



Recovery Begins with Babies and Families

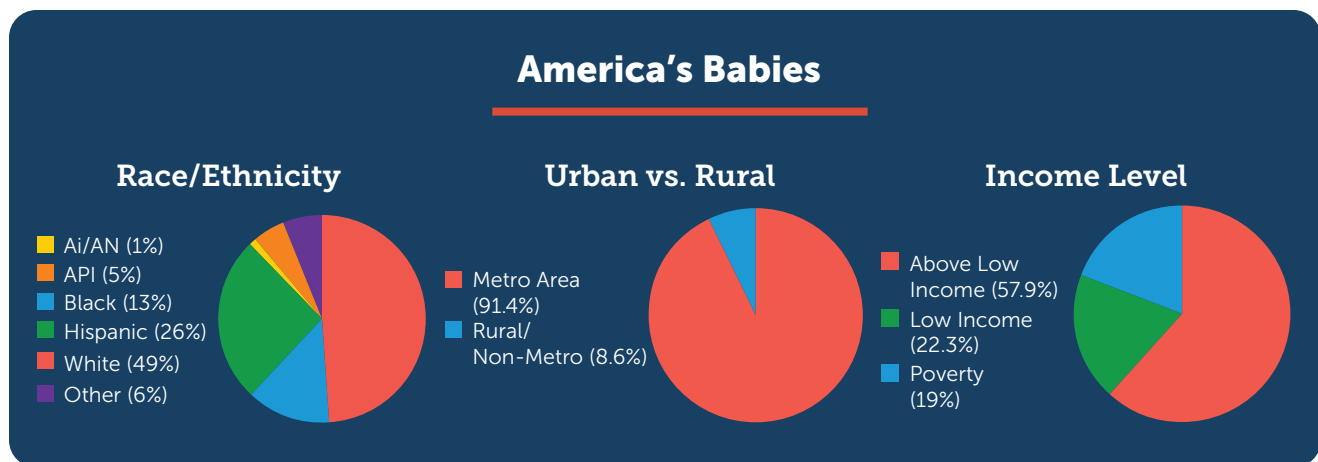
An Agenda for the Administration and the 117th Congress



ZERO to THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

Babies and Families Demand Attention

As the 117th Congress and the Biden-Harris Administration work to address the COVID-19 pandemic's destructive force and put our country back on track, our babies demand attention. Although this pandemic has rocked the entire nation, more than 12 million infants and toddlers will likely carry its harmful effects into adulthood if we do not respond with durable family-centered policies now.

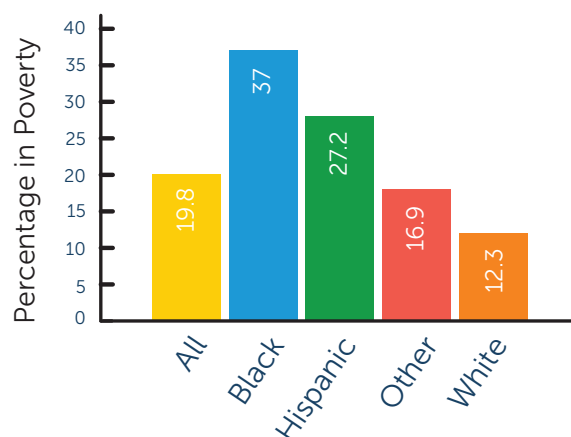


Young children are experiencing the pandemic environment—with its sustained economic hardship and emotional stress that sometimes spill over into violence, abuse, and trauma—during the period of most rapid brain development. Many of these young children are in danger of having the pandemic indelibly imprinted on their brains and bodies. This risk is not experienced equally. [The State of Babies Yearbook 2020](#) found that families of color and those with low income knew disproportional hardship before the pandemic.ⁱ This divide only deepened with the pandemic's health and economic effects. Families with low income who have young children overall are experiencing greater material hardship during the pandemic, but for Black and Latinx families, that hardship extends even to more affluent families.ⁱⁱ

Experiencing economic hardship and an inability to meet basic needs, such as food and housing, creates a chain reaction where parents' emotional stress grows and is transmitted to their young children (See chart "COVID-19 Pandemic: Emotional Distress Rises with Economic Hardship").ⁱⁱⁱ

The pandemic has forcefully exposed that our national policies have fundamentally ignored the family's critical role as the basic social and economic unit of our society. As a nation, we have simply stood on the sidelines as families juggle jobs and babies, scramble to meet basic needs, and at the same time try to nurture and prepare the children who will be our future workers, innovators, and leaders. The pandemic buffeted families more

Infant-Toddler Poverty by Race/Ethnicity



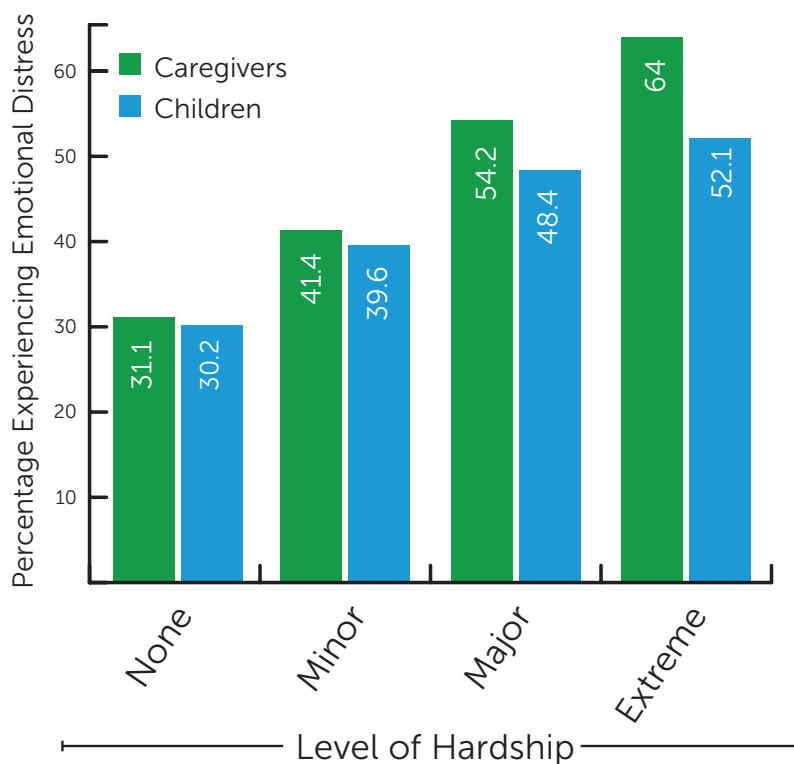
cruelly because our nation lacks policies such as permanent paid leave, durable basic economic supports, a strong early care and learning system, and supportive outreach to isolated families—policies that many other industrialized nations see as a primary responsibility. Very young children are feeling significant emotional stress, which, if not addressed, could undermine their development. Yet, we lack the infant and early childhood mental health system that could help support this developmental area most fundamental to early learning.

The science is clear: Early experiences matter—a lot. A child’s brain grows faster during its first three years than at any other time, with more than a million new brain connections forming each second. Brains are built from the bottom up. Early connections are the foundation for all later learning, rising like a scaffold with each new skill. The strength of these connections will shape a child’s future success in school and life. Early adversities, often beginning prenatally, literally get under the skin, changing brains and bodies for a lifetime. Strong, supportive relationships with close caregivers can buffer young children from adversity’s effects. Supporting families is thus the key to strong early learning and to recovering from the pandemic’s devastating effects.

As the Biden-Harris Administration takes office and the 117th Congress convenes, COVID-19 vaccines have begun rolling out, giving the world hope of the pandemic’s containment. But what of American families and the young children who will be, in the words of the late Elijah Cummings, “the living messengers we send to a future we will never see”? Will they have the social, economic, and racial justice equivalent of a vaccine to create a new normal that supports our families in giving their children the best opportunity to reach their potential?

This is both the challenge and opportunity before our national policymakers: to adopt robust, comprehensive child and family policies so our nation’s families will never again be set adrift, in crisis or in calm. Our nation will reap the rewards of such policies now and in the future. When families have what they need to thrive, our economy works. When policies embody equity—ensuring access to populations previously marginalized based on color, national origin, or family income—all children have opportunities to flourish and our society is strengthened.

COVID-19 Pandemic: Emotional Distress Rises with Economic Hardship



Credit: RAPIC-EC Project

A Policy Agenda to Support Families and Nurture Strong Early Development

Early childhood policies must be built as brains are built: from the bottom up. Starting with babies must be the first thought, not an afterthought.

To “think babies” means to start prenatally with robust maternal support and care, then ensure all babies and toddlers have the ingredients for strong development through equitable approaches to health care, parenting and family support, economic security, and early care and learning. Early neural connections—also known as “baby learning”—happen all the time, wherever babies are, with physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development so inextricably intertwined that what we think of as learning opportunities cannot be compartmentalized. To promote strong early development and learning means reaching babies and families where they are to ensure all babies have Good Health, Strong Families, and Positive Early Learning Experiences.

The following policies are long-term strategies to ensure that the potential of every baby is a national priority and to recognize the critical role of families in the economic and social fabric of our nation. But the COVID-19 pandemic’s severe and ongoing effects require continued action to address immediate needs and to sustain families and vital services such as child care.

ZERO TO THREE has described these needs in briefs on [5 Critical Needs for Babies in COVID-19](#), as well as [Building for the Future: Strong Policies for Babies and Families after COVID-19](#).



**Find more detailed information
about babies in your state:**

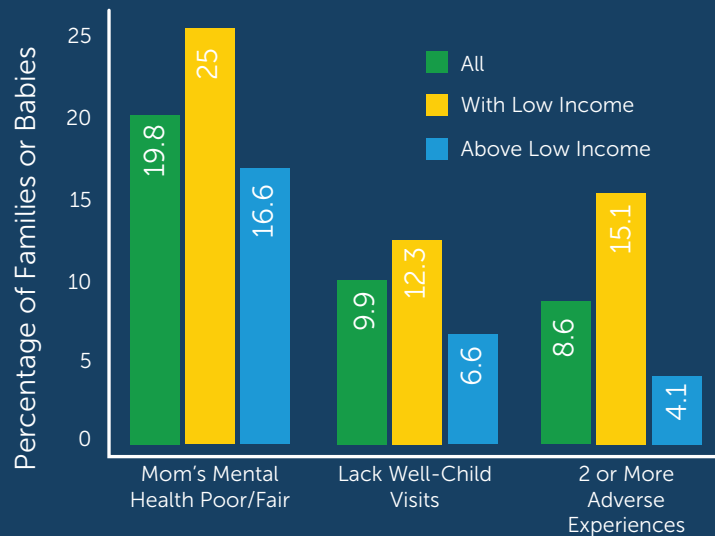
stateofbabies.org



Good Health

The foundation of a strong society is healthy people, starting before birth. Ensuring a healthy nation requires widely accessible, comprehensive health coverage, as well as accessible, innovative approaches to address the social determinants of health. Most importantly, our future success relies on the support of early social-emotional development that is the bedrock of babies' growth. Congress and the Administration can build on what science tells us:

Families Need Comprehensive Health Approaches



- **Transform pediatric care to support early development:** Pediatric primary care is a universal touchpoint that reaches almost every baby, toddler, and young child in the nation. We can transform the pediatric setting into a family-centered support by adding a child development specialist to the primary care team, an approach pioneered by ZERO TO THREE's HealthySteps program, driving better developmental trajectories and outcomes for young children and parents.
- **Increase the capacity to support strong infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH):** How young children feel about themselves and relate to others is at the core of all learning and development. Our nation must build the infrastructure and means to promote and address the foundational mental health needs of young children.
 - Infuse all early childhood settings, such as pediatric care, child care, and home visiting, with an understanding of infant and early childhood mental health to promote positive social-emotional development and seek support from IECMH professionals to address behavioral health concerns.
 - Develop a well-trained infant and early childhood clinical mental health workforce by establishing IECMH Centers of Excellence and clinical leadership programs to address mental health needs of infants and toddlers, especially the effects of trauma and other adverse early childhood experiences (ACEs). Such IECMH expertise should be infused in state child welfare systems to support babies and families who have experienced trauma.
 - Consistently apply the science of early childhood mental health with the widespread use of developmentally appropriate practices and tools. Promoting the use of developmentally appropriate

assessment instruments and the *Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood (DC:0-5)* to assess and diagnose mental health disorders in young children will help fill a critical gap.

- **Extend Medicaid coverage for mothers and babies:** We continue to support expanded access to health coverage for all parents and caregivers, particularly Medicaid expansion, but several smaller changes to Medicaid could enhance maternal and infant health as well as the role of primary care in prevention and promoting strong development:
 - Mandating Medicaid coverage for women through 12 months postpartum and promoting covering approaches such as doulas;
 - Ensuring coverage of IECMH services that include multigenerational therapies for babies and caregivers;
 - Mandating Medicaid coverage for all children until the age of three, and;
 - Requiring a certain percentage of Medicaid funding to be used for health promotion and prevention, including addressing the social determinants of health, and promoting use of Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment (EPSDT) to monitor and address developmental needs.

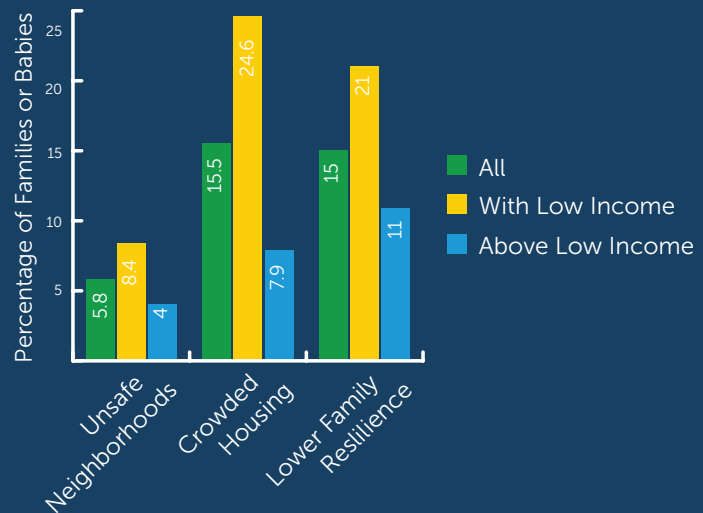




Strong Families

All families need support in tackling the tough, rewarding job of raising and nurturing children. Strong family policies support both the caregiving and economic functions of the family as well as fostering caring communities. They also can promote equitable support for all families, through policies that bolster economic security and broad community supports that reverse the disproportionate involvement with the child welfare system that families of color experience. Congress and the Administration should:

Babies' Hardships Differ by Income

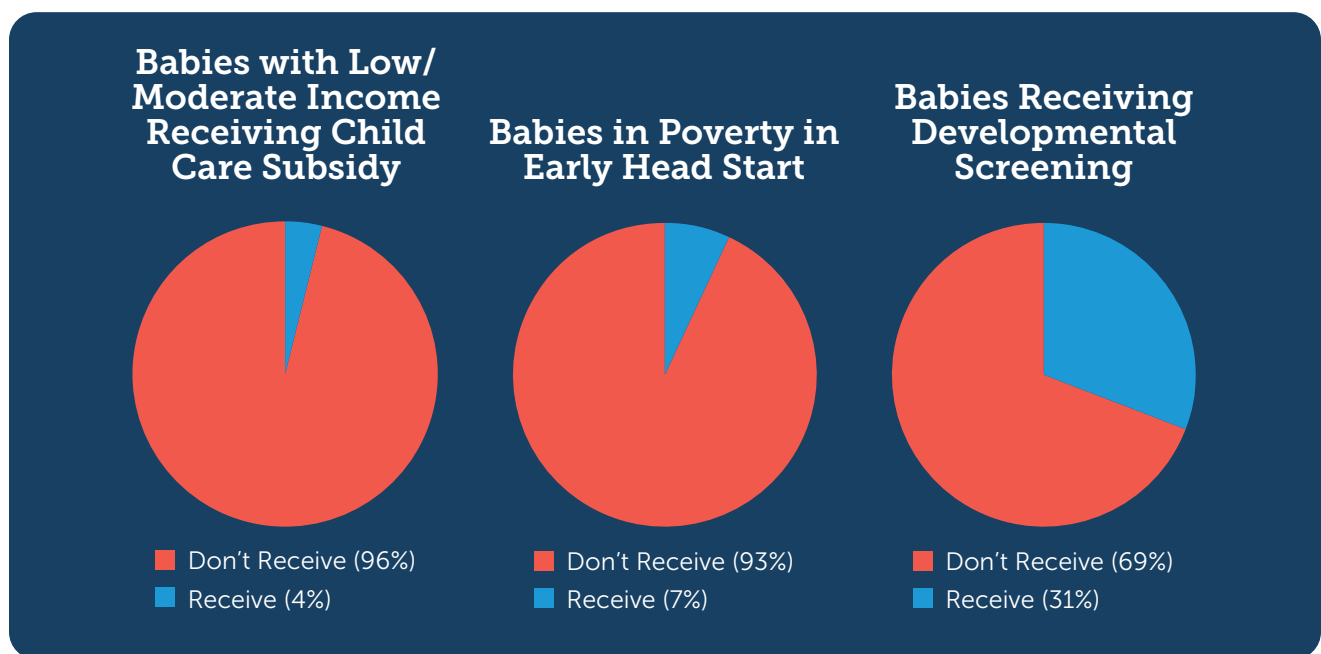


- **Enact comprehensive national paid leave policies:** Comprehensive paid family and medical leave, such as proposed in the FAMILY Act, promotes bonding between parents and babies, and enables workers to care for their own and family members' extended health needs. Paid sick days, such as proposed in the Healthy Families Act, allows all workers to earn time to address short-term care needs for themselves or their ill child or family member, and to obtain preventive care.
- **Build an equitable economic base:** Families need a range of policies that bolster economic security when children are young and their development is most sensitive to economic want. Families need a minimum wage of \$15 per hour, a universal child allowance—such as a young child tax credit—and new approaches such as “baby bonds” to help close the racial wealth gap.
- **Create communities that reinforce family strengths:** Create a robust new funding stream to help communities design strategies and implement services and supports to address the social determinants of health, giving every family a place to turn for support as they nurture their young children's development. Such support helps families form protective factors that buffer babies and young children from intolerable stresses that can derail their development. We spend billions separating families and placing children in foster care, perpetuating institutionalized racism and inequities, while investing almost nothing in prevention. It is time to create a continuum of parent and family support services.
- **Transform child welfare into a family-focused, trauma-informed “child well-being system”:** Transforming the child welfare system by applying the science of early childhood development and adopting trauma-responsive and healing-centered policies and practices can help courts and communities keep families intact and thriving. The Strengthening America's Families Act (SAFA) would build on promising work by states and judicially led community teams that are spreading across the country, instilling equity in family support and outcomes. SAFA also creates a framework for effectively implementing preventive services under the Family First Prevention Services Act.



Positive Early Learning Experiences

A well-funded early care and learning system helps ensure that all families can access the quality services their children need and must be built to ensure strong development from birth and even before. The needs of our infants and toddlers must be the first thought, not an afterthought. By the time they enter preschool, many young children will already be behind. We cannot afford to make our babies and toddlers wait for quality support for early development and learning. We must strengthen the range of services for infants, toddlers, and pregnant women, to promote equity of opportunity for enriching early learning experiences. Congress and the Administration should:



- **Sustain child care and build the world-class system families deserve:** As a key foundation for a strong economy, child care is a public good. We must increase investment in rebuilding the child care system decimated by COVID-19 and enact a comprehensive child care program that places quality child care within reach of all working families, particularly those with low and moderate income. The Child Care for Working Families Act would increase the number of children and families served, assure quality services, and promote equitable early learning opportunities.
- **Fully fund Early Head Start as a beacon of hope:** As more families are challenged by the sharp economic downturn, this effective early development and family support program should be empowered to reach all eligible infants and toddlers as well as serve significantly more pregnant people.
- **Expand Early Intervention (EI) as an essential part of the early care and learning system:** The federal funding structure for EI services through Part C of IDEA should enable states to fully meet the developmental needs of infants and toddlers, including developmental screening and follow-up, helping families navigate the system; expanding the EI workforce and ensuring adequate reimbursement, ensuring coverage for more children who are at risk or could benefit from services, and incorporating more infant and early childhood mental health expertise and services.



ABOUT ZERO TO THREE

ZERO TO THREE works to ensure all infants and toddlers benefit from the family and community connections critical to their well-being and development. Since 1977, the organization has advanced the proven power of nurturing relationships by transforming the science of early childhood into helpful resources, practical tools, and responsive policies for millions of parents, professionals, and policymakers.

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End Notes

ⁱ Keating, K., Cole, P. & Schaffner, M. (2020). State of Babies Yearbook: 2020. ZERO TO THREE.
<http://www.stateofbabies.org>

ⁱⁱ Rapid EC Project (September 2020). No Shelter from the Storm.
<https://medium.com/rapid-ec-project/no-shelter-from-the-storm-88e290dad8e6>

ⁱⁱⁱ Rapid-EC Project (December 2020). Facing Hunger: The Weight of the Pandemic is Falling on Families.
<https://medium.com/rapid-ec-project/facing-hunger-the-weight-of-the-pandemic-is-falling-on-american-families-1cbeb047a955>;
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