

COVID-19 makes existing family stress worse, ongoing study finds

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When the pandemic started to shut everything down last March, UO psychologist Phil Fisher's team at the Center for Translational Neuroscience jumped into action.

Fisher saw that the nation was entering into a unique period that would impact families and young [children](#) and he wanted to make sure researchers were collecting information about how exactly it was affecting households across the country.

Fisher and his team's research focuses on how different factors influence early childhood development and either help or hinder the wellbeing of a young child. He uses this research to develop programs and [policy recommendations](#) that can boost social impact for families.

Within a few weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, Fisher launched an ongoing survey to collect data about how families with young children were coping. The survey—a key part of a project known as RAPID-EC, for Rapid Assessment of Pandemic

Impact on Development-Early Childhood—aims to uncover information about the needs, health and well-being of families and children during the pandemic. The project collects and analyzes data in a rapid and ongoing manner, so Fisher and the team can better understand child development over time.

"From our prior research, we know that early stress isn't good for young children and that parents can act as a buffer to help mitigate this effect," Fisher said. "With so much changing during the pandemic, we wanted to collect high quality, scientifically rigorous data to understand how things are changing for families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic."

With funding from several philanthropic foundations, and through preestablished partnerships with a handful of [family](#)-focused online organizations, Fisher was able to reach thousands of families and collect nationally representative data in all 50 states. The survey was distributed weekly from April through July, and it has continued to get circulated every other week since then.

The major takeaways from the survey may be surprising, as they reflect issues for families that are not unique to the pandemic but rather how issues that predated the pandemic have been exacerbated over the course of the last year.

"The challenges that people with children are facing are not new," Fisher said. "Many families don't have the supports they need."

The survey reports that more families are experiencing financial stress and that inequalities that existed before COVID-19 hit have grown even deeper.

"A large portion of families with children struggle to make ends meet," Fisher said. He points to data that shows 40 percent of families are dealing with

financial hardship during the pandemic and struggling to pay for things like rent, utilities and groceries.

Fisher said that is a problem for children because parents can pass this stress along to young kids because they have less capacity to buffer their children from that stress. When children experience what psychologists call "toxic stress," it can overload their biological systems and lead to changes in their brains and immune systems, inflammation, and cognitive development.

The survey also shows that inequalities that existed before the pandemic have been exacerbated during COVID-19. That includes factors like race, ethnicity, [economic status](#) and special needs. Fisher said 60 percent of Black, Latinx and single-parent households in their survey are having a tough time making ends meet during the pandemic, which is an increase from 40 percent, and that growth includes a lot of Black or Latinx households that were middle or upper class before the pandemic, he said.

"Our major takeaway from these surveys is that many families are not okay and kids are not okay," Fisher said.

The survey also included open-ended questions for parents to share their stories, and a large number of respondents were eager to have their voices heard. Fisher has collected more than 120,000 stories through the survey.

Fisher is now focused on sharing the stories, data and takeaways from the survey with policymakers from the county level to the federal government to help inform policy changes that will help families across the country recover from the hardships they're facing as a result of the [pandemic](#). Some of the policy solutions that he highlights include paid parental leave, subsidies for child care and financial relief for struggling families.

He explains that there are [economic benefits](#) to these kind of policy changes and that the cost of family support programs will go down if fewer families are in financial distress.

"If families have enough money to pay for their basic needs, then more parents can be in the workforce, which means more money is in the economy," Fisher said. "Our data will help show that as you focus on the intersectionality of these issues, you can end up with economic benefits that can appeal to people of all political persuasions."

Provided by University of Oregon

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