

Child care stresses, hunger are harming U.S. families during pandemic

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(HealthDay)—With everyday life turned upside down, efforts to prevent

the spread of COVID-19 are taking a toll on the well-being and health of American families, a new poll reveals.

More than 1,000 parents nationwide were surveyed in early June.

"Without question, COVID-19 had a sudden and profound effect on families nationwide," said survey leader Dr. Stephen Patrick. He's director of the Center for Child Health Policy at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville.

Physical distance requirements, he noted, resulted in total upheaval, with "abrupt closures of schools, [child care](#), community programs and workplaces. Parents lost jobs, child care, social networks. For kids, schools closed, they stopped going to pediatricians."

In many households, access to [basic needs](#) like [food](#) and supplies has been hard to come by, too.

As a result, just over a quarter of parents said their mental [health](#) had deteriorated during the pandemic, and about 14% said their kids' behavioral health suffered.

Four percent said their kids' physical health had suffered and nearly 1 in 5 said their own had also worsened.

The [online survey](#) found women, unmarried parents and young [children](#) appeared to be most vulnerable. But the health impacts were similar for all races and ethnic groups, income levels, educational backgrounds and locations.

The poll revealed that insurance coverage and medical routines have been compromised. About 3% of respondents said they had lost their employer-based health coverage since March. And close to 40% said

scheduled medical appointments for their child had been canceled or delayed.

The pandemic has also brought a rise in "food insecurity," the poll showed. Fewer than a third said access to adequate food was a problem in March, compared to 36% by early June.

"Put simply, there are millions of children who will go hungry tonight, and the pandemic has made that worse," Patrick said.

Child care routines also took a hit. Almost a quarter of parents said their pre-pandemic child care arrangements had evaporated. And for families with children 5 years old or younger, nearly 39% experienced disruptions in child care.

All these issues were heightened among the 10% who said that both their [mental health](#) and their child's had suffered. Half of those parents said they had lost their child care, according to Patrick, while 16% said their health insurance coverage had been affected. Just over 1 in 10 said they struggled with "[food insecurity](#)."

Patrick suggested that any effort to address these concerns should recognize the particular vulnerability of children.

"The pandemic exposes how fractured the safety net is for American families," he noted, given that even pre-pandemic children were twice as likely to live in poverty as seniors, and six times more likely to be uninsured.

The good news? Though school reopenings are a matter of debate, Patrick said U.S. Congress is weighing legislation now to support schools and caregivers. "Millions of children receive food from schools, and since the pandemic began free food has been an important source of

food for families," he said.

What's needed, Patrick said, is a "more cohesive approach" recognizing that children's health is driven by many factors that extend well beyond the walls of a pediatrician's exam room.

This thought was echoed by Julia Yeary, director of military [family](#) projects for the child advocacy group ZERO to THREE in Washington, D.C.

"For our children, their world has been turned upside down," she noted. "They have experienced so many losses: loss of teachers, friends, playing freely in the neighborhood, even playground restrictions.

"[And] when a family doesn't know if they can pay their rent or buy food, it will impact [children] emotionally and physically," Yeary added.

So how can parents cope?

"Caregivers need to start with taking care of themselves [and] finding the emotional support they need," Yeary said. "This is critical if they are going to help their [child](#) to feel safe during this pandemic."

She suggested parents look into the federal Women, Infants and Children (WIC) food assistance program and community food banks to help stretch food dollars. In some states, [parents](#) can dial 211, a family service helpline.

Results of the online poll appear in the July issue of the journal *Pediatrics*.

More information: For tips on pandemic-era parenting, visit the [Child Mind Institute](#).

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