

Supporting Financial Stability for All Children in Nebraska

Kidsights Data is a groundbreaking initiative designed to generate population-level insights into how children develop from birth to age five using the Kidsights Measurement Tool, the first population-based tool in the nation to measure a core set of early child development skills throughout the early childhood years. Nebraska is home to Kidsights Data, located at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and has served as the pilot site for three statewide rounds of parent surveys, creating a unique and powerful dataset.

Through direct input from families with young children, Nebraska now holds one of the most innovative sources of early childhood data in the country, offering new opportunities to uncover what supports children's development and to share meaningful learnings with parents, early childhood educators, funders, and policymakers. Beyond developing the tool and leading data collection and analysis, Kidsights Data is committed to making these insights accessible to the public, and this brief is one way those learnings are being shared.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Supporting families' basic financial stability, such as food and housing, is central to promoting healthy child development and community well-being. When families experience financial hardship, these conditions can create stress and instability that undermine children's early development. Every child, regardless of where they live, should have the financial resources and security they need to thrive.

Findings from a statewide survey of Nebraska parents of young children, from birth to age five, show that economic hardship is widespread and is unevenly distributed across families. These challenges were substantially more common among families without a college degree, likely reflecting differences in income between families with and without a college degree.

Every child, regardless of where they live, should have the financial resources and security they need to thrive.

Importantly, the data show that even moderate levels of hardships, such as being able to afford food but not always the kinds of food that families want, or occasional difficulty covering basic needs such as food and housing, may deter child development.

Addressing economic hardship early, and before families experience severe or even moderate financial hardship, is an investment in our future that strengthens young children's development and promotes community well-being across Nebraska.

STUDY OVERVIEW & POPULATION CONTEXT

These findings reflect the voices of over 2,500 Nebraska parents of young children, birth to 5 years, who participated in a survey from Kidsights Data at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC). Families represent urban and rural communities across income levels.

Data are drawn from Kidsights Data and parent interviews, reflecting population-level patterns in variations of socioeconomic characteristics that children grow up in.

WHY POPULATION-LEVEL DATA MATTERS

Population-level child development data helps communities and decision-makers see patterns that individual stories alone cannot, guiding policy decisions that strengthen systems for all families and communities.

KEY FINDINGS: FINANCIAL DISPARITIES & CHILD DEVELOPMENT

In this brief, we focus on how financial hardships facing Nebraska families, specifically food insecurity and difficulty covering basic needs, influence child development.

We define and classify food insecurity based on parents' reports on their ability to afford enough food and the food they want: (1) always able to afford nutritious meals; (2) able to afford enough to eat but not always the kinds of food desired; (3) sometimes unable to afford enough to eat; and (4) often unable to afford enough to eat.

Similarly, we classify difficulty covering basic needs into four categories based on parents' reports on how often families have trouble covering basic expenses, such as food and housing, with their income: (1) never; (2) rarely; (3) somewhat often; and (4) very often.

Child developmental outcomes are measured using the Kidsights Measurement Tool (KMT), a parent-reported instrument that assesses children's motor, cognitive, language, and social-emotional development. The KMT provides validated scores that allow for comparisons of child development across age groups.

What the data shows



Approximately 40% of Nebraska families reported some level of food insecurity, with 9% of parents reporting that they sometimes or often could not afford to eat.

This disparity was larger by the level of parents' education: 13% of parents without a college degree reported sometimes or often being unable to afford food compared with only 2% of college-educated parents.



Children from households who were experiencing any level of food insecurity showed lower child development scores than those in food-secure households, even among families that could afford food but not always the kinds they believed they should eat.



60% of parents reported some levels of difficulty covering basic needs since the child's birth, such as food and housing, with their family income.

This disparity was larger by parents' education level: 32% of families without a college degree reported experiencing difficulty covering basic needs somewhat to very often, compared with 15% of families with a college degree.



Any level of difficulty covering basic needs was also negatively associated with child development, indicating that children from households struggling to meet basic needs had lower child development scores than those from households that didn't.

Taken together, these findings indicate that not only severe levels of financial hardships, but even moderate levels of food insecurity and difficulty meeting basic needs, are associated with more negative outcomes for Nebraska's young children. While many factors influence child development, helping families afford food and other basic needs may play an important role in promoting healthy child development. Families with a caregiver with lower educational levels face greater economic strain, indicating that targeted outreach and support for these families could be especially important for helping them raise healthy, well-developing young children.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Food Insecurity

"We don't eat out. That is one thing. We show cattle, and when I travel for work, I pack all of our meals. That's a big one.... On the first Saturdays of the month in town, they have a food drive, and I go in, and I pick up boxes."

–Rural Sales Representative

Covering the Basics

“We’re connected with a community program that is not income-based, and that’s fantastic, and it’s been a huge relief and helped out a lot with that for us. And just knowing that they’ll come through or they’ll give us resources that will help us.”

–Rural Social Services Employee

“We are very bare minimum, bare basics...We don’t take vacations. We don’t take time off work that doesn’t involve a kid being sick or having a doctor’s appointment, budget groceries. We don’t have fancy cars, phones, gaming systems. Money’s just not there.”

–Urban Pharmacy Tech

“Sometimes things get really tight, especially around the holidays or it’s like if something in life happens like a car breaks down or some other expense, you know, I feel like we’re just making by. We often joke that we essentially pay two mortgages because what I pay in child care a month is actually very close to what I pay in my mortgage.”

–Urban Director of Operations

FOR DECISION-MAKERS

State and local policymakers, child care systems, and community partners

Why it matters:

- Making sure all families can cover the basics and afford high-quality food is an important strategy to promote child development, community well-being, and fairness across places.

How it works:

- Supporting families’ basic economic security strengthens the conditions that allow children to thrive during the critical early childhood years.

What the data suggest:

- Strengthen access to financial support that promotes food security and housing stability for families with young children. These programs include free and reduced lunches for children in childcare and school, nutrition programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and access to health insurance through Medicaid.

50% of Nebraska families report receiving a government benefit

40% of families reported receiving some form of government-funded food assistance, either WIC, SNAP, or free/reduced school lunches

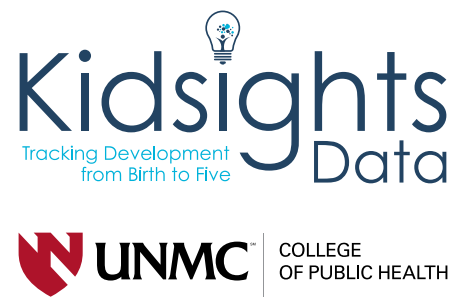
3% of parents reported receiving cash assistance

10% report being enrolled in Head Start or Early Head Start

40% reported receiving Medicaid

Ensuring families continue to have access to these support services is critical.

- Target outreach and support toward families with lower educational attainment, who are more likely to experience persistent financial strain and associated developmental risks.



About Kidsights Data

Kidsights Data is an initiative to build demand for and generate population-level data that tracks the development of children from birth to five in the United States using the Kidsights Measurement Tool. This tool is the first population-based measurement tool of a core set of child development skills for children from birth to age five in the United States. For more information about Kidsights Data, located in the College of Public Health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, visit www.kidsightsdata.org.