

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: FAMILIES' BIGGEST CHALLENGES DURING THE PANDEMIC

In each of our previous fact sheets, we have provided quotes directly from caregivers about their experiences, and now we are taking a closer look at their words to see what patterns emerge.

In every RAPID survey, we ask parents to provide written answers to open-ended questions about their experiences with the pandemic. Participants have been eager to share their thoughts—we have received over 170,000 written answers to these questions.



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In this fact sheet, we report on an innovative approach to analyzing these open-ended responses, called

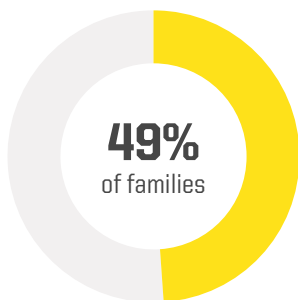
Structural Topic Modeling. This approach allows us to identify the most commonly occurring themes in the responses, and to examine how these themes vary in different demographic groups. Below are the topics within which caregivers have described their families' biggest challenges during the pandemic, along with quotes showing examples of each topic.

BIGGEST CHALLENGES OF THE PANDEMIC FOR RAPID FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Caregivers answered the following open-ended question: **What are the biggest challenges and concerns for you and your family right now?** More than 20 topics emerged from their written responses.

Families' Top 3 Challenges reported across all caregivers:

1 Caregivers struggle to balance work and child care



“The biggest concern is balancing work and childcare when it comes to quarantine guidance for exposure or illness. My kids are too young for masks and vaccines, but I don’t

have enough PTO to stay home for 10-14 days for a quarantine.”
Parent in Wisconsin

“[Our biggest concern is] childcare. Balancing increased work hours with lack of childcare. Getting any kind of a break from the stress.”
Parent in Oregon

“[We] live with a constant anxiety that daycare will close due to an outbreak and I’ll have no backup care, as no one wants to watch a potentially exposed child... It’s very difficult.”
Parent in New York

“I work [for] DoorDash so I have to bring my children with me. I often worry about how bringing them with me to work affects them but I don’t have a choice.”
Parent in Tennessee

“I left my job because I just couldn’t take it anymore—it felt like too much on top of everything else that was happening with the kids...”

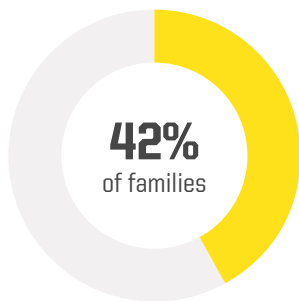
Caregivers answered the following open-ended question: **What are the biggest challenges and concerns for you and your family right now?**

and having them constantly sent home.” **Parent in Maine**

“We need access to affordable childcare. I want to work. There are lots of jobs, but they all pay \$13-\$15 and that just is not worth it when I would have to pay for childcare.”

Parent in Maryland

2 Caregivers struggle with well-being and emotional distress



“I have been under a lot of psychological stress recently, depressed and anxious, and I want to seek the help of a psychiatrist.” **Parent in California**

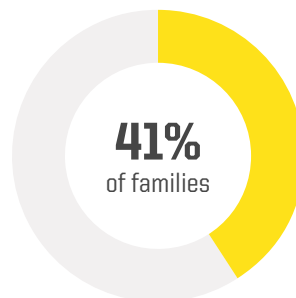
“[My biggest concern is] juggling the overwhelming feelings of needy small children, a depressed, angry husband, and a crazy world of racial and environmental injustice and wars.” **Parent in California**

“My husband and I are an island. We can’t find anyone who’s able to babysit even occasionally, we’re getting more and more stressed with the extreme spike in energy costs, and we’re so burnt out but can’t get regular medical attention for mental health needs.” **Parent in Maine**

“[Our biggest concern is] dealing with our mental health. I have no PTO because I had to use it all for my maternity leave. I have postpartum depression and anxiety but don’t have the time nor the money to deal with it properly.” **Parent in Ohio**

“Parents are drowning. We are burnt out. My state is ending our mask mandate before my child is vaccine eligible. Parents of children under 5 feel abandoned.” **Parent in Connecticut**

3 Caregivers struggle with finding stable employment



“Trying to find time to apply for jobs while taking care of our 1-year-old is challenging. Cost of living is so high that my husband’s salary plus my unemployment won’t cover all of our expenses.” **Parent in Illinois**

“I can’t really work since my oldest child gets out of school early and it’s hard to find a job who offers work from 9am-1pm.” **Parent in California**

“I am looking for work, but my options are limited because we do not have family or friends nearby and we can’t afford childcare.” **Parent in Oklahoma**

“[My biggest concern is] finding stable employment that will pay what is needed to afford ongoing

childcare and housing as cost of living continues to skyrocket.”
Parent in Georgia

BIGGEST CHALLENGES BY INCOME AND RACIAL/ETHNIC SUBGROUPS

Across families of different income levels and races/ethnicities, we saw both similarities and differences in how caregivers described their challenges during the pandemic.

Struggling with well-being and emotional distress was the most consistently described challenge for families across all demographic groups. Over a third of the families of every income level and race/ethnicity described struggles with well-being and emotional distress as one of their biggest challenges of the pandemic.

White, Latinx, and higher income families were also similar in their descriptions of challenges with balancing work and child care. Both White and higher-income families described challenges with social isolation, while Latinx families reported difficulty getting specialized supports for their children.

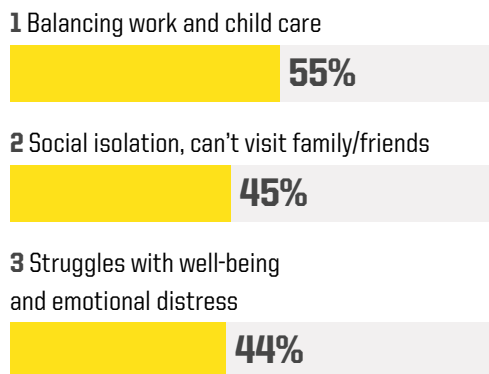
Lower-income and Black families described several financial-related struggles—difficulty paying for basic needs and finding stable employment, while Black families

in particular frequently noted that they were struggling with staying safe and happy.

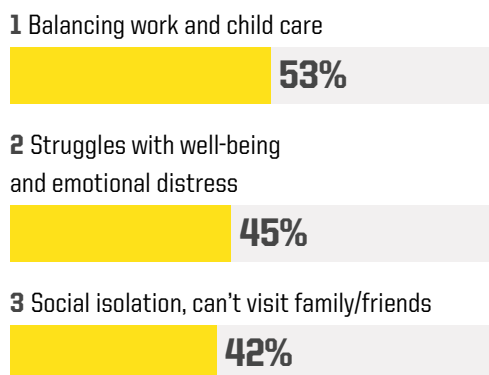
Over a third of the families of every income level and race/ethnicity described struggles with well-being and emotional distress as one of their biggest challenges of the pandemic.

Top 3 challenges by income and ethnicity

Higher income



White



“The isolation has made it lonely and hard to manage emotionally and mentally. My spouse and I are both under a high amount of stress, and I worry about how that affects our daughter.” **Parent in Oklahoma**

Latinx

1 Balancing work and child care



2 Struggles with well-being and emotional distress



3 Difficulty getting children support, therapy, and special-need services



Lower income

1 Can't pay bills/afford basic needs



2 Struggles with well-being and emotional distress



3 Difficulty paying rent, bills, healthcare



“[I] found out that my oldest child needs supportive services to help with development from the regional center in my community. They expect me to be available 5 days a week for 2 hours a day during business days and hours only. I fear that I’m letting my son down

and not helping him develop if I’m unable to accommodate his services with my work schedule.”

Parent in California

“[Our biggest concern is] money. It all comes down to money. Constantly worrying if our bills and basic needs will be met is overwhelming and crippling.”

Parent in West Virginia

“[Our biggest concern is] being able to continue paying as much as I currently do to barely survive—rent, food, basic necessities. I don’t have consistent childcare so I worry that my performance at work is slipping and I’m at risk of losing my job, which is the only thing supporting us right now. Including providing healthcare benefits for me and my children.” **Parent in California**

Black

1 Struggles with well-being and emotional distress



2 Challenges finding stable employment



3 Trying to stay safe and happy



“[Our biggest concern is] keeping the girls involved and advancing in their social and academic skills. Trying to keep them happy without ever really going anywhere or “adventuring” like we did before COVID-19.”

Parent in North Carolina

Black families in particular frequently noted that they were struggling with staying safe and happy.

SUMMARY

- Parents and other caregivers with young children used their own words to describe the challenges that they have been experiencing as a result of the pandemic.
- The top 3 challenges overall were balancing work and childcare, struggles with wellbeing and emotional distress, and challenges finding stable employment.
- We saw additional challenges frequently described when we looked within specific income and racial/ethnic groups, including those related to finances and paying for basic needs; social isolation; getting support, therapy, and special-need services for children; and staying happy and safe.
- Families of all income levels and race/ethnicities described struggles with well-being and emotional distress as a top challenge during the pandemic. In a follow-up report, we will take a more detailed look at how caregivers have used their own words to describe their difficulties with well-being and emotional distress as well as how this challenge has changed and persisted over time.

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 9,633 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

