Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

Research for Policy and Practice: Exploring Causes and Consequences of Poverty for Wisconsin Families

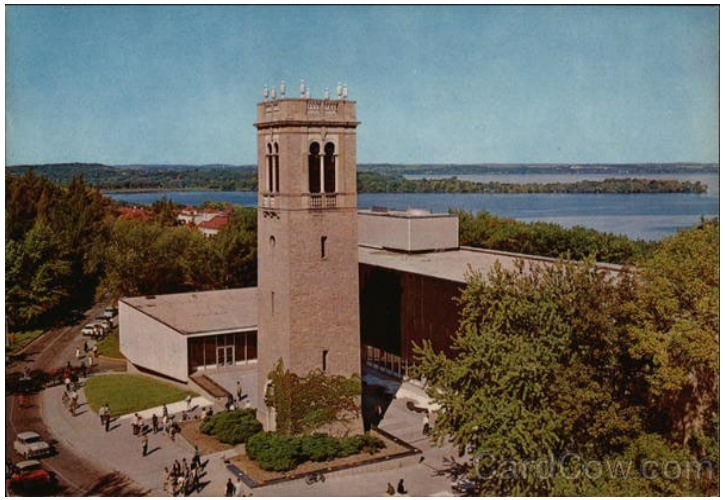
Hallie Bennett Lienhardt, Outreach & Communications Manager

Hilary Shager, Associate Director

Lisa Klein Vogel, Scientist

Molly Costanzo, Scientist

What Is The Institute for Research on Poverty?



- Established in 1966 during the War on Poverty
- Functions as an independent, multi-disciplinary center within the College of Letters & Science at the UW-Madison

- Core infrastructure funding from UW-Madison and U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services
- > $38 million in annual research project funding from grants and contracts from foundations, state and federal agencies

Realizing the "Wisconsin Idea"

- Mission
  - The Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) advances the understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and inequality by producing rigorous **research**, **training** scholars, **engaging** with policymakers and practitioners, and widely **disseminating** evidence.
- Vision
  - Policies and practice are informed by evidence and lead to the reduction of poverty and inequality in the United States.

US Collaborative of Poverty Centers

COLLABORATIVE OF POVERTY CENTERS

Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

UCI Center for Population, Inequality, and Policy

CENTER ON POVERTY & SOCIAL POLICY
at Columbia University

CENTER FOR Poverty & Inequality RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

CENTER ON RACE AND WEALTH
HOWARD UNIVERSITY

Hispanic Institute
Child TRENDS

POVERTY SOLUTIONS
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

STANFORD CENTER ON POVERTY & INEQUALITY

UKCPR UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY CENTER FOR POVERTY RESEARCH

WEST COAST POVERTY CENTER

WILSON SHEEHAN LAB FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Plus:
350+ affiliates from across the country

- about half at UW-Madison

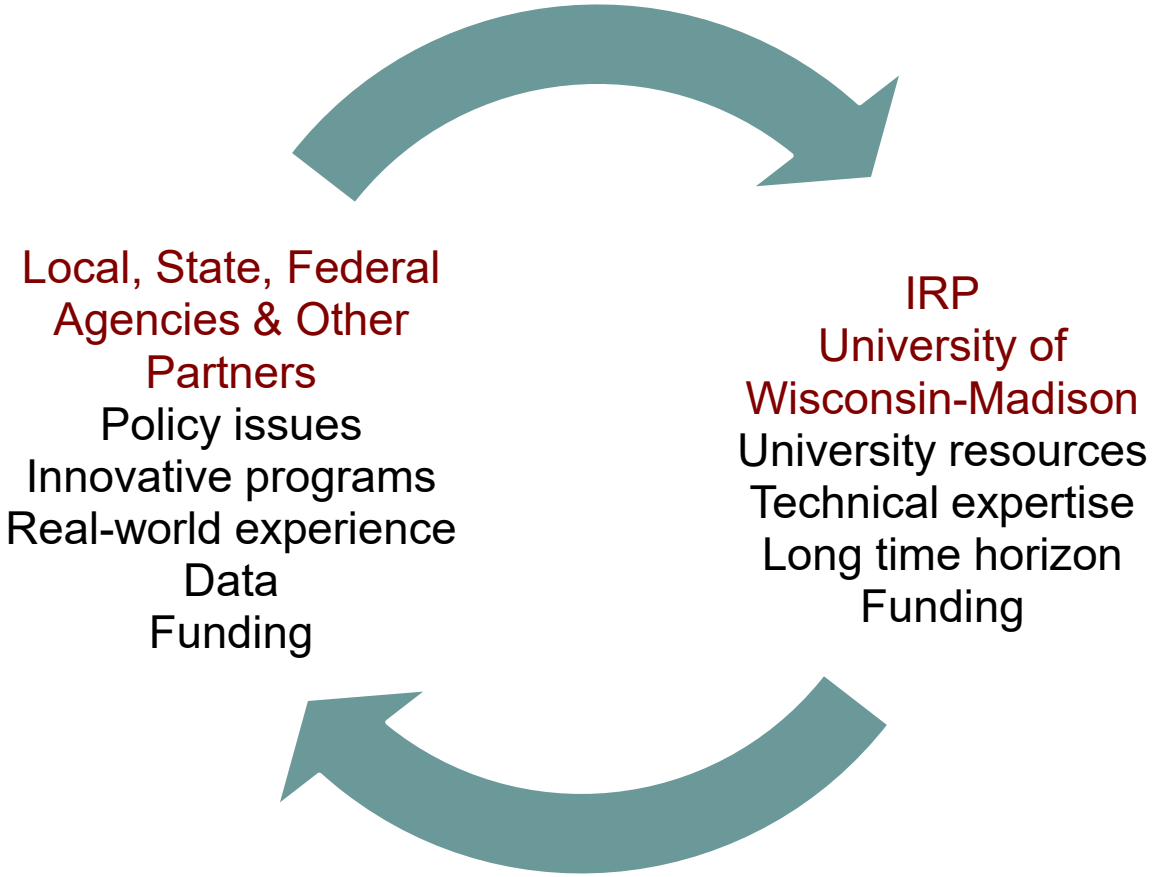
Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

National Research Center on Poverty & Economic Mobility

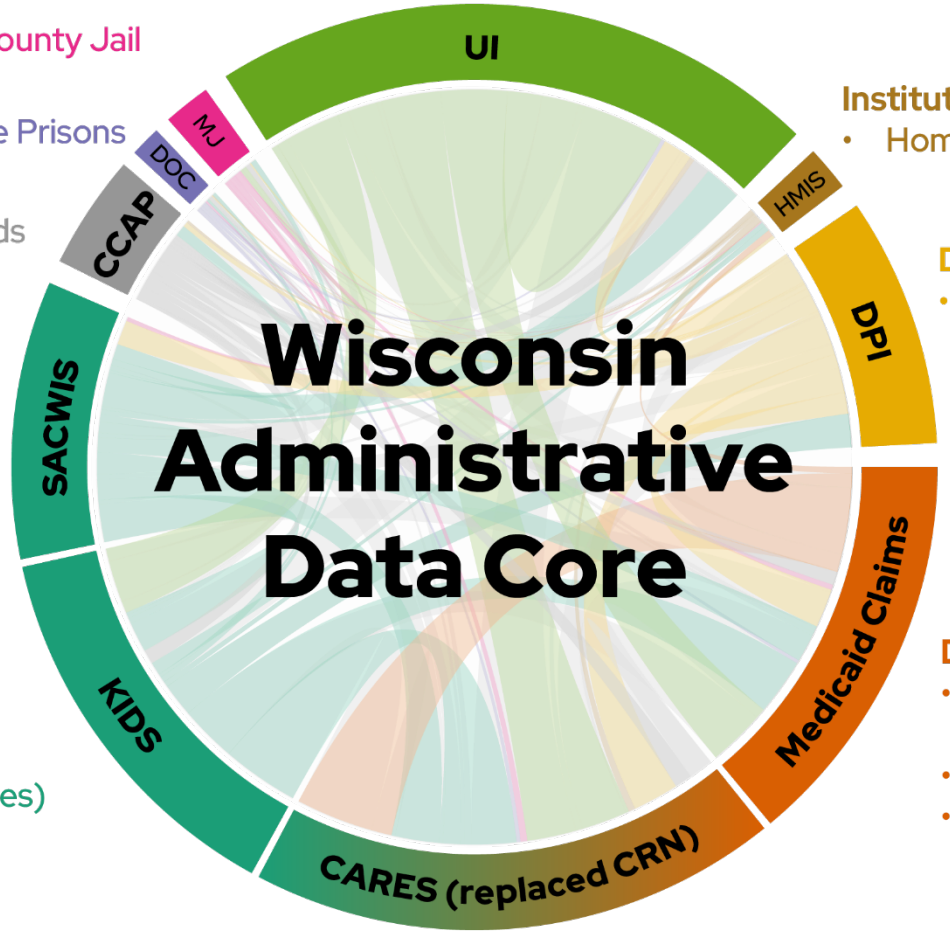
- 5-year, $12M+ cooperative agreement with the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)
- Focus on diversifying network of scholars, strengthening policy-relevant impact of work
  - Fellowships
  - Training & mentoring opportunities
  - Grant opportunities
  - Dissemination of cutting-edge research

What is Our “Logic of Collaboration”?

Collaboration Supports Policy Development and Academic Research



Wisconsin Administrative Data Core



Dept. Workforce Development
- UI Benefits
- Quarterly Wage Records

Milwaukee County
- Incarceration in County Jail

Dept. Corrections
- Incarceration in State Prisons

WI Court System
- Criminal Court Records

Institute for Community Alliances
- Homelessness Services

Dept. Public Instruction
- 4K-12 Education Records

N=13.6 million

Dept. Children and Families
- Child Protective Services
- Child Support
- W-2 (TANF)
- WI Shares (child care subsidies)

Dept. Health Services
- Medicaid Claims
- FoodShare (SNAP)
- BadgerCare Eligibility (Medicaid)

https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wadc/

Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Learning Resources

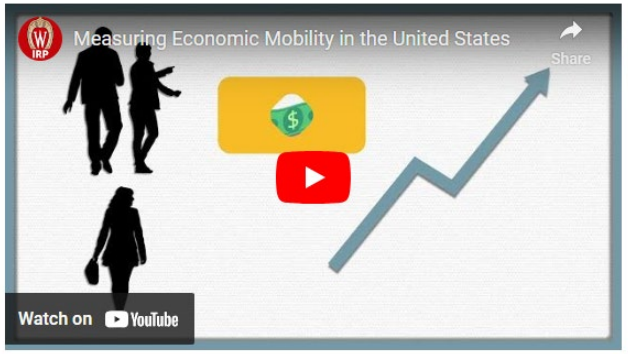
Navigating Disability Benefits: New Research On Administrative Burden And Work Incentives

Debra L. Brucker, Mike Levere, and Ramonia Rochester

August 27 2025

W126-2025

Debra L. Brucker, Research Professor, Institute of Disability, University of New Hampshire
Mike Levere, Assistant Professor of Economics, Colgate University
Ramonia Rochester, Director of Research, National Disability Institute (NDI)



U.S. Federal And State Poverty-Reduction Policy: Divergence In Discretion

Fast Focus Policy Brief
January 2024

Wisconsinites' Opinions About & Experiences With Child Care: Evidence From The WisconSays Survey

Hilary Shager, Yonah Drazen, and Emma Flanagan
Report
June 2025

Focus On Poverty & Classroom Supplement 40(1), September 2024: Housing Precarity: When Renters Struggle To Find And Keep A Home

Edited by James T. Spartz

September 2024

WHO IS POOR IN WISCONSIN?

FAQ

https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resources/

Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Connect with IRP

- Check out our website: https://www.irp.wisc.edu/
- Wisconsin research: https://www.irp.wisc.edu/research/wisconsin/
- Join our listserv: https://www.irp.wisc.edu/connect/

Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

Working with State Agencies: Wisconsin's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and Child Care System

Hilary Shager, PhD

Poverty Matters Conference

October 2, 2025

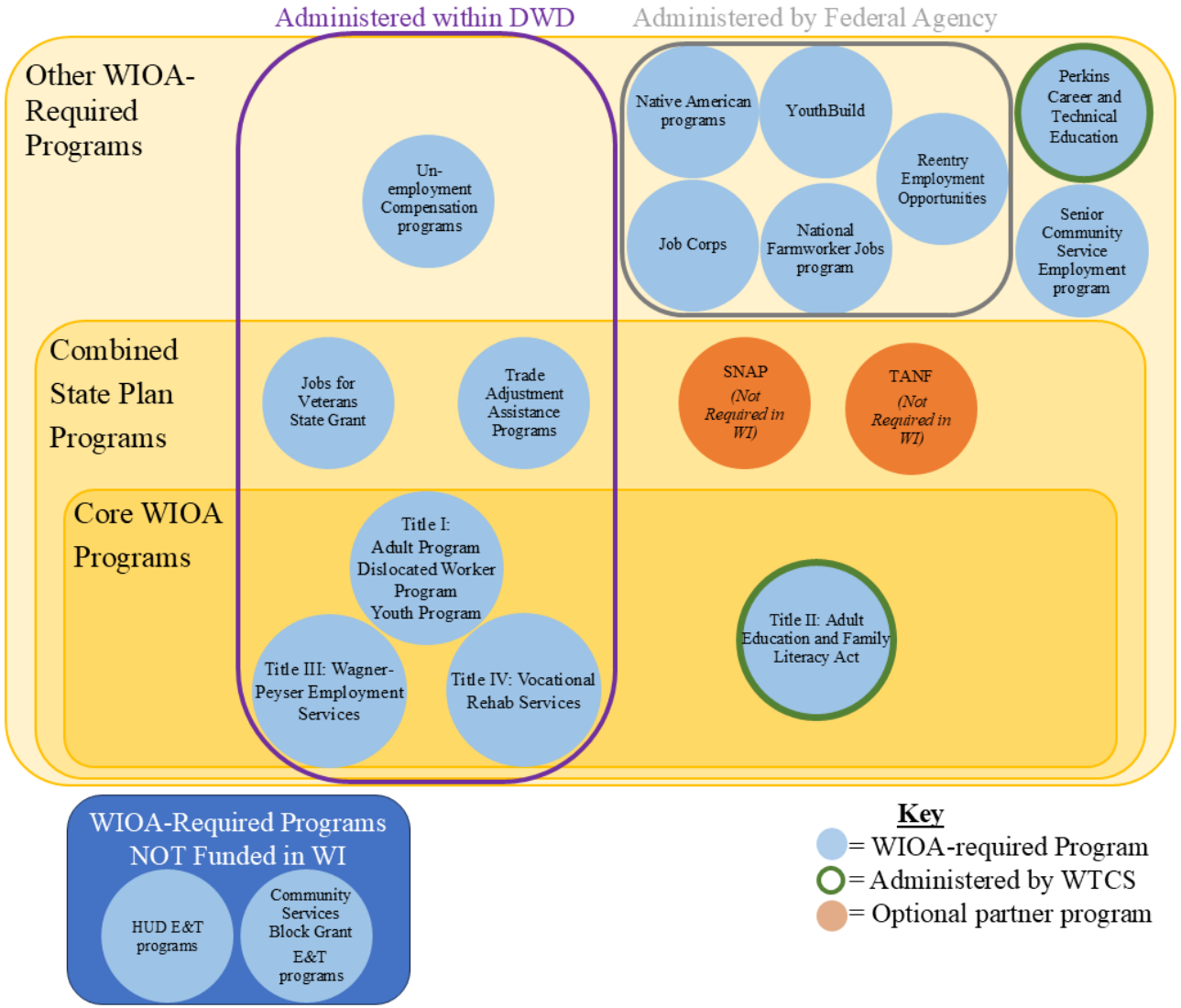
Acknowledgements

- Thank you to the WI Department of Workforce Development (DWD) and WI Department of Children & Families for these partnership opportunities
- Thank you to co-authors who could not be here today: David Pate, Marci Ybarra, Paja Charles, Liesl Hostetter, Jamie Koenig, Grace Landrum, Sarah Wesela (WIOA); Liesl Hostetter, Yonah Drazen, Emma Flanagan, Zach Bauer (child care studies)
- Thank you to DWD and WIOA staff, Workforce Development Board directors, partner agency staff, employers, WIOA clients, WI child care providers, and other Wisconsinites who shared their expertise and experiences
- Any views expressed here are ours alone and not necessarily those of the sponsoring institution

Work with WI State Agencies

- "Yours, Mine, and Ours"
  - Setting a shared research agenda
  - Technical assistance and research contracts
    - Medicaid, Child Welfare, Early Childhood Education, Child Support
  - Partnerships in seeking federal grants
  - Translation by design
  - Learning exchanges
  - Outreach to local and state government officials
  - Linking administrative data (WADC)

Wisconsin's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Program

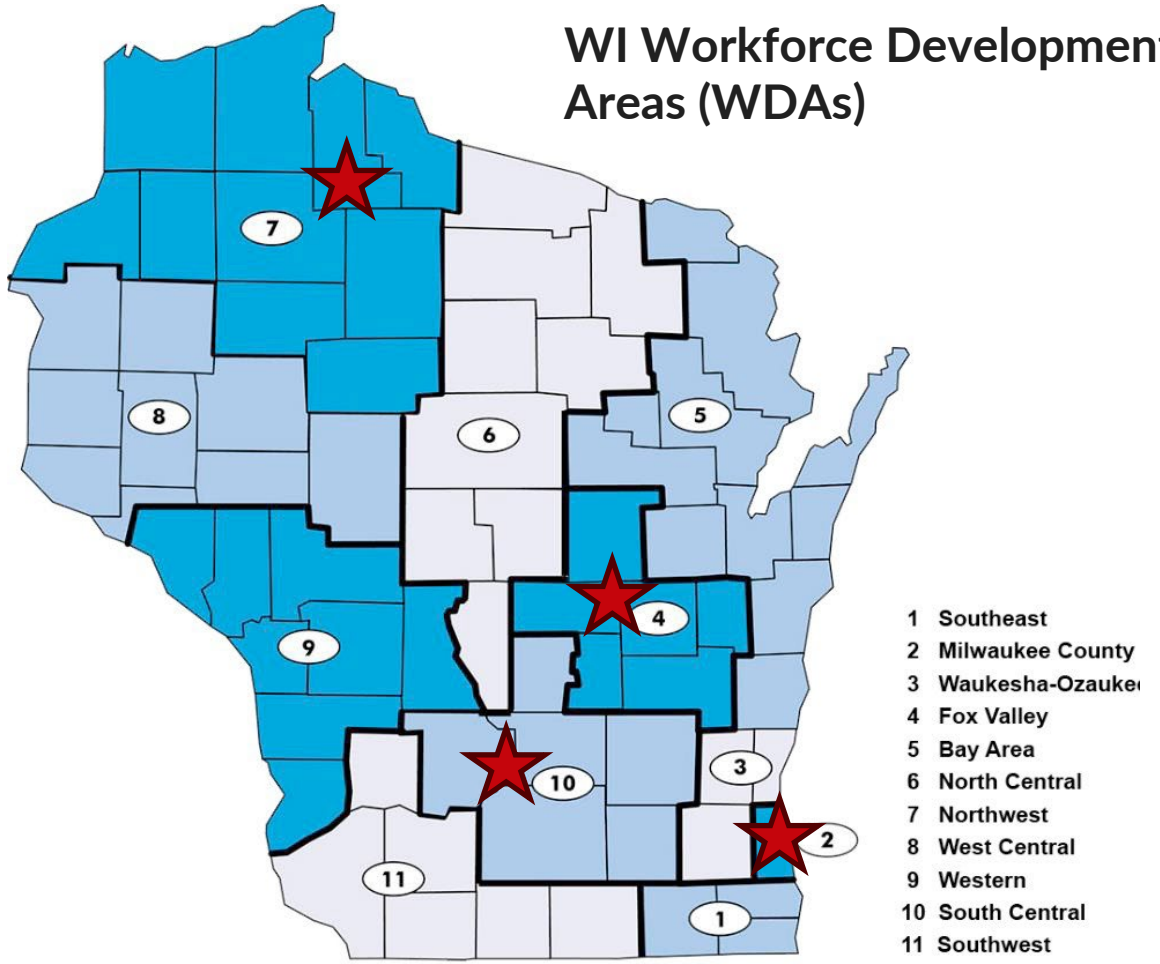


Study Goals

- Understand implementation of WIOA in Wisconsin
  - Identify ongoing accomplishments
  - Identify opportunities for improvement
  - Understand funding practices, opportunities to maximize efficiency
  - Describe customer experiences (employer, WIOA clients)
  - Identify models, lessons learned from other states

Study Methods

- Literature review
- Funding analysis
- Observations of one-stop centers in 4 WDAs
- Stakeholder Interviews
  - Workforce Board Directors/One-stop Operators
  - Direct service staff
  - Clients
  - Employers



How does your work interact w/the WIOA system?

- Strengths
- Weaknesses
- Opportunities
- Threats

WIOA System Strengths & Weaknesses

+Dedicated staff, effective case management at individual level

+Eager to try innovative, new practices and technology

--Struggles with siloed service delivery, lack of service coordination, realizing true “one-stop” vision of WIOA

--Administrative burden

--Variation within and across one-stop centers leads to inconsistent and inequitable service provision, outcomes

--Struggles to serve some populations with special needs

--Misaligned metrics

Interview Perspectives: Strengths & Weaknesses

"**As far as what we do well, I mean, we *care*.** We care about the work. So, whether our results are beautiful or not or we're moving people into programs, or they're all getting their HSEDs or their GEDs, **there's a general love of the work that we do and wanting to serve in a meaningful way**. And that was what changed my life to want to be able to work here." —*Staff*

"If we want to meet our metrics, we have to be selective. **We're pushed to prioritize people we can get placed quickly**. But those aren't always the ones who need us most."—*Director*

"**Paperwork is just so cumbersome**. If you ask any of our people, you know, how much of your time is spent on paperwork versus actually working with a person, you know, probably at least **50/50**." –*Staff*

WIOA System Threats & Opportunities

--Reduced federal funding, increased reliance on supplemental, competitive funding

--Underlying barriers to employment difficult for Job Centers to address without adequate community resources

+Mostly centralized, state-level approach; effective partnerships at local level

+Opportunities to improve cross-program enrollment, leverage blended and braided funding opportunities

Interview Perspectives: Threats & Opportunities

"In 2019, I received $4.2 million in funding. This past funding cycle I received 1.7. So, **our funding has been cut in half or more than that**, and we continue to go down this road of an 8 to 12% cut every year. The thing that doesn't translate with that is the performance that goes with it, right? **We're still held to the same performance standards, even though we are trying to do everything we can with less**." *—Director*

"Out of everything that I've utilized, the **Job Center website sometimes isn't always user friendly** in terms of finding jobs…**I love the workforce events**…"*—Client*

"… there's a lot of people looking for jobs right now…[I] try to give them the benefit of the doubt. You know, they've had some good work history…you know, **they'll be working here maybe a couple of months and then they lose their child care and they just—they just stop showing up for work**… So—**it would be nice to have just a sheet of resources**, you know, child care, transportation, you know, FoodShare, whatever it is." – *Employer*

Implications for Policy & Practice

- Develop integrated intake and info sharing processes
- Apply human-centered design principles
- Explore new ways to communicate available services (including non-employment services)
- Create guides, provide technical assistance about how to braid/blend funding streams, pursue outside funding
- Pursue integrated training & co-enrollment opportunities
- Collaborate with community service providers to address underlying barriers

Child Care Counts Program

- $479M + $170M federal dollars to WI child care providers (Nov. 2021-June 2025)
- Goals:
  - Stabilize providers during COVID
  - Make investments that, long-term, improve quality of care
- IRP/DCF evaluation partnership
  - Leverage monthly application process
  - Provide localized info shared with stakeholders, policymakers

Child Care Counts Evaluation

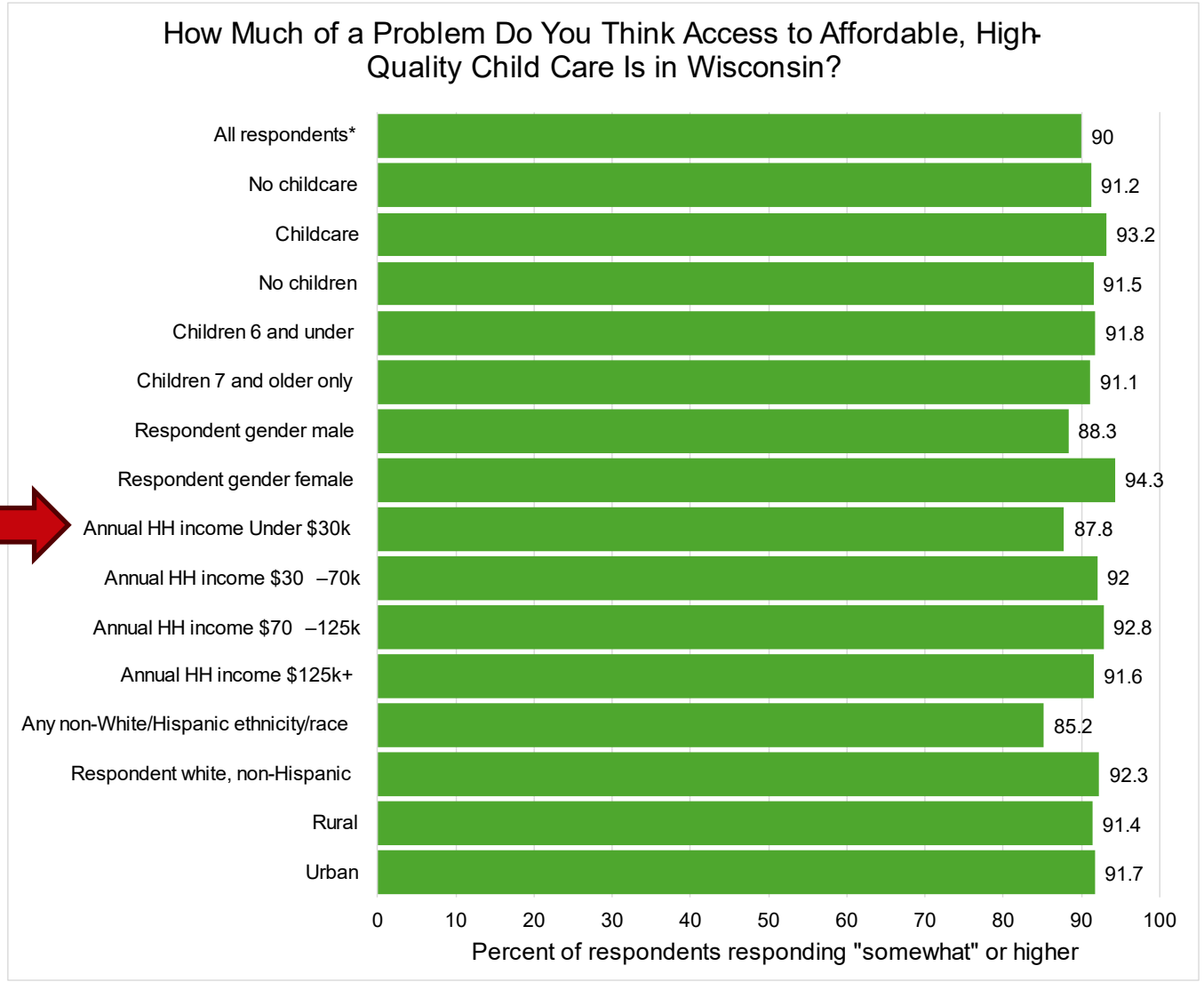
- Survey 1: August 2022
  - How did providers spend Child Care Counts funding?
  - What were impacts of funding on child care programs?
  - What improvements could be made to the program?
- Survey 2: February 2024
  - Understand supply and demand challenges faced by WI child care providers and families
  - Can providers serve more kids; what supports needed?
- Survey 3: November 2024
  - Whether and how much providers experienced changes in programs since May 2023 (50% reduction in CCC funding)
  - What will happen if Child Care Counts ends in June 2025?

WisconSays Survey: December 2024

- Partnership w/UW Survey Center
- Survey fielded as online, probability-based panel representative of the Wisconsin household population
  - N=2,649 total
  - N=475 using child care

Full report available here: https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/wisconsinites-opinions-about-experiences-with-child-care-evidence-from-the-wisconsays-survey/

Most Wisconsinites say child care access is problematic

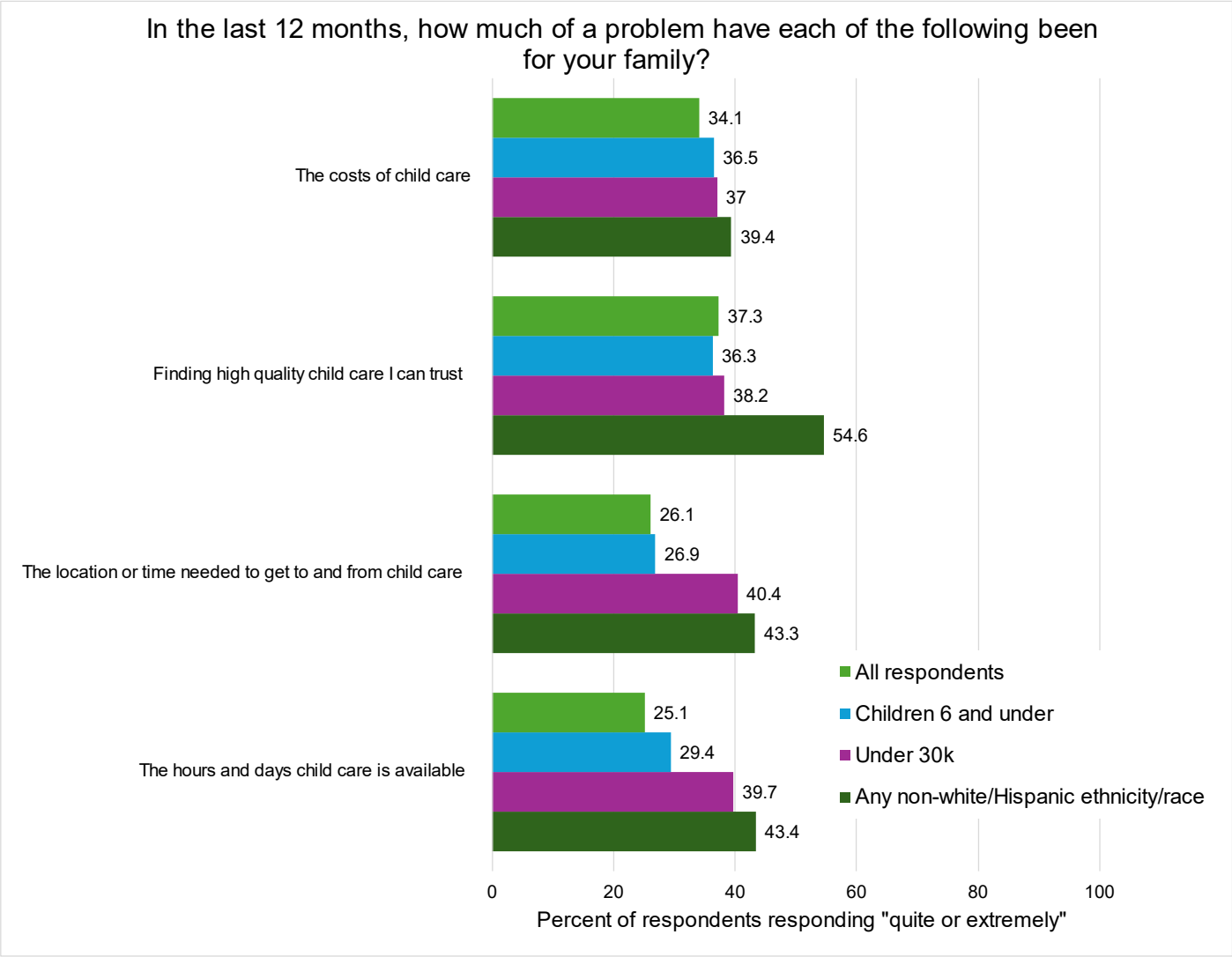


N=2,649

Weighted to represent full WI household population

Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

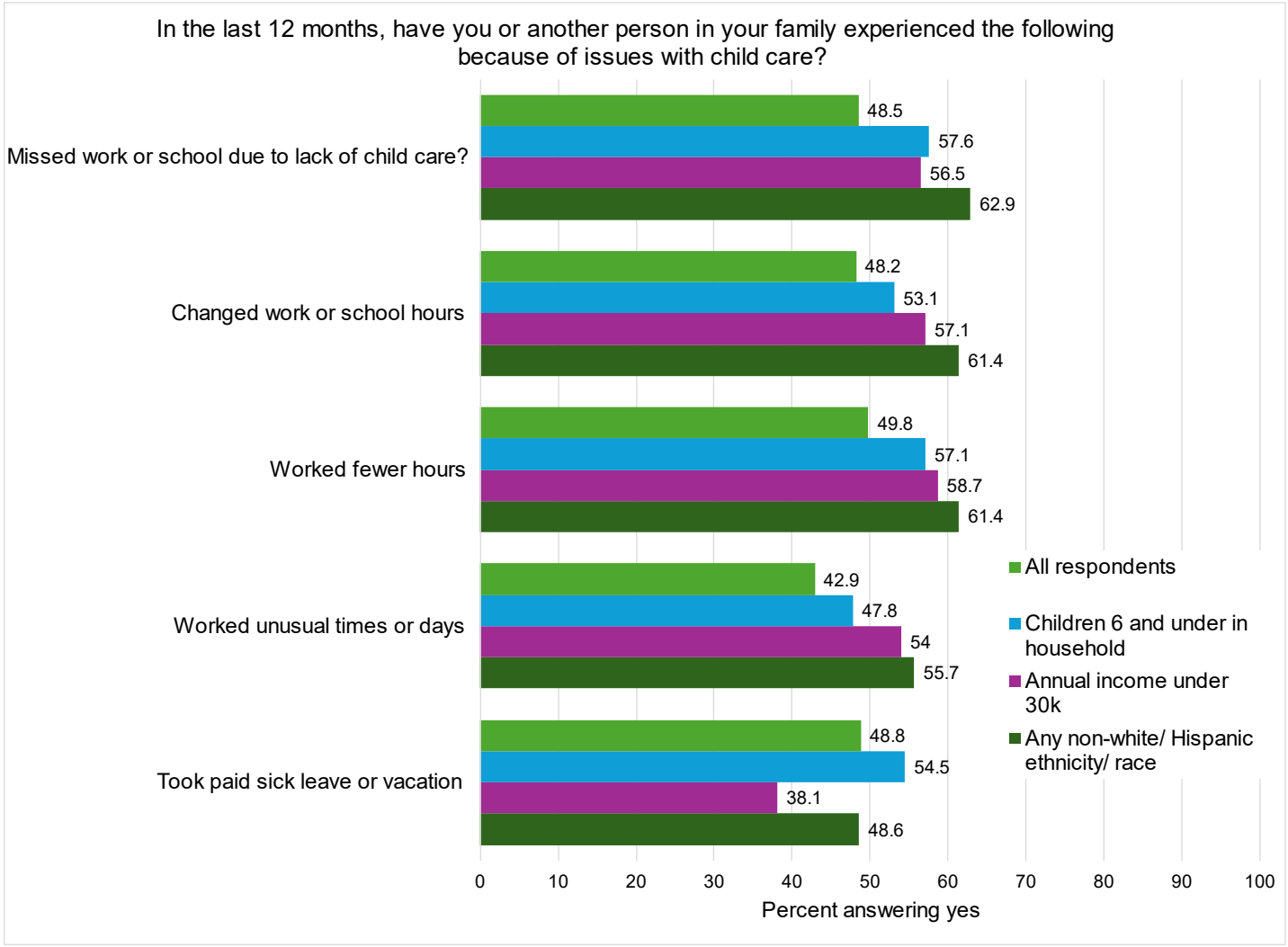
Many Wisconsinites struggle with accessing child care



Select on child care use

N=475

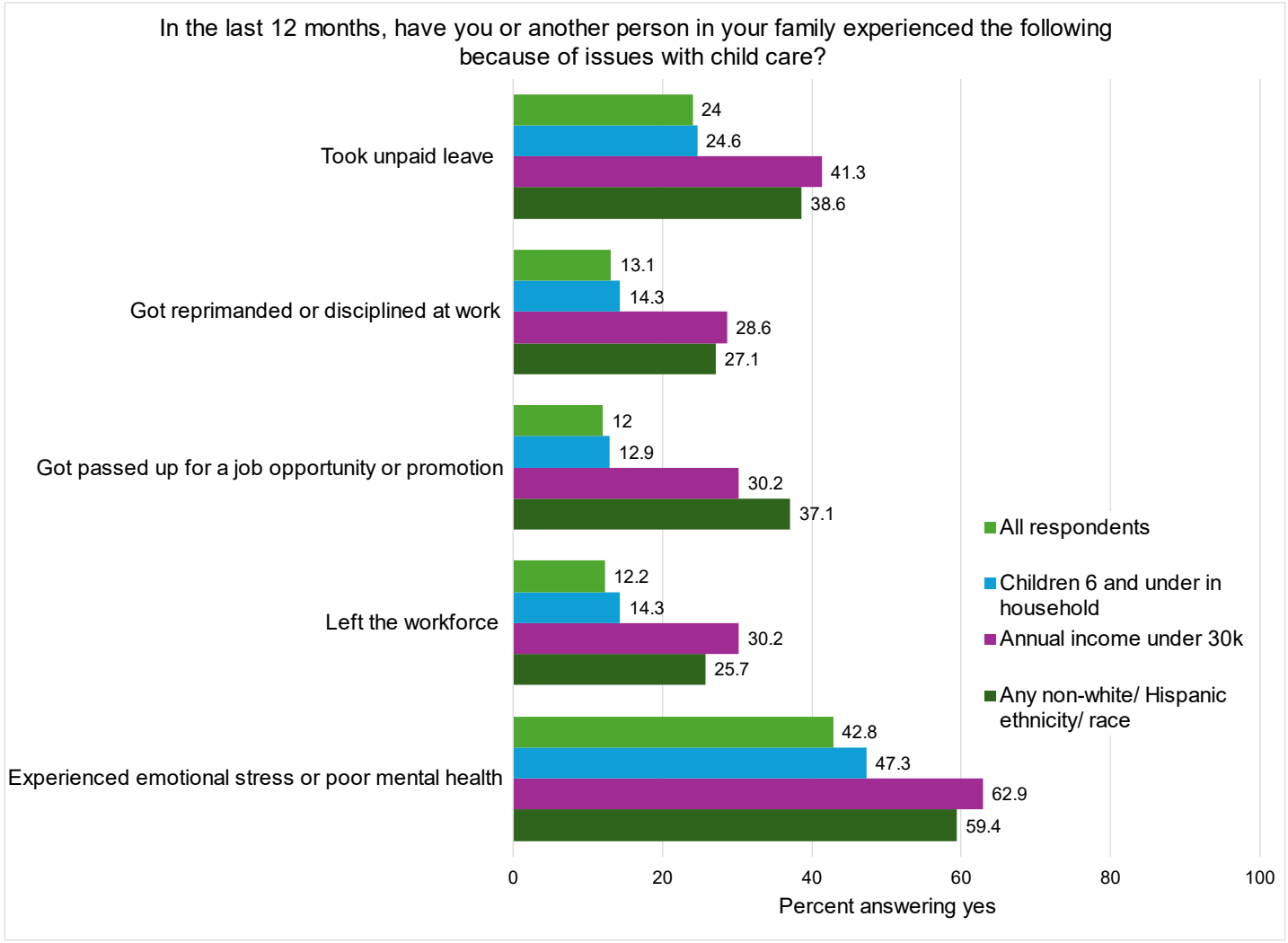
Many Wisconsinites report work, well-being issues because of child care



Select on child care use

N=475

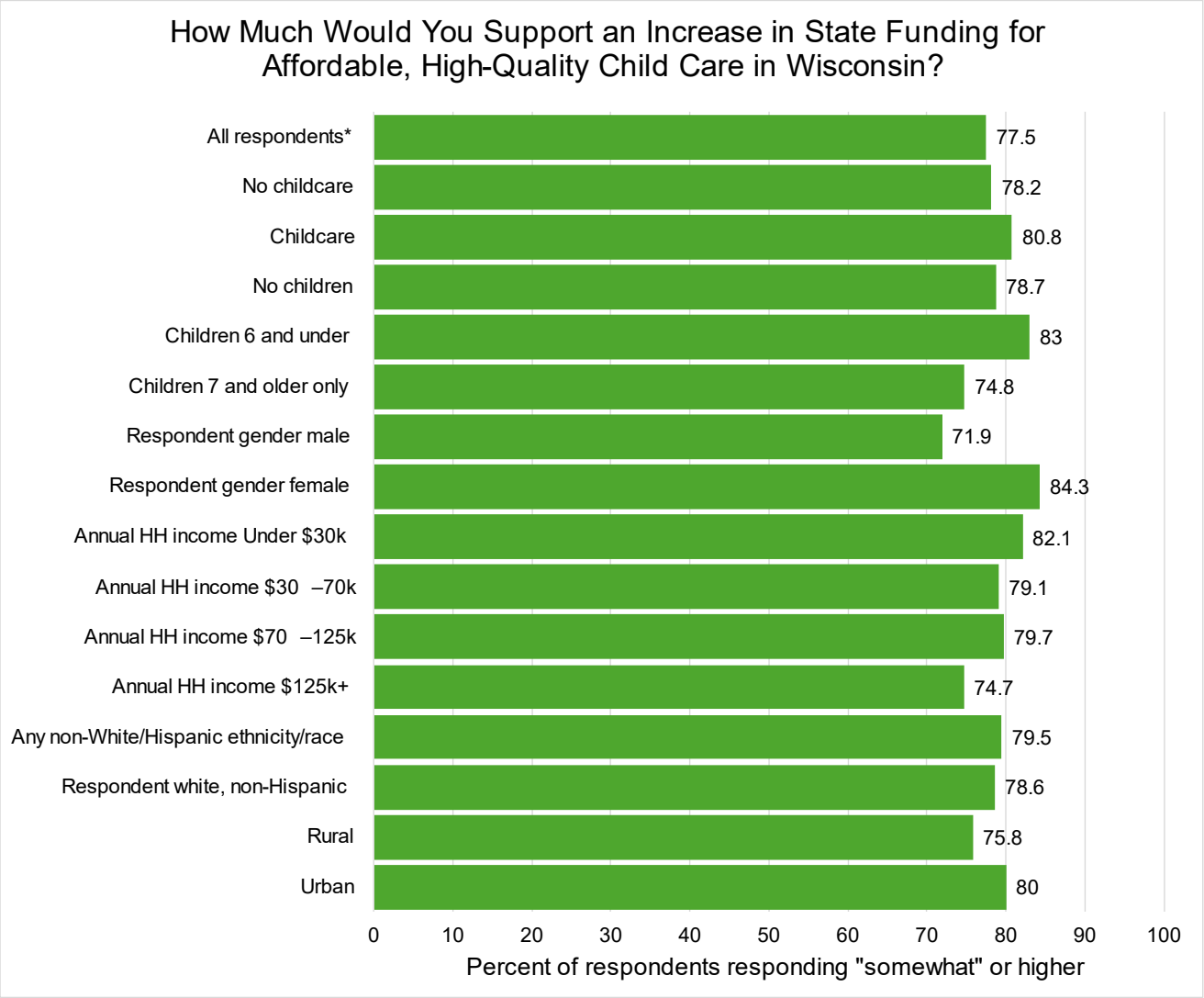
Many Wisconsinites report work, well-being issues because of child care



Select on child care use

N=475

Most Wisconsinites support increased state funding for child care



N=2,649

Weighted to represent full WI household population

Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Implications

- WI workforce development system can benefit from
  - More integrated intake, info sharing, training
  - Co-enrollment in partner programs
  - Reduced admin burden, but also attention to potential trade-offs re: variability in funding, service
  - Addressing underlying employment barriers
- Child care is one of these underlying barriers for many Wisconsinites, especially for low-income families
  - Challenges accessing care lead to implications for work

Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

Challenges Meeting Child Support Obligations: Evidence from Wisconsin Parents

Hilary Shager, Molly Costanzo, and Lisa Klein Vogel
UW-Madison Institute for Research on Poverty
2025 Poverty Matters Workshop
October 2, 2025

Research | Training | Policy | Practice

The Child Support Policy Research Agreement (WI DCF & IRP)

- Longstanding cooperative agreement between DCF & IRP
- Supports policy and practice-informed research & research-informed policy and practice
- ~15 projects per biennial agreement
- Learn more about our current and recent work here: https://www.irp.wisc.edu/research/child-support/child-support-policy-research/

Acknowledgements

- Thanks to…
  - Brown, Kenosha, Marathon, Racine, and Wood County child support agencies and ELEVATE staff
  - ELEVATE participants and other parents who took part in research
- Thank you also to . . .
  - DCF colleagues
  - OCSS project officers
  - UWSC and IRP colleagues

Any views expressed here are ours alone and not necessarily those of the sponsoring institution

Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Why Does Child Support Matter for Families?

- Regular child support payment associated with reduced poverty and other outcomes that improve child well-being
  - "Money you can count on" to meet basic needs

- No "back-up" if child support goes unpaid, leaving many CPs and kids with inadequate resources
  - CPs with low incomes are less likely to receive full, and regular, payments than those with higher incomes

- Many NCPs who are unable to pay also struggle to meet their own basic needs
  - NCP past-due support totaled $118 billion in 2018

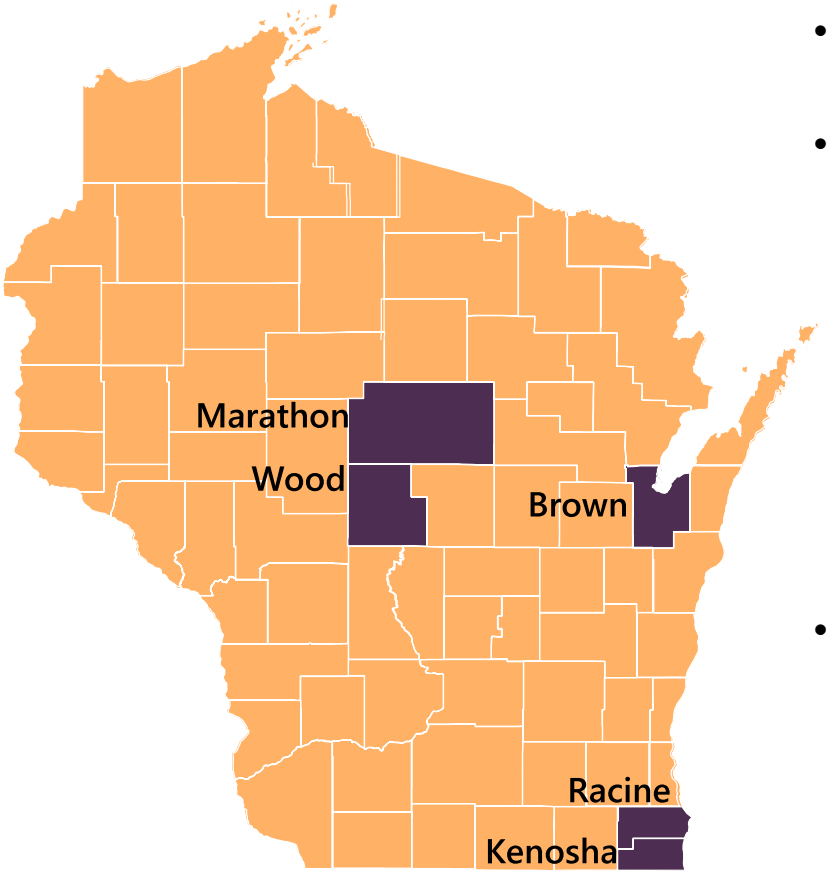
What Gets in the Way of Paying Child Support?

- Many NCPs lack the **ability** to pay what they owe
  - Many NCPs have limited earnings
  - Order amounts can be outsized to earnings
  - Some NCPs have had children with more than one partner, making it extra difficult to meet obligations across households
- Systemic barriers
  - Lack of policies supporting NCPs as parents (vs. earners)
  - Constriction of safety net, increasingly tied to employment
  - Historically adversarial approach to child support collection
  - Labor market
  - Access to services

ELEVATE Program Model

Empowering Lives through Education, Vocational Assessment, Training & Employment

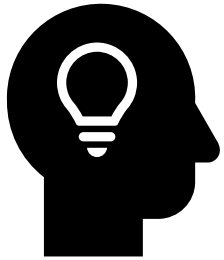
ELEVATE Enrollment: Who Was Eligible?



- Enrollment: January 2020 – December 2022*
- As required by DCF, all participants must:
  - Have an eligible child support order
  - Have difficulty (or be expected to have difficulty) paying
  - Be unemployed or underemployed
  - Be medically able to work
  - Live close enough to the program site to receive services
- As necessitated by the evaluation, participants also must:
  - Be 18 years of age or older
  - Have a valid SSN
  - Be able to complete the survey in English

ELEVATE Data Sources

- Baseline survey
  - Insight into experiences of often-overlooked group of parents
- Program participant interviews
- Custodial parent interviews/focus groups



Motivations for Enrollment: Help with Financial Situations and Jobs

- Most participants were motivated to improve their financial situations and sought help with:
  - Finding a job (or a better-paying job)
  - Obtaining access to training and education that could lead to a career
  - Help addressing barriers to work and financial supports

"Just hoping that they could help with, you know, monetary things like gas cards, help me build some skills to find employment. I knew they also could potentially help with car repairs if you needed things like that just to help you get on your feet—stay on your feet." - Participant

Motivations for Enrollment: Support Children, Improve Co-Parenting

- Participants were motivated to support their children
  - Get back on track with supporting children financially
  - Demonstrate responsibility and commitment
- Some participants hoped participation might lead to:
  - Reduced conflict with co-parents
  - More contact, or reunification, with children

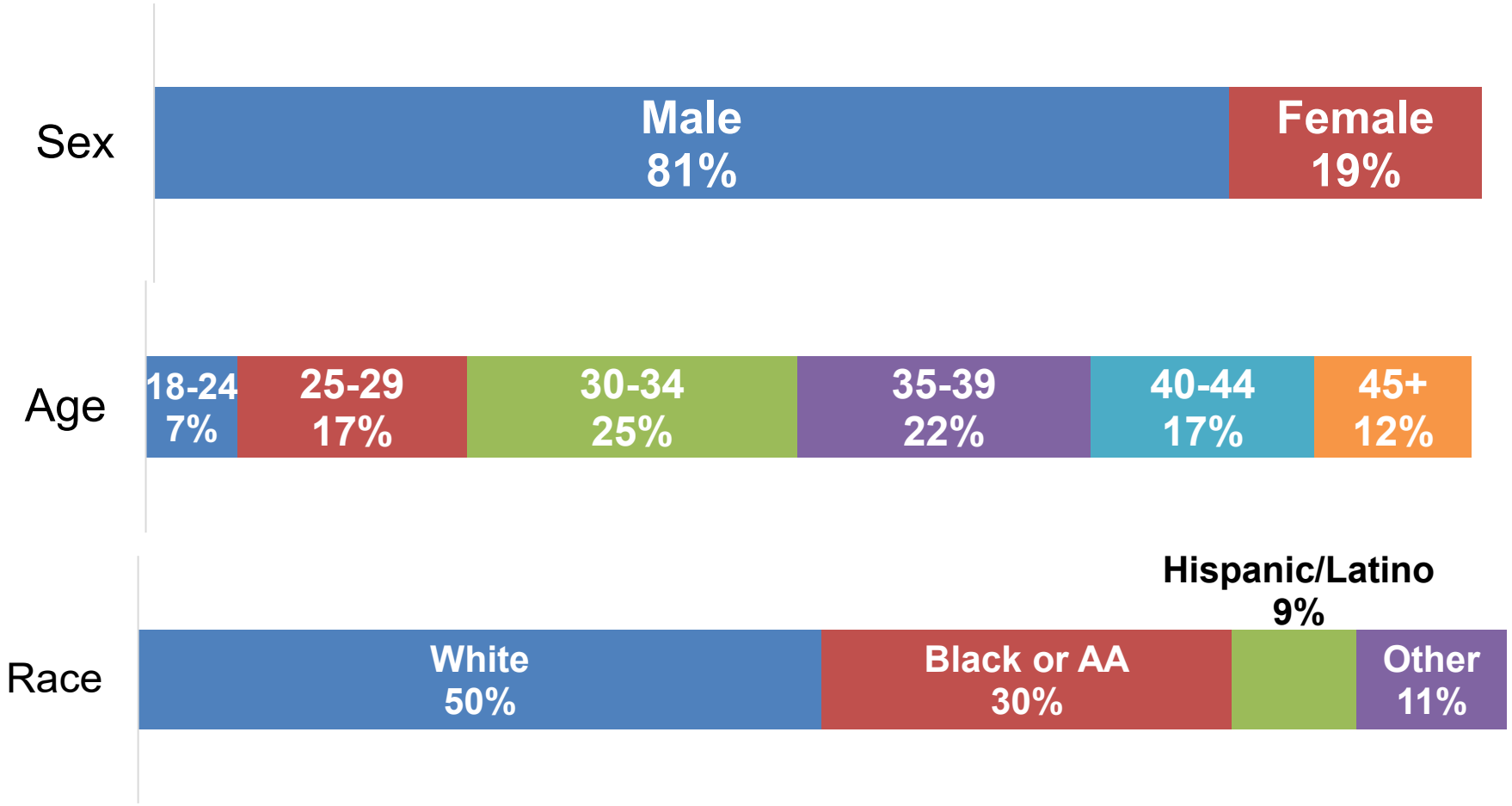
"My biggest motivation—until I got incarcerated last time, I was always a little bit ahead of my child support. And it really bummed me out, you know, falling behind, because I love my little boy, and I want to support him. So, my biggest motivation to get into the ELEVATE program was to get back on track and get caught up with child support again." - Participant

Motivations for Enrollment: Address Child Support Issues

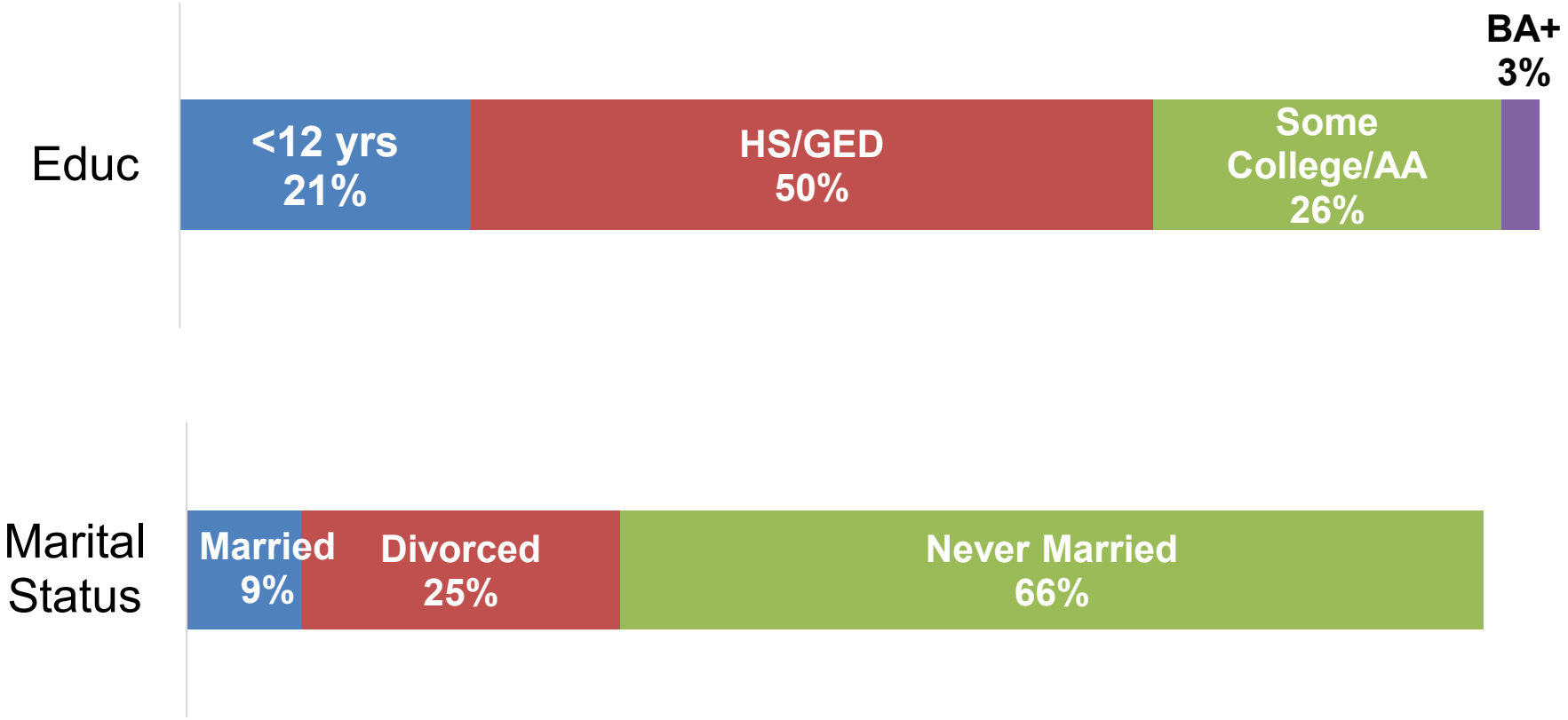
- Some sought to address child support issues, including:
  - Orders set at levels they felt were too high
  - Relief from enforcement actions

"The biggest motivation for me was that [ELEVATE] counts towards compliance with child support. That was a big concern for me with struggling to find a job. I still had three boys at home with me. Without being able to find daycare, I wasn't able to find a job. So it was reassuring to be a part of this program knowing that not being compliant wasn't going to factor into me losing other benefits." - Participant

Demographics

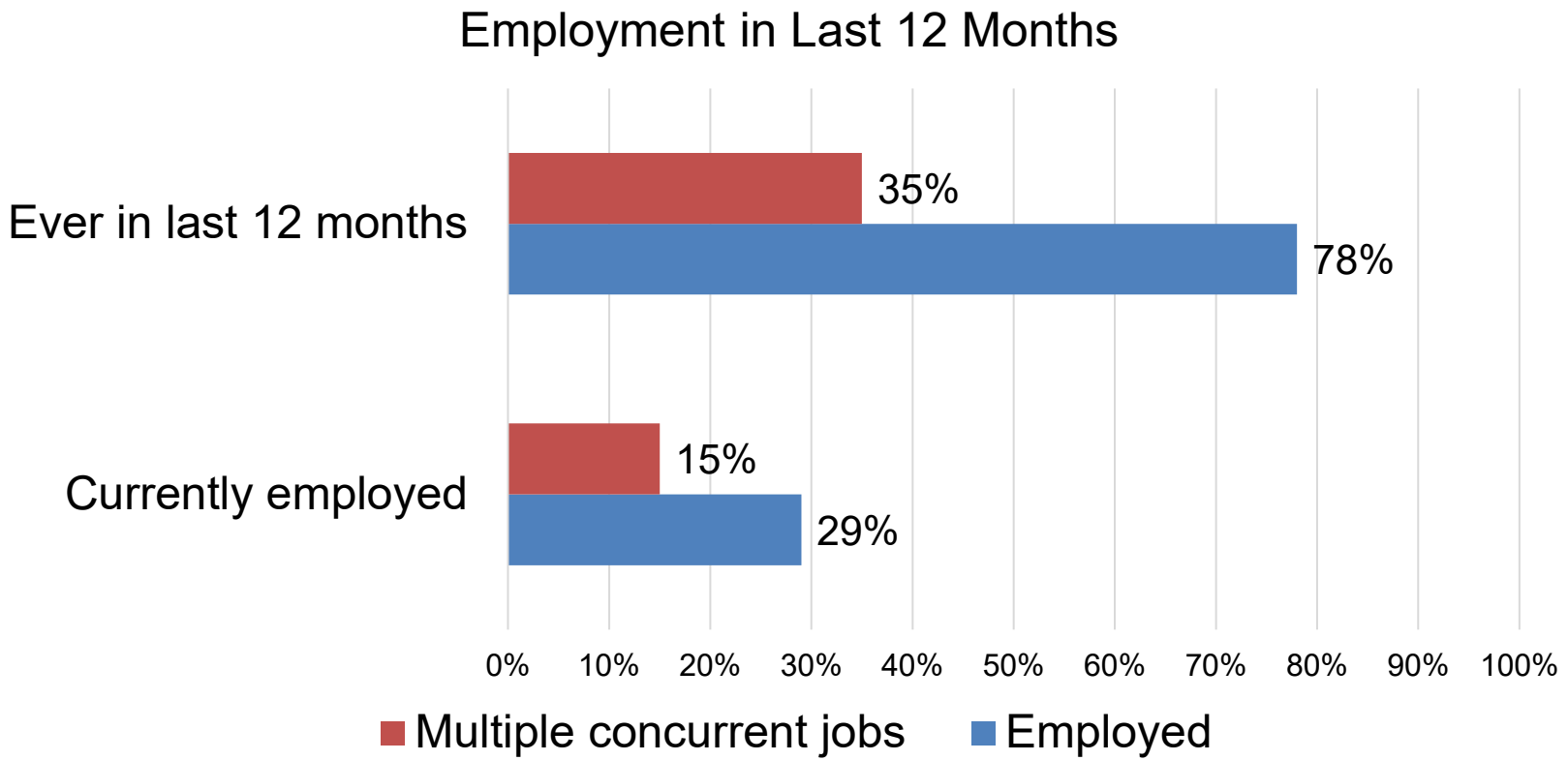


Demographics



Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Limited employment, pay, and benefits



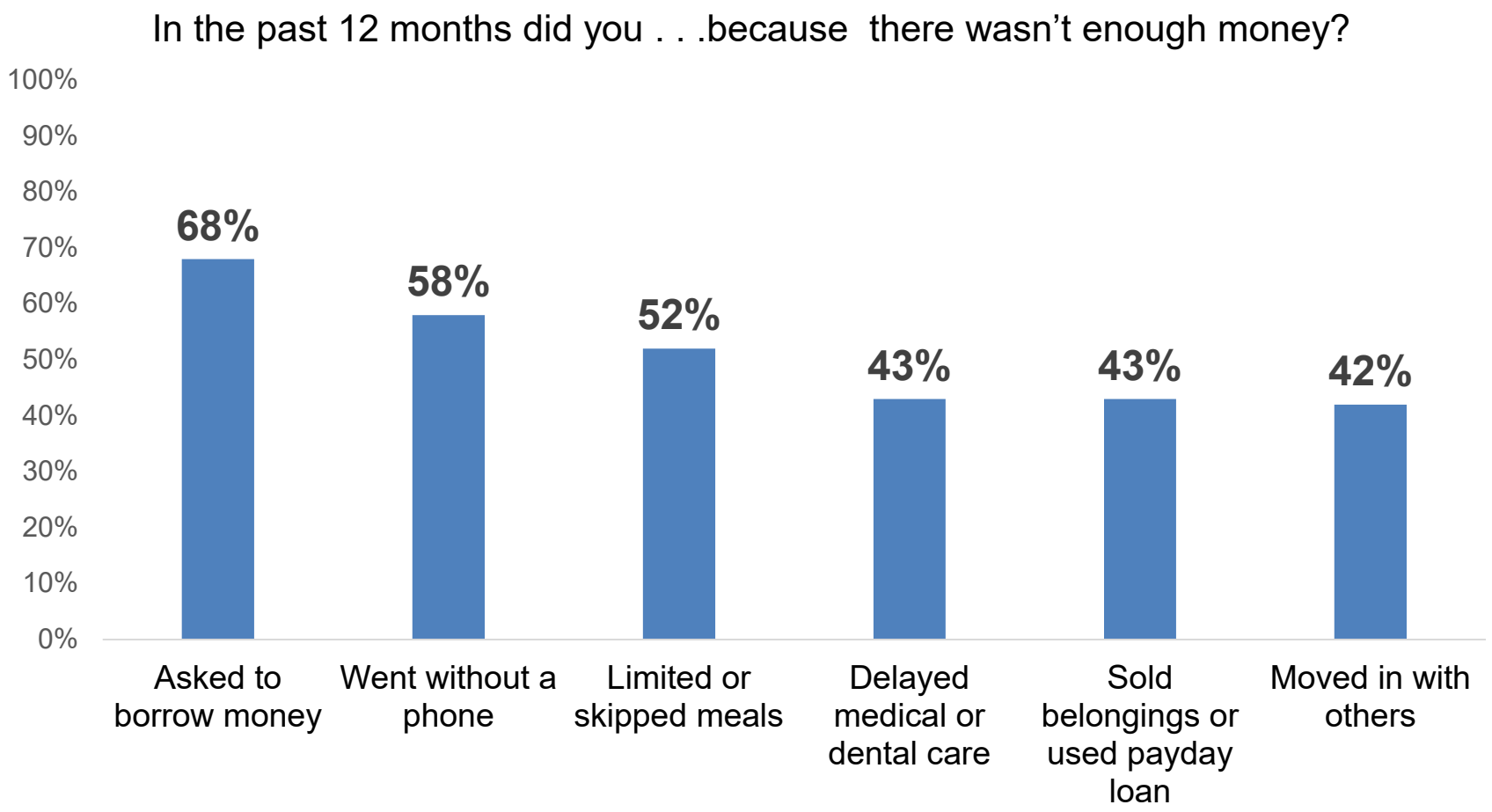
$15.70
Average hourly pay rate

40%
with job that offers **health insurance**

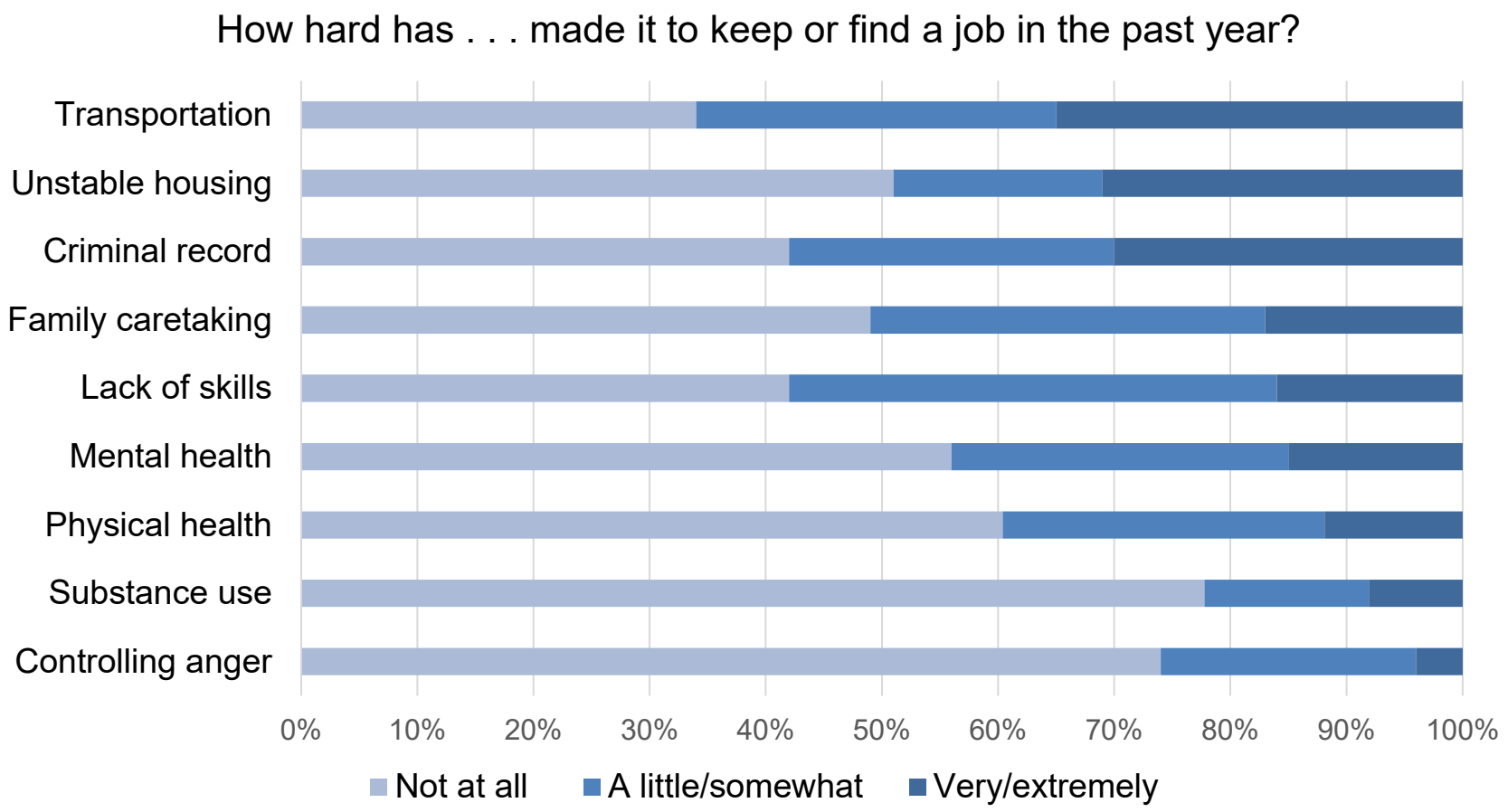
38%
with job that offers **paid leave**

Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Most participants had experiences of economic hardship



Transportation, unstable housing, criminal record most common barriers to employment



Obligors Shared Barriers to Finding and Keeping Work

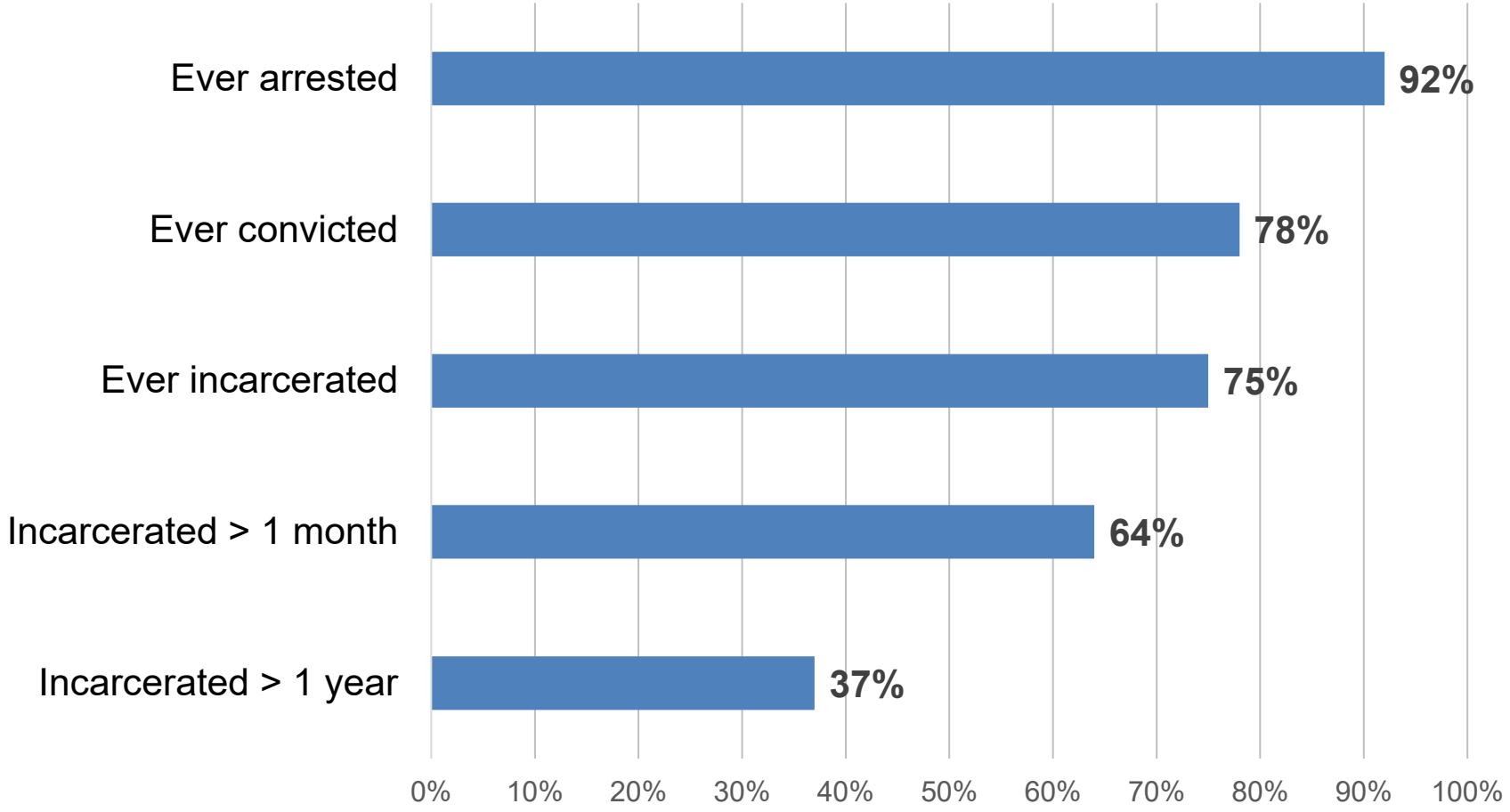
- Top five barriers identified on the baseline survey also arose during interviews:
  - Transportation
  - Criminal record
  - Family caretaking (children and parents)
  - Issues finding or keeping housing
  - Lack of job experience or skills

"When I first heard about ELEVATE, I just got out of jail, and I was behind on child support. I went to the child support office to talk to them about it, so I wouldn't be put under arrest…. I have a hard time finding jobs because I've been arrested a number of times. They told me that the ELEVATE program would help me find work and possibly give me training and counseling." - Participant

CPs Also Wanted Obligor Programs to Address Underlying Barriers

- Employment services
- (Co-)Parenting services & domestic violence services
- Mental health & substance abuse support
- Financial literacy
- Community involvement
- Motivational skills

High levels of criminal justice involvement

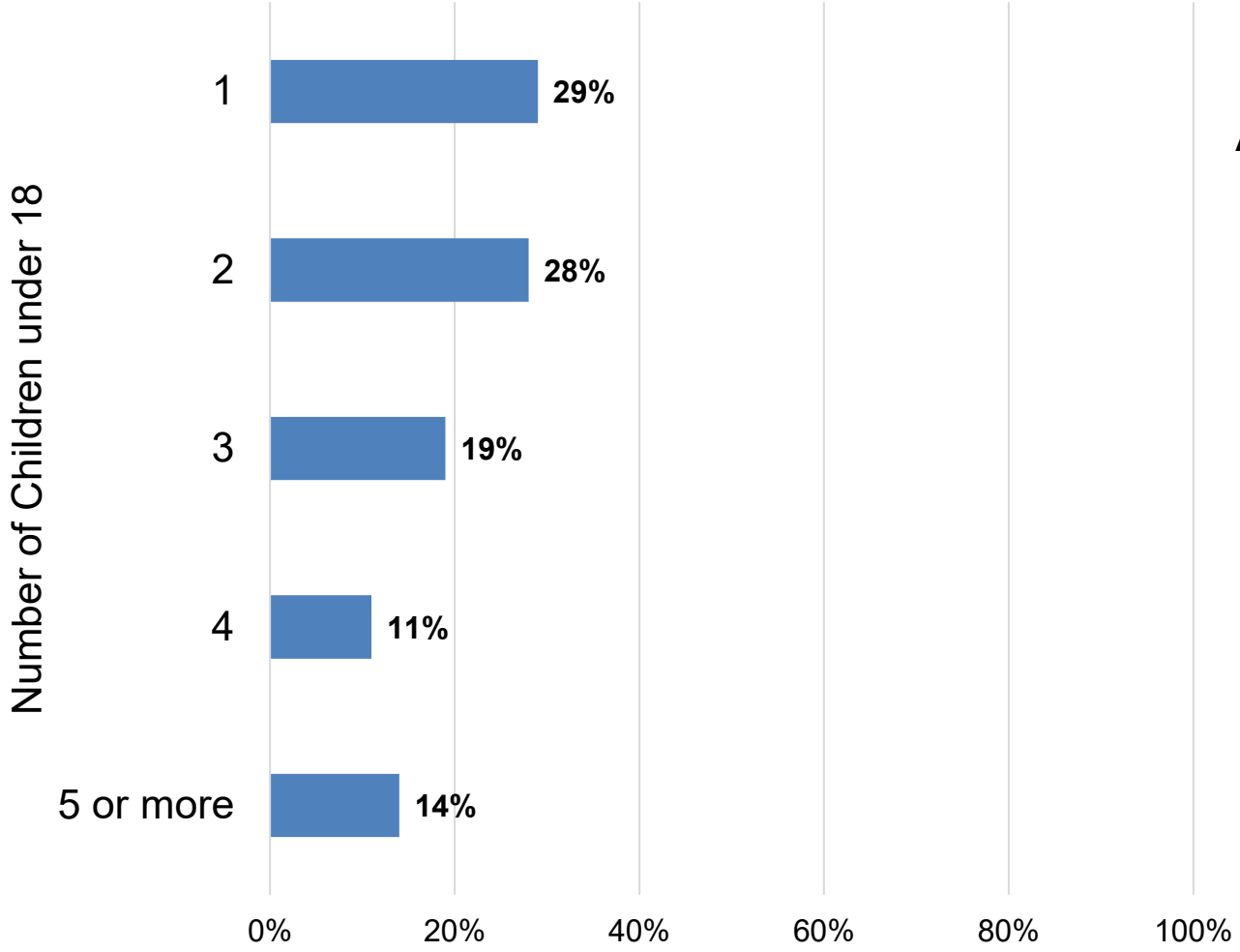


Physically healthy, but challenges with mental health

- In the last month, average number of days with poor:
  - Physical health: 5.7
  - Mental health: 10.2

- 32% met clinical cutoff for depression

Participants are parenting multiple children



6.07
Average age of youngest child

12.42
Average age of oldest child

59%
Children with multiple co-parents

Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Parents have strong ties to children

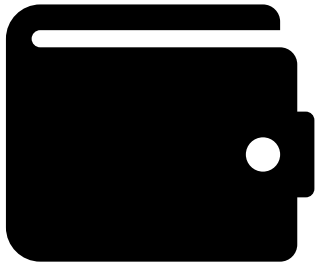
- **29%** have at least one resident child
- **79%** had contact with at least one child in last 30 days
  - **68%** had in-person contact

- **80%** agree or strongly agree they share an affectionate and warm relationship with their youngest child

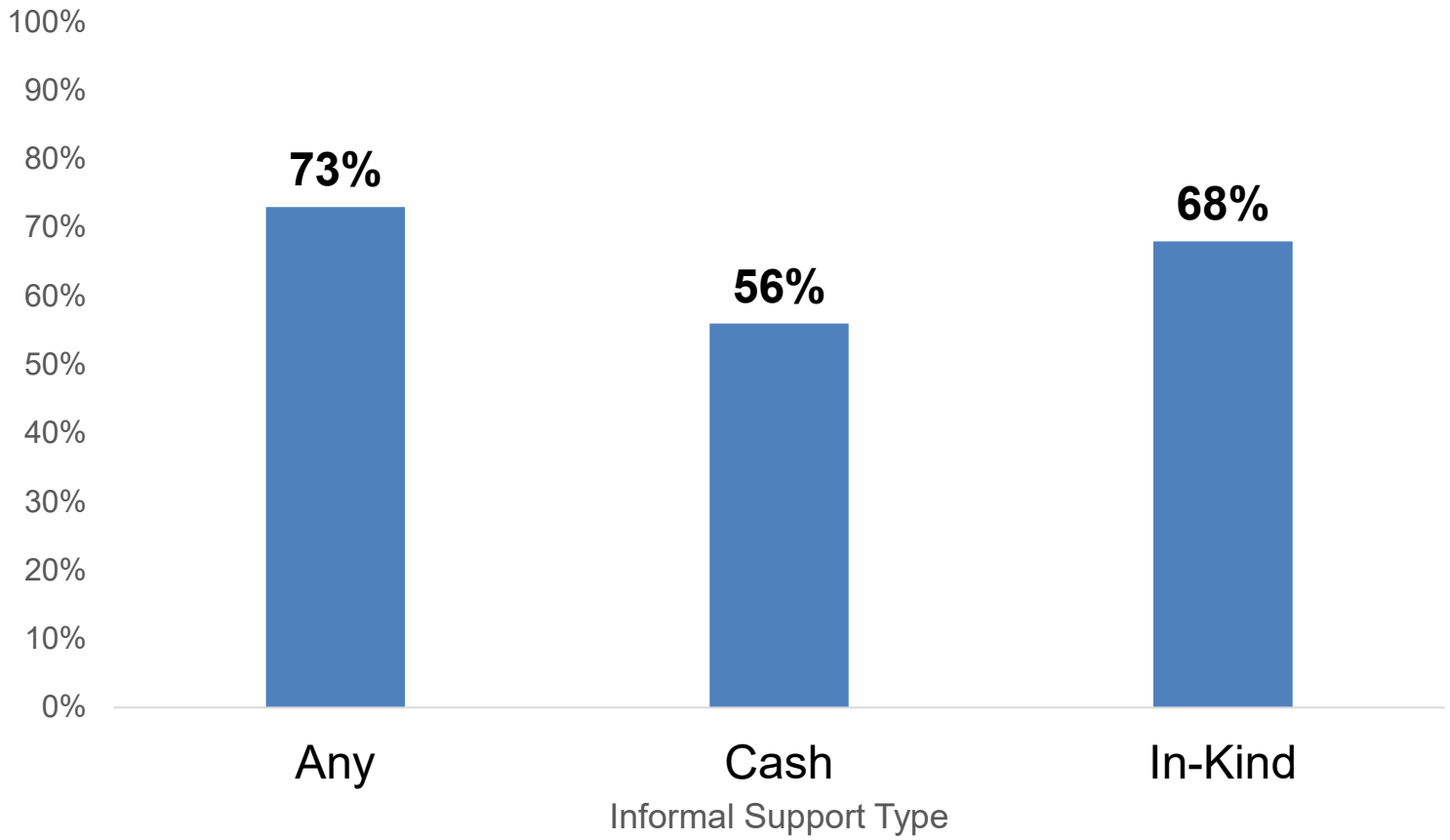
Substantial formal child support obligations

- **$420** average monthly order amount
- **$350** median monthly order amount

- 90% owe more than $134
- 25% owe more than $526

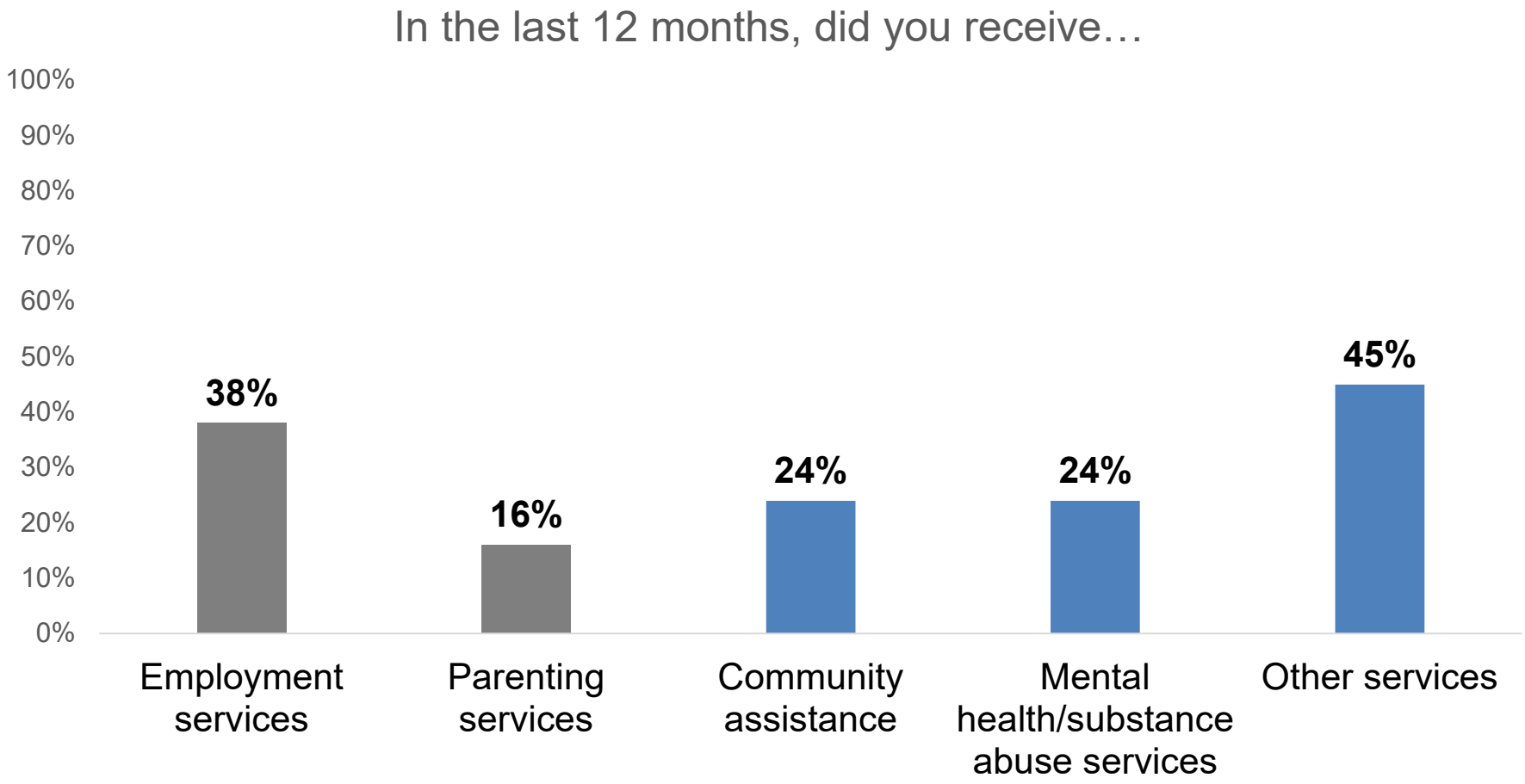


Rate of informal contributions is high



Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Parents receiving some services but potential gaps



Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Implications

- Parents face multiple, complex barriers to employment, meeting basic needs
  - Impact ability to pay child support & parent
- Requires intervention to address:
  - Underlying issues, policies, systems
  - Job quality, not just employment per se
- Strengths:
  - Strong ties to their children
  - Including providing financial support
- Opportunities for services:
  - Child support and other family-facing programs may be well-positioned to provide these supports

Comments/Questions

Hallie Bennett Lienhardt
hallie.lienhardt@wisc.edu

Hilary Shager
hilary.shager@wisc.edu

Lisa Klein Vogel
lmklein@wisc.edu

Molly Costanzo
macostanzo@wisc.edu