

Preventing ACEs Through Economic Supports (PACES)

Year One Evaluation Findings

In 2020, Foundation Communities launched the Preventing ACEs through Collaboration and Economic Supports (PACES) project, an initiative to promote tax filing and increase the receipt of federal tax credits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit (CTC) through direct and indirect community outreach efforts. The goal of PACES is to increase protective factors against early adverse experiences for children, specifically targeting families from twelve zip codes in the Austin-metropolitan area's Eastern Crescent, an area of Austin with the highest concentration of poverty in Travis County and a high density of child maltreatment.¹

As part of a three-year process and outcomes evaluation to study the effectiveness of the PACES project, the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) designed and administered the PACES Client Survey to examine change over time in families' tax filing behaviors, overall wellbeing, and protective factors against potentially adverse experiences. This report describes the characteristics, tax filing behaviors, and overall wellbeing of families in the PACES Sample in the baseline year, before PACES outreach efforts began. Over the next two years, we will track tax filing and wellbeing over time to learn about the success of the PACES project.

Introduction

Research demonstrates that children from families with low incomes face an increased risk of experiencing adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs. ACEs are potentially traumatic events in childhood (0-17 years) that can impact children well into adulthood, effecting later health, wellbeing, academic outcomes, and earning potential.^{2,3} ACEs include experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home; and other aspects of the child's environment that can undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding. For families, strengthening economic supports may prevent or mitigate the harms of ACEs.⁴ Tax credits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) provide additional income that strengthens household financial security and reduces poverty for families.⁵ The PACES project aims to ease environmental and economic conditions that place families and children

at risk for experiencing ACEs by increasing the rate of receipt of the EITC and CTC among eligible families.

Eligible beneficiaries of anti-poverty tools such as the EITC and CTC must first file their taxes and then claim the credit on their tax return. Given that one in five tax filers who qualify for the EITC fail to claim the tax credit and approximately one in four EITC-eligible workers do not file a tax return, numerous opportunities exist to increase tax filing and credit claiming among families.^{6,7} These opportunities are especially critical considering the recent expansion of the CTC through the passing of the American Rescue Plan Act.

PACES Project Overview

The PACES project aims to reduce financial strain and promote protective factors against ACEs for families by increasing the receipt of federal tax credits such as the EITC and CTC. The PACES project targets parents of color with young children who live within Austin's Eastern Crescent. The Eastern Crescent in Travis County comprises a large geographic region that borders Austin's urban core, stretching from East Austin to the eastern edges of North and South Austin. Poverty and child maltreatment reports are more concentrated in the Eastern Crescent than other areas of Travis County.^{8,9}

Foundation Communities partnered with numerous community organizations, known as partner organizations, to conduct outreach regarding the value of tax filing and tax credits. Community organizations participating in PACES receive customized training for staff members who provide direct client services. During training, tax outreach professionals educate frontline workers about the fundamentals of ACEs (e.g., definitions, signs, symptoms, and traumatic events), general risk and protective factors of ACEs, and information on improving families' financial status through receipt of the EITC and CTC. Increasing staff knowledge of ACEs and federal tax credits enables direct service providers to teach their clients about the importance of tax filing and claiming federal tax credits and refers clients to Foundation Communities' free tax preparation services. Through these referrals, in addition to direct outreach activities by Foundation Communities, PACES aims to increase the number of families who file for and receive the EITC and CTC.

Evaluation

Foundation Communities contracted with Dr. Cynthia Osborne and CFRP to conduct a three-year process and outcomes evaluation of the PACES project. By conducting a change-over-time analysis of a sample of Eastern Crescent families identified in Year One and followed for three years, the evaluation examines whether the PACES project is associated with an increase in the number of clients who file their taxes and receive the EITC. The evaluation also assesses the extent to which receipt of the EITC is associated with a decrease in risk factors that may place children at risk for experiencing ACEs and an increase of protective factors that can mitigate children's risk of experiencing adverse events.

More specifically, over the evaluation period, CFRP will address the following research aims: (1) assess the effectiveness of staff training; (2) assess the effectiveness of participant outreach, and (3) identify the components of the PACES project that enhanced or detracted from the success of the project.

The evaluation's data sources include two original surveys designed and administered by CFRP: the Community Partners' Staff Survey and the PACES Client Survey. CFRP administers the Community Partners' Staff Survey to frontline staff prior to PACES' customized staff training, directly after training, and a few months following training to measure changes in staff knowledge and staff referral behaviors. CFRP will administer the PACES Client Survey to clients each tax season for three subsequent years (i.e., 2021 for the 2020 tax year, 2022 for the 2021 tax year, and 2023 for the 2022 tax year) to measure changes in tax filing behaviors, in risk and protective factors of ACEs, and clients' use of free tax preparation services.

At the end of our three-year evaluation, we will report on the effectiveness of outreach and referral activities by measuring changes in tax filing behavior and ACEs risk and protective factors in the PACES Sample. The PACES Sample is a convenience sample of Eastern Crescent families with children who meet eligibility criteria for the EITC. We obtained the PACES Sample through Foundation Communities and partner organizations who sent the PACES Client Survey to their clients. We will track the PACES Sample by sending a repeated-measures survey each year for three years. CFRP will model changes in clients' risk and protective factors between years (One, Two, and Three) using time-series analysis and hierarchical linear modeling, accounting for changes in tax filing behaviors such as filing a tax return and claiming the EITC.

The Current Report

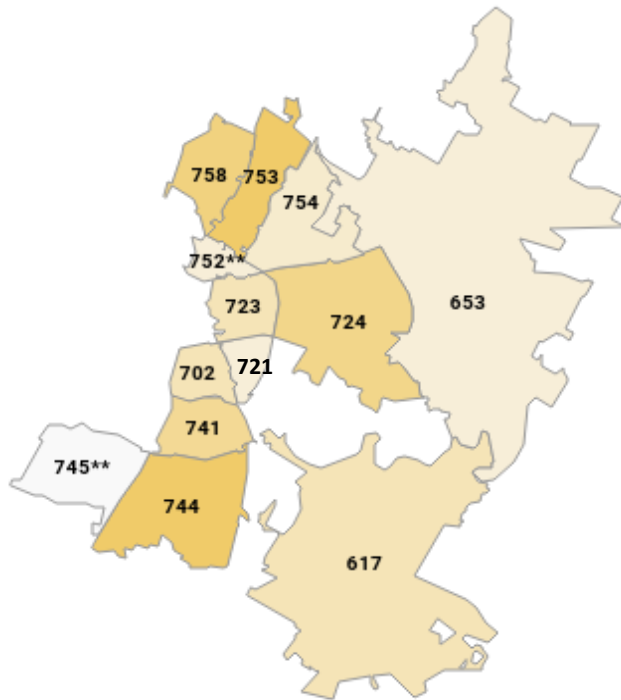
The current report focuses on the PACES Client Survey to provide information on who is in the PACES Sample and describe the tax filing behaviors and risk and protective factors of the PACES Sample at baseline or before any PACES outreach.

Methods

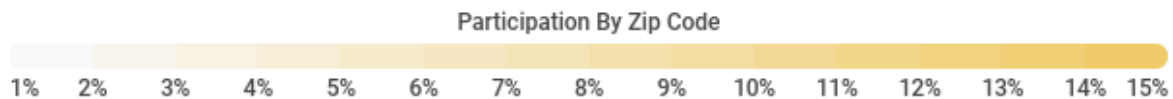
Sample

Foundation Communities and partner organizations distributed the Client Survey to their clients (i.e., the families they serve). Organizations used social media platforms, flyers, community events, listservs, parent groups, and text messaging services to promote the Client Survey. From July to September 2021, 624 eligible participants completed the Client Survey. Eligible participants were defined as individuals over the age of 18 residing in one of twelve targeted zip codes within Austin's Eastern Crescent (see Figure 1) with at least one child under the age of sixteen. Participants also had to be eligible for the federal EITC, as calculated by marital status, income, and the number of dependents. Importantly, the data for Year One, the baseline year, were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and the rollout of the expansion of the Child Tax Credit with the passing of the American Rescue Plan Act.

FIGURE 1: PACES SAMPLE PARTICIPANTS BY ZIP CODE WITHIN AUSTIN'S EASTERN CRESCENT



Zip Codes	Number of Participants	Percentage of Sample
78617	41	7%
78653	25	4%
78702	41	7%
78721	22	4%
78723	43	7%
78724	71	11%
78741	63	10%
78744	93	15%
78752	26	4%
78753	93	15%
78754	32	5%
78758	74	12%



Numbers reflect the zip code (with the leading "78" removed for space considerations). A "***" after the zip code indicates that there is a Foundation Communities tax help center located in this zip code.

Measures

Tax Filing Behaviors

CFRP designed several questions to measure tax filing behaviors. We asked respondents to report on their yearly income, tax return amount, use of their tax refund, whether they filed a tax return for the year 2020, and whether they claimed the EITC and CTC for the year 2020. We also asked about participants' knowledge about tax credits and their use of tax preparation services, such as Foundation Communities' services.

Family Wellbeing

To measure family wellbeing, CFRP adapted multiple measures to assess potential risk and protective factors such as economic and material hardship, mental wellbeing, and familial supports. We measured economic and material hardship using the Economic Hardship questionnaire.¹⁰ Participants rated their perception of economic hardship in several areas, including how much financial strain they felt, their ability to make ends meet, having enough money for necessities, and whether they had to make any lifestyle adjustments due to financial need. We summed all items to create an overall hardship score, with higher scores indicating a greater perception of economic hardship. We measured risk and protective factors using the Protective Factors Survey to assess changes in protective factors over time across three key areas: family functioning/resiliency, social support, and nurturing and attachment.¹¹ We calculated an average score for each key area, with higher scores indicating more protective factors present in the home. We used the Center for Epidemiological Studies of Depression Short Form (CES-D) to measure mental wellbeing, a self-reported measure assessing the presence or absence of negative and positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors experienced the week prior to taking the survey.¹² We used the CES-D to identify possible depression in respondents. We also asked respondents about their child care arrangements, work environment, and other environmental stressors families often face.

Analytic Approach

We descriptively analyzed and present point-in-time survey measures for the PACES Sample throughout this report. All descriptive outcomes are unadjusted values or raw proportions. We conducted two-sample t-tests or proportion tests to test all items for statistical significance for all reported values that compare measures across tax filing groups or race/ethnic groups. All tax filing status and racial/ethnic group differences presented are statistically significant unless otherwise noted.

Throughout the report, we present three racial/ethnic categories: (a) Black, (b) Latino/a/x, and (c) White. For respondents who identified as multiracial, we assigned them to their reported racial/ethnic group that, historically, has experienced structural racism and systemic barriers that perpetuated persons into positions of relative disadvantage. For this report, if an individual self-identifies as both Black and White, we assigned their race as Black; for an individual who identifies as both Latino/a/x and Black, we assigned their ethnicity as Latino/a/x. We assigned respondents who identified as American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, or preferred not to answer as “Other”; the sample size is too small to report their results individually (n=10).

Throughout the report, we focus on two tax filing status groups created based on participants’ reported tax behavior: 1) EITC claimers, or participants who both filed taxes and claimed the EITC, and 2) Non-filers, or participants who did not file their 2020 tax return and therefore did not claim the EITC.

Year One Evaluation Findings

Among the 624 participants in the PACES Client Survey Sample...

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 33 years: average age of respondents in our sample. • 13% are less than 25 years old. • 25% are between 26 and 30 years old. • 46% are between 31 and 40 years old. • 15% are 41 years or older.
Dependents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 28% have one dependent, 36% have two dependents, 20% have three dependents, and 15% have four or more dependents.
Race/Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 59% are Latino/a/x. (Respondents include all racial groups) • 23% are White. • 16% are Black. (Remaining respondents are American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, or preferred not to answer.)
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2% report no formal schooling. • 6% report a 1st-8th grade level of education. • 14% report a 9th-12th grade level of education. • 29% report having a high school diploma or an equivalent degree. • 31% report having some college. • 9% report having an associate's degree. • 10% report having a bachelor's degree or higher.
Home Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 63% primarily speak English. • 35% primarily speak Spanish. (Remaining participants primarily speak Arabic, French, Russian, Dari, Nepali, or Yoruba.)
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 80% of respondents are female. (Remaining participants are male, non-binary, or preferred not to answer.)
Marital Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 56% are legally married.
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 45% work full time. • 16% work part-time. • 39% are not employed.
Renting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 53% of families are renters.

91% REPORT NO COLLEGE DEGREE

Notes: Sample size across items in this table range from n=596 to n=624 because some respondents declined to answer individual items.

TAX FILING BEHAVIORS

Anti-poverty tools such as the EITC and CTC strengthen household financial security and improve family wellbeing by mitigating environmental and economic conditions that place children at risk for experiencing ACEs.^{13,14} The first step to claiming the EITC or CTC is filing a federal tax return. The PACES project aims to increase the tax filing rate among the Eastern Crescent community to improve a family's financial security, which, over time, may promote protective factors against ACEs.

- **84%** of respondents filed a 2020 tax return.
- **85%** of filers received a tax refund.
- **\$4,000**: average refund amount.
- **51%** of respondents claimed the Earned Income Tax Credit.
- **55%** of respondents claimed the Child Tax Credit.
- **24%** of respondents were not aware they could receive monthly Child Tax Credit payments.

**EVERY WHITE FILER
HAS HEARD OF THE
EITC; 1 IN EVERY 4
BLACK FILERS HAVE
NOT**



Comparing Non-filers to EITC Claimers

- **52%** of non-filers report an average yearly income below \$15,000 compared to **24%** of EITC claimers.
- **54%** of non-filers are unemployed compared to **34%** of EITC claimers.
- **77%** of non-filers have a HS education or less as compared to **42%** of EITC claimers.

Filing Behaviors Across Racial and Ethnic Groups[^]

- **63%** of White respondents claimed the EITC, **47%** of Black respondents claimed the EITC, and **46%** of Latino/a/x respondents claimed the EITC.
- **27%** of Black filers never heard of the EITC. **15%** of Latino/a/x filers never heard of the EITC, and **0%** of White filers never heard of the EITC.

[^]Note: Sample is limited to respondents who reported race/ethnicity and filing status (n=584).

How Families Filed[^]

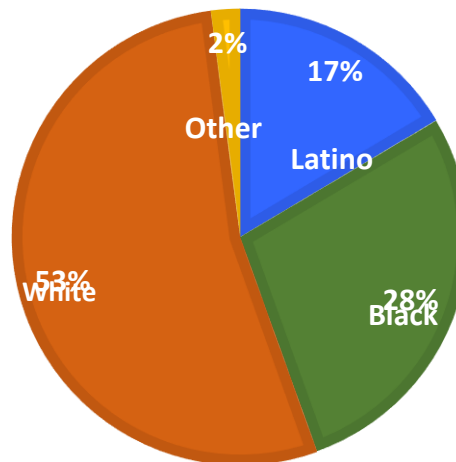
- **28%** of filers filed through Foundation Communities.
- **29%** of filers used an e-filing service to file.
- **24%** of filers used a paid professional to file. Of those who paid (n=125):
 - **86%** are Latino/a/x,
 - **65%** have a high school degree or less,
 - **42%** make between \$25,000 and \$50,000.
- Only **8%** of Latino/a/x filers used Foundation Communities to file compared to **45%** of Black filers and **69%** of White filers.
- **Over half** of those who report using Foundation Communities to file are White.

[^]Note: Sample is limited to respondents who filed a 2020 tax return (n=520).

MOST LATINO FILERS PAID A TAX PROFESSIONAL IN 2020; FEWER THAN 10% OF LATINOS USED FC TO FILE



FIGURE 2: RACE OF RESPONDENTS WHO FILED THROUGH FC IN 2020



Note: Sample is limited to respondents who filed through Foundation Communities (n=146)

Free E-filing and In-person Filing Options for Families

- **71%** have never used a free in-person tax preparer to file.
- **41%** have never used free online e-filing services to file.
- **Knowledge:** **65%** of respondents did not know about free in-person filing services, and **52%** did not know about free e-filing services.
- **Comfort:** **50%** of respondents feel uncomfortable using free in-person services, and **59%** feel uncomfortable using free e-filing services.
- **Barriers:** **27%** of respondents report unreliable transportation, and **31%** report limited internet access.

- **Myths:** Among those who have never used a free in-person tax preparer, **39%** believe they will receive their refund quicker, and **28%** believe they will receive more money if they pay someone to file their taxes.
- **27%** of respondents do not use a free in-person preparation service because they usually need a short-term loan before receiving their refund.

Refund**Advance****Use**

- **27%** report using a refund advance in the past 3 years.
- **43%** of respondents believe they will use a refund advance in the future.

Notes: Sample size across items in this table range from n=584 to n=624 because some respondents declined to answer individual items.

FAMILY WELLBEING

Parents who experience financial hardships, such as having a low income or living in deep poverty, are more likely to experience stress, depression, and relationship conflicts, which can impact their ability to be the best parents they can be and keep their children safe.^{6,7} Financial insecurity also increases social experiences and conditions such as frequent moves or experiencing food insecurity that increase the risk of experiencing ACEs.⁹ The PACES project aims to improve family wellbeing by increasing receipt of the EITC among families in Austin's Eastern Crescent, which may reduce the likelihood of children's exposure to ACEs.

**OVER HALF OF
ALL FAMILIES
STRUGGLE TO
MEET THEIR
BASIC NEEDS**



- More than **1 in 10** families could not always afford enough food.
- Approximately **2 out of 3** families adjusted their livelihoods in some capacity to make ends meet.
- Non-filers report **more** experiences of economic and material hardships, such as difficulty paying their monthly bills compared to EITC claimers.
- **22%** of families have children who have experienced three or more ACEs.
- **31%** of survey takers screened positive for possible depression.
- Non-filers report **lower** protective factors scores compared to EITC claimers.

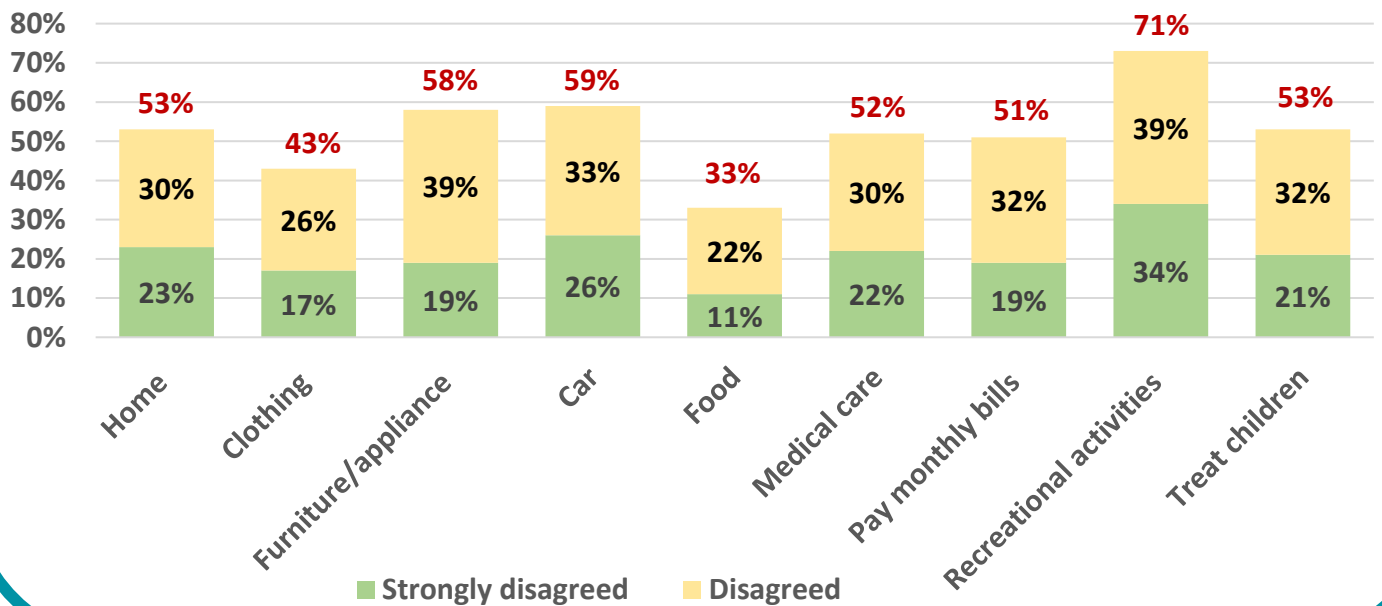
Economic and Material Hardship of Families

In the last three months, among all of the families in the sample...

- 52% could not afford proper medical care.
- 51% could not pay all their monthly bills.
- 33% could not afford the kind of food their family should have.
- 14% cut an adult’s meal size or skipped a meal for financial reasons.
- 22% shut down the heat or air conditioning.
- 27% did not see a doctor or dentist when they needed to.
- 24% were very short of money at the end of each month.

FIGURE 3: IN THE PAST THREE MONTHS, MY FAMILY HAD ENOUGH MONEY TO AFFORD...

Percent of Respondents who Disagree or Strongly Disagree



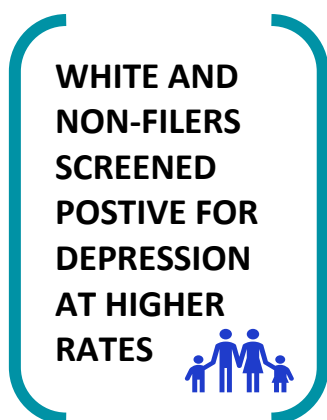
Economic and Material Hardship by Filing Behaviors

We summarized respondents' perceptions of their economic wellbeing to calculate an aggregate hardship score.

- **26[^]**: the mean economic hardship score for non-filers ($SD=8.73$).
- **21[^]**: the mean economic hardship score for EITC claimers ($SD=8.92$).
- **25%** of non-filers are very or extremely worried about experiencing bad times in the subsequent three months compared to **14%** of EITC claimers.
- **69%** of non-filers are somewhat or very short on money at the end of each month compared to **50%** of EITC claimers.
- **32%** of non-filer are unable to afford proper clothing compared to **12%** of EITC claimers.
- **37%** of non-filers cannot treat their children to a small gift or meal for financial reasons compared to **19%** of EITC claimers.

[^]Note: Scores ranged from 0 to 47, with higher scores indicating a greater perception of economic hardship.

Mental Wellbeing of Families



- **16%** of respondents rarely feel happy (less than 1 day) each week
- **7%** of respondents feel depressed all of the time (5 to 7 days) each week.
- **42%** of non-filers screened positive for depression compared to **32%** of EITC claimers, although this difference is not statistically significant.
- **39%** of White respondents screened positive for possible depression compared to **28%** of Latino/a/x and **29%** of Black respondents.

Unpredictable Family Life Experiences for Families

- **Moving: 16%** of families moved residences in the past three months.
- **Work stress: 34%** say work causes extra stress for them and their family.
- **Childcare problems: 39%** say their job makes it difficult to deal with childcare problems during work hours.
- **Inflexible work schedule: 57%** report a work environment that does not let them deal with their family's needs.
- **Multiple jobs: 22%** of respondents work multiple jobs.
- **Changes in childcare: 39%** changed their childcare arrangements in the past year.
- **Childcare stability: 42%** have had to make special arrangements in the past year because their usual child care arrangements fell through.

Protective Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 26% feel consistently hopeful about the future of their family.• 42% of respondents report doing things together with their family that feel special to them.• 42% of respondents have people in their life who believe in them.• 11% of respondents have no trouble finding someone to look after their kids on short notice.• 35% of respondents <u>do not</u> feel like they constantly have to tell their children “no” or “stop.”
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Notes: Sample size across items in this table range from n=585 to n=624 because some respondents declined to answer individual items.

Conclusion

Many families in the PACES Sample experience substantial economic and material hardship. Over half of families in our sample struggle to meet their basic needs, with many making choices about which necessities they can and cannot afford each month. Concurrently, many families are experiencing high levels of emotional distress.

Among the PACES Sample, non-filers report higher levels of material hardship than families who filed taxes and claimed the EITC. Most non-filers (n=102) are making less than \$15,000 a year (52%), are not employed (54%), have less than a high school degree (43%), and are Latino/a/x (71%).

However, every family represented in our sample should be eligible for the EITC. Using self-reported yearly income, the number of dependents, and marital status, we estimate that, on average, non-filers are missing out on approximately \$3,000 from EITC receipt. In our sample, a non-filer with one dependent missed out on an average of \$2,466 from the EITC; on average, a non-filer with two dependents did not claim \$2,994 from the EITC; and a non-filer with three dependents did not claim an average of \$3,838 from the EITC. The average amount missed varies by marital status (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4: AVERAGE REFUND AMOUNT NON-FILERS COULD HAVE RECEIVED FROM THE EITC IN 2020



Just among our relatively small sample of Eastern Crescent families who did not file a tax return in 2020, we demonstrate ample need for tax filing and EITC outreach such as that provided by the PACES project to increase the number of families who file *and* claim the EITC. Unclaimed EITC dollars do not reach the pockets of families who could benefit from additional income.

Extending our findings to the whole sample (including tax filers and non-filers), only half of all eligible families claimed the EITC and the CTC. Yet, families who file and claim the EITC report better wellbeing across multiple measures, including their ability to afford necessities such as food, housing, utilities, and health care.

This year of data collection took place during a period of increased hardship as the social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continued. We hope that the future will bring better conditions for all families. However, the substantial monetary amounts left on the table by not filing taxes and/or claiming the EITC and CTC and increased levels of hardship faced by families who report low uptake of these benefits indicate an opportunity for the EITC and CTC to substantially improve families' wellbeing, regardless of the broader circumstances in a given year.

Additionally, just 28 percent of tax filers in our sample used Foundation Communities' services in 2020 to file their tax return. Unlike most paid tax filing services that charge filers a flat filing fee or take a percentage of a filer's expected tax return, which can substantially reduce the benefit of tax refunds such as the EITC, Foundation Communities offers convenient free tax preparation services through their VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) program at multiple Prosper Centers around Central Texas. By increasing the awareness of and participation in free tax filing services, the PACES project's future outreach can decrease the cost for families to file their federal tax returns.

Our Year One findings also identify differences in tax filing behaviors and receipt of federal tax credits across families of different races and ethnicities, highlighting a key opportunity for the PACES project. Latino families in the sample used Foundation Communities to file their taxes much less frequently than their White and Black counterparts. Over half of our survey takers are Latino/a/x, yet they make up the largest percentage of non-filers and the largest percentage of families who pay a tax professional to file. Latino families also report the lowest EITC receipt rates in our sample. Each of these differences highlights an important opportunity for the PACES project to target outreach to Latino families to ensure they have the same access to knowledge about tax filing and federal credits and opportunities to file their taxes for free as other families in their communities.

Over the next two years, we will assess the success of the PACES project by tracking and analyzing changes in EITC-receipt among the PACES Sample and changes in the risk and protective factors associated with ACEs. In other words, we will look to see whether rates of tax filing and EITC receipt increase among our sample and, if so, whether, in turn, families' wellbeing (as measured by risk and protective factors against ACEs) improves as well.

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