



Child Care Workers' Experience of Economic Hardship During the COVID-19 Pandemic, from 2021 to 2022

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KEY POINTS

- The Census Household Pulse Survey provided a window into experiences of hardship reported by child care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This analysis shows that child care workers experienced high rates of hardship compared to other employed persons:
 - Reports of housing insecurity ranged from a high of 25 percent to a low of 11 percent during the period April 2021 to May 2022
 - Reports of energy insecurity ranged from a high of 59 percent to a low of 29 percent during the period August 2021 to August 2022
 - Reports of difficulty with household expenses ranged from a high of 79 percent to a low of 49 percent during the period April 2021 to August 2022
 - Reports of food insecurity ranged from a high of 63 percent to a low of 25 percent during the period April 2021 to August 2022
- Black and Latino child care workers experienced more hardship than White and Asian child care workers; differences in rates of hardship by race and ethnicity were observed for housing insecurity, food insecurity, and difficulty with household expenses.
- Child care workers living with young children experienced higher rates of energy insecurity than child care workers living without young children.
- Findings support policies to raise wages, improve workplace benefits, and raise the wage floor for child care workers.

OVERVIEW

Child care workers have historically earned very low wages relative to other teaching jobs and occupations with comparable skill demands, even before the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Earnings are so low that many child care workers cannot afford care for their own children.^{2,3} Racial inequities in positions and wages have characterized the child care field, where Black and Latino workers are more likely to be in lower-level positions⁴ and Black early care and education (ECE) workers experience wage disparities compared to White workers.^{5,6} Low wages in the ECE workforce disproportionately affect women of color,⁷ who are overrepresented in the ECE workforce and its lowest-paying jobs.^{8,9}

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in child care closures and job and revenue loss.^{10,11} Many child care programs that remained open operated with lower enrollment, contributing to greater financial instability.¹² Only 67 percent of the 2019 center-based child care and early education workforce was employed in October 2020 (seven months into the pandemic), and a majority of child care workers experienced at least one period of not working from March 2020 through early 2021.¹³ Employment in October 2020 also differed by race and ethnicity: Latino center-based teachers were less likely to be working than their non-Latino White counterparts.¹⁴ From the perspective of families with young children, families had difficulty accessing child care amidst child care disruptions, with Latino and Black households most affected by pandemic-related child care disruptions.^{15,16}

Many children and families experienced economic hardship during the pandemic. While many people lost employment throughout 2020, Black, Latino, and other people of color bore hardship disproportionately.^{17,18} Upwards of 20 percent of Black and Latino households with children had a worker who left or lost employment, compared to 16 percent of White households with children, from April to June 2021.¹⁹ As of December 2020, Black and Latino individuals experienced food insecurity at over double the rate than White individuals.²⁰ Households with children also bore high rates of hardship; for example, households with children were more likely to report food insecurity than households without children in October 2021.²¹

This brief describes the significant hardships child care workers experienced during the second and third years of the COVID-19 pandemic (from April 2021 to August 2022), focusing specifically on housing insecurity, energy insecurity, difficulty with household expenses, and food insecurity. Using Census Household Pulse data, we looked at child care workers' experiences of hardship over time. We also look at how experiences of hardship differed by race and by the presence of young children in households.

DATA SOURCE: CENSUS HOUSEHOLD PULSE SURVEY

This analysis used data from the [Census Household Pulse Survey](#), which was designed to quickly capture social and economic changes in the U.S. population to aid federal and state policymakers during pandemic recovery.²² This analysis used data collected from April 2021 to August 2022 (biweekly from April 2021 to October 2021; monthly thereafter).^{23,*} The online surveys were administered to a random selection of housing units from the Census Bureau Master Address File.^{24,25}

Our sample focuses on child care workers, which is defined as respondents who reported being employed “outside your home” at a “preschool or daycare” setting in the last seven days.[†] The sample includes all workers who work in preschool or child care settings such as custodial staff, bus drivers, directors, and managers, as well as teachers. As a result of the survey item wording, this analysis excludes preschool or child care teachers who worked virtually at home and family child care workers who provided care in their own homes. However, employees of

In this brief, child care workers are teachers or other staff working in a preschool or child care setting outside their home. Child care workers who provide child care in their own home or who were unemployed at the time of the survey are not included.

* Some indicators used in measures of economic hardship are available for fewer months and that is indicated in the findings section.

† Respondents who reported not working for either pay or profit in the last seven days (e.g., volunteers) were dropped from this analysis.

family child care providers who do not live at the care setting were included. Due to survey item wording, this analysis also does not include those who were not working at the time of the survey.

We examined four types of hardship: housing insecurity, energy insecurity, difficulty with household expenses, and food insecurity:

- We identified respondents as **housing insecure** if they were not caught up on rent or mortgage; were “not at all confident” or only “slightly confident” in their ability to pay mortgage or rent next month; or were deferring their rent or mortgage payment.[‡]
- We identified respondents as **energy insecure** if they had ever in the last 12 months reduced or had to forego expenses for basic household necessities to pay an energy bill; or had ever in the last 12 months been unable to pay the full energy bill amount.
- We identified respondents as having **difficulty with household expenses** if they responded that their level of difficulty paying for usual household expenses was “a little difficult,” “somewhat difficult,” or “very difficult.”
- We identified respondents as **food insecure** if they reported having “sometimes” or “often” not enough to eat or “not the kinds of food” they wanted to eat.

The sample size of child care workers varied by hardship indicator (see Table 1 in the appendix) and across waves. For example, the sample size for food insecurity ranged from around 100 to 300 respondents per wave (the total number of respondents across all waves for food insecurity was a little under 5,000 respondents). We used person weights for estimates and replicate weights to produce standard errors and conduct statistical tests for differences by race/ethnicity and by whether child care workers live with young children. All differences discussed in this paper are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

Readers should be mindful of the limitations in this data source. The 2020 Census Household Pulse Survey had low overall response rates and varying levels of nonresponse bias across periods, calling into question whether these data are representative of the U.S. population.²⁶ In addition, this analysis has some limitations related to who the child care workers are that were and were not included. This analysis excludes child care workers who work virtually from home or care for children in their own homes (e.g., family child care providers). This analysis also excludes respondents with missing data on the hardship variables (i.e., individuals missing on housing insecurity were not included in the housing insecurity analysis), and these individuals may be different from those with non-missing data. For example, individuals with missing values on a housing item were less likely to hold bachelor’s degrees, and less likely to be White, than individuals with non-missing values on this item. We also exclude child care workers who were unemployed at the time of the survey, which may lead to underestimates of economic hardship. Finally, non-teaching staff may also be included in the analyses.

FINDINGS

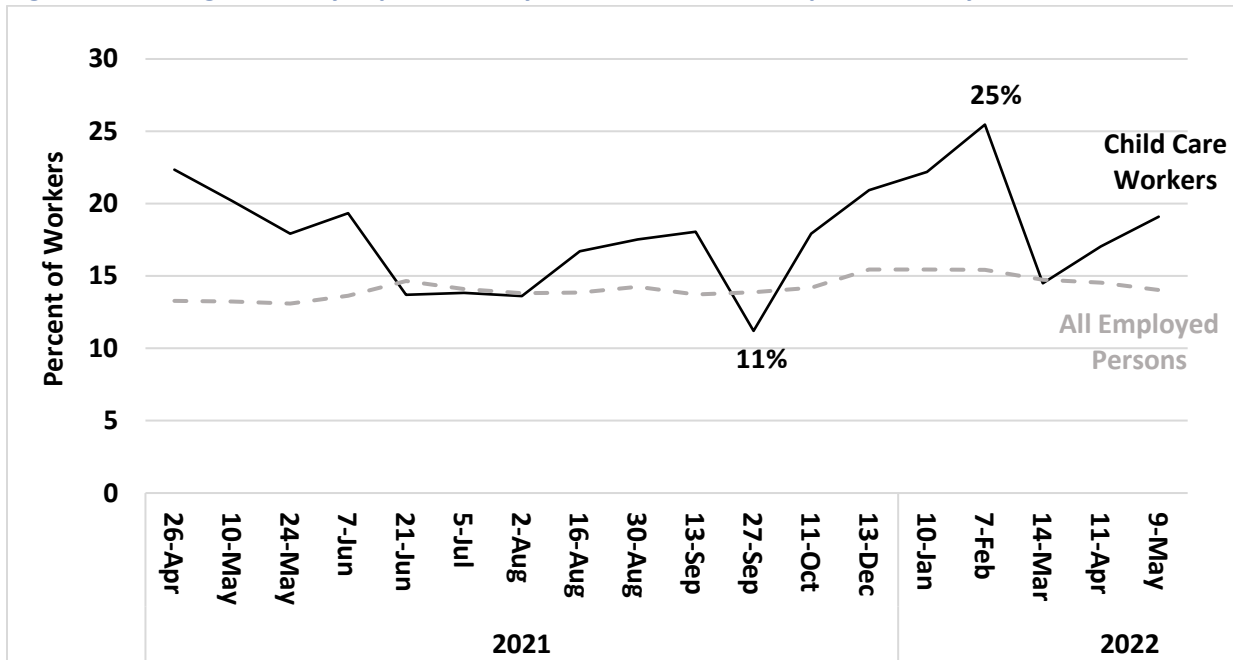
Child care workers experienced high levels of economic hardship

We looked at four types of hardship: housing insecurity, energy insecurity, difficulty with household expenses, and food insecurity.

[‡] Those who owned their house free and clear and or who occupied without payment of rent were automatically coded as housing secure.

Child care workers experienced high levels of housing insecurity from April 2021 to May 2022,⁵ with a low of 11 percent to a high of 25 percent of child care workers reporting housing insecurity at any given time (Figure 1). “All employed persons” (also from the Census Household Pulse Survey data) includes child care workers and is provided as a reference only. Child care workers make up less than one percent of all employed persons.

Figure 1. Housing Insecurity Experienced by Child Care Workers, April 2021-May 2022



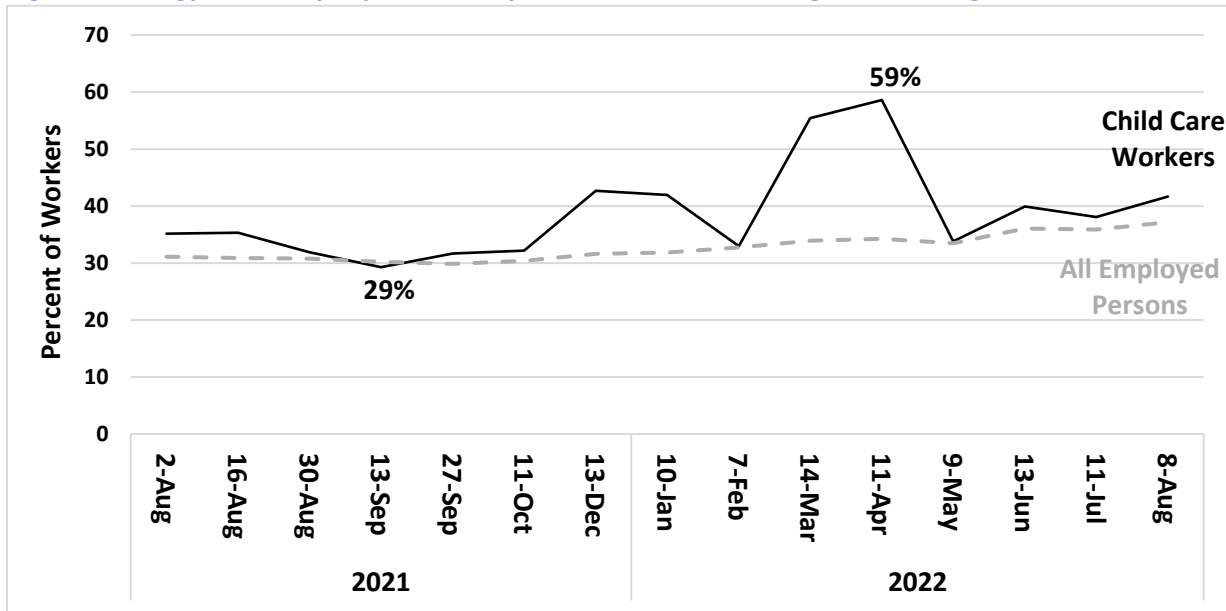
Source: Census Household Pulse Survey, N=4007

Note: “All employed persons” includes child care workers and is provided as a reference only. Child care workers make up less than one percent of all employed persons. One item used in the housing insecurity indicator was not available after May 2022. A chi-square test of independence determined that overall (aggregating across all waves in the period above), child care workers were more likely to experience housing insecurity compared to all other employed persons.

⁵ One item used in the housing insecurity indicator was not available after May 2022.

Child care workers experienced high levels of energy insecurity from August 2021 to August 2022, ** with a low of 29 percent to a high of 59 percent of child care workers reporting energy insecurity at any given time (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Energy Insecurity Experienced by Child Care Workers, August 2021-August 2022



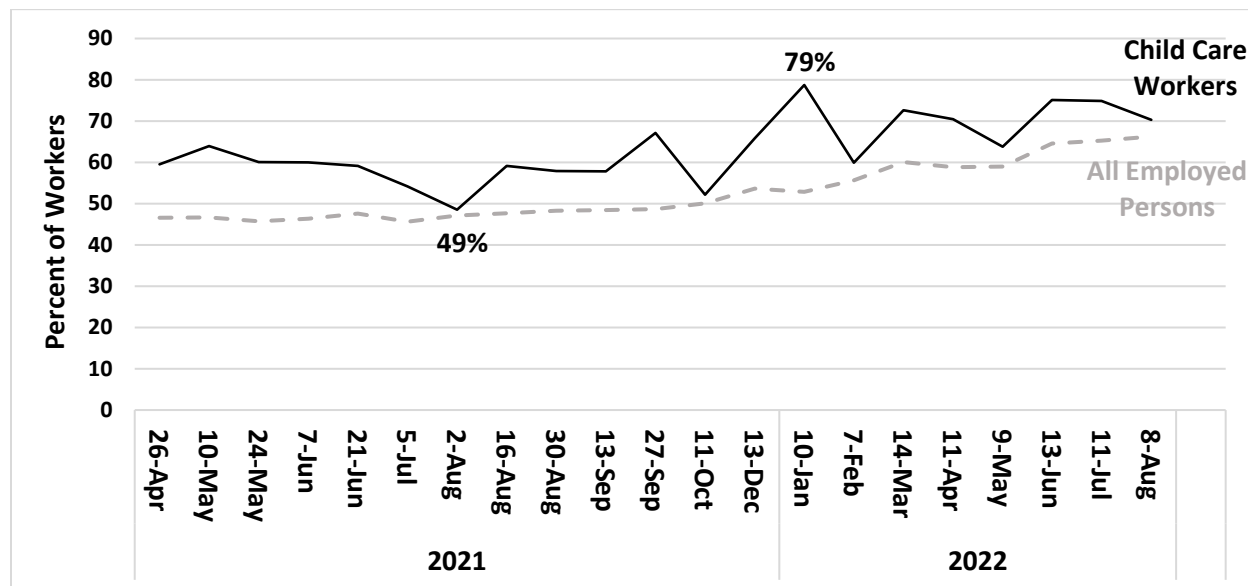
Source: Census Household Pulse Survey, N=2951

Note: "All employed persons" includes child care workers and is provided as a reference only. Child care workers make up less than one percent of all employed persons. Items used in the energy insecurity indicator were available beginning August 2021. A chi-square test of independence determined that overall (aggregating across all waves in the period above), child care workers were more likely to experience energy insecurity compared to all other employed persons.

** Items used in the energy insecurity indicator were available beginning August 2021.

Child care workers experienced high rates of difficulty paying for usual household expenses from April 2021 to August 2022, with a low of 49 percent to a high of 79 percent of child care workers reporting difficulties with household expenses at any given time (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Difficulty with Household Expenses Experienced by Child Care Workers, April 2021-August 2022

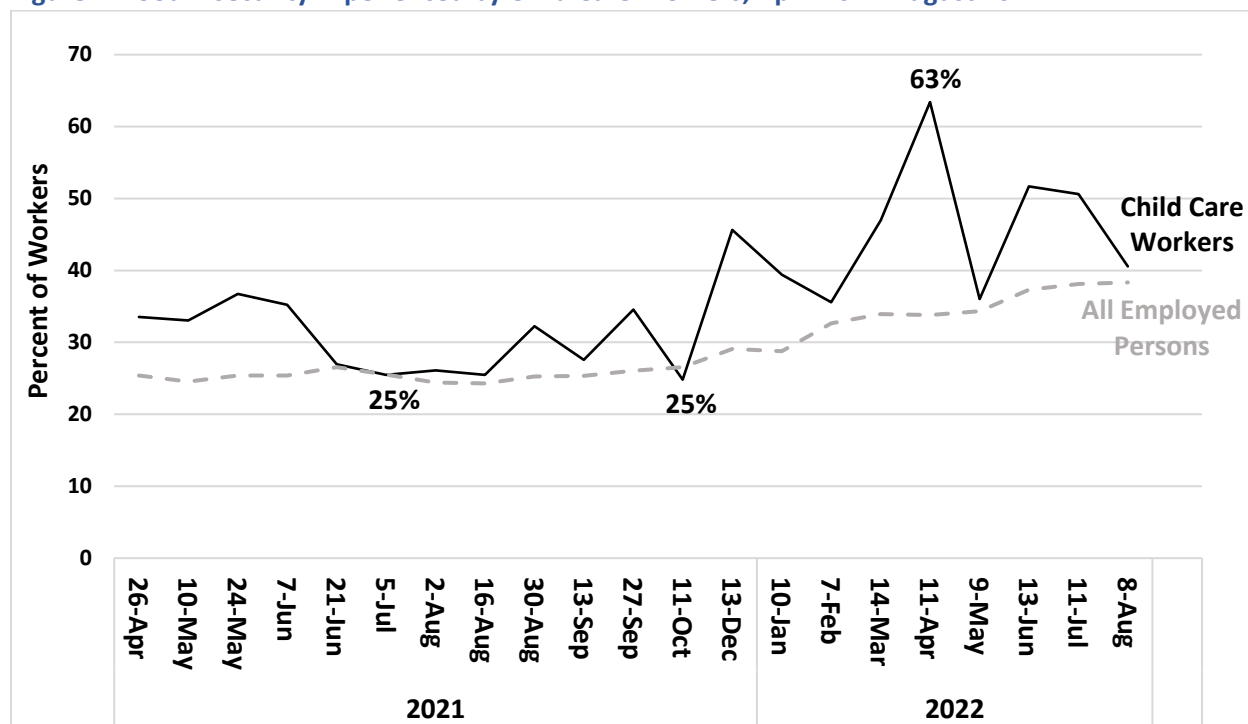


Source: Census Household Pulse Survey, N=5168

Note: "All employed persons" includes child care workers and is provided as a reference only. Child care workers make up less than one percent of all employed persons. A chi-square test of independence determined that overall (aggregating across all waves in the period above), child care workers were more likely to experience difficulty with household expenses compared to all other employed persons.

Child care workers experienced high rates of food insecurity from April 2021 to August 2022, with a low of 25 percent to a high of 63 percent of child care workers reporting food insecurity at any given time (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Food Insecurity Experienced by Child Care Workers, April 2021-August 2022



Source: Census Household Pulse Survey, N=4908

Note: "All employed persons" includes child care workers and is provided as a reference only. Child care workers make up less than one percent of all employed persons. A chi-square test of independence determined that overall (aggregating across all waves in the period above), child care workers were more likely to experience food insecurity compared to all other employed persons.

Black and Latino (any race) child care workers experienced greater hardship than White and Asian child care workers

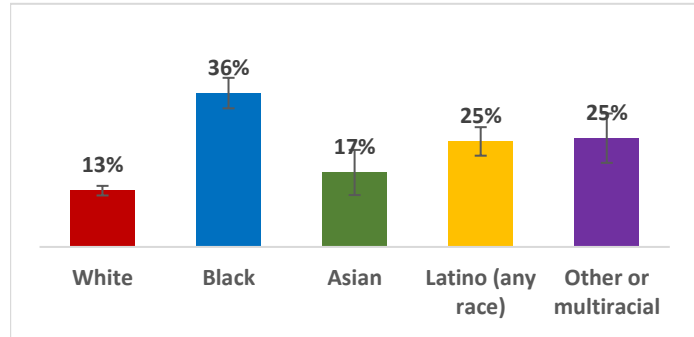
There were several differences observed in rates of hardship by race and ethnicity for housing and food insecurity and difficulty with household expenses.

Black and Latino workers experienced significantly higher rates of housing insecurity than White workers (Figure 5). Black workers also experienced significantly higher rates of housing insecurity than Asian workers. Black and Latino workers experienced significantly greater difficulty with household expenses than White workers (Figure 6).

White, Black, Latino, and Other or multiracial workers⁺⁺ experienced significantly higher rates of food insecurity than Asian workers (Figure 7). Latino workers also experienced significantly higher rates of food insecurity than White workers. Other differences across groups were not statistically significant.

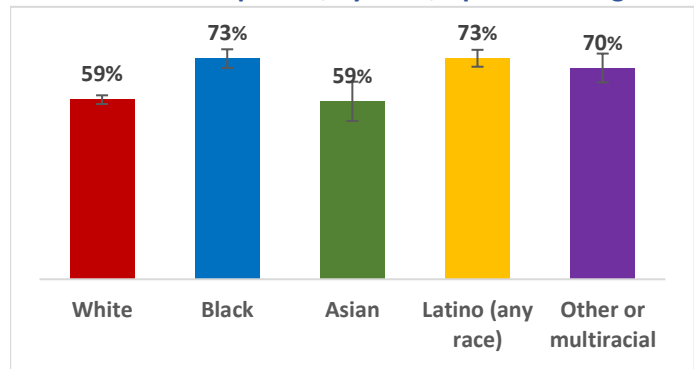
There were no differences in rates of energy insecurity by race and ethnicity (estimates not shown).

Figure 5. Percent of Child Care Workers Experiencing Housing Insecurity, by Race, April 2021-May 2022



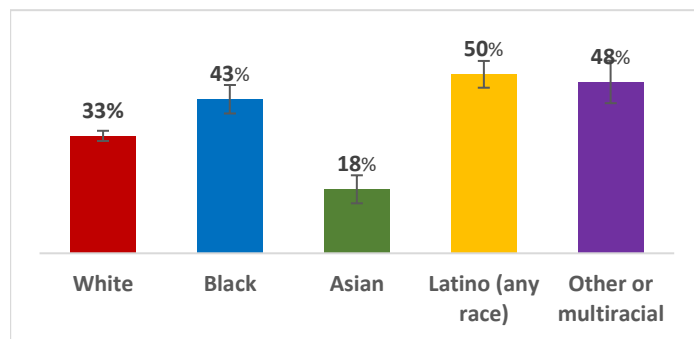
White (N = 3022), Black (N = 327), Asian (N = 107), Latino (N = 402), Other or multiracial (N = 149). The error bars represent a 95% confidence interval.

Figure 6. Percent of Child Care Workers Experiencing Difficulty with Household Expenses, by Race, April 2021-August 2022



White (N = 3858), Black (N = 438), Asian (N = 149), Latino (N = 508), Other or multiracial (N = 215). The error bars represent a 95% confidence interval.

Figure 7. Percent of Child Care Workers Experiencing Food Insecurity, by Race, April 2021-August 2022



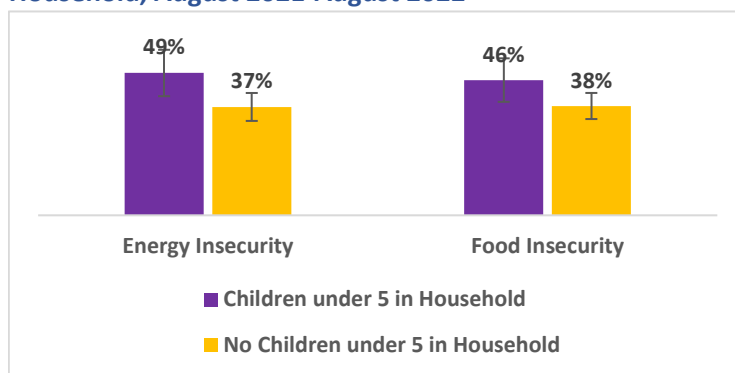
White (N = 3677), Black (N = 412), Asian (N = 140), Latino (N = 477), Other or multiracial (N = 202). The error bars represent a 95% confidence interval.

⁺⁺ The category “Other or multiracial” includes, for example, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Chamorro, Samoan, or Other Pacific Islander; and individuals who selected two or more races (but were not Latino).

Child care workers living with young children experienced greater energy insecurity than those not living with young children

Child care workers living with young children experienced significantly higher rates of energy insecurity than those living without young children. The data also suggests that child care workers living with young children may have experienced higher rates of food insecurity than child care workers living without young children, but this difference was marginally significant ($p < 0.06$; Figure 8). There was no difference for housing insecurity and difficulty with household expenses (estimates not shown).

Figure 8. Percent of Child Care Workers Experiencing Energy Insecurity and Food Insecurity, by Presence of Young Children in Household, August 2021-August 2022



Energy Insecurity, Children under 5 in Household (N = 480), No Children under 5 in Household (N = 2471); Food Insecurity, Children under 5 in Household (N = 527), No Children under 5 in Household (N = 2670). The error bars represent a 95% confidence interval.

CONCLUSION

Using data from the Household Pulse Survey, we found that child care workers experienced concerning rates of housing insecurity, food insecurity, energy insecurity, and difficulty with household expenses from April 2021 to August 2022. These findings lend support for policies that aim to raise wages and improve workplace benefits for child care workers overall and raise the wage floor for child care workers (i.e., the minimum wage for child care workers). Although we are not able to directly explain variation in hardship across time, it is useful to note that during this time, inflation was high and continued to rise;^{27,28} many households with children received monthly advance payments of the Child Tax Credit (July to December 2021),^{29,30} followed by a lump sum payment for some households in 2022.³¹ States received significant funding from the federal government to provide stabilization funds for child care providers in 2021³² and implementation varied; provider receipt differed across states³³ and as of December 2021, some states had either not obligated half of the stabilization funding or any of the funding.^{34,35}

There were also disparities in rates of hardship by race and ethnicity. Black and Latino child care workers experienced more housing insecurity and difficulty with household expenses than White, non-Latino workers; Latino child care workers experienced more food insecurity than White, non-Latino workers; and Black child care workers experienced more housing insecurity and food insecurity than Asian workers. These differences may be due to structural barriers that Black and Latino child care workers face: Black and Latina women disproportionately work in home-based child care and experience wage disparities related to age of children served.^{36,37,38} Education is also tied to compensation.³⁹ Black and Latino ECE workers are less likely to hold a bachelor's degree than White or Asian workers.⁴⁰ Policies are needed to address racial inequities in positions, wages, and education.⁴¹

There were also disparities in hardship experienced by households with and without young children: child care workers living with young children experienced higher rates of energy insecurity than child care workers living without young children. These findings bolster the need for policies that support workers with young children (i.e., the provision of child care for child care workers with young children).

This brief highlights the hardship experienced by child care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring the need for more support for the child care workforce. Addressing hardship among child care workers could also yield positive downstream effects for the children and families that rely on the child care workforce.⁴²

APPENDIX

Table 1. Sample Size of Child Care Workers and All Employed Persons, by Hardship Indicator and by Wave

Housing Insecurity			
Year	Wave	Child Care Workers	All Employed Persons
2021	26-Apr	228	31,713
	10-May	286	36,639
	24-May	259	34,067
	7-Jun	268	32,552
	21-Jun	230	31,212
	5-Jul	217	29,820
	2-Aug	196	31,561
	16-Aug	176	33,700
	30-Aug	196	34,130
	13-Sep	171	31,616
	27-Sep	175	29,605
	11-Oct	202	27,953
	13-Dec	203	31,500
2022	10-Jan	191	39,369
	7-Feb	289	38,731
	14-Mar	283	42,419
	11-Apr	211	31,551
	9-May	226	30,229
Energy Insecurity			
2021	2-Aug	196	31,235
	16-Aug	178	33,421
	30-Aug	193	33,764
	13-Sep	167	31,287
	27-Sep	174	29,339
	11-Oct	197	27,667
	13-Dec	203	31,220
2022	10-Jan	186	39,065
	7-Feb	286	38,381
	14-Mar	278	42,063
	11-Apr	207	31,290
	9-May	222	29,976
	13-Jun	174	30,055
	11-Jul	152	27,433
	8-Aug	138	24,191
Difficulty with Household Expenses			
2021	26-Apr	293	38,696
	10-May	342	44,646
	24-May	317	41,709
	7-Jun	328	39,904
	21-Jun	304	38,285
	5-Jul	284	36,586

	2-Aug	218	34,751
	16-Aug	189	37,142
	30-Aug	219	37,508
	13-Sep	186	34,639
	27-Sep	197	32,444
	11-Oct	223	30,793
	13-Dec	219	34,240
2022	10-Jan	206	42,004
	7-Feb	303	41,896
	14-Mar	321	46,952
	11-Apr	233	34,708
	9-May	248	33,354
	13-Jun	206	34,185
	11-Jul	174	31,257
	8-Aug	158	27,344
Food Insecurity			
2021	26-Apr	268	36,030
	10-May	321	41,618
	24-May	293	38,854
	7-Jun	302	37,184
	21-Jun	275	35,619
	5-Jul	252	34,023
	2-Aug	215	34,030
	16-Aug	187	36,403
	30-Aug	211	36,791
	13-Sep	182	33,995
	27-Sep	195	31,851
	11-Oct	218	30,162
	13-Dec	216	33,647
2022	10-Jan	205	41,427
	7-Feb	299	41,220
	14-Mar	309	45,273
	11-Apr	220	33,472
	9-May	239	32,198
	13-Jun	192	32,348
	11-Jul	163	29,604
	8-Aug	146	26,024

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