

PARENTS ON STRUGGLES WITH WELL-BEING AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Parents and their children are feeling anxious, depressed, lonely, stressed, burnt out, and unable to cope.

In our [previous factsheet](#), we evaluated parents' open-ended responses to the question, "what is challenging during the pandemic for your family?" Here, we look more closely at what parents have said about their struggles with well-being and emotional distress.



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We employed Structural Topic Modeling to analyze 38,171 parent responses collected since April of 2020. This approach allowed us to go beyond numeric survey responses (eg, those with yes/no answers or ratings on 15 scales) and look at which themes emerged when parents were given the chance to describe their families' challenges in their own words.

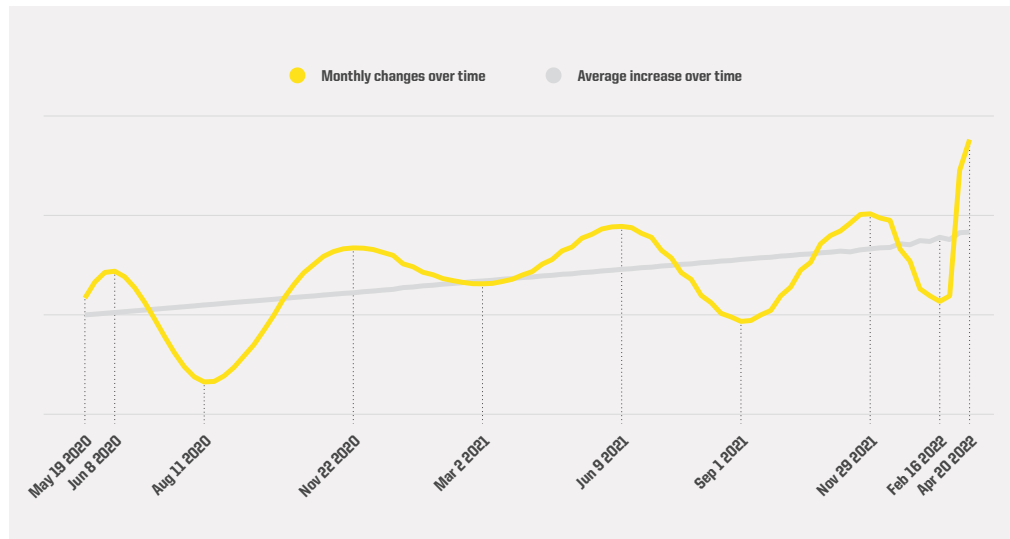
Common themes that emerged from parents' descriptions of their biggest challenges included balancing work and child care, maintaining steady employment, social isolation, and paying bills. In addition, challenges with well-being and emotional distress were described as a challenge more consistently than any other topic. In fact, struggling with well-being and emotional distress was mentioned as a top 3 challenge overall

(42% of families) and within every demographic group—high income, lower income, White, Black, and Latinx (at least a third of families in each subgroup).

These data made it clear that parents and their children are feeling anxious, depressed, lonely, stressed, burnt out, and unable to cope. Here we take a closer look at how parents described their challenges with well-being and emotional distress during the pandemic. In addition, the Structural Topic Modeling method allowed us to determine how these concerns changed over time, between our early surveys in spring of 2020 and our most recent surveys. We provide examples of parents' own words that show just how challenging struggles with well-being and emotional distress have been, and continue to be, for families with young children during the pandemic.

CHALLENGES WITH WELL-BEING AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS ARE GETTING WORSE

Persistence of struggles with well-being and emotional distress throughout the pandemic*



Struggling with well-being and emotional distress was mentioned as a top 3 challenge overall (42% of families) and within every demographic group—high income, lower income, White, Black, and Latinx (at least a third of families in each subgroup).

* Number of respondents varied at each time point.

- Families have experienced challenges with well-being and emotional distress throughout the pandemic. Their descriptions of these struggles have varied over the past two years but we have seen a general increase over time. Challenges with well-being and emotional distress are getting worse.
- Notably, in summer 2022, families reported challenges with well-being and emotional distress more than at any other point in the pandemic.

PARENTS' STRUGGLES WITH WELL-BEING AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Parents' open-ended descriptions of their families' struggles with well-being and emotional distress were detailed and diverse. Below are some of the responses from parents who talked about these struggles when we asked about their family's biggest challenge during the pandemic.

"Honestly, right now my husband's mental health is my biggest concern. He has a very stressful career... and he will not see help for his depression and anxiety. His moods impact the moods of the whole household and now I am concerned he will lose his current job. It's not all related to the pandemic, but his anxiety sure is worse since it started. He really worries about our son getting sick. He is too young to be vaccinated but is otherwise healthy. We do as much as we can to protect him and teach him good habits. Every time my husband has a tickle in his throat, he worries he has COVID even though he is vaccinated himself.. It has been exhausting worrying for him, trying to help him, and trying to be the positive presence in our home." **Parent**

"We are mentally burned out in all aspects of our lives—as employees, parents, partners. Our marriage is struggling because there is nothing left to give at the end of the day. If it weren't for my student loans, I would leave the workforce. Our family can't continue to survive under these conditions." **Parent in Tennessee**

"I think our biggest challenge especially for me is having to forgo working (or working odd hours) in order to make the pandemic "new normal" work for our family. This has meant loneliness and burnout. And me being burned out as the primary parent means that I'm not the parent I should be for them. There's just a lack of options for childcare and they're expensive. And we don't have any spare money to go enjoy some free time." **Parent in Oregon**

"I struggle to pay off debts. My credit is [not good] and I have been working over the past few years to fix it to no avail. I am able to pay rent each month, but have come to realize I will never be a home owner due to not being able to

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save for a down payment. I struggle when emergencies come up like my car troubles and have no way to fund repairs. I work one full time and two part time jobs to stay afloat and I am getting burnt out without aid.” **Parent in New Jersey**

“[Our biggest concern is] burnout and exhaustion. I don’t feel like I’m a good parent because I’m just annoyed and irritable all the time. All the activities I used to do for self-care are unsafe. I’m sad for all the things we want to be able to provide my kids but that we can’t because of fear of exposure.” **Parent in Maine**

“[My biggest concern is] my husband lost his job, which is what we used to cover the cost of childcare. However, he can’t handle being the primary childcare provider for our 2 kids

so it’s extremely stressful in our household. Additionally, COVID has intensified the depression & anxiety he was experiencing pre-COVID, making it very difficult to live comfortably in the same house with him 24/7. Counseling is too expensive, so we’re simply trying to cope on our own. I’m worried how that’s affecting so many things, but most critically the development and security of our kids.” **Parent in Michigan**

“It is extremely hard and the burnout is even harder. Managing work and a family seems almost impossible. Coming home just to cook and clean but knowing that without the job you would struggle financially.” **Parent in California**

“[I am] just burnt out and feel like I don’t have energy to be present for my child.” **Parent in Minnesota**

SUMMARY

- When parents with young children were asked to describe their biggest challenges related to the pandemic, struggles with well-being and emotional distress were mentioned more consistently than any other topic across families overall and across families grouped by income and race.
- More than two years into the pandemic, struggles with well-being and emotional distress continue to be a big challenge for families, and they are getting worse. More families

are describing these struggles now than at any other time since the pandemic began.

- From parents’ own words, it is clear that families with young children are continuing to suffer from the challenges of the pandemic. Even as some aspects of daily life improve (eg, restrictions, employment opportunities), challenges with well-being and emotional distress persist and are continuing to get worse with time.

Families with young children are continuing to suffer from the challenges of the pandemic.

ABOUT THE RAPID PROJECT

Data presented in this fact sheet are based on RAPID household surveys. Analyses are based on 38,171 valid responses from 9,6333 caregivers between April 2020 and April 2022. These caregivers represent a range of voices: 8.82% are Black/African American, 15.23% are Latinx, and 36.42% 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

104

surveys

17,000+

households

50

US states

