

Wellness Check: Material Hardship and Psychological Distress among Families with Infants and Toddlers

Findings from the Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey

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Families raising infants and toddlers experience singular joys—and unique challenges. Even against a backdrop of an improving economy and low unemployment rate, many new parents struggle to pay for basic expenses, find affordable child care, and balance work with family responsibilities.

We turned to data from the Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey to understand the extent to which parents of young children experience material hardship and psychological distress, both of which can adversely affect health and development. This nationally representative survey of adults ages 18 to 64 was conducted in December 2017/January 2018 and again one year later.

Among parents of children younger than 3, the survey found the following:

More than 4 in 10 (44.3 percent) reported at least one form of material hardship,¹ meaning they had difficulties paying or were unable to pay for food, medical care, housing expenses, or utilities in the past year.

Nearly 3 in 10 reported medical hardship, and more than a quarter reported food insecurity.

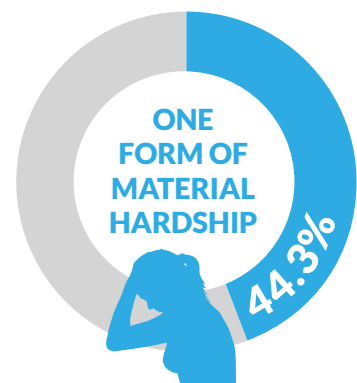
These realities present challenges for children's healthy development. Infants and toddlers living in food-insecure households may not receive the specific nutrition young children need. Parents who defer medical care because of cost for themselves or other family members put infants and toddlers, whose immune systems are developing, at risk. Difficulties paying rent or utilities may lead to residential instability and unsafe home environments.

Material Hardship and Serious Psychological Distress

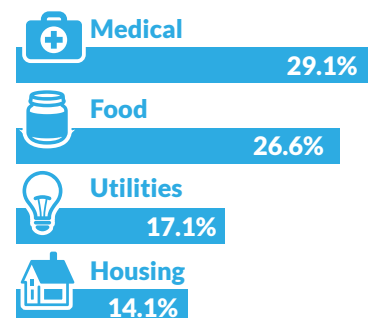
Many families who struggle to make ends meet experience serious psychological distress.² Parents experiencing both material hardship and psychological distress may be challenged to provide infants and toddlers with nurturing environments, enriching learning experiences, and positive parenting.

The first 1,000 days of an infant's life, between conception and his or her second birthday, are a critical period for healthy brain and immune system development.

PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN REPORTING...



TYPES OF HARDSHIP

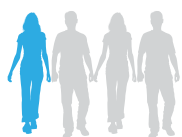


Among parents of children younger than 3 who experienced material hardship, the survey found the following:



21.1%

One in five reported experiencing serious psychological distress.



26.5%

About one in four low-income parents reported experiencing serious psychological distress.³

Exposure to parental psychological distress, particularly if it leads to long-term mental health issues, can disrupt a child's brain development, specifically the neural pathways that determine how a child copes with stressful events. Parental depression is a major risk factor for child maltreatment and neglect, which lead to poor academic and social outcomes for children.

How Can Policymakers Support New Parents?

New parents, particularly those with limited incomes, need effective supports to mitigate the harmful effects of material hardship and psychological distress on themselves and their children. Here are steps that policymakers can take:



Paid Leave

Provide options for paid leave to help parents maintain their income after the birth of a child.



Child Care

Expand child care assistance to help parents pay for the high cost of infant/toddler care and allow them to return to work and maintain their earnings.



Parental Mental Health

Provide screenings for anxiety and depression for pregnant women and new parents and expand access to mental health services.



Social Safety Net

Ensure access to Medicaid/the Children's Health Insurance Program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, and housing and utility assistance programs to help families meet basic needs.



Home Visiting

Scale up evidence-based home visiting programs that have demonstrated positive impacts on maternal mental and physical health and the quality of the home environment.

Additional Reading

The Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey

Urban Institute <https://urban.is/2HmcOQa>

Excessive Stress Disrupts the Architecture of the Developing Brain: Working Paper 3

Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, National Scientific Council on the Developing Child <https://bit.ly/2BVD8LS>

The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development: A Research Synthesis

Heather Sandstrom and Sandra Huerta, Urban Institute <https://urban.is/2UHTmi7>

What Explains the Widespread Material Hardship among Low-Income Families with Children?

Michael Karpman, Dulce Gonzalez, Stephen Zuckerman, Gina Adams, Urban Institute <https://urban.is/2A8HBdj>

¹ Total sample size of parents living with children: parents with children under age 3 surveyed in December 2017/January 2018 or December 2018/January 2019 was 1,131. Some respondents participated in both rounds of the survey.

² The Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey defines respondents experiencing "serious psychological distress" as those who score high on the Kessler six-item psychological distress scale. The module asks respondents whether they frequently or constantly feel nervous, hopeless, restless, worthless, "so sad that nothing could cheer them up," and/or that "everything was an effort." Respondents rate each item on a four-point frequency scale. Respondents who score 13 to 24 points are considered to have "serious psychological distress." Psychological distress is reported at higher rates in the Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, which may owe to the survey mode. See this source for more details: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/well-being-and-basic-needs-survey>.

³ "Low income" is below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.