

SEEING THE FULL PICTURE: POVERTY RATES MAY HAVE DROPPED BUT FAMILIES ARE STILL FACING MATERIAL HARDSHIP

The RAPID study has been continuously tracking material hardship among families with young children since the beginning of the pandemic. Data from the RAPID study on material hardship add important context to understanding families' experiences.

A recent [New York Times article](#) reported that from 1993 to 2019 the child poverty rate has dropped by more than half. This decline is a major step in the right direction.



It shows the critical role of robust government support and the gains that can be made when we decide that the well-being of our country's young children and families is a collective responsibility. It also shows the power of persistent efforts of parents, caregivers, and advocates. While progress has been considerable, the pressing problem of child

poverty has not been resolved. RAPID data show that material hardship among families with young children has been on the rise since April 2022. We also find that having higher household income does not fully protect families from material hardship and its subsequent negative influences on parent and child emotional well-being.

“I’m struggling to maintain buying food despite getting food stamps. I’m buying less of what is needed to save money in case of emergencies.
Parent from Florida in August 2022

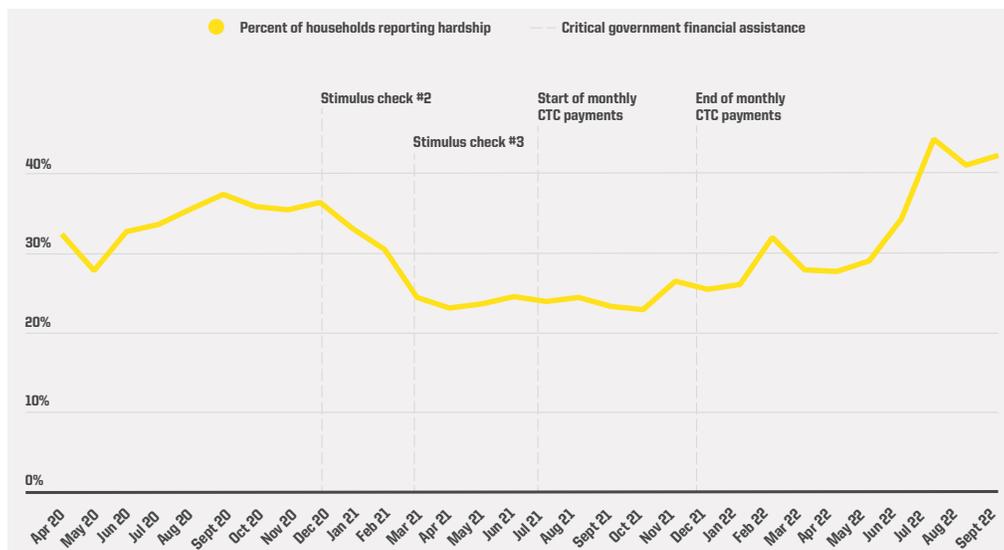
FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN ARE CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING HIGH AND INCREASING LEVELS OF MATERIAL HARDSHIP

While the three stimulus checks and the monthly Child Tax Credit payments temporarily reduced levels of hardship, rates of material hardship (i.e., the percentage of families having difficulty paying for at least one type of basic need) have remained above 20% since the beginning of the pandemic. In recent months, there was a dramatic increase in the material hardship rate, which

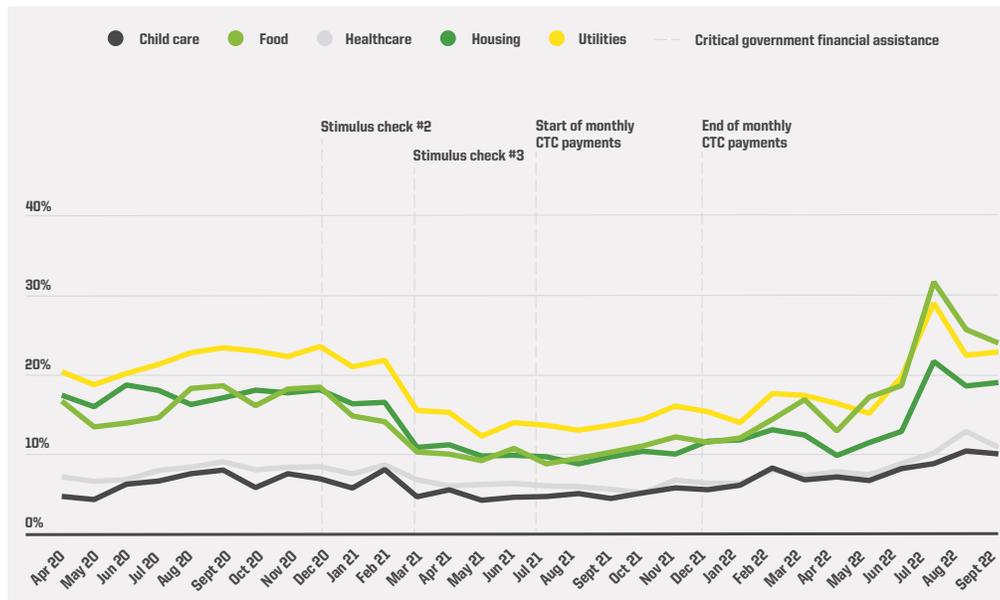
jumped from 28% to 44% between April and July 2022. This is the highest hardship rate and the most substantial increase in the more than two years of the RAPID survey. Food, utilities, and housing are the areas of material hardship with the most dramatic increases. Since July 2022, difficulty paying for food has become the most prevalent type of material hardship for families with young children.

“We moved and our housing costs have doubled. We had to move because we needed more space and to be closer to our son’s school and childcare options for our daughter plus we wanted to be in a more diverse area. But the cost of living is so expensive, and gas is so high. I’m worried about handling the increased costs because our income has not increased.
Parent from Michigan in July 2022

Trend of material hardship among families with young children



Trend of material hardship by type of basic needs



HIGHER HOUSEHOLD INCOME HAS NOT FULLY PROTECTED FAMILIES FROM MATERIAL HARDSHIP

When comparing families' material hardship experiences across different income levels, lower-income households (below 200% of the federal poverty level; FPL) have continuously reported higher hardship rates than middle- (between 200% and 400% FPL) and higher- (above 400% FPL) income families.

In recent months, two out of three lower-income families with young children indicated that they were facing material hardship.

For middle- and higher-income households, there has been a steady increase in rates of material hardship since March 2022, which for middle-income households reached 39% in August 2022 and, for higher-income households, 17% in July 2022. This finding suggests that household income does not fully represent families' experiences of financial difficulties and does not provide a complete picture of childhood poverty. Children in middle- to higher-income households may still experience material hardship.

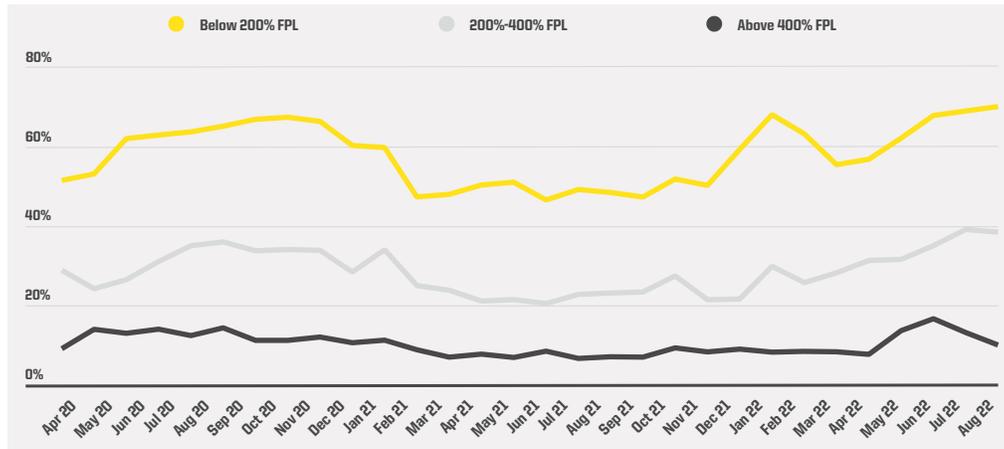
“[Our biggest challenge is] Being a one job household due to daycare being so expensive and our rent going up 300 dollars in one year.

Parent from North Carolina in July 2022

“The biggest challenge is electricity. It is so hot where we live, and all the month of June had record highs. We keep our thermostat high but our AC struggles to keep up and the bill keeps going up anyway. I’m afraid that if it gets hotter, our AC unit may give out and we cannot afford another one. A couple of years ago, we could not keep up with the summer electric bill and I’m scared it may happen again.

Parent from Texas in July 2022

Trend of material hardship by household income levels



“Choosing which foods to buy and how much we buy. We have to buy cheaper, lower quality foods more often. Buying less food and household items or not at all if necessary.
Parent
in August 2022

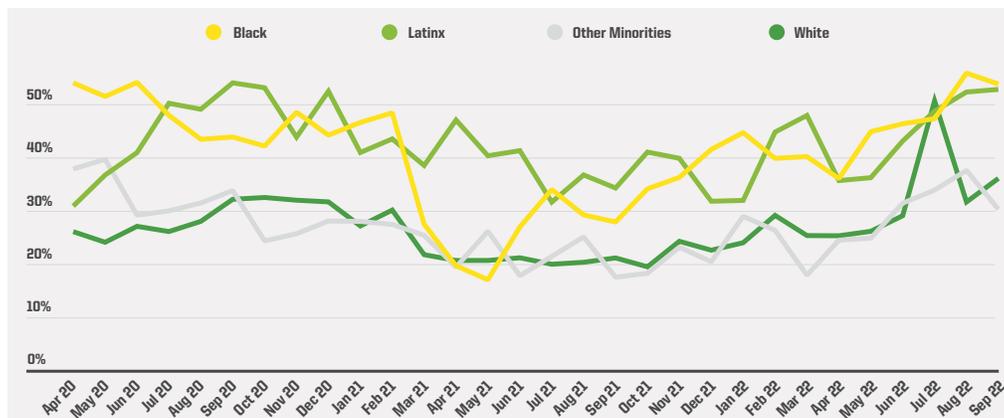
THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC, THERE HAVE BEEN DIFFERENCES IN THE EXPERIENCES OF MATERIAL HARDSHIP BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

Aligned with previous reports, Black and Hispanic/Latinx families have consistently reported significantly higher rates of material hardship than white households throughout our investigation. This is true across all types of basic needs.

For Black, Latinx and other minorities, increases in material hardship started earlier than for other families.

Although white families experienced sharp increases in hardship beginning in July 2022, this trend began three months earlier (March/April 2022) for Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and other minority households. This earlier onset of hardship increases may be attributed to higher pre-existing levels of financial insecurity, such as more unpaid debt and overdue bills and employment instabilities.

Trend of material hardship by race/ethnicity



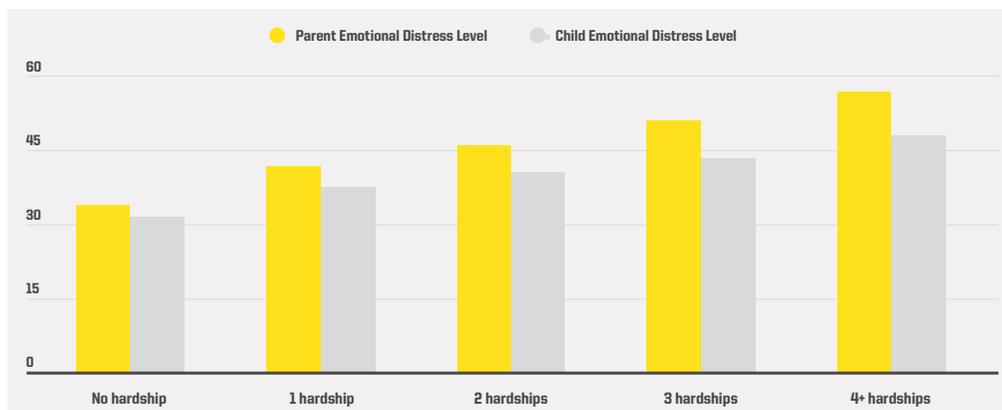
EXPERIENCES OF MATERIAL HARDSHIP CONTINUE TO AFFECT PARENT AND CHILD EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

RAPID has consistently found evidence of a chain reaction of material hardship, where increases in material hardship are associated with increases in parents' emotional distress (a composite of parent depression, anxiety, loneliness, and stress symptoms) and subsequent child emotional distress (a composite

of child fearfulness/anxiety). This chain reaction has persisted throughout the course of our investigation.

As material hardship has dramatically increased over the past several months, parents and young children may also experience substantial declines in emotional well-being.

Association between material hardship and emotional distress*



*

We ask parents about their experiences with four symptoms of emotional distress: stress, loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Responses for each symptom were averaged to create a single score and transformed to a range of 0-100 for each parent. Child emotional distress is calculated in the same manner.

CONCLUSION

Families with young children are experiencing concerning and increasing difficulty in affording basic needs. Due to historical structural inequalities, Black, Latinx, and lower-income families have consistently reported higher hardship levels and experienced an earlier onset of increased hardship this year. However, white and middle-to-higher income households also experienced substantial increases in material hardship in recent months.

RAPID data provide critical context to the experience of families with young children in America and, with the NYT article, provide a fuller picture of child poverty in this country. The decline reported by NYT represents progress, but also shows that there is considerable work ahead. A greater sense of collective responsibility and expanded government support are needed to assure the well-being of families with young children and bring an end to child poverty in this country.

ABOUT THE RAPID PROJECT

Data presented in this fact sheet are based on RAPID household surveys. Analyses are based on responses collected from 15,556 caregivers between April 2020 and September 2022. These caregivers represent a range of voices: 9.1% are Black/African American, 13.8% are Latinx, and 34.9% live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. Proportions/percentages are calculated based on the item-level response rates, not on the total sample. 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](#).

RAPID is under the direction of Philip Fisher, PhD, Director of the Center on Early Childhood at Stanford University

1,000

surveyed monthly

110

surveys

15,000+

households

50

US states

