

PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN ARE CONCERNED ABOUT ACCESS TO FOOD

Since April 2020, we have been using the RAPID Survey Project to ask families with young children about their ability to meet basic needs. In mid-2022, we saw a rise in the number of parents reporting at least one material hardship. RAPID measures material hardship by asking parents if they are experiencing difficulty paying for basic needs, such as food, housing, utilities, child care, healthcare, and wellness activities.



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Along with the overall rise in material hardship, we saw a specific increase in the number of families experiencing difficulty accessing food. Families' food hardships have persisted, and in 2024, more than one in five families reported difficulty accessing food.

To better understand these experiences of hardship and difficulty accessing food, we expand on these findings in this fact sheet by exploring where families are purchasing groceries and looking at differences in food access by income level and residential location.

LOWER-INCOME FAMILIES REPORT LESS ACCESS TO GROCERY SOURCES

In March 2023, RAPID asked parents with young children nationally about the types of stores they visit regularly (every two weeks or more often) to purchase groceries for their family. The question asked: In the past month, how often did someone in your household buy groceries from each of the following sources? Parents could select more than one type of store in their response and indicated the frequency that they bought food from that source.

Convenience stores and pharmacies serve as grocery sources for many families, and for lower-income families in particular. More than one in three (36%) lower-income families reported regularly purchasing groceries from convenience stores,

compared to 22% of middle-to-higher-income families. Nearly a quarter of lower-income families (24%) reported regularly purchasing groceries from pharmacies, compared to 17% of middle-to-higher-income families.

Lower-income families were also less likely than middle-to-higher-income families to report having easy access (defined as a short walk or drive from home) to places to buy groceries.

These findings support other research that has shown that lower-income families have more limited access to affordable, nutritious food and rely more on smaller neighborhood stores that may not carry healthy foods or may offer healthy foods at higher prices.

“My biggest concern at the moment is the availability of nutritious food.”

Parent in California

“[My biggest challenge is] making ends meet and having what we need. Also, affording food. Food stamps aren't lasting for the month anymore and the food pantry is too far away to afford gas to get there.”

Parent in Pennsylvania

“Our family income has decreased, and we can't meet the daily expenses of the family. Sometimes we can only eat two times a day and my children don't have enough to eat.”

Parent in California

FAMILIES LIVING IN RURAL AREAS REPORT LOWER ACCESS TO GROCERY SOURCES

RAPID surveys include questions about where families live to better understand how families' experiences differ across the country. Families living in rural areas reported much lower access to supermarkets (44%) than families in urban areas (81%).

Notably, rural and urban parents also differed based on income levels: nearly half (49%) of the rural families who participated in the survey were lower

income, which was higher than the proportion of lower-income families in urban areas (36%).

Other research shows that rural families experience higher rates of hunger than families living in other areas. Taken with the findings about access to grocery stores, the data show that families who are struggling the most to pay for food also have the lowest access to grocery sources.

"I live in a rural area with not much access to quality food."

Parent in Arizona

"We live in a rural area where transportation is a must in order to do basic things like getting to school, work, and even the grocery store."

Parent in Hawaii

MANY PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN ARE CONCERNED ABOUT GETTING FOOD FOR THEIR FAMILIES

Since RAPID launched in 2020, we have asked parents this open-ended question: What are the biggest challenges and concerns for you and your family right now?

Using Structural Topic Modeling, an innovative approach to analyzing parents' answers to open-ended questions, we identified the most common themes in parents' responses related to food access, and examined how these themes are different between demographic groups.

We found that parents frequently raised concerns about food access. Among the most prevalent concerns about food access were the high cost of food, difficulty affording food, and concerns about food programs ending.

Lower-income families were more likely than middle- and higher-income families to raise these food-related concerns.

Topics extracted from parents' open-ended responses related to food experiences, by topic prevalence:

- High cost of food
- Difficulty affording food
- Concerns about losing food benefits
- Concerns about food quality and nutrition

"Cost of food, gas rising, tightened the budget. Harder to find packs of pull-ups and wipes near our rural home without paying more."

Parent in Illinois

CONCLUSION

Families with young children are experiencing hunger and facing limited options of where to get food. Lower-income families and families living in rural areas are most likely to experience hunger and food hardship and have limited access to grocery sources.

Having stable and routine access to healthy, nutritious foods is essential to healthy early childhood development. Supporting families with young children to consistently meet basic needs, like food, can improve families' economic circumstances as well as the physical health and emotional well-being of parents and young children.

A previous RAPID fact sheet reported that rates of food hardship were lowest when federal food-related programs and policies were in place, such as expanded SNAP and WIC benefits, paused work requirements for food benefits, and provided universal free school meals. RAPID data showed that when the policies ended in 2022, hunger and material hardship rates began to increase. This suggests that protections like these addressed the cost and access factors that contributed to hardship and hunger and underscores the importance of continuing these measures to support the development that is so essential in early childhood.

“[My biggest challenge is] having enough food for the entire month without having to get canned food from neighbors or the county food banks.

Parent in Maryland

“We starve ourselves so our children can eat properly.”

Parent in Indiana

“I don’t have enough food to last me until my next paycheck, and I don’t have money to buy more food.”

Parent in California

“The food we have stored up won’t last forever, and we will go hungry at some point.”

Parent in Texas

ABOUT THE RAPID PROJECT

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

Data presented in this fact sheet are based on RAPID parent surveys. Analyses on food access are based on responses collected from 820 parents during March 2023. These parents represent a range of voices: 14% are Black, 18% are Latinx, and 40% live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. In addition, Structural Topic Modeling analyses are based on open-ended survey responses collected from 1,395 parents between April 2020 and September 2023, which includes a diverse sample of 11% Black, 13% Latinx, and 55% lower-income households. Proportions/percentages are calculated based on the item-level response rates, not on the total sample. The data for these analyses are not weighted.

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](#).

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.

7,000+

Providers

20,000+

Households

50

US States

