

The Challenges Facing Families of Young Children During the Coronavirus Pandemic: Findings from Virginia

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The coronavirus pandemic (COVID) dramatically impacted the lives of families with young children. Since the pandemic began, families have faced increased food insecurity¹ and economic instability.² They experienced disruptions in child care and heightened stress, and reported growing concerns about their children’s behavior.³ Understanding families’ experiences can help policymakers and communities better target supports.

This winter, nearly 7,000 Virginia parents and guardians of children 0-5 completed a survey about their experiences during the pandemic. This brief describes families’ concerns related to their employment and financial stability, their ability to manage caregiving and work responsibilities, and their children’s learning and wellbeing. The brief also explores differences in families’ concerns by their income level and their child’s race as systemic barriers and discrimination may exacerbate challenges for families in poverty and families of color. Overall, findings indicate high levels of stress and worry in all three areas, especially among low-income families, Black families, and Hispanic families. These differences by income and race suggest that the pandemic may have heightened existing inequities in families’ financial stability and overall wellbeing.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The Families with Young Children Survey was administered by the [Study of Early Education through Partnerships](#) at the University of Virginia, and was open to all Virginia families with children ages birth through kindergarten. The survey was disseminated by child care centers, schools, and other family-facing organizations (such as the Virginia Department of Education and Head Start) through social media, listservs, and other forms of communication. It was anonymous and was offered online, in both English and Spanish, from December 2020 to January 2021.

This brief focuses on the 5,842 respondents⁴ who reported that their youngest child was between ages 0 and 5 and not yet in kindergarten at the time of the survey.

Respondents who indicated that their child was already in kindergarten at the time of the survey were excluded from this analysis. The families were diverse with respect to family income and race (see Box 1 below for

income and race definitions). As shown in Table 1, about 17% reported a household income below 150% of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL), and 27% reported an income between 150% and 300% of the FPL. Families in the sample were somewhat less likely to be low-income than families in Virginia overall (17% versus 22%).

About 14% of respondents identified their child as Black, non-Hispanic, and 10% identified their child as Hispanic. 64% of respondents identified their child’s race/ethnicity as White, non-Hispanic, a somewhat higher percentage than among parents in Virginia overall (52%).⁵

Table 1: Characteristics of families in survey sample.

<u>Child/Family Characteristic</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
FPL category	
Under 150% FPL	17%
150%-300% FPL	27%
Over 300% FPL	56%
Child’s race/ethnicity	
Black, non-Hispanic	14%
Hispanic	10%
White, non-Hispanic	64%
Other/multiracial	12%

Note: Based on 5,561 to 5,729 responses.

Box 1: Defining income and race/ethnicity categories

Income Categories

- **Low-income** families are defined as those whose income and family size place them below 150% of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL).
- **Highest income** refers to families whose income and family size place them above 300% of the Federal Poverty Line.

Race/ethnicity Categories

- Respondents identified their child as one or more of the following race/ethnicity groups: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, White, or other race/ethnicity. These are the race/ethnicity groups used by the Virginia Department of Education.
- This brief presents information for the three largest race/ethnicity groups (**White**, **Black**, and **Hispanic**). All other respondents are included in the group labeled **Other**, due to small sample sizes.

See **Box 2** at the end of the brief for additional details on how these categories were defined.

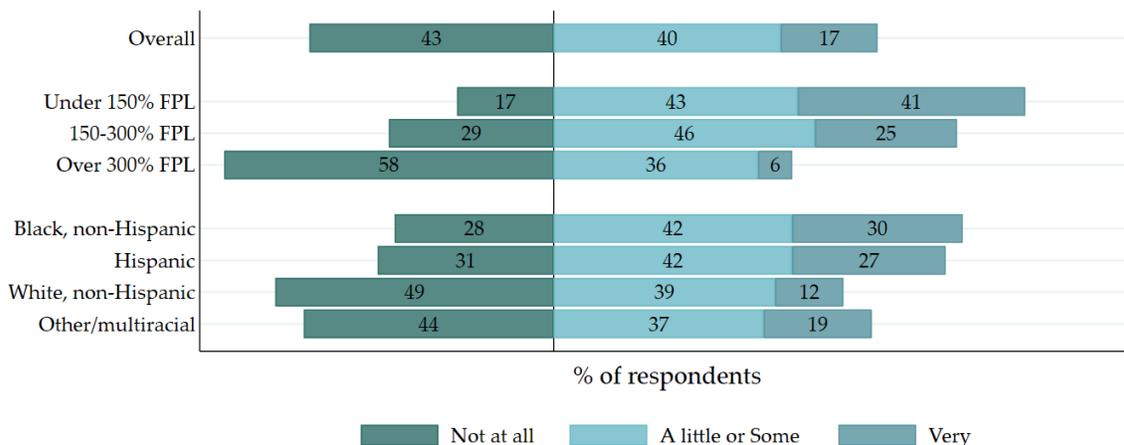
FAMILIES' FINANCIAL CHALLENGES DURING COVID

The survey asked parents how worried they felt (not at all, a little, some, or very) about their financial wellbeing during COVID. More than half of families (57%) reported being at least a little worried about running out of money or being unable to pay bills, and nearly 17% noted they were *very* worried (Figure 1).

These concerns were particularly pronounced for families with an income below 150% FPL. In these families, 41% were very concerned about being unable to pay the bills. In contrast, just 6% of families with an income over 300% FPL expressed this level of concern, and the majority (58%) reported that they were not at all worried. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (72%) with a Black child and 69% of respondents with a Hispanic child reported being at least a little worried about being unable to pay bills. This was true for 51% of respondents with a White child.

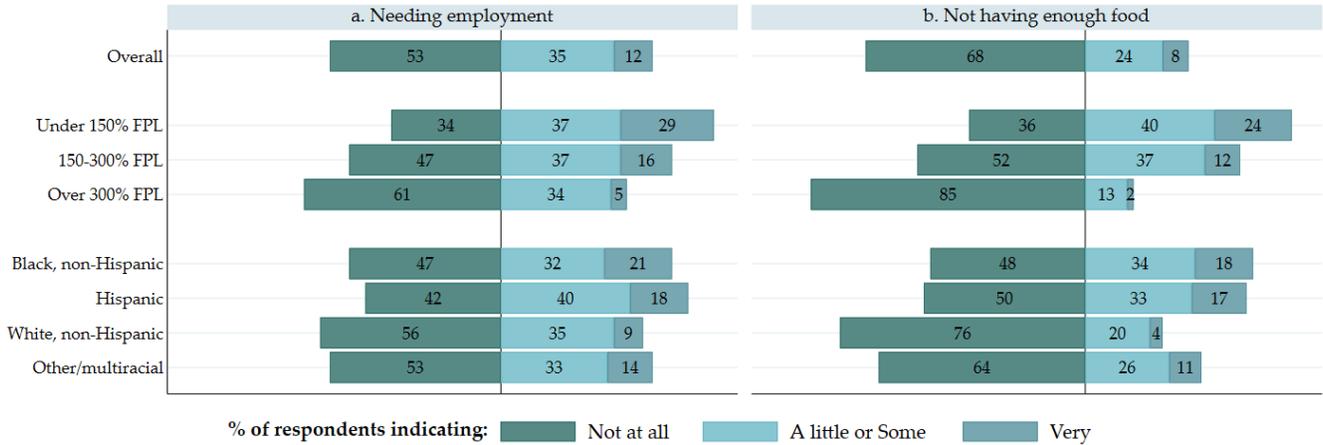
Families also reported high levels of concern about finding employment (Figure 2). Overall, nearly half of respondents (47%) reported being at least a little worried about a family member needing employment. Among families with an income below 150% FPL, 29% reported being very worried about needing employment, compared to just 5% of families in the highest income group. Families with Black or Hispanic children were about twice as likely (21% and 18% respectively) as families with White children (9%) to report being very worried about needing employment.

Figure 1. Families' level of worry about running out of money or inability to pay bills.



Note: Figure displays families' responses to the question, "Currently, how worried are you about running out of money or not being able to pay the bills?" Based on 5,761 responses.

Figure 2. Families' level of worry about needing employment and not having enough food.



Note: Based on 5,759 (a) and 5,754 (b) responses.

"Financially we are struggling. We can afford our youngest in daycare. However, with elementary schools being virtual, our two other children also need daycare. It's too much for us to afford 3 children in daycare!"

About one in three families (32%) reported being at least a little worried about having enough food to feed their family, and 8% indicated they were very worried. Nearly two thirds (64%) of families with an income below 150% FPL reported being worried about having enough food, and even among families with an income over 300% FPL, 15% of families reported being concerned about food access. Respondents with a Black or Hispanic child were more than four times as likely as respondents with a White child to indicate being very worried about having enough food.

In written responses, families described their financial hardships and ways in which their child care needs exacerbated these challenges.⁶ One respondent stated, "Losing my job has put us in a bad financial situation. It has been hard to find employment with COVID that fits my school and child care hours." Another explained that COVID led to additional, unforeseen child care costs: "Financially we are struggling. We can afford our youngest in daycare. However, with elementary schools being virtual, our two other children also need daycare. It's too much for us to afford 3 children in daycare!"

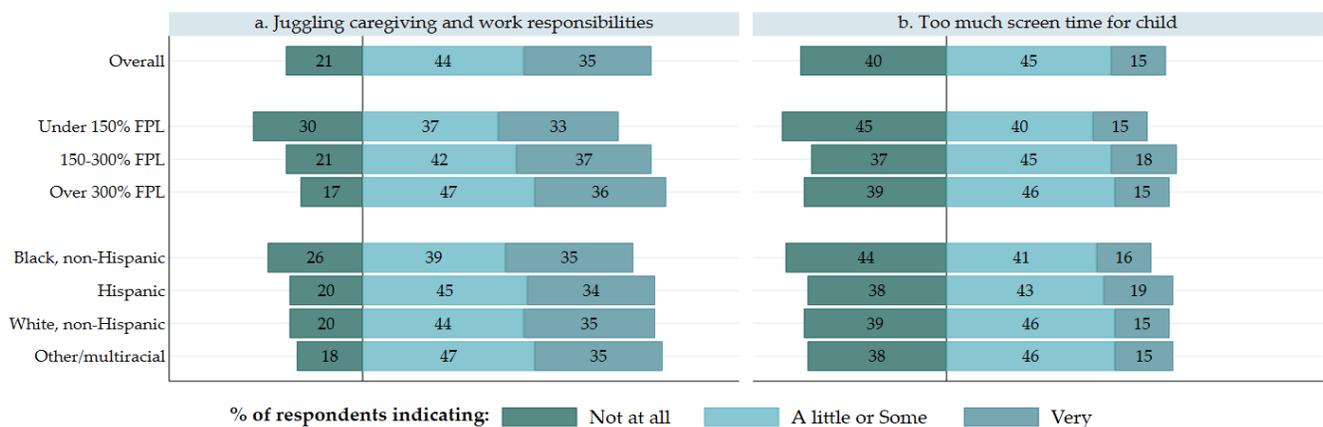
MANAGING CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES DURING COVID

As child care centers closed or moved to a virtual format during the pandemic, many parents and guardians of young children faced additional child care responsibilities. As shown in Figure 3, a large majority of all respondents indicated they were struggling to balance their work and caregiving responsibilities during the pandemic. More than three quarters of respondents (79%) worried about juggling work and caregiving responsibilities. One respondent elaborated: “Virtual learning requires me to teach my son throughout the day, then work a full shift. I am burnt out.” Another wrote, “It’s been extremely stressful to juggle working and helping two young students doing virtual school. It’s taking a toll on our mental health.”

During this year of widespread virtual learning, the majority of families (60%) were also concerned about too much screen time for their children (Figure 3). Most parents (80%) reported they were worried about keeping their children occupied (not shown in figure), which may have contributed to increased screen use. One parent wrote, “It’s been difficult to keep the children engaged in virtual learning while working from home. Difficulty focusing on work while kids are virtual learning often results in letting kids have screen time (tablets/TV are the babysitters).” Notably, concerns about juggling work and caregiving, keeping children occupied, and too much screen time were common across the board and did not differ substantially by income or race.

"It's been extremely stressful to juggle working and helping two young students doing virtual school. It's taking a toll on our mental health."

Figure 3. Families' level of worry about juggling caregiving and work and too much screen time for child.



Note: Based on 5,750 (a) and 5,759 (b) responses.

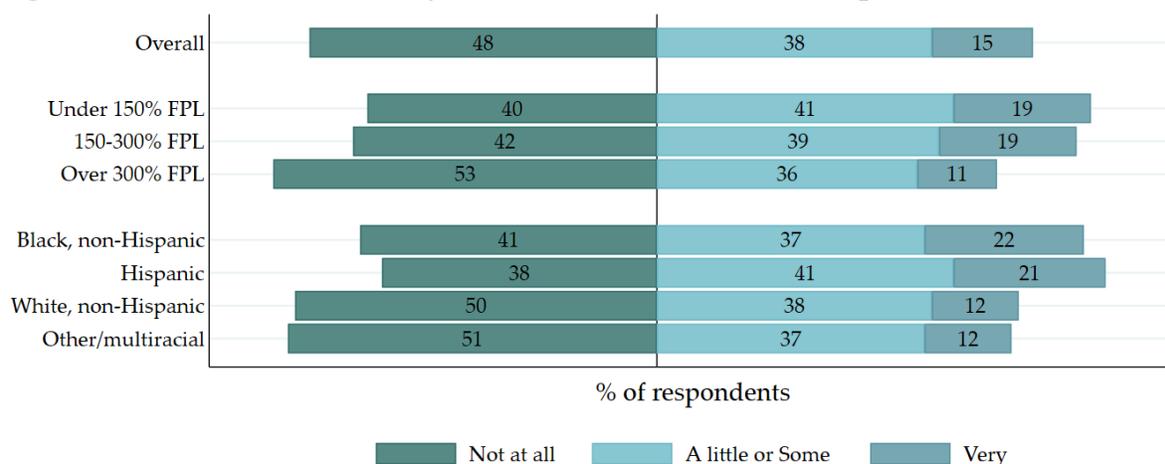
CONCERNS ABOUT CHILD’S LEARNING AND WELLBEING DURING COVID

Many families were concerned about their child’s learning during COVID. More than half of respondents (53%) indicated that they were at least a little worried about their child’s academic development, and 15% indicated they were very worried (Figure 4). Low-income families and families with Black and Hispanic children were more likely to indicate this concern. For instance, families with an income below 150% FPL were nearly twice as likely as families with an income over 300% FPL to report being very worried about academic skill development.

"My child has much less exposure to other children and academics than his older siblings at a similar age, and I worry about the impact on his readiness for kindergarten."

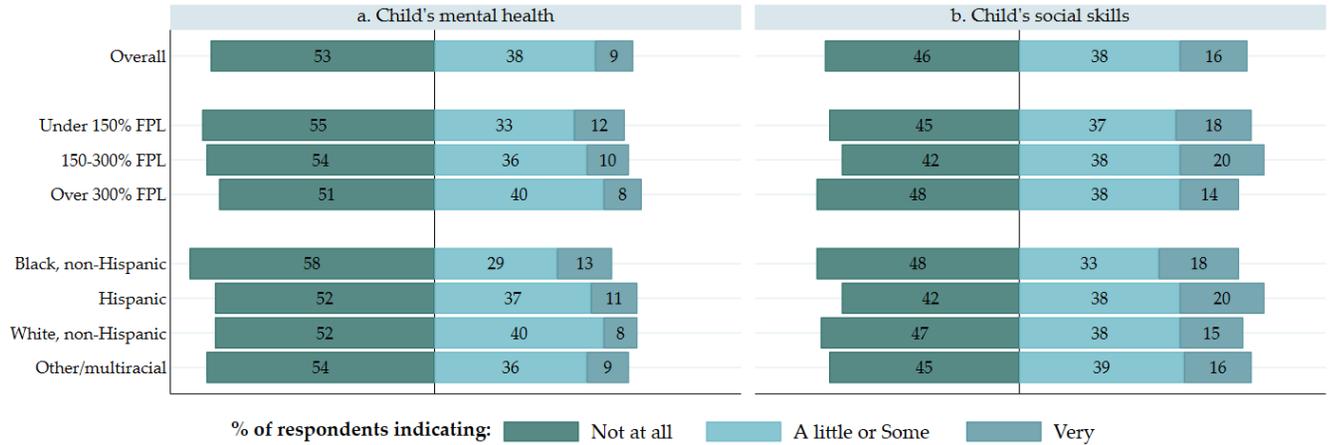
Many families also reported concerns about other aspects of their children’s wellbeing and development: 47% of families indicated they were worried about their child’s mental health and 54% indicated they were worried about their child’s social skills (Figure 5). Lower income families and families with Black and Hispanic children indicated somewhat higher levels of concerns.

Figure 4. Families' level of worry about child's academic development.



Note: Figure displays families’ responses to the question, “Currently, how worried are you about your child's academic development (e.g., learning to read, count, etc.)?” Based on 5,753 responses.

Figure 5. Families' level of worry about child's mental health and child's social skills.



Note: Based on 5,767 (a) and 5,753 (b) responses.

These concerns differed by child’s age, as well (not shown in figures). Respondents with a child aged 3-5 were more likely than respondents with an infant or toddler to report being worried about any developmental concerns. For example, over 60% of families with a child aged 3-5 were worried about academic development, compared to only 38% of families with a child aged 0-2. While 54% of families with a child aged 3-5 reported being at all worried about their child’s mental health, only 38% of families with a child aged 0-2 reported this concern.

Many respondents described their concerns about their child falling behind socially and academically in their written comments.⁷ One explained, “My child has much less exposure to other children and academics than his older siblings at a similar age, and I worry about the impact on his readiness for kindergarten.”

CONCLUSION

Like families around the country, families with young children in Virginia experienced significant challenges during the pandemic. Families struggled to balance their work and caregiving responsibilities. They worried about their young children’s learning and development. And many also worried about not having enough resources to meet their basic needs. These challenges were particularly pronounced for low-income families and families with Black and Hispanic children, who experienced substantially more financial hardship than historically more privileged families.

It is worth noting that the findings documented in this report likely understate the severity of the challenges faced by Virginia’s low-income families, as well as Black and

Hispanic families. Survey respondents tended to be somewhat higher-income and were slightly more likely to be White than Virginia parents more broadly.

The findings from this survey highlight the need to proactively and equitably support families with young children. For Black, Hispanic, and other families who have been negatively affected by longstanding systemic inequities, the economic crisis and drastically altered early care and education landscape may have exacerbated existing financial challenges as well as difficulties accessing high quality early care and learning opportunities. Federal stimulus funds and expanded eligibility criteria for the Child Care Subsidy Program⁸ may address some of these challenges by helping Virginia families access child care options that flexibly meet their needs. Ensuring families understand the new eligibility requirements and have assistance finding programs will be essential to making this initiative effective.

Early childhood education programs, including family child care homes, child care centers, Head Start programs, and school-based pre-kindergarten programs, will need support ensuring they are equipped to provide emotionally and culturally responsive instruction as they address the needs of young children who have had varied experiences throughout the pandemic, and who may be struggling with mental health and other developmental challenges. Teachers will require assistance to assess children's needs, target necessary supports, and ensure all children have the opportunity to thrive.

ENDNOTES

¹ Patrick, S.W., Henkhaus, L.E., Zickafoose, J.S., Lovell, K., Halvorson, A., Loch, S., Letterie, M., & Davis, M.M. (2020). Well-being of Parents and Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A National Survey. *Pediatrics*, 146(4). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-016824>

² Kirzinger, A., Hamel, L., Munana, C., Kearney, A., & Brodie, M. (2020, April 24). *KFF Health Tracking Poll - Late April 2020: Coronavirus, Social Distancing, and Contact Tracing*. Henry Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://www.kff.org/report-section/kff-health-tracking-poll-late-april-2020-economic-and-mental-health-impacts-of-coronavirus/>

³ Patrick et al.

⁴ While 5,842 respondents with children aged 0-5 and not yet in kindergarten completed the survey, not all respondents answered every question. Response numbers vary throughout the brief and are noted in all tables and figures.

⁵ Based on data from Kids Count Data Center, 20% of children aged 0-4 in Virginia are Black, non-Hispanic; 16% are Hispanic; 52% are White, non-Hispanic; and 12% are some other race or multiracial. Therefore, families with White children are somewhat overrepresented in the survey compared to Virginia families with young children overall. About 22% of Virginian families with children aged 0-4 have an income below 150% FPL, meaning that lower income families are somewhat underrepresented in the survey sample.

⁶ Families responded to the question, “In what ways, if any, has COVID created challenges for your family and/or your parenting?” In some cases, responses have been lightly edited for clarity.

⁷ Families responded to the question, “Overall, how would you say COVID has impacted your youngest child’s learning, development, and well-being?” Response has been edited for clarity.

⁸ In April 2021, [Governor Northam committed](#) over \$200 million of federal funding to expand eligibility for early childhood education (ECE) subsidies and provide additional resources to ECE providers. Eligibility for subsidies will be expanded to include families with a household income of up to 85% of area median income.

Box 2: Defining income and race/ethnicity categories, detailed

Income Categories

- Federal Poverty Line (FPL) category was estimated based on families’ responses to questions about household income and household size. It was calculated by assuming respondents were at the top of their reported income range (reported in bands of \$20,000 up to \$100,000). FPL thresholds were based on the US Department of Health and Human Services’ [2020 Poverty Guidelines](#). As an example, 150% FPL for a family of 3 was \$32,580 in 2020.

Race/ethnicity Categories

- In this brief, **Black, non-Hispanic** refers to families who identified their child as Black or African American and no other race.
- **White, non-Hispanic** refers to families who identified their child as White and no other race.
- **Hispanic** refers to families who identified their child as Hispanic, regardless of whether they selected any other race.
- **Other/multiracial** consists of 507 respondents who selected more than one race/ethnicity group (excluding Hispanic) and/or wrote-in some form of “multiracial” or “biracial,” 157 respondents who identified their child as Asian, 26 respondents who identified their child as “Other” race/ethnicity, 9 respondents who identified their child as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 1 respondent who identified their child as American Indian or Alaskan Native.



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