

# CALIFORNIA PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN STRUGGLE TO PAY FOR BASIC NEEDS

## California Voices

The RAPID-California Voices Project has heard from more than 3,000 households across the state so far. This fact sheet includes data from monthly survey responses from November 2022 to May 2023.

Since April 2020, RAPID has been listening to parents and caregivers of young children across the U.S., asking about their economic circumstances, well-being, use of child care and more. Now the RAPID-California Voices Project is shining a light on how parents and caregivers are faring in the Golden State. Initiated in November 2022, this multi-year, statewide survey of households with young children aims to better understand the needs of families, amplify parent voices, and promote data- and parent-informed policies and programs.



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In this first fact sheet, we focus on the data we have gathered so far on parents' experiences of material hardship, their

well-being, and awareness and likelihood of using the state's new transitional kindergarten program.

# HALF OF CALIFORNIA PARENTS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN ARE HAVING DIFFICULTY PAYING FOR BASIC NEEDS

From late 2022 to early 2023, 50% of households surveyed said they were having trouble affording at least one of the following: food, housing, utilities, child care, healthcare, or well-being needs, such as mental health services. Housing was the most prevalent hardship, with twenty-five percent of California families having difficulty paying for housing (both rent and mortgage). One in five reported difficulties paying for healthcare, food, child care, and utilities, respectively.

These numbers parallel national-level data. In RAPID's national survey of

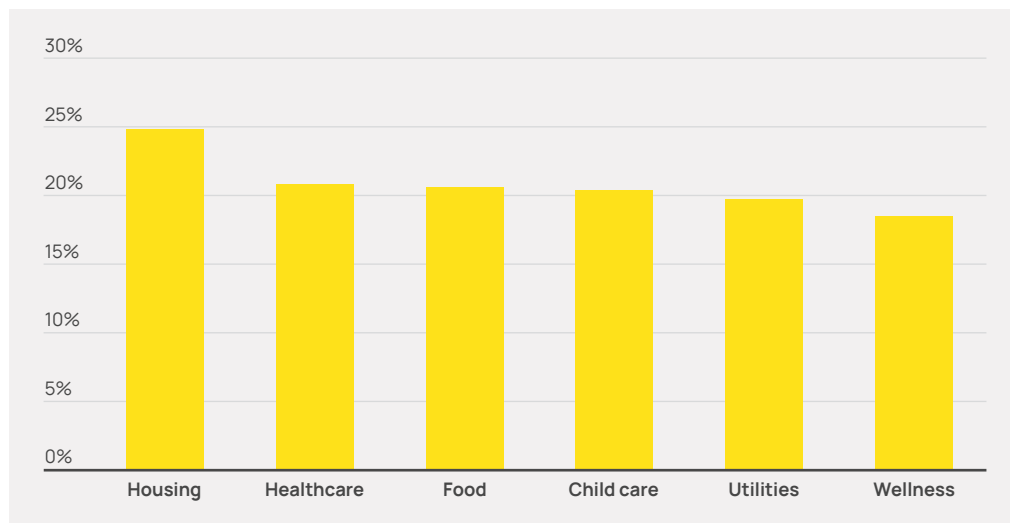
households with young children, parents reported rising levels of material hardship throughout 2022. The hardship rate peaked in December 2022, when 47% of households reported difficulty paying for at least one basic need. The national hardship rate has stabilized but remains high, with more than 1 in 3 households nationally reporting hardship by April 2023.

Hardship experiences are not distributed equally across California households with young children. For example, households in rural areas are experiencing significantly higher rates of hardship than urban areas of the state.

**“Child care alone is like another mortgage payment. Please help us working parents. We deserve help and to live without stressing if I have food on the table or if I will have enough for child care on top of other bills.”**

Parent in Contra Costa County

Percent of parents who reported hardship, by type of basic need



**“Reliable, quality, affordable child care (including ideas for what to do when they have mild sicknesses but can't go to school) would relieve major stressors in our family. This would positively impact our work and home lives immensely.”**

Parent in San Luis Obispo County

About 49% of families living in California's urban areas reported material hardship, compared to 79% of families living in rural areas or small towns. Similarly, lower-income households at or below 400% of the federal poverty level (67% vs 44%) were also more likely to experience material hardship.

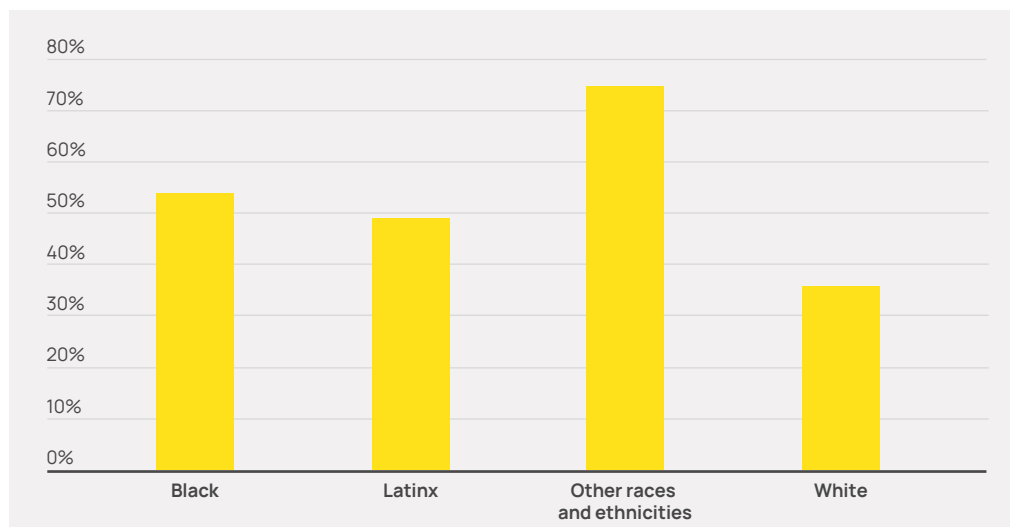
Seventy-five percent of families of other races and ethnicities, which include Asian, Middle Eastern/West Asian/North African, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Multi-Race, experienced material hardship. Furthermore, white parents were the least likely to experience material hardship, followed by Latinx and Black households.

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**“[The biggest challenge right now is] adjusting to being a working parent [and] finding affordable, high-quality child care.”**

Parent in LA County

Material hardship rate among California parents, by race and ethnicity




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## 75% OF PARENTS SURVEYED REPORTED EXPERIENCES OF EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

Experiencing material hardship can lead to pressure on emotional well-being. When a parent's emotional well-being declines, it can directly affect the well-being of children in their care. Research shows that being exposed to chronic stress in early childhood can negatively affect biological and socioemotional development. When caregivers are stressed and burned out, it can become much more difficult to buffer their children from that stress. Overall, three in four parents reported experiences of emotional distress.\*

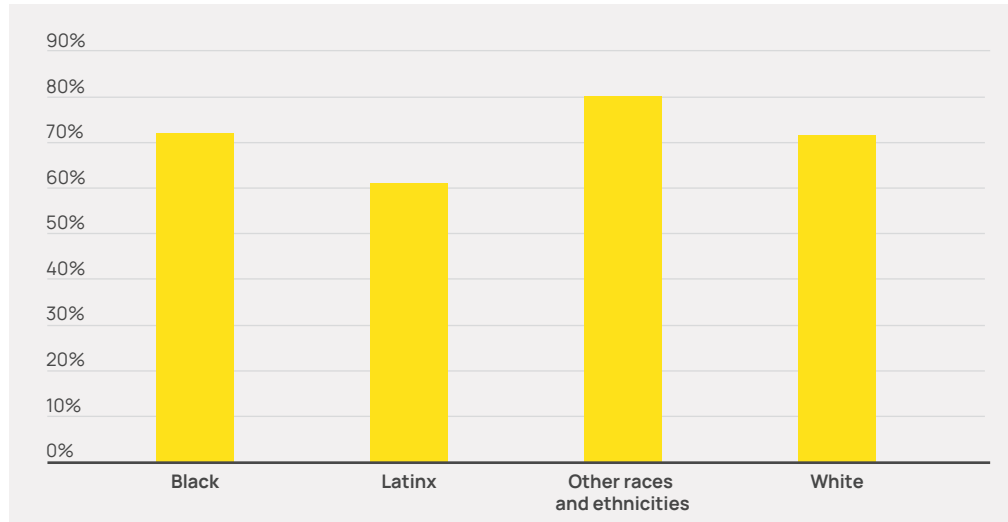
Seventy-one percent of parents in lower-income households reported emotional distress, compared to 65% of parents in moderate- to-higher-income households.

The rate of emotional distress was particularly high (80%) for families in the other races and ethnicities group, which includes Asian, Middle Eastern/West Asian/North African, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Seventy-two percent of both Black and white parents reported emotional distress.

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\* Parent emotional distress is measured as a composite of depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness symptoms.

Percent of parents who reported emotional distress, by race and ethnicity




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**“[My] kids [are] not getting everything they need from a learning standpoint.”**

Parent in San Bernardino County

## 75% OF PARENTS REPORTED THEIR CHILDREN ARE EXPERIENCING EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

When parents feel emotional distress, it can filter down and affect a child's well-being. In fact, RAPID has consistently found evidence of a chain reaction of hardship, where increases in material hardship are associated with increases in parents' emotional distress which are, in turn, associated with increases in child emotional distress.

In children, internalized emotional distress can look like fearfulness and anxiety,

and externalized emotional distress can look like fussiness and defiance. RAPID calculates a child emotional distress score based on a composite of those reported behaviors.

Overall, 75% of parents indicated their children were experiencing emotional distress. Fifty-nine percent of parents reported their children's fussiness/defiance symptoms, and 46% of parents reported child fear/anxiety symptoms.

# THE MAJORITY OF PARENTS ARE AWARE OF CALIFORNIA'S TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN

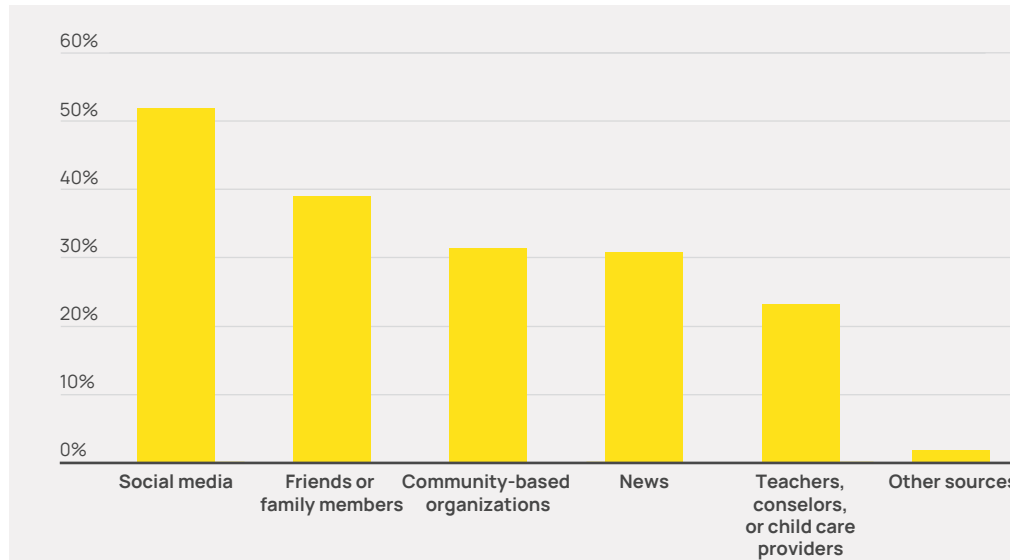
In 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom announced a statewide initiative to expand transitional kindergarten (TK) to all four-year-olds. It's considered to be the largest universal preschool program in the U.S., and free to all students regardless of income.

Overall, 83% of parents surveyed had heard about California's TK program and, among those who had heard about the program, the vast majority (90%), said they were likely to enroll their children.

Overall, more than half of households that had heard of the program found out about it through social media (52%), followed by a friend or family member (39%), a community-based organization (31%), and the news (31%).

Lower-income families were more likely to have heard about TK through a friend or a family member, and moderate and higher-income families were more likely to have heard about it through social

How parents heard about TK, by source



But there were variations in these numbers between demographic groups. Only 62% of lower-income households had heard of the state's TK program, compared to 91% of moderate- and higher- income households.

media. Black and Latinx families were also most likely to hear about TK from a friend or family member.

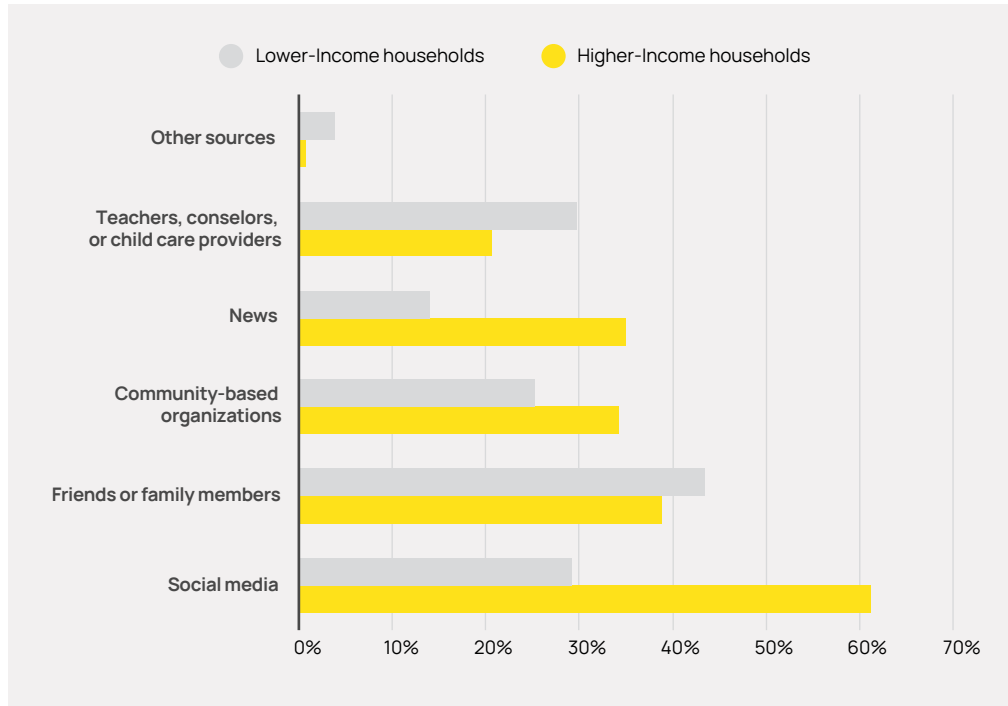
**“[What would help most right now is if] my child can enter preschool and kindergarten as soon as possible, and there is no long waiting list, so I can concentrate more on my work.”**

Parent in Mariposa County

**“I need full-day kindergarten. I need smaller class sizes for when my children start school. Thirty-one children in kindergarten, first, and second is too many as their teachers are trying to build the foundation of their education...”**

Parent in Merced County

How parents heard about TK, by income level



## THE FUTURE OF THE RAPID-CALIFORNIA VOICES PROJECT

RAPID will continue to field monthly surveys of parents and caregivers across California through June 2025. During this time, we will continue to gather and share information and parent voices on a range of topics, including material hardship, well-being,

and experiences with California's early childhood policies and programs. There are also plans to report more specific data filtered by geographic location, including rural vs urban, and children's ages (0-3 and 4-5).

# ABOUT THE RAPID-CA VOICES PROJECT

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

The RAPID-California Voices Project aims to survey 10,000 households with young children across the state from 2022-2025. The surveys are designed to listen to caregivers of young children on topics such as families' economic circumstances, adult and child emotional well-being, access to and use of child care and other supports and services, as well as areas of resiliency. RAPID will regularly provide relevant data to amplify the voices of caregivers and the experiences of young children from across the state.

RAPID will work alongside community organizations to amplify parent voices, enhance existing, community-led efforts to support adults in the lives of young

children, and make data on California family experiences widely accessible to advocates, researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and parents themselves.

Data presented in this fact sheet are based on the RAPID-CA surveys. Analyses are based on responses collected from 3,444 caregivers between November 2022 and May 2023.

These caregiver voices represent: 12.59% Black and African American, 21.08% Latinx, 9.91% other racial/ethnic groups, and 20.03% live at or below 400% federal poverty level. Percentages are calculated based on the item-level response rates, not the total sample.

