing short-term fluctuations. As such, the trend line provides an overall view of the data and is not intended to match the specific numbers cited in the narrative.

Percentage of parents reporting emotional distress by experience, overall



Data note: We apply a common smoothing method to plot a trend line that approximates the overall pattern of the data while reducing short-term fluctuations. As such, the trend line provides an overall view of the data and is not intended to match the specific numbers cited in the narrative.

“My child is fussy, defiant, and somewhat destructive, probably the normal amount for a 3 year old, but my patience is low.”

Parent in Pennsylvania

Parents of children under age 6 see high levels of emotional distress among their young children

We also ask parents about their children’s behavior in the past month and measure child emotional well-being as a composite of two experiences: internalized emotional distress (e.g., fearfulness) and externalized emotional distress (e.g., fussiness).*

“Definitely noticed my kids being more fussy lately and I am definitely stressed and not patient enough sometimes. Lots of grumpy days and, with winter upon us, I’m definitely worried about everyone’s mental health and well-being.”

Parent in Colorado

In April 2025, more than two in three (71%) parents said their children were experiencing emotional distress. Of these parents, 44% said their children had internalized distress and 63% had externalized emotional distress.

Notably, in April 2025, 71% of parents of young children also reported experiencing emotional distress themselves.

These high rates of emotional distress among young children are consistent with RAPID data gathered over the five-year span of the project. On average, between April 2020 to April 2025, 82% of parents reported emotional distress experiences in their children. Of these parents, 44% reported internalized distress in their children and 78% report externalized emotional distress in their children.

“Our child is so ridiculously fussy and we feel so helpless as she just screams and whines all the time now and nobody believes us. We have no idea what’s wrong with her and everyone tells us that she’s normal and babies whine. This is beyond that and we don’t have anyone to help us.”

Parent in Washington

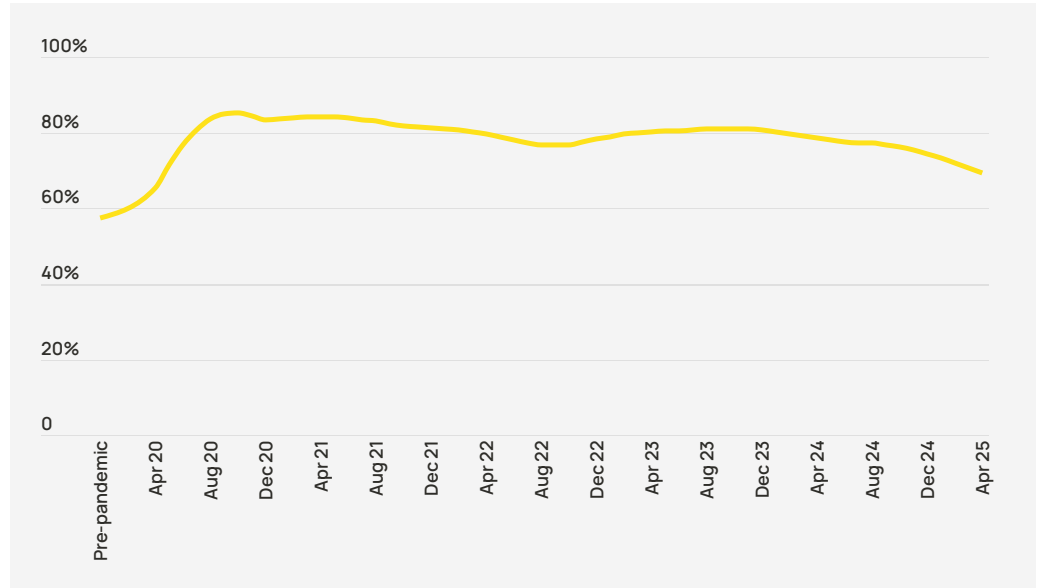
Additionally, the percentage of families experiencing emotional distress in April 2025 is lower than the five-year average, which is understandable given that RAPID began collecting data in 2020 during the pandemic.

* RAPID measures child emotional well-being by asking parents to report how often the phrase “too fussy or defiant” and “too fearful or anxious” fits their child’s behavior in the past month.

“I think my child might be depressed.”
Parent in California

However, a substantial percentage of parents still reporting emotional distress in themselves and their children remains a concern and warrants the attention of leaders in a position to create policies and programs that impact families with young children.

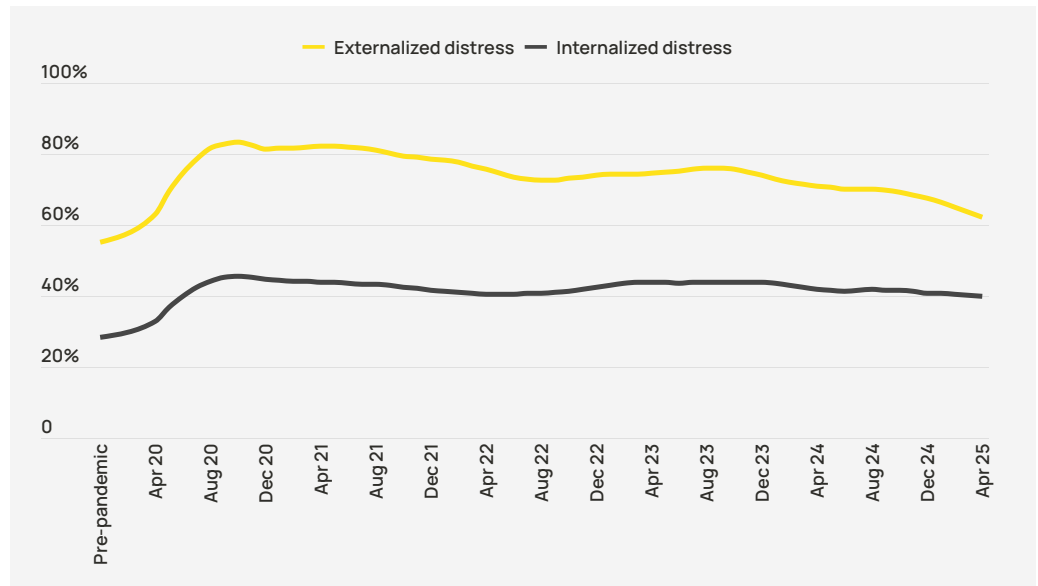
Parents reporting emotional distress in their children, overall



“Paying bills, making repairs that are costing us money not being repaired, trying to find ways to help our depressed and anxious 2-year-old feel connected to the world in the ways she desperately wants and needs [are my biggest concerns right now].”
Parent in Alabama

Data note: We apply a common smoothing method to plot a trend line that approximates the overall pattern of the data while reducing short-term fluctuations. As such, the trend line provides an overall view of the data and is not intended to match the specific numbers cited in the narrative.

Parents reporting emotional distress in their children by experience, overall



Data note: We apply a common smoothing method to plot a trend line that approximates the overall pattern of the data while reducing short-term fluctuations. As such, the trend line provides an overall view of the data and is not intended to match the specific numbers cited in the narrative.

“Money is a bit tight so I have to be very diligent about budgeting. With the budgeting, we are able to comfortably skate by, but it’s a narrow margin. Since I’m going to school, that’s an added stress on all of us, with my focus split between the children, my household, and my schoolwork. I can see when they get frustrated and act out for attention. It’s difficult to navigate and balance, and I know it’s putting a toll on them.” Parent in Wisconsin

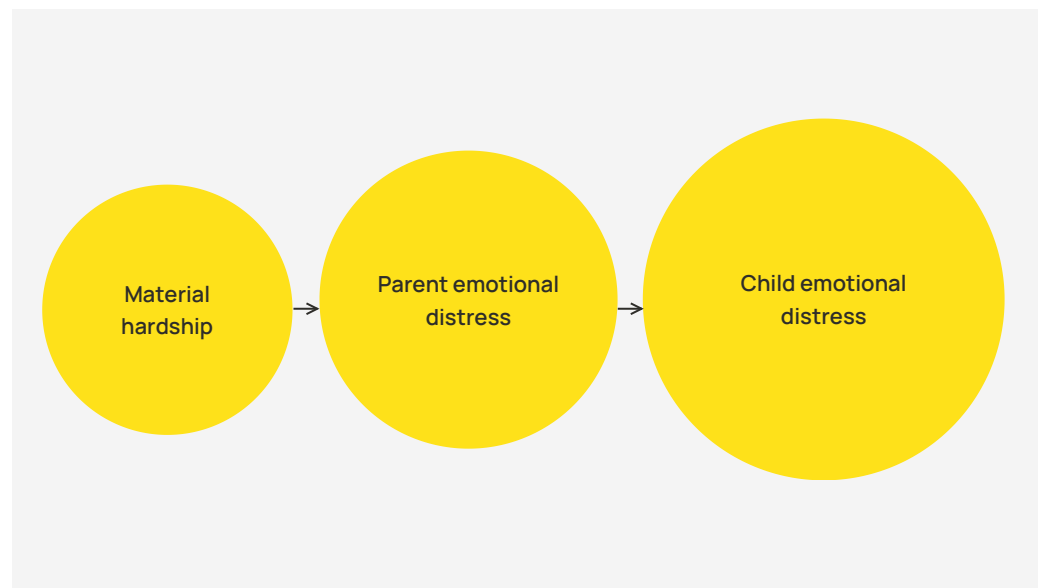
“My partner has lost his job and the family is now solely supported by my income, which I cannot afford to live on. We don’t have enough income to buy enough food. For the nutrition of my children, I can only eat less.” Parent in California

Family experiences of material hardship are associated with parent and child emotional distress, forming a chain reaction of hardship

To better understand the experiences of households with young children, we performed additional analyses to see whether changes in economic difficulties might be related to changes in parents’ emotional well-being and emotional distress in their young children.

RAPID analysis of data from April 2020 to April 2025 provide strong evidence of a chain reaction of hardship. That is, as parents’ experiences of material hardship increase, they also experience more emotional distress, which, in turn, is associated with parents reporting increased emotional distress among their young children, creating a chain reaction of hardship.

Chain reaction of hardship



“The fact that it’s just me and my child with no family nearby, I feel like I’m constantly doing everything alone and my child is attached to me all the time.”
Parent in Nebraska

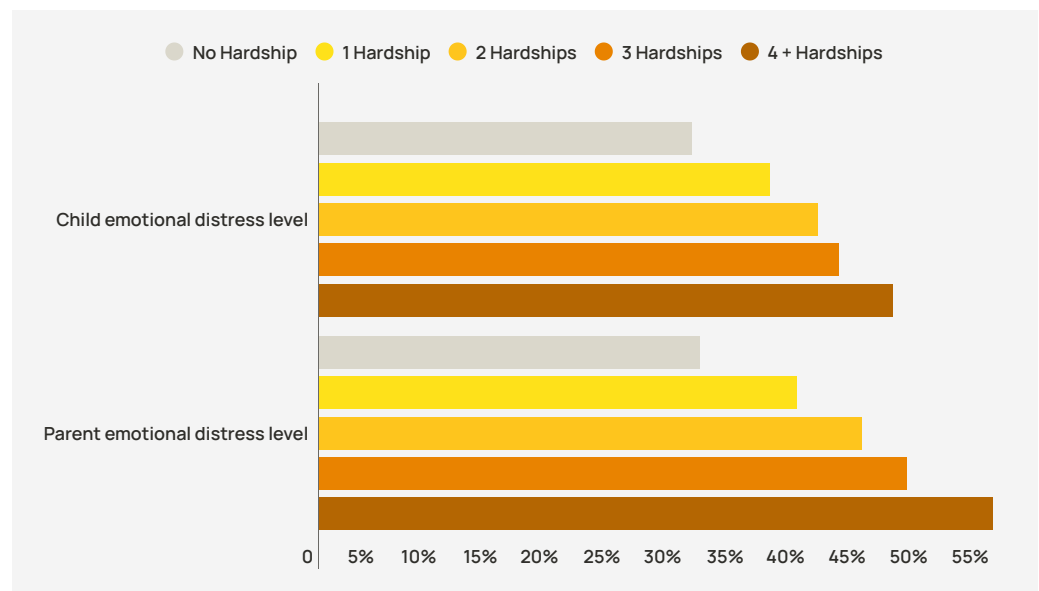
This chain reaction of hardship can undermine the stable, nurturing care that parents seek to provide and that is essential to healthy development in early childhood.

Young children of parents reporting little or no material hardship experience lower emotional distress, while young children of parents reporting moderate to high material hardship experience notably higher levels of emotional distress.

“My child’s behavior is getting bad. I do not feel like I have good tools to deal with it and I am not sure if it is normal for a 3-year-old.”
Parent in Pennsylvania

Having discovered this link in 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we continue to see a chain reaction unfold over time from material hardship to parent and child emotional well-being.

Association between material hardship and emotional distress, overall



When we look at the material hardship data set alongside the timelines of federal policies such as the expanded Child Tax Credit, increased SNAP and WIC benefits, stimulus checks, and other family supports, we see significantly lower rates of families reporting material hardship and parents and children experiencing emotional distress.

“The biggest help to us is my cash assistance from the government and our food stamps so we don’t go hungry. Also, the support from our family members.” Parent in Rhode Island

This points to national policies that alleviate the chain reaction of hardship and are essential in helping families make ends meet, access their basic needs, and support their emotional well-being.

When the supports are present, parents report lower material hardship and lower emotional distress, and parents’ emotional well-being cascades to their children who, in turn, experience lower emotional distress.

As the policies expired and cost of living expenses increased, material hardship and emotional distress rose sharply, once again leaving many families struggling.

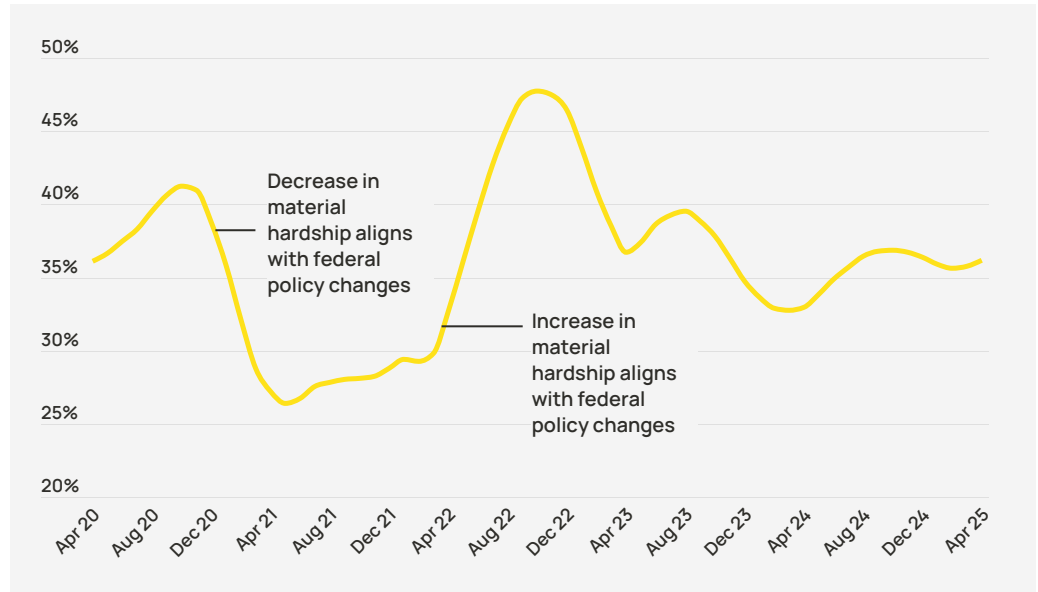
When the supports are withdrawn, parents report higher material hardship and higher emotional distress. Parents’ emotional well-being, which is connected to their experiences of material hardship, affects their children who, in turn, experience higher emotional distress.

This chain reaction of hardship is evidence that children’s well-being is closely tied to their parents’ own well-being, which is tied to experiences of material hardship.

Thousands of parents have shared in their own words with the RAPID survey how essential these policies and supports are in helping them make ends meet. Parents say elected officials can once again take action to address their concerns and help families. These data and caregiver voices can inform targeted policies and programs that improve family well-being and strengthen communities.

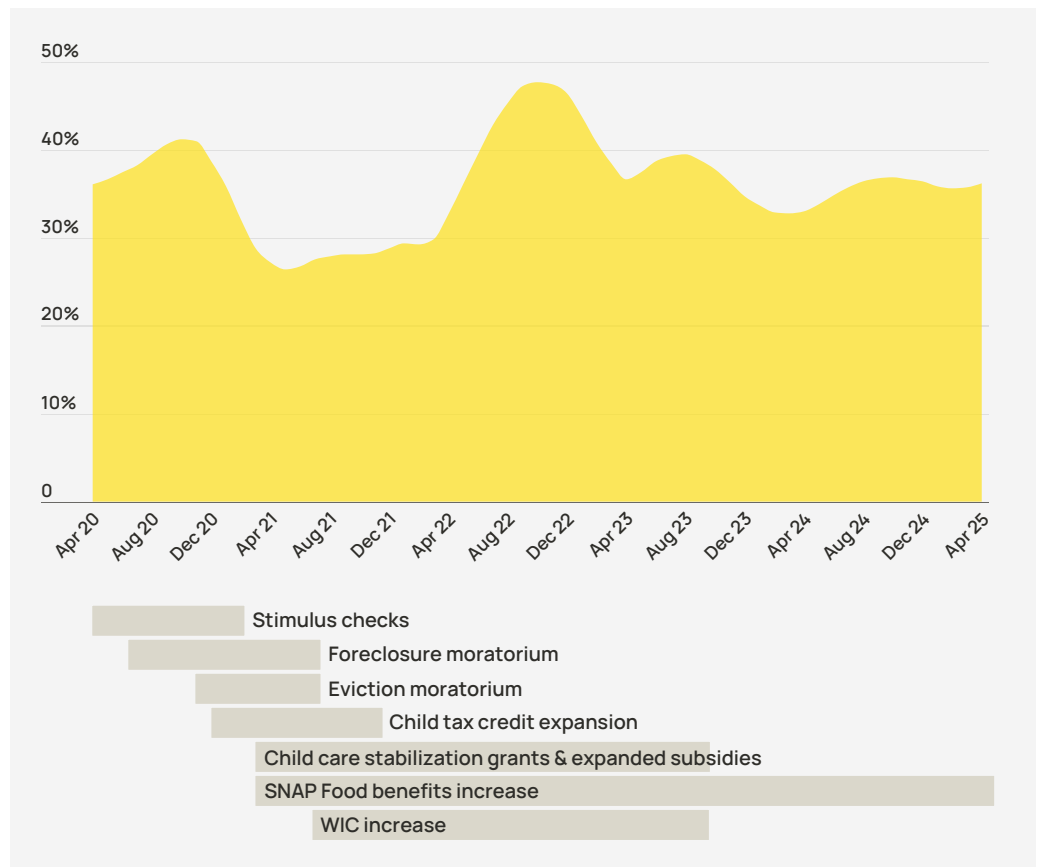
“Thankful for reliable daycare that allows us to work, even though our child gets sick there all the time and we don’t have alternate child care. Thankful for WIC and Medicaid for our child so we don’t have to worry about her medical bills.” Parent in Florida

Parents reporting one or more material hardship, overall, policy annotations



Data note: We apply a common smoothing method to plot a trend line that approximates the overall pattern of the data while reducing short-term fluctuations. As such, the trend line provides an overall view of the data and is not intended to match the specific numbers cited in the narrative.

Parents reporting one or more material hardship, overall, compared to policies



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Conclusion

Since 2020, the RAPID survey has asked parents of young children across the country about their household economic circumstances, their own emotional well-being, and their children's emotional well-being. With analysis of these data, we find that the economic well-being of the family and emotional well-being of the parent and then the child are deeply connected.

RAPID survey data has consistently revealed evidence of a chain reaction of hardship, in which material hardship is directly associated with an increase in parents' emotional distress which is, in turn, associated with an increase in child emotional distress. These experiences have been consistently documented in RAPID data since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Economic hardship in families with children under age 6 is prevalent, with more than two in five families in April 2025 reporting difficulty meeting basic needs, one of the highest levels RAPID has recorded. These experiences of materials are having ripple effects, negatively affecting the well-being of parents and then, in turn, young children.

The chain reaction of hardship we are observing suggests that many young children may be experiencing toxic stress, which involves significant and chronic activation of the stress response system. Decades of research show that experiencing toxic stress in infancy and early childhood can negatively affect brain, biological, and social-emotional development. There is also extensive evidence of the links between experiences of early adversity and poorer

outcomes in terms of health, education, well-being, and income later in life. RAPID data show that national policy interventions are strongly connected to the levels of material hardship and emotional distress that parents of young children report experiencing, and that policymakers can once again take these steps to support family well-being and children's development.

Parents and other caregivers play a key role in buffering children from the effects of chronic stress, making toxic stress tolerable. But when caregivers are stretched and overloaded by continuous threats to their own well-being from experiences of material hardship, their ability to play this buffering role is compromised. These data suggest that supporting parents to meet their basic needs subsequently protects children's health, development, and well-being from the effects of family economic hardship.

Research also shows that early childhood is a period of significant developmental plasticity, where supportive environments and predictable stability can foster resilience, despite experiences of stress, like material hardship. Given this, it is critically important that we support children, parents, and families during this period of development.

Community and state policymakers can once again adopt proven policies to support families with young children. Programs such as the expanded and refundable Child Tax Credit, increased food assistance, and child care stabilization funds play a critical role in family well-being. RAPID data show that these supports, implemented during the pandemic, led to improved family well-being and child development. Reinstating these policies would help reduce

material hardship and increase emotional well-being in both parents and children.

With Congress considering cuts to essential family programs and with larger percentages of families with young children experiencing the chain reaction of hardship, there is an urgent need to take immediate action to improve economic circumstances in support of healthier, thriving families and communities now and in the future.

About the RAPID Survey Project

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

↑
22,000+
Parents

↑
12,000+
Providers

↑
50
U.S. States

This set of analyses on RAPID data is based on responses collected from 23,073 parents of young children who provided two or more responses between April 2020 and April 2025. These caregivers represent a range of voices: 8.7% are Black, 13.4% are Latinx, and 30.2% live at or 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.

The RAPID project includes a survey of caregivers with children under age 6 and a survey of child care providers and other adults who care for children under age 6. These surveys are designed to gather essential information continuously regarding the needs, health-promoting behaviors, and well-being of children and their families and important adults in their lives.

RAPID collects data monthly from 1,000 caregivers and child care providers in all 50 states. The surveys are national in scope, though not technically nationally representative. RAPID collects snapshots of data across time and can also assess trends longitudinally.

For more information about RAPID study design and methods, [see here](#).