

Four years of listening to caregiver voices shows increasing economic hardship and emotional distress among those providing child care to young children

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Those who care for young children, in homes and in centers, provide critical support for families and for overall child development. Yet despite the complexity and importance of their work, these essential workers face serious challenges, including chronically low wages, high stress, and limited professional support. Child care providers make up a diverse segment of the early care workforce, with varying needs, interests, and access to resources.

Since April 2020, RAPID has been surveying parents of young children and reporting on trends, including the persistence of material hardship and its effect on emotional well-being. In March 2021, RAPID began surveying child care providers.

In this fact sheet, we report on data collected between March 2021 and March 2025, and focus on what we are hearing from providers across the country about their economic and emotional well-being.



Stanford
Center on Early Childhood

“Housing! Our old home is crumbling. In all honesty, it should probably be condemned. It needs so many repairs. I am too embarrassed to share how bad it is, but imagine the worst and it’s probably there. We don’t know what to do. There is barely enough money to feed and clothe our kids and keep the vehicles filled with gas so that we can get to work and back.”
Center director in Kentucky

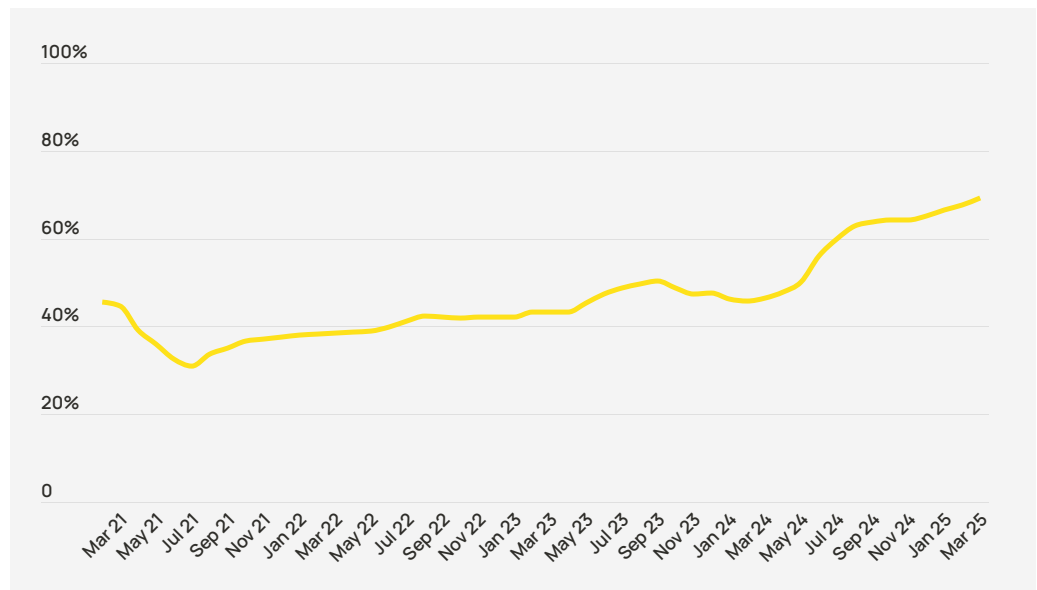
Our sample includes center-based teachers and directors, home-based providers, family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) providers, and babysitters/nannies.

Access to basic needs has remained a serious challenge for child care providers throughout the RAPID project and appears to be worsening

RAPID asks child care providers about their overall well-being, economic circumstances, and working conditions. One way that RAPID looks at economic circumstances is by asking providers about experiences of material hardship, which is defined as difficulty meeting basic needs, including food, housing, utilities, child care, and healthcare.

“The rise of costs for groceries, fuel, utilities, and other necessities is becoming too much. We are barely making ends meet. We have no extra money. We need help financially to stay ahead.” Home-based provider in Maine

Percentage of providers reporting one or more material hardship, overall



“Being able to pay all bills and buy groceries without making sacrifices [is my biggest concern].”
Center teacher in New Hampshire

“We only paid part of last month’s rent and I don’t have any extra money to pay for next month’s rent. I have received an eviction notice from my landlord and I am worried that I will be evicted.”

Center teacher in California

Data from the four years of the RAPID provider survey consistently show material hardship is widespread among child providers of young children.

From March 2021 to March 2025, more than half (54%) of providers, on average, experienced material hardship in one or more basic needs. On average over the past four years, utilities (62%), healthcare (54%), food (47%), housing (42%), and child care (20%) were the most common material needs that providers reported difficulty affording.

“Biggest challenge for me is currently paying rent and power. For at least the last six months, I only buy groceries about once every 6–8 weeks and I buy the cheapest things I can possibly find and hope I make it another 6–8 weeks.”

Center director in North Carolina

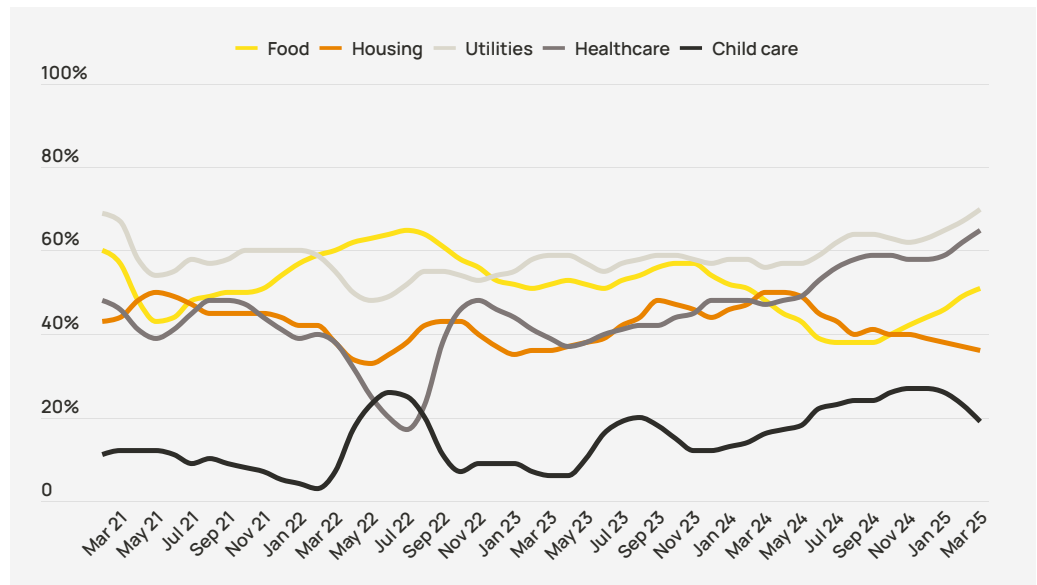
Data from the March 2025 survey show that material hardship is worsening among child care providers

In March 2025, more than two in three (66%) providers had difficulty meeting one basic need. Among these providers, utilities (64%), healthcare (62%), food (53%), housing (40%), and child care (25%) were particularly difficult to afford.

“Affording utilities [is my biggest concern] because they are becoming more expensive than rent.”

FFN provider in Virginia

Percentage of providers reporting material hardship by source, overall



“[My biggest concerns are the] high costs of housing and related expenses (insurance, taxes, etc.) as well as food. We are just fine but I know costs have gone up and I can only imagine other families are hurting.”
FFN provider in Colorado

“I no longer qualify for government insurance. While I am able to get benefits from my employer, life is going to get much more expensive and I might not be able to get the mental health I need to deal with my depression and burnout. The stress is making me seek other employment, which increased my stress.” Center teacher in Indiana

“High stress, burnout, and limited benefits [are my biggest challenges].”
FFN provider in Louisiana

The percentage of providers experiencing material hardship in March 2025 is the highest level recorded since RAPID began collecting this data in 2021.

Additionally, the 23-percentage point increase (45% to 68%) from our November 2023 [fact sheet](#) reporting provider material hardship shows that these economic challenges are growing sharply and crucial to address.

Having access to essentials, like food, housing, and other resources, is critical to the well-being of caregivers and to their ability to support families and the healthy development of young children.

In their responses to open-ended questions, providers write that they are very worried about their ability to reliably access food and household goods, housing, and utilities, and that they often have to choose between which monthly bills to pay.

Emotional distress has been prevalent in child care providers throughout the RAPID project and is getting worse

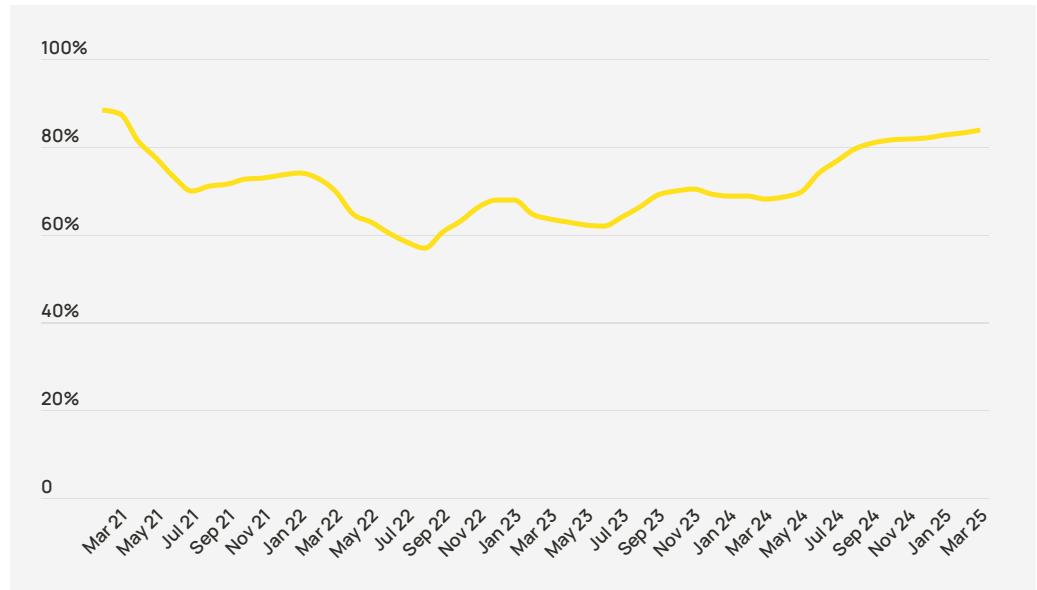
RAPID surveys ask child care providers about their own emotional well-being, which we measure as a composite of four emotional distress experiences: stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness.*

Data from the four years of the RAPID provider survey consistently show emotional distress is [prevalent](#) among child providers.

“My mortgage is due and I don’t have the money to pay it, which makes me anxious.” Center teacher in California

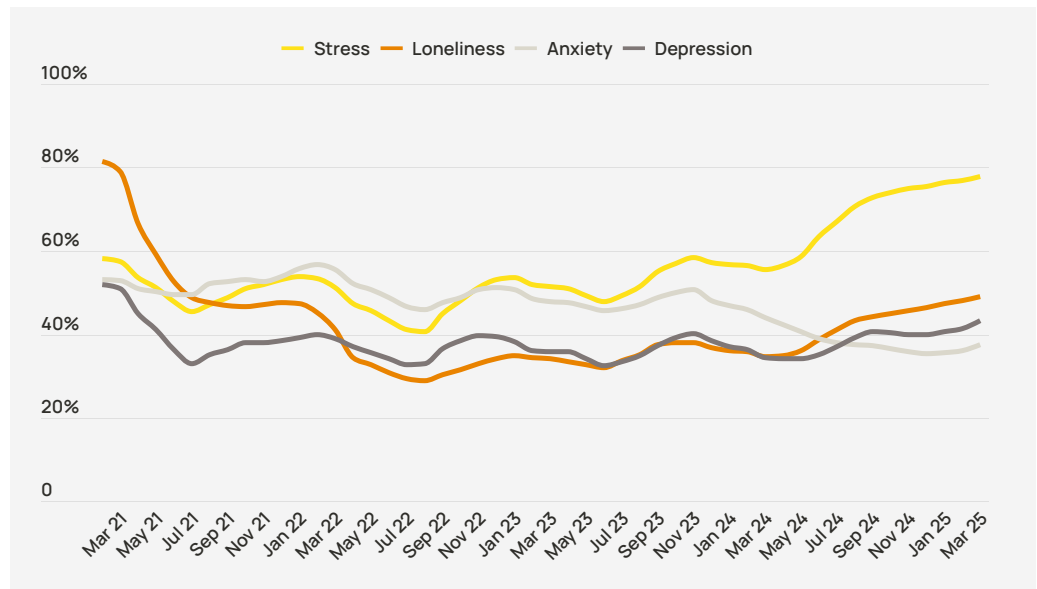
From March 2021 to March 2025, three in four (75%) providers reported experiencing emotional distress. Of these providers, stress (63%), loneliness (43%), anxiety (42%), and depression (38%) were common experiences.

Percentage of providers reporting emotional distress, overall



“There have been a lot of preschools and child care homes closing in my area and I fear the shortage of available child care will have a negative impact on my community, yet I have no choice. At this point I hope I can make enough to stay open until the end of the year. It is creating unhealthy levels of anxiety and has negatively impacted my sleep habits.” Home-based provider in Oregon

Percentage of providers reporting emotional distress by experience, overall



“Burnout from working and having less family time [are my biggest concerns].” Home-based provider in Texas

"I can't afford to take off work to get to the appointments needed for my family. I make too much for government help, so groceries are hard, I work 3 jobs (7 days a week) and I still struggle. It's awful. My car just started making a noise. I can't afford to take it to the shop. It makes a person very depressed."

Center teacher in Pennsylvania

The data show that emotional distress is increasing among child care providers. In March 2025, the majority (83%) of providers of young children experienced emotional distress. Of these providers, stress (77%) was the most prevalent experience, followed by loneliness (43%), depression (37%), and anxiety (34%).

The percentage of providers experiencing emotional distress in March 2025 is at one of the highest levels since we started reporting these data in 2021 during the pandemic.

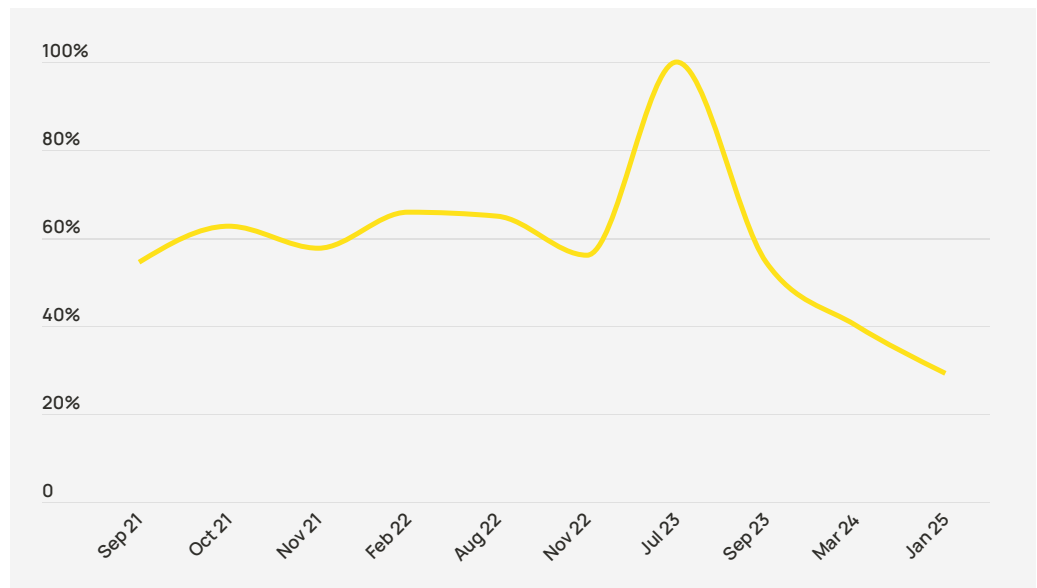
"I live in a city with no public transportation system. I work in a private preschool for less than a living wage. I have no insurance and can barely afford to live close enough to my work. If my husband loses his job, I will be homeless and I will have to quit working, too. Because I would never be able to afford rent on my income."

Center teacher in Texas

Child care providers in understaffed programs are particularly affected by emotional distress

To understand providers' work environment, we asked providers if their child care program is currently experiencing staffing shortages.

Percentage of providers experiencing staffing shortages, overall



"It has been hard to see the light through the tunnel. Short staffing has made my job much harder because people do not have a sense of punctuality, time management and responsibilities. I am a person who supports the classroom, kitchen, janitor, and office management, and I feel very exhausted and undervalued."

Center teacher in California

“Cost of living has gone up but our income has not. I am losing co-workers/employees at work because of the low pay, which then puts the extra workload and stress on me. I am usually not in a good mood and fatigued by the end of the day that it's exhausting to provide for my own family.” Center teacher in Wisconsin

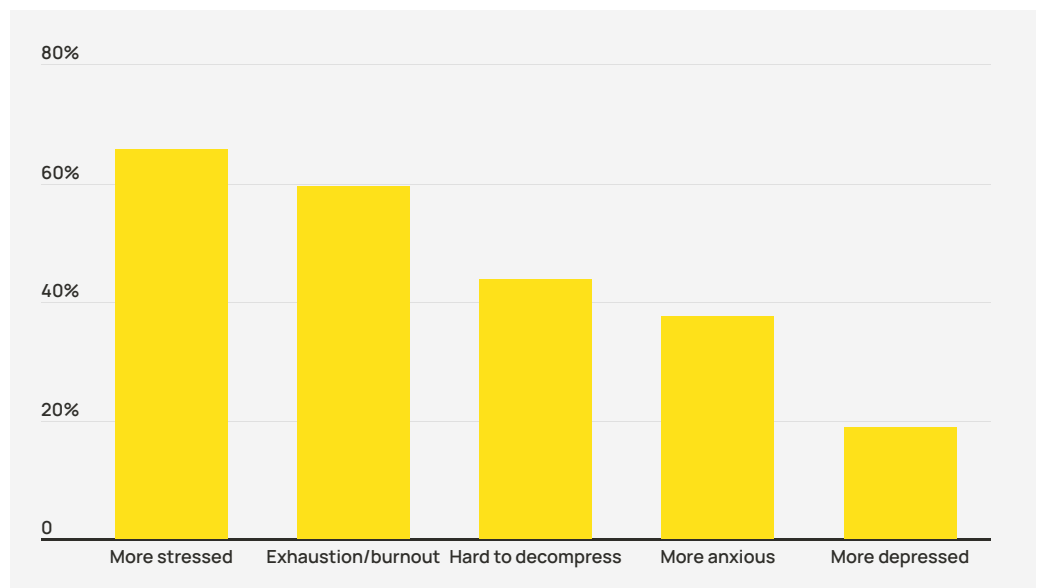
“My mental health and time [are my biggest concerns]. As more and more teachers quit, move, or get fired for cause, I cannot find replacements that are BOTH qualified AND competent. Because of this, I'm working open to close, plus extra hours. I literally feel myself burning out and have started to actively look into what steps to take to close our school. The reward of helping children, families, and teachers is not worth the pay, nor stress, nor personal sacrifice of my own health and family for others that just see us as a daycare. I'm so beyond tired and hopeless about anything getting better. It will be the hardest decision ever because I know there aren't enough openings for our students in other programs and our core group of dedicated teachers don't want to work anywhere else. But no one can help me.” Center director in Illinois

In January 2025, about one in three (29%) providers reported staffing shortages. We also found that because these providers take on more responsibilities as their peers leave the program or workforce, they report being more stressed, anxious, and depressed than they were before the staffing shortages.

Among providers in a program that has a staffing shortage:

- 66% are more stressed than they were before staffing shortages.
- 60% are exhausted or burned out.
- 44% say it's hard to decompress outside of work.
- 38% are more anxious than they were before staffing shortages.
- 19% are more depressed than they were before staffing shortages.

Percentage of providers experiencing well-being impacts from staffing shortages



“Dealing with depression has been a major challenge in the past year. Much of this, I attribute to the state of early childhood. The inability to hire new staff, losing staff to higher paying jobs, the bleakness of the advocacy for early childhood – all of this has me feeling incredibly down and hopeless. I recently started on antidepressants as a result.”
Center director in New Hampshire

Additionally, the percentage of providers experiencing staffing shortages in January 2025 is lower than we have previously seen, which is understandable given that RAPID began collecting these data during the pandemic. However, a substantial percentage of providers (29%) still report staffing shortages and emotional distress related to the shortages, which remains a concern and demands the attention of leaders in a position to create policies and programs that impact caregivers of young children.

Conclusion

Over the past four years of the RAPID project, child care providers of children under age 6 have consistently reported serious challenges in meeting their basic needs. These trends have worsened over time. Economic pressures, including low wages and rising costs of basic needs, are contributing to significant financial strain. These difficulties are linked to high levels of emotional distress across the workforce, with particularly elevated distress reported by providers working in programs undergoing staffing changes. Four years of RAPID data highlight that these issues are widespread and persistent, pointing to the need for policymakers’ ongoing attention and action to support these caregivers.

Child care providers are vital to families and communities, and are a key part of the foundation of early learning. Addressing these challenges requires sustained policies and programs that focus on both the economic and emotional well-being of child care providers. Improving

compensation, reducing debt burdens, and stabilizing staffing conditions would help support this essential workforce. RAPID will continue to monitor these data to ensure that providers' economic and emotional well-being positions them to support the positive, healthy development of young children.

* RAPID measures anxiety by asking providers to select how often they have been bothered by "feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge" or "not being able to stop or control worrying" in the past month. RAPID measures depression by asking providers to select how often they have been bothered by "little interest or pleasure in doing things" or "feeling down, depressed, or hopeless" in the past month. RAPID measures loneliness by asking providers to select how often they felt lonely in the past month. RAPID measures stress by asking providers to select how often they felt stress in the past month.

About the RAPID Survey Project

The RAPID Survey Project is based in the Stanford Center on Early Childhood, under the direction of Philip Fisher, PhD, Director of the Center.

↑
23,000+
Parents

↑
15,000+
Providers

↑
50
U.S. States

This set of analyses on RAPID national data is based on responses from 13,795 child care providers of children under age 6, collected between March 2021 and March 2025. These caregivers represent a range of voices: 30% are Black, 23% are Latinx, and 27% live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. Proportions/percentages are calculated based on the item-level response rates, not out of the total sample size. 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 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](#).