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# Systemic Solutions Are Required to Address Pandemic's Devastating Impact on Children and Families

## Introduction

It has been an unimaginable past twelve months since the nation and the state of Wisconsin came to a standstill to begin what would be the worst crisis to hit the country in over a hundred years. COVID-19 has killed over 540,000 Americans and over 7,000 Wisconsinites. This loss will reverberate across families, communities, states, and the nation for decades and decades to come. The loss of life has been beyond our worst nightmare, and the rippling impact of the pandemic has indelibly marked children's and families' health, economic well-being, and education.

Families continue struggling to meet their children's everyday needs during the COVID-19 pandemic while trying to manage increasingly unstable finances, school, work, and mental health, according to a recent policy report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. [\*Kids, Families and COVID-19: Pandemic Pain Points and the Urgent Need to Respond\*](#) details the significant and harmful strain on children and families arising from the widespread health crisis across all 50 states. Families are juggling the pressures of lost work and income, insufficient food, housing insecurity, complicated childcare, and serious schooling problems for their children.

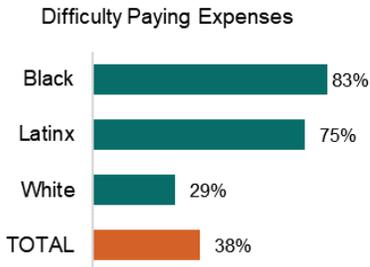
“While we might be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel as more Wisconsinites get vaccinated and cases decline, the rebuilding and the shoring up of the lives of children and families will not happen overnight. It will take a concerted effort, and investment in the families of Wisconsin, to build a better future for our children with particular attention given to children and families of color who have been left out for far too long,” said Erica Nelson, Advocacy Director for Kids Forward. “There are reasons to be optimistic that we are making the right investments given the passage of the American Rescue Plan and Governor Evers' proposed budget.” This report discusses the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of Wisconsin families, including those who have been most detrimentally affected by it - communities of color.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All images in this report are by Black Illustrations, unless otherwise attributed.

## Report Results

Results described here are from both the U.S. Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey (from November 25 – Dec 21) and the Socioeconomic Impact of COVID-19 Survey conducted by Washington University’s Social Policy Institute (from August 10 to September 4). Notably, many of the survey questions asked respondents about their experience in the week prior to filling out the question. All respondents had children living in their household. Indicators of food security, housing stability, health insurance status, and mental health stood out as key areas of impact among families across the state and nation, as well as child care access and deaths from COVID-19.



Over 1 in 3 families in Wisconsin (38%) reported difficulty paying for usual household expenses in the study week (45% nationally). This hardship was more frequent among Wisconsin’s families of color, and 2.9 times more Black families than white families reported this experience (5 out of 6 Black families). Thousands of families are living paycheck to paycheck with little to no savings, due to low wages and high costs of living in many regions of the state.

Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau



In Wisconsin, 51% of all families reported a loss of employment income since mid-March 2020 (56% nationally)<sup>2</sup>. Notably, 64% of Black and 71% of Latinx families suffered loss of job income. When people turned to Unemployment Insurance (UI) for help, Wisconsin’s sluggish and outdated system cracked under the sudden flood of new applications, leaving many families without the timely support they were counting on. Unemployment Insurance has been repeatedly overburdened by legislative actions adding needless obstacles.



Nearly 1 in 8 Wisconsin families (13%) reported that there was not enough to eat in their household during the study week (18% nationally). For many families, food insecurity was a problem before the arrival of COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, 9% of Wisconsin families reported not having enough food, revealing the inadequacy of our existing income and food assistance programs to meet the nutritional needs of our state’s families.



Over 1 in 7 Wisconsin families (15%) reported having little or no confidence in making their next rent or mortgage payment on time (22% nationally)<sup>3</sup>. Though the margins of error are somewhat wide at the state level, 42% of respondents in Wisconsin and 37% of respondents in the U.S. also reported being very or extremely likely to be forced to leave their current home due to eviction or foreclosure within the next two months<sup>4</sup>.

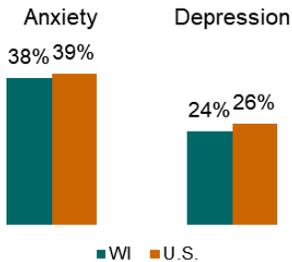
<sup>2</sup> Money icon by supalerk laipawat from the Noun Project. Wisconsin icon by Marvdrock from the Noun Project.

<sup>3</sup> Mortgage icon by Gilbert Bages from the Noun Project. Wisconsin icon by Marvdrock from the Noun Project.

<sup>4</sup> Data is from November 11th – December 7th, 2020.

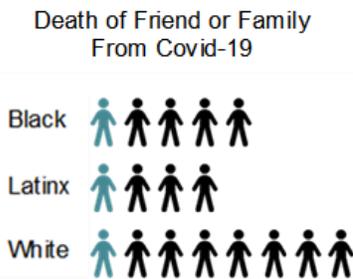


As hospitals and clinics became flooded with COVID-19 patients, other routine health care may have been postponed or cancelled. In Wisconsin, 1 in 3 families (33%) reported that they had delayed getting medical care due to the pandemic (36% nationally). However, health care was already inaccessible for some: 8% of Wisconsin families reported that they did not have health insurance (12% nationally).



Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Even for those with health insurance, mental health services have been reported as unavailable or extremely limited, despite families’ increasing need for this support. Over 1 in 3 Wisconsin families (38%) reported that they felt nervous, anxious or on edge for more than half of the days or nearly every day in the study week (39% nationally). Nearly 1 in 4 families in Wisconsin (24%) reported that they felt down, depressed or hopeless in the study week (26% nationally). Parents experiencing mental health challenges may have greater difficulty in attending to their children’s needs.



Data Source: Washington University

Though work, financial, and family stressors during the pandemic may be contributing to these mental health challenges, the impact of grief cannot be overlooked. [Over half a million people](#) in the U.S. have died from COVID-19, taking a substantial emotional toll on families. According to Washington University<sup>5</sup>, 25% of Latinx families, 20% of Black families, and about 13% of white families in the U.S. reported a death from COVID-19 among their friends and family members. By March 2, 7405 Wisconsin residents had died from COVID-19<sup>6</sup>. But the burden of illness and death has not been distributed equally within the state. Compared to white residents, Indigenous residents died at rates 2.9 times higher, Latinx residents 2.6 times higher, Black residents 2.2 times higher, and Asian and Pacific Islander residents 1.6 times higher.



According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation report, “half of the adults in households with children surveyed by Washington University said they felt they were not equipped to help their children with schoolwork, 36% were unable to provide their kids with a quiet place to study and 32% lacked adequate broadband internet and online learning tools.” Expanding broadband here in Wisconsin would go far toward ensuring families in both rural and urban areas have more equitable access to educational opportunities during this period of virtual learning.

<sup>5</sup> Person icon by Adrien Coquet for the Noun Project.

<sup>6</sup> Data through March 2, 2021. APM Research Lab, Color of Coronavirus <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>.

## Families Less Likely to Return Workforce Due to Lack of Child Care



Data Source: Washington University

The pandemic also revealed racial and gender inequalities in the pressure of balancing work and family life. Nationally, nearly 1 in 3 families with children (32%) reported to Washington University that they were less likely to return to the workforce due to a lack of child care<sup>7</sup>. Among Latinx families with children, this proportion was even higher: 38%. The Annie E. Casey Foundation report notes, “Whether these parents are finding such care is no longer available, they can no longer afford it, or they themselves have been thrust into additional caregiving roles, an enormous portion of the nation’s workers could be sidelined from being able to support themselves and their families, revealing a current and systemic challenge that will hold the country back from returning to full economic strength.”



Reversing decades of progress towards gender equality in the workplace, Bureau of Labor Statistics data revealed this summer that far more women than men have left the workforce. A [report](#) by Lean In and McKinsey and Company showed that 72% of fathers and 44% of mothers believe they are splitting the labor of housework equally with their spouse, and four times more mothers than fathers reported being responsible for all household labor. This report also notes particular challenges in the workplace this year for women of color and women with disabilities. According to [data](#) reported by Wisconsin Public Radio, Wisconsin women began 2020 with lower unemployment rates than men, but by April, unemployment rates for women were double those for men, and continued to be higher for several months. Preliminary data from the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) showed higher unemployment for women than men on average for 2020.

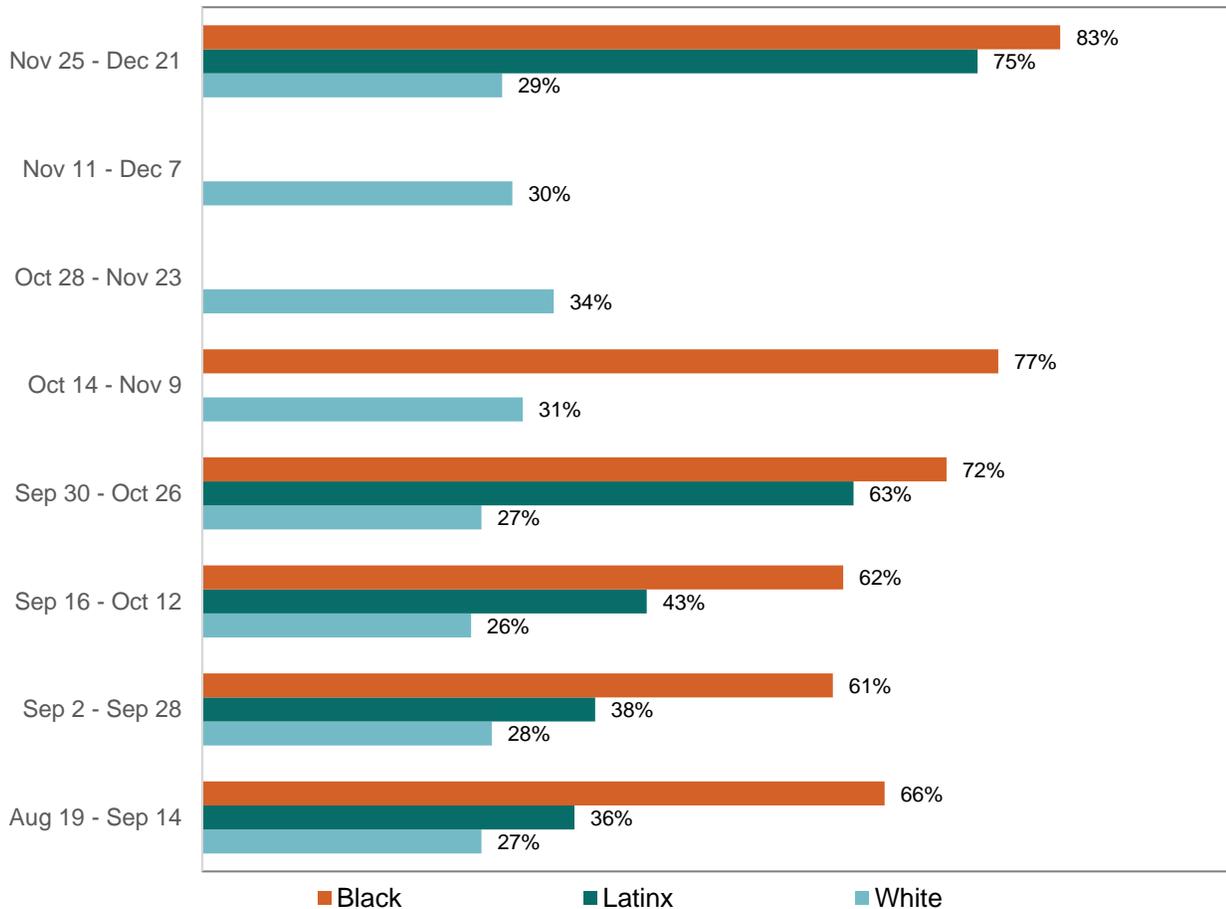
## Ongoing Data Shows Growing Hardship

These reports show how urgently families need immediate financial relief to keep food on their tables and a roof over their heads, and to ease the emotional burden they are experiencing. However, the data assembled in 2020 likely underrepresents the depth of hardship that now faces families across our state. More businesses have closed. Families’ savings are being further depleted. Children’s learning challenges have likely deepened. And parents’ coping strategies are being further tested. As more recent survey data are released, we expect greater hardship on Wisconsin’s families to be reflected, especially among Black and Latinx families. For example, more recent data shows a distressing 83% of Black families and 75% of Latinx families having difficulty paying for usual household expenses in the study week<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Child icon by Adrien Coquet from the Noun Project.

<sup>8</sup> Data is from Nov. 25<sup>th</sup> – Dec. 21, 2020.

## Wisconsin Households with Children Reporting Difficulty Paying for Usual Household Expenses in the Past Week

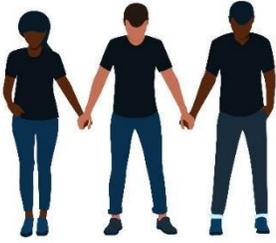


Data Source: Kids Count Data Center: <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data#WI/2/0/char/0/271>. Population Reference Bureau analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, Phase 2, 2020. Racial and ethnic groups in these data are not mutually exclusive.

### Economic Crises Before the Pandemic

Unfortunately, thousands of families were already suffering before COVID-19 arrived, especially families of color. Over 13 million U.S. children lived in poverty, and 4 million lacked health insurance. Results from the [2020 KIDS COUNT® Data Book](#) revealed a troubling pre-pandemic snapshot of Wisconsin’s children, especially for African American children: 42% lived in poverty, 51% lived in families with parents lacking secure employment, and 51% lived in families spending over thirty percent of their income on housing. Economic indicators were commonly three or four times more severe for African American children and families in our state than for whites. As the effects of the pandemic on employment, income, and housing ripple across our state, the impact of this crisis will certainly fall harder on those families of color who were already economically vulnerable.

## Opportunities for Positive Transformation



Although what is to come in the current year has yet to be seen with respect to family well-being, 2021 is also when Wisconsin will be deciding its state budget for the next biennium. We intend to use this time to create coalitions that fuel a morally responsible budget, capable of alleviating the hardship being born by so many Wisconsin families. Our goal goes beyond a return to the pre-pandemic economy. As advocated by [Reimagine Wisconsin](#), “we shouldn’t - and in fact we can’t - try to rebuild Wisconsin’s economy the way it was before the collapse. To do so would be to buy back into a system purposefully designed to systematically marginalize people of color and enrich only a few.”

This moment is an opportunity to examine policies and legislation that left thousands in Wisconsin out in the cold even before COVID-19 arrived. We must dismantle barriers that have kept families from thriving. We must fundamentally re-imagine education and child care, restore funding to our crumbling and inadequate public assistance programs, and restructure our economic policies to help more families achieve economic security. We will also demand that recovery plans prioritize the needs of those hardest hit by the crisis. “Pain and burnout arising from the vastness of this crisis is very real,” explained Erica Nelson, “but there are strategies to end this suffering. Effective solutions exist, and we must be persistent, putting one foot in front of the other, to find and then implement policies that can recreate, reform, and renew our state.”

Kids Forward calls on state policymakers to adopt cost-effective policies, many of which are embodied in the state budget, that will strengthen Wisconsin families, with a priority on meeting the needs of Wisconsin’s communities of color, by doing the following:

### *Data*

- Generally speaking: all agencies in the economic, health, and education arenas must routinely disaggregate the data they collect by race, ethnicity, and gender so they can be held accountable for managing their resources to achieve greater equity.

### *Economics*

- Reform unemployment insurance (UI) to cover all workers, replace the antiquated computer system that runs the UI program, and streamline the process for receiving benefits.
- Increase the minimum wage to a family-supporting level of at least \$15 an hour, and establish a method for it to be automatically adjusted each year for the cost of living.
- Require businesses to provide paid sick leave and family leave, so workers can afford to stay home if they are sick or someone in their family needs care.
- Strengthen a tax credit that enables homeowners on fixed incomes and people earning low wages to stay in their homes.
- Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to help combat poverty among children and families.

## Health

- Expand BadgerCare and add more options and flexibility for mental health coverage.
- Eliminate unnecessary barriers to health care and other public assistance programs that make it more difficult for families to receive urgently needed support.

## Education

- Increase broadband across the state to ensure equal access to education and employment opportunities.
- Support strong schools, and make sure they have the resources to safely educate children and address racial gaps in academic opportunity.
- Improve access to child care, especially for gig workers and families with part-time and variable work schedules. Increase investment in the child care industry and workforce.



The next few months will be critical for many families. The recent passage of the federal COVID-19 relief package will be critical for both individuals and small businesses, and so will the Wisconsin state budget. Keep your eyes on the [Kids Forward website](#) for more ways you can join us in advocating for long-term policy solutions that support every child, every family, and every community in Wisconsin.

## Acknowledgements

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