

# Children in Families Receiving Cash Assistance

## DEFINITION

*Children in families receiving cash assistance* is the percentage of children under age 18 who were living in families receiving cash assistance through the Rhode Island Works Program (RI Works). These data measure the number of children and families enrolled in RI Works during the month of December. Children and families who participated in the program at other points in the year but who were not enrolled in that month are not included.

## SIGNIFICANCE

The goal of RI Works is to help very low-income families meet their basic needs by providing cash assistance and work supports, including employment services, SNAP benefits, health insurance, subsidized child care, and a small annual clothing allowance for children. Children and families qualify for cash assistance based on their income, resources, and the number of people in their families.<sup>1</sup>

RI Works cash assistance recipients must participate in an employment plan unless they meet specific criteria for an exemption. This employment plan must take into account the parent's skills, education, and family responsibilities as well as place of residence and should outline a process for helping the parent meet his or her employment goals. Parents should be

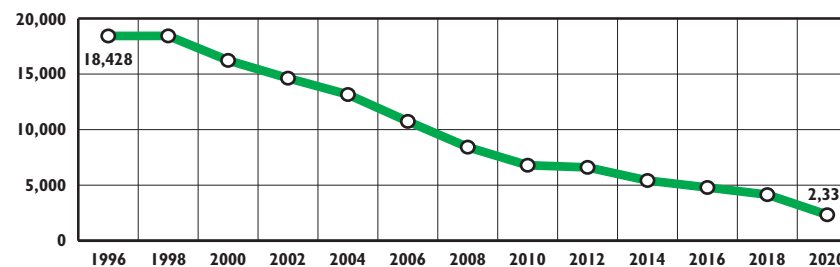
informed about opportunities to seek additional education or training to improve their employability prospects.<sup>2</sup>

RI Works provides a safety net for some children whose parents are unable to work due to a disability and can function as an unemployment system for parents who do not have sufficient earnings or work experience to qualify for unemployment benefits. RI Works also provides time-limited supplementary cash assistance to very low-income working families.<sup>3</sup> In 2020, the average hourly wage of working parents enrolled in RI Works was \$14.80 per hour.<sup>4</sup>

RI Works connects families to the Office of Child Support Services, which assists families in establishing paternity (when applicable), identifying and locating non-custodial parents, and obtaining child support payments from non-custodial parents.<sup>5</sup> In Rhode Island, the first \$50 of child support paid on time each month on behalf of a child enrolled in RI Works goes to the custodial parent caring for the child. The balance is kept by the state and federal governments as reimbursement for assistance received through RI Works.<sup>6,7</sup>

The maximum monthly RI Works benefit for a family of three is \$554 per month. This benefit amount provides \$6 per person per day and has not been increased in 30 years.<sup>8,9</sup>

Cash Assistance Caseload, Rhode Island, 1996–2020\*



Source: Rhode Island Department of Human Services, InRhodes Database, December 1, 1996-2015 and RI Bridges Database, December 2016-2020. Cases can be child-only or whole families and multiple people can be included in one case. \*The Rhode Island Department of Human Services changed the method for calculating the caseload data starting in the 2012 Factbook. This change is reflected in 2010-2020 caseload data. Comparisons to earlier years should be made with caution. Starting in 2016, caseload data are for the month of December and not for a point in time, December 1.

- ◆ Since 1996, when the program began, the Rhode Island cash assistance caseload has declined steadily. Between 1996 and 2020, the Rhode Island cash assistance caseload decreased by 87% from 18,428 cases to 2,339 families. The decrease from 2019 to 2020 may be due in part to the increase in Unemployment Compensation benefits provided during the COVID-19 pandemic, as these benefits counted as monthly income.<sup>10</sup>
- ◆ The RI Works caseload declined due to policies implemented in 2008, when the program changed from the Family Independence Program (FIP) to RI Works. These policies included new time limits (a 48-month lifetime limit for benefits and a periodic time limit that was removed as of January 1, 2020), closing the entire family's case when parents reach their time limit, and limiting eligibility for legal permanent residents to those who have had that status for five years.<sup>11,12</sup>
- ◆ In December 2020, there were 1,361 adults and 4,121 children under age 18 enrolled in RI Works. Three-quarters (75%) of RI Works beneficiaries were children, and 39% of the children enrolled in RI Works were under the age of six.<sup>13</sup>
- ◆ In December 2020, 50% (1,171) of RI Works cases were single-parent families, 48% (1,126) were child-only cases, and 2% (42) were two-parent families.<sup>14</sup>
- ◆ In 2019, 13,154 children in Rhode Island lived in extreme poverty (in families with incomes below 50% of the federal poverty threshold), yet only 6,884 children received cash assistance in December 2019.<sup>15,16</sup>

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## RI Works Policies

### Work Requirements

◆ Single-parent families must participate in a work activity for a minimum of 20 hours per week if they have a child under age six and a minimum of 30 hours per week if their youngest child is age six or older. For two-parent families, one or both parents must participate in work activities for an individual or combined total of 35 hours per week.<sup>17</sup>

### Time Limits

◆ The lifetime limit for RI Works is 48 months. As of January 1, 2020, the periodic time limit of no more than 24 months of cash assistance in a 60-month period was repealed.<sup>18,19</sup>

### Hardship Extensions

◆ Families can apply for hardship extensions that allow them to continue receiving cash assistance after reaching the time limit if the parent has a documented significant disability, is caring for a significantly disabled family member, is unable to pursue employment due to domestic violence, is homeless, or is unable to work because of “a critical other condition or circumstance.” While parents must submit requests for hardship extensions (for six-month periods), there is no limit on the total time a family can receive a hardship extension.<sup>20,21</sup>

### Child-Only Cases

◆ Child-only cases are those that receive assistance for only the children in the family because the child’s parent is ineligible. Child-only cases include children living with a non-parent or a parent who is disabled and receiving Supplemental Security Income.<sup>22</sup>

### Sanctions

◆ If a parent misses a required appointment, refuses or quits a job, or in some other way fails to comply with an employment plan and is not able to establish “good cause” (e.g., lack of child care, illness, a family crisis, or other allowed circumstance), the family’s cash benefit is reduced. If benefits are reduced for a total of three months (consecutive or not) due to non-compliance, the family’s case is closed and the entire family loses the RI Works benefit. Benefits can be restored in the month after the parent reapplies and comes into compliance.<sup>23</sup>



## RI Works by Case Type, December 2020

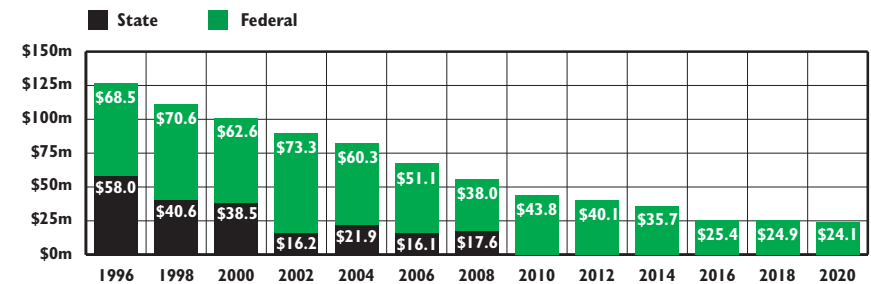
	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Child-only cases	1,126	48%
Cases with adults with a work activity	989	42%
Cases with adults exempt from a work activity*	215	9%
Unknown status	9	<1%
<b>Total RI Works Caseload</b>	<b>2,339</b>	

Source: Rhode Island Department of Human Services, RI Bridges Database, December 2020. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

\*RI Works regulations require that all parents and caretaker relatives included in the cash assistance grant participate in a work activity unless they receive a temporary exemption. Exemptions from work activities include: illness or incapacity (104), youngest child under age one (70), second parent is a non-participant (22), in third trimester of pregnancy (9), being a victim of domestic violence (2), caring for a disabled spouse or child (1), or multiple reasons (7).



## Rhode Island Cash Assistance Expenditures, State Fiscal Years 1996-2020

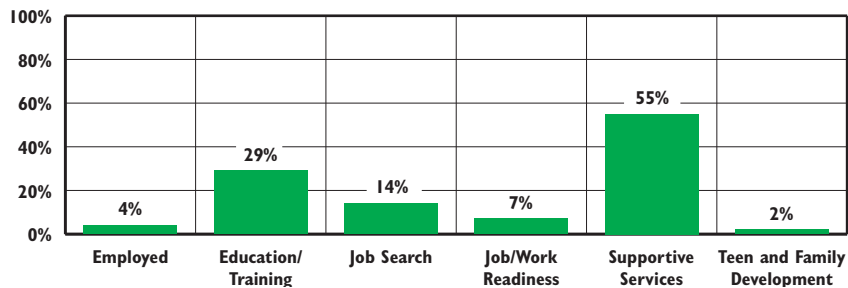


Sources: Rhode Island Department of Human Services. (2007). *Family Independence Program 2007 annual report*. (FY 1996-2001); House Fiscal Advisory Staff. (2004-2019). *Budget as enacted: Fiscal Years 2005-2020*. (FY 2002-2019); House Fiscal Advisory Staff. (2020). *FY 2020 revised budget: 2020-H 7170, Substitute A, as amended*. (FY 2020). Fiscal years 1997-2019 are funds spent and FY 2020 is final budget.

◆ In State Fiscal Year 2020, for the eleventh year in a row, no state general revenue was allocated for cash assistance. State general revenue spending for cash assistance decreased steadily from 1996 through 2010, and the program is now entirely supported by federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant funds. Total expenditures for cash assistance in Rhode Island (federal and state) decreased by 81% between 1996 (when the program began) and 2020. Expenditures increased in 2020 because federal COVID relief funds were used to provide an additional payment to participants.<sup>24,25</sup>

# Children in Families Receiving Cash Assistance

  
**Families Enrolled in the RI Works Program,  
by Type of Work Activity, December 2020**



Source: Rhode Island Department of Human Services, RI Bridges Database, December 2020. The total number of work activities (1,102) is larger than the number of families with a work activity (989) because some families (113) had multiple work activities during the month.

- ◆ As of December 2020, 4% of families with work activities were employed. Most of these families were also engaged in other work activities during the month.<sup>26</sup>
- ◆ Parents with limited training and skills can participate in basic education and work skills programs. Parents also can receive up to one year of vocational education as part of their 48-month lifetime limit.<sup>27</sup> As of December 2020, 29% of families were participating in education or training programs.<sup>28</sup>
- ◆ Fourteen percent of families with a work activity were participating in job search activities, including job search and job skills development programs delivered in partnership with the Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training, and 7% were participating in other job readiness activities. Another 55% of families were receiving supportive services, including mental or physical health and substance abuse treatment, and housing and homelessness services needed to address barriers to employment.<sup>29,30</sup>
- ◆ An additional 2% of families received educational support through the Teen and Family Development Program, a program for young parents.<sup>31</sup>

  
**Support for Young Parents**

- ◆ A child is nine times more likely to grow up in poverty if that child's mother gave birth as a teen, the parents were unmarried when the child was born, and the mother did not receive a high school diploma or GED.<sup>32</sup>
- ◆ RI Works provides additional support to young parents. Parents who are under age 20 and do not have a high school diploma or GED are required to receive parenting skills training and are supported in completing their high school education while enrolled in RI Works. In addition, pregnant or parenting teens under age 18 are required to live with their parent, legal guardian, or adult relative or in an adult-supervised setting.<sup>33</sup>
- ◆ In December 2020, there were 73 parents under the age of 20 enrolled in RI Works. Some are parent heads of household, and others may be parts of multi-generational households.<sup>34</sup>

  
**Support for Individuals with Disabilities and Their Families**

- ◆ Recent research conducted in several states shows that cash assistance recipients report physical and mental health disabilities at higher rates than the general population. Parents with physical or mental health conditions can face barriers to employment, including discrimination by employers.<sup>35</sup>
- ◆ Under RI Works, parents with disabilities may be exempt from work requirements only if they are receiving SSI or SSDI or determined to be eligible for SSI or SSDI. Other parents with disabilities are referred to the Office of Rehabilitation Services for further assessment, vocational rehabilitation services, and help applying for SSI, or to substance abuse or mental health treatment, as appropriate.<sup>36</sup>
- ◆ As of December 2020, 314 families (13% of the total RI Works caseload) had hardship extensions, 30 for a physical or mental disability, 11 who were unable to work due to a domestic violence situation, nine to care for a disabled family member, five due to homelessness, and 259 because of economic hardship or another critical condition or circumstance.<sup>37</sup> Nationally, many families leave cash assistance not because they find work, but because they reach their time limit or are sanctioned. These families often have barriers to employment, such as a mental or physical impairment, or a child with a disability.<sup>38,39</sup>

# Children in Families Receiving Cash Assistance

Table 11. Children in Families Receiving Cash Assistance (RI Works), Rhode Island, December 2020

CITY/TOWN	# OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18	NUMBER RECEIVING CASH ASSISTANCE		% OF CHILDREN RECEIVING CASH ASSISTANCE
		FAMILIES	CHILDREN	
Barrington	4,597	3	5	<1%
Bristol	3,623	19	27	1%
Burrillville	3,576	17	27	1%
Central Falls	5,644	109	192	3%
Charlestown	1,506	1	1	<1%
Coventry	7,770	26	35	<1%
Cranston	16,414	105	153	1%
Cumberland	7,535	31	56	1%
East Greenwich	3,436	9	12	<1%
East Providence	9,177	67	103	1%
Exeter	1,334	2	2	<1%
Foster	986	4	6	1%
Glocester	2,098	5	11	1%
Hopkinton	1,845	4	4	<1%
Jamestown	1,043	3	3	<1%
Johnston	5,480	51	68	1%
Lincoln	4,751	20	35	1%
Little Compton	654	2	2	<1%
Middletown	3,652	27	50	1%
Narragansett	2,269	2	4	<1%
New Shoreham	163	0	0	0%
Newport	4,083	73	125	3%
North Kingstown	6,322	19	30	<1%
North Providence	5,514	47	67	1%
North Smithfield	2,456	4	7	<1%
Pawtucket	16,575	257	435	3%
Portsmouth	3,996	6	13	<1%
Providence	41,634	939	1,792	4%
Richmond	1,849	4	8	<1%
Scituate	2,272	3	5	<1%
Smithfield	3,625	7	8	<1%
South Kingstown	5,416	23	45	1%
Tiverton	2,998	20	26	1%
Warren	1,940	9	13	1%
Warwick	15,825	72	127	1%
West Greenwich	1,477	0	0	0%
West Warwick	5,746	69	126	2%
Westerly	4,787	20	36	1%
Woonsocket	9,888	256	457	5%
Other/Unknown	NA	4	5	NA
Four Core Cities	73,741	1,561	2,876	4%
Remainder of State	150,215	774	1,240	1%
Rhode Island	223,956	2,339	4,121	2%



## Education and Training Supporting Employment

◆ An estimated 75,000 working-age adults (ages 18 to 65) in Rhode Island do not have a high school diploma. Of the 5,500 adults in adult education programs in Rhode Island, 94% entered these programs with a reading or math level lower than the ninth grade.<sup>40</sup>

◆ Between 2019 and 2029, jobs requiring a postsecondary degree or certificate are projected to grow faster than jobs requiring a high school diploma or less.<sup>41</sup> Between 2015 and 2019, the unemployment rate for Rhode Islanders without a high school diploma was 7.5%, compared to 6.6% for those with a high school degree and 2.6% for those with a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>42</sup>

◆ Parents enrolled in RI Works face significant barriers to success in the labor market. Thirty-nine percent of parents enrolled in RI Works report not finishing high school. Among a recently tested group of parents receiving cash assistance, about one-third (34%) of those tested in English tested at or below the sixth-grade reading level, while more than half (56%) of native Spanish speakers enrolled in RI Works tested at or below the sixth-grade reading level on a Spanish-language version of the test.<sup>43</sup>

◆ Research comparing mandatory job-search-first and mandatory education-or-training-first programs has found that the most effective approach is a mixed strategy where beneficiaries are encouraged to look for and take full-time jobs that pay above the minimum wage, offer benefits, have the potential for advancement, and also are offered high-quality, work-focused, and short-term education or training to improve their employability.<sup>44</sup> States should explore how to meet their work participation rate while offering beneficiaries a chance to improve job skills and long-term work preparedness.<sup>45</sup>

### Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Human Services, RI Bridges Database, December 2020. The Rhode Island Department of Human Services changed the method for calculating the caseload and persons receiving cash assistance starting in the 2012 Factbook. Comparisons to data presented in previous Factbooks should be made with caution.

The denominator is the total number of children under age 18 from U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2010, Summary File 1.

Communities may have more families than children receiving cash assistance because a pregnant woman without children is eligible if in the final trimester of her pregnancy.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

### References

<sup>1,2,3,5,8,17,18,20,22,23,27,30,33,36</sup> Rhode Island Works Program rules and regulations, 218-RICR-20-00-2 (2020). Retrieved February 2, 2021, from sos.ri.gov

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