

SEPTEMBER 2020

PAVING THE ROAD TO RECOVERY FOR FAMILIES

Supporting Missouri
Kids & Families
Through and
Beyond
the COVID Crisis

KIDS 
WIN MISSOURI



Paving the Road to Recovery for Families Executive Summary

From August to September, Kids Win Missouri engaged with over 50 parents through community conversations and surveyed over 100 parents from 23 counties to better understand their challenges as they balance their children's care, education, health and safety, and navigate their families through financial hardships brought on by the pandemic.



Key Takeaways

- The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting communities and groups in different ways and exacerbating inequities.
- Most families are overwhelmed by the new responsibilities associated with juggling work, school or child care and their home life in the middle of the pandemic.
- Parents are craving clear communication and well-articulated plans from leaders at all levels.

Policy Solutions:

- Target funds and resources in areas where inequities are being compounded.
- Support solutions that offer flexibility and necessary resources for families.
- Enact comprehensive, aligned strategies to ease families' anxiety and stress.



BACKGROUND

Parent Community Conversations and Survey



The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every child and family in Missouri and across the United States.

From school to child care to health care to family economic security, children and families are experiencing changes and uncertainty in their everyday lives. Data help support this.

An August 2020 landscape analysis from Child Care Aware of Missouri reported that, nationally, 13% of parents either quit their jobs or significantly reduced their hours because of closed schools and lack of child care. As of late September across Missouri, 10% of students are attending districts which are offering school fully in person, 39% are in-person with a distanced option, 25% are blended, and 25% are completely virtual ([DESE Related Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Information](#)).

Additionally, there are more than 4,000 fewer children receiving subsidized child care in August than September ([DSS](#)). Since the pandemic started, 95 counties in Missouri are now considered child care deserts compared with only 63 prior to March. The uneven playing field that already existed in low- and middle-income communities in terms of child care has been exacerbated by the pandemic, furthering inequities. ([CCAMO](#), August 2020; [CAP](#), June 2020).

Other economic indicators, like spikes in accessing Medicaid and food support, have also demonstrated the impact the crisis is having on the lives of children and families.

There are more than 77,900 more children on MO HealthNet in August compared to February, showing a huge increased need (Missouri Department of Social Services Monthly Management August [report](#)). Additionally, there were more than 62,500 more families receiving SNAP benefits in August compared to February..

In August and September of 2020, Kids Win Missouri met with parents to hear about the impacts the crisis has had in their lives in order to better understand the needs of children and families throughout our state.

We held 11 virtual conversations with 50 parents and also surveyed more than 100 parents from throughout the state in 23 counties.

The parents represented Missouri's diverse geographic landscape, different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and had varying experiences with the pandemic to share with our team. We talked with several parents of children with disabilities or special needs, foster and adoptive parents, and single parents as well.

Each conversation focused on three major topics – Children's Care and Education, Health and Safety of Children and Families, and Family Economic Security.



CARE AND EDUCATION

Many families were unsure about their child's health and safety in returning to school or child care and felt conflicted about making the decision to return to in-person learning.

- Parents talked about their children's underlying health conditions or conditions that those living in their house may have that prevented them from feeling comfortable in sending their children back to school or care.
- Some seemed more comfortable if they lived in communities with low levels of community spread of the virus and their children were at a school or child care center with small group sizes and ratios.

Parents are struggling to find balance in providing care and education for their children while also working.

- Families we met with talked about the difficult position they face with trying to provide support and a more normal school experience for their children, while also tending to their professional duties. Many are working from home, adjusting their schedules to meet their children's school or care needs, or working outside of the home and struggling to find the needed assistance for their children.
- Many parents talked about using the additional leave time afforded to them in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, but this only gave parents two weeks of paid time off, which is not enough to cover the end of the Spring semester, Summer, and their needs with school starting in the Fall.

“Child care is nearly impossible to find in our area. It is very concerning.

Diana Johnson, mother of two from La Plata

Child care remains difficult to access or unaffordable for families.

- Foster parents and the parents of children with disabilities talked about the difficulties in finding available programming.
- For foster parents, the issue is the lack of programs willing to accept state subsidy, allowing for affordable care.
- Many parents of children with disabilities mentioned not having programming in their area that would accommodate their children's special needs or disabilities. Many of these families talked about one parent leaving the workforce or relying on family options to provide care for their children.
- Others discussed the added or unexpected costs of needing and finding care. For many parents with school age children, their children would typically be in school, which would not require them to pay for additional full-day care or educational support.
- With virtual schooling taking place, many of them discussed not having the funds to support an in-home caregiver or center-based care.





PARENT PERSPECTIVE

*Vanessa Pimblott
Mother of 2
St. John, MO*

What are the greatest challenges for you and your family right now?

Balancing work and family life since we're all at home, while also managing a new, slimmer budget due to more restricted working conditions. My husband is a small business owner so we're thankful for the flexibility but also have more limited working hours with him helping out at home while I try and work.

What are your greatest concerns around the health and safety of your children and family?

On one hand, I'm concerned that my kids won't get the necessary social play and interaction they need at this age (pre-k and kindergarten), and on the other hand, I'm concerned that other families won't be taking appropriate precautions (wearing masks, staying home when they're sick, avoiding large crowds) which could expose my children and others.

What are your biggest financial concerns?

My greatest worry is that we won't be able to continue to pay for our early childhood care that our youngest is currently enrolled in.

"My greatest worry is that we won't be able to continue to pay for our early childhood care that our youngest is currently enrolled in."

What should policymakers prioritize in the upcoming year?

I would love universal early child care. Health care is the whole family's wellbeing, including mental health. Universal health care and access to early childhood education for all

VIRTUAL EDUCATION

The quality of virtual schooling and instruction was a great concern for many parents.

- Some parents talked about the lack of socialization or social/emotional learning being part of it, while others questioned if their students would be left further behind if the virtual instruction did not match their learning style. The one-on-one interactions between students and teachers is not as prominent in the virtual space, putting their children at risk of falling behind.
- Most parents of children with special needs or disabilities felt virtual learning was not a feasible option for their children.

Virtual schooling requires more resources and equipment which have associated costs.

- Parents discussed some of the struggles with ensuring their children had the appropriate technology, devices, and internet access to accommodate virtual learning. While many school districts reached out to families to provide what they could, some parents still didn't feel fully equipped or prepared and many indicated that accessing the equipment was not always easy or clear and could be costly.
- Parents also expressed concern with providing appropriate work environments for their children to allow for an optimal learning space in their home that feels like school..
- One parent talked about wanting to set her children up with their own learning space, including their own desks, but mentioned the high up-front costs. She ended up putting them on a credit card to properly provide her kids with an ideal education environment.

“So much pressure is being put on schools to adjust very quickly and with less funding, and I am afraid we will see the repercussions for years to come.

Katy Lineberry, parent of two from Kansas City*

Parents of children with special needs or disabilities were concerned about their children receiving the school-provided additional support or therapies that they need to succeed. Their biggest concern is their children losing a year or falling further behind without access to these services.

- They expressed a lack of clarity with how their schools were planning to maintain the goals and plans in their children's Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and whether or not schools would attempt to cut hours of services or access to particular services, which would violate the spirit of federal laws protecting children with disabilities.
- Parents were concerned about the short-term and long-term ramifications of IEP modifications and lacked clarity on what the school's obligations would be in making up the services missed or allowing for additional years of schooling if needed.

“We have one computer and three people trying to use it. Today it crashed--it just completely stopped working.”

Justina Brown, mother of two from Kansas City, MO

“I worry about how [my] kids IEP requirements will be met and how online schooling will work for kids with special needs.”

Parent from Columbia, MO





PARENT PERSPECTIVE

Trimia Davis

*Single Mother of 4
Columbia, MO*

What are the greatest challenges for you and your family right now?

I think the biggest challenge is the restrictions that are in place. As a homeschooling family for the past 4 years, it's been difficult to schedule field trips, educational activities, and group activities that we'd normally have.

What are your greatest concerns around the health and safety of your children and family?

My biggest concern with health and safety is that I'm in a high risk group with underlying health issues. If I were to contract something and end up in the hospital, what would happen to my children? I'm a single mom with out any family here.

What are your biggest financial concerns?

We have a small home based business, Davis Craft Studios, that took a huge hit this year. Many of the craft shows we've come to rely on were cancelled earlier this year, and with my health concerns, fall and winter shows are paused as well. We've relied much on in-person sales and not utilized e-commerce so now we're kind of playing catch up to try to salvage some of this year's sales.

"If I were to contract something and end up in the hospital, what would happen to my children? I'm a single mom without any family here."

What should policymakers prioritize in the upcoming year?

My biggest concern here is mostly in regards to homeschooling. I don't want them to try to introduce legislation that's going to put more regulations on our current homeschooling laws. With many people opting to homeschool, I know that this means money and funding out of public school.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Mental Health was a top concern for all parents – both for their children and themselves.

- In every conversation, parents expressed concern about their children's mental health, social and emotional development, and overall well-being, especially without having access to regular or in-person school and other social or physical activities.
- Many parents discussed the struggle to find balance with everyone home all of the time and feeling overwhelmed with school, work and home life.

The majority of parents reported having health insurance for their children and themselves – though many expressed concerns about the cost of maintaining coverage or acquiring health care services.

- Some discussed the high costs of maintaining health insurance and the impact on their family budgets. For instance, one parent shared her need to maintain her job to provide necessary, yet costly health insurance for her family, leaving little money for other expenses.
- One parent specifically mentioned postponing a necessary surgery, due to temporary income loss and the cost of the procedure.

Many parents were anxious about going to doctors' offices and some delayed services or treatments due to this anxiety.

- Most of the parents we talked were staying up-to-date on health appointments or well-child checks where immunizations were being administered, though some talked about delaying appointments out of anxiety or difficulty getting into their doctor.

- Parents volunteered that they were avoiding visiting the doctor for minor illnesses or ailments, instead treating themselves with at-home or over-the-counter remedies
- Overall, parents expressed greater concern for monitoring their children's health and neglecting their own health care needs, at least temporarily.

For parents of children with special needs, there were unique concerns relating to health insurance coverage and Medicaid.

- Some parents discussed the difficulty of qualifying for Medicaid. For certain children with disabilities, there are a limited number of waivers to access coverage and it is not need-based, but rather a first come, first serve basis. They noted this is a problem during non-pandemic times, too.
- Others talked about a lack of clarity about what services were or were not covered and the costs associated with requiring additional services or therapies (per their physicians) that were not covered by insurance.
- Many also talked about the difficulty in finding care providers they could afford or accepted their coverage, particularly those providing support services or aid (like home health care workers).

Those living in areas of the state impacted by gun violence expressed concerns about community and neighborhood safety.

- With limited options in terms of school and child care, these parents were especially worried about keeping their children safe at home and in their neighborhoods.

"I am afraid that if kids have too much alone time, their mental health will suffer immensely."

Beth, parent from Kirksville, MO

"We're avoiding going anywhere because I can't afford to get sick. I'm in constant survive-and-try-not-to-panic mode."

Parent from St. Louis, MO

"[I'm] tired, overwhelmed, and at times exhausted."

Parent from Kansas City, MO





PARENT PERSPECTIVE

Regina Heath
Mother of 1
Kansas City, MO

What are the greatest challenges for you and your family right now?

The greatest challenges are maintaining a stable household income, and keeping my child entertained because play dates are almost non-existent.

What are your greatest concerns around the health and safety of your children and family?

My concern is: are we doing every thing we need to do to stay well. I worry about high co-pays if me or my partner need to go to the doctor and having adequate coverage. With the marketplace insurance that we chose in the past seemed so limited, but it's what we could afford. Now we have no coverage. Our child is covered.

What are your biggest financial concerns?

The biggest worry about finances is keeping gainful employment and making sure all our needs are still being met.

"Medicaid expansion would be great for families like ours that are considered working poor...We make too much to qualify for full Medicaid and not enough to afford insurance premiums at work."

What should policymakers prioritize in the upcoming year?

In the 2021 legislative session, I think health care should continue to be a topic of discussion, I have preexisting conditions and I work, but if I put me and my family on an insurance plan through my job, I know my income decreases drastically because of the premium payment. A solution would be the Marketplace Insurance, but that took me away from my original health care provider that knows us well because I chose a plan based on what I could afford for a monthly premium. Medicaid expansion would be great for families like ours that are considered working poor. Our household's highest college degree is a Masters, but we still are caught in between. We make too much to qualify for full Medicaid and not enough to afford insurance premiums at work.

FAMILY ECONOMIC SECURITY

Parents were feeling the financial impacts of COVID in a variety of ways.

- Some families had retained employment but struggled with reduced pay, hours, or mandatory furloughs.
- Others discussed losing their jobs or being unable to work (or return to work) due to necessary schooling and child care issues.
- For parents of children with disabilities, many talked about the fact that their families are accustomed to living off of one income and having one parent at home. However it was still quite different than during pre-pandemic times when they also received additional support from school.

Even where parents had not lost employment or pay, almost all families noticed increased costs in having their children and families home all the time.

- Many parents realized a significant increase in their grocery bills or utility bills.
- Parents that needed to leave home for work struggled to find and afford child care options, due to school and summer camps being closed.
- Some parents' incomes were too high to qualify for program benefits, but not high enough to comfortably afford the additional needs of their family during this time.
- Many families discussed needing and accessing additional food or nutritional support through their schools, local churches or non-profits, and the SNAP program.

"Do I just quit my job to take care of the kids? How do I pay my bills? The notion of quitting my job to take care of my kids might be unrealistic for me, but it is not for others, which is exactly where the inequities lie."

Vanessa Pimblott, parent of two from St. John

Others talked about difficulties in understanding or accessing the various federal and state benefit programs that could assist them.

- A few parents did not know about the P-EBT (pandemic EBT) program for children that qualified for free or reduced lunch until the deadline for application had passed and did not feel that they had been properly informed.
- Other parents thought they may qualify for child care benefits or Medicaid benefits for their children but were not sure how to access them. We were able to share relevant information with these parents.
- At least one parent was a sole proprietor and could not access the Paycheck Protection Program or did not realize she could until the deadline had already passed.





PARENT PERSPECTIVE

Isca Dolfina
Mother of 2
Kansas City, MO

What are the greatest challenges for you and your family right now?

The greatest challenge is to keep a job because for non essential worker like us, we do not know if our job is safe or if our hours will get cut.

What are your greatest concerns around the health and safety of your children and family?

The greatest concern is our well being and our mental health. Being active is kind of hard since most of the parks and gyms are closed. Not to mention healthy foods such as vegetable or fruits are becoming expensive. With everything being limited, it's starting to drive my children crazy!

What are your biggest financial concerns?

My biggest worry is right now is how to pay bills. With hours cut, bills are piled up and we are paying in installments. It's like never a ending payment.

"My biggest worry right now is how to pay bills. We do not know if our job is safe or if our hours will get cut."

What should policymakers prioritize in the upcoming year?

Education. Even though I chose virtual school for my children and the district has been good with the curriculum and provide us with supplies, keeping everyone safe to go back to school is the top priority.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting communities and groups in different ways and exacerbating inequities.

Many families that were struggling before the pandemic have found themselves in even more dire straits as the impacts of the pandemic continue to affect their communities and their daily lives. For virtual schooling, underserved families have less access to the necessary technology, equipment, and other resources to stay connected and engaged in their education. For children with special needs or disabilities, the lack of access to hands-on support, therapies, or other special services puts them at risk to fall further behind and to lose progress in their growth and development.

Families that were economically disadvantaged or food insecure prior to the pandemic have, in many cases, found themselves on harder times, whether due to job or pay loss, lack of access to food and resources, or other confounding factors. It is critical that decision makers focus on where there are the greatest disparities in order to help level the playing field for children and families that need it most and advance racial and economic equity to support children and families at risk of falling further behind.

Most families are overwhelmed by the new responsibilities associated with juggling work, school or child care and their home life in the middle of the pandemic.

In every session we talked about the mental health and social emotional toll the pandemic was having on children and parents. Most parents felt they were doing their best to make things work but struggled with the feeling of not meeting their professional or personal obligations in their entirety. Many parents also felt ill-equipped to appropriately teach their children and provide care while juggling their own responsibilities and assignments during the day. Though there was some relief in terms of paid leave offered early on, these benefits ran out quickly with the extended shutdowns of school, work and child care, and families are still feeling the effects of the pandemic in their communities. It was also clear that parents need additional access to mental health support, both for themselves and for their children.

Parents are craving clear communication and well-articulated plans from leaders at all levels.

Parents' uncertainty around plans was the one common element that rang true throughout all of the sessions when talking about frustrations around school, local health orders, and decisions being made at the state and federal level. Many parents expressed the tension in trying to understand when making decisions about preparing for school, whether to send their children to child care, or how comfortable they felt with taking their children to the doctor. Many explicitly mentioned the lack of cohesive leadership and clear communication from leaders contributing to their anxiety or uncertainty when making decisions that impact their children and families.

THOUGHTS FROM PARENTS

“The government response to parent needs has been inconsistent and too politicized.”

John Jones, parent from MO

“It seems like leadership has been lacking and [there are] lots of inconsistencies throughout Missouri.”

Parent of two from Lee's Summit, MO



CALL TO ACTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted every aspect of life for children and families throughout our state. Day-to-day activities such as work, school, doctors visits, putting food on the table, and the ability to make rent or a mortgage payment are not only different, but more difficult for Missouri families. From our conversations and observations, we encourage policymakers to consider the following:

Policymakers should focus on areas where inequities are being compounded to target funds and resources.

Solutions may include additional outreach and extending the flexible eligibility and enrollment requirements for families to access needed resources, like child care, cash assistance, health care coverage, and other safety net benefits. Where possible, lawmakers at all levels should target resources in communities where they are most needed to help limit the widening of racial and economic disparities for kids and families.

Policymakers and employers should support solutions that offer flexibility and necessary resources for families.

This may include promoting flexibility or leave benefits that recognize the additional personal and professional obligations parents are taking on and offering additional leave benefits where possible to help parents provide necessary support and structure for their children. Additionally, targeting specific resources to support family mental health needs would benefit both children and parents during these difficult and uncertain times.

Policymakers should also consider comprehensive, aligned strategies to ease families' anxiety and stress.

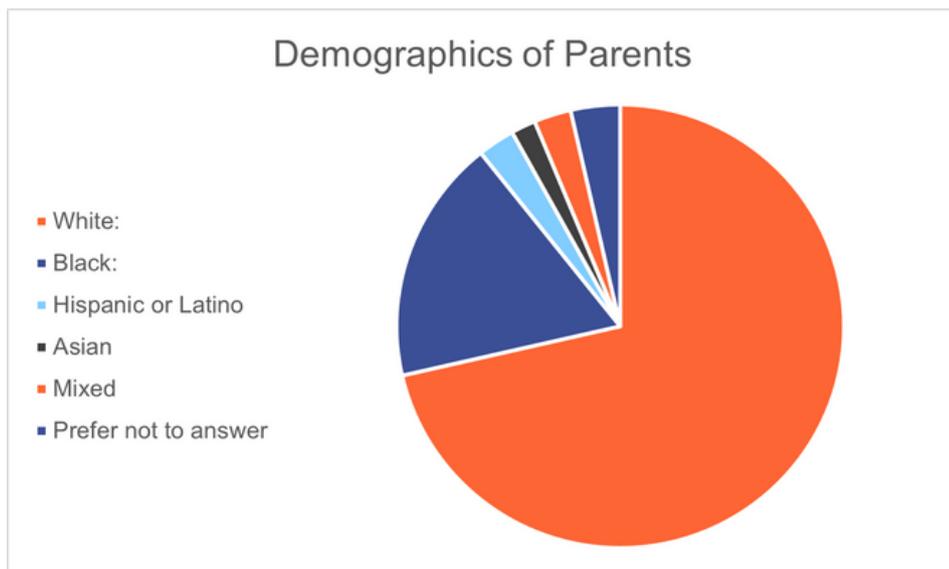
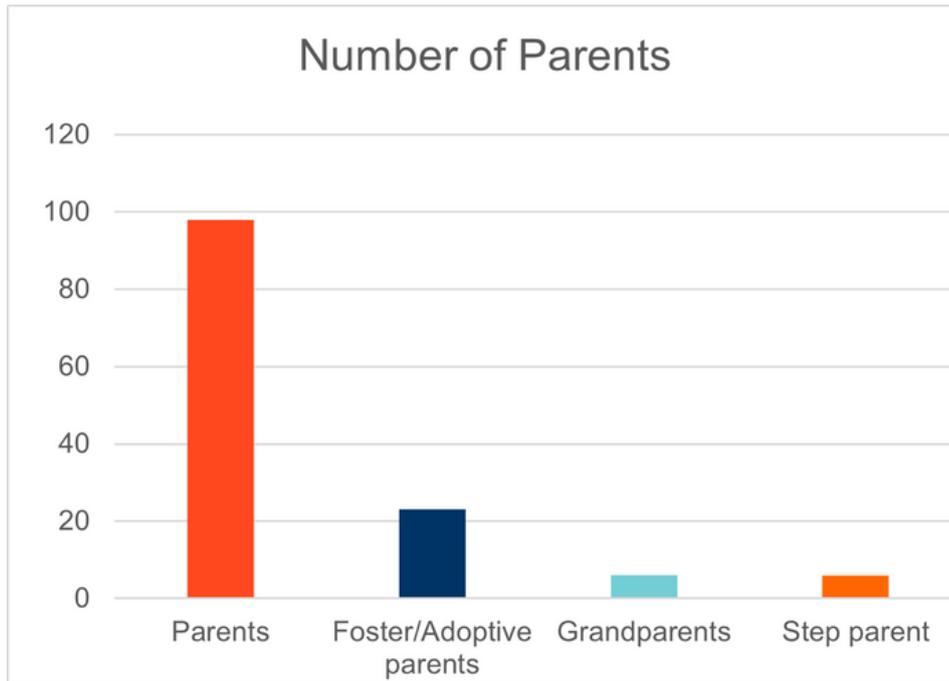
Leaders at all levels - from the school board to the Governor to the President - should communicate more robustly with families and align strategies so there is more consistency in communications to families. This alignment and cohesion could greatly reduce the anxiety and uncertainty parents feel they are shouldering at the moment, due to lack of clear guidance and action from the top.

Supporting children and parents in Missouri through these actions will help them continue to recover and rebuild from the impacts of the pandemic.



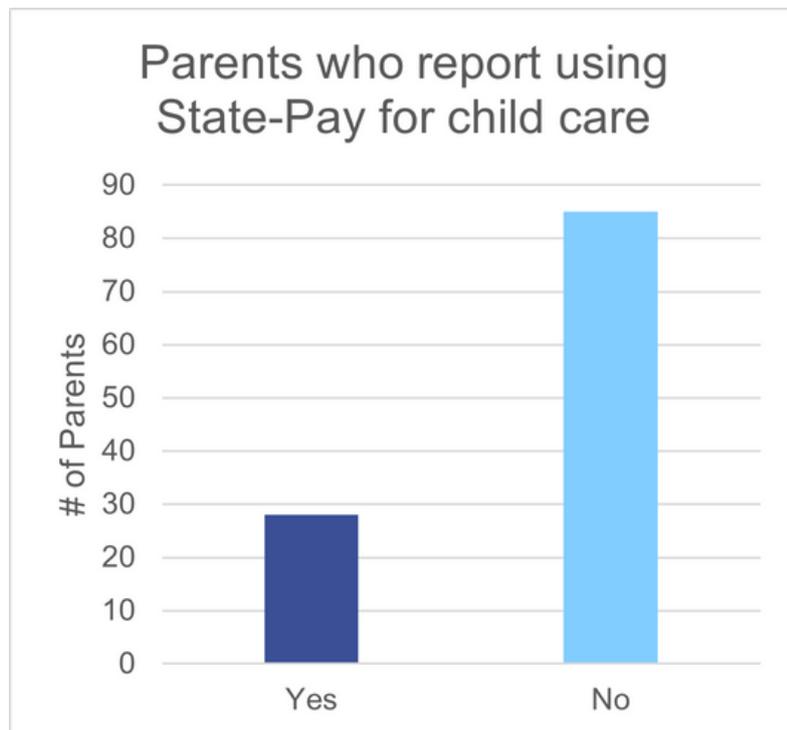
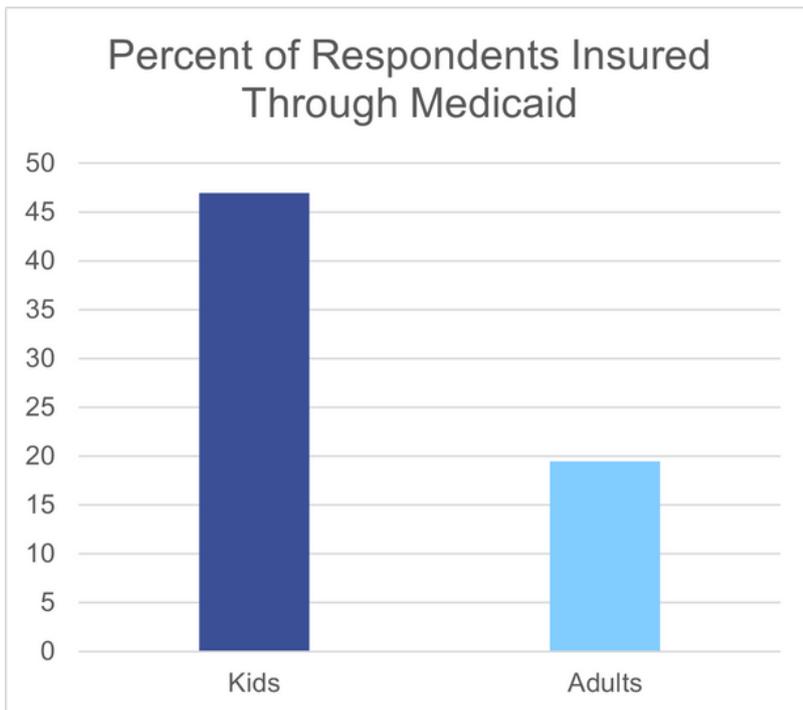
PARENT DEMOGRAPHICS

A brief look at participants in our community conversations and survey



PARENT SURVEY RESPONSES

A brief look at participants in our community conversations and survey



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We are a coalition of organizations and individuals dedicated to improving the well-being of Missouri children.

Our vision is that all Missouri children have the opportunity to be happy, healthy, and successful.

Join us at kidswinmissouri.org