

Hunger is increasing among those who provide care to young children



November 2025



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Since March 2021, RAPID has been surveying child care providers of children under age 6 about their overall well-being and economic circumstances. One way that RAPID looks at economic circumstances is by asking about experiences of material hardship, defined as difficulty in the last month meeting one or more areas of basic need, including food, housing, utilities, child care, and healthcare.

There have been many recent reports about how the lapses in SNAP benefits will affect households with children. In this fact sheet, we report on how issues of food insecurity and hunger are affecting another critical sector of society — adults who provide care and education for young children. We depend on these individuals to nurture, teach, and keep our children safe every day, allowing tens of millions of parents to work and contribute to the economy.



Stanford
Center on Early Childhood

“Grocery bills continue to rise and we are having to cut back on what we buy and redo our menu at home to be able to afford the same amount of food we were buying just months ago. This is not a new trend. This has been a continual trend, but now it is really beginning to affect our income budget.”
Center director in Washington

“Keeping enough food to feed growing kids [is my biggest concern].”
FFN provider in Massachusetts

“[My biggest concern right now is that] we don’t go hungry in the street someday.” Center teacher in Georgia

“We are struggling to pay for basic needs such as healthcare and food.”
Home-based provider in Arkansas

In this context, data from the RAPID national survey of early care and education professionals should be cause for concern.

In March 2025, we reported that about half of surveyed child care providers had difficulty affording food in the last month, and in their open-ended question responses, providers wrote that they were very worried about their ability to reliably access food. Having access to essentials, like food, is critical to the well-being of providers and to their ability to support children, families, and communities. Hunger and economic instability in the early care and education workforce increase turnover and force providers to look elsewhere for better paying jobs that meet their basic needs.

In this fact sheet, we report on data collected between June 2021 and June 2025, to document what we are hearing from child care providers across the country about their access to food and experiences of hunger. Our sample includes center-based teachers and directors; home-based providers; and both paid and unpaid family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) providers.

“Grocery shopping expenses keep rising. The cost of living is so high.”
Center teacher in Michigan

Having enough food is a struggle for a significant percentage of child care providers

Provider hunger is a persistent and serious challenge that is growing sharply.

From June 2021 through May 2025, (44%) of child care providers surveyed, on average, experienced hunger.*

In June 2025, more than half (58%) of child care providers surveyed experienced hunger, one of the highest rates recorded since RAPID began collecting this data in 2021.

In responses to open-ended questions, child care providers wrote that they are concerned about their ability to reliably access food for themselves and their family and that they are stressed about having to pay more as the cost of groceries increases. Providers also shared that they skip meals and eat less so that the young children in their care have enough food, as indicated by the quotes in this fact sheet.

“We’re struggling to afford basic needs, food, rent, and utilities. Everything costs more, but our income hasn’t changed. We’re skipping meals so the kids can eat. Grocery prices are through the roof.”
Center teacher in Colorado

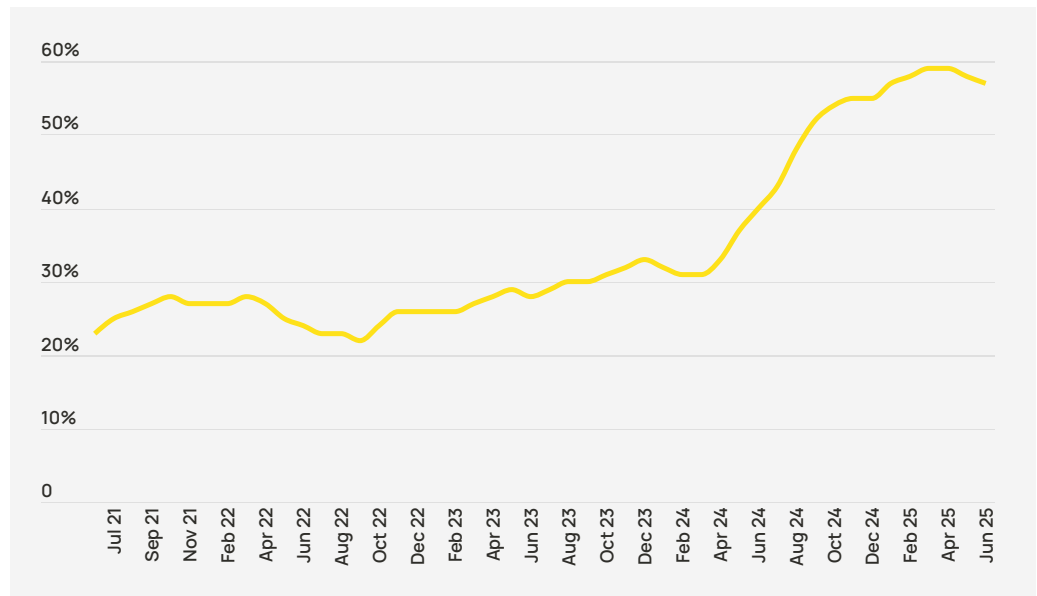
*We measured hunger by using six food security items developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA):

1. The food that we bought just didn’t last, and we didn’t have money to get more.
2. We couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals.
3. Did you or other adults in your household ever cut the size of your meal or skip meals because there wasn’t enough money for food?
4. If yes, how often did this happen?
5. Did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn’t enough money for food?
6. Were you ever hungry but didn’t eat because there wasn’t enough money for food?

We calculated a total score for each provider based on providers’ responses to these items and classified providers as experiencing hunger if they reported two or more of these experiences. (i.e., if they have a score equal to or greater than 2).

“Food bills are getting higher and higher.”
Center director in Washington

Percentage of providers experiencing hunger



Data note: We apply a common smoothing method to plot a trend line that approximates the overall pattern of the data while reducing short-term fluctuations. As such, the trend line provides an overall view of the data and is not intended to match the specific numbers cited in the narrative. Data collected between June 2021 and June 2025.

“Hunger issues [are my biggest concern].” Center teacher in New York

“Keeping food in the house and meeting our nutritional needs as a family [are my biggest concerns].”
Home-based provider in Ohio

Hunger is a struggle for child care providers that cuts across roles and settings

Hunger is a widespread issue affecting child care providers across all types of roles and settings.

In June 2025, center teachers (66%) were particularly affected by hunger, followed by home-based providers (52%) and FFN providers (46%). Even among higher-paying provider roles, 21% of center directors reported hunger.

“Keeping enough food on the table with rising grocery prices is hard.”
Center teacher in Connecticut

Although the percentages differ across child care provider roles and settings, the fact that a large percentage of providers across all provider roles and settings reported hunger points to the presence of broad economic challenges the early care and education workforce faces.

“The biggest challenges and concerns for me and my family right now are having reliable access to healthy food, paying all of our utility bills on time, and securing a stable home. Rising prices make it hard for us to buy enough food and pay for electricity, water, and other bills we need to live. We are worried we may lose our home if we fall behind on payments. We want a more stable and comfortable life, where we do not have to constantly stress about having enough food or keeping a roof over our heads. Our hope is to find a way to provide a better future for our family.”
Home-based provider in Indiana

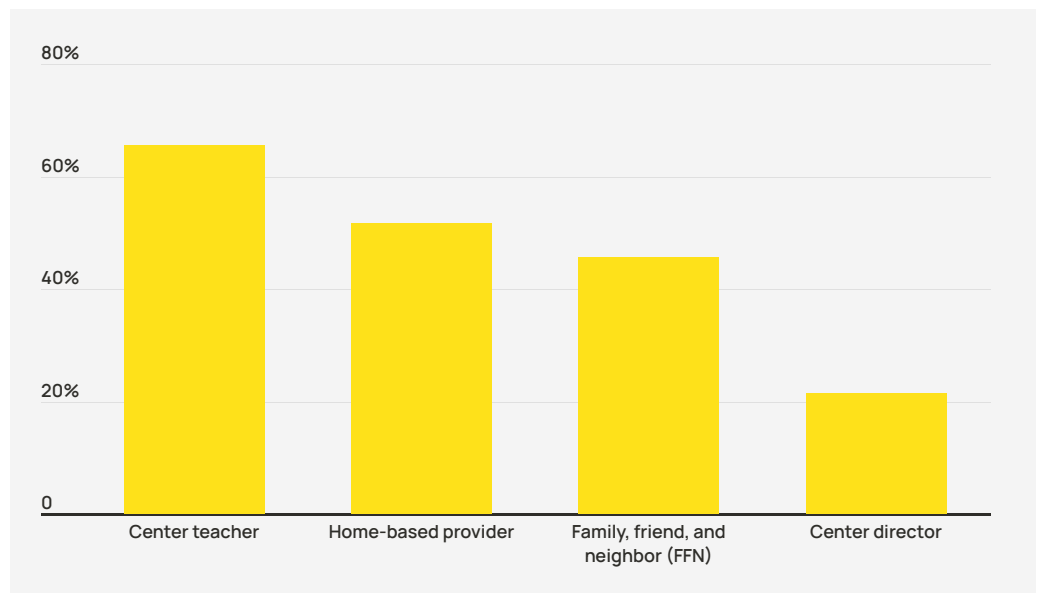
“Food cost is outrageous.”
FFN provider in North Carolina

“Grocery increase in prices and no local USDA program to help out. Providers are sinking farther and farther in the hole.” Home-based provider in Idaho

These experiences of hunger compromise providers' health, well-being, and ability to support the positive development of young children.

These data demand urgent attention from policymakers to shape policies and programs that improve providers' ability to meet basic needs, including food.

Percentage of providers in June 2025 experiencing hunger, by role



Conclusion

Over the past four years of the RAPID project, a substantial percentage of child care providers across all roles and settings have reported experiencing hunger. These trends are worsening and in June 2025 reached one of the highest levels since the study began in 2021.

Economic uncertainty and the rising cost of food and other basic needs are creating significant financial strain for providers. Other analyses show 43% of the early care and

education workforce relies on programs like SNAP to make ends meet. The shutdown of the federal government and resulting disruptions to SNAP will immediately impact provider hunger, a situation that will continue to worsen amid federal changes to nutrition programs, including cuts to SNAP and WIC and stricter eligibility requirements.

These economic challenges undermine caregiver well-being and children's development and are likely to increase provider turnover and program closures, creating additional disruptions for children and families. The prevalence of hunger in the early care and education workforce makes it essential to implement policies that support providers' ability to meet basic needs and thereby promote the well-being of children, families, and communities.

About the RAPID Survey Project

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

↑
23,000+
Parents

↑
15,000+
Providers

↑
50
U.S. States

This set of analyses on RAPID data is based on responses collected between June 2021 and June 2025 from 4,368 child care providers of children under age 6. These caregivers represent a range of voices: 18.4% are Black, 18.7% are Latinx, and 30.7% 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 not weighted.

The RAPID project includes a survey of caregivers with children under age 6 and a survey of child care providers and other adults who care for children under age 6. These surveys are designed to gather essential information continuously regarding the needs, health-promoting behaviors, and well-being of children and their families and important adults in their lives.

RAPID collects data monthly from caregivers and child care providers in all 50 states. The surveys are national in scope, though not technically nationally representative. RAPID collects snapshots of data across time and can also assess trends longitudinally.

For more information about RAPID study design and methods, [see here](#).