

December 2021

Education/Economic Mobility Survey Summary

Produced by [Langer Research Associates](#)

The following is a summary of random-sample U.S. survey research on early learning, K-12 and post-secondary education and economic mobility released from late November to late December 2021. This project is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Key Takeaways

Education studies released in the past month add to evidence of the pandemic's impacts on student learning, mental health and the consequences of remote learning. Others chronicle pandemic-fueled enrollment declines in K-12 and higher education and assess the widespread adoption of test-optional college admissions policies.

Surveys on economic mobility, for their part, reveal deep concerns about the economy and inflation alongside easing worry about employment and job security. New studies delve into gig platform and health sector employment; others assess attitudes about stimulus payments the past year and views on the beleaguered social policy bill currently stalled in the U.S. Senate.

Detailed results of these and other new surveys on education and economic mobility follow.

K-12 Education

An analysis of more than 600 school districts in 23 states and Washington, D.C., finds that few have returned to pre-pandemic enrollment; most instead report a second straight year of declines ([NPR 12/15](#)). That's the case even though instructional modes largely normalized, with nearly all public school students in grades four and eight attending full-time in person classes as of last fall ([NCES 12/15](#)).

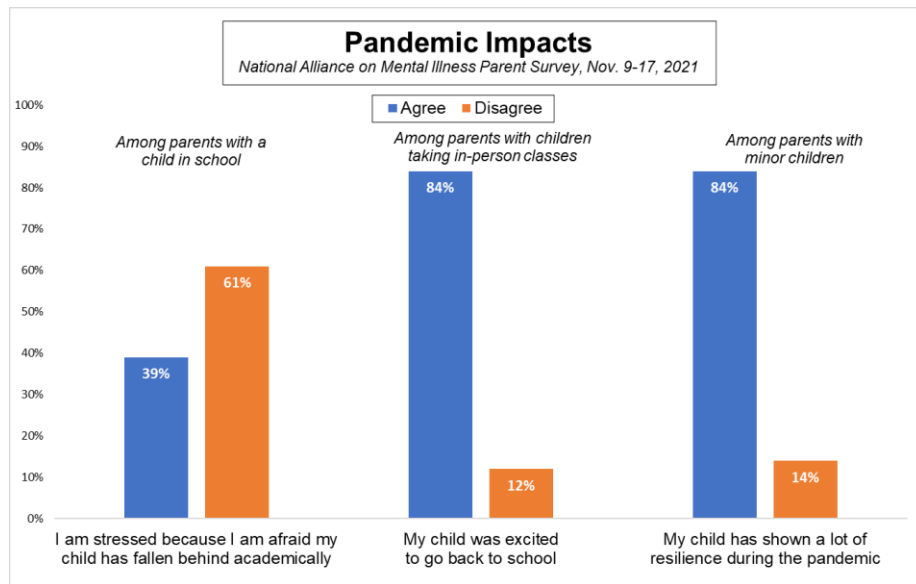
One report finds that pandemic learning losses appear to have stabilized, albeit with no signs of improvement as of the start of the 2021-22 school year. Based on assessments from more than six million children in grades 3-8, median student scores were 9 to 11 percentile ranks lower in math and 3 to 7 ranks lower in reading in fall 2021 compared with fall 2019. Losses were greater among students in high-poverty schools as well as Black, Hispanic and American Indian and Alaska Native students, replicating findings from last spring. ([NWEA 12/14](#))

Another analysis, however, finds moderate improvement in assessment scores among grade 1-6 students, suggesting possible headway against academic losses. These results are based on assessment scores from three million students in math and 2.7 million in reading nationally, albeit with Florida disproportionately represented. It says students were approximately four months behind in math and three months behind in reading at the beginning of the 2021-2022 year, a roughly one-month improvement since spring 2021, though gains were smaller in

majority Black schools. (It confirms greater learning losses in lower-income and majority Black and Hispanic schools.) ([McKinsey & Company 12/14](#))

Seventy-three percent of parents of minor children said the pandemic has had a negative impact on their education, with 35 percent calling it a major one ([KFF 11/8-11/23](#)). In another survey,

39 percent of parents with a child in school agreed with the statement, “I am stressed because I am afraid my child has fallen behind academically.” At the same time, 71 percent said their child’s performance at school was about the same as before the pandemic and 84 percent agreed their child has shown a lot of resilience. As many agreed their child was excited to go back to school. ([NAMI 11/9-11/17](#))



Addressing learning impacts, 96 percent of K-12 public schools as of the summer planned to conduct diagnostic student assessments at the start of the 2021-2022 year. Nearly all in this group, 99 percent, intended to use them to address pandemic learning needs. ([NCES 12/15](#))

Mental Health

In the first half of last year, eighth, 10th and 12th graders reported increases in feelings of anxiety, worry, depression, loneliness, boredom, difficulty sleeping and other negative mental health indicators since the beginning of the pandemic ([NIDA February-June 2021](#)).

Among parents of minor children, one in five in mid-November said their child felt more stressed, anxious and irritated than before the pandemic, double the share who said these feelings had lessened. (Roughly seven in 10 saw no change.)

Fifty-eight percent of parents with children age 3 to 17 agreed that their child struggled being away from friends for so long; 31 percent agreed their child experienced fear or anxiety about becoming very sick from COVID-19; and, among those with a child in school, 23 percent agreed their child was suffering from stress after falling behind.

Among those whose child had recent experience with remote classes, 51 percent agreed that it was “really hard” on their child. Eighty-three percent of parents of school children agreed that

the school has been supportive of their child's mental health. A quarter had gone to a teacher or administrator for information on the topic. ([NAMI 11/9-11/17](#))

In terms of school responses, in September data, 86 percent of K-12 public schools reported having encouraged staff to address supporting students' social, emotional and mental well-being. Fewer, 59 percent, offered professional development training to do this; 42 percent hired new staff specifically for this purpose. ([NCES 12/15](#))

Parents also are affected. Fifty-three percent agreed that the remote learning process was "really hard" on them. Among those whose child has returned to in-person school at least some of the time, six in 10 agreed that they feel less stressed since the transition. ([NAMI 11/9-11/17](#))

The Broader K-12 Picture

Twenty-two percent in October said the quality of K-12 education in the public schools was a major problem in their local community; 36 percent called it a minor problem, 41 percent, not a problem. Results were unchanged from March 2018. ([Pew Research Center 10/18-10/24](#))

On the home front, also in a newly released study from October, mothers were far more apt than fathers to report doing all or most of the work in overseeing their child's educational activities, such as managing homework, reading to them or attending parent-teacher conferences, 61 vs. 14 percent. ([UChicago Harris/AP-NORC 10/7-10/11](#))

Teachers Unions

An analysis finds losses in teachers' union membership in the 2020-2021 school year. For example, the National Education Association lost 2.3 percent of its members and the American Federation of Teachers lost 2.1 percent. ([The 74 12/15](#))

State Results

Florida. From 2014 to 2019, low-income students attending Catholic schools through the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program saw annual gains in math and reading performance relative to national averages, increasing an average of 2.1 percentile ranks in math and 3.6 in reading. In contrast, students using the program to attend non-Catholic private schools fell 2.6 percentile ranks behind in math and 0.3 behind in reading. The difference held when controlling for demographic differences between the two groups. ([Urban Institute 12/16](#))

Tennessee. Eighty-four percent of Tennessee registered voters said having access to a good-quality K-12 public school education is very important to them and their family. Many fewer, two in 10, picked education as the state government's top priority out of seven issues offered.

A or B grades for local public elementary, middle and high schools ranged from 42 to 48 percent. Still, many more were satisfied than dissatisfied with their district's pandemic response, 63-27 percent.

Respondents were more receptive to state school funding based on student poverty or disabilities than English-language needs. Eight in 10 favored additional funding if schools show success educating students with greater needs. Views on school vouchers were divided, 35 percent opposed, 31 percent in support, a third saying they don't know enough. More, nearly six in 10, said they don't know enough to say about a potential state law allowing for partisan school board elections; 26 percent disapproved, 16 percent approved. ([Vanderbilt 11/16-12/6](#))

Texas. Eighteen percent in November picked education/schooling as the top priority for Texas' next governor to address, fourth out of 11 issues offered, after immigration, COVID-19 and jobs/the economy. Eleven percent called it a main problem facing Texas ([Spectrum News-Ipsos 11/16-11/26](#)). In another poll, among registered voters, 5 percent called schools the most urgent issue facing the state, ranking sixth out of 12 provided ([Quinnipiac 12/2-12/6](#)).

Post-secondary Success

An analysis finds a 5-point drop in the share of 2020 high school graduates who enrolled in college the following fall, with broad disparities. Immediate enrollment declined 10 points, from 55 to 45 percent, at high-poverty schools, compared with 4 points, from 77 to 73 percent, at low-poverty schools. The study also finds no overall rise in gap-year enrollment in fall 2021; rather, this declined slightly.

In terms of college outcomes, students from low-poverty high schools were far more apt than those from high-poverty high schools to complete a college degree within six years of high school graduation, 60 vs. 24 percent. ([NSCRC 12/1](#))

Another analysis finds a 15 percent decline in international student enrollment at higher education institutions in 2020-21, compared with a 2 percent drop in 2019-2020. It was down 14 percent among undergraduates, 12 percent among graduate students, 64 percent among non-degree-seeking students and 9 percent among those in Optional Practical Training. Enrollment fell by 46 percent among new students and 3 percent among continuing students. The report says international students accounted for 5 percent of higher-education students in 2020-2021, contributing \$39 billion to the U.S. economy in 2020. ([Institute of International Education-Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs 11/15](#))

The number of four-year colleges adopting test-optional admissions policies has more than tripled since spring 2020. Compared with pre-pandemic adopters, schools making this change during the pandemic have lower tuition and fees but more selective admission rates. ([Urban Institute 12/16](#))

Average Tuition and Fees



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Authors' calculations from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, accessed via the Urban Institute's Education Data Portal, and FairTest data.

State Results

California. Federal student aid applications under FAFSA during the 2020-2021 cycle generally were unassociated with the share of socioeconomically disadvantaged students in a district. In some cases, adjacent districts had vastly different rates, suggesting district efforts may instead be a dominant factor. Submission rates generally were higher in cities and suburban areas than in towns and rural areas and in districts with somewhat larger shares of Hispanic students and smaller shares of white students. ([PPIC 12/1](#))

Another California report assesses the impact a state law enacted in 2018 requiring community colleges to maximize opportunities for students to complete transfer-level math or English courses within a year, rather than remedial courses. The share of students enrolling in introductory, transfer-level math rose from 22 percent in 2015 to 80 percent in 2019; the share of first-time math students passing transfer-level math within one term tripled, from 15 percent to 46 percent. Racial and ethnic gaps narrowed; completion rates for transfer-level math rose from 9 percent in fall 2015 to 39 percent in fall 2020 among Latino students and from 7 percent to 31 percent among Black students. White and Asian students remained more likely to successfully complete such courses. ([PPIC 12/9](#))

Economic Mobility

Negative ratings of the economy ranged from 63 to 82 percent in December ([AP-NORC 12/2-12/7](#); [CNBC 12/1-12/4](#); [CNN 12/8-12/12](#); [Fox News 12/11-12/14](#), among registered voters; [Gallup 12/1-12/16](#)). Two-thirds said economic conditions in the country are getting worse ([Gallup 12/1-12/16](#)). With inflation at a 40-year high, seven in 10 in November said the economy was on the wrong track, up 5 points in a month to a 10-year high ([Fannie Mae 11/1-11/17](#)).

Three-quarters are worried about the state of the economy in the community where they live, including three in 10 very worried ([CNN 12/8-12/12](#)). Four in 10 expect the economy to worsen in the next year; 27 percent think it'll get better, 25 percent, stay the same ([CNBC 12/1-12/4](#)). Results are similar among registered voters ([Fox News 12/11-12/14](#)).

Thirty-seven percent are extremely or very concerned about the economy collapsing during the pandemic, down from 48 percent a year ago. Three in 10 are extremely or very concerned about economic impacts of mask or vaccine requirements. ([Axios-Ipsos 12/10-12/13](#))

Financial Situation

Americans rated their household finances positively by 64-35 percent in one survey, but, when asked about personal finances and given different response options in another, registered voters break 42-58 percent ([AP-NORC 12/2-12/7](#); [Fox News 12/11-12/14](#)).

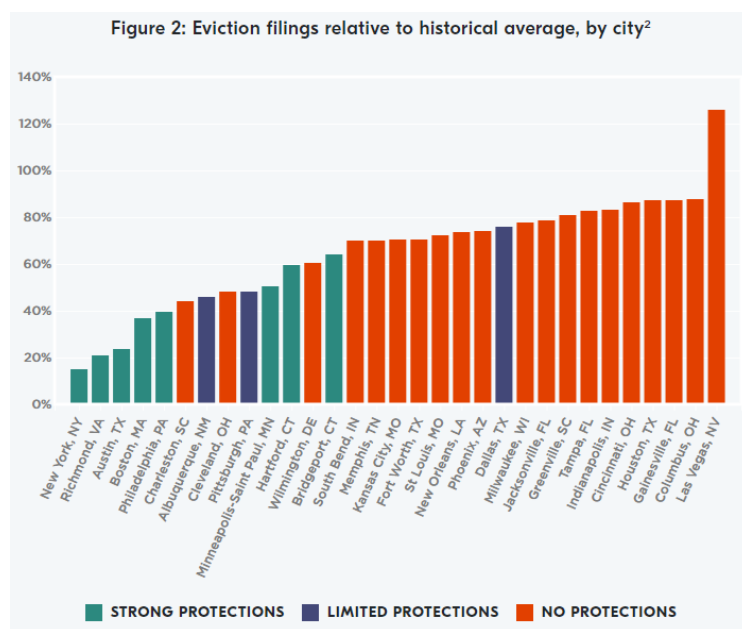
Compared with a year ago, one-third say they're worse off, 21 percent better off, the rest about the same ([CNN 12/8-12/12](#)). In similar results among registered voters, 37 percent say they're worse off, 17 percent better off and 44 percent about the same ([Fox News 12/11-12/14](#)). In

another gauge, in November, 23 percent said their household income was significantly higher than 12 months earlier; 13 percent, lower; 61 percent, about the same.

Looking ahead, in November, 21 percent expected their financial situation to get worse over the next year, steady from the previous month at an 8-year high. Four in 10 expected their financial situation to get better, also steady. ([Fannie Mae 11/1-11/17](#))

Twenty-eight percent worry all or most of the time that their family’s income won’t meet their expenses. It’s 42 percent among those with annual household incomes less than \$50,000, compared with 15 percent of those with higher incomes. ([CNN 12/8-12/12](#))

An analysis of eviction filings in 31 cities and six states finds a 20 percent increase in cases filed in the three months after the federal moratorium was lifted Aug. 27, compared with the preceding three months. Still, the rate of eviction filings was muted, peaking at 63 percent of the historical average in the second month post-moratorium, with substantial local variation. Filings reached at least 75 percent of the historical average in 11 cities but was far lower in others with state or local protections in place, including New York City (15 percent), Richmond (21 percent) and Austin (24 percent). ([Eviction Lab 12/9](#))



A review of the market for single-family homes, the dominant housing type in the United States, cites restrictive zoning, stringent and/or non-standardized building codes, higher material costs, labor shortages and financing issues as key problems constraining supply for potential low- and middle-income buyers ([Urban Institute 12/15](#)).

Inflation/Expenses

Consumer prices rose 6.8 percent in the year through November, their largest 12-month increase in nearly 40 years ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 12/10](#)).

Eighty-four percent of registered voters in one poll, and nine in 10 employed or job-seeking people in another, were concerned about inflation or the cost of living ([Fox News 12/11-12/14](#); [Rutgers Heldrich Center 11/19-11/21](#)). Using a different scale, six in 10 Americans overall are extremely or very concerned about the cost of food and basic household goods rising ([Axios-Ipsos 12/10-12/13](#)). And 63 percent of registered voters are concerned about being able to pay their bills, rising to 78 percent of those with household incomes less than \$50,000 ([Fox News 12/11-12/14](#)).

Two-thirds overall say their household expenses are higher than at the start of the pandemic while just 24 percent say their household incomes are higher.

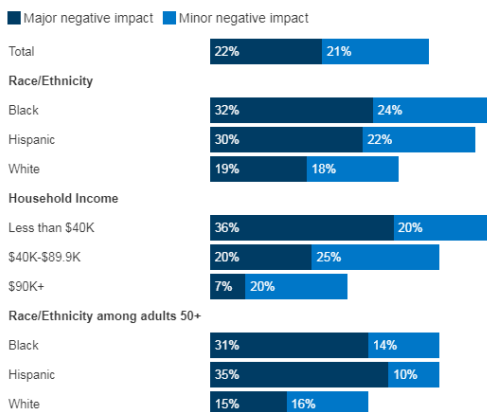
Forty-one percent say inflation is having a major impact on their household finances ([AP-NORC 12/2-12/7](#)). Three in 10 registered voters report “serious financial hardship” over the last six months ([Fox News 12/11-12/14](#)).

In November data, 43 percent said the pandemic had negatively impacted their ability to pay for necessities such as housing, utilities and food; 22 percent called it a major impact.

Black (56 percent) and Hispanic people (52 percent) were more apt than whites (37 percent) to report a negative impact ([KFF 11/8-11/22](#)).

Those With Lower Incomes, Black, Hispanic Adults More Likely To Report The COVID Pandemic Had A Negative Impact On Their Ability To Pay For Basic Necessities

Percent who say the coronavirus pandemic has had a major or minor negative impact on their ability to pay for basic necessities like housing, utilities and food:



NOTE: See topline for full question wording.
SOURCE: KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor (November 8-22, 2021) • [Download PNG](#)

KFF COVID-19
Vaccine Monitor

In October data, half of adults said the availability of affordable housing was a major problem in their community, higher among those with lower incomes ([Pew Research Center 10/18-10/24](#)).

About four in 10 say it’s very or somewhat difficult for them to pay their grocery bills; 37 percent, their mortgage or rent ([Monmouth 12/2-12/6](#)). Thirty-one percent call it very or somewhat difficult to pay for usual household expenses, up 4 points since August ([U.S. Census Bureau 12/1-12/13](#)).

Adapting to these challenges, anywhere from 29 to 39 percent report cutting back on dining expenses, non-essential shopping, driving and buying meat. Three in 10 say they’re delaying big purchases, price-hunting and drawing from savings more than usual. ([AP-NORC 12/2-12/7](#))

More in another poll say they’re driving less, 43 percent. A majority, 54 percent, changed what groceries they buy to stay within their budget; 39 percent changed the stores they buy from and 26 percent had difficulty finding affordable housing. Each (with the exception of changing stores) is 10 points higher among those with incomes less than \$50,000. ([CNN 12/8-12/12](#))

Seventy-nine percent of adults expect the cost of living to increase in the year ahead, similar to April 2021 results, but 18 points more than in December 2019 ([CNBC 12/1-12/4](#)).

Most Important Problem

Given seven economic issues, 36 percent of registered voters pick inflation as the biggest, vs. government spending and the deficit (16 percent) and income inequality (13 percent), with others in the single digits ([Fox News 12/11-12/14](#)). Given eight issues more broadly, essentially as many pick the cost of living as the top problem (22 percent) as cite the pandemic (23 percent)

([CNBC 12/1-12/4](#)). In an open-ended question about the biggest concern facing their family, three in 10 mention expenses or inflation ([Monmouth 12/2-12/6](#)).

Employment

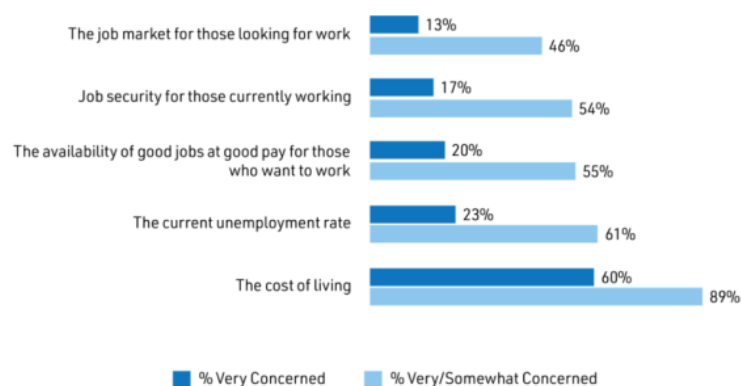
The unemployment rate fell 0.4 points to 4.2 percent in November, its lowest since March 2020, though still up from 3.5 percent in February 2020 ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 12/3](#)). An estimated 4.2 million people quit their jobs in October, down 205,000 from a high in September in data since December 2000. There were 11.0 million job openings. ([BLS 12/8](#))

Newly released 2020 data find that the “work-experience unemployment rate” – the share of people who were unemployed at some point during the year as a proportion of those who worked or looked for work – reached 15.7 percent that year, nearly doubling from 8.0 percent in 2019 to its highest since 2010. In all, 26.4 million people experienced unemployment at some point in 2020, up 12.9 million from 2019. The share of workers who worked full time, year round declined from 70.2 percent in 2019 to 63.1 percent. ([BLS 12/9](#))

Seventy-three percent of those employed or unemployed and looking said now’s a good time to find a quality job, a vast improvement from 28 percent in December 2020. Half of workers were extremely or very confident that if they lost or wanted to leave their current job they could find another as good or better, nearly double the share a year ago.

Accordingly, concern about the unemployment rate, job security and the job market has dropped since December 2020. Nonetheless, in November results, 61 percent of labor force participants were concerned about the employment rate; 55 percent, the availability of good jobs at good pay for those who want to work; 54 percent, job security for employed people; and 46 percent, the job market for those looking for work. Twenty-nine percent were concerned about their own job security, down from about four in 10 in December 2020 ([Rutgers Heldrich Center 11/19-11/21](#)). Fewer in another survey, 15 percent, were concerned about losing their job ([Fannie Mae 11/1-11/17](#)).

Figure 1. Concern about the U.S. Economy and Jobs, Labor Force, November 2021



Eighteen percent in October said the availability of jobs was a major problem in their community, down from 31 percent in March 2018. It was about twice as high among lower-income adults compared with others. ([Pew Research Center 10/18-10/24](#))

Asked the biggest reason for worker shortages, a third of registered voters select unemployment benefits and stimulus checks; 19 percent, concern about COVID-19; 17 percent, low wages; 16 percent, vaccine mandates; and 11 percent, changing lifestyles ([Fox News 12/11-12/14](#)).

Wages

Nearly two-thirds of private-sector workers were employed in industries in which the average weekly wage in the second quarter of 2021 was at least 5 percent higher than a year earlier, per an analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Biggest increases were in accommodation and food services, +18.4 percent after a 4.9-percent decrease the previous year; the information sector, including software and internet publishing (+12.3 percent); management of companies and enterprises (+12.0); finance and insurance (+9.8); wholesale trade (+8.5) and retail trade (+8.4). Wages decreased in the educational services sector (-1.0) and arts, entertainment and recreation (-6.9). ([Pew Research Center 12/22](#))

Thirty-seven percent of employed people expect their wages to increase in the next 12 months, up 10 points since April 2021 but still down from 49 percent two years ago ([CNBC 12/1-12/4](#)).

Employment factors

Fifty-five percent of employed people in October said having a child is an obstacle to opportunity for job advancement in their workplace. Roughly four in 10 said the same about opportunity for a raise, job security and their relationships with coworkers. Among people who ever have been employed, women and those under 30 were more apt to view having a child as an obstacle in the workplace. Seventeen percent delayed having a child based on the demands of their job.

Again among those who've ever been employed, two-thirds chose a job with a schedule that allowed them to manage their personal responsibilities and half said they spent less time at their job to focus on friends and family. Still, 52 percent said they spent less time with friends and family to focus on their job. ([UChicago Harris/AP-NORC 10/7-10/11](#))

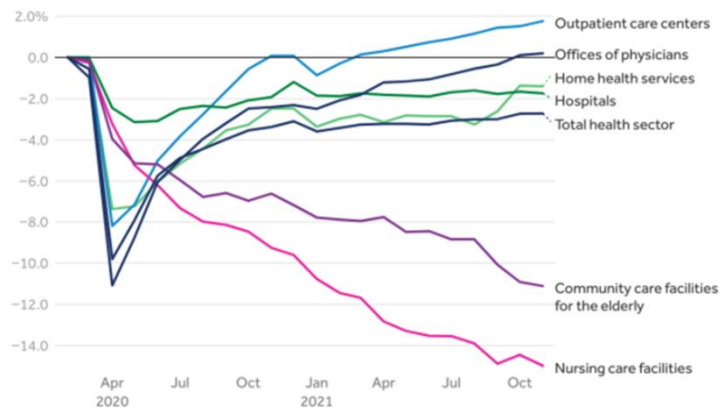
Among people working for pay, 59 percent in mid-November were working in person, 20 percent from home and 21 percent both. If left up to them, fewer would choose to work in person (30 percent) and more would opt for a hybrid model (48 percent). About one in four thought their work puts them at a great deal (13 percent) or a good amount (13 percent) of risk for coronavirus; that rises to 37 percent among those working in person. ([Marist 11/16-11/19](#))

Health sector employment

Health sector employment in November was 2.7 percent below pre-pandemic February 2020, based on preliminary data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Declines have been most prolonged among nursing care facilities, accelerating a previous trend. Job openings and quit rates increased in 2021, reflecting labor shortages rather than increased capacity.

Unemployment rates largely have returned to pre-pandemic levels for hospital workers. There's a gender gap for non-hospital health workers, who make up most of this sector. Unemployment was down among male health workers, from 3.5 percent in February 2020 to 2.9 percent. It was up among their female counterparts, from 2.3 to 3 percent. ([Peterson-KFF 12/10](#))

Cumulative % change in health sector employment by setting, since February 2020, seasonally adjusted



Note: Data for October and November 2021 are preliminary.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Employment Survey (CES)

Peterson-KFF
Health System Tracker

Gig platform work

A newly released analysis of August data finds that 16 percent of adults have earned money using an online gig platform, including 9 percent in the previous 12 months (defined as current or recent gig workers). About two-thirds in that group called it a side job. Six in 10 called the money essential (23 percent) or important (35 percent) for meeting their basic needs. Most cited needs to save more (56 percent) or cover gaps or changes in their income (52 percent).

About eight in 10 who've ever been a gig worker reported very (24 percent) or somewhat (55 percent) positive experiences. But nearly half said companies have been unfair when it came to their benefits. Thirty-six percent said the same about their pay; a quarter, about work assignments. ([Pew Research Center 8/23-8/29](#))

State-specific Results

Tennessee. Sixty-four percent of Tennessee registered voters rate the nation's economy negatively. That flips regarding the state's economy, 68 percent positive. Twenty-nine percent say the economy and jobs should be the state government's top priority, first in a list of seven items. ([Vanderbilt 11/16-12/6](#))

Texas. One in four Texans in November picked jobs or the economy as the top priority for Texas's next governor (third in a list of 11). One in 10 picked affordable housing ([Spectrum News-Ipsos 11/16-11/26](#)). In another measure, 11 percent of registered voters call the economy the most urgent issue for the state, second out of 12 items presented ([Quinnipiac 12/2-12/6](#)).

Government Action

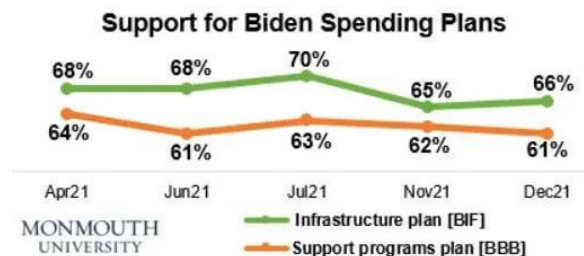
About seven in 10 say the U.S. government is doing too little to try to reduce inflation and disruptions in the nation’s supply chain alike. That’s twice as many as say the same about its efforts to control the spread of the coronavirus. ([CNN 12/8-12/12](#))

Sixty-two percent say they received a stimulus payment last year. Of them, eight in 10 were helped by it, 27 percent a lot. Seventeen percent report receiving the expanded child tax credit; again eight in 10 were helped by it, 15 percent a lot. ([NPR-Marist 11/30-12/6](#))

In newly released September-October data, 68 percent were pessimistic that the federal government would implement policies that “ensure all Americans will have equal access to quality healthcare services.” “American corporations and businesses” also were on the hook: Sixty-five percent said they have a lot of power to reduce healthcare costs, more than Congress (57 percent), Joe Biden (23 percent) or voters (11 percent). Forty-eight percent reported a worse view of the U.S. healthcare system as a result of COVID-19; 45 percent said the government was doing worse at controlling healthcare costs. ([West Health-Gallup 9/27-9/30; 10/18-10/21](#))

Infrastructure

Sixty-six percent in one poll and 56 percent in another support Biden’s infrastructure bill ([Monmouth 12/2-12/6](#); [NPR-Marist 11/30-12/6](#)). Sixty-nine percent are optimistic it will make progress toward improving roads and bridges, 53 percent that it’ll help create better paying jobs and 34 percent that it’ll make progress toward lowering inflation ([NPR-Marist 11/30-12/6](#)).



Social policy bill

Sixty-one percent support the Biden social policy bill now stalled in Congress, when it’s described as “a plan to expand access to healthcare and childcare, and provide paid leave and college tuition support” ([Monmouth 12/2-12/6](#)). Forty-one percent support it when it’s called the “Build Back Better bill” without elaboration ([NPR-Marist 11/30-12/6](#)). Twenty-eight percent call it a top priority for Congress; 33 percent say it’s important but with other more pressing matters ([Monmouth 12/2-12/6](#)).

Given another description – “President Biden’s proposed multi-trillion dollar social spending plan for programs such as health care, childcare and climate change” – 42 percent think it would hurt the economy, 36 percent help, 19 percent not make much difference. Forty-six percent think it’d increase inflation, 21 percent help reduce it, 28 percent not make much difference ([Fox News 12/11-12/14](#)). People divide on whether significantly reducing “the part of the bill that expands support programs” is a good or bad thing, 41-45 percent ([Monmouth 12/2-12/6](#)).