



Voices of Child Health REPORT

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REPORT HIGHLIGHTS: SAFETY SUMMARY

Half of families have experienced at least one characteristic of being energy insecure.

One in five Chicago parents have reduced expenses for other household needs to pay their energy bill.

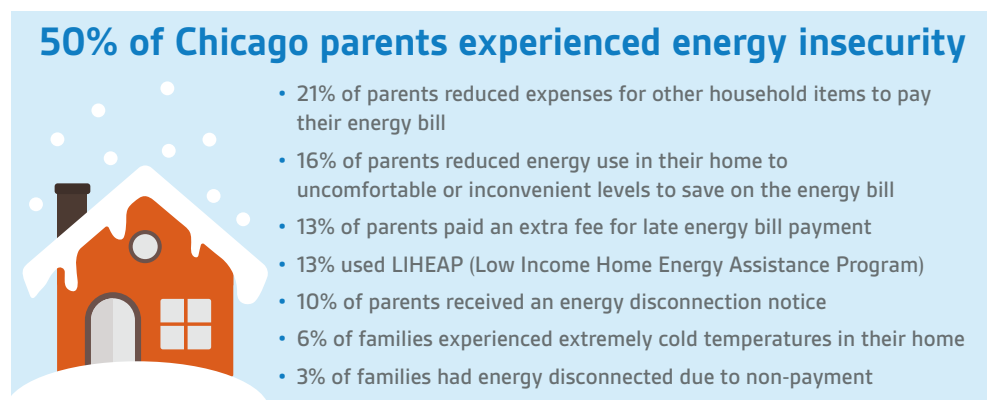
Twenty-six percent of families are at increased risk of a heating equipment fire from heating their home with a space heater in winter.

Chicago Families' Energy and Heating Challenges in Winter

Chicagoans are bracing for the coldest months of the year,¹ in what may be one of the coldest winters in decades. Many families face difficulty paying their energy bills to heat or cool their homes throughout the year. This is often referred to as "energy insecurity" and could lead to worse health for children.² In the winter, there is also an increased danger from unsafe heating practices for families trying to stay warm. Half of heating equipment-related fires occur in December, January and February, which may result in property damage, injuries and death.³

In this month's *Voices of Child Health Report*, we asked over 500 parents in Chicago about their energy bills and how they typically heat their homes during cold weather.

Figure 1. Percentage of parents and families who experience different characteristics of energy insecurity within the past 12 months.



Many Chicago families face energy challenges in the winter

The most common indicator of energy insecurity that parents reported was reducing their expenses for other household needs (e.g., rent, food, medicine, transportation) to pay their energy bill, with 21% of parents reporting that they have had to do this. Parents also reported reducing energy use to uncomfortable or inconvenient levels to save on their energy bill (16%). Additionally, 13% of parents have paid an extra fee for late energy bill payments, 13% have used LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) to help cover their energy bills in the winter months, 10% received an energy disconnection notice, 6% reported that their family has experienced extremely cold temperatures in their home and 3% had their energy disconnected due to not paying.

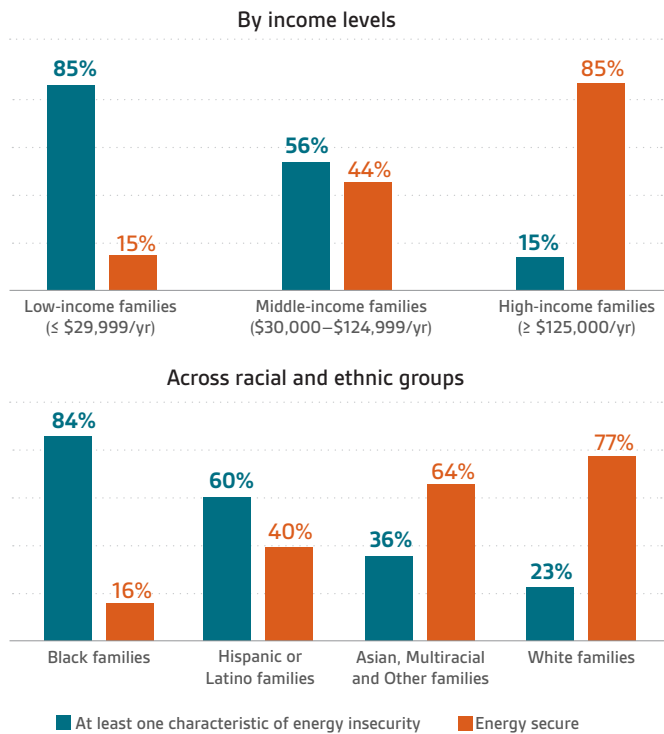
Overall, half of Chicago parents (50%) shared that their family has experienced one or more indicator of energy insecurity (e.g., lack of heat, lack of air conditioning, disconnection notice, unhealthy temperature and reducing or forgoing basic needs).⁴

Chicago families experience energy insecurity unequally across demographic groups, particularly by income and race and ethnicity. Low-income (\leq \$29,999) and middle-income (\$30,000–\$124,999) families are more likely (85% and 56%, respectively) to experience at least one characteristic of energy insecurity compared to high-income families (\geq \$125,000) with just 15% reporting a characteristic of energy insecurity. Black families (84%) are the most likely to experience at least one characteristic of energy insecurity, followed by Latino or Hispanic families (60%), Asian, Multiracial and other race families (36%), and White families (23%).



Figure 2. The percentage of families experiencing temperature insecurity across income levels and race or ethnicity.

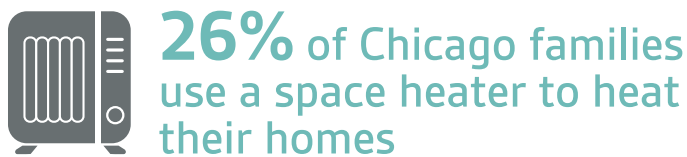
Percent of families having at least one characteristic of energy insecurity



Most Chicago families heat their home with central heating and 26% use a space heater

Chicago families heat their homes in a variety of ways throughout the winter, sometimes combining multiple methods. When asked to select all the ways they heat their home a large majority (83%) of families have a central heating system that uses electric or gas, a quarter (26%) use a space heater and 16% use a radiator. The percent of families using space heaters is especially concerning with one-third of all house fires being caused by space heaters. Also, space heaters account for about 80% of the injuries and 90% of the deaths in home fires that are caused by heating equipment.⁵ Only 3% of Chicago parents report using a wood-burning fireplace and 6% report using a gas fireplace. To be safest while keeping warm in the winter, it is important for families to learn about and follow [safe heating practices](#), specific to the way(s) they heat their home.

Figure 3. Over one in four parents use space heaters to heat their home in winter.



Chicagoans can receive help with their energy bill through LIHEAP. In our survey, 13% of parents reported using LIHEAP to help pay their energy bills. This varied by household income, with a higher proportion of parents with low household income using LIHEAP (28%), followed by families with middle household income (14%) and high household income (0%). For more information on energy assistance, please review the [LIHEAP website](#); and for assistance with a variety of services in Illinois, review the Community Action Agencies [website](#).

Additional resources and safe heating tips

Below is a list of helpful resources and tips to stay safe and warm this winter:

- The [City of Chicago](#) has information for Chicago residents on carbon monoxide safety and alarms in your home.
- [American Red Cross Carbon Monoxide Safety Tips](#) covers what carbon monoxide and carbon monoxide poisoning is, and ways to stay safe.
- The City of Chicago's [Office of Emergency Management and Communications](#) has extreme weather tips, including a [list of warming centers](#) throughout the city.
- The [Chicago Fire Department](#) has tips for space heater and electrical safety.
- [Ready Illinois](#) has tips to stay safe in extreme cold throughout the winter.
- The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) has tips on how to keep children safe in cold weather.

REFERENCES

1. US Department of Commerce N. Chicago (O'Hare) 1991-2020 Climate Normals. https://www.weather.gov/lot/chicago_normals
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3. Safety with heating equipment | NFPA. <https://www.nfpa.org/education-and-research/home-fire-safety/heating>
4. Energy Insecurity And Health: America's Hidden Hardship | Health Affairs Brief. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hpb20230518.472953/full/>
5. Home Heating Fires report | NFPA. December 1, 2022. <https://www.nfpa.org/education-and-research/research/nfpa-research/fire-statistical-reports/heating-equipment>

HOW THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED

This study utilized a cross-sectional survey to explore parents' experiences and behaviors related to energy insecurity and how they heat their homes. Parent respondents were originally recruited to the sample through a probability-based sample of parents with children aged 0–17 who lived in Chicago by NORC at the University of Chicago. The current survey was administered in English and Spanish via Qualtrics. The survey completion rate was 23%.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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