

October 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 September to late October 2021. This project is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Key Takeaways

Education

Reading and math scores among 13-year-olds fell in fall/winter 2019 assessments compared with 2012, the first drop in almost 50 years of long-term assessment data. Recreational reading declined as well, as did the prevalence of home computers for nine-year-olds.

The pandemic has added to learning challenges: A majority of K-12 parents express concern that their child has fallen behind because of the pandemic – and among them, most think that catching up on those losses will be difficult.

Other COVID-19 worries pertaining to education persist: Half of parents of children younger than 18 see sending their children to school as a large or moderate risk to their own health and well-being. Yet vaccine hesitancy among parents is substantial.

In other education-related studies this month, 73 percent of Americans call improving public education very important in maintaining U.S. global influence. And six in 10 Americans say Congress should prioritize federal funding for two goals: establishing pre-kindergarten for all three- and four-year-olds and making community college tuition-free for two years.

Economic Mobility

On economic mobility, Americans' ratings of their personal finances and the buying climate have fallen to hit eight-month lows in weekly data, with consumer sentiment overall sustaining its second-steepest 8-week drop in nearly 36 years of data. Thirty-nine percent of registered voters report falling behind financially, 28 percent think that living on their savings would send them into additional debt within a month. Still, in a positive sign, a record 74 percent overall think now's a good time to find a quality job.

Two-thirds say they've been helped in the past few months by federal and state government programs providing financial assistance. About three-quarters say it's highly important for the federal government to address jobs and unemployment; as many say that the government should

be doing more to help Americans in general. As things stand, nearly four in 10 report serious personal financial problems and as many have no savings to fall back on.

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

K-12 Education

Based on pre-pandemic data, the National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that 13-year-olds' reading and math scores declined from 2012 to 2020, a first in data since the early 1970s. There was no significant change in 9-year-olds' scores. (Assessments were administered to 13-year-olds from October to December 2019 and to 9-year-olds from January to March 2020.)

Fewer 9- and 13-year-olds than in 2012 said they read for fun almost every day, with a wide gap between the age groups – 42 and 17 percent, respectively. Nine-year-olds also were less apt to say they have a computer at home that they use, 74 percent, compared with 88 percent eight years earlier. ([NAEP 10/14](#))

Pandemic Effects on Learning

U.S. Census data indicate that homeschooling rates in fall 2020 increased more in states where more students were offered in-person or hybrid learning. Homeschooling rates also rose more among Black households and those with incomes lower than \$50,000. ([NBER September 2021](#))

An analysis of data from 11 school districts found that, in all but one, increases in chronic absenteeism in the 2020-21 school year were higher among English learners than among the overall student population ([The 74 9/30](#)).

The number of adults saying their local district closed schools in the previous few weeks because of a COVID-19 outbreak eased slightly, from 14 percent in early October to one in 10 at the end of the month ([Axios-Ipsos 10/8-10/11 and 10/22-10/25](#)).

Eleven percent of parents of children younger than 18 see sending them to school as a large risk to their own health and well-being; an additional 38 percent think it's a moderate risk. Thirty-seven percent say it's a small risk; 14 percent see no risk. ([Axios-Ipsos 10/22-10/25](#))

As far as the children's risk, one-third of those with K-12 students in their household think their children are not too (25 percent) or not at all safe (8 percent) from getting COVID-19 at school. Just 15 percent think they're very safe; a plurality, 52 percent, think they're somewhat safe. (This question was only asked of those who planned to send their children to school in person.)

Of those who had K-12 children in their household last year (2020-2021), four in 10 said they attended school in person for most of the school year; most, six in 10, did not. Fifty-two percent say the quality of the education children in their household received last year was only fair or poor; 47 percent, excellent or good.

Sixty-nine percent say children in their household fell behind in their learning because of the pandemic. That includes 36 percent who think their children fell behind a lot; 33 percent, a little. Just three in 10 said their children didn't fall behind.

Among those whose children fell behind (and will be in school this year), seven in 10 think it will be very (14 percent) or somewhat (56 percent) difficult for them to catch up on education losses from last year. ([NPR-RWJF-HSPH 8/2-9/7](#))

Masks in Schools

Support for local school districts requiring everyone in schools to wear masks has eased from 70 percent in late August and mid-September to 65 percent in early October. Forty-seven percent strongly support such a mandate while 21 percent strongly oppose it. ([Axios-Ipsos 10/8-10/11](#))

Vaccination

Fifty-six percent think K-12 schools should require teachers and other staff to get vaccinated for COVID-19 unless they have a medical exemption; 42 percent say not ([KFF 10/14-10/24](#)).

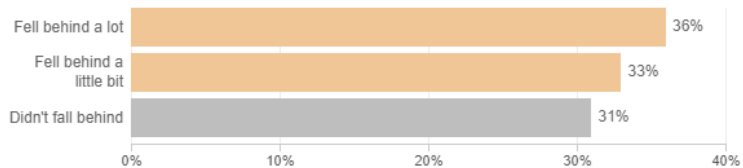
For students, support for vaccine mandates range from 44 to 54 percent, similar to the range in results reported [last month](#), with question wording a likely factor ([KFF 10/14-10/24](#); [Politico-HSPH 9/28-10/3](#); [Quinnipiac 10/1-10/4](#)).

Eight percent reported having gone to a public meeting or demonstration, contacted any school official or other public official or written an op-ed/letter to the editor to express their views about school vaccine mandates ([Politico-HSPH 9/28-10/3](#)).

Thirty-one percent of parents of 12- to 17-year-olds rule out getting them vaccinated, a 10-point increase since September. Among the rest, half of say their child has been vaccinated (46 percent) or they'll get them vaccinated right away (4 percent), 11 percent plan to wait and see and 5 percent say they'll act only if their school requires it. Hesitancy is higher among white parents (42 percent rule it out for their child) vs. parents in racial and ethnic minority groups (among whom 13 percent take that position).

For children 5-11, again three in 10 parents rule out vaccination. Twenty-seven percent plan to act right away once a vaccine is authorized and available, a third plan to wait and see and 5 percent await a school requirement. (This question was asked before an FDA advisory panel recommended authorization of the Pfizer vaccine for this age group.) ([KFF 10/14-10/24](#))

A majority of households with school-age children say that their kids have fallen behind in school because of the pandemic



Notes

Respondents were asked: Last school year, do you think any children in your household fell behind in their learning because of the COVID-19 outbreak, or not? If yes, do you think they fell behind a lot or a little bit?

Source: NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health poll of 3,616 adults, including 701 adults with children in K-12 last school year, conducted Aug. 2-Sept. 7.

Credit: Daniel Wood/NPR

In a poll without a wait-and-see option, 45 percent of parents of children younger than 12 say they won't have their child vaccinated once it's approved for their age group. Intention to have their child vaccinated ranges from seven in 10 parents with college degrees to 44 percent of those without a degree. It's nine in 10 among Democrats, 48 percent among independents and 19 percent among Republicans. ([Gallup 10/18-10/24](#))

The Broader K-12 Picture

In a newly released study from July, 73 percent rated improving public education as very important to the United States remaining influential on the global stage, numerically topping 12 items. An additional 22 percent called it somewhat important. ([Chicago Council 7/7-7/26](#))

A broad 82 percent have high or medium trust in public school teachers to offer good ideas to solve problems affecting their community; 15 percent have low trust. (Fewer, two-thirds, have high or medium trust in college professors.) ([Grinnell-Selzer 10/13-10/17](#)) Seventy-seven percent think teachers are underappreciated ([Quinnipiac 10/15-10/18](#)). One in 10 says education is one of three topics (of 17 listed) that they find "the most worrying" ([Axios-Ipsos 10/14-10/20](#)).

Seventy-three percent of registered voters express concern about "what's taught in public schools." Given "major problem," "minor problem," "not a problem" options, 63 percent call school administrators "pushing a political agenda" a major problem; 57 percent say the same for threats of violence against public school officials, as do 54 percent for "parents aggressively pushing a political agenda at school boards." It's 49 percent for "too much of a focus on race in schools," 47 percent for parents not having enough say over what is taught and 44 percent for "overly accommodating transgender policies." Alternative propositions were not offered.

In a question noting that the National School Boards Association has asked the U.S. Justice Department to investigate threats of violence from parents, 53 percent say school boards truly need extra protection from real threats while 40 percent say school boards are trying to stop parents from opposing their policies. Parents are 10 percentage points more apt to think school boards truly need protection, 63 percent. ([Fox News 10/16-10/19](#))

On another topic, 62 percent of Americans think teaching firearm safety in schools would have an impact on reducing gun violence and violent crime in the United States. Two in 10 think this would have no impact; 17 percent are unsure. ([Axios-Ipsos 10/14-10/20](#))

State Results

Texas. An analysis found that students at Texas schools without mask mandates this school year were more apt than students at schools with mask mandates to test positive for the coronavirus, 2.93 vs. 1.89 percent. It relied on Texas Department of State Health Services COVID-19 case data and a list from the state attorney general of public entities requiring masks. ([The Texan 10/7](#))

Early Learning

A majority, six in 10, said providing federal funding to establish pre-kindergarten for all 3- and 4-year-olds should be an extremely important (17 percent) or very important (43 percent) priority for the government in the spending bills before Congress. Twenty-three percent said it shouldn't be too important of a priority; 17 percent, not a priority. ([Politico-HSPH 9/14-9/19](#))

Post-secondary Success

Six in 10 also said providing federal funding to make community college tuition-free for two years should be an extremely or very important priority. Democrats were 30 points more apt than Republicans to call this highly important, 79 vs. 49 percent; it was 56 percent among independents. ([Politico-HSPH 9/14-9/19](#))

Adults split, 50-47 percent, on whether colleges and universities should require students to get vaccinated for COVID-19 unless they have a medical exemption. Support has declined from 55 percent in September. ([KFF 10/14-10/24](#))

Economic Mobility

The national economy or economic conditions are rated negatively by three-quarters of the public in three surveys and 57 percent in a fourth ([Gallup 10/1-10/19](#); [Quinnipiac 10/15-10/18](#); [Fox News 10/16-10/19](#); [Consumer Comfort Index 9/28-10/24](#)). In one, 55 percent think the economy is getting worse, up 21 points from mid-April; in another, it's 38 percent ([Quinnipiac 10/15-10/18](#); [Consumer Comfort Index 9/28-10/24](#)). Given the options of better or worse (not "staying about the same"), 68 percent think the economy's getting worse ([Gallup 10/1-10/19](#)). Fifty-eight percent in September said the economy was on the wrong track ([Fannie Mae 9/1-9/26](#)).

Fifty-two percent expect the overall strength of the U.S. economy to worsen in the next 12 months, while 36 percent expect it to be better ([Grinnell-Selzer 10/13-10/17](#)).

Half of adults in July saw "reducing economic inequality at home" as very important to the U.S. remaining influential on the global stage. An additional three in 10 said it's somewhat important. ([Chicago Council 7/7-7/26](#))

Financial Situation

About six in 10 Americans rate their personal finances as excellent or good ([NPR-RWJF-HSPH 8/2-9/7](#); [Consumer Comfort Index 9/28-10/24](#)). Using "very" or "somewhat" good, it's about three-quarters ([Axios-Ipsos 10/22-10/25](#)).

Fewer, 40 percent, say it's an excellent or good time to buy things. Personal finance and buying climate ratings both are at eight-month lows ([Consumer Comfort Index 9/28-10/24](#)).

A third say they're worse off now than before the pandemic (23 percent a little worse and 9 percent a lot worse). Nineteen percent are better off; half, about the same ([NPR-RWJF-HSPH 8/2-9/7](#)). Still, by 2-1, Americans are more optimistic than pessimistic about their financial

future, 65 vs. 29 percent. Optimism, though, is down 10 points since late March 2019. ([Quinnipiac 10/15-10/18](#))

In another survey, more also think their personal financial situation will improve rather than worsen in the next year, 40 vs. 18 percent. Again, optimism is down 11 points from pre-pandemic. ([Fannie Mae 9/1-9/26](#))

That said, almost three times as many registered voters say they're falling behind financially (39 percent) as say they're getting ahead (14 percent) ([Fox News 10/16-10/19](#)).

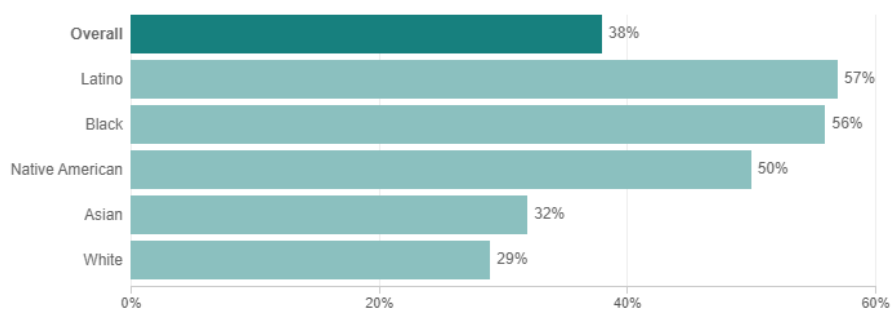
In data mostly from August, 38 percent reported serious financial problems in the previous few months, including paying credit card bills, loans or other debt (22 percent); affording medical care (17 percent); paying for utilities such as gas or electricity (16 percent); paying for food or their rent or mortgage (14 percent each) and making car payments (11 percent). Eighteen percent had other serious financial problems.

Such problems peaked at 59 percent of people with annual household incomes less than \$50,000, vs. 18 percent of those with higher incomes. They also were higher among Black, Hispanic and Native American people.

Thirty-eight percent said they didn't have any savings to fall back on. Half of them did have savings before the pandemic, half not.

([NPR-RWJF-HSPH 8/2-9/7](#))

Serious financial problems plague U.S. households, especially among Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans



Notes

Respondents were asked whether anyone in their household had been having serious problems a) paying the mortgage/rent, b) paying for utilities, c) making car payments, d) affording medical care, e) paying credit cards/loans/other debt or f) affording food or had g) other serious financial problems in the past few months.

Source: NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health poll of 3,616 adults conducted Aug. 2-Sept. 7. The margin of error for the overall sample is 3.4 percentage points.

Credit: Connie Hanzhang Jin/NPR

In data collected last March to June, 19 percent of adults 65 and older reported using up all or most of their savings or losing their job or source of income because of the pandemic. That rose to 39 percent among Hispanics and 32 percent among Black seniors, compared with 14 percent of whites. ([Commonwealth Fund 3/1-6/14](#))

About six in 10 registered voters say they could live on their savings for six months or less without going into additional debt – 28 percent for up to one month, two in 10 for two to three months and 13 percent for four to six months ([Fox News 10/16-10/19](#)).

Among registered voters age 25 and older, 63 percent are very (24 percent) or somewhat (39 percent) anxious about having enough money to live comfortably through their retirement years.

Six in 10 (excluding retirees) say they are behind schedule when it comes to planning and saving for retirement, with 9 percent ahead of schedule and the rest on track. Seventy-four percent of those with household incomes less than \$50,000 are behind, dropping to 36 percent of those with \$100,000-plus incomes. ([AARP 9/22-9/29](#))

Prices in September grew 0.4 percent, up 5.4 percent the last 12 months ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 10/13](#)). Inflation/higher prices again tops a list of concerns among registered voters, with 87 percent extremely or very concerned, 5 points higher than last month. A broad 83 percent say their bills for groceries and everyday items have increased; 43 percent, a lot. Half call rising gas prices a major problem for them and their family. ([Fox News 10/16-10/19](#))

A recently released study from November 2020 found that those who reported housing insecurity had higher psychological distress and lower self-rated health than those with housing security. Twelve percent overall reported housing insecurity. ([Linton et al. 9/30](#))

Two in 10 adults with at least one child in their household said they'd experienced serious problems getting childcare in the previous few months when they or someone else in their household needed to work. It was 34 percent among those with a child younger than five. ([NPR-RWJF-HSPH 8/2-9/7](#))

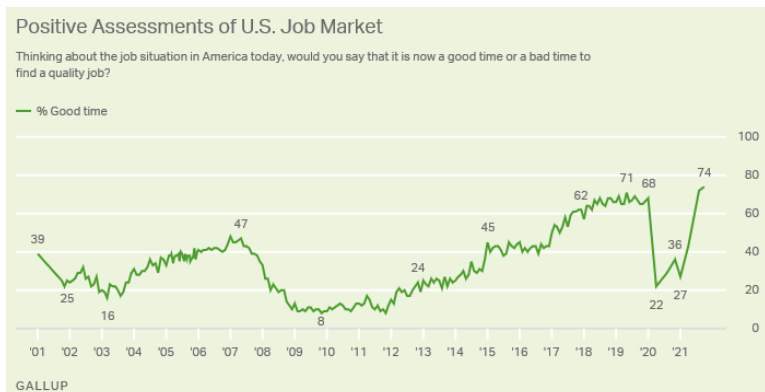
Three in 10 of those with children younger than five said their child was unable to attend daycare or another childcare arrangement in the past four weeks because it was closed, unavailable, unaffordable or because they were concerned about their child's safety in care. Among them, about a quarter say they or someone in their household took unpaid leave (25 percent) or cut work hours (27 percent) to care for their children, and 16 percent apiece either left a job or did not look for a job in order to provide care. Six percent say they lost their job because of time away to care for children. ([U.S. Census Bureau 9/29-10/11](#))

In mostly August data, two-thirds said they've been helped in the previous few months by federal and state government programs providing financial assistance including stimulus payments, expanded unemployment benefits, grants, loans and other types of financial assistance. Twenty-three percent overall said they've been helped a lot, while 44 percent said they've been helped a little. ([NPR-RWJF-HSPH 8/2-9/7](#))

Employment

Seventy-four percent think now's a good time to find a quality job, a record in nearly 21 years of data. It's 79 percent among college graduates and 69 percent among those with a high school education or less. ([Gallup 10/1-10/19](#))

Still, 56 percent of employed adults (full- or part-time) in late



September/early October said they hadn't received a raise or found a better-paying job in the previous 12 months. Twenty-four percent said they got a raise, 16 percent found a better-paying job and 4 percent both. The net of 28 percent who received a pay raise was down from 38 percent in November 2019.

Pay raises were more common among those earning more, ranging from 39 percent among those making more than \$75,000 annually to 9 percent of those earning less than \$30,000. ([Bankrate 9/28-10/3](#))

In August and early September, 59 percent of adults said they were employed (46 percent full-time and 13 percent part-time). Among those not employed, four in 10 would rather have been employed. Among part-time workers, 35 percent preferred full-time employment. Forty-two percent overall said that since the start of the pandemic, they or someone living in their household lost or had to quit a job or had their income reduced. ([NPR-RWJF-HSPH 8/2-9/7](#))

In more recent data, 16 percent indicate they or a household member have lost employment income in the last four weeks ([U.S. Census Bureau 9/29-10/11](#)). As many employed adults, 16 percent, say they're concerned about losing their job in the next year, up 5 points since June ([Fannie Mae 9/1-9/26](#)).

Compared with before the pandemic, 36 percent in late September/early October said they're earning more now. 12 percent less, 52 percent about the same. ([Bankrate 9/28-10/3](#))

The labor force participation rate held steady at 61.6 percent in September, still 1.7 points short of its level in February 2020 ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 10/8](#)). Among adults who were not working at the time (excluding retirees), 14 percent said the main reason they didn't work was because they were sick or disabled, 11 percent did not want to be employed, 10 percent were caring for children, 9 percent were laid off or furloughed because of the pandemic and 6 percent said their employer closed permanently or temporarily because of the pandemic. Seven percent didn't work because they or someone they knew were sick with coronavirus symptoms. ([U.S. Census Bureau 9/29-10/11](#))

The unemployment rate declined 0.4 point to 4.8 percent in September ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 10/8](#)). Among registered voters, 71 percent express concern about unemployment across the country ([Fox News 10/16-10/19](#)). Eight percent of adults say unemployment is one of the three topics (of 17 provided) they find "the most worrying."

Government Action

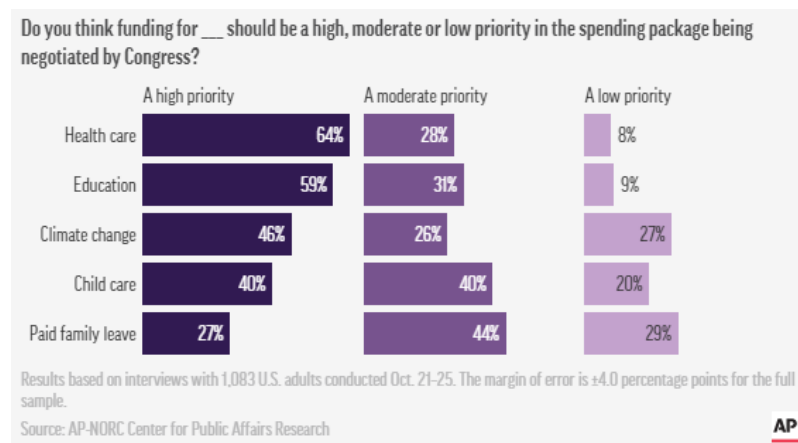
In recently released results from mid-September, about three-quarters of Americans said it's highly important for the federal government to address the issue of jobs and unemployment. Those with incomes less than \$50,000 were more apt to call government action on this issue extremely important, 41 percent, compared with about a quarter of those with higher incomes. ([Monmouth University 9/9-9/13](#))

One-third in early October said the federal government should be doing a lot more to help Americans regardless of the cost; an additional four in 10 said they should be doing more but shouldn't spend too much. Democrats were 50 points more apt than Republicans to say the government should be doing a lot more, 61 vs. 11 percent.

Sixty-two percent supported “a roughly \$1 trillion spending bill to improve the nation’s roads, bridges, broadband and other infrastructure projects.” Fifty-seven percent supported “a \$3.5 trillion spending bill on social programs such as childcare, education, family tax breaks and expanding Medicare for seniors.” Four in 10 opposed it, 8 points more than in early August. ([Quinnipiac 10/1-10/4](#))

Described as “an economic bill, which would expand social safety net programs and enacts policies to combat climate change,” support for passing “all of the proposed safety net and climate change policies” dropped to 41 percent. Three in 10 preferred “a bill that enacts fewer of those policies, but which costs less money.” An additional three in 10 preferred no such bill. ([CNN 10/7-10/11](#))

Registered voters split on whether “the bill being considered by the U.S. House that would allocate an additional three and a half trillion dollars toward infrastructure, including spending to address climate change, health care and childcare” will help the economy (38 percent) or hurt the economy (40 percent). Two in 10 don't think it'll make much difference. Also among registered voters, two-thirds express concern about the amount they pay in taxes. ([Fox News 10/16-10/19](#))



Rating each as a high, moderate or low priority, adults are most apt to call health care (64 percent) and education (59 percent) high priorities for funding in the then-\$3.5 trillion package. Forty-six percent say the same of climate change and 40 percent, childcare. Twenty-seven percent say paid family leave should be a high priority. ([AP-NORC 10/21-10/25](#))

In a mid-September poll, eight in 10 said increasing federal spending on child nutrition for low- and moderate-income families should be an important priority for federal spending. Seventy-three percent said the same about increasing spending on childcare subsidies for working families. It was six in 10 for “increasing federal government spending to provide down-payment assistance, rental assistance and other homeownership initiatives to help people who have traditionally had problems affording home purchases.” ([Politico-HSPH 9/14-9/19](#))

Reminded that, “Earlier this year, Congress passed additional financial help for people who buy their own health insurance coverage as part of the COVID-19 relief package,” eight in 10 favor the federal government making that help permanent for low- and moderate-income Americans

who don't get health insurance through their jobs. Three-quarters favor the federal government providing insurance options for lower-income people living in states that have not expanded their Medicaid programs. ([KFF 9/23-10/4](#))

In another survey, three-quarters called providing federal funding to expand Medicaid to cover these people an important priority in the current spending bills ([Politico-HSPH 9/14-9/19](#)).

More than eight in 10 support three types of government action on prescription drugs – tying price increases to the inflation rate, limiting out-of-pocket costs for people on Medicare and negotiating with drug companies for lower prices. About eight in 10 favor providing additional government funding for Medicaid to pay for changes to home and community-based services and a tax credit to help cover expenses for families of people who need help with daily activities. ([KFF 9/23-10/4](#))