



# Stressors and Supports For Californians with Low Incomes During COVID-19

March 2023

## The ACCESS Study

The Assessing California Communities' Experiences with Safety net Supports (ACCESS) Study interviewed a diverse sample of 502 Californians with young children between August 2020 and April 2021. The goal was to understand the low take-up of safety net support programs. Survey sections covered topics such as housing, pandemic social stressors, adult and child health, discrimination, food insecurity, and health care access. Qualitative questions provided insight into family stressors, coping mechanisms, and whether new policies to help families eased some of the challenges associated with the pandemic. The study shed light upon the extent to which the pandemic exacerbated stressors among families and revealed the need for more robust supports for California families.

### Study Participant Characteristics

- \$20,235 average annual income
- 2 children on average
- 53% Latinx, 23% Black, 11% White, 12% Other race
- 28% Married
- 62% SoCal, 22% NorCal, 16% Central Cal
- 91% participated in CalFresh (SNAP) and/or WIC prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

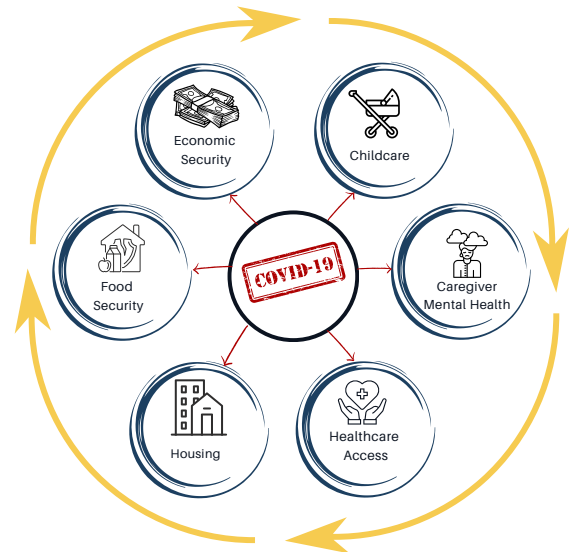
## Pandemic benefits helped, but stressors remained



Source: Monkey Business Images

California was at the forefront of instituting new social and economic policies to help families, including increased CalFresh benefits and stimulus checks.<sup>1</sup> While these additional supports helped, they could not eliminate all the stressors families faced during the pandemic. We found that school closures, lockdowns, and employment disruptions put stress on caregivers and children. Families living with low income were hit especially hard as they did not have the resources - space, money, flexible employment - to offset these new constraints.

“  
...it's been hard because I mean if COVID would have never existed, my kids' schools would still be open. We would have still been working, we would have been fine. We even had to use our life savings because like we had no money at all, whatsoever, once I had to stop working.  
- ACCESS Study Participant <sup>2</sup>  
”



# Multiple crises exacerbated pandemic stress

The ACCESS Study revealed that the most vulnerable families - those with the least time, money, and space - were most negatively impacted by compounding stressors during the pandemic



Source: Digitalskillet

“  
We utilized everything that was offered to us, everything that was available. Ultimately, none of them ended up helping us and we ended up relocating to a different county that was slightly cheaper, even though it was, you know, more of an inconvenience...”  
-ACCESS Study Participant<sup>2</sup>  
”

## Caregiver mental health suffered<sup>3</sup>

- Childcare and housing disruptions were associated with more depressive symptoms among caregivers.

## Employment disruptions were less impactful than housing and childcare disruptions.

- While the prevalence of employment disruptions was high, researchers did not find associations between employment disruptions and depressive symptoms, self-rated health, or food security among caregivers, possibly because unemployment supports were appropriately expanded.

## Healthcare was delayed for kids & caregivers<sup>4</sup>

- Lack of childcare and pre-existing medical conditions were associated with delays in healthcare for children.
- Lack of childcare, experiences of racism, and government mistrust were all associated with delayed medical care among parents/caregivers.

## Recommendations:

### More support is needed for families with low-income

The pandemic exacerbated existing weaknesses in the safety net. It is critical to address the following issues, both for future emergency preparedness and for ongoing support of families in need. Additional supports are needed to ensure:

- Affordable childcare
- Equitable access to open schools
- Adequate income and housing supports
- Reducing impacts of structural racism

This work is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Tipping Point, and UC Berkeley. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funding agencies.

#### References:

1. Characterizing the landscape of safety net programs and policies in California during the COVID-19 Pandemic. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19052747>
2. A qualitative study of pandemic disruptions and perceived gaps in government supports among mothers of young children. Mooney, A. Forthcoming.
3. Pandemic-related socioeconomic disruptions and adverse health outcomes: a cross-sectional study of female caregivers. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14287-2>
4. Social and economic factors related to healthcare delay among low-income families during COVID-19: Results from the ACCESS Observational Study. <http://doi.org/10.1353/hpu.2022.0148>