

**July 2021**

## **Education/Economic Mobility Survey Summary**

Produced by [Langer Research Associates](#)

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

### **Key Takeaways**

#### **Education**

New studies released in the past month show the biggest decline in public school enrollment in 20 years, document extensive learning losses in math and reading skills during the pandemic and sound alarms for post-secondary enrollment, with fewer high school seniors – especially students of color – applying for federal student aid.

In a more positive sign, the share of parents planning to send their child to school in person in the fall rose from 77 percent in late April and May to 84 percent in June. But fewer prefer this approach over fully or partially remote alternatives, and the current surge in cases attributed to the coronavirus Delta variant poses a question mark for the school year ahead.

Other new studies on education show disparities in which students were afforded an opportunity for in-person learning this spring, explore substantial continuing hesitancy among parents to have their child vaccinated, measure attitudes on vaccine mandates and other safety protocols and evaluate learning disruptions linked to remote learning in the past year.

#### **Economic Mobility**

On the economic mobility front, surveys this month signal a mix of progress and challenges ahead. One new study projects a dramatic decrease in the poverty rate in 2021 – falling to nearly half its level in 2018 – given pandemic-related economic supports. At the same time, inflation is a leading concern, financial pressures are growing particularly on people in lower-income households and household savings have shrunk.

Just half of Americans in mid-June said either their personal finances or (for employed people) their work situation was completely back to normal. While three in 10 expect their family finances to get better in the coming year, a quarter expect them to get worse.

In a comparatively positive result, 11 percent of employed adults are concerned about losing their job – a pandemic low in ongoing monthly data, and down from a high of 26 percent in June 2020.

In terms of government action, seven people in 10 – across partisan lines – say promoting jobs and growth should be a high federal priority, and two-thirds favor free preschool as part of the infrastructure bill being negotiated in Congress.

Detailed results follow.

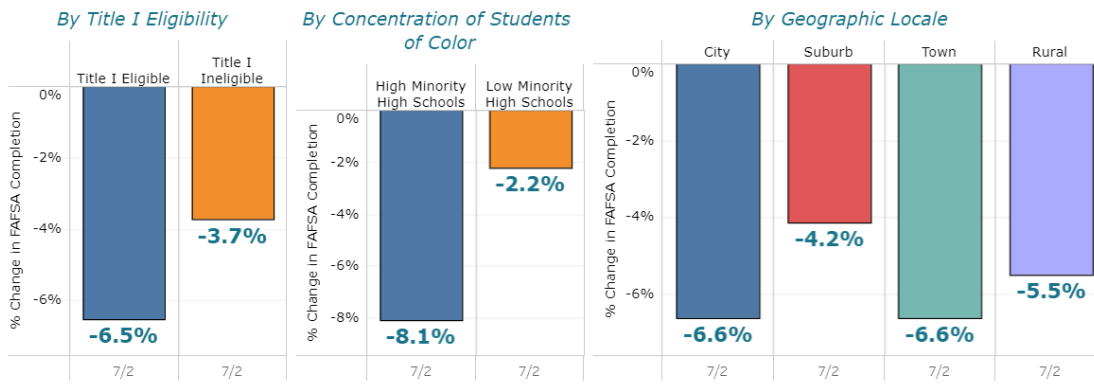
**K-12 Education**

K-12 public school enrollment dropped by 3 percent in 2020-2021, its largest year-on-year decline in the past two decades. That’s the equivalent of 1.5 million fewer students.

Parents delaying their child’s first years of school is a key factor: Enrollment fell especially sharply among pre-K public school students, down 22 percent. It was down 9 percent among kindergarten students, 3 percent among elementary and middle schoolers and less than 1 percent among high schoolers. ([The74](#); [National Center for Education Statistics 6/28](#))

Further, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) submissions by high school seniors seeking college tuition assistance dropped by 4.8 percent this year. Declines were steepest among students from Title 1 schools (those with larger shares of low-income students), down 6.5 percent, compared with 3.7 percent in other schools; and among schools with more than 40 percent Black and Hispanic students, down 8.1 percent. vs. 2.2 percent in other schools.

**% Change in FAFSA Completion Year-Over-Year by Selected Characteristics**



The changes amount to about 102,000 fewer seniors submitting FAFSA forms this year and a total of about 270,000 fewer across the last two years. Analysts say this reflects lower-income students – disproportionately Black and Hispanic seniors – taking advantage of the pandemic-related labor shortage. ([NCAN 7/19](#))

In other new data, 32 percent of Americans express a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in public schools. Reversing a pandemic bump, that’s down 9 percentage points from a year ago; in 2019, a similar 29 percent were highly confident. There’s a wide partisan divide, with Democrats

and Democratic-leaning independents (43 percent) about twice as apt as Republicans and GOP leaners (20 percent) to express this level of confidence in the schools. ([Gallup 6/1-7/5](#))

## Learning Modes

A CDC analysis of 1,200 U.S. public school districts from September to April underscores disparities among those who experienced fully in-person learning. While the share of students learning fully in person rose across the board from January to April, the increase was largest, and the total highest, among white students (+37 points to 75 percent), compared with Black students (+31 points to 63 percent), Hispanic students (+23 points to 59 percent) and those of other racial or ethnic backgrounds (+31 points to 57 percent).

There was a sharp regional gap as well, with average access to fully in-person learning from September to April far higher in the South (63 percent – likely given both fewer restrictions and open-school mandates there) than in the Midwest (37 percent), West (22 percent) or Northeast (16 percent). ([CDC 9/8-4/23](#))

Still, by May, nearly all public schools with fourth- or eighth-graders, 98 percent, offered at least some in-person instruction. Among racial and ethnic groups, a majority of Asian fourth- and eighth-graders received fully remote instruction (55 percent), while most white, Hispanic and Black students were receiving full or partial in-person instruction (84, 67 and 62 percent, respectively). ([The74](#); [NCES](#); [Institute of Education Sciences 6/16-6/29](#))

More broadly, in an indicator of continued pandemic impacts, just 34 percent of parents of children under 18 in June said schooling was completely back to normal. ([Gallup 6/14-6/20](#))

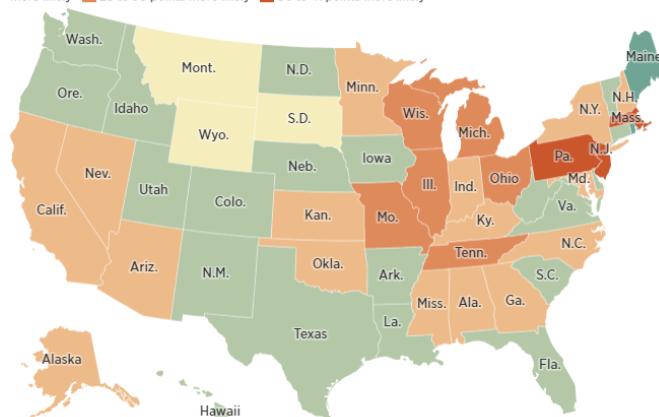
Another recently released study, conducted in March and April, measured educational challenges among 3- to 13-year-olds learning remotely whose household incomes were below the national median (\$75,000). Thirty-four percent of parents in this group reported that their child at some point was unable to participate in class or complete schoolwork because of a lack of internet access. About as many said their child had to attend school or do schoolwork on a smartphone and 21 percent reported an inability to participate in school or finish schoolwork because they could not access a computer. Fifty-three percent reported any one of these. ([New America-Rutgers-SSRS 3/10-4/18](#))

### **Differences in Virtual-Only Instruction by Race and Ethnicity**

Students of color in Pennsylvania and New Jersey were more likely to be offered virtual-only classroom instruction compared with white students, leading the nation in the gap between the two groups.

Percentage-point difference in virtual-only instruction between students of color and white students

Legend: No virtual instruction offered (Yellow), Less likely than white students (Light Green), 0 to 10 points more likely (Medium Green), 11 to 20 points more likely (Light Orange), 20 to 30 points more likely (Dark Orange), 30 to 41 points more likely (Red)



The study classifies "students of color" as all students who identify with a racial or ethnic group other than non-Hispanic white.

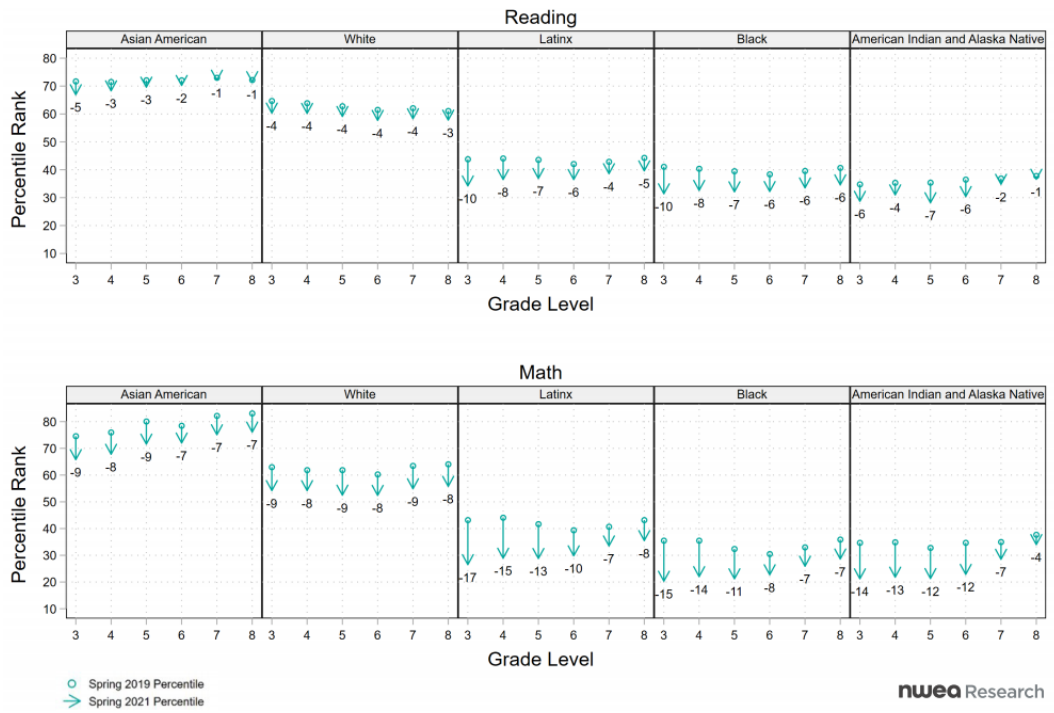
Map: JOHN DUCHNESKIE / Staff Artist • Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Safety protocols for in-person learning remain widespread: In May/June data, large majorities of parents of children learning in hybrid or in-person models reported that their child’s school required teachers (85 percent) and students (82 percent) always to wear masks, had hand sanitizer in classrooms (81 percent), required contact tracing (72 percent) and was enforcing six feet of distancing (63 percent). Half said their child’s school required everyone to have their temperature taken. ([USC UAS 5/12-6/22](#))

Pandemic Learning Loss

New studies reveal the magnitude of pandemic learning loss. One finds that students in first through sixth grade fell behind rapidly in math and reading during the initial spring 2020 shutdowns. On average, students began the 2020-2021 school year three months behind in math and one month behind in reading. While the losses slowed in 2020-21, students fell further behind, ending the year five months behind in math and four months behind in reading. ([McKinsey & Company 7/27](#))

Another study of students in third through eighth grade finds similar underachievement in reading and math at the end of the 2020-2021 year vs. 2018-2019. Declines were steepest among younger students: In math, median achievement dropped 8 points from the 2018-2019 median percentile among eighth graders, rising to 12 points among third graders. Drops were more modest in reading, ranging from 3 to 6 points. Learning loss among Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native and Black students was steeper in both subjects relative to white and Asian students. For example, math scores among third graders declined 17 points among Hispanic students, 15 points among Black students and 14 points among American Indian/Alaska Native students, compared with 9 points among white and Asian students alike. ([NWEA 7/28](#)) (Also see data on Texas math and reading scores in the state section below.)



## Next Steps for Schools

In one study, eight in 10 parents of children younger than 18 said they were personally ready to send their child to school or daycare or already were doing so. Still, 17 percent were unready for this. ([NPR-PBS NewsHour-Marist Poll 6/22-6/29](#))

In similar results, 84 percent of parents of non-homeschooled school-age children said they were planning to send their child to school in person in the fall, up from 77 percent in late April and May. Fewer, 7 percent, said they were unsure, down from 14 percent. The share not planning to send their child to in-person school held essentially steady at 9 percent.

Intentions and preferences differed. Asked how they'd prefer their child to attend school given pandemic conditions and school policies in their area, just 54 percent of parents opted for fully in-person learning. A quarter preferred remote-only classes and two in 10 choose a hybrid model. These data were collected before the July surge in cases nationally. ([USC UAS 5/12-6/22](#))

Middle and lower-income parents divide on educational priorities for the year ahead. Among those with incomes below the national median, whose children will be entering first grade or higher, a third prioritized academics, including reading and writing (22 percent) or math and science (11 percent). Thirty percent cited their child's social and emotional well-being; 20 percent, getting to spend time with other kids. Fifteen percent prioritized physical activity. ([New America-Rutgers-SSRS 3/10-4/18](#))

## Coronavirus Vaccination

Even with eight in 10 ready for a return to fully in-person learning (if not necessarily preferring it), parents' intentions to have their child vaccinated remain low.

In one recent survey, 55 percent of parents of children younger than 18 report that their child has received a vaccine or is at least somewhat likely to do so as soon as it's available for their age group, essentially steady since late May. ([Axios-Ipsos 7/16-7/19](#))

Intentions are even lower in another survey that provides additional response options. In this study, in June, 42 percent of parents or guardians of a child age 12 to 17 said their child has been vaccinated or that they planned to get them vaccinated right away, about the same as a month earlier. About three in 10 planned to wait and see or to take action only if their child's school required it. A quarter ruled out vaccinating their child, little changed. ([KFF 6/8-6/21](#))

In terms of actual uptake, as of July 27, 37 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds had received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine in CDC data. ([Washington Post 7/27](#))

Americans overall divided on K-12 vaccine mandates in June, with most parents opposed. About half of all adults said K-12 schools should require students to get vaccinated unless they have a medical exemption; 45 percent oppose this. Opposition rose to 61 percent among parents of children younger than 18. ([KFF 6/8-6/21](#))

Another poll also finds Americans overall split on requiring public school students age 12 or older to be vaccinated before they can attend school in person, 50-49 percent. More favored requiring public school teachers to be vaccinated before returning to work, 63-37 percent. ([Politico-Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health 6/22-6/27](#))

### State Results on Education

**California.** Overall statewide K-12 public school enrollment in California declined by 3 percent from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021, matching national results noted above. This varied widely by locale, with about three in 10 districts experiencing drops of 5 percent or more. District-level declines were not highly correlated with reopening status. ([PPIC 6/16](#))

A separate analysis finds that the share of California ninth graders who go on to graduate and complete the state's A-G requirements – college preparatory courses required for admission to UC and CSU campuses – has risen steadily for more than a decade, to 43 percent. This includes big gaps by race and ethnicity, with Asian (71 percent) and Filipino (63 percent) students especially apt to graduate with A-G requirements. It's 49 percent among white students, falling further among Hispanic (36 percent), Pacific Islander (34 percent), Black (31 percent) and Native American (23 percent) students. Racial and ethnic disparities persist in nearly all districts statewide; gaps are even larger in some higher-performing districts. ([PPIC 6/29](#))

**Texas.** Far fewer Texas students met grade-level expectations on standardized tests in 2021 than in 2019. (Exams were not administered in 2020 because of the pandemic.) Declines in math were sharpest: Just 35 percent of third through eighth graders tested at grade level, down 15 points from 2019. Learning loss in reading was more modest, down 4 points to 43 percent.

Instructional modes mattered – especially in math, in which the decline from 2019 levels ranged from 9 points in districts where more than three-quarters of students were taught in person to 32 points in those where fewer than a quarter attended in person. Reading gaps ranged from 1 point to 9 points, respectively. ([Texas Education Agency 6/28](#))

On mask use, about half of Texas adults (51 percent) in June said public schools should be allowed to require this; 45 percent opposed it. ([Quinnipiac 6/15-6/21](#))

**New Hampshire.** New Hampshire adults split on a measure signed into law by the governor that bans teaching “divisive concepts” in public schools, 42-44 percent, support-oppose. Eight in 10 Democrats oppose the measure while three-quarters of Republicans support it. ([UNH 7/15-7/19](#))

Earlier, in June, 51 percent of New Hampshire adults who had heard of a bill that would ban teaching critical race theory opposed the measure; 38 percent supported it, with one in 10 neutral or unsure. ([UNH 6/17-6/21](#))

### Post-secondary Success



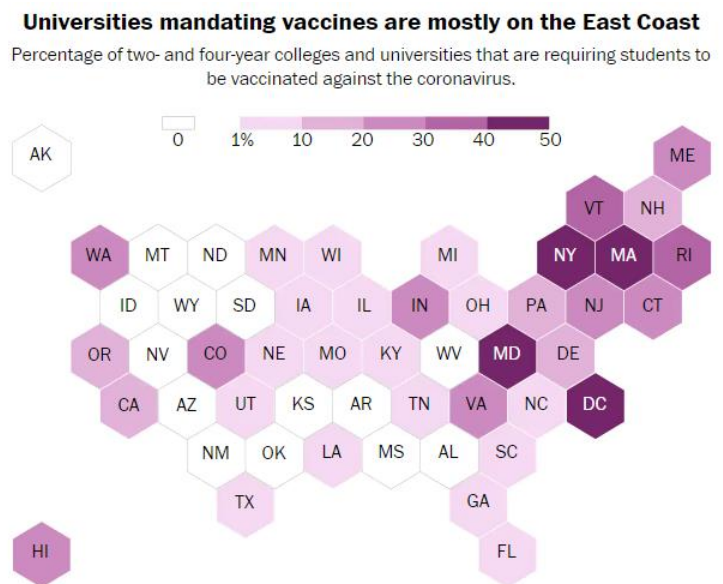
As with K-12 schools, post-secondary enrollment saw pandemic declines. Of 2.6 million students who entered college for the first time in fall 2019, 74 percent returned to any U.S. institution in the following year. That’s a 2-point drop from the previous cohort of fall 2018 freshmen and the largest such decline in 10 years.

The year-over-year decline among Hispanic students was at least double that of Asian, white and Black students. Persistence rates – continuing at any institution the following year – were highest among Asian (87 percent) and white (79 percent) students, compared with Hispanic (69 percent) or Black (65 percent) students. ([The74](#); [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center 7/8](#))

(Overall college enrollment dropped 6.8 percent last fall. This initially was reported as 21.7 percent, since sharply [revised](#) down. The NSCRC says even the lower figure is unprecedented.)

Relatedly, in early July, 44 percent of households with an adult who’d planned to take post-secondary classes this term reported those plans had been cancelled, up 3 points in a month. A third are taking fewer classes this term, down 3 points. The share taking more classes held steady (10 percent). Few are pursuing alternatives such as taking classes for a different certificate or degree (3 percent) or from a different institution (2 percent). ([U.S. Census Bureau 6/23-7/5](#))

As the Delta variant and rising case counts pose continued threats to enrollment and campus life this fall, colleges and universities are adopting divergent approaches. More than 600 campuses will require vaccines for at least some students and employees, including the public university systems in California, Maryland and New York, the Ivy League and most top-rated national universities and liberal arts colleges. By contrast, a dozen states have no colleges or universities with mandates and several governors have barred them at public universities. ([Chronicle of Higher Education 7/27](#); [Washington Post 6/23](#))



A campus vaccine mandate for students is favored by 58 percent of Americans overall, including an identical share of current undergraduate and graduate students. ([KFF 6/8-6/21](#))

## **Economic Mobility**

### **Financial Situation**

A newly released study projects a steep decline in the U.S. poverty rate – from 13.9 percent in 2018 to 7.7 percent in 2021 – with federal and state pandemic responses key to the shift. Federal

stimulus checks had the largest antipoverty impact, accounting for lifting 12.4 million Americans out of poverty; expanded food stamp and unemployment insurance are other leading factors. Even with the projected decline, large equity gaps are expected to remain: Hispanic (11.8 percent), Asian American and Pacific Islanders (10.8 percent) and Black people (9.2 percent) are projected to have a higher poverty rate than whites (5.8 percent). ([Urban Institute 7/28](#))

Still, a weekly gauge of consumer sentiment reveals continued pressures: Just 45 percent say it's a good time to buy things, a retreat from a pandemic high five weeks ago. It's fallen notably among lower-income Americans, down 8 points among those earning less than \$50,000 annually to 32 percent. Among those earning \$100,000 or more this has held essentially steady, at 70 percent. ([Consumer Comfort Index 6/28-7/25](#))

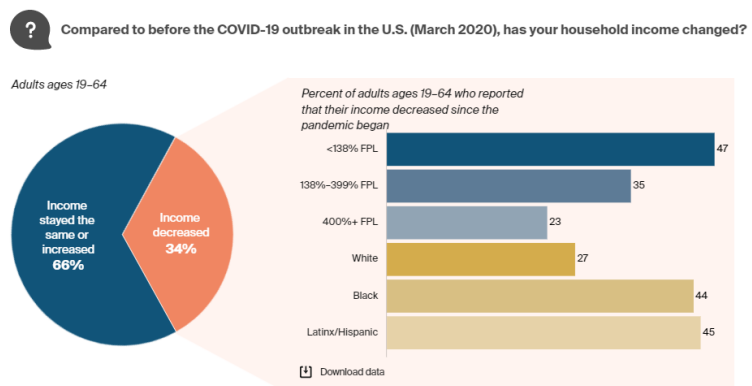
Inflation topped a list of seven items in concern for the U.S. economy, cited by 26 percent. That was followed by wages (18 percent), unemployment (16 percent), housing costs (14 percent), labor shortages (10 percent), gas prices (9 percent) and interest rates (3 percent). ([NPR-PBS NewsHour-Marist Poll 6/22-6/29](#))

In a measured sign of progress, 12 percent expect someone in their household to have a loss in employment income in the next four weeks, matching the pandemic low in data since April 2020 ([U.S. Census Bureau 6/23-7/5](#)). Still, just half of adults in June reported that their personal finances were completely back to normal ([Gallup 6/14-6/20](#)).

Other pandemic impacts remain: Twenty-seven percent report their personal family finances have gotten worse since the start of the pandemic. For 14 percent, they've gotten better; six in 10, about the same ([NPR-PBS NewsHour-Marist Poll 6/22-6/29](#)). Asked another way, 13 percent say their household income is significantly lower than a year ago, holding steady at last month's pandemic low. Twenty-seven percent cite significantly higher incomes, also essentially steady with last month's pandemic high. ([Fannie Mae National Housing Survey 6/1-6/24](#))

In data collected from March to June, a third of adults age 19 to 64 reported that their household income has decreased since the pandemic began. Hispanic (45 percent) and Black adults (44 percent) were far more apt than whites (27 percent) to report lower household income. Lower-income households also fared worse: Those with incomes less than 138 percent of the federal poverty level were twice as apt as those in top-income households to report pandemic income loss, 47 vs. 23 percent. ([Commonwealth Fund-SSRS 3/9-6/8](#))

One-third of adults said that their income fell during the pandemic. Higher rates were found among Black and Latinx/Hispanic adults and people with low income.



Note: FPL = federal poverty level.  
 Data: Commonwealth Fund Health Care Coverage and COVID-19 Survey, March–June 2021.  
 Source: Sara R. Collins, Gabriella N. Aboulaifa, and Munira Z. Gunja, *As the Pandemic Eases, What Is the State of Health Care Coverage and Affordability in the U.S.?* Findings from the Commonwealth Fund Health Care Coverage and COVID-19 Survey, March–June 2021 (Commonwealth Fund, July 2021).



In further pandemic impacts, a third of Americans interviewed in June said they have less money saved now than before the pandemic. Half as many, 17 percent, reported more savings; 42 percent, about the same. Low-income households are especially hard hit: The share reporting reduced savings reached nearly half (47 percent) of those with household incomes less than \$30,000, vs. about a quarter (27 percent) of those earning \$75,000 or more. ([Bankrate-SSRS 6/22-6/27](#))

Financial challenges also persist for small businesses, which employ nearly half of U.S. workers. Twice as many report a decrease in revenues in the past week than say there's been an increase, 20 vs. 11 percent, with the share reporting an increase at a four-month low. (Seven in 10, no change.) Two-thirds say the pandemic has had a large (25 percent) or moderate (42 percent) negative effect on their business; still, that's down from nine in 10 in May 2020. In terms of recovery, a third think it'll take more than 6 months for their business to return to its normal level of operations, generally steady since mid-May. ([U.S. Census Bureau 7/12-7/18](#))

Prospectively, 41 percent of Americans expect their personal financial situation to get better in the next year, down 6 points in three months to 10 points below its pre-pandemic level ([Fannie Mae National Housing Survey 6/1-6/24](#)). In a similar question, three in 10 expect their personal family finances to get better in the coming year. A quarter expect them to get worse; 46 percent, about the same ([NPR-PBS NewsHour-Marist Poll 6/22-6/29](#)). In newly released results from a March survey of Hispanic adults, 54 percent expected their family's financial situation to be better a year from now ([Pew Research Center 3/15-3/28](#)).

### Employment

Pandemic disruptions persist: In June, just half of employed adults reported that work was completely back to normal for them ([Gallup 6/14-6/20](#)). In terms of impacts over the past year, data from March find that half of Hispanic adults had someone in their household take a pay cut, be laid off, furloughed or lose their job during the pandemic ([Pew Research Center 3/15-3/28](#)). In another measure, a quarter of working parents report that child care responsibilities have impacted their ability to work in person ([NPR-PBS NewsHour-Marist Poll 6/22-6/29](#)).

Eleven percent of employed adults were concerned in June about losing their job, a pandemic low in ongoing monthly data. ([Fannie Mae National Housing Survey 6/1-6/24](#))

### State Results

**California.** Analysis of California employment data reveals a rapid recovery in the state, with job growth this year erasing about half of the pandemic losses to date. Service sectors led the way, accounting for 60 percent of growth. Challenges remain: Roughly one in six is unemployed (8 percent) or underemployed, discouraged or marginally attached (6 percent). ([PPIC 6/25](#))

### Government Action

Seven in 10 adults think promoting economic and job growth should be a high priority for the federal government, including majorities of Democrats (76 percent), Republicans (68 percent) and independents (62 percent) alike.

When asked about a broad range of items for inclusion in the infrastructure package being debated in Congress, two-thirds strongly (41 percent) or somewhat (26 percent) favor including free preschool programs. Fewer, 54 percent, favor including free community college tuition for Americans who have not been to college. Thirty-one percent oppose this, with 15 percent on the fence. ([AP-NORC 7/15-7/19](#))

Among measures put in place in response to the pandemic, 75 percent think funding for grants and low-interest loans for small businesses still are needed. Fifty-seven percent say the same about temporarily preventing evictions and foreclosures. This falls to 34 percent for additional unemployment insurance payments of \$300 a week. ([AP-NORC 7/15-7/19](#))

A majority of adults, 57 percent, said in June that the enhanced federal and state unemployment benefits related to the coronavirus should end; four in 10 said they should continue. ([NPR-PBS NewsHour-Marist Poll 6/22-6/29](#))