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A Survey of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County During COVID-19



UCLA Labor Center

UCLA Labor Studies

UCLA College | Social Sciences
Institute for Research
on Labor & Employment

dhi

Dolores Huerta Labor Institute

 Los Angeles Community College District

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY LONG BEACH | *American Studies*

June 2020

A Survey of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County During COVID-19 Report Brief

A Supplementary Report to *Unseen Costs*

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About Us

The **UCLA Labor Center** brings together workers, students, faculty, and policy makers to address the most critical issues facing working people today. The Labor Center’s research, education, and policy work lifts industry standards, creates jobs that are good for communities, and strengthens immigrant rights, especially for students and youth.

The **Dolores Huerta Labor Institute** works with Los Angeles Community College District faculty to educate students about labor history, the labor movement, the impact of unions, and workers’ issues, to promote critical thinking, enhance career prospects, and encourage civic participation among students.

The **California State University, Long Beach, American Studies Program** uses an interdisciplinary approach to American life, culture, and history to explore the interactions between peoples within national and global contexts. Its labor studies course educates students about intersectional labor issues, worker movements, and applied research methodology to foster critical thinking.

The **UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment** is a multidisciplinary research center dedicated to research, teaching, and service on labor and employment issues. Through the work of its units—the Labor Center, Labor Studies, Human Resources Roundtable, and the Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program—the institute engages in wide-ranging research agendas that carry UCLA into the Los Angeles community and beyond.

The **UCLA Labor Studies** program offers undergraduates the opportunity to learn about the workplace and the social, political, and economic forces that influence it, with emphasis on the labor market, public policy, employment relations, unions, and working-class movements. The program also explores issues of race, class, and gender in the workplace.



Executive Summary

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges have rapidly transitioned from in-person classes to remote learning, dramatically changing the way students receive instruction. At the same time, students who work are also facing unemployment or reduced hours. Most of those who were not laid off are working in frontline positions in essential services. Compounding those challenges are government policies that prohibit many college students and certain low-wage workers from accessing economic relief benefits.

This study supplements the report [Unseen Costs: The Experiences of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County](#) with new data on the effects of the pandemic on this population. Based on 236 surveys collected from Los Angeles public colleges and universities in April and May 2020, this study builds on existing knowledge concerning the experiences of workers and learners by documenting how their academic, employment, and life experiences have changed since the onset of the global health crisis.

The following are key findings from the report:

Workers and learners face new challenges as they manage remote learning.

- Workers and learners were required to access a mix of live remote and prerecorded lectures and coursework. Though most had access to a personal computer, half of the students accessed classes through their smartphones and almost a quarter through a tablet. One quarter shared their technological device with other household members.

- Half of workers and learners said they were having some trouble understanding course materials. A tenth of students were struggling in all their classes.
- Of the students who tried to contact faculty/teaching assistants (TAs), over one third said that only some or few were accessible. Over half (59%) reported that campus staff were only sometimes available.
- Over half (57%) did not access any campus mental health services or support.
- Overall, 64% of workers and learners said the shift to remote learning was very or extremely stressful. Nearly a third (32%) were considering withdrawing or taking a break from school.

Workers and learners face financial and workplace insecurity.

- Half of workers and learners had been laid off, terminated, or furloughed from their jobs. Of those who continued to work, many (45%) had their hours reduced, and 14% reported that their hours fluctuated more than before the pandemic.
- Half of those still employed worked on-site (rather than remotely), and over two-thirds were concerned about their personal safety at work.
- Only a third had access to paid sick leave, and very few received hazard pay (14%) or increased pay (12%) for working during a pandemic.
- For those out of work, only one third had applied for unemployment benefits. Of those who did not apply, two thirds assumed they did not qualify.
- Overall, 51% of currently employed and 59% of unemployed workers and learners found the pandemic conditions very or extremely stressful.

Workers and learners face housing and financial challenges during COVID 19.

- Over a quarter of workers and learners were not able to access any kind of stimulus or emergency aid.
- Many (28%) experienced housing changes due to COVID-19, such as moving back in with family or having to vacate student housing.
- One quarter were unable to pay rent and another quarter were unsure if they would have funds to pay for food and other necessities.
- The majority (61%) of workers and learners were living in households with four or more people.
- The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic created additional responsibilities for workers and learners, including performing more household duties (59%), supporting the household financially (34%) and helping family members with childcare and homework (31%).

It is imperative that public colleges and universities, employers, and policy makers address the diverse needs of workers and learners so they can thrive academically, financially, and personally. The following are specific recommendations for ameliorating the effects of the pandemic for workers and learners; The recent UCLA Labor Center and Dolores Huerta Labor Institute study, *Unseen Costs: The Experiences of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County* provides a more comprehensive set of recommendations for this population.

- 1. Address inequities in remote access and learning.** Colleges need to ensure workers and learners have access to technology, technology literacy training, and high-speed internet. Faculty and instructors need to reconsider their teaching methods, including forms of assessments.
- 2. Develop educational and workplace safety nets.** Colleges should freeze tuition and fee increases, and companies need to offer a range of health benefits such as hazard pay and paid sick leave. Workers and learners need flexibility in meeting their work and educational commitments.
- 3. Deliver holistic support for workers and learners.** Colleges should provide mental health and counseling support and food support to ensure students have access to fresh produce and meals. Policy makers should pardon rent payments for those who have experienced a loss of employment or reduction in hours.



Introduction

About half of undergraduate students in Los Angeles County were employed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused a number of unprecedented changes for workers and learners on their college campuses and at their work sites.¹ Colleges have rapidly transitioned from in-person classes to remote learning, dramatically changing how students receive instruction, and some colleges have asked residential learners to vacate student housing.² At the same time, students who work are also facing unemployment or reduced hours.³ Most of those who were not laid off are working in frontline positions in essential services, with varying access to personal protective equipment (PPE) or other safety practices.⁴ Compounding those challenges are government policies that prohibit many college students and certain low-wage workers from accessing economic relief packages.⁵ Such changes raise concerns about how the pandemic has exacerbated existing issues, from mental health struggles and stress, to affordable housing, future employment, and quality jobs.⁶

This brief supplements the report [*Unseen Costs: The Experiences of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County*](#) with data on the new conditions and changes experienced by those working and going to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our goal is to evaluate how the potential loss of work or reduction of hours and the rapid transition to remote learning have compounded the challenges workers and learners face in Los Angeles County. With unemployment at a record high nationwide and workers in precarious situations, workers and learners are detrimentally impacted both on the job and at school.⁷ Other researchers have conducted surveys on the effects of the pandemic on the college experience,⁸ but little is known about how COVID-19 is affecting the ongoing and complex concerns of workers and learners.

Our previous study documented how workers and learners often struggle to meet academic demands when their employers afford them few accommodations. Though workers and learners try to balance academic and work demands, work often interferes with school responsibilities. Additionally, we found that workers and learners are susceptible to food and housing insecurity.⁹

This brief not only expands on the existing literature and our previous research but also captures people's experiences of the pandemic and the policies and solutions needed in this moment.¹⁰ This study is the first of its kind to capture workers and learners' experiences and the impact of the pandemic on both their work and their education.

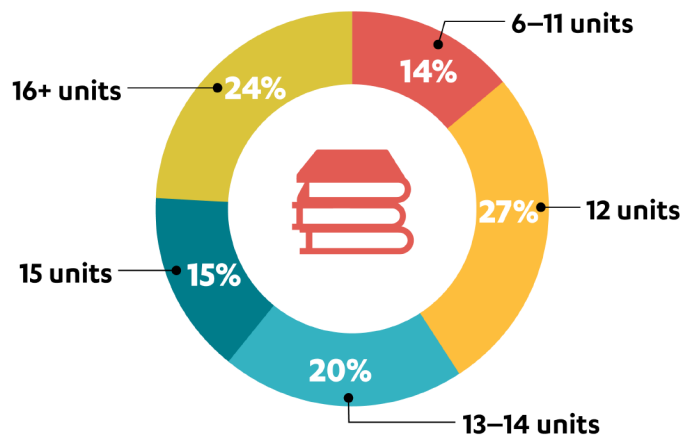
Using the same methodology as our *Unseen Costs* project, we trained students to collect the surveys, and we sought their responses to the initial data. Students conducted surveys with their peers. To qualify, learners had to be enrolled in six units at a public college or university in Los Angeles County and working at least 16 hours a week as of fall 2019—even if they had stopped going to school or working since. We collected a total of 236 surveys. We sought to build on existing knowledge concerning the experiences of workers and learners by documenting how their academic and life experiences have changed since the onset of the pandemic.



Accessing Classes

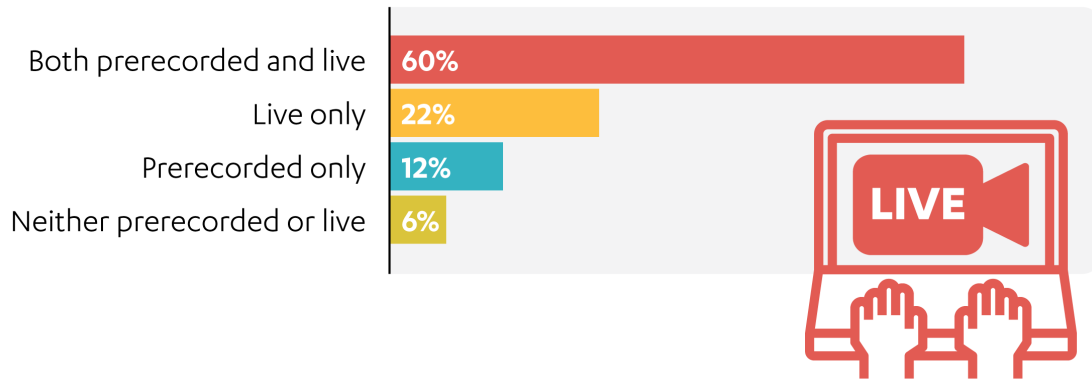
The transition to remote learning happened quickly and without much notice to students. When it was time to return to class in March 2020, 5% did not continue their studies. Most workers and learners, however, continued to take a relatively full course load.

Figure 1: Number of Units Enrolled



Faculty also had to quickly adapt to remote learning, which resulted in changes to course structures. Over half of the students said that their classes were a mix of prerecorded and live remote sessions. About one fifth (22%) were expected to attend live remote sessions, which some students noted was challenging when navigating home and work dynamics. About a tenth only had pre-recorded classes, which deprived learners of the opportunity to interact with their professors and peers. A small group of the students noted that they had neither live nor pre-recorded class lectures.

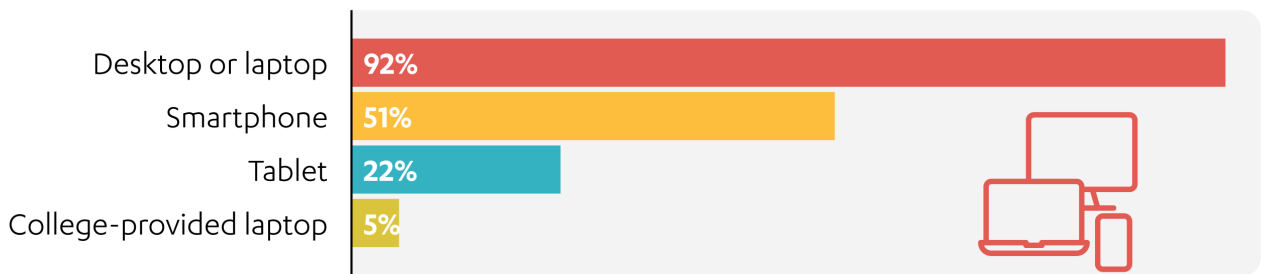
Figure 2: Lecture and Coursework Format



The majority of workers and learners were able to access the live and prerecorded class sessions; 98% said they had access to the prerecorded video or audio lectures, and 97% said they had access to the live video or telephone sessions.

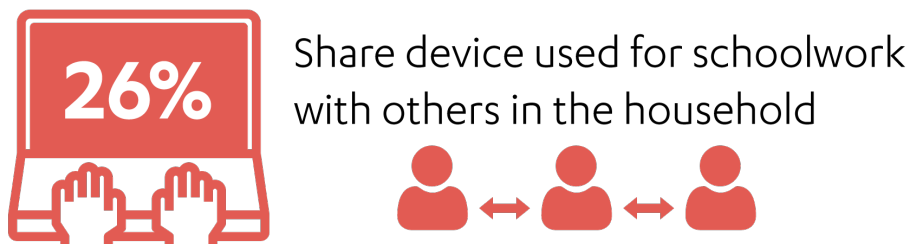
Most workers and learners had access to laptops or desktops, though many still had to access their classes and coursework through mobile devices such as tablets or smartphones. Half of the students accessed classes through their smartphone and almost a quarter through a tablet.

Figure 3: Devices Used to Access Courses and Course Materials



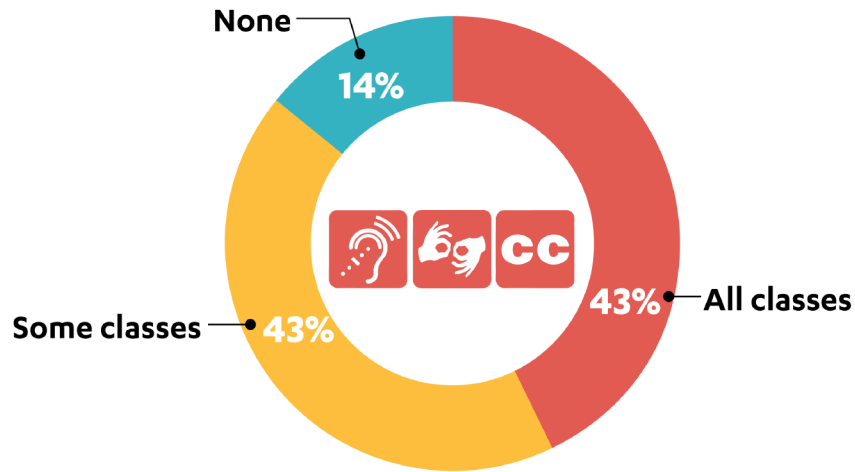
In addition, a quarter of the workers and learners shared their devices with others in the household, hampering class participation, the ability to complete assignments, store course materials, and so on.

Figure 4: Share Device with Other Household Members



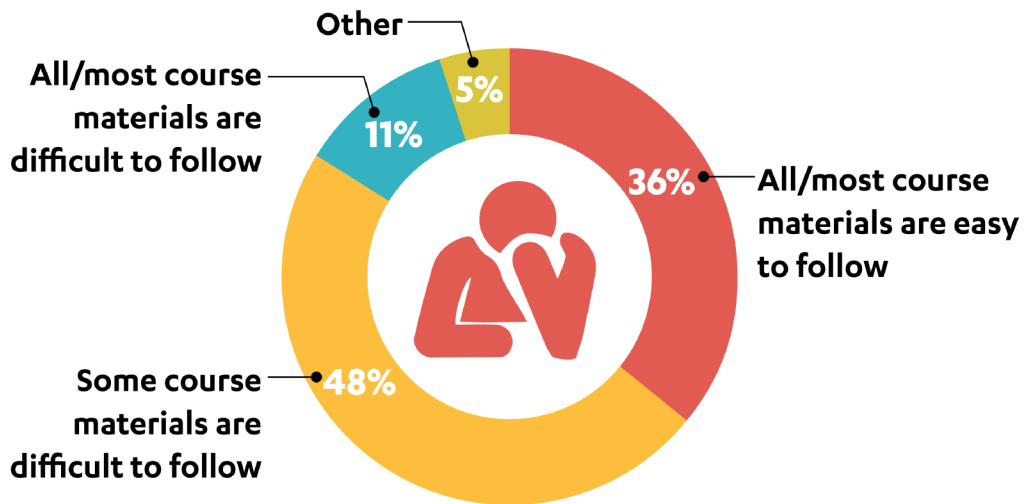
Campuses also lacked consistent disability accommodations.¹¹ Half of the workers and learners were not sure about access or didn't need accommodations. Of the workers and learners who responded to this question, over half said that some or none of their classes offered disability accommodations, such as real-time captioning of live lessons.¹²

Figure 5: Disability Accommodations



Faculty and instructors need to be aware of learners' varying digital literacy and offer clear instructions for learners to be successful in navigating technological platforms (e.g., Zoom, Blackboard, Canvas, Kannopy, etc.). For those attending classes remotely, there was a mix of responses regarding workers and learners comprehension of course material.¹³ Half said they were having some trouble understanding materials, while a tenth were having trouble in all of their classes.

Figure 6: Understanding of Class Materials

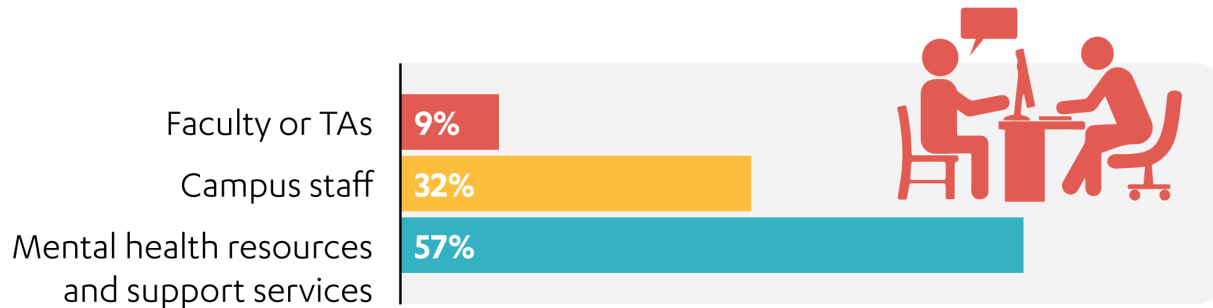


A few expressed that the course materials were not difficult, but staying on track and delegating time for their classes while studying at home was much more difficult. Others described that they felt they were having to teach themselves because live instruction had been replaced with YouTube videos or other noninteractive formats. They attributed their frustrations with remote learning to factors like "confusing or unclear instructions and/or emails" or simply "not feeling as motivated"—a sentiment that has been echoed by learners nationwide.¹⁴

Accessing Campus Resources

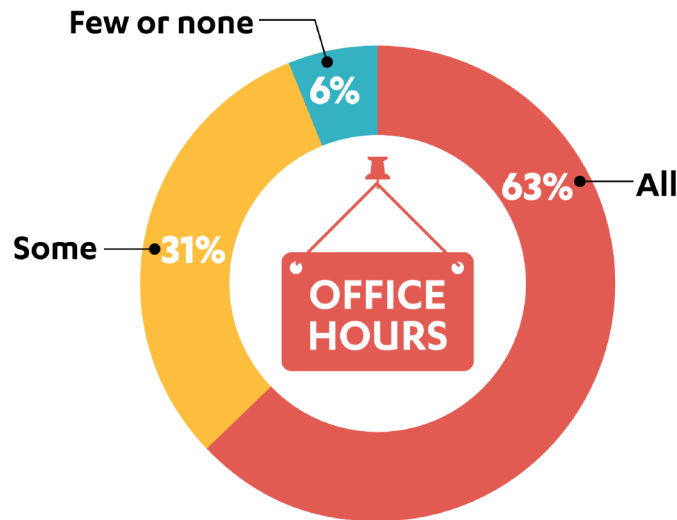
During this time of distance learning, making contact with faculty and staff can be challenging. Some students did not contact or did not need to contact campus personnel or resources. More than half of the workers and learners said they did not need mental health service and resources. With the pressures at school and work during a pandemic, this is surprising and may speak to the stigma of accessing services or lack of availability of these services.¹⁵

Figure 7: Did Not Contact Campus Personnel or Access Resources



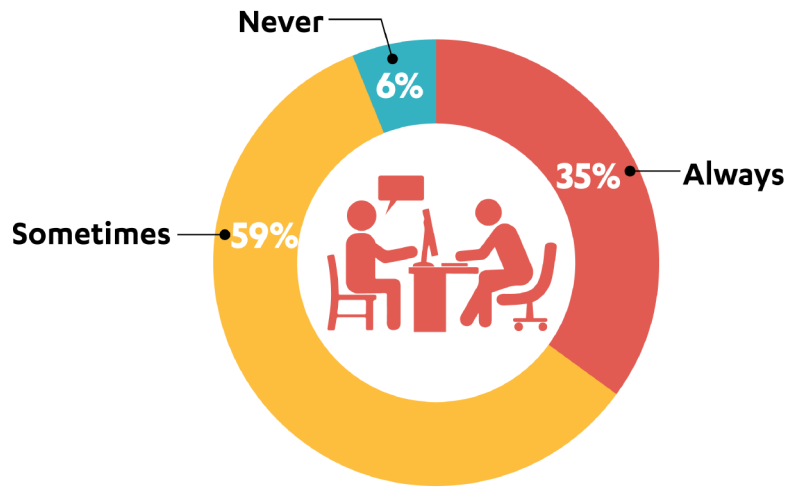
While two thirds reported that their faculty and TAs were available, a little over a third reported that only some or a few of their faculty and TAs were available.

Figure 8: Availability of Faculty and TAs



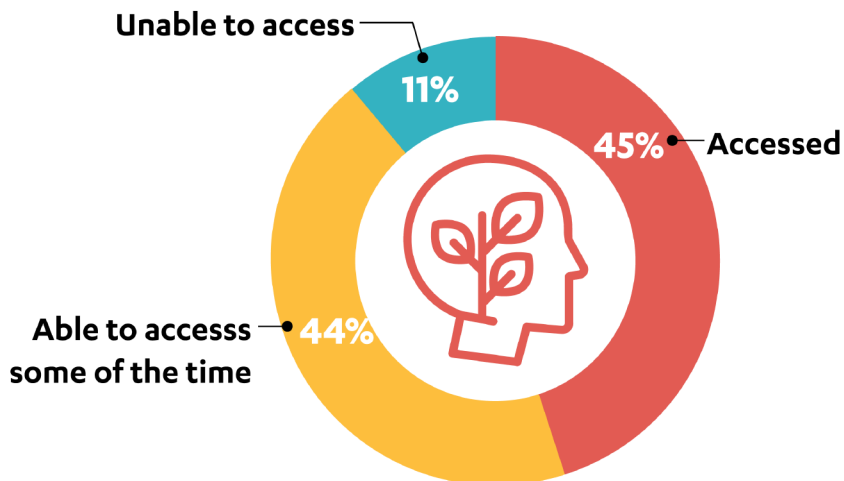
For reaching campus staff in particular, about a third were completely available, and two thirds were only sometimes or not available.

Figure 9: Availability of Campus Staff



In regard to mental health resources and support services, while many students were able to access these services, a tenth were not able to access them at all, and 44% said they were only able to access services some of the time.

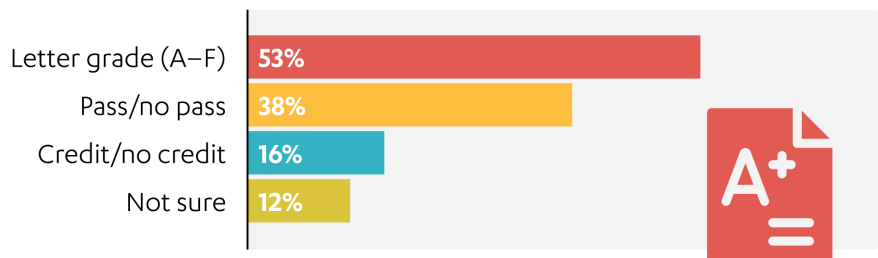
Figure 10: Access to Mental Health and Support Services



Accessing Academic Impacts

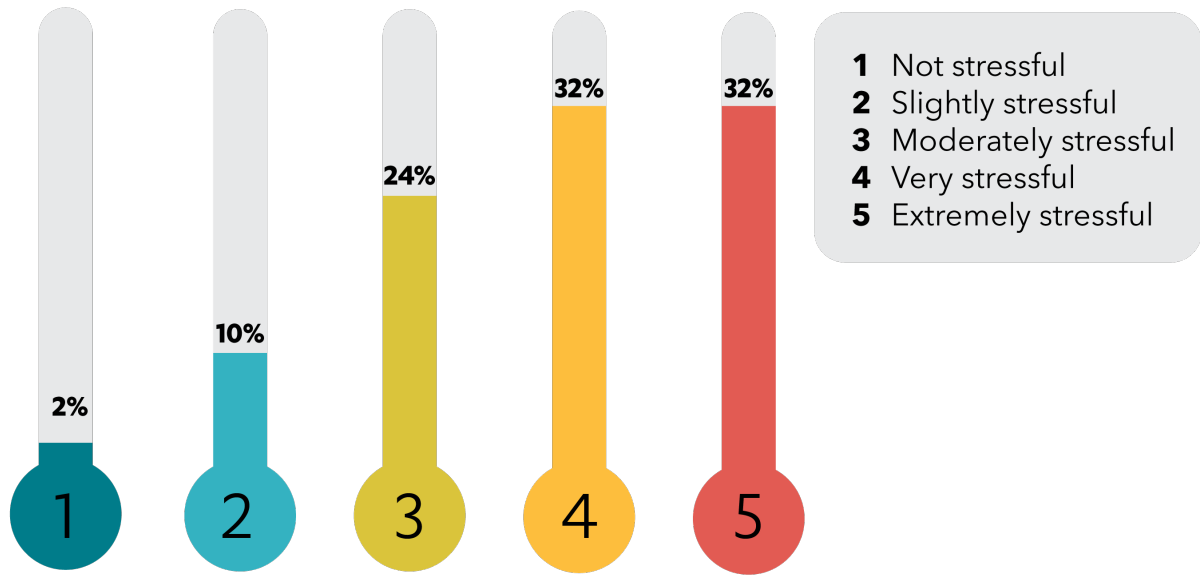
While most colleges adopted a pass/fail grading system to ameliorate the effects of the sudden transition to remote learning,¹⁶ some learners expressed concerns about how changing grading systems would affect their academic eligibility for transfers to four-year colleges or graduate school.¹⁷ However, slightly more workers and learners preferred a pass/no pass or credit/no credit system to letter grades.

Figure 11: Grading Type Preference



Like many learners nationwide,¹⁸ the vast majority of workers and learners are experiencing increased stress in response to the shift to remote learning due to the pandemic. Nearly two thirds are very or extremely stressed, with an additional one quarter feeling moderately stressed.

Figure 12: Stress Caused by Shift to Remote Learning



One third of workers and learners report are considering withdrawing from school due to the changes caused by the pandemic, and colleges, especially community colleges, are worried about losing their students.¹⁹

Figure 13: Considered Taking a Break or Withdrew from School



For the 5% of workers and learners who decided to stop attending school, one of the most common reasons was not wanting to study remotely. Other workers and learners noted not having enough space to study at home or the funds to pay tuition and fees. A few reported that since the outbreak of COVID-19, they have had to care for others, including family members, which did not leave enough time for school. Finally, some reported lack of access to technology as their primary reason for withdrawing.



The Worker Experience

Pre-Pandemic Employment

In addition to the sudden shift to remote learning, workers and learners also faced rapid changes to their work. On March 19, the state instituted the Safer at Home order, which shut down many businesses and left open only those deemed essential. Our survey found that 52% of workers and learners were laid off, terminated, or furloughed from at least one of their jobs.

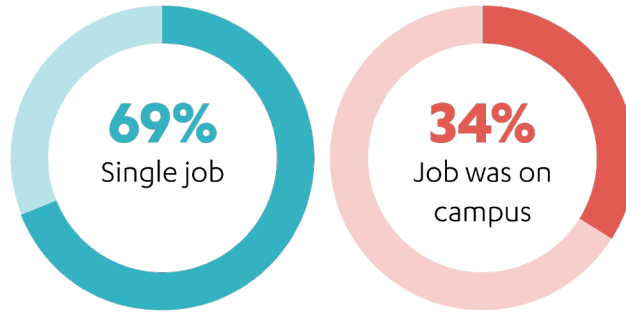
Figure 14: Unemployment Among Workers and Learners



1 in 2
were laid off,
terminated, or
furloughed











Before the pandemic, most of the workers and learners had one job, and a third were working on campus.

Figure 15: Pre-Pandemic Jobs



Workers and learners were concentrated in education/university, retail, and restaurant.

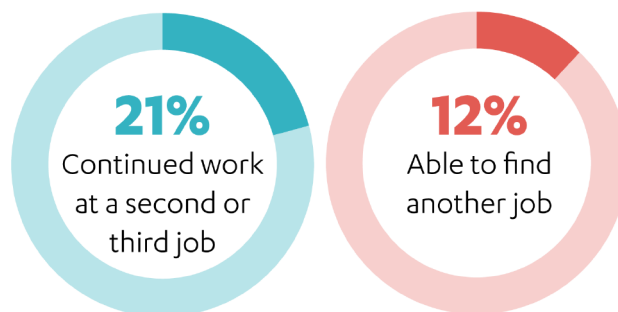
Table 1: Top 10 Pre-Pandemic Work Sectors

| Industry | % of respondents |
|---|------------------|
| Education/University  | 32% |
| Retail  | 22% |
| Restaurant  | 18% |
| Health care  | 7% |
| Grocery  | 5% |
| Government/nonprofit  | 5% |
| Entertainment  | 5% |
| Transportation/delivery  | 4% |
| Gig economy  | 3% |
| Health and Fitness  | 2% |

Pandemic Employment Conditions

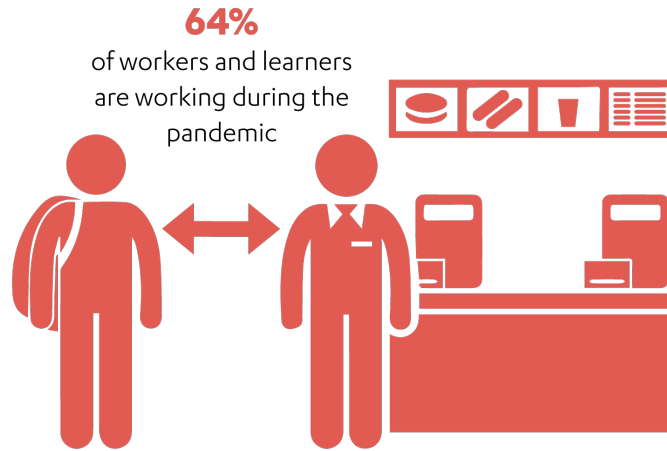
Of those who lost jobs, 21% were able to continue working through a second or third job. A few who lost jobs were able to find new employment.

Figure 16: Terminated Workers













Two thirds of workers and learners continued to work on the front lines and in essential positions.

Figure 17: Currently Working



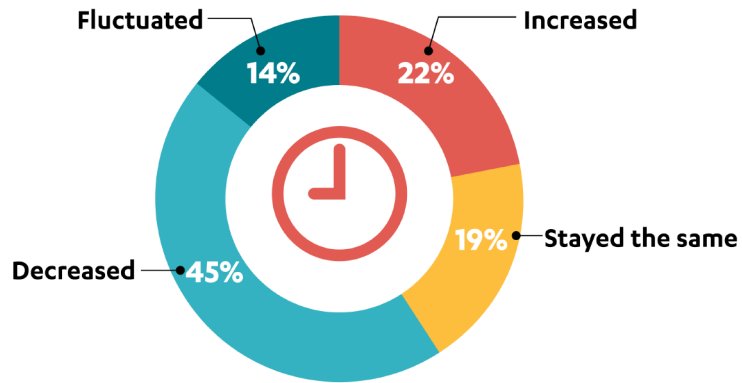
After COVID-19, a third of workers and learners still worked in the education field. As expected, there was a decrease in retail and restaurant jobs and an increase in grocery work.

Table 2: Top 10 Pandemic Work Sectors

| Industry | % of respondents |
|--|------------------|
| Education/university/childcare  | 34% |
| Grocery, convenience, gas stations  | 17% |
| Government/nonprofit  | 9% |
| Health care, home care  | 7% |
| Food service, restaurant  | 6% |
| Transportation/delivery  | 6% |
| Retail  | 4% |
| Gig economy  | 3% |
| Finance/insurance/real estate  | 3% |
| Security/law enforcement  | 3% |

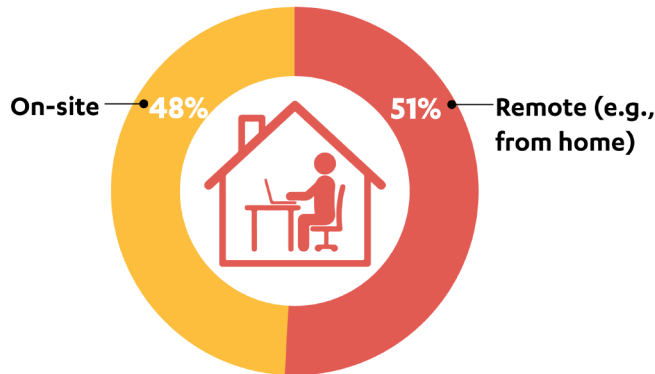
For those still working, almost half have had their hours decreased, and a tenth reported fluctuating hours, lack of stability, and decreased wages.

Figure 18: Pandemic Work Hours



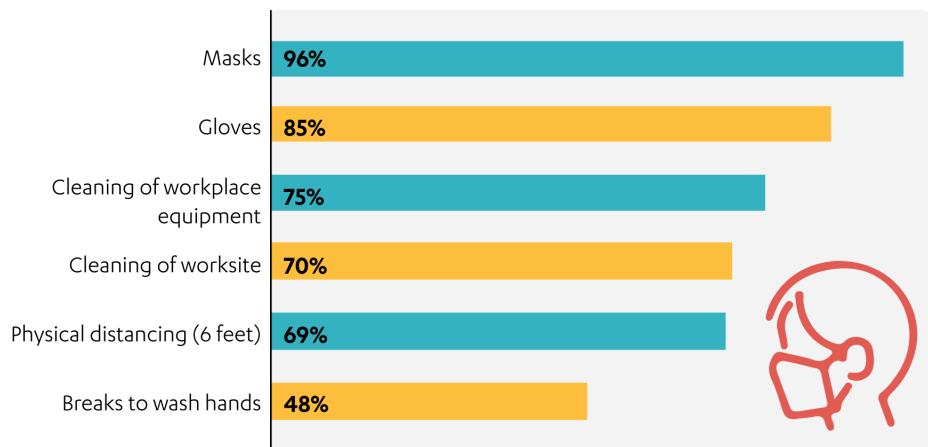
For those who continued working or found new employment, a little more than half worked remotely.

Figure 19: Workplace Location



Of those working on-site, most had access to a number of safety measures, including gloves and masks, but only half reported getting breaks so that they could wash their hands.

Figure 20: Available PPE and Other Protections



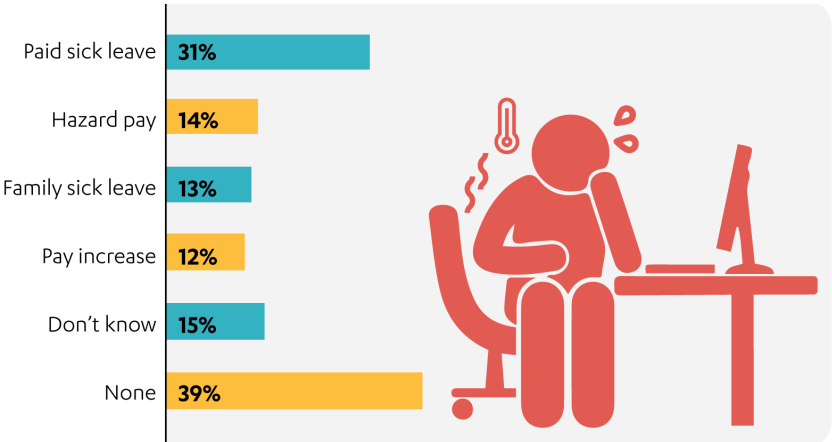
Even with the various protections, the majority of on-site workers reported concerns over their personal safety.

Figure 21: Worker Safety



Only a third of workers and learners had access to paid sick leave. Further, very few workers received hazard pay (increased wages due to the hazards of working during a pandemic) nor did they receive any kind of general pay increase.

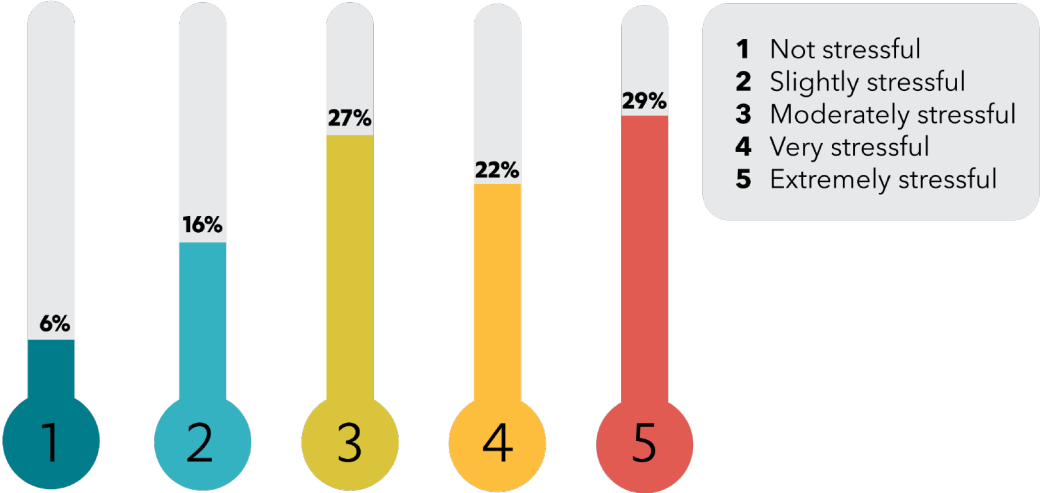
Figure 22: Employee Benefits



Because of the risk that COVID-19 poses, access to health care is of utmost importance. Most workers and learners (98%) have had access to health insurance during this pandemic.

For those still working, 51% found it very or extremely stressful.

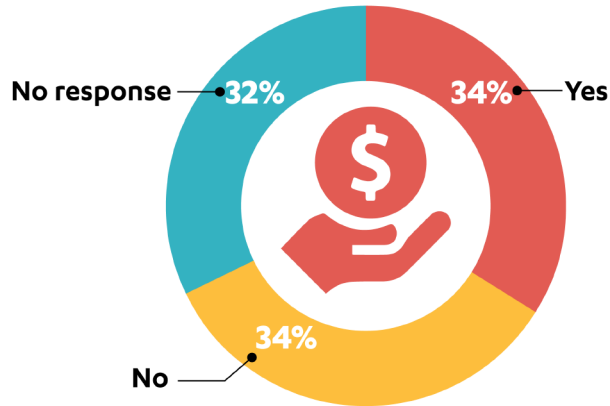
Figure 23: Pandemic Stress Levels of Employed Workers and Learners



Navigating Unemployment

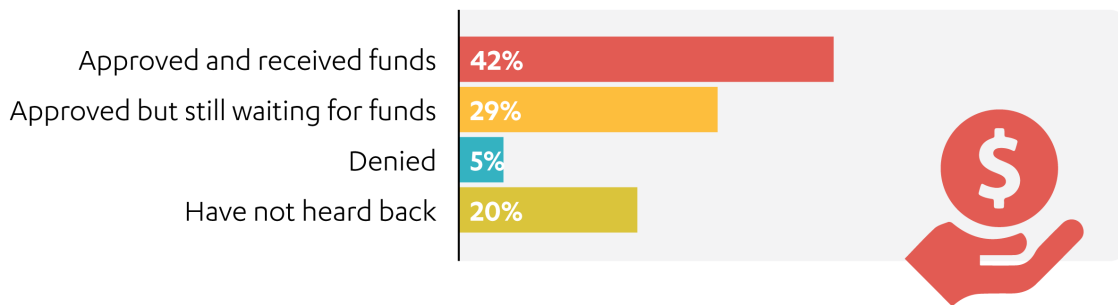
As college campuses shifted to remote learning across the country, many students lost their campus jobs.²⁰ For those in our survey who lost their jobs, about one third applied for unemployment insurance.

Figure 24: Applied for Unemployment Insurance



Of those who filed for unemployment insurance, many had still not received funds.

Figure 25: Unemployment Insurance Status



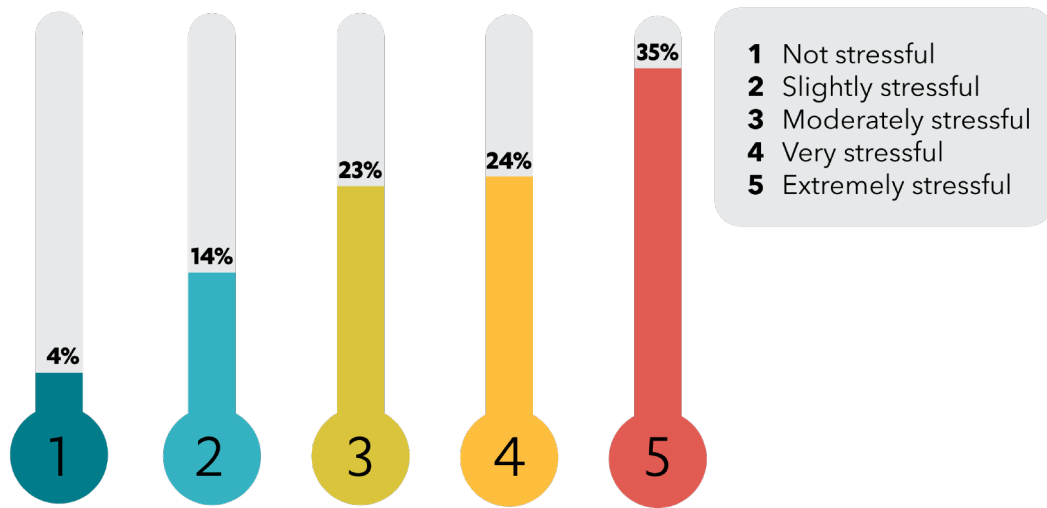
Those who did not file unemployment insurance did not think they were qualified or did not know how to file.

Figure 26: Reasons for Not Filing for Unemployment Insurance



Those who were newly unemployed reported high levels of stress.

Figure 27: Stress Levels of Unemployed Workers and Learners



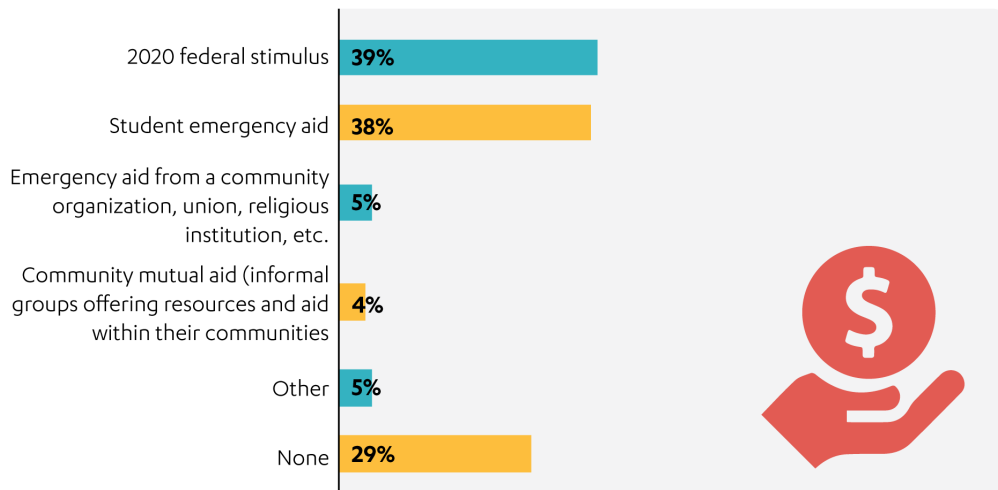


Life Experiences

Financial Support

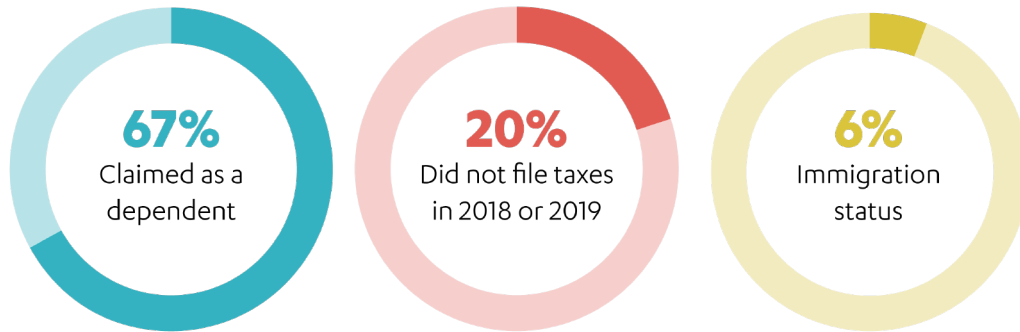
The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, approved March 27, 2020, provided qualifying individuals with a \$1,200 stimulus payment, but many, including students, were left out.²¹ Additionally, the CARES Higher Education Fund allowed colleges to provide emergency funds to students, but only a small minority of workers and learners have received that aid. Some received relief from other personal or community networks.²² Nearly a third of workers and learners have not received any form of emergency assistance.

Figure 28: Stimulus and Other Forms of Aid Received



Nationwide, 4 million high school and 9 million college students were excluded from the CARES Act.²³ Most of the workers and learners reported that they did not receive the stimulus funds because they were claimed as a dependent.

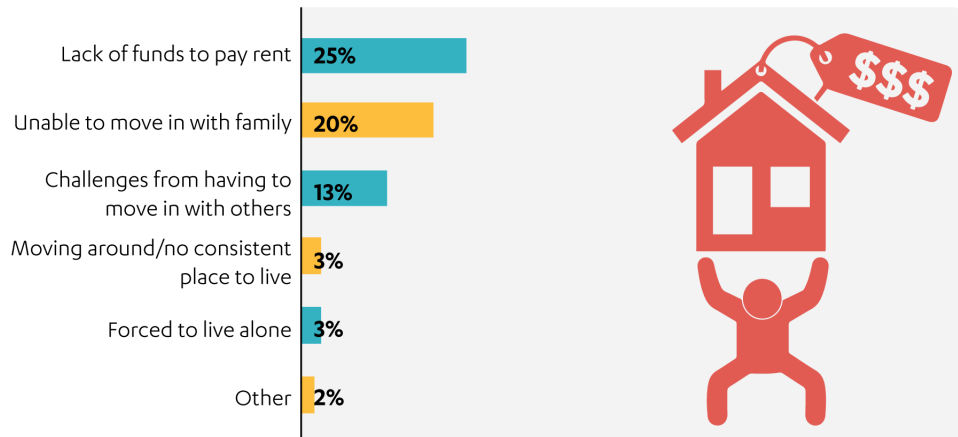
Figure 29: Reason for Not Receiving Stimulus



Housing and Living Situation

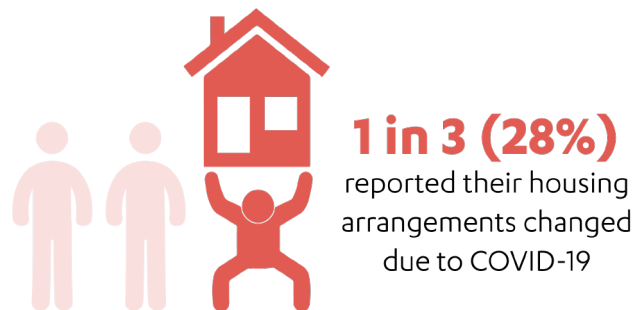
The COVID-19 pandemic impacted their housing arrangements. A quarter of workers and learners lacked funds to pay rent. Some workers and learners did not have the option to move in with their families, and a tenth were experiencing challenges from having to move in with others.

Figure 30: Housing Issues since COVID 19



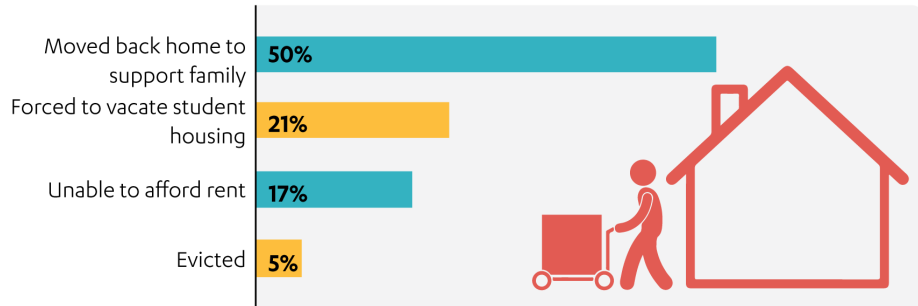
A little over a quarter of workers and learners had to change their housing situations due to COVID 19.

Figure 31: Housing Changed



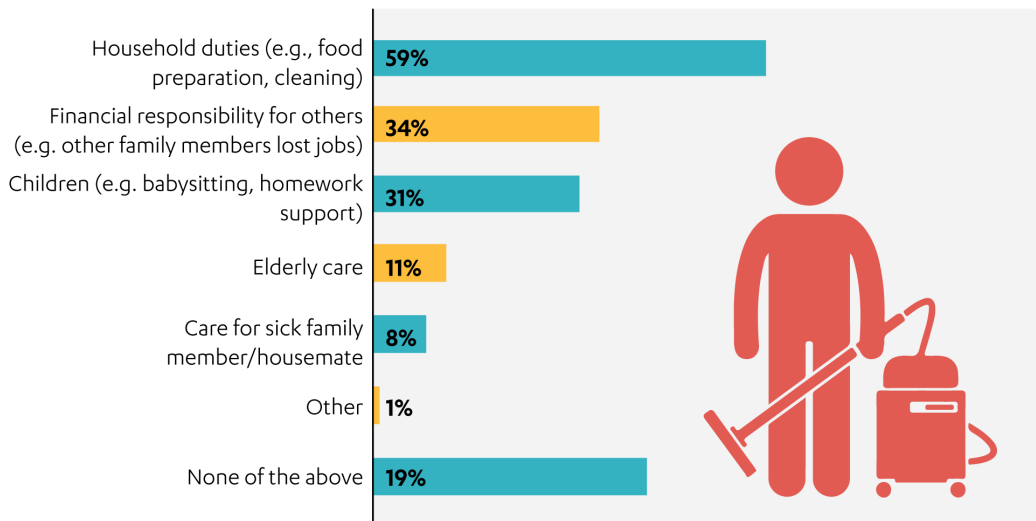
The reasons behind the changes varied but the most common were moving back home to support family, being forced to vacate student housing,²⁴ and inability to afford rent. One student noted that “the stimulus check wasn’t enough to pay for rent.”

Figure 32: Reasons for Housing Changes



Almost all workers and learners, regardless of changes in their housing arrangements, were facing housing challenges and increased responsibilities as a result of the pandemic. Many had to take on additional household or financial responsibilities. Some workers and learners also needed to support other family members with childcare and homework.

Figure 33: Increased Responsibilities

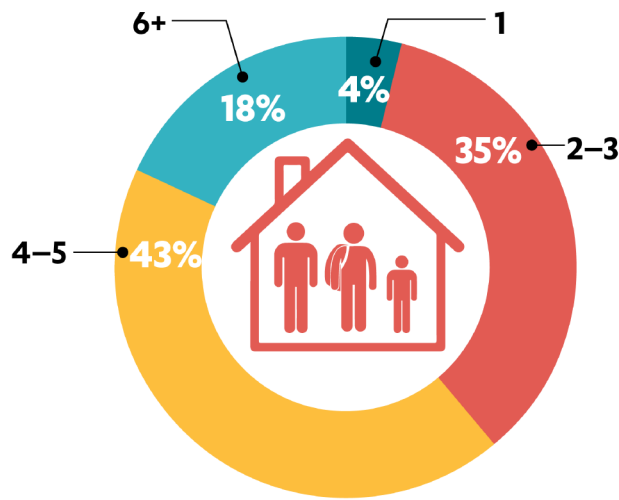


Workers and learners noted other ways they are providing additional support to their families. Some were shopping for groceries and essential supplies, so their parents could stay safe at home. Another needed to file unemployment benefits for parents and relatives who do not speak English. Workers and learners also discussed using CalFresh to provide groceries for their household and pay for internet service.

Since the vast majority of workers and learners do not live alone, those working on the front lines pose a risk to family and household members.²⁵ Those engaged in remote learning also have to take into account other household members given that many share common spaces,²⁶ and, now, find themselves engaging in household and caretaking duties.

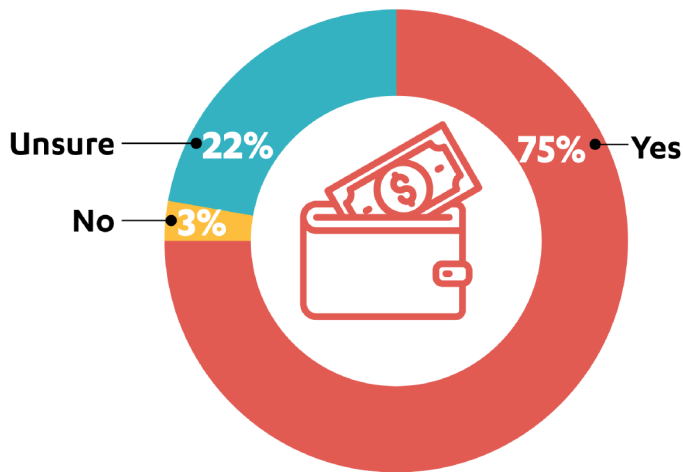
Very few workers and learners lived by themselves. Nearly two thirds of workers and learners are in a household with at least 4 people.

Figure 34: Number of People in the Household



Like many people have reported, workers and learners are concerned about their ability to pay for food and other necessities in the coming weeks. Almost a quarter of students are unable or unsure if they will be able to pay for food and necessities in the next four weeks.

Figure 35: Ability to Pay for Food and Other Necessities





Workers and learners are struggling to balance school and work during an unprecedented time. They have had to adapt to an entirely new learning environment and reduced academic support all while attempting to figure out how to cover their living expenses and rearrange their housing situations. Even for workers and learners who are still employed, their work hours have been reduced or have become less consistent, threatening their financial security. Never have workers and learners been more vulnerable or faced more challenges in pursuing their educational and professional goals. Public colleges and universities, employers, and policy makers must respond to the diverse needs of workers and learners to enable them to thrive academically as well as personally. The following are specific recommendations to ameliorate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers and learners; Unseen Costs provides a more general set of recommendations.

- 1. Address inequities in remote access and learning.** Colleges need to ensure workers and learners have access to technology, technology literacy training, and high-speed internet. Colleges need to support faculty and instructors in adjusting their teaching methods, including forms of assessment, to create a learning community where students are actively engaged with course content and feel supported in their learning.
- 2. Develop educational and workplace safety nets.** As students are grappling with job losses and decreased work hours, colleges should freeze tuition, fees, and housing costs. Employers need to offer a range of safety nets to workers even as the economy opens back up, including but not limited to hazard pay and paid sick leave. Workers and learners were already managing multiple, often conflicting, roles, and COVID-19 has added even more to their plates, amplifying their need for flexibility to meet their work and educational commitments.

3. Deliver holistic support for workers and learners. Colleges should incorporate telemental health platforms so they can provide mental health and counseling support to students. Maintaining social distancing can be achieved with telehealth appointments as well as providing a greater range of availability outside regular business hours. Policymakers must work to eliminate prerequisites and ensure that telehealth services are covered by insurance companies.²⁷ Colleges and universities should consider alternative food options to ensure students have direct access to fresh produce or meals. For example, since May 2020, UCLA Housing has been selling fresh produce, which would normally have gone to dining halls, directly to students and their families. Policy makers must pardon rent payments for those who have experienced job loss or reduction in hours.



Appendix A: Methodology

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UCLA Labor Center, in collaboration with the Dolores Huerta Labor Institute at the Los Angeles Community College District and the California State University (CSU), Long Beach, American Studies Program, conducted a survey to examine both the student and employment experiences of workers and learners during the pandemic. The survey included a 15-minute in person, telephone or video sessions with 236 workers and learners attending public colleges in Los Angeles County. Students recruited workers and learners from their social networks who attend colleges in the University of California, CSU, and California Community College systems. They conducted surveys via videoconferencing or telephone and entered the data into an online platform (a few students were able to meet with respondents face to face by observing physical distancing procedures). The protocol for this study involved asking potential respondents a series of questions, or screeners, to ensure that each participant had taken at least six units at a Los Angeles County public college and worked at least 16 hours a week since fall 2019. Surveys in English were conducted from April 22 through May 29, 2020. CSU Long Beach and UCLA undergraduate students contributed to the preliminary analysis.

Table A1: Number of Surveys Collected by College System

| CCC (39%) | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Cerritos College (6) | LA Pierce College (10) |
| Compton College (1) | LA Southwest College (2) |
| Cypress College (1) | LA Trade Tech College (14) |
| East LA College (14) | LA Valley College (3) |
| El Camino College (2) | Long Beach City College (8) |
| Glendale Community College (1) | Pasadena City College (4) |
| LA City College (2) | Rio Hondo College (5) |
| LA Harbor College (5) | Santa Monica College (6) |
| LA Mission College (2) | West LA College (5) |
| CSU (25%) | |
| CSU Dominguez Hills (9) | CSU LNorthridge (9) |
| CSU Los Angeles (13) | Cal Poly Pomona (4) |
| CSU Long Beach (24) | |
| UCs (36%) | |
| UCLA (85) | |

| | | Percentage of Survey Sample |
|-----------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Age | 18–24 | 80 |
| | 25–45 | 19 |
| | 46 and older | <1 |
| Gender | Female | 66 |
| | Male | 33 |
| | Gender nonconforming, genderqueer, or gender questioning | 1 |
| Race/ethnicity | Hispanic or Latinx | 68 |
| | White | 8 |
| | Black or African American | 8 |
| | Multiracial | 7 |
| | Asian | 6 |
| | SWANA (Southwest Asian and North African) | 2 |
| | Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander | 1 |
| | Native American or Alaskan Native | <1 |
| Has dependents | Yes | 5 |
| | No | 95 |

Table A2: Survey Sample Demographics



Appendix B: Acknowledgments

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