

# Essentials are getting increasingly difficult to access for families with young children

October 2025



designbysoapbox.com

Since April 2020, RAPID has been surveying parents of young children and reporting on trends, including the persistence of material hardship and its effect on emotional well-being. RAPID's goal is to document the real-time experiences of families and caregivers.

RAPID measures material hardship as difficulty within the past month meeting basic needs, including 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 families and the healthy development of young children.



**Stanford**  
Center on Early Childhood

“One of the biggest challenges for our family right now is the rising cost of rent. It feels like every year the rent goes up, but our income doesn’t keep pace. A huge portion of our monthly budget goes just to keeping a roof over our heads, leaving very little for savings, groceries, transportation, or emergencies. The pressure to stay housed is constant, and it forces tough trade-offs, sometimes delaying bills, cutting back on essentials, or skipping activities for the kids. The stress of possibly not being able to afford next month’s rent is a weight we carry daily.”

Parent in Florida

“Getting bills paid or getting kicked out [are my biggest concerns].”

Parent in Maryland

“[My biggest concern is] the cost of baby diapers and formula, which keep on increasing.” Parent in Oklahoma

This fact sheet uses data collected in July 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.

## Basic needs are not being met by nearly half of families with children under age 6

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 and to better understand the contexts in which young children are developing, RAPID asks families about their ability to meet basic needs.

In July 2025, approximately one in two (45%) families with young children surveyed reported difficulty in the past month meeting one or more of their basic needs. Families reported that utilities (32%), food (27%), healthcare (25%), housing (22%), and child care (11%) were particularly difficult to afford.

These percentages are some of the highest levels recorded since RAPID began collecting data in 2020.

The rate of hardship in July 2025 was significantly higher than in the previous month, June 2025, increasing by 11 percentage points (from 34% to 45%). This sharp increase may be signaling a larger national trend of increased economic hardship among families with young children.

“Inflation and the rising cost of everyday essentials. Rising utility costs. Just the prices of everything going up so fast when wages don’t keep up with costs.”  
Parent in West Virginia

“One of our biggest challenges right now is the rising cost of utilities. Electricity, gas, and water bills have steadily increased, and they’re eating up a large part of our monthly income. That means we have less flexibility for other essentials like groceries, child care, medical needs, or even saving for emergencies. We’re constantly juggling bills and making tough choices, just to keep the lights on and the house comfortable.”  
Parent in Alabama

“Utilities are a growing burden. Every bill feels heavier than the last—electricity, water, gas, internet. We’re constantly juggling, trying to figure out what can wait and what absolutely has to be paid right away. It’s exhausting to live like this. We’re not asking for luxury, we just want to be able to meet our basic needs without constant fear.” Parent in Tennessee

As the quotes in this fact sheet show, families responded to open-ended questions in July 2025 with concerns of managing the cost of food and household goods, utilities, and child care for their family, and the stress and worry this causes their household.

The prevalence of material hardship in families with young children shows that basic needs are difficult for many parents to afford, which can make it difficult to provide the care that is essential for young children’s health, development, and well-being.

## Emotional distress is a serious challenge affecting the majority of parents of young children

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

In July 2025, approximately three in four (72%) parents of young children surveyed reported experiencing emotional distress. Of these parents, stress (55%) was the most

\*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 month. 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 month. 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.

“My husband was laid off last November. He hasn’t been able to find work and it’s starting to really stress us both out.” Parent in Oregon

“The stress of daily life, financial pressure, and uncertainty are affecting our emotional well-being. It’s hard to find affordable, high-quality child care, and without it, balancing work and parenting becomes overwhelming. We need more support for families’ mental health and better access to child care we can trust.” Parent in Minnesota

“My biggest concern is my family’s safety. We are Latinos and even though we are citizens it seems like the current administration doesn’t care and will deport anyone that looks Latino.” Parent in California

prevalent experience, followed by anxiety (44%), loneliness (42%), and depression (34%).

This is consistent with data from five years of the RAPID survey which show emotional distress experiences are common in parents of young children.

In their July 2025 responses to RAPID’s open-ended survey questions, and as shown by the quotes in this fact sheet, parents frequently wrote about having to choose between which of their monthly bills to pay and how this makes them feel stressed and anxious. Additionally, parents expressed concerns about how immigration enforcement could affect their family and community.

## Many parents of children under age 6 see emotional distress in 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).\*

In July 2025, approximately three in four (73%) parents surveyed said their children were experiencing emotional

\*RAPID measures child emotional well-being using two items from the Child Behavior Checklist. Parents reported how often the phrases “fussy or defiant” and “fearful or anxious” reflected their view of their child’s behavior in the past month, even if other people might not agree.

“While we are doing well financially, I am an immigrant. I am here legally, my husband is American, my three young children were born here, but I live in constant fear now. I’m scared of the police, I’m scared of ICE, I’m so scared of being separated from my family. I have followed the law, committed no crimes. I am here in good standing legally, but it seems that the government doesn’t care. I have no rights. I am absolutely terrified to leave my house, terrified of any law enforcement officers. My children are young and they need me; I’m so scared of being separated from them. I cry every day. If I see a police officer, I panic. This is a really hard way for my family and I to live.”  
Parent in New Hampshire

“We try to support each other the best we can, but the emotional load is heavy, especially with kids who are also feeling the stress in their own ways. We wish there were more accessible resources and less stigma around asking for help.” Parent in Tennessee”

distress. Of these parents, 47% said their children had internalized distress and 64% had externalized emotional distress.

Over the five-year span of the RAPID project, large proportions of parents surveyed have consistently reported emotional distress among their young children. This trend continues in July 2025.

RAPID has found that families’ experiences of economic hardship are associated with higher rates of emotional distress. Further, parents’ experiences of hardship and emotional distress have ripple effects that negatively affect the emotional well-being and development of their young children.

We discovered this finding in collaboration with a team led by Dr. Abbie Raikes at the University of Nebraska Medical Center that developed the Kidsights Measurement Tool, a survey-based measure that assesses how young children’s development is progressing, in terms of cognitive, motor, language, and social-emotional milestones. When measured along with factors such as family income, education, geography, and other family characteristics, Kidsights results can be used to report on overall development for groups of children and assist public health and policy decision-making.

To assess how young children are developing, RAPID included the Kidsights tool as part of our ongoing monthly surveys to parents in July 2023 and August 2023. Our analysis paired Kidsights data with national RAPID household survey data on family well-being (e.g., material hardship, food insecurity, parent distress, healthcare

“[My biggest concerns are] balancing technology use with play, learning, and interaction. Addressing tantrums, emotional regulation, or boundary testing, especially as new parents.”

Parent in Rhode Island

“Right now, one of our biggest challenges is maintaining our overall wellness while juggling the demands of child care. It can be physically and emotionally exhausting trying to balance work, parenting, and household responsibilities without consistent support. Quality child care is essential, but it’s hard to find and often expensive. The stress of trying to keep our child safe, engaged, and well-cared for while also trying to take care of ourselves can feel overwhelming. We’re doing our best, but the lack of affordable, dependable child care options makes it difficult to truly focus on our health and well-being as a family.”

Parent in California

“We’re working multiple jobs just to cover basic expenses. I will like the policymakers to make housing, healthcare and education more affordable.”

Parent in California

disruptions, child care disruptions) to better understand how these experiences are associated with children’s early development.

After accounting for the effects of families’ income levels, races and ethnicities, geographic locations, and family structures, our analysis found that household experiences of material hardship are significantly associated with decreases in measures of early development. In other words, children in families that experience material hardship fall behind in their development.

The data show that, on average, young children in families that consistently met their basic needs had higher developmental scores and were developmentally ahead of their peers in the same age group. Conversely, young children in families that experienced material hardship had lower early childhood developmental scores, indicating that young children in these families were, on average, developmentally behind compared to their peers in the same age group who did not experience material hardship.

Additionally, as parents’ experiences of material hardship increased, their children’s developmental scores decreased, reflecting more negative impacts of material hardship on early development.

Together, RAPID and Kidsights data suggest that supporting parents to meet basic needs buffers the effects of family economic hardship on parents’ emotional well-being, and their children’s emotional well-being and development.

The substantial proportion of parents in July 2025 reporting material hardship, emotional distress, and signs

“I wish policymakers understood how much programs like rental assistance and expanded SNAP [food benefits] helped us. Taking those away too quickly left us vulnerable again.”

Parent in Virginia

of emotional distress in their children is concerning and warrants the attention of leaders in position to create policies and programs that can better support families and young children.

## Parents of young children call on policymakers to increase access to essentials

“I’m on edge every month, praying I will scrape together enough for rent, and the weight of uncertainty is crushing. Policymakers, I need you to turn words into action and make affordable housing a lifeline for families like mine who are fighting to stay afloat.”

Parent in Hawaii

In their July 2025 responses to RAPID’s open-ended survey questions, parents wrote about how important family support policies are in making basic needs accessible. As indicated by the quotes in this fact sheet, parents call on policymakers to take action to address their concerns and help families.

“As a family, the most challenges we are facing are financial insecurity, access to healthcare, or education. We are doing our best, but we need policymakers to understand the real-life impact of their decisions. We urge them to prioritize policies that support families like ours.”

Parent in Florida

RAPID data has shown that national policy interventions are strongly connected to the levels of material hardship and emotional distress that parents of young children report experiencing. When policies like the expanded Child Tax Credit, food assistance, and child care supports were in place, families reported less material hardship and higher levels of family and child well-being. This shows the potential of national policies to support families in meeting basic needs and preventing the chain reaction of hardship. Given the persistence and increase of material hardship, continued investment in proven supports is essential to help families meet basic needs and support children’s health and development.

“Elected leaders should know that parenthood with little kids is isolating, especially for those of us without family nearby. We need more community centers with free playgroups, parenting classes, and mental health support places where we can learn, connect, and breathe. Right now, the only resources are for families in crisis, but we need help before we reach that point. Also, school lunch programs should extend to preschools. Many kids go hungry in the afternoon, and that affects their learning and behavior. Small changes like that would lift so much weight.”  
Parent in West Virginia

These data and caregiver voices can inform targeted policies and programs that improve family well-being and strengthen communities.

## Conclusion

Over the past five years, the RAPID project has listened closely to parents of children under age 6. We have consistently heard about challenges meeting basic needs. In July 2025, RAPID recorded one of the highest rates of material hardship among parents since April 2020. In open-ended responses, parents shared how economic uncertainty and pressures, including the rising costs of essentials, are contributing to significant financial strain. These economic difficulties are linked to higher levels of emotional distress in parents and their young children and to negative effects on young children’s development.

At the same time that Congress is reducing funding for essential policies and programs that many families rely on, a larger percentage of families with young children are experiencing the chain reaction of hardship. Immediate action is needed to improve economic circumstances in support of healthier, thriving families and communities now and in the future. RAPID will continue to listen to parents to ensure that families’ economic and emotional well-being positions them to support the positive, healthy development of their young children.

# 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.

↑  
23,000+  
Parents

↑  
15,000+  
Providers

↑  
50  
U.S. States

This set of analyses of RAPID data is based on responses collected in July 2025 from 1,347 parents of children under age 6. These caregivers represent a range of voices: 20.2% are Black, 26.8% are Latinx, and 24.6% 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. These analyses are weighted in order to adjust the samples to match the known population.

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 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](#).