

RATTLED:

Tracking the Experiences
of Families With Infants and
Toddlers in 2025

Allie Schneider & Samantha Melvin, PhD



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Introduction

A national survey of parents with infants and toddlers highlights a clear pattern:¹ in 2025, families and babies were rattled by mounting economic strain and distress, and conditions only got tougher as the year went on.

In 2025, families faced growing hardship paying for necessities like food and housing, alongside elevated levels of parental emotional distress and rising concerns about children’s behavior and development. These challenges were most acute for low-income families who account for 3.8 million of the 11 million infants and toddlers² across the United States, families of color and families in rural areas.

During the first three years of life, children’s development is at its most sensitive to changes in environments and relationships. Babies’ well-being is powerfully influenced by supportive relationships with trusted adults and access to critical resources such as food, housing, health care and child care.³ Experiences of stress – especially the chronic, unrelenting stress associated with experiencing economic hardship – can impact babies, the family and their relationships with each other. Without the buffer of responsive relationships, household-level stress can get “under the skin” and alter a young child’s brain development, which in turn can lead to lifelong difficulties with mental health, learning and well-being.⁴

These patterns highlight the need for immediate policy attention. In 2026 and beyond, babies and families deserve better.



Parents’ voices need to be heard. We are suffering.

–Parent in Tennessee (March 2025)

Key Findings: A Year of Increasing Challenges for Babies and Families

- **Economic Well-Being:** Families increasingly struggled to afford the basics in 2025, especially utilities and food. Parents attribute this, in part, to rising costs and stagnant wages. By the end of 2025, over half of families with infants and toddlers (53%) reported having a hard time paying for basic material needs like food and housing, 23 percentage points higher than the 2021 average during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges were especially concentrated among families living in poverty, in rural areas and Black and Latine families.
- **Emotional Well-Being:** Over the course of 2025, the rate of parents experiencing elevated anxiety and depression symptoms rose from 21% to 29% and 14% to 25%, respectively. Parents reported increasing concerns about their children’s learning and development, which rose from 46% in January to 64% in November. Material hardship, parent emotional distress and child development concerns were all closely associated, with both material hardship and parent distress playing strong independent roles in parents’ concerns for their children’s development.
- **Resilience Despite Challenges:** Despite economic and emotional hardship, parents worked to provide stability and strong relationships to their children, important practices that buffer the negative effects of stress on children’s development. Between January and June 2025, nearly half (46%) of parents reported feeling hopeful about the future most of the time. This rate declined to 33% of parents in the second half of 2025. Most parents (97%) reported consistent or increased quality time with their child over the past month. Over half of parents (55%) felt they could handle things well and 61% felt supported when they felt overwhelmed and stressed. Parents reported receiving public benefits at much lower rates than national averages (19% reported receiving benefits), but, in open-ended responses, many highlighted the importance of those supportive policies for their families’ well-being.

What Families With Babies Need From Policymakers

When families are supported by their communities, public investments and family-friendly policies, they are better able to provide the responsive care, stable environments and strong connections that babies need to thrive. ZERO TO THREE's Policy Framework highlights three interconnected areas for comprehensively supporting babies and their families to help them thrive:

- **Good Health:** Ensure affordable, comprehensive health and mental health coverage for infants, toddlers and parents; support nutrition; and promote social and emotional well-being through perinatal, infant and early childhood mental health screenings and services across early childhood settings.
- **Strong Families:** Strengthen families' economic security by protecting and expanding access to nutritious food, safe housing and income supports; advancing family-friendly workplace policies like paid family and medical leave; investing in responsive family support services that reduce stress and promote healthy parent-child relationships, including preventing child welfare system involvement; and protecting neighborhood safety, including by ceasing immigration enforcement operations in areas with children present and avoiding family separations and detentions.
- **Positive Early Learning Experiences:** Enable access to high-quality, affordable, inclusive and culturally affirming child care and early learning by investing in key programs, sustaining a strong early childhood workforce and ensuring safe and nurturing environments where infants and toddlers can thrive.

About the Data

Since April 2020, the RAPID Survey Project at the Stanford Center on Early Childhood has elevated timely data on the experiences of young children and the adults who care for them. For this report, ZERO TO THREE analyzed a subset of RAPID Survey data from households with children under age three (ages 0 months to 35 months) to examine baby and family well-being in 2025.

The 2025 sample included 5,816 total responses from households with at least one child under age three, representing 3,481 unique parents and 3,828 unique infants and toddlers. Families had on average one child under age three, with an average age of 21 months. Nearly 99% of those who responded to the survey in 2025 identified as a parent of young children in their household, so we refer to respondents as "parents" throughout. Over half of the sample was made up of parents who identified as white (55%), reported moderate to high incomes (above 200% of the Federal Poverty Level [FPL]; 68%) and/or had obtained a college degree or higher (80%). Weights were applied to estimates throughout this report to adjust the sample to better reflect the national population of households with young children. See the Methodology appendix for additional demographic details of the sample and weighting techniques.

Analysis note

All differences highlighted in this report are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, adjusted for household income level, respondent race/ethnicity and geographic region. Results are presented as weighted percentages and are rounded to the nearest whole number. In some cases, response categories or months are combined to improve interpretability and ensure sufficient sample sizes for analysis.

Economic and Political Context of 2025

2025 was a year of uncertainty, upheaval and financial strain for many families and communities across the United States. A combination of economic and social developments throughout 2025 impacted many families' economic, social and emotional experiences across the year.

Beginning in April 2025, tariffs increased the cost of essential goods and services for consumers, resulting in increased financial strains on families with young children.⁵ Job growth slowed to the weakest it has been since the COVID-19 pandemic, with clear disruptions starting in May, and unemployment levels rose over the course of the year.⁶ While middle- and high-wage workers experienced moderate wage growth in 2025 relative to inflation, low-wage workers experienced a decline, marking a departure from 2021-2024 wage gains.⁷

Throughout the year, multiple federal funding freezes and government shutdowns imperiled access to key services including health care, nutrition assistance and child care for many families, and led to chaos and confusion about these services for others.⁸ Major reductions in force across the federal government and among federal contractors have resulted in lost employment for many families. Lost positions at federal child and family service agencies have also begun causing further disruptions and delays to family-serving programs.⁹

Enacted in July 2025, H.R. 1 made historic cuts to SNAP and Medicaid that will likely increase poverty, food insecurity and health disparities¹⁰, and throw state budgets into crisis,¹¹ with some states already implementing harmful cuts to programs that support children and families.¹² The legislation also made way for sweeping immigration enforcement actions that have caused direct harm to communities and young children across the country.¹³

Families' Economic Well-Being

In 2025, parents with infants and toddlers reported increasing material hardship and reduced access to basic needs amidst rising costs of everyday items:

- Material hardship (difficulty paying for basic needs) reached its highest level in the past five years, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly half of parents (44%) reported some level of difficulty paying for the basics, and about a quarter (24%) reported it was hard or very hard to pay for the basics.
- Disparities in material hardship widened by race, ethnicity and geography, with particularly high rates of hardship among Latine (40%) and Black (35%) parents (compared to 24% of all parents reporting it was hard or very hard to pay for basics) and families living in rural areas (33% compared to 23% of families living in urban areas).
- Material hardship increased from the start to end of 2025. In January 2025, 16% of parents reported it was hard or very hard to afford the basics; by July, that rate had nearly doubled to 30%. This rate remained above 30% for the remainder of the year.
- Parents cited rising costs of "everything," from food and utilities to child care, diapers and equipment, especially felt by families with low incomes. Among families experiencing poverty, 91% reported noticing rising costs on everyday items (compared to 64% of moderate- and high-income families).
- Food insecurity increased from 13% at the start of 2025 to 24% by the end of the year, with an especially large jump among families receiving SNAP and WIC, which could be associated with the government shutdown from October to November of 2025.
- Families faced increasing difficulty paying for housing over the course of the year, especially among renters who are disproportionately people of color and low-income families. While 12% of renters reported not being able to pay the full amount at the start of 2025, this rate surged to 20% by November 2025.
- Latine and immigrant families experienced concerning patterns in reduced access to health care services. Latine (8%) and immigrant parents (8%) were more likely to miss well-baby visits than non-Latine parents (less than 1%) and non-immigrant parents (5%).
- Latine and immigrant families in particular faced barriers to child care access due to concerns about immigration enforcement activities. Nearly 10 times as many Latine parents compared to non-Latine parents (71% versus 7.5%) and a higher rate of immigrant parents compared to non-immigrant parents (57% versus 39%) reported being concerned about immigration enforcement activities impacting their family's participation in child care.

Research has consistently shown that economic well-being is closely linked to caregiver and child well-being,¹⁴ including findings from RAPID Survey data.¹⁵ Consistent access to and affordability of concrete resources that meet basic needs, including food, housing, utilities, health care and child care is a foundational support for strong families and healthy child development.¹⁶ However, far too many families in the United States have a hard time accessing and affording basic necessities; this type of unpredictability in accessing basic material needs has a documented negative impact on child and family well-being.¹⁷ Our findings indicate that these challenges increased in 2025 compared to previous years and rose even higher across the year.

Material Hardship: Difficulty Affording Basic Needs

Average material hardship rates, measured by whether parents reported it was hard to afford the very basics like food, housing, medical care and heating in the last month, peaked among households with infants and toddlers in 2025, reaching the highest annual average in the past five years. Nearly 1 in 4 parents with infants and toddlers (24%) reported it was hard or very hard to pay for the very basics, and almost half (44%) reported at least some difficulty paying for the very basics.

Material hardship rates also increased during 2025. In January 2025, 16% of parents reported it was hard or very hard to afford the basics; by July, that rate had nearly doubled to 30%, where it remained for the remainder of the year. Throughout the second half of the year, over half of parents reported at least some material hardship. Controlling for income, race and region, parents had three times higher odds of experiencing material hardship in the second half of 2025 compared to the first half. When asked to think ahead about the upcoming year, nearly 1 in 3 parents (31%) reported they were not so sure they would be able to access basics like health care, rent, food and child care for their family.

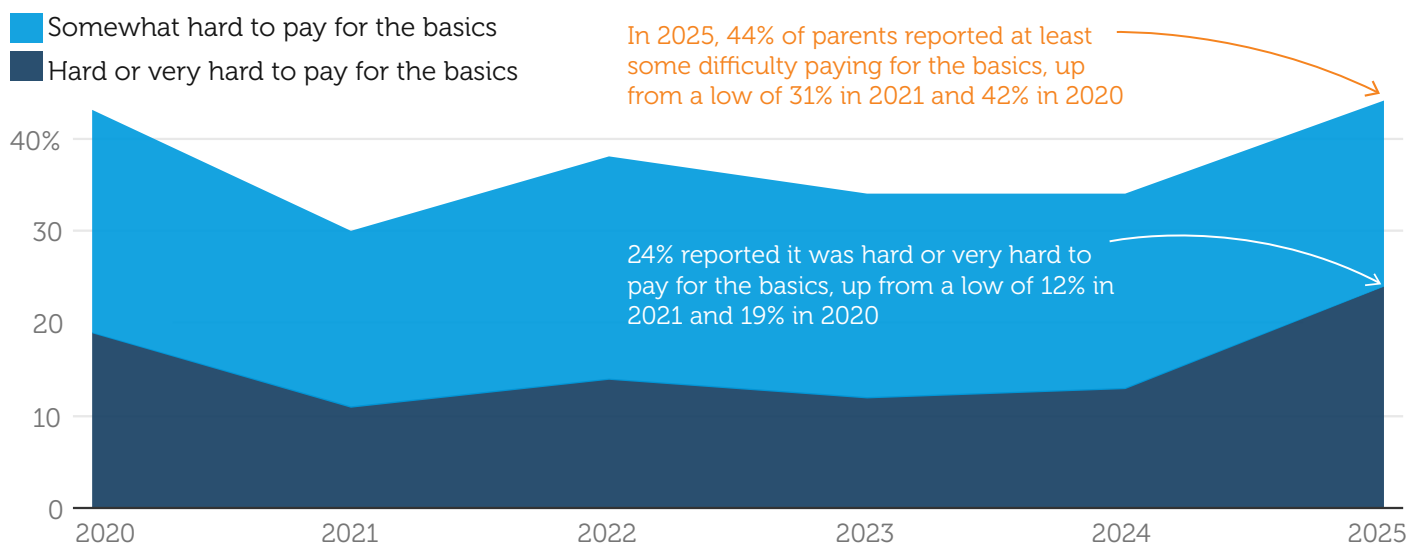


My biggest concern is providing stability and security for my child’s future while juggling the financial strain of medical bills and navigating a system that often feels stacked against us.

–Parent in California (November 2025)

Figure 1

Material hardship among families with infants and toddlers reached a five-year high in 2025



Average annual percentage of parents with infants and toddlers reporting it was hard to pay for the very basics, 2020-2025.

Growing Disparities in Experiences of Material Hardship

While families across income levels experienced some amount of material hardship, families experiencing poverty and low incomes reported especially high rates of material hardship and stress affording the basics. Among families experiencing poverty, 45% reported it was hard or very hard to afford the basics (compared to 21% of families with moderate or high incomes) and 57% reported stress affording the basics (compared to 30% of families with moderate or high incomes). Following population-level racial disparities in wealth and income, material hardship rates were particularly high among Latine (40%) and Black (35%) parents in 2025. Material hardship rates were also higher for families in rural areas (33%) than in urban areas (23%).

In the United States, about 3.8 million infants and toddlers (35% of all babies and toddlers) are experiencing poverty or live in low-income families¹⁸ and over half of babies and toddlers are children of color (a greater proportion compared to the overall population).¹⁹ These disparities highlight that millions of young children are growing up without secure access to the basic resources they need during their period of most rapid brain development.²⁰ Because material hardship can be misinterpreted as neglect, these disparities can also result in disproportionate child welfare system involvement for families of color.²¹

Figure 2

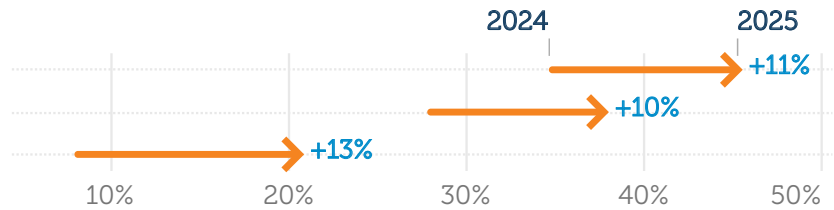
Disparities in material hardship grew in 2025

Income

In poverty (below 100% FPL)

Low income (between 101-200% FPL)

Moderate to high income (above 200% FPL)



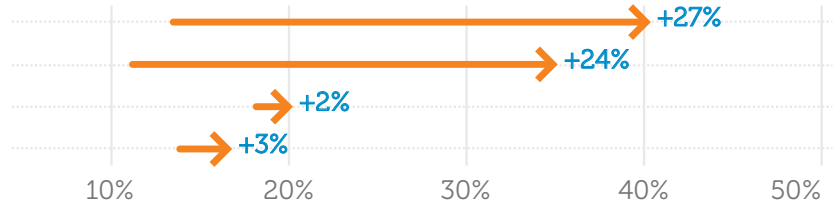
Race/ethnicity

Hispanic/Latine

Black

Two or more races

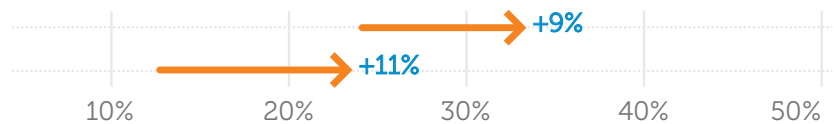
White



Urban/rural

Rural

Urban



Percentage of parents with infants and toddlers reporting it was hard or very hard to pay for the very basics, change from 2024 to 2025.

Paying for Utilities and Food Was Especially Challenging

Out of five types of basic needs (food, housing, utilities, health care and child care), parents reported difficulty paying for three on average. Among parents reporting any difficulty paying for basics, 69% reported difficulty paying for utilities, 57% reported difficulty paying for food and approximately half reported difficulty paying for housing (49%) or health care (52%). Approximately 30% of parents reported difficulty paying for child care (and 41% of parents who reported using any type of child care reported difficulty paying for it).

Families experiencing poverty or low incomes were more likely to report difficulty paying for food (66%) and housing (56%). Families with moderate and high incomes were more likely to report difficulty paying for health care (59%), potentially demonstrating the supportive role of programs like Medicaid and CHIP in buffering health costs for eligible low-income families and the need to expand program eligibility. Across income levels, approximately 70% of families reported difficulty affording utilities.

Figure 3

Parents experiencing any level of material hardship reported challenges paying for basics



Percentage of parents with infants and toddlers reporting difficulty paying for each of five basic needs. Percentage is reported out of the sample of parents who reported any level of difficulty paying for the basics.

1 in 3

rural households with babies experienced material hardship, compared to approximately 1 in 5 urban households in 2025.

2X

as many families living in poverty had trouble paying for the very basics like food, medical care, housing and utilities compared to households with moderate or high income (44% vs. 21%) in 2025.

31%

of parents reported they were not certain they would be able to access the very basics, like health care, rent, food and child care, for their family when asked to think ahead for the next year.

Families Felt the Squeeze of Rising Costs

Parents' increasing difficulty paying for the basics may be partially explained by rising costs and wages that have not kept up with higher expenses. More than 70% of parents noticed that costs had gone up for everyday items. Reports of rising costs largely paralleled trends in hardship data, with food (65%) and utilities (47%) being the items with the most frequently reported cost increases.²²

As with material hardship, families with lower incomes felt these rising costs the most. While 64% of parents in households with moderate or high incomes noticed increased costs, 91% of parents experiencing poverty and 78% of families with low incomes reported noticing increased costs.

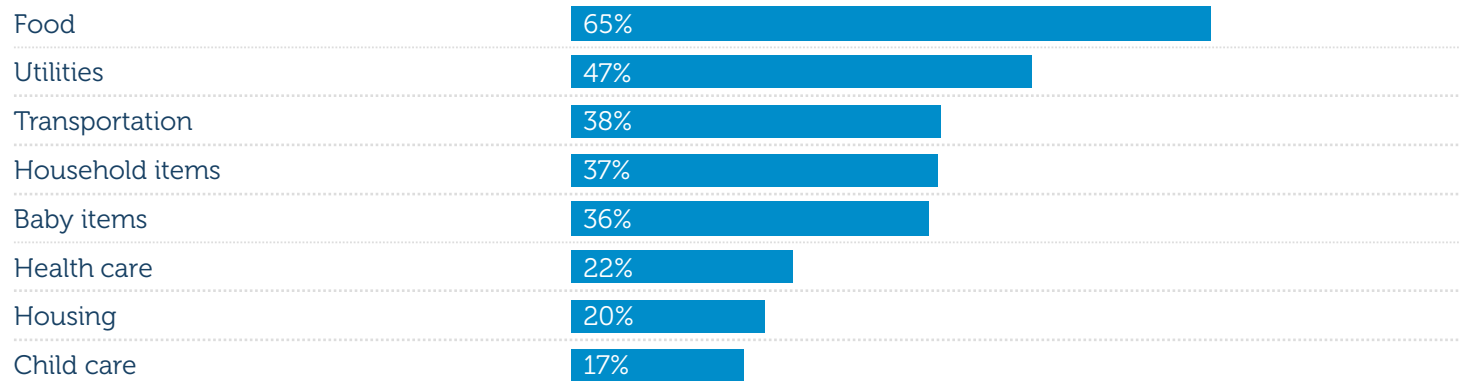
Figure 4

Parents noticed rising costs of everyday items in 2025

Among all families with infants/toddlers:



Among those who noticed rising costs, parents noticed the following items had become more expensive:



Percentage of parents with infants and toddlers who noticed that costs had increased in their area, 2025.

7 in 10

parents reported noticing increased costs of everyday items in 2025. Among households experiencing poverty, 9 in 10 reported increased costs.

27%

of parents who used paid child care reported that their costs had increased in the last month and 24% reported they expected their costs to increase in the next month.

Parents cited costs as a major reason they were struggling to access baby and toddler items like formula, diapers, wipes and equipment. While these specific questions were only fielded in July 2025, about 1 in 10 parents reported difficulty accessing formula and/or diapers. Diaper insecurity can have cascading effects on family well-being, impacting health and child care participation, which may have later effects on parents' ability to work.²³ Nearly half of parents (47%) reported increasing costs of equipment like cribs, strollers, car seats, baby gates, high chairs and other products.

Parents also reported rising costs of child care when asked about these expenses in June 2025. Among parents who used paid child care, approximately 1 in 4 reported that their costs had increased significantly in the last month or that they expected a significant increase in the next month. Rising costs were most heavily concentrated among higher-income households (over 200% FPL) and families using paid home-based care (including licensed family child care and family, friend and neighbor care).

“ Rent takes up most of our income, and on top of that, the utility bills keep rising. Some months, it feels like we have to choose between keeping the lights on or buying groceries. We're doing everything we can to stay on track, but it's exhausting living with the constant fear of falling behind. I just want stability for my family to know we'll have a roof over our heads and heat and water when we need it. That kind of security shouldn't feel out of reach.

–Parent in Tennessee
(September 2025)



Emerging Trends in Families' Access to Basic Needs



Rising Food Insecurity

Rising costs and general difficulty paying for food also manifested in rising reports of food insecurity among families. Across 2025, an average 15% of parents with infants or toddlers experienced low or very low food security, measured by reports of not having money to buy food, not being able to afford balanced meals and skipping meals or eating less because there wasn't enough money.²⁴ Food insecurity rates increased in 2025 compared to the previous three years, nearly doubling from 13% at the start of 2025 to 24% by the end of the year.

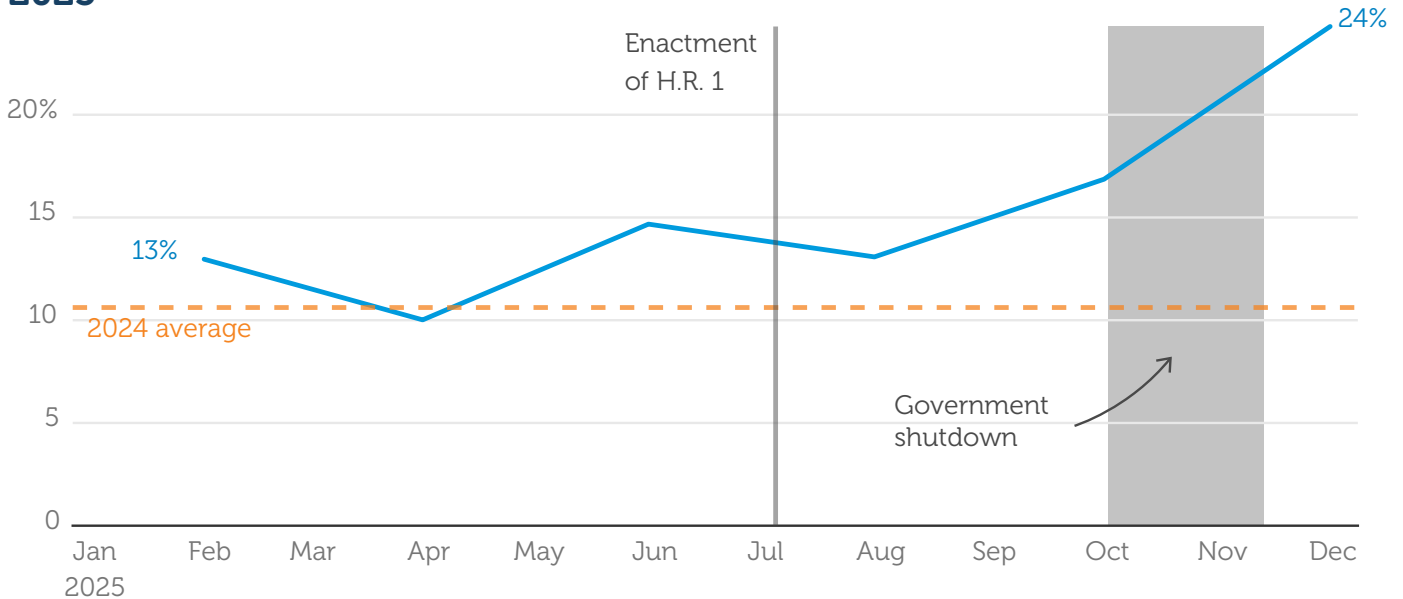
Adults in food-insecure households often shield young children from the direct experiences of food insecurity, meaning that child food insecurity rates are typically lower than caregiver- or household-level rates.²⁵ However, household food insecurity is consistently linked with parental depression, anxiety and stress, which in turn impacts child behavior and development.²⁶ In extreme cases, food insecurity also elevates risk for child welfare system involvement.²⁷

The availability of government assistance programs in relationship to food insecurity cannot be ignored. The large increase at the end of the year aligns with the timing of the government shutdown from October to mid-November 2025, when many families receiving SNAP experienced disruptions, or at least anticipated disruptions, to food benefits.²⁸

Initial research on the impacts of H.R. 1, enacted in July 2025, highlights significant drops in SNAP participation across the country between July and December 2025.²⁹ Beginning in October 2027, fundamental changes to SNAP's funding structure may further disrupt family access to SNAP benefits as reductions in federal support will cause states to make policy choices that may limit SNAP eligibility.³⁰ It is especially important to keep an eye on food insecurity rates going forward, as this data will no longer be reported at the national level by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.³¹

Figure 5

Food insecurity increased among households with infants and toddlers in 2025



Average bimonthly percentage of parents with infants and toddlers who were experiencing low or very low food security, 2025. Chart displays combined two-month averages, with plotted points marking the midpoint between combined months. For example, the average estimate based on survey responses collected between January 1, 2025 and February 28, 2025 is plotted at the timepoint of February 1, 2025.

“ Wages are not rising and all of our costs are. Every trip to the grocery store is costing more, and the stores are struggling to keep produce stocked.

–Parent in New York
(September 2025)



Widening Affordability Gap Between Homeowners and Renters

Across the sample of families with infants and toddlers in 2025, over 1 in 10 parents (11%) reported not being able to pay the full amount of rent or mortgage or being late with a payment because they were not able to afford it. Among families who rented their home, an average 18% of parents reported not being able to afford their full rent each month, and 30% reported being worried about being able to afford their rent. Among families who owned their home, an average 5% reported not being able to afford their full mortgage each month, and 9% reported being worried about being able to afford mortgage.

Housing challenges were more common in 2025 compared to the previous two years, particularly among renters, and housing challenges increased across 2025. While 12% of renters reported not being able to pay the full amount at the start of 2025, this rate surged to 20% by November 2025. The widening gap between renters and homeowners highlights existing racial disparities in home ownership and housing stability. Both nationally and in this sample, renters are disproportionately people of color and lower income compared to homeowners.³²

Beyond difficulty paying rent, 8% of parents reported receiving an eviction notice in the last 30 days; 21% whom reported receiving an eviction notice reported being evicted from the place they rented. Eviction notices became more common in 2025 compared to previous years of the survey, with only 3% of parents reporting receiving eviction notices in 2024 and 1% in 2023. Of those who reported receiving an eviction notice, nearly half of parents were Latine and nearly a quarter were Black. Across the country, infants and toddlers are the age group at the highest risk of eviction; unstable, unsafe or overcrowded housing can negatively affect babies' long-term health and development.³³

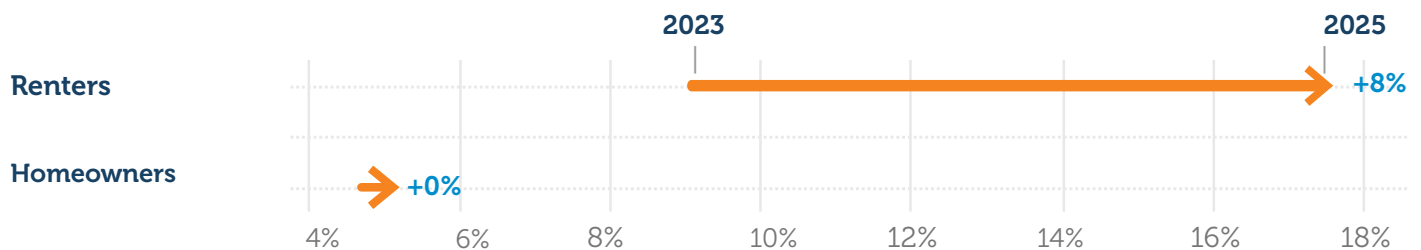
Rising housing affordability challenges in the RAPID Survey align with broader national trends. Nationally, housing prices continued to grow in 2025 to rates that were 60% higher than they were in 2019. Rental unaffordability hit an all-time high, with cost burdens rising fastest among middle-income households.³⁴ High home prices and interest rates contributed to the lowest home buying rates in the last 30 years,³⁵ and the unaffordability crisis contributed to surging rates of homelessness, particularly among families with children.³⁶ Existing federal housing support has not kept pace with housing needs or rising costs, and proposed HUD funding cuts would result in even greater housing affordability challenges for families and children and widening disparities in housing security.³⁷

“ When housing is unstable, everything in our lives becomes unstable.

–Parent in Hawaii
(July 2025)

Figure 6

Housing affordability gaps increased between renters and homeowners in 2025



Annual average percentage of parents with infants and toddlers who reported they could not afford their full housing payment in the last month, 2023 to 2025.



Possible Concerns About Accessing Health Care and Child Care Among Latine and Immigrant Families

In 2025, only a small percentage of parents overall (6%) reported missing a well-baby check-up. However, results highlight a notable disparity in barriers to care; Latine parents (8%) and immigrant parents (8%) missed well-baby visits at a higher rate compared to non-Latine parents (less than 1%) and parents whose parents and grandparents were born in the United States. (5%). Among those who missed well-baby checks, the most common reason was cost (45%), possibly reflecting barriers in access to health insurance. Although families were not explicitly asked about the role of immigration enforcement on health care access, other reports have documented reluctance to seek medical care among families in immigrant communities.³⁸

When parents were asked in September through December about the impacts of immigration enforcement activities in their community, 43% reported being concerned that immigration enforcement activities could affect their family's participation in child care. Concern rose across the full sample between September and December from 39% to 56%. Although families from any ethnic background could be concerned because of the pervasive impacts of immigration enforcement on communities and on the child care workforce,³⁹ reports of concern in the RAPID sample were driven primarily by Latine and immigrant parents. Nearly 10 times as many Latine parents compared to non-Latine parents who used child care (71% versus 7.5%) reported being concerned about immigration enforcement activities impacting their family's participation in child care. Concern was also higher among first- and second-generation immigrant parents compared to those whose parents and grandparents were born in the United States. (57% versus 39%). Between September and December, concern rose across groups, and the rate of Latine families reporting their child had missed days of child care due to concerns about immigration enforcement activities increased from 3% to 12%.



The political climate makes me scared for my family. I fear that our family may be separated by ICE. Even though we are citizens, we can be racially profiled. And it scares me.

—Parent in California
(July 2025)



Families' Emotional Well-Being

In 2025, parents with infants and toddlers reported increased emotional distress and concerns for their children's development:

- About 1 in 5 parents screened positive for elevated anxiety and/or depressive symptoms in 2025, a three-year high that rose even higher across the year. By the end of 2025, 29% were screening positive for elevated anxiety symptoms and 25% were screening positive for elevated depressive symptoms.
- Material hardship was strongly associated with increased anxiety, depression, stress and loneliness, even when controlling for parents' race, income and region. Parents reporting that it was very hard to pay for basics had over six times higher odds of screening positive for elevated anxiety and/or depressive symptoms compared to parents who reported it was not very hard to pay for basics.
- In 2025, 24% of parents reported being very concerned about their child's learning, development or behavior, over twice the rate in any year since 2020. The rate of parents who had any concerns about their children's development, learning and behavior rose throughout 2025 from 46% to 64%. Developmental concerns and reports of behavior that can be challenging were independently associated with material hardship, suggesting a unique role of economic well-being in shaping parents' concerns for their children.

Caregiver and baby well-being are closely linked.⁴⁰ When parents' or caregiver's own emotional needs are not met, it is harder to be responsive to a baby's needs and to help them regulate their emotions.

Parents' Emotional Distress

Based on brief mental health screenings,⁴¹ an average 19% of parents screened positive for elevated depressive symptoms and 23% screened positive for elevated anxiety symptoms in 2025. Rates of parents experiencing elevated anxiety and depression symptoms were higher in 2025 (23% and 19%, respectively) compared to the previous two years (up from 20% and 12% in 2023, respectively). Parent distress symptoms also increased over 2025. From January to November 2025, the rate of parents with positive anxiety screenings increased by 8 percentage points from 21% to 29%, and the rate of parents with positive depression screenings increased by 11 percentage points from 14% to 25%. Controlling for income, race and region, parents had approximately twice the odds of screening positive for anxiety and/or depressive symptoms in the second half of 2025 compared to the first half.

“

Ongoing uncertainties have caused increased stress and anxiety for both me and my child, impacting our emotional well-being and daily routines. We're concerned about the long-term effects on mental health, social development, and academic progress.

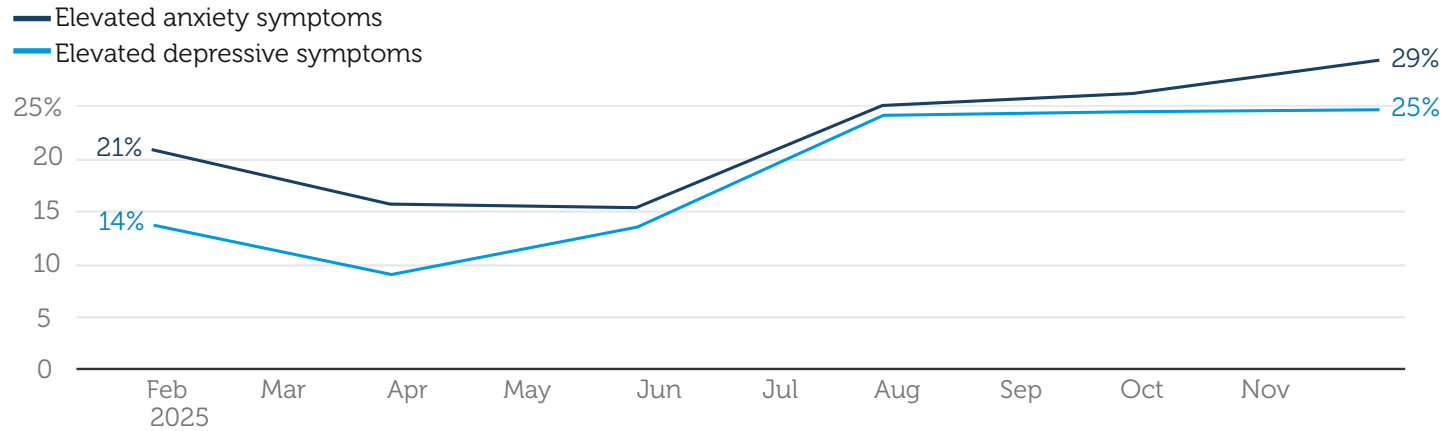
–Parent in Texas
(April 2025)

Across 2025, an average 19% of parents reported that they usually or always felt stressed in the last month, while 14% reported that they usually or always felt lonely. These responses were fairly stable over the last several years and over the course of 2025.

Overall, material hardship was strongly associated with increased anxiety, depression, stress and loneliness, even when controlling for parents' race, income and region. Parents reporting that it was very hard to pay for basics had over six times higher odds of screening positive for anxiety and/or depressive symptoms compared to parents who reported it was not very hard to pay for basics.

Figure 7

Anxiety and depression increased among parents with infants and toddlers in 2025



Average bimonthly percentage of parents with infants and toddlers who screened positive for elevated anxiety or depression symptoms, 2025. Chart displays combined two-month averages, with plotted points marking the midpoint between combined months. For example, the average estimate based on survey responses collected between January 1, 2025 and February 28, 2025 is plotted at the time point of February 1, 2025.

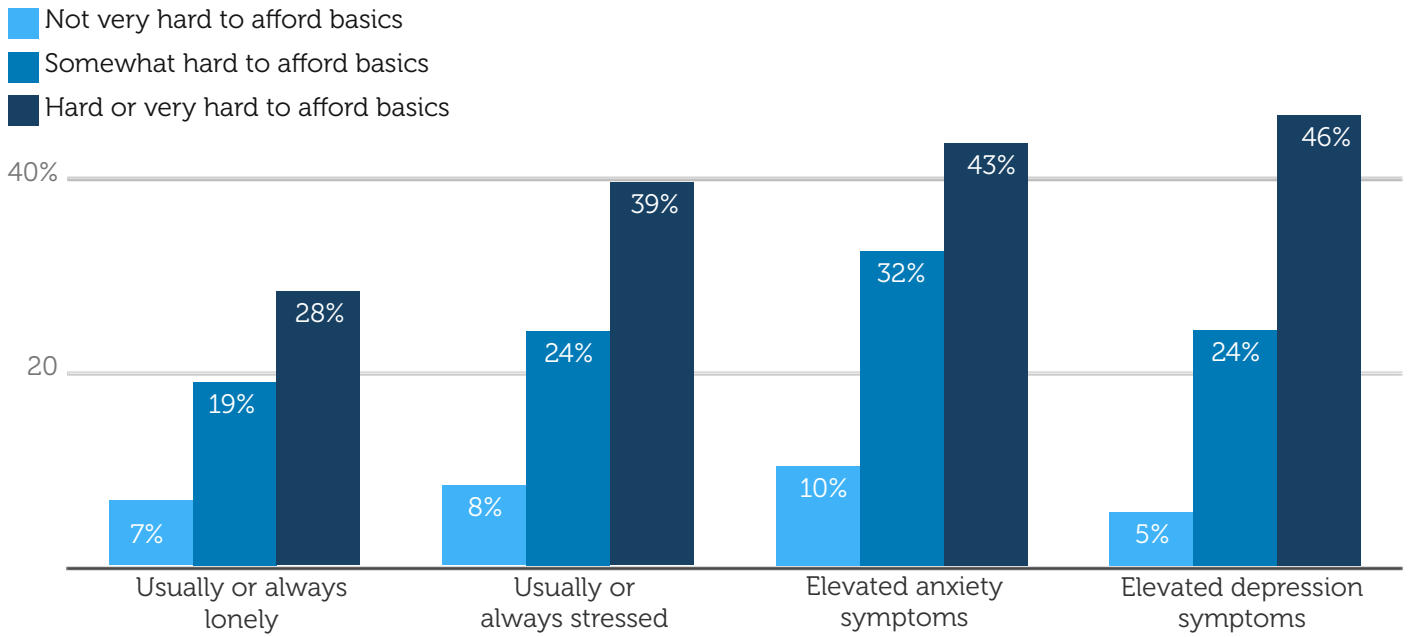


In the past month, I've felt a lot of anxiety about ensuring my children's safety and well-being. With the current situation, I've been worried about their health and how to protect them. It's been stressful, and I've felt uncertain about how to manage everything.

—Parent in Hawaii
(June 2025)

Figure 8

Parent emotional distress increased with greater material hardship



Average indicators of parent well-being among parents with infants and toddlers by level of reported material hardship, 2025.



Parents' Concerns About Babies' Development and Behavior

Across 2025, an average 55% of parents reported some level of concern about their child's learning, development or behavior and about a quarter reported they were very concerned, a rate that is double any previous year since 2020. Reported concerns about learning, development or behavior increased in the second half of 2025. By November 2025, 34% of parents with infants and toddlers reported they were very concerned and 64% reported they were very or somewhat concerned about their child's learning, development or behavior.

In 2025, the vast majority of parents (over 90%) reported developmentally typical rates of behaviors that can be challenging or concerning for parents when frequent, such as being fussy, anxious or having tantrums. More than twice as many parents reported that their children were often fearful or anxious in 2025 compared to the previous two years, increasing from 3% on average in 2023 and 2024 to 6% in 2025.

On both concerns for children's development and children's anxious and fearful behavior, parents' reports were strongly associated with their own emotional distress. However, increased parent emotional distress did not fully account for associations between higher material hardship and parents' reports about children's behaviors that could be challenging. Findings suggest that material hardship had an independent influence on children's distress. Previous research from this survey has looked across time points to document a "chain of hardship" that unfolds over time, linking increases in material hardship, parent emotional distress and child emotional distress week by week.⁴²

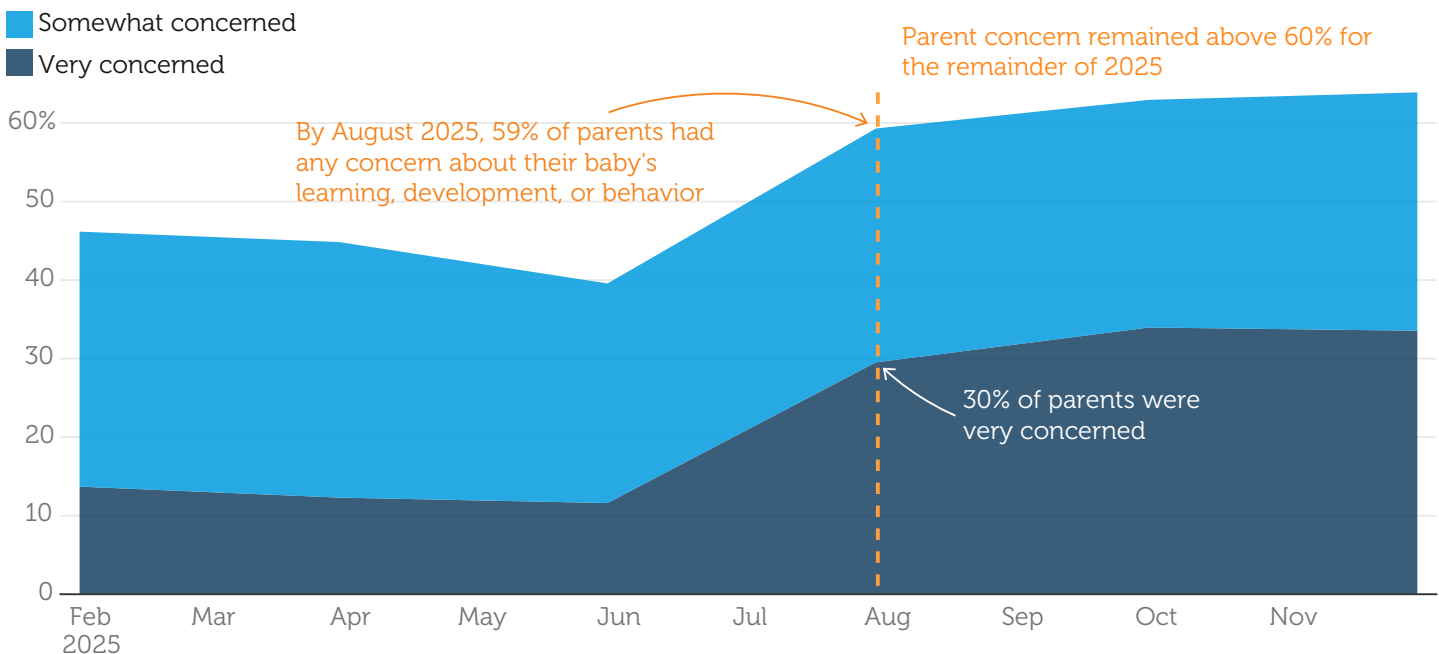


My biggest worry is making sure my kids have what they need to thrive emotionally and physically even when things are uncertain for me.

—Parent in Minnesota
(April 2025)

Figure 9

Parent concerns about infant and toddler learning, development and behavior increased in 2025



Average bimonthly percentage of parents reporting concerns about their baby's learning, development, or behavior, 2025. Chart displays combined two-month averages, with plotted points marking the midpoint between combined months. For example, the average estimate based on survey responses collected between January 1, 2025 and February 28, 2025 is plotted at the time point of February 1, 2025.

Resilience Despite Challenges and the Need for Systemic Support

In 2025, parents with infants and toddlers reported signs of resilience and sources of support that helped during a challenging year:

- Nearly 2 out of 5 parents (39%) reported that they felt hopeful about the future most of the time. However, hope declined over the course of the year. Between January and June 2025, nearly half (46%) of parents reported feeling hopeful about the future most of the time. This rate declined to 33% of parents in the second half of 2025.
- Over half of parents felt that they could handle things well (55%), that being a parent felt manageable (56%) and that they got the support they needed when they were stressed or overwhelmed (61%).
- Most parents (97%) reported consistent or increased quality time with their child over the past month.
- When asked about what would help the most to reduce sources of family conflict right now, 35% of parents reported having lower levels of stress and worry, 20% reported being able to meet their child's social and emotional needs and 15% reported knowing they could pay for basic needs.
- Families reported engaging in stable routines like regular bedtime, playtime and eating dinner as a family approximately three to five times per week.
- Only 19% of parents in the RAPID sample reported receiving public benefits, well below national averages of Medicaid/CHIP coverage. Estimates from the RAPID Survey data may underestimate actual benefits receipt, but results indicate that many parents did not receive the support they needed in 2025.

Parents reported a variety of strategies and supports that signal their resilience or their ability to adapt and thrive despite adversity or stress,⁴³ both as individuals and as parents during an economically and emotionally difficult year. Parents' individual attitudes, parenting practices, levels of social support and connection⁴⁴ as well as access to policies that help them meet their own and their family's material and psychological needs⁴⁵ are all protective factors that can help buffer very young children from the toxic effects of economic hardship, discrimination and other adverse experiences in early childhood.⁴⁶ Although many families were able to cope with challenging experiences, this resilience does not remove the urgent need for systemic supports.

“

A strong network of health care providers, support groups and loved ones has made all the difference for us, offering both practical help and emotional stability.

—Parent in California
(November 2025)



Individual Attitudes

While nearly 2 out of 5 parents (39%) reported that they felt hopeful about the future most of the time in 2025, this rate declined over the course of the year from 42% in January to 31% in December. Over half of parents felt that they could handle things well (55%),⁴⁷ that being a parent felt manageable (56%) and that they got the support they needed when they were stressed or overwhelmed (61%). At the same time, 77% reported that they could benefit from additional resources and support on parenting and how best to support their child's development. Research, particularly with Black and Latina mothers who disproportionately experience systemic adversity, has documented the importance of hope for the future and the ability to identify and use resources in supporting children's development and well-being.⁴⁸

Parenting Practices

In March 2025, a subset of questions focused on family stability measures like routines, quality time and positive relationships. On average, families reported engaging in stable routines like regular bedtime, playtime and eating dinner as a family approximately three to five times per week. Parents reported often engaging in activities supportive of their child's development like reading to them, singing to them and engaging in back-and-forth exchange and the vast majority (97%) reported consistent or increased quality time with their child over the past month. Stable routines and quality family time are critical for building strong caregiving relationships and for healthy emotional development.⁴⁹ Parents' resilience in their ability to provide these positive experiences for their children despite economic and emotional distress serves as an important buffer for young children's socioemotional development and mental health.⁵⁰

When asked in March 2025 to think about what would help the most to decrease conflict in their family right now, parents reflected on mental health needs and affordability challenges. Overall, 35% of parents reported that having lower levels of stress and worry would help reduce conflict the most right now, 20% reported that being able to meet their child's social and emotional needs would help and 15% reported that knowing they could pay for basic needs would help.

“ Talking openly, spending time together and leaning on our faith and close friends has really helped us stay strong through challenges. Knowing we're not alone makes a big difference.

—Parent in Nebraska
(October 2025)

Social and Community Supports

The national survey did not ask parents about sources of social support in 2025, although these data are forthcoming in 2026. However, on open-ended items asking parents what was helping them most right now, many talked about the importance of their community in keeping them grounded and connected to their children. Many parents also shared that having reliable child care was a buffer against other stressors in their lives, providing necessary security and support.

“ Community and family [is] stepping up to support us as we adjust to being a family of five. Grandparents have come to visit to help cook and take care of the older two kids, and community members are providing dinner several nights a week to help us ease into this new phase of life.

—Parent in Maryland
(August 2025)

Access to Public Benefits and Resources That Support Well-Being

Some parents of infants and toddlers in this sample reported accessing public benefits in 2025, but rates fell well below expected estimates when compared to national data. Despite a high rate of households experiencing material hardship, only 19% of parents of infants and toddlers surveyed reported receiving any type of public benefit, well below national averages of Medicaid/CHIP coverage for births and young children (over 40%)⁵¹ and the rate of children under age 3 who receive SNAP (approximately 26%).⁵² Very few families in the sample were able to report whether or not they received child care subsidies. On the whole, few parents appeared to have access to supportive benefits, although estimates from the RAPID Survey data may underestimate actual benefits receipt. Some parents may not know they receive Medicaid, for example, if they received health care under a state-named Medicaid program.⁵³

Whether parents actually accessed public benefits and resources at lower rates than the national population or not, their perception that they did not receive the support they needed raises questions about the role they see policy playing in helping to improve their lives. Importantly, some families who did receive public benefits for themselves or their children highlighted the essential buffering impact of these programs on their economic and emotional well-being.

“ [We are concerned] that we may lose our SNAP, WIC and Medicaid benefits under the current administration. We depend a lot on [these benefits] and would have difficulty getting by without them.

–Parent in Oregon
(February 2025)

What Parents Want and Need From Policymakers in This Moment

Across 2025, families with infants and toddlers struggled with rising costs of “everything,” as many parents put it, from food and housing to health care and child care. Rising financial strain and changes to access and eligibility for federal programs have wide-reaching consequences for families and communities, adding a significant source of stress that has impacted family well-being.

Many indicators of economic hardship like food insecurity and difficulty affording housing peaked in 2025 compared to the previous two years. Some variables like overall material hardship reached an all-time high over the past five years of the RAPID Survey.

While this report does not explore causal relationships between economic hardship and parent and child well-being, analysis demonstrates positive associations between rising material hardship and parent stress, anxiety and depression among parents with infants and toddlers in 2025. In 2025, parents also reported rising concern about their children’s behavior, learning and development, which was at least in part explained by rising material hardship. The rate of parents reporting they were very concerned about their child’s development reached above any previous year of the survey.

“ I have been taking these surveys for years at this point and this is the lowest and most concerned I have felt, even during the early pandemic when I had an infant.

–Parent in California
(February 2025)

When asked about the biggest challenges and concerns they have right now, many parents drew connections between rising costs, unaffordability and inaccessibility of basic needs, and the ways that financial constraints affected their family lives. Some of these family-level impacts included difficulties saving money for long-term goals, providing the educational opportunities they want for their young children, navigating stress and mental health related to financial concerns and having enough quality time to spend with their children. Parents also mentioned health concerns, accessing services for children with special needs, general parenting stresses and challenges, navigating unemployment and difficult job markets, and broader societal and political concerns.

Notably, many indicators of financial hardship and emotional distress spiked in the summer of 2025 and remained elevated for the rest of the year. Findings from the survey make clear that going into 2026, many families were having an even harder time meeting their needs compared to the start of 2025.

“ With the rising cost of living, it’s hard to make ends meet, let alone set aside money for long-term goals like retirement, education or even just a safety net for emergencies. We’re constantly juggling priorities and trying to make do with what we have, but it’s stressful and uncertain.

–Parent in Tennessee
(March 2025)

Changes to national policy and economic context that took hold in the spring of 2025 and continued into 2026 could be affecting parents’ experiences as connected to their economic and emotional well-being. In open-ended responses, many families mentioned concerns about the impacts of tariffs, persistent inflation, funding freezes to federal and state programs, layoffs across sectors, historic cuts to Medicaid and SNAP, state budget crises and heightened discrimination and violence in communities, including as a result of immigration enforcement tactics. As we move into 2026, it is critical to continue monitoring and to take urgent action to support babies and their families.

“ I have never been so fearful for people I care about (especially immigrants and LGBTQ people in my life) and for our country.

–Parent in Texas
(June 2025)



At a time when so much feels uncertain and parenting feels harder than ever for many, families are entering 2026 still rattled by the instability of the previous year. It is critical that we listen to the voices and solutions that families are calling for. Below we share a sampling of what parents with infants and toddlers want their elected officials and other policymakers to know about what they need right now:⁵⁴

Policies that meet the needs of all families struggling to afford the basics for their very young children and support to help prevent these challenges in the first place

“My family is struggling with the basics, and we urgently need support to make ends meet. The lack of health insurance is a huge concern; without coverage, we are often forced to forgo necessary medical care, which affects our well-being and increases long-term costs...Food insecurity is also a constant worry. The rising cost of groceries makes it difficult to provide healthy meals for my family, and we are forced to make tough choices about what we can and cannot afford...Child care costs are overwhelming. It’s hard to find affordable, high-quality child care, and the expense often forces families to make difficult decisions about work and time spent with their children...Ultimately, I want leaders to know that families like mine need immediate relief through policies that address these fundamental issues: affordable health care, food security and accessible child care. These are the basics that will allow families to thrive, not just survive.”

–Parent in Georgia (March 2025)

Increased support for housing stability and affordability to ensure families have a safe and secure place to live

“Rent has gone up so much that it’s taking a huge portion of our income, leaving very little for other necessities like food, transportation and emergencies. It feels like we’re always one unexpected expense away from falling behind. Finding a safe, stable and affordable place to live has become incredibly difficult. Even small apartments in average neighborhoods are priced way above what most families can realistically afford. This constant pressure makes it hard to feel secure or plan for the future. We’re doing our best, but the cost of rent is making it harder and harder to stay afloat.”

–Parent in Tennessee (April 2025)

“Policymakers should understand that many families facing eviction aren’t irresponsible. They’re struggling with rising rents, high utility costs and stagnant wages. More affordable housing options and rent assistance are urgently needed.”

–Parent in Maryland (October 2025)

Paid family and medical leave, flexible and quality child care, and friendly workplace policies that help families balance working and spending more time together

“Balancing work and family responsibilities has become increasingly difficult. Many working parents, including myself, struggle with long hours, high workplace demands and a lack of flexibility, which affects our ability to be present for our families. We need policies that support better work-life balance, such as expanded family leave, affordable child care options and workplace flexibility. Investing in these areas would not only help families like mine but also create a healthier, more productive workforce.”

–Parent in Florida (February 2025)

Enhanced access to and quality and supply of mental health services

“Right now, two of the biggest concerns for our family are housing stability and mental health – they’re deeply connected and both weigh heavily on us... Mental health, for both the adults and kids in our family, has taken a hit because of this ongoing stress. The pressure of trying to provide, stay afloat financially and maintain stability takes a toll. It leads to anxiety, burnout and moments where it feels like we’re just trying to get through each day. For our child, they can pick up on that tension, and it sometimes affects their mood or behavior.”

–Parent in Tennessee (April 2025)

“Mental health services are overrun with people, and it is hard to get in anywhere.”

–Parent in Pennsylvania (January 2025)

Investments with babies at the center that benefit everyone and strengthen our collective future

“We are doing alright now but feel strongly that more affordable quality child care and health care options would benefit the country as a whole. We really need stable leadership working to invest in and improve public health, education, child care, family leave, climate policy and more to help ensure our children have a good future ahead of them.”

–Parent in Connecticut (January 2025)

“I would appreciate policies that ensure fair wages, access to quality health care and investments in education so that we can build a more stable future for our family and our community.”

–Parent in Tennessee (February 2025)



toddlers and families, particularly for families facing the greatest challenges with economic security. In light of the national scale of families' experiences, we recommend the following policies that federal lawmakers can support in 2026 to help babies, families and communities thrive:

Good Health

- Expand access to affordable health and mental health care that comprehensively meets the needs of young children and families, including coverage under Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Affordable Care Act subsidies and other programs that support health and well-being.
- Invest in perinatal, infant and early childhood mental health screenings, services and supports across settings, including early intervention through Medicaid and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C.

Strong Families

- Protect and expand critical food and nutrition assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).
- Expand and reduce barriers to programs that help families meet basic needs, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) and housing and utility assistance programs.
- Support paid family and medical leave policies, the Child Tax Credit and other financial supports that make raising a baby more affordable for all families, particularly those facing the greatest barriers.
- Cease immigration enforcement operations in areas where young children are present, avoid family separation and detention, and cease detention of pregnant and postpartum people.

Positive Early Learning Experiences

- Increase access to affordable, high-quality child care and early learning programs, including through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Head Start and Early Head Start, while rejecting policies that would reduce access, roll back quality standards or undermine a well-compensated and well-supported workforce.
- Invest in early intervention through the IDEA Part C, ensuring services are available in the home and integrated into child care and early learning settings.

States and localities also have a critical role to play in taking action to support families' well-being. For state-level policy recommendations and examples, please visit [ZERO TO THREE's Building for Babies Self-Assessment Tool](#) and [The Baby Book](#).

Methodology

For this report, authors analyzed a subset of data collected by the Stanford Center on Early Childhood’s RAPID Survey Project from households with children under age three between April 2020 and December 2025, focusing on the experiences of families with infants and toddlers in 2025.

Sample Characteristics

Between January 2025 and December 2025, this sample included 5,816 total responses, representing 3,481 unique parents and 3,828 unique infants and toddlers. Response rates from individual parents ranged from one to 12 times across 2025, with families responding an average of 1.7 times in 2025; 95% of parents responded between one and four times. Demographic characteristics were largely stable over the course of the year, with small differences in proportions for income level and race and ethnicity; these differences are adjusted in logistic regressions. Monthly response rates averaged 485 responses per month, ranging from a low of 280 responses in December 2025 to a high of 776 responses in October 2025. Response rates differed by survey item; to account for smaller sample sizes available for month-over-month analysis, the authors opted to use combined two-month estimates. Most parents (97%) responded to the survey in English and 3% responded in Spanish.

Analysis

Analyses were conducted using a subset of raw survey data from the RAPID Survey Project, filtered by households with at least one child under age three (between 0 and 35 months) at the time of each response. All data cleaning and statistical analyses were performed in RStudio.

All differences highlighted in this report are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. To better understand the association between material hardship, parent distress and indicators of child well-being, we fit a series of weighted regression models, controlling for parent race and ethnicity, poverty level and region. We fit logistic regression models for binary outcomes and linear models for continuous measures. Throughout the report, results are presented as weighted percentages and are rounded to the nearest whole number. In some cases, response categories or months were combined to improve interpretability and ensure sufficient sample sizes for analysis.

We incorporated post-stratification weights following guidance from the RAPID Survey Project to adjust the sample to better reflect the national population of households with young children. Specifically, weights were constructed to align the sample with population benchmarks of families with at least one child under age six from the American Community Survey (ACS) 2024 five-year national estimates.⁵⁵ Target distributions were based on parent race, poverty status and census region.

Prior to weighting, we took several steps to address missing data. When possible, missing parent region or race was filled using responses from the same individual in prior survey waves. Given the relatively smaller sample of families with infants and toddlers compared to the sample of families with children under age six, poverty status was also supplemented using responses provided within six months. While poverty status may change over time, it was assumed to be relatively stable over this shorter period.

Limitations

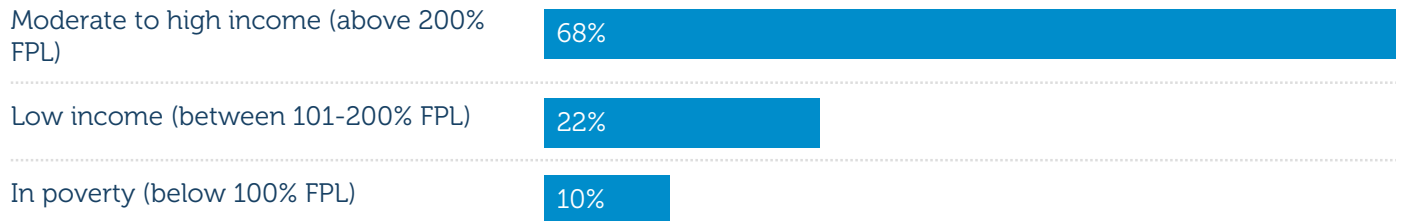
All measures are based on parent self-report and reflect respondents’ subjective experiences. In addition, the analysis was constrained by the structure and wording of available survey questions, which did not always allow for full interpretation of underlying conditions or nuances in family experiences. The data rely on a convenience sample; although weighting was applied to better approximate the target population, the results are not representative of all families with infants and toddlers in the United States.

There is also a risk of response bias, which we attempted to mitigate by observing sample demographics over time. Finally, because this analysis uses secondary data that were received in a pre-cleaned form, we do not have full visibility into the systems and processes used to ensure data quality. Complete methods for sampling and cleaning in this data set are summarized elsewhere.⁵⁶

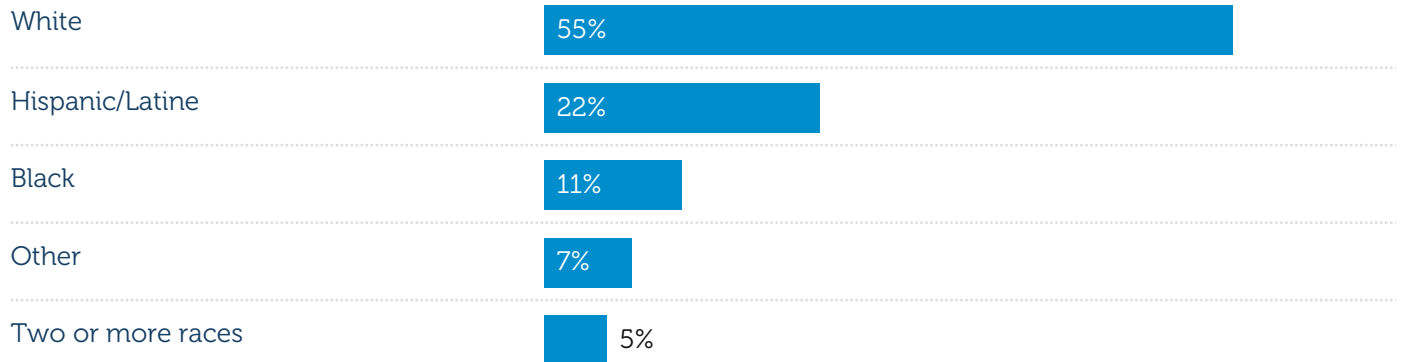
Figure 10

2025 RAPID Survey sample distribution

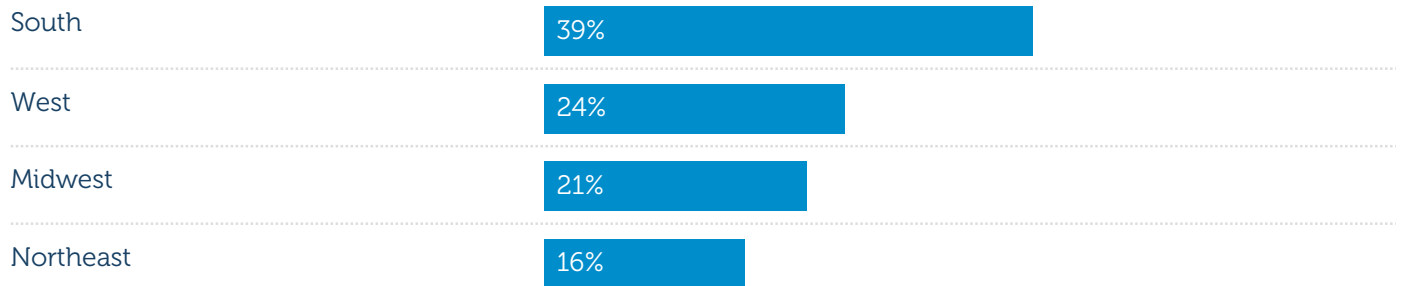
Income



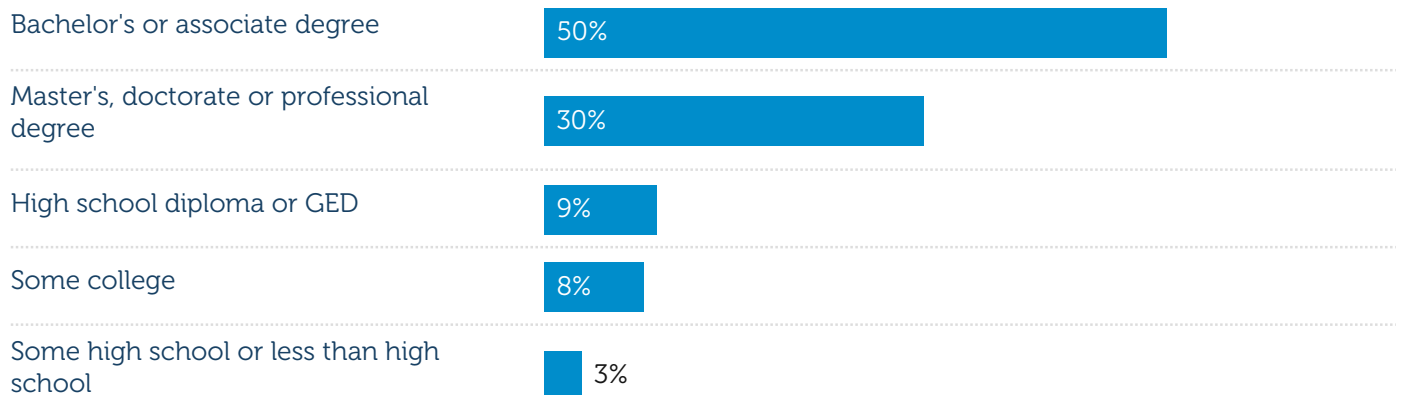
Race/ethnicity



Geographic region



Parent education



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⁴¹ The RAPID Survey Project adapted existing mental health screening questions to measure parent symptoms of depression and anxiety. For depressive symptoms, RAPID used the two-item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-2) screening tool. PHQ-2 questions are available at <https://www.hiv.uw.edu/page/mental-health-screening/phq-2>. For anxiety symptoms, RAPID used the two-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-2) screening tool. GAD-2 questions are available at <https://www.hiv.uw.edu/page/mental-health-screening/gad-2>. Parents who scored a 3 or higher on each screening tool were identified as positive for elevated depressive or anxiety symptoms.

⁴² Center for Translational Neuroscience (2020, July 30). *A Hardship Chain Reaction: Financial Difficulties Are Stressing Families' and Young Children's Well-being during the Pandemic, and It Could Get a Lot Worse*. Medium. <https://medium.com/rapid-ec-project/a-hardship-chain-reaction-3c3f3577b30>

⁴³ The American Psychological Association defines resilience as “the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences.” Some factors that contribute to how people adapt to adversities include individual-level worldviews and coping strategies, as well as the availability and quality of material, social and psychological supports and resources, which are heavily shaped by social policies.

⁴⁴ Gavidia-Payne, S., Denny, B., Davis, K., Francis, A., & Jackson, M. (2015). *Parental resilience: A neglected construct in resilience research*. *Clinical psychologist*, 19(3), 111-121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cp.12053>

⁴⁵ Last, B. S., Triplett, N. S., McGinty, E. E., Waller, C. R., Khazanov, G. K., & Beidas, R. S. (2024). *The social determinants of resilience: A conceptual framework to integrate psychological and policy research*. *American Psychologist*, 79(8), 1049. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001308>

⁴⁶ Negussie et al. (2019).

⁴⁷ Reverse scored item reported. Question text was “I often have the feeling I cannot handle things very well.”

⁴⁸ Iruka, I. U., Forte, A. B., Liu, S., Sims, J., & Curenton, S. M. (2025). *Initial validation of the family cultural wealth survey: relation with racial discrimination and well-being for Black families*. *Adversity and Resilience Science*, 6(1), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42844-024-00139-y>

⁴⁹ Selman, S.B. & Dilworth-Bart, J.E. (2023). *Routines and child development: A systematic review*. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 16(2), 272-328. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12549>

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⁵¹ KFF. (n.d.). *Births Financed by Medicaid by Metropolitan Status*. State Health Facts Data. <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/state-indicator/births-financed-by-medicaid/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colld%22:%22Location%22:%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>; Georgetown University Center for Children and Families analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS). <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/microdata/access/2023.html>

⁵² ZERO TO THREE calculation based on Llobrera, J. & Nuñez, L. (2025, September). *Nearly 2 Million Young Children in the U.S. Lived in Food-Insecure Households in 2023*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/nearly-2-million-young-children-in-the-us-lived-in-food-insecure>

⁵³ American Council on Aging. (2025, July 8). *Medicaid By State: Alternative Names and Contact Information*. <https://www.medicaidplanningassistance.org/state-medicaid-resources/>

⁵⁴ Parent quotes in the following table were submitted in response to questions: 1) "What would you like your elected officials or other policymakers (for example, U.S. Congress, state and local leaders) to know about how your family is doing or what you need during this time?" and 2) "What are the biggest challenges and concerns for you and your family right now?"

⁵⁵ Ruggles, S., Flood, S., Sobek, M., Backman, D., ... J., & Williams, K.C.W. (2025). IPUMS USA: Version 16.0 [dataset]. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V16.0>

⁵⁶ Liu, S., Mazzaferro, M., & Fisher, P. A. (2026). *Understanding US households' equitable access to infant and toddler care in the context of state CCDF eligibility-establishing policies*. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 76(3), 169-183. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2026.03.007>