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Poll: One in three parents of infants and toddlers are skipping or reducing meals because of coronavirus pandemic

Poll finds that New York's parents of young children are experiencing intense financial instability and higher stress

NEW YORK – Parents of infants and toddlers across New York State are experiencing intense financial insecurity during the coronavirus pandemic, with one in three (34%) indicating in [a new statewide poll released today](#) that they are skipping or reducing meals and one in ten (11%) saying they are skipping or reducing meals for their children.

Unemployment and loss of income are among other key concerns expressed by New York parents of infants and toddlers, with one in three (34%) saying they have had their hours or pay reduced or have taken time off of work to care for children as a result of the crisis. Two-thirds say they worry about losing their jobs or having hours reduced in the future (67%) and more than half (51%) said they feel uneasy about their personal finances.

The poll also reveals that the coronavirus crisis has significantly changed parents' child care arrangements and other parenting supports. Before coronavirus, 41% of families relied on family- or center-based child care providers and 42% had at least one parent staying home to care for their child. Now, just 5% say their child care/day care program is open and that their child/children are still attending, and 80% have at least one parent at home.

The poll, released Thursday by the Raising NY coalition of parent, early childhood, education, civil rights, business, and health organizations and conducted by Global Strategy Group, also highlights gaps in the resources parents said would be most helpful compared to what they have access to. Although 91% of parents indicated that free or increased internet access would be helpful in response to the crisis, just 17% said they currently have that resource. And while 90% of parents said that providing meals that parents can pick up in their communities or have delivered to their home would be helpful, just 26% said they had access.

The [poll memo](#) from Global Strategy Group and a [summary of poll results](#) can be found at RaisingNY.org/coronavirus.

“No parent should ever be faced with the incredibly difficult decisions that New York families now find themselves grappling with on a daily basis,” *said Hope Lesane, associate director for early childhood for The Education Trust–New York, which staffs the Raising NY coalition.* “We know that even before this pandemic, families of color and families from low-income backgrounds were disproportionately affected by financial insecurity and limited access to high-quality early learning experiences. These poll results make it clear that the coronavirus crisis has exacerbated these inequities. It is crucial that leaders at the federal, state, and local levels hear the voices of all parents and provide them with the additional financial and other support to get through this difficult crisis.”

“Many people across the state are struggling right now, but as the poll results indicate, it’s particularly hard for parents of young children,” *said Heather C. Briccetti, Esq., president and chief executive officer of The Business Council of New York State, Inc., and co-chair of Raising NY.* “Data and research show that investing in resources for young children has a significant positive impact on their development and overall health and education outcomes. While the state is facing budget challenges at this time, we want to make sure that the needs of children and families are not forgotten about.”

“Parents have told us and the evidence bears it out: the impacts of this pandemic are hurting young children in low-income communities,” *said Kate Breslin, president and chief executive officer of the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy and co-chair of Raising NY.* “If New York State doesn’t address the disparate impacts of COVID-19 by investing in low-income communities and families, we will see disparities increase and remain with us for decades.”

“After receiving the survey results, I was unable to sleep knowing children and parents are skipping or reducing meals as a consequence of COVID-19,” *said Melodie Baker, director of education at United Way of Buffalo & Erie County, co-chair of Raising NY, and chair of the Erie-Niagara Birth to 8 Coalition.* “Our vulnerable populations are in survival mode and need support like never before. Without adequate investments in social supports the ripple effects we are uncovering today will be far greater in the years to come.”

Among key poll findings:

- **New York’s parents of infants and toddlers are experiencing intense financial insecurity during this time. As a result of this crisis, many parents are skipping or reducing their family’s meals.**
 - Unemployment and temporary loss of work are affecting 16% of parents of young children in New York. Even among employed parents, a third (34%) have had their hours or pay reduced or have taken time off work to care for their child or children as a result of the crisis, and two-thirds (67%) say they worry about losing their jobs or having their hours reduced in the future. A majority (57%) worry about not being able to pay for basic expenses like food, housing, and health care if the crisis continues.
 - Over a third of parents (34%) say they have skipped or reduced the size of their own meals as a result of the coronavirus crisis, and that number is significantly higher among furloughed workers (49%), middle-income parents (48%), single parents (46%), parents in New York City (45%), and Hispanic parents (42%) in the state. Overall, 11% of parents have skipped or reduced the size of the meals they provide for their children as well, which disproportionately affects parents of children enrolled in Early Head Start (36%), single parents (27%), and parents in New York City (22%).

- **For many New York families, the coronavirus crisis has been incredibly disruptive and put parents' and young children's well-being at risk.**
 - Most parents (73%) say the coronavirus crisis has significantly disrupted their home and family lives (particularly in New York City: 77%) and many worry about their family's mental health as a result of the coronavirus crisis (75%). Two-thirds of parents (68%) worry their child's social, emotional, and cognitive development will suffer as a result of the coronavirus crisis, and three in four (77%) report their own levels of stress is much higher than usual during this time.
 - A staggering one out of four parents of young children (25%) worry about the impact of substance abuse and domestic violence on their family as a result of the coronavirus crisis, with worries about abuse particularly widespread in New York City (35%), among Hispanic parents (36%), and among parents of children with disabilities (39%). These numbers are particularly concerning given the evidence that these adverse experiences can have a lasting impact on health and outcomes.
 - Parents whose children participate in assistance programs like Early Head Start, Early Intervention, and home visitation have also experienced significant disruptions, with 38% reporting not receiving services during the crisis.
- **The coronavirus crisis has significantly changed parents' child care arrangements and other parenting supports. The crisis has introduced a lot of uncertainty about child care for many parents of young children in New York, including among essential workers.**
- Just 66% of parents say they plan to return to the child care arrangements they had prior to the coronavirus crisis – 12% say they do not plan to return and 21% are unsure what they will do when the crisis is over. This uncertainty around child care cuts across all types of pre-pandemic arrangements, including previous stay-at-home parents who may be unsure if they could continue to care for their child at home (47% unsure/won't return) and low-income families (49%) who may be unable to afford their existing care if their financial situation worsens. **Some — but not all — parents have been in a position to make the most out of this time with their child, though more time at home has come at the expense of more screen time for infants and toddlers.**
 - While many parents report they have been able to spend more quality time with their child as a result of the changes to their routine and child care arrangements (76%, driven by unemployed parents at 89% and parents who earn more than \$100,000 per year at 81%), parents also report that their child spends more time watching TV (71%) and using devices like tablets (67%).

Supported by the results of this survey, policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels should focus their efforts to further assist New York's parents on:

- **Financial assistance:** As we note above, many parents have been laid off work, furloughed, or temporarily had their hours or pay reduced as a result of coronavirus, and a majority worry about not being able to afford basic expenses if the current crisis continues. Financial assistance for parents of young children during this period beyond what many families have already been able to access through state unemployment insurance and federal stimulus payments is a key area where New York families could benefit from additional support.

- **Food security:** One clear manifestation of financial instability and lack of food availability is parents' ability to feed themselves and their families. In less than two months, this has already translated to greater food insecurity among significant proportions of parents. Families in New York City, African American and Hispanic parents, single parents, and furloughed workers are disproportionately more likely to report making the difficult decision to skip or reduce their family's meals and particularly need additional support.
- **Access to health, wellness, and support professionals:** A third of parents (34%) say they have missed health appointments for their child due to coronavirus and, as we note above, parents who have access to technology are receptive to staying in contact with their child's doctor through telehealth or telemedicine programs. In addition, it is a significant problem that many families are not receiving the Early Intervention and home visitation services that they need – one that may be made worse by lack of access to technology and the digital divide.
- **Support for parents and families:** Parenting even in normal circumstances can be challenging, and in the midst of the pandemic, parents are finding positive support in innovative ways through text messaging, use of developmentally appropriate resources, and fostering connections digitally. For the most vulnerable families who deal with issues such as addiction and abuse that may arise or be exacerbated as a result of the state's stay-at-home order, specific attention is essential to ensure availability of quality critical services for parents who need it. More linguistically accessible information regarding food, housing, employment, health, and other emergency needs that are available to those with and without internet access, as well as information on supporting children's development, would also be helpful for parents.
- **Web-based supports and resources:** Many community-based organizations, libraries, museums, child care providers, and other entities are providing virtual tools and resources that families are using. More linguistically accessible information (and outreach to advertise them) like free online resources, developmental programming such as virtual story time, resources that can help with food, housing, employment, health, and other emergency needs, and connections to other parents are all widely viewed as helpful among parents.
- **Greater investment in early childhood programming moving forward:** As we note above, support for expanding access to quality, affordable child care and preschool for New York families with young children is incredibly high among parents of young children at 92%. As the state recovers from the devastating impact of the crisis and looks to reimagine the role of government in supporting New Yorkers, 83% of parents of young children also agree that the state should be doing more to ensure infants and toddlers in New York are healthy and developmentally on track at birth and throughout early childhood.

"These poll results highlight what a challenging time this is for families of infants and toddlers and confirm what we are hearing from the families we serve, including concerns about their children's developmental progress when so many resources are not available or only available online," **said Kim Sweet, executive director of Advocates for Children of New York.** "The state must ensure that we are keeping young children healthy and safe and providing ongoing resources for their developmental and educational progress."

"This new survey further documents the dramatic stress and urgent needs of young children and their families during the pandemic, including the shocking prevalence of hunger in these households," **said Betty Holcomb, policy director for the Center for Children's Initiatives.** "The report also delivers a critical message to state policymakers. Virtually all these parents – 91% – support greater investment in

quality early childhood programming going forward, an essential element to ensuring babies, toddlers, and preschoolers are healthy and developmentally on track to succeed in school and beyond, in good times and bad.”

“These findings are alarming,” **said Larry Marx, chief executive officer of The Children’s Agenda.** “It’s as if we’ve re-entered the Great Depression. When the novel coronavirus first appeared, people commonly thought children would be unharmed. But our most vulnerable citizens, including infants and toddlers, are being scarred by it. Our government, at all levels, has to step up its response to get more resources to families in need.”

“This pandemic has hit the already stressed and overextended parents of infants and toddlers especially hard,” **said Meredith Menzies Chimento, executive director of the Early Care & Learning Council.** “Many are essential workers and are struggling to pay for basics such as food, but due to school closures and socialization being limited, many are now also confronted with the high cost of child care. A short-term solution is the CARES Child Care Scholarship, which the Early Care & Learning Council and our network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies strongly encourage income-eligible parents to utilize. However, in the long term, we are committed to working with Raising NY and all levels of government to rebuild a system that better supports all families and eliminates vulnerability.”

“In these unprecedented times, we know that the equity issues that have plagued our systems have been exacerbated for already vulnerable families and children,” **said Ramon Peguero, Esq., president and chief executive officer of the Committee for Hispanic Children & Families.** “With the release of Raising NY’s parent poll results, we begin to see the depths of the impact and how that translates to the daily lives and difficult decisions being made by parents across New York State. The Committee for Hispanic Children & Families (CHCF) joins our Raising NY partners in calling on the state to target its response and action to reflect the true needs of vulnerable families and children during this time. With an astonishing 68% of parents worrying about their young children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development as a result of coronavirus, it is imperative that we take thoughtful, responsive, and proactive action to ensure that families receive the necessary supports to mitigate the long-term devastation of this crisis.”

“There is no doubt that COVID-19 affects every single New Yorker, but how it effects our youngest children and their families must be of paramount concern,” **said Sherry Cleary, executive director of CUNY Professional Development Institute.** “In fact, in a society that seeks to ‘build back better’ following such a disaster we will need to consider how to change the way we support our most vulnerable populations and this report provides the beginnings of a blueprint.”

“Unfortunately, this data is not surprising,” **said Dr. Liz Izakson, executive director of Docs for Tots.** “Families with young children pre-COVID19 were not well-served by existing services that tend to focus on school- age children or the aged. This data highlights how a crisis like the current pandemic exasperates an already vulnerable and fragile population that requires unique consideration and solutions. Raising NY is poised to help inform those solutions for a stronger NY.”

“This poll exposes the impossible set of decisions that parents are being forced to make each and every day,” **said Rachel P. Bonsignore, director of Liftoff Western New York.** “It is imperative that all infants and toddlers are supported and have access to high-quality early childhood experiences. Every parent deserves our collective concern and our aligned action now more than ever.”

“It’s clear from the results, COVID-19 is reinforcing long-existing inequities in New York,” **said Kim Sykes, director of education policy for the New York Immigration Coalition.** “Immigrant New Yorkers have always been forced to navigate a system that struggles with language access issues, where getting

information on available supports in a language they understand and through vehicles accessible to those who lack devices and WiFi is still a concern. However, these issues are further compounded by the economic fall-out from the pandemic, leaving many already struggling families both food and housing insecure.”

“These poll results illustrate the gaps in our current child- and family-serving systems,” **said Tim Hathaway, executive director of Prevent Child Abuse NY.** “We must use what we’ve learned during the pandemic to change the way we do things going forward, including transforming the child care system so that it can continue to be the backbone of our returning workforce. In addition, PCANY echoes the concerns of many parents that child and domestic abuse is increasing during this time, and wants to make clear that resources are still available. PCANY’s NYS Resource Guide can help connect families to services and supports.”

“At United Way of New York City, we know that the health and wellness of children and their families is critical to the success of our communities,” **said Sheena Wright, president & chief executive officer of the United Way of New York City.** “This is why we take a dual-generational approach to advancing our mission to ensure that every New Yorker can thrive. The results of this poll are sobering. We stand with our partners and Raising NY, and urge leaders to ensure that parents of young children get the financial assistance, food security, and investments in early childhood programs that are desperately needed.”

The survey had a confidence interval of +/-4.9%. All interviews were conducted via web-based panel, including 58% of interviews conducted via mobile device. Care has been taken to ensure the geographic and demographic divisions of parents of young children in New York State are properly represented.

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About Raising NY

Raising NY is a diverse statewide coalition of parent, early childhood, education, civil rights, business, and health organizations dedicated to increasing the number of children who are on track for school readiness. Learn more at RaisingNY.org.