

In the Voices of Parents:

Mothers Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic

October 2021

Part 3

We would like to extend our gratitude and appreciation for all of the hard work and dedication provided by Marquinta Thomas and the Referrals and Outreach Team:

Kanella Maniatis

Tasha Smith

Felicia McBride

Denise Anderson

Josefina Marquez-Rosas

Laura Castaneda

Martina Harnesberry

Monica Perez

Monique Jackson

Alisa Radcliffe

Leatrice Taylor

INTRODUCTION

The Referrals and Outreach team at Illinois Action for Children (IAC) followed Cook County parents for almost a year to learn about families' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey and two in-depth interviews developed by the Referrals and Outreach and Research teams focused on employment, child care, family well-being and children's schooling during the pandemic. We capture the results from this three-part series in two previous reports and the current report.

Part I of the series captures parent experiences in the summer of 2020, shortly after the Governor lifted the emergency stay-at-home order. The team surveyed 144 parents who had used IAC's referral service in the previous year. At that time, unemployment affected close to half of the parents. They had been laid off or furloughed or stopped working because their children were now home or to keep their families safe from COVID-19 exposure. Over half of the families experienced food insecurity as their financial situations worsened. Parents who were working relied largely on family members to care for their children when their child care programs closed or because they felt it was a safer option.

By November 2020, follow-up interviews with 26 of the mothers (detailed in Part II of the series) found that families were shifting back to formal child care programs. However, not all mothers felt it was safe and some could not find available programs that met their needs. Unemployment persisted, with a third of the mothers not working because of lack of child care or job opportunities. Other mothers saw their work hours reduced. Government assistance programs were critical for these mothers, and with the help of SNAP and school lunch programs, most families' food needs were met. However, rent and utility assistance were still a need. In addition, mothers and children were adjusting to new schedules and challenges with remote learning, including learning the technology and getting the support they needed from school.

This final report of the series describes the experiences of these same mothers as of April 2021. One year after the start of the pandemic, families were still recovering from the challenges and changes brought about by the pandemic. Working mothers who lost their jobs, in particular, experienced setbacks that were still impacting their families. Despite this, mothers were grateful for their families' health, safety, and perseverance.

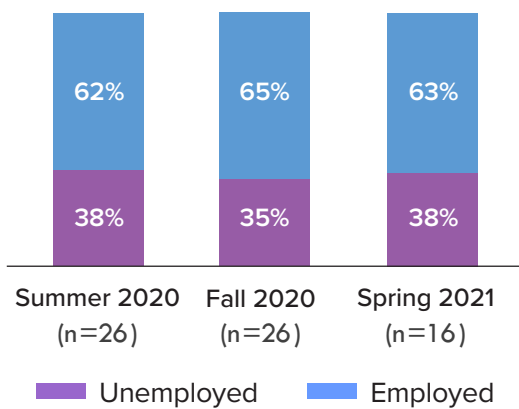
ABOUT THE MOTHERS

In April 2021, 16 of the 26 mothers that were interviewed in November responded to our request for an additional interview. Most of the mothers were Black (12), with the rest being Latinx (2), Asian (1), or they did not say (1). All lived in Chicago except three who lived in Suburban Cook County. Over half (9) of the moms were in their thirties. The youngest was age 19 and the oldest was 44. On average, mothers had three children. Ten moms had a child under age six, and 14 had a school-age child (eight had both).

Mothers' Employment

More than a year into the pandemic, many mothers had been unable to return to the workforce. Among the mothers we followed, the percentage who were unemployed remained consistent from summer 2020 to spring 2021, with over a third unemployed at each interview. There were several reasons mothers were not working in spring 2021, including struggling to find a job, lack of child care, and recently having a baby. One mother told us in the fall that she walked away from her job to help her children with remote learning. She was still unemployed in spring 2021 and having a hard time landing a new job, "I have been on a lot of interviews and no one has hired me."

Mothers' Employment Status



Child care challenges prevented some mothers from finding a job. In the fall, one mother reported being evicted and that she and her teen and pre-teen children were temporarily staying with various family members. In April 2021, we learned that the family was living in a shelter and had been for the past 5 months. While there, the mother found a job and worked briefly but had to leave the job due to child care issues, "I can't leave them in the shelter by themselves. So, it required me to quit my job. I'm still in the shelter. I can't stay at work because of [the] situation. So pretty much everything is still the same."

Another mother left her job after giving birth to her fifth child and needed support to return to the workforce, "I'm looking for work. At the same time, I have five kids...But I just have to get someone to be able to help with my schedule."

WHAT MADE MOMS PROUD

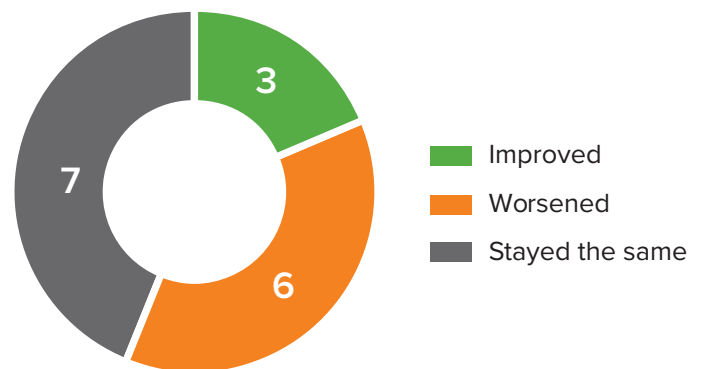
"We are healthy. We have stayed COVID free."

—Mom of 4, 8, 10 and 11-year-old

Families' Financial Well-Being

Employment and life changes made it difficult for families to recover from the financial hardships of the past year. Between the fall and spring, two mothers separated from their partners and this negatively impacted their living and financial situation. One of these mothers had to move in with her mother, and the other said she was now "a single mom with three children." Mothers who lost their job or had their work hours reduced said providing for their families was becoming harder. The family living in the shelter has been homeless for two years in different states and the mother was feeling that there were no resources available to help her move forward, "I think the middle class, well I'm going to say the upper class, get more help... they have a lot more, they are open to more opportunities than I am... even with me being in the shelter I can't get the help."

Mothers' Financial Situation in April 2021 Compared to November 2020



However, three mothers said that their financial situation had improved since fall 2020. Receiving public benefits, utility assistance and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), made a positive impact on two of these families. One mother said her financial situation improved after she got a raise at work. There were several working mothers who did not seem to have major financial challenges.

Most mothers who were unemployed were not receiving unemployment benefits, and those who were felt it was not enough. Only two of the six unemployed mothers received unemployment benefits. One mother said the amount was not enough to significantly improve her financial situation, "I do receive unemployment, which is a big help, but things are pretty much the same. Still looking for work." A mother who had lost her unemployment

benefits was hoping to resolve the issue so she could begin receiving them again. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and utility assistance were helping this mother get by. It is unclear why the rest of the mothers who were unemployed were unable to access unemployment benefits.

Most families had enough food but struggled to pay for other basic needs. As we learned from the November interviews, food assistance programs such as SNAP were helping families put enough food on the table. At least six of the sixteen mothers were receiving SNAP benefits in spring 2021. Only one mother said she could not buy enough food for her family. This mother did not qualify for SNAP or TANF because of her undocumented status. She had a job throughout the duration of the interview series (June 2020 to April 2021), but her income and resources were clearly very limited.

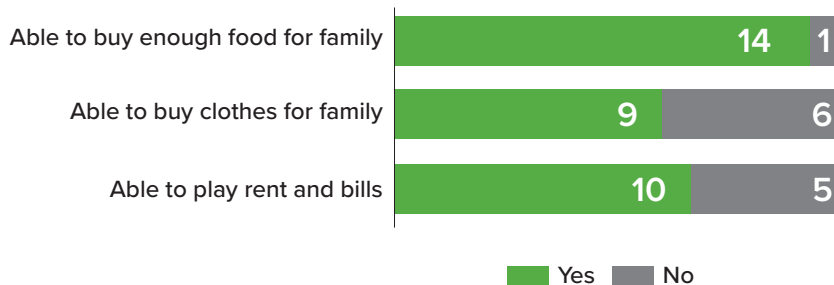
Several families struggled to pay for their housing and utility bills. One mother worried: *“I am thinking about next month’s rent. Will I have the money to pay the rent?”* The mother who had separated from her husband and moved in with her mother hoped to move into her own apartment but needed financial support to make this possible. *“I will*

need to apply for assistance to get help paying rent, utility bills and get a Link card.” One mother, though, had just applied for utility assistance through the Community and Economic Development Association of Cook County and was going to apply for Comcast Cares.

Obtaining other necessities, such as clothing, had to be put off. *“Clothing, I’m still, you know, I’m taking it one step at a time...You know, if I get some extra cash then I’ll get some stuff the kids need. And then kind of just wing it.”* Similarly, a mother that was unemployed said, *“It’s not about the food. It’s about being able to buy clothes and stuff for my kids and stay afloat with my rent.”*

The COVID-19 stimulus checks temporarily relieved some financial stress and were used to pay for basic needs. Mothers used the third COVID-19 stimulus checks that were disbursed in March 2021 to pay their bills, pay off debt, or put some aside for savings. Many mothers said the checks helped them pay for rent and utilities and, for one, her children’s shoes. One mother was able to pay off all her credit card debt. A few mothers had not yet received their checks, including the mother living in a shelter. She had completed a change of address form, but the check had not yet arrived.

Ability to Pay for Basic Needs



Rebecca: “This is not me.”

Rebecca is a mother of five who gave birth to her youngest child in November 2020. She was laid off from her job because of the pandemic in June 2020 and had not found employment since then. She had been struggling financially during fall 2020 and was not receiving unemployment benefits or other types of assistance. She had trouble paying for rent, utilities, and new clothes for her children, *“It’s wintertime. They need new coats, new clothes because they’re getting bigger and new shoes because they’re getting bigger and they’re growing out of stuff. I’m passing stuff down from the older baby to the middle baby. Then, from the middle baby to the youngest baby. The oldest baby suffers more than anybody as she grows more.”* As of

spring 2021, Rebecca is still unemployed, but her family is doing better because they receive TANF benefits.

Rebecca takes care of her children on her own which has not been easy, *“Some days I want to sleep in, but I can’t cause I got to get the kids ready for school. And then I got another baby on me, a little baby.”* It has been difficult to find a new job without any child care support, *“I am looking for work. But I just have to get someone to be able to help with my schedule.”* She has a positive attitude about managing these hardships and is adamant about finding a job to support her family, *“I’m looking for a job. I don’t like to sit around... This is not me.”*

Child Care Experiences

In the early months of the pandemic, when child care programs closed or reduced their capacity, parents turned to family members for their child care or cared for their children themselves while working remotely or unemployed. By fall, many parents returned to using formal child care programs. Others would have liked to but considered it too risky or could not make it work due to the high cost, incompatible hours, or programs not offering remote learning assistance for their school-age children.

By spring, half of working mothers we spoke with who had children age birth to 5 were using formal child care centers or home-based programs for their younger children. The other half relied on family, a friend, and parental care – one mother watched her preschooler while she worked from home and another staggered her work schedule with her husband to have child care coverage.

For school-age care, mothers relied largely on family members to watch their children after school and while the children were in remote learning.

Mothers using child care programs felt positive about their care and did not express safety concerns.

- *“My work schedule works with the daycare. I feel my child is safe at the daycare.”*
- *“She’s very comfortable there with everybody that’s been taking care of her.”*
- *“Not being able to physically go in and look around and stuff like that you know, I was skeptical about it. But as far as right now I do feel like she’s okay. It had to grow on me for a while.... Educational wise it’s a best fit for me.... I love it.”*

However, one mother looking for a job was uncertain that a child care center would work for her. She found that programs did not have the same hours as they did in the past, making care less available. She also worried that a program might have to close a classroom if someone becomes sick, and this would be particularly risky if she was starting a new job.

Nearly all of the mothers using care by family also felt happy with their care.

- *“I prefer my family taking care of my children.”*
- *“They are in good hands and happy, less stress.... They are with family and close to home.”*

However, as we found in earlier interviews, one mother said the care by her family members was not as consistent as she needed as she started her new job. She planned to apply for child care assistance so she could find another arrangement.

The working mothers who relied solely on parental care reported difficulty with their arrangements.

- The mother of a 2-, 6- and 15-year-old who staggered her work schedule with her husband reported: *“It’s pretty just kind of stressful. Especially like my husband can’t sleep cause he works overnights and my kid is remote... [and] a 2-year-old is a lot....So yes, we probably have to change it up a little bit.”*
- The mother caring for her preschooler while she worked remotely said: *“It’s hard to keep the little one entertained while I work. It’s not easy, trying to get her occupied without kind of encouraging electronic... devices to pretty much entertain herself.”*

Finally, difficulties submitting CCAP paperwork frustrated one parent, who said her mother had yet to be paid for the care she was providing.

Parent Well-Being

Many of the main concerns of mothers from the fall continued into the spring – financial worries, remote learning responsibilities, and their family’s health and safety. As some mothers returned to in-person work and some children to hybrid learning models, scheduling challenges arose for some and others wished for more time with their children.

Financial concerns were taking a mental toll on some mothers. When mothers were asked about their biggest struggles, as in earlier interviews, responses related to employment or finances were the most common. They cited being out of work, not earning enough income and being unable to pay rent as top concerns.

Mothers described the impact on them mentally. The mother living with her children at the shelter said, *“Being as a mother, for you not to be able to take care of your children, it’s just devastating.”* Similarly, a mother frustrated with her inconsistent work hours said *“I have family to help me for a while. But mentally, yes, it’s affecting me...going from being able to provide to not being able to provide.”* One mom who was unemployed said she struggled to stay motivated, while another said about being unemployed, *“This is not me.”*

Some mothers cited time management as their biggest struggle. As in the fall, moms had difficulty balancing their work schedules and caregiving responsibilities. Since fall, one mother started a new job and also separated from her husband. She found it challenging to juggle working, arranging child care among her family members, and keeping on top of her children’s remote learning. Two other mothers, including one who returned to working in person, found it difficult to coordinate their schedules with their children’s hybrid school schedules. Another mother expressed how difficult it was as a single mother to manage everything on her own.

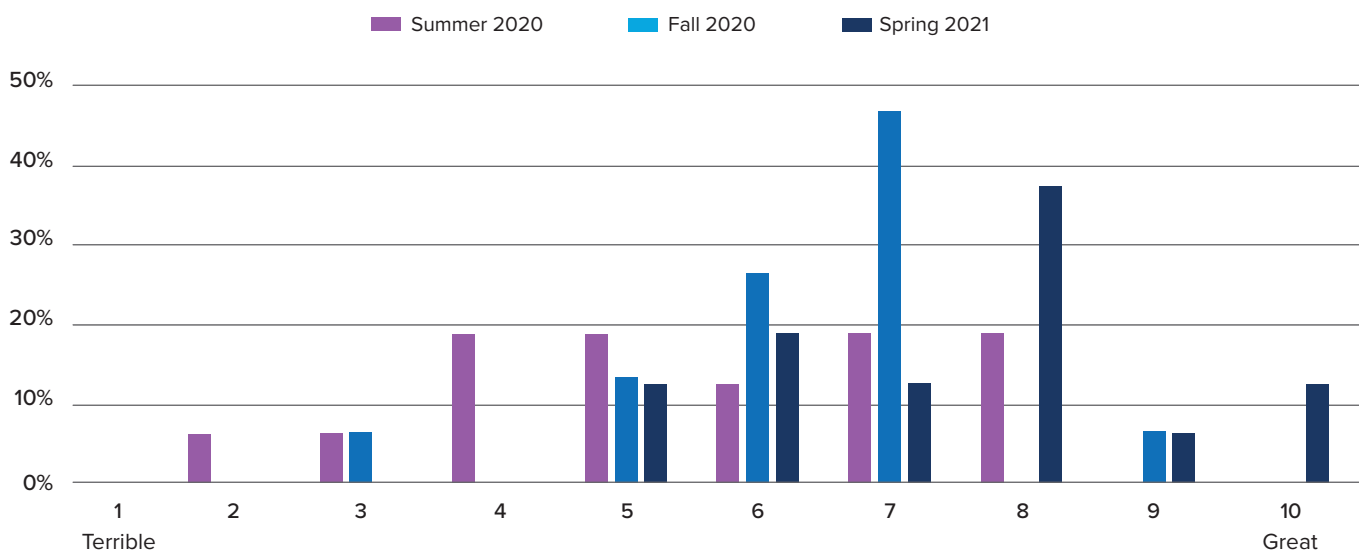
Two mothers felt they worked too many hours. The one who coordinated work schedules with her husband needed to take off work at times to accommodate his schedule, but she felt pressured by her employer to work even more than her regular hours. The lack of rest has been a main source of stress for them. *“As far as the rest factor, because sometimes like in my job...with the pandemic they try to make us work a ton of overtime... That’s frustrating, because it’s like [if] you don’t work it, you will get written up.”* She didn’t think she would be able to continue with the job much longer.

The demands of being home and assisting children with remote learning improved for at least one mother since the fall: *“I’ve gotten a lot better from last time. As you know, it was kind of rough on me in the beginning, but I’m adjusting.”*

Two working mothers wished they could spend more time with their children. A mother of two children ages five and nine had been working from home but recently returned to the office. She said, *“I am back at work, so our time to be together has been difficult. Only on weekends when I am off, we do family activities.”* Also, a mom of a two-year-old said she struggled with *“having her in day care so that I can’t see her during the day pretty much because I have to work.”*

Despite their struggles, parents rated their well-being fairly high overall. Mothers were asked to rate their overall well-being from 1 to 10, with 1 being terrible and 10 being great. Among the sixteen mothers participating across all three interviews, 75 percent gave a response in April 2021 that was similar to their response in November 2020, and a quarter rated themselves at least two points higher. The average rating across the mothers rose steadily, from 5.6 in June 2020 to 6.3 in November 2020 to 7.4 in April 2021.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you say you personally are doing overall? n=16



The average parent rating has risen steadily over time, from 5.6 in June 2020, to 6.3 in November 2020 to 7.4 in April 2021.

WHAT MADE MOMS PROUD
“That we are still together, and happy, and pushing through obstacles.”
 –Mom of 6, 7, 11, 12-year old

Child Well-Being

Although more than half of the mothers had no concerns about the well-being of their children, some wished their children had more opportunities to be outside the home. Others described adjustments their children had to make to new family and living arrangements or said their children were coping with remote learning challenges.

Mothers felt their children needed more outdoor time, activities outside the home and exercise.

- *“The only thing that’s a little concerning is, you know, them not being able to be as active and kind of stuck in house....One program that I did find that I wanted to put them in, I can only qualify if I was working, and I wasn’t working.... When school was open, they’d have a lot of afterschool programs.”*
- *“So they are pretty much limited to doing, you know, playing inside the house or occasionally we might then go outside and play around in the yard, but that’s about it.”*
- *“I definitely feel like they need some exercise. They need more exercise.”*
- *“They are good, they need more outdoor time.”*

Children had to adjust to changes in their family life and living arrangements. The separation of one couple affected their youngest child, as the mother reported that her son was reluctant to move to the new house and was missing his dad. The mother who was living at the shelter with her teen and pre-teen children said it had been a very hard time for her children, *“A lot of depression right now. We are just trying to get through it.”* Another family moved to a better neighborhood and school district, which she said is *“overall good for everyone,”* but the move meant the children had to switch from in-person to remote-only learning and this limited their social opportunities. *“Now they are remote. They still see their friends from time to time, but they really want to hang out with their friends.”*

WHAT MADE MOMS PROUD

“I’ve had more opportunities to spend time with my children. We spend time together. We have set goals for the family; save money for a vacation.”

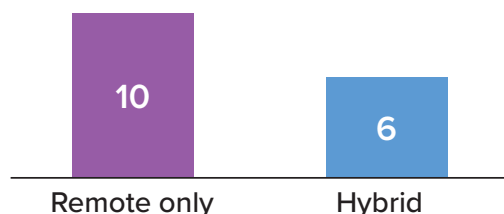
–Mom of 5 and 9-year old

Parent and Children’s Experience with School

As schools opened for in-person learning in the spring, more parents chose fully remote classes over in-person.

This is not surprising considering that, in the fall, despite reporting many challenges with remote learning, most mothers still preferred it to in-person classes for safety reasons. By April 2021, ten of the fourteen mothers with school-age children had a child in remote-only learning while six had a child in a hybrid model (part in-person and part remote). Two parents had a child in each.

Spring 2021: More Families Had Children in Remote-Only Learning than the Hybrid Model



Safety continued to be the main reason parents opted for remote-only learning. *“Well, I don’t want him to be remote, but I’m choosing the remote because it’s safe.”* Other reasons were that some schools had not yet offered in-person learning, in-person learning no longer worked because the family had moved, and remote learning better accommodated the family because they were at a shelter and their future was uncertain.

Parents continued to report challenges with remote learning.

- **Social impact:** Some parents were concerned with the social impact. *“Like my four-year-old, you know, his first school experiences are behind a computer, so that’s really all he knows at this point.”* However, she felt her children were safer at home than in the hybrid model that the school offered.
- **Academic impact:** Other mothers were concerned their children were not getting the academic help they needed. One mother said her son in seventh grade did not feel comfortable asking for help from his on-line teacher. *“He’s in advanced math, and he’s kind of having a hard time keeping up because it’s remote and he’s not able to be in the class, you know, to answer certain questions and stuff.”* Another said a language barrier prevented her from assisting her children with their assignments, *“My children help each other with the homework. I am not able to help them, I do not speak English and my education level is grade school in Mexico.”*

- **Conflicts with parent schedule:** As mentioned, parents struggled to balance their own schedules with helping children with remote learning. One mother had children in kindergarten and first grade as well as children under five. Whenever she had to run an errand, her children had to go with her and miss school, *“So it’s like, if I go out the door and go anywhere or go shopping anywhere, they have to cancel school.”*

For families returning to in-person learning, parents and children seemed happy with the hybrid model. Mothers who chose in-person/hybrid learning did so because it allowed their children to get out of the house and socialize, it worked better for working parents, and mothers felt their children would get more help or learn better than if they were remote learning.

Mothers reported that their children were happy being in a school setting and around their friends and classmates, *“She’s getting back into to the habits and you know kind of enjoying being back in the in the scene of school, which is good, so I’m glad for that.”* One mother with two school-age children said that the hybrid model was a good balance for her daughter with social anxiety, although both of her children were struggling with their grades. At least one mother wanted her children to be in-person learning full-time as opposed to hybrid because it worked better with her work schedule.

Children who had Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and required extra learning supports had mixed experiences with receiving those supports remotely.

Three school-age children who were learning remotely received or should have received IEP supports. Two of the mothers felt satisfied with their children’s progress. One said, *“The teachers are doing as best as they can from a computer, I believe. His two special education teachers are amazing. They are. They do what they can, you know, to make sure he, you know, has what he needs.”* Despite the support, however, her son still found remote learning very difficult. A third mother had been working since fall to get support for her 7-year-old daughter, who stopped receiving one-on-one assistance when the pandemic started. As of spring 2021, she still had not received an update on her daughter’s IEP situation. *“When she was in school, she had a one-on-one teacher, so I don’t see why they didn’t give her one-on-one in virtual learning. That what I want to know.”* Finally, the mother of a preschooler with an IEP said her son was receiving better support now that he returned to an in-person child care program: *“The [remote] services did not work for my 4-year-old. My child does not like sitting in front of the computer. However, he is getting the support from the teacher and staff from the daycare.”*

Alma: “Pandemic or no pandemic, I had to work.”

Alma lives in southwestern Cook County with her three children ages 2, 11 and 16. In previous interviews she had been able to meet her families’ needs through her retail job. By April 2021, her economic situation had worsened due to reductions in her work hours to just 27 ½ per week. Alma is undocumented and therefore cannot access SNAP food benefits to supplement her income like other mothers can, and she did not receive the government stimulus payments that have kept so many families afloat. She says, *“My legal situation has been hard. Pandemic or no pandemic I had to work...The Stay-at-home Order does not apply to me. If I do not work, we do not eat.”* So far, she has been able to pay for rent and bills but needs more income to cover the gas for her hour-long work commute.

Another of her struggles during the pandemic has been helping her children with their remote learning. *“I am not able to help them, I do not speak English and my education level is grade school in Mexico.”* But she says her children have helped each other with assignments. She is proud of this and that *“We are healthy and are together.”*

WHAT MADE MOMS PROUD

“That we still have a roof over our heads. We still have lights; we still have gas. Cause at times, in months, I couldn’t pay for them.”

–Mom of 4-month-old and 2, 4, 5 and 7-year-old

Mothers' Views on Government Support

We asked the mothers what, if anything, the government could do to help them and their family at this point, a year into the pandemic. Some mothers were unsure how to respond to this question and others raised issues but did not provide specific solutions. Mothers affirmed their support for the stay-at-home policies and some discussed additional ways the government or employers could support them.

Mothers felt the state responded well to the pandemic by instating the stay-at-home order (SAHO) in March 2020. Some preferred that everyone continue limiting social activities because they believed COVID was still a major threat. Along the same lines, some mothers did not want their children to return to in-person learning yet. One mother who was undocumented did not believe the SAHO made a difference for her because if she stopped working she would have no access to public benefits, *"Pandemic or no pandemic I had to work...If I do not work, we do not eat."* She could not protect herself by staying home.

Families want concerted efforts and support from programs and policies that fit their unique needs. A theme that resonated among some responses was that parents need more support than they've been receiving to continue working and taking care of their children. One

mother would like for employers to be more considerate of parents that run into issues with their child care arrangements. She felt it was difficult to have a stable job when child care was not stable, for example, when there is a COVID case at her child's center. *"There was an isolated outbreak to where they had to close the room for 14 days. So now if I have to be off for 14 days."*

One mother described that single parents are particularly challenged by the pandemic, *"I felt like this has really affected...single parents probably the worst. The people who don't have a support system. The people who, it's just them...it's not that easy to just have kids at home, all day and still go to work. You know, it's not practical."* Another mother would like to see policies and solutions that address local issues and consider the community's needs, *"Put somebody out in the field to see what's really going on. Make a census of what is needed and what is not needed."*

Given that many of the mothers were having issues paying bills and rent, it is not surprising that a mother suggested a tax reduction and an extension on the eviction moratorium. She felt that these are solutions the government can more easily implement, *"there's not a whole lot more that I think that they can do...but there are also things that the government can control and that's money."*

Mothers' views on the government response to the pandemic

Stay-at-home order was an effective public health response and social distancing should continue to be promoted because COVID-19 is still a concern

Working parents, single parents, and families experiencing homelessness are left behind by the system

Public health education on COVID-19 safety measures is needed

Resources and support their families need

Targeted community solutions based on needs assessment; not a one-size-fits-all solution

Extension on the eviction moratorium

Tax reductions

Consideration and support for working parents whose child care arrangements are not stable

WHAT MADE MOMS PROUD

"I have a job, I stayed home for three months with my children. I took care of them."

—Mom of 6 and 10-year-old

Mothers cherished that their families were together and healthy.

Finally, we asked mothers what they were proud about regarding their family's experience during the first year of the pandemic. They expressed being proud that their

family had stayed together and spent more time together, that their family remained healthy and COVID-free, and that they had done what was needed to make it through. Their individual responses to this question have been presented throughout this report.

CONCLUSION

Supporting Women in the Workforce

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic recession have greatly impacted working women and their families. These mothers faced difficult dilemmas, weighing the need to work against the needs and safety of their children: Would working expose their children (and children's caregivers, particularly grandparents) to COVID-19? If they worked, would their school-age children have adequate support with remote learning? And did they have child care that was consistent enough to maintain a job?

Many women, moreover, were employed in essential occupations, including in the care-giving occupations of health care, child care, home care, elderly care and education, and they faced enormous pressure to return to work during and after the stay-at-home order even though their children were out of school and child care was scarce.

Some mothers could not continue working or take a new job, despite being the primary providers of their families. Gendered divisions of labor reduced women's participation during the pandemic as the burden of caregiving typically falls on women. Now after months at home, many mothers can no longer afford to be unemployed without substantial support from public assistance programs and are struggling to re-enter the workforce.

The rapidly changing COVID-19 situation could still lead to new emergencies. Children currently in school might need to return to a hybrid or remote learning model or to quarantine temporarily due to a COVID exposure at school. As long as the pandemic persists, mothers will need supportive systems to respond to these situations and make quick decisions for their families.

To ensure the well-being of families, policies must support women's participation in the workforce by:

1. Mandating employers to provide more flexibility for parent caregivers, including paid sick days and paid medical and family leave. Parents should not have to choose between bringing home a paycheck that sustains their family and caring for their child.
2. Creating a more robust child care system that is aligned with families' day-to-day realities. The mothers we spoke with noted that lack of child care that meets their needs is a barrier to finding new employment. In particular,

WHAT MADE MOMS PROUD

“Just staying together as family. You hear a lot of stories of people at my job, like getting divorced there, things not going so well. So basically just being able to maintain these relationships.”

—Mom of 2, 6 and 15-year-old

mothers need affordable child care and care during non-traditional hours such as evening care. They also need child care during their job search process. Illinois recently expanded its Child Care Assistance Program to cover child care during a parent's job search. This will help many mothers to return to work.

Illinois must increase its investment in all child care settings to support the varied needs of parents. This means adequately funding care in centers and in homes, including care by family, friend and neighbor providers who often meet families' needs in ways formal programs do not.

Strengthening the Social Safety Net

Meeting basic needs was complicated for mothers who lost jobs or hours of work and had to survive on reduced incomes. They had to identify and apply for public or private assistance programs to buy food or pay utility bills. The mothers' experiences highlight the critical differences among social safety net programs and suggest different levels of improvements these services could adopt for future emergencies and recoveries. Overall, the most glaring gap is the lack of access to safety net programs for the significant number of undocumented families in Illinois and across the country.

Some mothers whom we interviewed struggled with food insecurity during the summer months of 2020, though, by the fall were largely able to meet their food needs with assistance from SNAP, the SNAP expansion for school-age children, and the school lunch program. Some families still relied on food pantries in the fall. Overall, needed public resources were available but there were delays in getting them to families.

WHAT MADE MOMS PROUD

“Proud that we are still able to be together, nobody died.”

—Mom of 10, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 17-year-old

WHAT MADE MOMS PROUD

“The kids are getting to spend time with the grandparents. I think that's what keeps my parents motivated is being around the kids, so that's a blessing.”

—Mom of 4 and 12-year-old

In other safety net programs, the assistance available to families was more limited or less flexible than government food assistance programs. For example, programs set up to help struggling families with rent and utility expenses directly either did not go far enough or did not reach all who needed them as early as they were needed. The same is true of programs that provided additional income such as expanded unemployment benefits and stimulus payments. In these cases, emergency expanded benefits were not already built into benefit programs to address potential emergencies, but were left to often contentious partisan political decisions, typically in Congress. Technical issues also plagued some programs, for example overloaded websites for applying for unemployment insurance. Emergency planning in these programs should include planning communications to inform parents of resources and how to access them, as with SNAP, and testing policies or procedures and technology in advance for ramping up parents' access under emergency conditions. Since there is no sign of recovery in housing and relief in evictions, we can expect rent crises to loom large during the next few years unless we see substantial policy solutions.

Public health insurance was a far more successful safety net program during the pandemic. Parents we interviewed did not report having serious challenges meeting their families' health care needs. Unlike food supports, health care in Illinois was a developed resource to which many parents already had access through All Kids/ACA/Medicaid; and like child care assistance, it had less contentious ways to extend or expand services.

The pandemic has revealed critical weakness in the social safety net in Illinois (and ultimately the federal safety net) that can be seen by the differences among the levels of support that safety net programs have provided: (1) medical care with health insurance and child care assistance for essential workers were largely accessible from the beginning of COVID; (2) food assistance was slow in rising to emergency need but eventually became accessible; and (3) income, rent and utility supports have not yet reached levels that are widely supportive. These differences highlight the importance of building a more robust safety net of essential public services with flexible administration that during emergencies can give families access to all basic services comparable to the access they had to medical care and child care assistance.

Supporting Family Mental Health

Faced with multiple sources of stress, many of the mothers we spoke with indicated that they or their children faced emotional challenges. Moreover, they were receptive to offers for mental health supports, and some already were receiving therapy or counseling. This is a positive sign that there is opportunity for building stronger mental health resources for mothers or families during both normal and emergency times.

Preparing for Future Remote Learning Needs

By fall of 2020, children in the families we interviewed generally had the devices they needed for remote learning, although in some families, children had to share a single device. Access to the internet was still an issue for some. In our view, the largest educational burden that fell on parents was ensuring that children engaged in learning. Not all parents had the

WHAT MADE MOMS PROUD

“Because we have to stay away from each other a lot more...it made me appreciate [my family] a little bit more.... made me appreciate the times that we were able to spend together.”

—Mom of 2-year-old

time and ability to assist their children or had other adults to help. Children have had unequal experiences with learning during the pandemic, and factors such as child age, children's abilities and special needs, internet access, stability of their home environment and available adult help can all contribute to unequal learning outcomes.

School-age children that were in remote learning and attending child care programs relied on providers to help them with technology issues and to stay on task with their classes. Unfortunately, not all child care programs were prepared to manage the new remote learning responsibilities. This made it more difficult for parents to find child care that met their families' needs; some parents made the decision to leave their jobs to help their children with remote learning. Policymakers should take inventory of the supplies and resources child care programs need to accommodate remote learning as the threat of school closures and quarantines persists. We should not allow remote learning to present such challenges to children's opportunity in the fall of 2021 or in the next emergency.

Improving Outreach to Families

During a heat emergency, we now know, neighbors and relatives should reach out to older and vulnerable people. But during a long pandemic that slowly saps the financial and emotional resources of parents, and particularly single parents, and the health of children, we need to have similar campaigns for outreach to families that have no relative or neighbor

watching out for them. General public service and public education campaigns may be the answer, but the public sector could also use parent contact information held by schools, social services, and pediatrics offices to reach out with information and check in calls.

Parents who stayed at home to care for children often faced a number of challenges, including time management, finding outdoor and indoor activities for children, using remote learning technology, emotional issues, and difficulty in finding new employment when they were ready. These challenges were predictable to a certain extent, and some useful resources are available for addressing them. It would be worthwhile to build a library of these resources and develop a communications strategy and infrastructure for getting them to more parents.

WHAT MADE MOMS PROUD

“I have been with my children sharing time together. I learned to play, learned to cook, go out to the park. We spend more quality time.”

–Mom of 5, 9 and 10-year-old

