

January 2022

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 postsecondary education and economic mobility released in December 2021 and January 2022. This project is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Key Takeaways

Despite the Omicron surge, Americans broadly favor in-person learning in the nation's schools, with two-thirds saying learning losses are a bigger concern than coronavirus infection.

Recently released studies also find declines in trust in the “people running” education in the pandemic era and in ratings of teachers' honesty and ethics. Others note racial/ethnic inequities in teacher preparedness and high levels of job-related stress among school principals, particularly among women and principals of color.

Other studies on education show further declines in postsecondary enrollment, find lessened support for students' postsecondary transitions and examine attitudes toward free expression on campus among college students.

Surveys on economic mobility, for their part, find broadly negative ratings of the economy and substantial reports of financial hardship in the face of a 40-year high in inflation. New studies also examine changes in the labor force, impacts of school closures on work, trends in union membership and attitudes toward unemployment benefits as they relate to vaccine compliance.

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

K-12 Education

Pandemic Impacts and Response

Majorities prefer in-person K-12 learning even in the face of the Omicron surge. Sixty-six percent of Americans think it's safe for students to attend K-12 schools in person, two-thirds say children not going to school in person and falling behind is a bigger concern than the virus spreading as a result of their attending, and two-thirds of registered voters in late December opposed a shift to remote learning. ([Quinnipiac 1/7-1/10](#); [NBC News 1/14-1/18](#); [USA Today-Suffolk 12/27-12/30](#))

That's even though 63 percent of parents see sending their child to school/daycare as a large or moderate risk to the parents' health and well-being, similar to last August, during the Delta

surge. Twenty-two percent say their child’s school or childcare center closed fully or partly because of COVID-19 in the last few weeks. ([Axios-Ipsos 1/21-1/24](#))

There are broad gaps in risk perceptions among groups: While 28 percent overall think it’s unsafe for students to go to school, that rises to 58 percent of Black people and 48 percent of Democrats ([Quinnipiac 1/7-1/10](#)).

Given further options, most registered voters think their public schools should operate in-person as usual (28 percent) or with social distancing and masks (27 percent). Three in 10 favor a mix of in person and remote learning. Fourteen percent pick fully remote classes. Results are similar among parents. ([Fox News 1/16-1/19](#))

Equal shares of adults rate their community’s K-12 schools’ handling of COVID-19 positively and negatively, 33 percent, with the rest taking a midpoint option ([AP-NORC 1/13-1/18](#)). Half of parents trust what their child’s school has said about the coronavirus; 27 percent don’t, with the rest unaware or undecided ([NBC News 1/14-1/18](#)).

The Broader K-12 Picture

Confidence in “the people running” the institution of education fell from 26 percent in 2018 to 18 percent in 2021 ([GSS 12/1/20-5/3/21](#), analyzed by [AP-NORC 1/26](#)). Just 8 percent in early December said education was one of the three topics they find most worrying, ranking 12th in a list of eighteen items ([Ipsos 12/3-12/7](#)).

Fifty-two percent of registered voters think the Democrats would do a better job on education, while 45 percent pick the Republicans ([Fox News 1/16-1/19](#)). Among all adults, 39 percent agree with the Democratic Party on education policy, 31 percent with the Republican Party, 28 percent with neither ([Pew Research Center 1/10-1/17](#)).

Teachers

Two analyses of 2017-2018 data find that Black and Latino students were disproportionately learning from inexperienced teachers. Nationally, 15 percent of teachers were novice (first- and second-year) teachers at the schools serving the greatest percentages of Black students compared with 10 percent at the schools serving the smallest percentages of Black students ([Ed Trust 12/2021](#)). While this nationwide pattern didn’t exist for Latino students, the schools with the highest share of Latino students had more first-year teachers than the schools with the lowest share in 32 states ([Ed Trust 12/2021](#)).

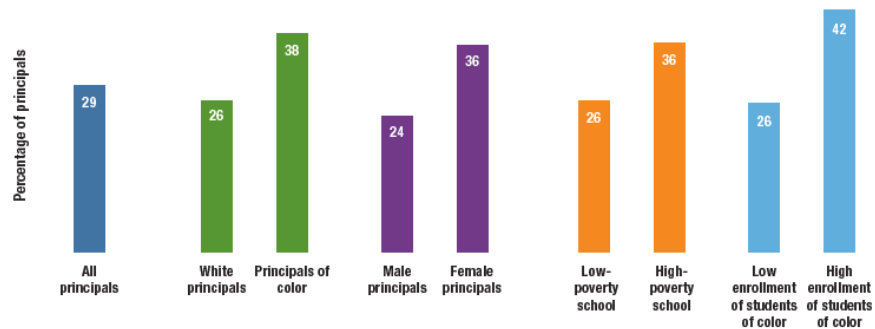
Sixty-four percent of adults in December rated the honesty and ethical standards of grade-school teachers as very high or high, down from 75 percent in 2020. Teachers still were third most apt to be seen as honest and ethical in a list of 22 professions, following only nurses and medical doctors. ([Gallup 12/1-12/16](#))

Principals

In recently released results, 83 percent of secondary school principals reported in March and April 2021 that their work always or often was stressful since the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. Across demographic groups, 75 to almost 90 percent said they experienced frequent job-related stress. Sixteen percent said they had difficulty coping with it.

Nearly 40 percent of women and principals of color experienced constant job-related stress, compared with about one in four men and white principals. Those who led schools with high enrollment of students of color, high-poverty schools and schools that went to fully remote learning also were more apt than their peers to report the highest degree of stress. ([RAND March-April 2021](#))

Percentage of Secondary Principals Who Reported Experiencing Constant Job-Related Stress One Year into the COVID-19 Pandemic



Critical Race Theory

On CRT, 47 percent in early December rejected a statement that “public schools are teaching children that all white people are racist, by teaching critical race theory.” Thirty-one percent agreed with it; two in 10 were unsure. Sixty-five percent of Republicans agreed, compared with 7 percent of Democrats and 28 percent of independents. ([Ipsos 12/3-12/7](#))

State Results

Texas. An extensive statewide survey of attitudes toward public education in Texas covers views on the role of public schools in their communities, school quality, pandemic impacts, challenges facing teachers, testing and more, among both public school parents and Texans overall.

Among other results, the share of Texas public school parents giving their community’s public schools an A or B grade is up 12 points in two years, to 68 percent, compared with 48 percent among non-parents. Public school teachers, for their part, get As or Bs from 76 percent of public school parents and 67 percent of all adults in the state.

Sixty-nine percent of Texans think public school teachers are undervalued in society today; 63 percent say salaries for their community’s teachers are too low. More trust teachers to make decisions that are in the best interests of public school students than trust school principals, the local school board, district administrators or state elected officials. ([Charles Butt Foundation 9/24-10/4](#))

In other recently released data from last fall, 56 percent of Texans with children age 12-17 said they would support a school vaccine requirement ([Episcopal Health Foundation 10/20-11/18](#)).

An analysis of Texas public school data from 1995-2018 found that the share of Hispanic teachers was associated with positive, albeit small, impacts on Hispanic elementary school students' reading and math standardized test scores, lower discipline rates and a lower eventual high school dropout rate. Researchers did not find clear impacts of teacher diversity on longer-term outcomes such as college enrollment and graduation. ([Urban Institute 1/11](#))

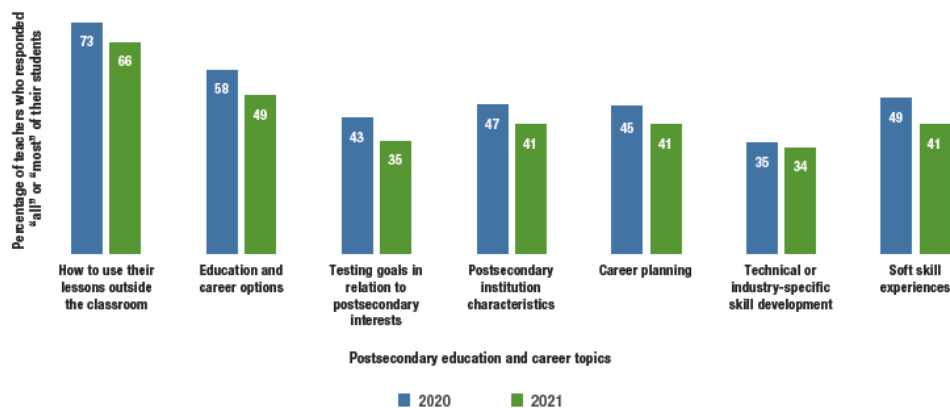
Early Learning

Texas. In recently released data from last fall, nine in 10 Texans overall and 94 percent of public school parents in the state supported their community's public schools offering pre-kindergarten for any student whose family wants it. This rose to the level of strong support among 44 of the general public and 53 percent of public school parents. ([Charles Butt Foundation 9/24-10/4](#))

Pathways

High school teachers were less apt to report discussing a variety of postsecondary education and career topics with students during the 2020-2021 school year than in 2019-2020. Fewer reported discussing education and career options with all or most of their students (49 percent, down from 58 percent), postsecondary institution characteristics (41 vs. 47 percent) and career planning (41 vs. 45 percent).

Postsecondary Education and Career Topics That Teachers Discussed with All or Most of Their Students in Spring 2020 and Spring 2021



NOTE: The results in this figure are based on teachers' responses to the following survey question: "During the current school year (2020-2021), how many students have you talked with about the following education and career topics?" For the 2020 LTS, the question instead refers to the 2019-2020 school year. For each topic, respondents could indicate "all of my students," "most of my students," "some of my students," "none of my students," or "[I did] not have access to information/resources to share" (2020: n = 2,273; 2021: n = 2,123). For each topic, the differences between 2020 and 2021 results were statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, except for in the technical or industry-specific skill development category.

Eighty-four percent of high school principals reported that almost all students in their schools received help preparing for postsecondary education and careers, but the reported sufficiency of that help was lower, and varied. Sixty-nine percent of principals said almost all high-achieving students received sufficient supports, compared with 54 percent for at-risk students and 49 percent for underachieving students. Sixty-seven percent said almost all students with disabilities received sufficient supports, 57 percent for students of color and 56 percent for low-income

students. Principals were least apt to think almost all students who did not ask for supports received sufficient help to meet their needs for a successful transition to postsecondary education and careers, 39 percent.

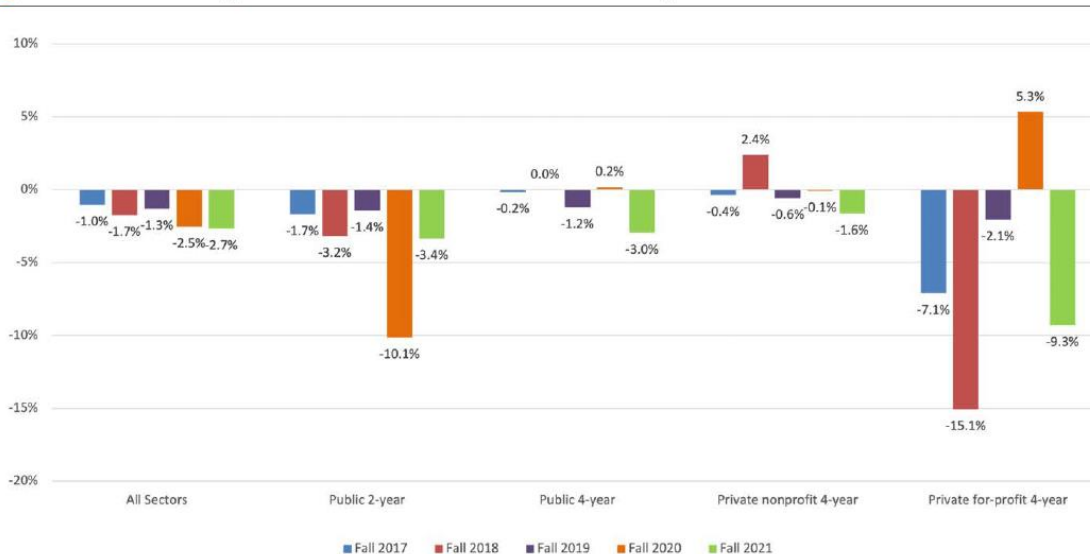
Of 11 barriers, principals were most apt to see lack of student motivation and inadequate family engagement as top items in preventing every student in their school from receiving sufficient supports for a successful postsecondary transition. ([RAND March-April 2021](#))

A longitudinal study of the high school class of 2013 finds college attendance related to perceptions of affordability. Among students who in 2012 thought their family could afford to send them to college, 58 percent were enrolled in college three years later, compared with 38 percent of students who thought their family could not afford to send them. Attending college or trade school within three years of high school peaked at 90 percent among those who believed their family could afford college and had at least one parent with a bachelor’s or other college degree. It was 55 percent among those who thought their family could not afford college and whose parent(s) had a high school diploma or less. ([NCES 1/12](#))

Postsecondary Success

In households with an adult who’d planned to take postsecondary classes this term, 18 percent canceled their plans and 12 percent were taking fewer classes than planned ([U.S. Census Bureau 12/29-1/10](#)).

Figure 1. Percent Change in Total Enrollment from Previous Year by Institutional Sector: 2017 to 2021



Higher education enrollment fell 2.7 percent (or 476,100 students) in fall 2021, after a 2.5 percent drop in fall 2020, resulting in a two-year decrease of 5.1 percent (937,500 students). Undergraduate enrollment alone fell by 3.1 percent (465,300 students) in 2021, with a two-year decline of 6.6 percent (1,025,600 students).

Declines in fall 2021 occurred across college types, but community college enrollment was down 3.4 percent (161,800 students), while graduate enrollment was down less than half a percent (10,800 students). ([NSCRC 1/13](#))

Postsecondary transfer enrollment declined less than 1 percent (11,300 students) in fall 2021 after a 9.2 percent drop (137,000 students) in fall 2020. Transfers were up 2.3 percent among continuing students (19,300 students) but down 5.8 percent (30,600 students) among those returning from an interruption in enrollment. ([NSCRC 1/19](#))

A recently released study fielded last summer explored attitudes toward free expression among college students. Of the two options provided, 59 percent said it's more important for colleges to "allow students to be exposed to all types of speech even if they may find it offensive or biased" while 22 percent said it's more important to "protect students by prohibiting speech they may find offensive or biased." Black and Hispanic students were more likely than white students to want to protect students by prohibiting certain speech.

Six in 10 students supported creating campus "safe spaces" (zones designed to be free of threatening speech, concepts or actions). Opinions were mixed on rules restricting potentially offensive or biased speech on campus, 33-36 percent, support-oppose, with the rest unsure. At the same time, two-thirds said colleges should be able to restrict people from using racial slurs against people of color on campus.

Majorities said colleges should not be able to restrict students from several other forms of speech on campus: displaying a poster expressing support for a presidential candidate (72 percent), passing out pamphlets with a Christian message (66 percent), expressing political views that are upsetting or offensive to certain groups (60 percent) or students starting a group supporting gun ownership rights (59 percent). Students also were more apt to think colleges should not be able to restrict students from wearing clothing that displays the Confederate flag on campus, 42-34 percent, with the rest undecided.

More opposed than supported disinviting speakers whose message is perceived to be offensive or biased against certain groups, 45-25 percent. Fifty-three percent agreed that "a university disinviting a speaker to speak on campus because of their views is depriving people of their rights to free expression"; 42 percent disagreed.

A majority, 65 percent, agreed that "the climate at [their] school or on [their] campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find it offensive." Nearly half, 48 percent, felt comfortable disagreeing with ideas expressed by an instructor or other students in class.

Thirty-four percent reported having felt uncomfortable on campus because of something someone said in reference to their race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation, whether or not it was directed at them. Seventeen percent felt unsafe for the same reason. One in five

Black and Hispanic students alike said they'd felt unsafe on campus because of a comment about their identity, as did 14 percent of white students. ([Knight Foundation 7/30-8/16](#))

State Results

California. Applications to the University of California for fall 2021 first-year admission hit a record 128,128, up 13 percent from 2020. The incoming class had a record proportion of students from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, 43 percent. At the same time, new first-year students at California State University campuses dropped 5 percent. Students from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups made up 64 percent of all Californians enrolled at CSU.

Both these university systems initiated new admissions policies, allowing non-letter grades to satisfy A-G requirements during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years and ceasing (UC) or suspending (USC) the use of ACT/SAT scores in admissions decisions ([PPIC 1/5](#)).

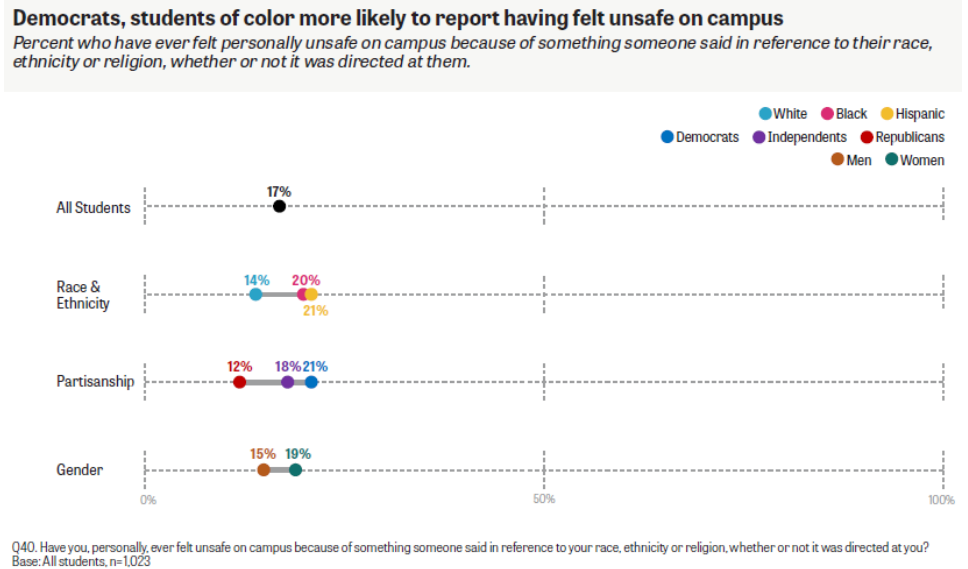
Economic Mobility

On the economic front, negative ratings of the economy or economic conditions ranged from 70 to 77 percent in January ([ABC/Ipsos 1/28-1/29](#); [Fox News 1/16-1/19](#), among registered voters; [Gallup 1/3-1/16](#); [Pew 1/10-1/17](#); [Quinnipiac 1/7-1/10](#)). Sixty-five percent think the economy's on the wrong track, about double the number in February 2020 ([Fannie Mae 12/1-12/17](#)).

Majorities think the economy's getting worse ([Gallup 1/3-1/16](#); [Quinnipiac 1/7-1/10](#)), but this drops to 35 percent thinking about a year from now. About as many (37 percent) think things will be about the same, 27 percent, better ([Pew 1/10-1/17](#)).

The public splits on whether economic growth will go up or down in the next six months, 40-39 percent ([Gallup 1/3-1/16](#)). Twenty-three percent of registered voters think the economy's in a recession, 16 percent a depression and 36 percent stagnation. Twenty-three percent think it's in an economic recovery. ([USA Today-Suffolk 12/27-12/30](#))

Seventy-one percent are very or somewhat worried that restrictions aimed at stopping the spread of Omicron will hurt businesses in their area. Compared with previous surges, 56 percent are more worried about the potential impact of the current outbreak on the U.S. economy, vs. 38 percent less worried. ([KFF 1/11-1/23](#))



Forty-two percent are extremely or very concerned about the economy collapsing during the pandemic; one-third, about mask or vaccine requirements negatively impacting the economy ([Axios-Ipsos 1/21-1/24](#)). Sixty-nine percent think the pandemic is a major threat to the U.S. economy. Thirty-two percent call it a major threat to their personal financial situation ([Pew 1/10-1/17](#)).

Financial Situation

Forty-nine percent of registered voters say their personal financial situation is excellent or good, up from 42 percent in December ([Fox News 1/16-1/19](#)). Forty-three percent of all adults in December expected their personal financial situation to get better in the next 12 months, 34 percent the same, 22 percent worse ([Fannie Mae 12/1-12/17](#)).

Forty-nine percent say rising prices have caused financial hardship for their household, 9 percent severe hardship. This is a slight increase from November, when 45 percent reported hardship. It's two-thirds among those with annual household incomes

About Half in U.S. Say Rising Prices Causing Financial Hardship

Have recent price increases caused any financial hardship for you or your household? // (If yes:) Is that a severe hardship that affects your ability to maintain your current standard of living, or is it a moderate hardship that affects you somewhat but does not jeopardize your current standard of living?

	Severe hardship	Moderate hardship	No hardship
	%	%	%
U.S. adults	9	40	50
Annual household income:			
Less than \$40,000	20	46	33
\$40,000 to \$99,999	9	47	44
\$100,000 or more	3	29	68

Based on a Jan. 3-13 Gallup Panel web survey of U.S. adults; percentage for no opinion not shown

GALLUP

less than \$40,000, 56 percent of those with incomes of \$40,000-\$99,999 and 32 percent of those with incomes of \$100,000 or higher. ([Gallup 1/3-1/13](#))

Six in 10 say their family's income is falling behind the cost of living ([NBC News 1/14-1/18](#)). Thirty-one percent overall say it's been very (13 percent) or somewhat (18 percent) difficult to pay for household expenses in the last seven days.

Seventeen percent report that their household experienced a loss of employment income in the past four weeks ([U.S. Census Bureau 12/29-1/10](#)). Seventeen percent also reported significantly lower household incomes than 12 months ago, a numerical high since April ([Fannie Mae 12/1-12/17](#)).

Inflation/Expenses

With consumer prices up 7.0 percent in 2021 ([BLS 1/12](#)) – their largest 12-month increase in nearly 40 years – 85 percent of registered voters say they're extremely or very concerned about inflation and higher prices ([Fox News 1/16-1/19](#)). Seventy-one percent said inflation concerned them more than jobs, 24 percent ([USA Today-Suffolk 12/27-12/30](#)).

Large majorities say prices for food and consumer goods (89 percent), gas prices (82 percent) and housing (79 percent) are worse than they were a year ago; half or more say they're a lot worse ([Pew 1/10-1/17](#)). Eight in 10 think inflation will rise further in the next six months, with half expecting it to go up a lot. Seventy-eight percent think interest rates will go up, while 46 percent say the same of the stock market ([Gallup 1/3-1/16](#)).

A plurality of registered voters, 43 percent, expect inflation and rising prices to continue to be a major issue for more than a year ([Fox News 1/16-1/19](#)).

Similar to last month, 63 percent of Americans are extremely or very concerned about the cost of food and basic household goods rising ([Axios-Ipsos 1/21-1/24](#)). Thirty-four percent alike say the prices of groceries and gasoline have had the biggest impact on them personally, 15 percent housing and 10 percent health care ([NBC News 1/14-1/18](#)).

Half say inflation is causing them to save less for unexpected expenses. To pay for an unplanned \$1,000 expense, 44 percent say they'd use their savings, a numerical high in eight years of data and up from 39 percent last year. About one-third would borrow money from a credit card (20 percent), family or friends (10 percent) or a personal loan (4 percent). An additional 15 percent would cut other spending. ([Bankrate 1/4-1/9](#))

Most Important Problem

Twenty-eight percent say rising prices because of inflation is the biggest problem facing the United States, second only to the pandemic in a list of six items ([KFF 1/11-1/23](#)). In another poll, 23 percent say jobs and the economy is the most important issue facing the country, most-cited in a list of eight items and up from 13 percent in August. An additional 13 percent pick the cost of living, ranking fourth ([NBC News 1/14-1/18](#)).

Employment

Unemployment fell 2.8 percentage points in 2021 to 3.9 percent, approaching its pre-pandemic level of 3.5 percent. Job growth averaged 537,000 per month and average hourly earnings increased by 4.7 percent during the year. ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 1/7](#))

Four and a half million workers quit their jobs in November, a high in 22 years of data. There were 10.6 million job openings at the end of the month, down from 11.1 million in October, but well above 6.8 million in November 2020 ([BLS 1/4](#)). The labor force participation rate in December was 1.5 points lower than in February 2020 ([BLS 1/7](#)).

Seventy-two percent say now's a good time to find a quality job, near its peak of 74 percent in October ([Gallup 1/3-1/16](#)). Fifty-six percent say the availability of jobs has improved compared to a year ago ([Pew 1/10-1/17](#)). Among employed people, one in 10 says they're currently looking for another place of employment and 39 percent are open to a new opportunity but not looking ([Ipsos 1/7-1/11](#)). Twenty-two percent of adults say they changed to a better job during the pandemic; 13 percent quit their job ([NBC News 1/14-1/18](#)).

Forty-three percent expect unemployment to go down over the next six months; 34 percent think it'll go up ([Gallup 1/3-1/16](#)).

Comparing Q3 2021 to Q3 2019, the number of women age 25 and older in the labor force fell 1.3 percent; the number of men was down a similar 1.1 percent. The decrease

was larger among women than men among those without a high school diploma, 12.8 vs. 4.9 percent, as well as among high school graduates with no college education, 6.0 vs. 1.8 percent. There wasn't a significant disparity in labor force decline among those with some college but no bachelor's degree, down 3.8 percent among women and 4.7 percent among men. There were positive gains among both women and men with at least a bachelor's degree, 3.9 and 2.7 percent, respectively. ([Pew 1/14](#))

Among adults in households with children younger than five, 13 percent report that an adult in the household cut work hours in order to care for children in the last four weeks. Thirteen percent also say an adult in the household used paid leave in order to care for children; 11 percent used unpaid leave. Six percent report an adult in the household leaving a job in order to care for children in the last four weeks and 2 percent lost a job because of time away to care for children. ([U.S. Census Bureau 12/29-1/10](#))

A recent analysis finds that school closures had significant impacts on the number of hours parents worked per week and whether or not they worked full time (defined as 35+ hours). Effects were concentrated among parents without college degrees. ([NBER January 2022](#))

Another analysis found K-12 school reopenings associated with a significant increase in employment and a small increase in work hours among married women with school-aged children (especially those with older school-aged children), but not among unmarried mothers, women without children or married custodial fathers ([NBER January 2022](#)).

The number of wage and salary workers belonging to unions decreased by 241,000 to 14 million in 2021. The union membership rate was 10.3 percent, the same as in 2019. (It's down from 10.8 percent in 2020, when the rate ticked up due to a disproportionately large drop in the total number of nonunion workers compared with the decrease in the number of union members.) The highest union membership rates in 2021 were in education, training and library occupations (34.6 percent) and protective service occupations (33.3 percent). Rates were lowest in food preparation and serving-related occupations (3.1 percent) and sales and related occupations (3.3 percent). ([BLS 1/20](#))

Job-related Attitudes



Eight in 10 Americans support requiring employers to provide paid sick leave/family medical leave to cover their employees' time off because of COVID-19, including 43 percent who strongly support this ([Axios-Ipsos 1/7-1/10](#)).

Results differ on unemployment benefits in terms of COVID-19 vaccine compliance. In one poll, 57 percent oppose providing unemployment benefits for people who lose their job for not complying with COVID-19 vaccination requirements ([Axios-Ipsos 1/7-1/10](#)). In another, fewer, 37 percent think people should not be eligible for unemployment benefits if they lose or quit a job over vaccine mandates ([Quinnipiac 1/7-1/10](#)).

Among employed people, 64 percent are working outside the home, 14 percent from home and 22 percent a combination of both. Thirty-six percent are worried they'll have to miss work due to a coronavirus infection ([KFF 1/11-1/23](#)). Fifty-six percent of workers see working indoors in an office as a large or moderate risk to their health and well-being, up from four in 10 in mid-December ([Axios-Ipsos 1/21-1/24](#)).

State Results

Texas. About half of Texans last fall said the pandemic had caused their household financial hardship, rising to "severe" hardship for 16 percent. Hispanic adults and those with lower incomes were more likely to report financial hardship. ([Episcopal Health Foundation 10/20-11/18](#))

Government Action

A majority, 61 percent, support the plan "still being considered by Congress [that] would expand access to healthcare and childcare, and provide paid leave and college tuition support." Fewer, one in four, call it a top priority. Results were similar in December. ([Monmouth 1/20-1/24](#))

By contrast, in a question that doesn't describe its proposed elements, the public divides evenly on "Build Back Better." Just 34 percent say the bill would help the country as a whole and fewer, 23 percent, say it would help them or their own family. More say free universal pre-kindergarten (59 percent) and four weeks of paid family or medical leave (53 percent) would help the country. Fewer think these would help them or their own family, 26 and 41 percent, respectively.

More think BBB would increase inflation (46 percent) than decrease it (8 percent). A plurality (47 percent) say they don't know much or anything about what's in the plan. ([Politico-HSPH 1/4-1/9](#))

In late December, 34 percent of registered voters thought Biden should keep fighting for the "\$2 trillion Build Back Better legislation for social spending programs and climate initiatives." Twenty-one percent said he should try to scale it back further; 38 percent, move on. ([USA Today-Suffolk 12/27-12/30](#))