

Equalizing the Playing Field: Home Visiting's Role in Linking Families to Economic Supports

The Home Visiting Applied Research Collaborative (HARC) advances innovative methods in home visiting research and the translation of findings into policy and practice.

Background

Research suggests that reducing poverty and enhancing a family's access to added income and supportive services, particularly in a child's early years, increases a child's performance on key cognitive measures and early school performance (Duncan et al., 2011). The American Rescue Plan (ARP) offered an unprecedented opportunity to confront child poverty by offering low- and middle-income families substantial new resources to meet the needs of their children without being "labeled" as needing public welfare benefits. ARP benefits included, among other things, a child tax credit/allowance, expanded and fully refundable earned income tax credits, and a childcare and dependent cash credit to cover a greater proportion of costs for more families. Early assessments of these benefits found a reduction in poverty rates occurring across all groups, although the poverty rate among Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) populations continue to exceed the rate among White families (Parolin et al., 2021). Assuming high utilization rates, at least one benefit-cost analysis estimated that making the child tax credit permanent would generate social benefits with a net value of \$982 billion per year, a favorable return on the benefits projected annual cost of \$97 billion (Garfield et al., 2022). Yet, maximum benefits can only be achieved by ensuring that all eligible families - especially those with lowest incomes - are aware of the supports and able to access them (Sawhill & Welch, 2021).

While there are many avenues to inform families of ARP and other economic benefits, the relationship-based nature and broad availability of early home visiting programs throughout the country place providers of these services in a unique position to serve as "policy translators" for their program participants, many of whom face high levels of personal and economic challenges and may not be able to access benefits without direct assistance. To maximize the likelihood that home visitors can facilitate families fully accessing the benefits to which they are entitled, greater clarity is needed to determine how home visitors view their role in this area and what information and tools they require in order to best serve families.

The relationship-based nature of home visiting and the service's broad availability throughout the country offer an efficient pathway to connect young families to economic benefits, many of whom may not access them without direct assistance.

The Current Study

To fill this information gap, the Home Visiting Applied Research Collaborative (HARC) partnered with six national home visiting models to co-design a web-based survey and structured focus groups to assess home visitors' **familiarity with the economic benefits** available for families and their **experience in assisting program participants to access these benefits**. Participating models included Family Spirit, Family Connects, Healthy Families America (HFA), Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), Nurse Family Partnership (NFP), and Parents as Teachers (PAT). Each national model provided all their home visitors and supervisors a link to a web-based survey addressing the following research questions:

- What types of economic stressors are families experiencing?
- How knowledgeable are home visitors regarding the ARP and other benefits available to families?
- What are the beliefs and attitudes of home visitors toward discussing economic well-being with families?
- What supports do home visitors need to increase their capacity to support families' economic well-being?
- What are the major barriers that limit the ability of families to access the benefits they need?

OVERVIEW OF STUDY METHODS

We conducted the web-based survey with home visitors in November 2021 followed by a series of eight focus groups with a subset of home visitors in February 2022. Surveys were designed to take about 10 minutes to complete and asked questions about home visitors' interactions with program participants around economic benefits and supports. Focus groups were 90 minutes or less and were designed to elicit more nuanced information regarding home visitors' knowledge, underlying motivations, experiences, and barriers encountered when engaging program participants around their income and benefit concerns. Focus group participants were grouped by region of the country (Midwest, Northwest, West, or South).

PARTICIPANTS

Over 1,600 home visitors representing all participating models and regions of the country completed the online survey (**Table 1, Figure 1**). As expected, models with the largest number of respondents (PAT, NFP, and HFA) are among the most commonly available home visiting programs in the US and make up the largest proportion of home visitors nationwide (National Home Visiting Resource Center, 2021).

All survey respondents provided direct services to families; 15% of the sample also reported having supervisory responsibilities. Almost half (47%) reported working in home visiting for over ten years. Respondents represented all regions of the country. Respondents worked in suburban communities and small towns (43%), rural or frontier communities (38%), high density, major cities (17%), and tribal communities (2%). National model representatives reported that this geographic distribution of programs generally reflect the overall distribution of their affiliate agencies.

Forty-one home visitors participated in one of eight focus groups. All but one group included home visitors from two or more home visiting models. Focus group participants represented all regions of the US (**Figure 1**).

Table 1. Survey Participants by Model (N=1612)

Model	n (%)
Family Spirit	33 (2.2)
Family Connects	75 (4.7)
HIPPY	174 (10.8)
Nurse Family Partnership	214 (13.3)
Healthy Families America	217 (13.5)
Parents as Teachers	899 (55.8)

Study Findings

Families enrolled in home visiting programs face significant economic stress. We asked respondents to compare the level of economic stress they observed among the participants in their programs pre- and post-pandemic. Among respondents who had been employed in home visiting for at least 18 months, only 2% reported observing less stress among their current families now compared to before the pandemic (**Figure 2**). Over half of respondents identified lack of affordable, high-quality childcare, lack of adequate income, and lack of stable income as current stressors experienced by many or nearly all of the families they served. They reported observing economic stressors such as food insecurity, unstable housing, and limited health care access for both the parent and child less frequently, often in only some or a few of their cases.

Focus group participants confirmed these patterns and frequently noted the added burden and stress COVID placed on a family’s daily lives.

Figure 1. Survey and Focus Group Participants by US Region

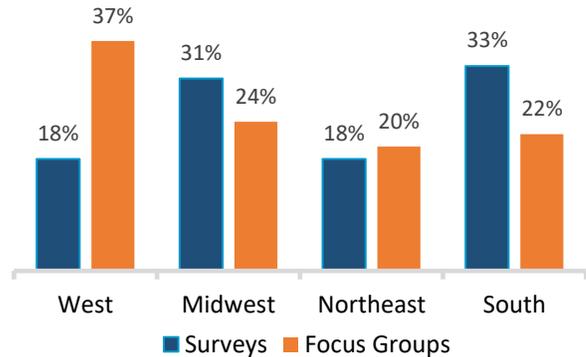
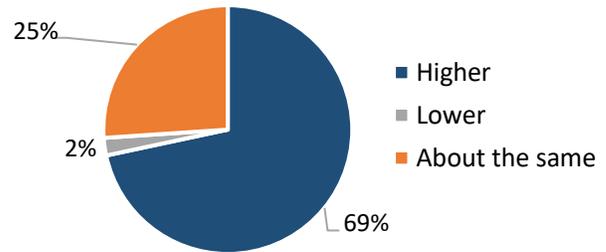


Figure 2. Frequency of Family Stressors Now Compared to Before COVID-19 Pandemic



We are living in a childcare desert here with COVID – Focus Group (FG) Participant

A lot of our families were losing their jobs due to COVID. (...) At times, I felt like a counselor and that's not my background. They would talk to me and then getting off of the call, I had to take time for myself because I was just like, "Oh, my goodness, what's going on?" I knew what was going on, but it took a toll on myself too.

– FG Participant

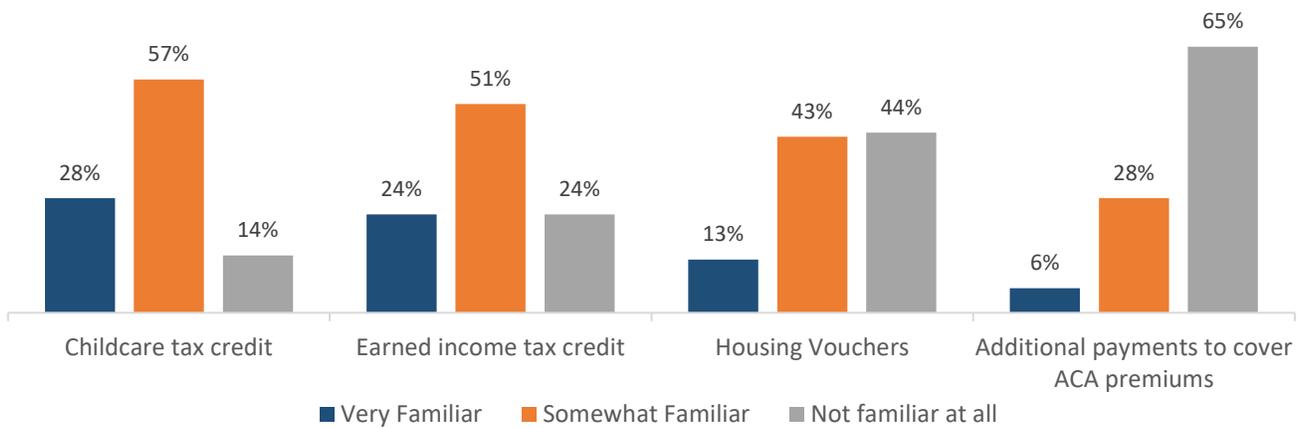
Home visitors report families face significant barriers in accessing ARP benefits and other economic supports.

Home visitors reported that families on their caseloads cited a number of barriers in securing economic benefits, such as those included in the ARP. When asked to indicate the top three challenges they observe among families, the most common reasons included families simply being unaware of the benefits (61%); families finding the process of accessing benefits too complicated and unclear (54%); and not filing income tax returns on a regular basis (45%). Other challenges noted by over a quarter of the respondents included concerns that accessing benefits will complicate their immigration status (29%) and not trusting the Government (25%). Similarly, as described in the quote below, focus group participants reported a constellation of challenges that may have a cumulative impact on service access, such as prior negative experiences with service providers, immigration concerns, and lack of technology.

Section 8 has a waiting list. The daycares have a waiting list. (...) There's a waiting list for internet in certain areas as well. People have to just try to rely on their phones and then they have data issues or things like that. We have people coming in and trying to fill things out and we're able to print things for them and scan or fax if they need, but it's trouble because then they have to still get here. – FG Participant

Home visitors' levels of understanding and knowledge of the ARP varied widely. We asked respondents to gauge their knowledge of the ARP and related benefits by indicating agreement or disagreement with several statements related to this topic. Fewer than half of all respondents agreed that they were generally familiar with the ARP and with the process of applying for benefits (**Figure 3**). Home visitors reported strongest familiarity with the child tax credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

Figure 3. Home Visitor Self-Reported Knowledge of Specific ARP Benefits



Excerpts from focus groups also demonstrate variable knowledge regarding eligibility criteria and how to access the range of economic benefits available within communities.

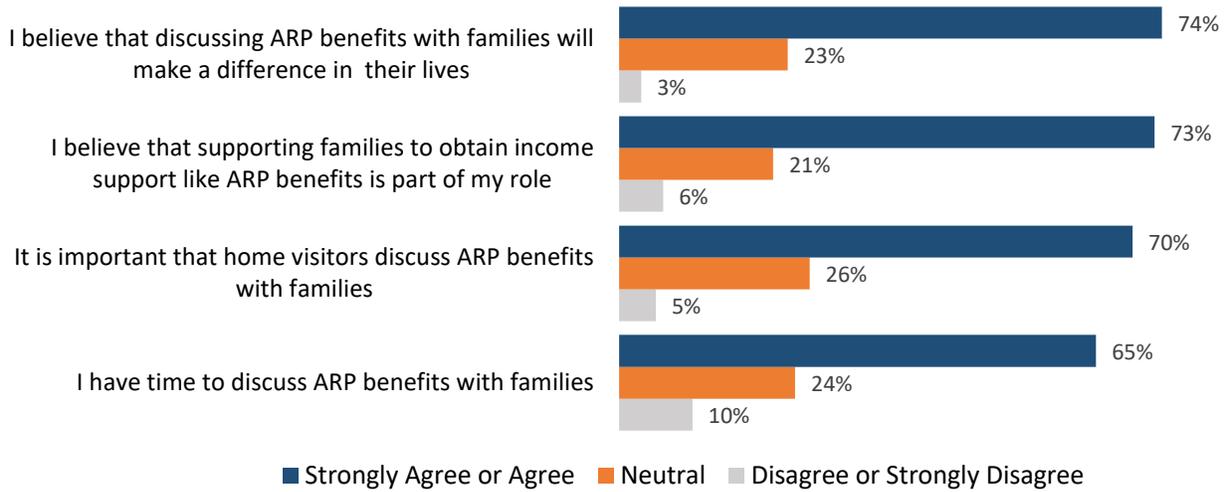
[I am] definitely more prepared to talk about things that either I or my family personally have used or I know people firsthand have had to deal with...there's a lot of stuff that I'm not exactly knowledgeable on. – FG Participant

[We] have our local WIC office that maintains quite the list of resources, and we borrow their list to hand out to our clients. Do I know every resource of the list? No. Do I know the ones that my clients use more frequently? Yes. – FG Participant

I don't fully understand the Child Tax Credit. My baby was born in 2020 - it was a whole confusing thing. I don't know how to help them (families) get it. – FG Participant

Home visitors place high priority on discussing economic benefits with families and believe such discussions make a difference for the families they serve. We asked home visitors about their level of agreement with a series of statements designed to capture their beliefs and attitudes toward discussing economic self-sufficiency and access to benefits with families. Most home visitors (between 65 - 74%) agreed or strongly agreed that these discussions are an important part of their job and that families directly benefit from such discussions (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4. Home visitor beliefs and attitudes about discussing ARP benefits with families



Focus group comments support these findings and reflect a commitment among home visitors to address a family’s economic needs as part of their overall portfolio of improving parental capacity:

Whatever the family's goals are, and if benefits is something that they would like and would help them, we're there to guide them through the process with however much hand-holding they need. Barrier removal is our job.
 – FG Participant

Despite high levels of agreement, almost one third reported that they had not discussed the ARP or its benefits with any of the families on their caseloads (Figure 5). Only about a quarter of the respondents reported that they raised this issue with nearly all or many of their families. This outcome reflects the constellation of concerns noted by home visitors families face in securing these benefits and the lack of familiarity home visitors have with both the ARP and other public benefits for addressing economic needs.

Although most respondents reported receiving at least some training around this topic, over a quarter had received no training, and almost a third wanted more training (Figure 6). When asked to rate the helpfulness of seven specific training strategies or supports, respondents rated all strategies as potentially helpful (Table 2). In particular, many wanted links to resources they could provide families to facilitate direct access to these benefits.

Figure 5. % Families with Whom HV Discussed ARP Benefits in Past Month

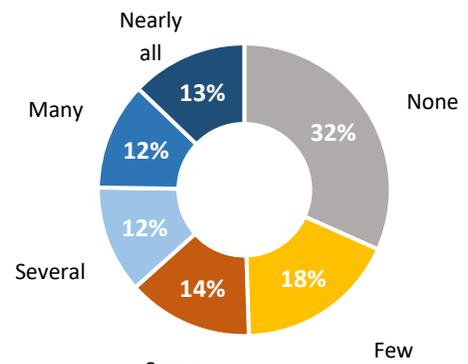


Figure 6. Perceptions of the Amount of Training and Supports Received

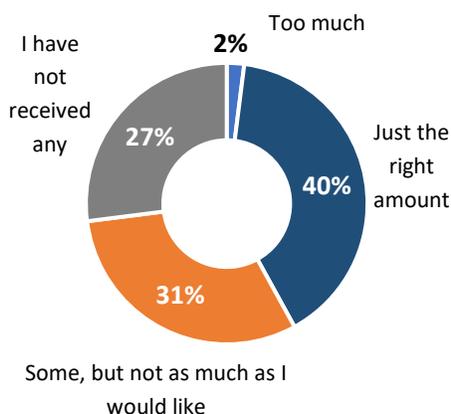


Table 2. Strategies Endorsed as Helpful or Very Helpful

Support	Helpful or Very Helpful
Direct links to connect families with benefits	90%
Presentations on specific elements of the ARP	87%
Presentations on how to discuss benefits with families	81%
Staff with specialized training and knowledge	79%
Regular updates at staff meetings	83%
Conversations with supervisors on specific elements of the ARP	77%
Conversations with supervisors on how to discuss benefits with families	72%

In terms of improving the frequency of home visitors addressing these issues, we found that having received some training **was associated with greater discussion** of economic benefits with families ($r_{\tau} = .24, p < .001$). In addition, greater knowledge and more positive views of holding these discussions were correlated with the frequency with which home visitors have these discussions ($r_{\tau} = .48, p < .001$).

Focus group participants described additional strategies they found helpful in addressing economic self-sufficiency with families, such as direct contacts at benefits offices, as shown in the quote below.

It'd be awesome to have a person at our County Jobs and Family Services that we could specifically go to and talk to and ask questions (...) so they could get to know us and be more willing to help the families. – FG Participant

Implications

Survey and focus group findings underscore the deep commitment home visitors have to addressing the economic and self-sufficiency needs of program participants. Recognizing that home visiting programs have many expected outcomes, economic challenges are prevalent among young families, particularly as communities emerge from the pandemic. Home visiting is well positioned to help translate broad public policies that address income, affordable childcare, housing and health care access and support families who wish to access economic benefits. While home visitors are willing to accept this challenge, they will require additional training and programmatic support. In addition, there is a need to strengthen systems to remove barriers and ensure that access to economic benefits is fair and equitable.

Moving forward, home visiting programs might consider the following practice reforms to strengthen the capacity of home visitors to address this issue, including the following:

- Expand opportunities for cross-model learning at the national, state, and local community levels regarding available economic benefits and how best to support family economic well-being based on individual needs and preferences.

- Strengthen communication between home visiting programs and local community agencies and organizations that manage or provide economic benefits programs to reduce complexity and barriers to access.
- Develop materials for families that *clearly* describe benefits, eligibility criteria, and access pathways across different federal, state, and local or community funding streams.
- Consider *what works best, for whom, and in what contexts*; ensure that families who struggle with complex eligibility criteria, language barriers, or application procedures receive more directed and sustained assistance, as needed.

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