Exploring EmPwR

EARLY INSIGHTS

Vol. 1. Winter 2026

What is EmPwR?

EmPwR gives families a monthly cash gift, with no strings attached. Then we study what happens. Will money help improve family well-being, reduce stress, and keep kids safe and out of the child welfare system? This project is a team effort between Brightpoint, three universities, and major funders who all want to learn how money can support families. Learn more at empwrstudy.com.

About this report

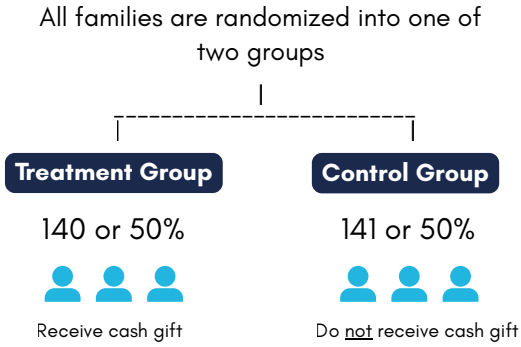
This 2-page report is for EmPwR partners and families. These first insights may change as we keep gathering information. However, we hope this document is a helpful preview of what we are starting to learn about EmPwR families and their experience with EmPwR.

SECTION 1: **EARLY ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

281 **Families have enrolled in EmPwR since January 2025**

How the EmPwR Study is Designed

EmPwR uses a Randomized Control Trial (RCT) design. An RCT measures whether the money affects families and in what ways.



Investing in Illinois Families

EmPwR puts cash in families' hands. The amount is based on how many children live in the home and what every day expenses (rent, groceries, transportation, utilities) cost by city or town. Since the start of the study:

Since January 2025, 140 treatment families have received a total of **$526,412**.

Over the study, a treatment family can receive between **$5,280** and **$8,388** a year.

Who is in the Study

Age. Most caregivers are in their mid-thirties but their ages vary. Caregivers range from 18 to 62 years old.

Household Size. Households include between 1 and 13 members. On average, 4 people live in a caregiver's home.

Race/Ethnicity. Caretakers mostly identify as white (40%), Black (35%), or Hispanic/Latino/a (17%)

What Caregivers Say About the EmPwR Money

> "We have the EmPwR money to use for groceries, so we're able to do more recreational things. We go out as a family and do things together and we're chipping away at debt, so it's been very helpful."
>
> - Working two jobs, parent of 2, receives $488 a month

> "That money's been helping me pay rent. [I also use it for] essentials, stuff we need for the house, the kids, help pay bills. Clothing, because my youngest one just completely grew out of everything."
>
> - Working part-time, parent of 2, receives $609 a month

> "I know that it's coming and I know that I can take care of this bill and I don't have to worry about my necessities."
>
> - Parent of 3 & grandparent of 1, finishing job training, receives $573 a month

SECTION 2: **WHAT WE ARE LEARNING ABOUT FAMILIES & STRESS**

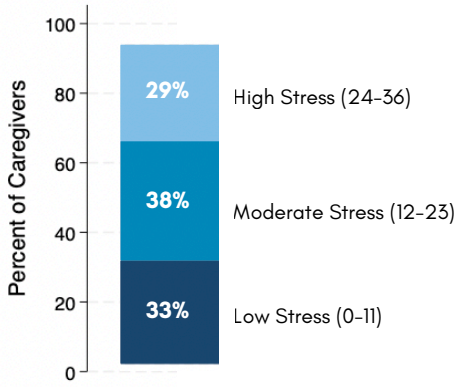
Research shows that caregivers who feel they can handle tough situations may find it easier to take care of their children than those who feel overwhelmed. But these feelings are personal. What feels hard for one person might not be for someone else. We ask EmPwR caregivers to rate stress on surveys and describe how it shows up in their lives during interviews. Later, we will use this information to see if getting EmPwR money changes how caregivers deal with difficult moments.

At the beginning of the study (baseline), we are learning that:

Surveys

All 244 caregivers have a child welfare case but feel different levels of stress. Stress here means how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overwhelming life feels. Most caregivers report a medium level of stress (38%) and the rest are split between high (29%) and low (33%) stress.

Perceived Stress Among Caregivers at Baseline



Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1980)
Sum Score, 0=no stress; 36 is the most possible stress

Interviews

Caregivers experience and think about stress in quite different ways. Interviews with 60 caregivers highlight how ideas around stress are complex. For example, caregivers may say they have very little stress but then explain that they "barely have time."

My stress was an 8-ft giant

Before my case opened and got closed, [my stress level] was beyond me. An eight-foot giant. My caseworker checks on me every week and she helps me. It's really nice to have somebody that can do those hands-on things and make it easier, [and] make sure it's happening.

Stress is and isn't stressful

I think I'm always just anxious because I'm a mom, so I'm just always nervous about my kid. I also work a very high stress job. I love working here, but it is a lot. So, I think, yeah, work goes into [my stress]. Not in a negative way, but I guess stress can't really be positive. I think I am just always stressed about the future just because.

Rethinking Stress? On surveys, caregivers often say their stress is low. But when they talk about their daily lives, they describe situations that sound very difficult. Interviews show that stress is not always seen as a bad thing, even if it is not exactly good. Many caregivers have learned how to handle situations that are unpredictable or out of their control. Because their experiences are so unique, could EmPwR families have their own definition or definitions of "stress"? As more caregivers answer surveys and participate in interviews, we will get more information to help us figure this out.

SECTION 3: **WHAT'S NEXT**

Growing our enrollment in 2026!

To include families in more rural and small town areas of Central and Southern Illinois, we plan on partnering with a second child welfare agency that supports families in these areas. With this group on board, we expect to enroll an additional 15 families a month.

On average, we enroll **25 families** a month. In year 2, we expect 40 families a month!

SECTION 4: **ASK US ANYTHING!**

Have a question about what we are doing? What about a suggestion for a next report? Maybe you just want to stay updated. Please email at ssw-empwrstudy@illinois.edu anytime!

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