

A Closer Look at Families' Experiences with Massachusetts Family Support Programs during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Led by researchers from Tufts Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research (TIER) at Tufts University, the Children's Trust funded a study that aimed to understand changes in families' experiences during the pandemic, and how local agencies who provide services to families adapted to meet families' needs. In December of 2020, 156 staff from Children's Trust family support programs voluntarily participated in a brief online survey. Featured programs included Healthy Families Massachusetts (HFM) and Family Centers. See inset for a description of the participating programs. Staff answered questions about whether families experienced increased struggles, if it was difficult to reach families, and how their agencies adapted to meet families' needs.

Healthy Families Massachusetts is a home-based family support and coaching program that supports young, first-time parents and helps them create stable, nurturing environments for their children. The program matches parents with trained professionals who visit families' homes to provide support during pregnancy and the child's first three years of life.

Family Centers are community hubs where parents go to get support navigating the joys and challenges of parenting. They can tap into community resources, learn new parenting skills, get individualized family support during times of stress, meet other families, and participate in activities and programs that support them in their caregiving role.

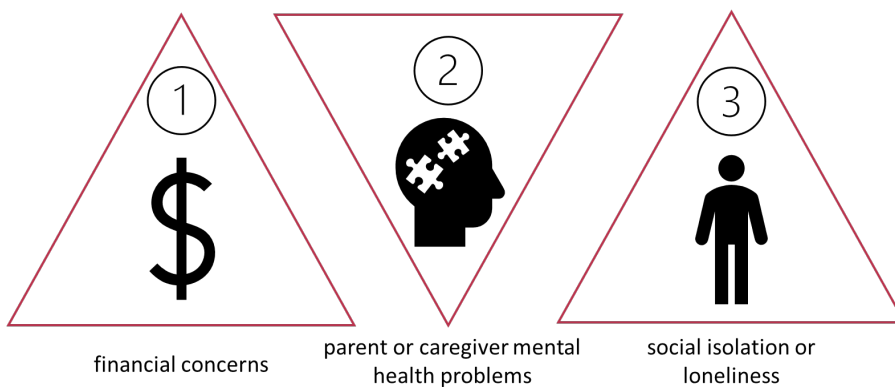


Figure 1. Staff report on families' top three struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Three-quarters or more of staff perceived families to be experiencing increased stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. The top three key stressors identified by staff included financial concerns, parent or caregiver mental health problems, and social isolation and loneliness. Despite rising concerns for parents' mental health, two-

thirds of staff agreed that families were less likely to be able to access mental health services during the pandemic.

Staff aimed to address families' stressors in multiple ways. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, high proportions of staff reported that they provided resources to or engaged in several activities more frequently, including providing families with concrete support or basic resources (60% of staff), hosting virtual playgroups or social activities for families (74% of staff), and hosting virtual parent education or support groups for families (66%). Moreover, 94% of agencies developed resources for community-level supports related to the pandemic, including flyers for foodbanks and personal protective equipment access.

While agencies were able to quickly pivot to virtual programming, some families remained hard to reach. Notably, families experiencing mental health challenges and housing insecurity were cited as the hardest to reach during the COVID-19 pandemic. Young families, families involved with child protective services, undocumented families, and families experiencing intimate partners violence were also perceived as hard to reach by about 30% of participating staff. See Figure 2.

Figure 2. % staff perceived family is hard to reach during the pandemic (n=155).

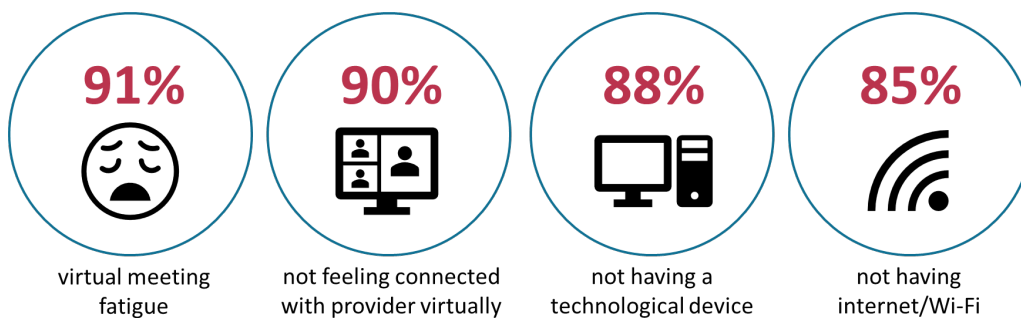
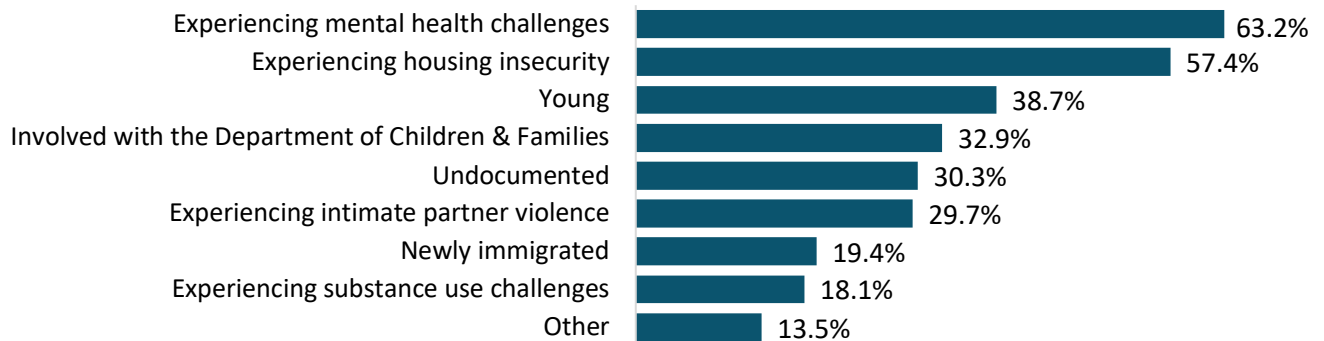


Figure 3. % staff perceived most common barriers to receiving virtual services among families during the pandemic.

Several barriers hindered families from receiving virtual services. Virtual meeting fatigue, not feeling connected to their provider in a virtual space, not having a computer or cell

phone, and not having internet or Wi-Fi access were the most common barriers mentioned by staff.

In effort to address some of these barriers, most staff reported that their agencies connected families with organizations that provided families with technological devices and provided families with information on places within their communities that offered free Wi-Fi.

Families were not alone in experiencing increased stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff identified their top three stressors as engaging and supporting families virtually, worrying about getting sick with COVID-19, and having an increased workload. Despite this, staff overwhelmingly reported that they felt connected and supported by both their colleagues and supervisors, with 80% of staff being satisfied with how their agency adapted during the pandemic.

Family support programs play an essential role in addressing the needs of families with young children during the pandemic.

To learn more about TIER, visit our website: <https://ase.tufts.edu/tier/>

To learn more about these local agencies in your community, visit the Children’s Trust website at: <https://childrenstrustma.org/our-programs>