Many Vermont families with young children are struggling to make ends meet

STATE SURVEY

May 2026

The RAPID Survey Project partners with cities, counties, and states across the U.S. to listen to parents and caregivers with children under age 6. Their voices and experiences provide snapshots of what life is like for those raising young children in communities across the country and provide local insights on national trends. RAPID's goal is to lift up parent voices to inform local policies and programs that support families. Learn more about our work and where we conduct surveys.

In Vermont, we partnered with Building Bright Futures and community-based organizations in the state to hear directly from Vermont families of all races, ethnicities, and income levels, about their experiences raising young children.

RAPID surveys ask about families' and caregivers' economic well-being, including questions about their experiences of material hardship, which is defined as difficulty in the last month affording one or more areas of basic need: food, housing, utilities, child care, and healthcare.

RAPID Stanford Center on Early Childhood

BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES

"Losing our housing, being able to pay rent and keep up with the bills [are my biggest concerns]." **Parent in Lamoille County**

Consistent access to basic needs is an important part of having a stable home environment and the economic well-being that support healthy development of young children and their families.

This fact sheet reports on data gathered between January 2025 and June 2025 from Vermont parents of children under age 6 across the state. It focuses on what caregivers told us about their experiences of material hardship and its effects on family well-being.

"The cost of goods, food, and housing interest rates are killing our monthly budget." **Parent in Addison County**

Building Bright Futures will share this information with policymakers, funders, and economic developers so that programs and policies are reflective of the experiences of Vermont families.

Basic needs are out of reach for nearly half of Vermont families with young children

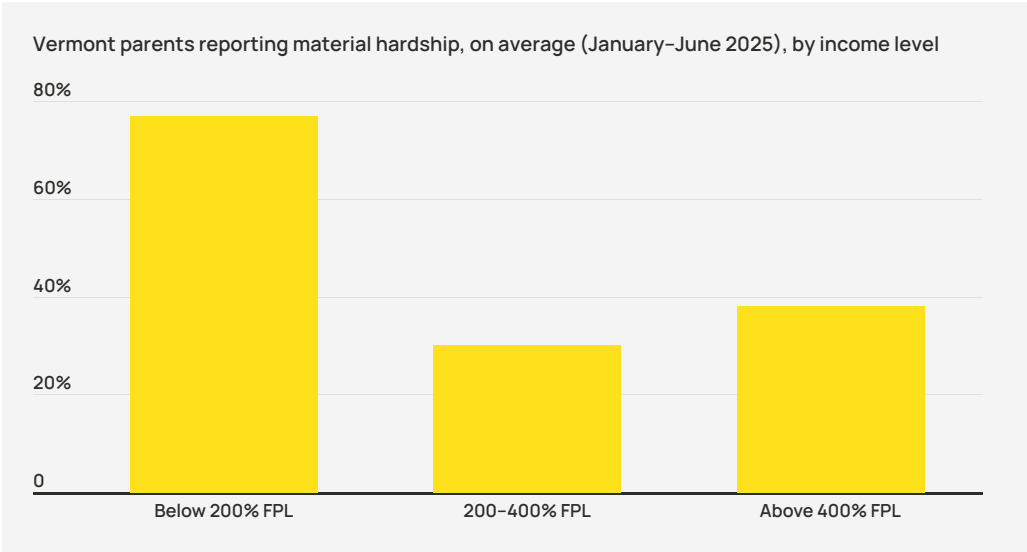
"The cost of living, especially with a child who requires child care [is my biggest concern]." **Parent in Chittenden County**

Economic well-being is critical to families' ability to access essentials, like food, housing, and other resources that support the healthy, positive development of young children. To understand family economic well-being, we asked Vermont parents with young children about experiences of material hardship.

"Housing. We rent in a very expensive city/state. We'd like to buy a home but are unable to afford the house prices. Our landlord is also planning to sell the home we currently rent." **Parent in Chittenden County**

Between January 2025 and June 2025, 44% of Vermont parents surveyed, on average, reported difficulty affording one or more basic needs.

"Access to child care has been a huge challenge. It has impacted my ability to work more than a few hours a week. State assistance is the bare minimum. I do receive housing assistance which is so needed. I have trouble paying my bills and buying necessities for myself and my daughter."
Parent in Chittenden County



"Food is so expensive, I'm having to find more food shelves to utilize. The exhaust on my car needs to be fixed but I can't afford it."
Parent in Windsor County

Material hardship affected Vermont families across household income levels.* On average across this six-month period, we saw the highest reports in lower-income (77%) families, but large percentages of higher-income (38%) and middle-income (30%) families also experienced material hardship. The fact that a substantial number of families have difficulty accessing basic needs points to the presence of broad economic challenges that run across all income levels.

"The unpredictable nature of the economy is my only concern."
Parent in Chittenden County

On average, one in three (32%) Vermont parents experiencing material hardship had difficulty paying for utilities. This was the most common area of hardship. Parents also reported difficulty affording housing (21%), food (18%), healthcare (17%), and child care (8%).

* RAPID measures income levels based on the 2025 federal poverty levels (FPL). The lowest-income households are those below 200% of the FPL, middle-income households fall between 200% and 400% of the FPL, and the highest-income households are above 400% of the FPL. In Vermont for a family of four people, the lowest-income households are those below $64,300, middle-income households fall between $64,300 and $128,600, and the highest income households are above $128,600.

"Costs of daily living. Cannot afford groceries and SNAP benefits keep getting cut due to their cost of living adjustment calculations, despite our income being very low and stagnant."
Parent in Washington County

In responses to open-ended questions, Vermont parents wrote about how hard it is to afford basic needs and about the stress and worry this causes. The quotes in this fact sheet illustrate these challenges.

Unexpected economic conditions are making it difficult for Vermont families with young children

"We really are just barely making it by with our income. I know my husband could get a raise if he wanted one, however we are choosing not to have him get a raise because we will start losing things that we desperately need, like Medicaid. The threshold for these things are really too low for the cost of living right now. We are not a wealthy family by any means. And my daughter is profoundly disabled so I am not able to work. We are in a tough situation."
Parent in Windsor County

The RAPID survey asked Vermont parents: "Have costs for everyday items gone up in your area in the past month?"

From January 2025 to June 2025, 48% of Vermont parents surveyed, on average, said everyday items had gone up in the past month, with more lower-income (76%) families reporting increased costs than higher-income (56%) and middle-income (34%) families.

To parents that reported increased costs, we showed a list of everyday items and asked if they had purchased or used less of those items due to increased costs. On average, the most common household expenses selected from this list were household goods (63%) and transportation (55%). Other areas where families had made reductions included utilities (41%), food (36%), healthcare (16%), and baby items (12%).

"My biggest concern is ensuring my family's safety from harm both physically and emotionally."
Parent in Orange County

In a separate question, we asked parents about unexpected household events that affected their family's economic circumstances. One in five Vermont parents surveyed (21%), on average over the six-month survey period, said they

"Safety given the current political climate [is my biggest concern]." **Parent in Orange County**

brought home less income than expected in the past year due to unemployment, a pay cut, or reduced work hours.

In addition to income instability and increasingly unaffordable everyday items, Vermont families said that, on average, unexpected vehicle repairs (60%), unexpected hospital visits (53%), and unexpected home/appliance repairs (49%) were sources of financial strain.

"There just isn't enough time in the day. Between managing schoolwork, therapy, emotional check-ins, and our own jobs, we're always running on empty. It's not that we don't care, it's that we're at capacity. We need more flexible, accessible services that don't add more to our already full plates." **Parent in Lamoille County**

Half of Vermont parents of young children experience emotional distress

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

Between January 2025 and June 2025, one in two Vermont parents of young children surveyed (50%), on average, reported emotional distress. Among these parents, stress (37%), loneliness (35%), anxiety (31%), and depression (27%) were reported.

"The rising cost of living is a big concern for myself and my family." **Parent in Washington County**

In responses to open-ended questions, Vermont parents wrote that increased costs and financial debt made them feel stressed and forced them to make difficult choices to meet their family's needs.

* RAPID measures anxiety by asking parents 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 parents 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 parents to select how often they felt lonely in the past month. RAPID measures stress by asking parents to select how often they felt stress in the past month.

"Child care. My daughter's school closes for the summer and I have no full time care options. She is only 4 so she is too young for most camps. Right now we will have to band-aid solutions together, and as a full time employee, this is very stressful because I need reliable child care all year." **Parent in Washington County**

As indicated by the quotes in this fact sheet, Vermont parents expressed concerns about safety, federal policy changes, cuts to public programs, and the challenges of navigating high costs of living and economic instability.

Half of Vermont parents report that their young children experience emotional distress

"The rising cost of living is a big concern for myself and my family." **Parent in Washington County**

We also ask parents about their children's behavior in the past month and measure child emotional well-being as a composite of externalized emotional distress (e.g., fussiness) and internalized emotional distress (e.g., fearfulness).* Parents could report instances of either or both types of distress.

During January 2025 to June 2025, on average, 50% of parents surveyed reported one or more emotional distress behaviors in their young children. Specifically, 44% reported externalized emotional distress and 26% reported internalized distress.

"Concern about our nation. I am scared by what is happening at the federal level right now and worried about how my family and other families will get through this." **Parent in Chittenden County**

* RAPID measures child emotional well-being using items from the Child Behavior Checklist. Parents reported how often the phrases "fussy or defiant" and "fearful or anxious" reflected their view of their child's behavior in the past month.

"Really just the small community nonprofit groups and grant groups and housing groups and things like that [are helping the most]. We've used all sorts of grants over the past to pay for medical equipment, fuel assistance, and we've used the reach ahead benefits for winter tires for our vehicles so that they are safe to drive. But mostly it's been small, local charities and such." **Parent in Windsor County**

Vermont parents of young children say policies, programs, and supports help them meet basic needs

Previous analyses of national RAPID data have shown a strong association between policy interventions and the levels of material hardship and emotional distress in parents and young children.

In their responses to RAPID's open-ended survey questions and as indicated by the quotes in this fact sheet, Vermont parents highlight the importance of both national and state family support policies in meeting basic needs.

"Food banks are helping to supplement my food stamps so we can save a bit more money each month, and the Reach Up [a local government agency] office." **Parent in Orleans County**

Conclusion

Data from 2025 show that Vermont families with young children are experiencing economic uncertainty coupled with the pressure of increased costs of everyday items. Many Vermont parents with young children, and particularly families with lower incomes, are facing economic circumstances that make it hard to meet the basic needs that are critical to providing healthy, responsive caregiving.

"Food and cash assistance through Vermont's Reach Up program [are helping the most]." **Parent in Chittenden County**

Consistent access to basic needs is key to a stable home environment, and the healthy development of young children and their families. Experiencing financial insecurity, material hardship, and difficulty paying unexpected expenses can undermine families' economic stability and children's positive health, development, and well-being.

"Universal school meals program in Vermont [is helping the most]."
Parent in Chittenden County

Given the high rates of economic hardship among Vermont families, there is a need to ensure Vermont parents of young children receive early and necessary support to provide the stable, nurturing care that is essential to healthy development in early childhood. Understanding the needs and challenges that families face can inform targeted policies and programs that promote families' economic well-being and support children in these families.

"Food programs like SNAP [are helping the most]."
Parent in Washington County

Building Bright Futures aims to make these findings available to advocacy organizations and policymakers who are in a position to improve economic circumstances in support of healthier, thriving families and communities now and in the future. Together with the insights parents shared in their responses to open-ended questions, these data can inform policies and programs to better support Vermont's youngest children and their families.

"The Vermont child care subsidy covers our child care expenses and saves us almost $3,000 each month."
Parent in Windham County

About the RAPID State Surveys

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

RAPID partners with cities, counties, and states to gather essential and ongoing information and caregiver voices, provide timely and relevant data to inform local policies and programs, and develop the capacity of local organizations to employ rapid-cycle survey methods and enhance the impact of their work on behalf of children, families and the child care workforce.

This set of analyses on RAPID national household data is based on responses collected between January 2025 and June 2025 from 869 Vermont parents of a child under age 6. These caregivers represent a range of voices: 12.8% are Black, 30.8% are Latinx, and 31.2% of the participants live 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 weighted to adjust the samples to match the known population.

Building Bright Futures (BBF) is Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network, serving children from the prenatal period through age 8 and their families across the state. BBF maintains a statewide network of 12 Regional Councils and Strategic Plan committees that bring together families, providers, and leaders to address local and statewide early childhood needs.

© Stanford University