

## The Children's Trust and Universal Basic Income: Initial Lessons Learned from Family Financial Pilot Initiative

While the United States does not offer a federal unrestricted cash grant program, states and localities across the nation have experimented in "universal basic income," providing stipends to families to ensure that basic health, housing, nutrition, education, and utility needs are effectively met. In 2025 alone, 18 states - including California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania - have launched programs to provide financial floors to families, regardless of work requirements and means testing. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has explored a number of universal cash grant projects in recent years, most of which were located in eastern Massachusetts and serving the greater Boston area.

Seeing the potential value in such efforts in other parts of the state, the Children's Trust established its Family Financial Pilot (FFP) in Springfield, seeking to help a region of the state, often overlooked by such policy pilots, in real need. Utilizing financial resources made available through the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the Children's Trust, through its successful Healthy Families Massachusetts program, launched an ambitious universal basic income effort to identify and implement new ways to support families in need.

Why did the Children's Trust take on this effort? While such experiments in the United States have largely focused on the financial impact of such programs, the Children's Trust saw a real need to determine how unrestricted cash grant programs could positively impact family structures, specifically reducing child abuse and neglect while building economic supports for families most in need.

### Methodology

Launched in June 2023, FFP was designed by the Children's Trust in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, including the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance and a range of organizations and government entities working closely with Healthy Families Massachusetts. More than \$1.2 million was provided to 132 families in the Springfield-based program, with participating families receiving \$500 monthly for 18 months. Prenatal participants (18 in total) received \$100 a month until the child's birth, and then received \$500 monthly payments. Accelerated payments (\$550, \$650, \$750) were provided to participants in the final three months of the pilot to ease transition.

As financial relief was not the only objective of the initiative, in addition to cash payments, participants were also offered group meetings with other parents, providing opportunities for sharing insights and for receiving information on economic well-being topics that complemented existing family support programming they were receiving through Healthy Families.

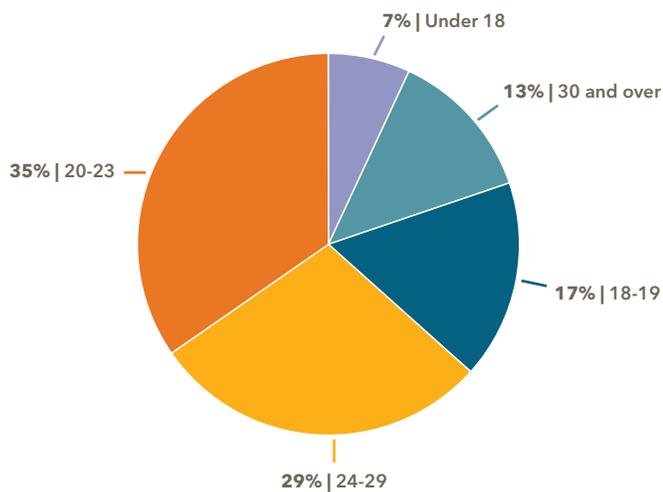
**"I use it for the basics for my daughter, It gives me room to breathe."**

- FFP participant

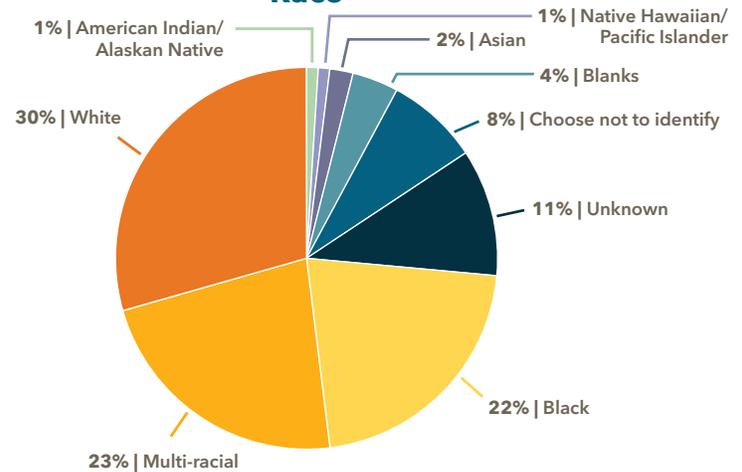
## Participant Demographics

As illustrated by the charts below, the Children's Trust sought to build a cohort that represented the population of western Massachusetts and of those families in the most need.

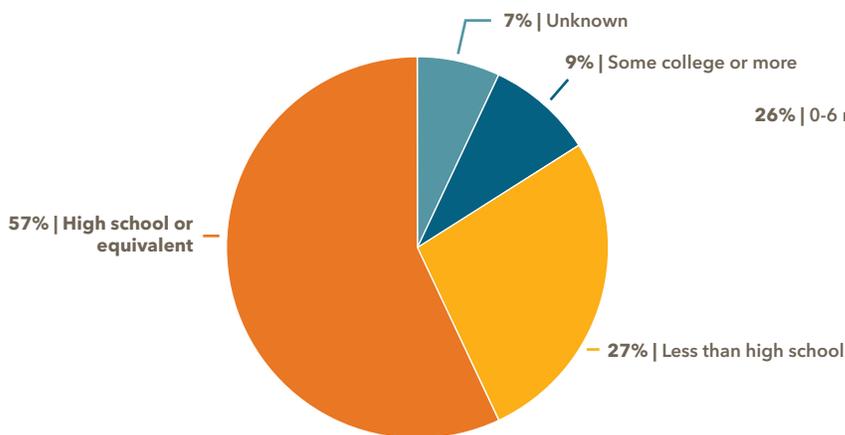
### Age



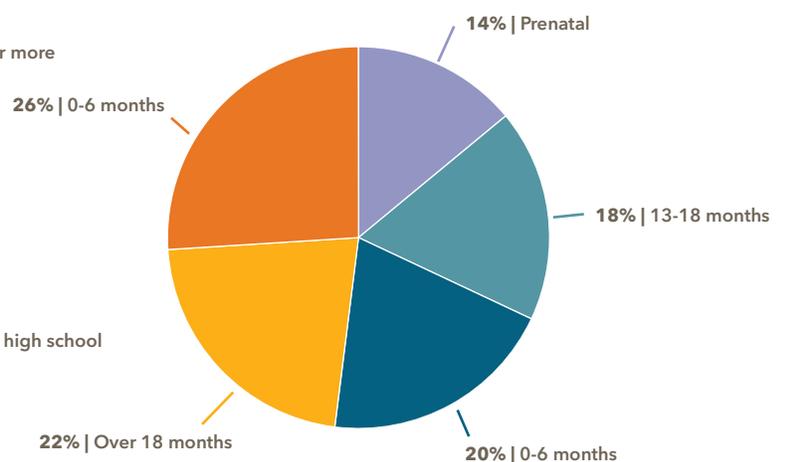
### Race



### Education Level



### Child age at pilot start



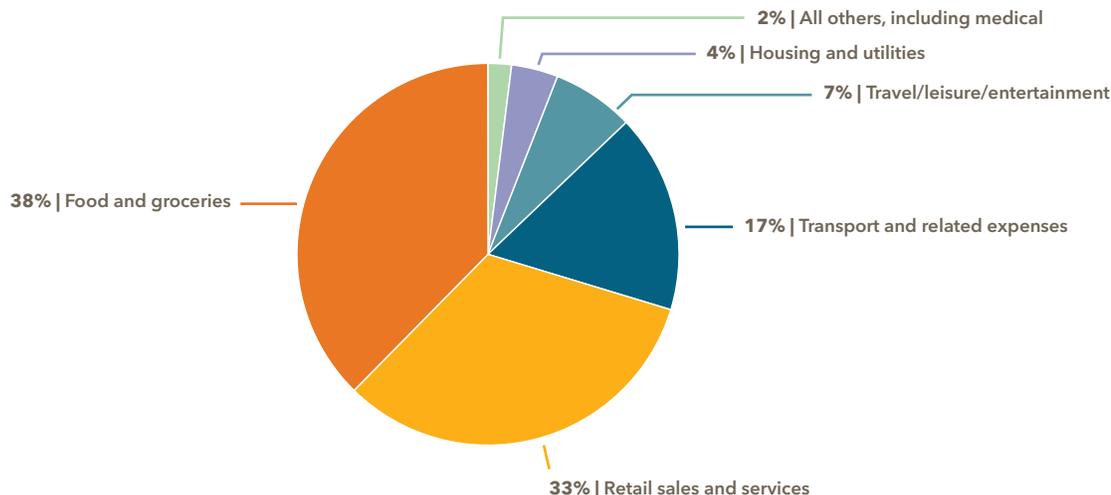
## Initial Findings

Through its FFP program, the Children's Trust sought data on how universal basic income could not only impact family spending patterns, but also how it influenced home visiting engagement, family well-being, and child safety and support. Through participant surveys conducted every six months and observations, spending data, and engagements by pilot staff, the Children's Trust found:

***Participant spending followed patterns seen in other cash grant projects, with the bulk of spending on food, retail, and transportation costs.***

FFP families generally reported that they prioritized daily expenses. In promising developments, five participants committed to using funding to more stable family housing. Other families used pilot resources to provide birthday celebrations for their children, providing a sense of stability and normalcy in households that may not have previously experienced such. More importantly, the FFP pilot demonstrated that families were using these microgrants as was intended, to care for the family and its needs. ***Overall, participants reported a nearly 41% reduction in their difficulty affording what they needed each month.***

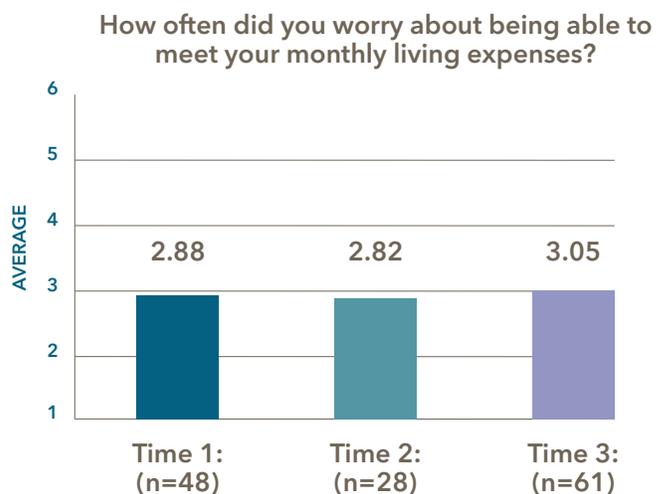
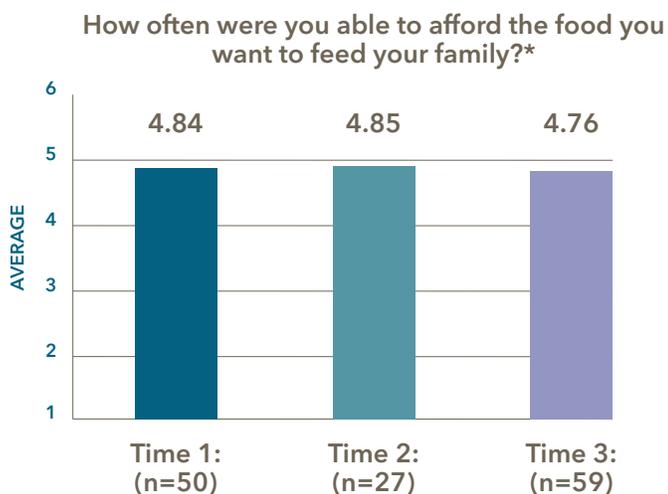
## Transactions



**FFP families' most pressing needs were met, as heads of household were less concerned about being able to feed their families.**

Data collected throughout the pilot found that families were able to afford the food needed for the family, and that concerns about monthly living expenses decreased (but were not eliminated). Participants also demonstrated that FFP resources helped address educational attainment and employment needs in the family. Actual spending data was gathered by analyzing the monthly usage of prepaid cards provided to participants. **Half of participants reported that their overall financial situation improved compared to before participating in the pilot. The top five ways that funds were spent each month were: 1) groceries or food to make at home; 2) basic household or personal hygiene items; 3) apparel; 4) utilities/bills; and 5) transportation.**

Overall, participants **very frequently could afford the food they desire to feed their family** but **sometimes worried** about **meeting their monthly living expenses**.



Participants responded on a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 = **all of the time** to 6 = **never**. \*this statement is reversed

**“It was very helpful with bills and baby’s needs. I’m thankful to have been a part of the pilot program.”**

- FFP participant

**FFP participants remained in the program longer than is typical for home visiting programs nationally, and for Healthy Families Massachusetts specifically.**

As of August 2025, more than three months after the FFP pilot officially completed, nearly one-third of FFP participants (39) were still actively participating in HFM home visits and other programming. By remaining in the program longer, at-risk families continued to access information and services designed to strengthen the family and protect the children in it. **Pilot participants stayed enrolled in HFM longer than they might have in the absence of the pilot, as the pilot encouraged parents to see further benefit in HFM offerings.**

**“This experience really helped. Especially being a first-time mom, I really appreciate it.**

- FFP participant

## What's Next

While much is still being learned – both regionally and nationally – about universal basic income programs and the impact they have on families and communities in need, the Children's Trust FFP effort offered several key lessons that should be considered as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts seeks to strengthen families and ensure that children are protected and not victimized because of financial concerns or the stresses that come from them.

For **state and local policymakers**, future universal basic income (UBI) efforts must be extended beyond the Boston area to include families in need across the Commonwealth (as also indicated by the legislative Special Commission to Study Poverty's recommended An Act Significantly Alleviating Poverty legislation). The impact of such efforts will also be further strengthened when they are combined or collaborate with other established family and social safety net programs, such as Healthy Families Massachusetts. Initial data from FFP also showed that UBI resulted in improvements in parents' educational attainment, employment rates, and mental health.

For the **family support workforce**, efforts such as FFP can serve as a gateway to other needed resources, such as individual coaching, family workshops and classes, and online resources and activities designed to strengthen the family structure. They also allow parents to prioritize their children's needs and planning for the future.

For **parents and heads of households**, such basic support not only improves the financial stability of families, but it can also improve overall wellbeing by reducing stress and promoting family bonding. And when built effectively, programs such as FFP can eliminate the shame and stigma that can be experiences with many safety net programs.

For the **mental health and social support community**, efforts like FFP offer a much-needed bulwark against financial stress that can prevent or undermine parents' capacities to form strong emotional security for their children, which is critical to children's mental health, as well as that of parents.

For the **Massachusetts philanthropic community**, the FFP pilot demonstrates how relatively small-dollar financial supports can change families and communities for the better, protecting our most vulnerable while showing the potential available to many families who do not see a future.

And for the **youth of Massachusetts**, UBI has the potential to reduce child abuse and neglect, while offering families the opportunity to focus on the needs of their children and their futures.