

Rocked by COVID-19, Young People's Uncertainty over Future Could Shape Economic Outlook for an Entire Generation

"I believe the community will be forever affected by the outbreak...It will leave an imprint on everybody's minds that will last for years."

- Hispanic male, online focus group participant, age 21, lower income, Illinois

schooling could cause ripple effects in the kind of jobs that young people pursue—and qualify for—in the future, which can affect their long-term ability to achieve their dreams, accumulate wealth, and pass it on to future generations.

A new tracking poll, conducted by Goodwin Simon Strategic Research (GSSR) with support from Equitable Futures, a project of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, shines new light on how the adjustments, sacrifices, and other life changes young people have had to make during the COVID-19 pandemic are impacting their perceptions about their future. Conducted in August 2020, the nationwide online poll surveyed Black and Hispanic youth from a broad spectrum of household incomes and white youth from households with lower incomes.

Uncertainty during this climate of upheaval is, of course, not exclusive to young people. Yet, the stakes for Black and Hispanic youth and white youth from households with lower incomes are especially high because the pandemic is exacerbating existing economic inequalities, which presents a graver threat to their future economic outlook.

Overview

The lives of Black and Hispanic youth and white young people from households with lower incomes have been rocked by the COVID-19 outbreak. COVID-19 is forcing many young people to calculate the value of college differently than they were before the pandemic and, for some, to rethink their decision to go to college in the first place.

These decisions around

This research shows that, as young people grapple with feelings of uncertainty about when the country will emerge from the current crisis, they are also juggling more responsibilities: many are working multiple jobs in unsafe conditions and stepping up to help with caring for family members at unprecedented levels. The research also reveals how the impact of the pandemic is gendered in the realms of both caregiving and paid employment.

The pandemic is also forcing a reckoning: young people are facing extreme uncertainty as they imagine their future selves and the paths they need to take to move through and pursue their career and other life goals.

Introduction

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States in early spring, numerous public opinion polls have been conducted of American adults, gauging their attitudes and perceptions during this period of unprecedented upheaval. Surveys that have probed public opinion on the pandemic's impact on education, jobs, and economic recovery have largely reflected the viewpoints of parents, teachers, and other adults—fewer explore young people's attitudes. This is despite the fact that their generation stands to sustain the biggest long-term impact from the current crisis.

How is the COVID-19 outbreak reshaping young people's perceptions of their future? The tracking poll by GSSR offers insights into this question by showing how Black and Hispanic youth and white youth from households with lower incomes are navigating a changed economy and other turbulent realities of the pandemic—as well as the emotional and practical challenges they face as they weigh their current and future prospects.

That COVID-19 disparately impacts this swath of the youth population has been well documented. Research shows that people of color are more negatively impacted by COVID-19, and that young people (18-24) and people from households with lower incomes are also more negatively impacted by job loss in particular, which exacerbates existing risk/inequalities.^{1,2} As a result of longstanding inequities in our education, social, and economic systems, Black and Hispanic young people faced a more challenging road to achieving career and financial stability even before the coronavirus outbreak relative to their white peers. Research has shown that this is true even after accounting for income and education levels.³ For white youth from households with lower incomes, the barriers include persistent class inequity and the rising cost of higher education.^{4,5,6}

Given these historical inequities, it is critically important to better understand how these young people are experiencing

Methodology

2020 survey respondents included:

- 209 white females, 204 white males
- 203 Black females, 205 Black males
- 204 Hispanic females, 220 Hispanic males
- 272 youth ages 15-16
- 390 youth ages 17-18
- 643 youth ages 19-21

The margin of error for n=1,305 is +/- 2.7 percentage points and higher for subgroups.

2019 survey respondents included:

- 370 white females, 386 white males
- 486 Black females, 451 Black males
- 499 Hispanic females, 398 Hispanic males
- 528 youth ages 15-16
- 676 youth ages 17-18
- 1,434 youth ages 19-21

The margin of error for n=2,638 is +/- 1.9 percentage points and higher for subgroups.

You can learn more about the survey methodology and review the full findings deck by following the buttons below or by visiting <https://www.equitablefutures.org/covid19>.

**SURVEY
METHODOLOGY⁸**

**SURVEY
RESULTS⁹**

Parents/guardians provided written consent prior to minors being surveyed in both surveys.



Illustration by Bianca Vazquez Castillo, age 17

the economic, social, and academic disruptions triggered by the coronavirus pandemic and how these disruptions are impacting or informing choices that may impact their future economic mobility. This grounding may also help identify what their most immediate needs might be.

The analysis presented in this brief compares findings from an online national survey conducted August 8th to August 16th, 2020 among 1,305 young people ages 15 to 21 with a similar online nationwide survey conducted one year ago, from September 16th to September 22nd, 2019, among 2,638 young people ages 15 to 21. The 2019 survey is part of a larger body of quantitative and qualitative research conducted among young people in 2019.⁷

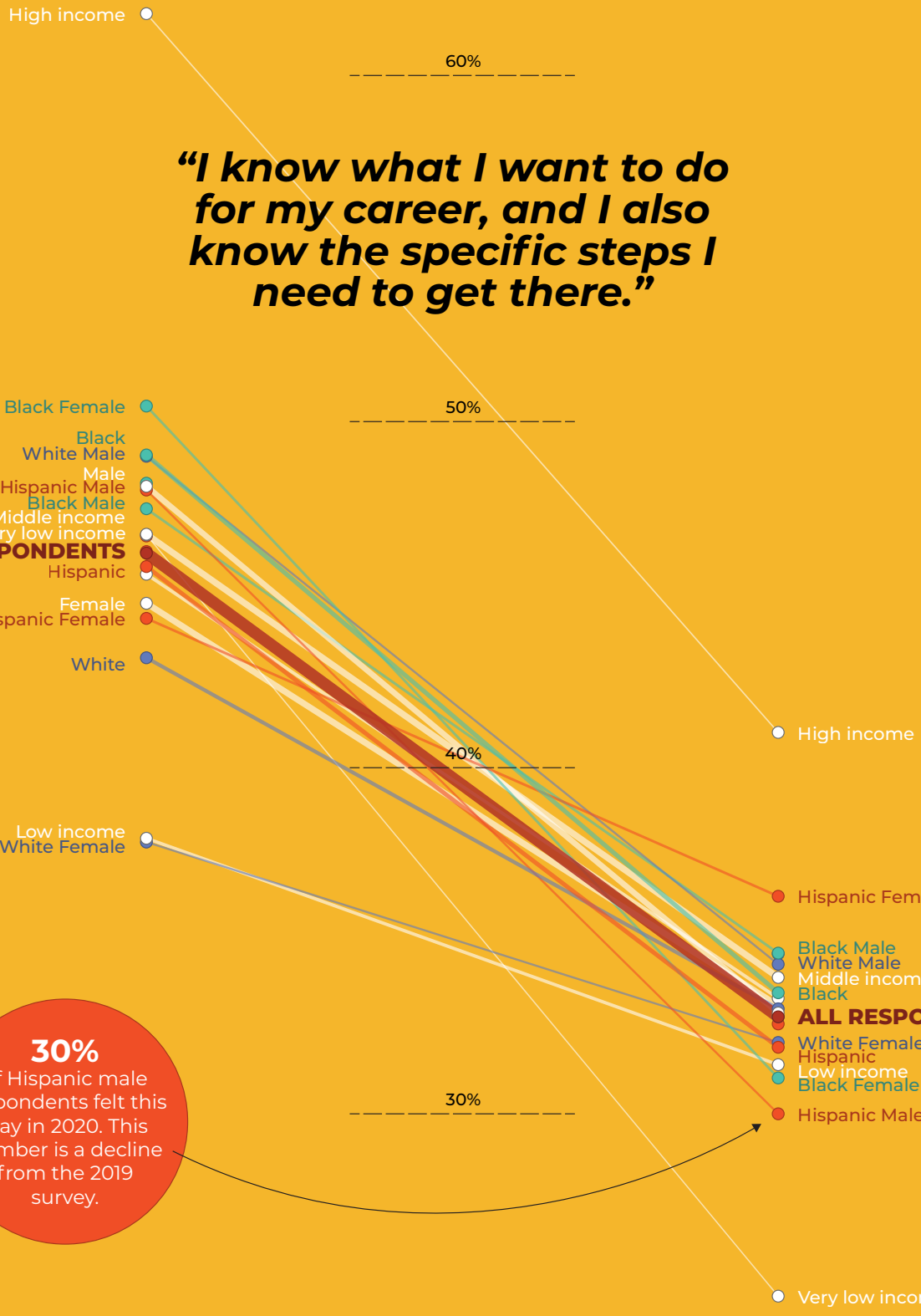
Key Findings

Fewer respondents report feeling very clear about their goals and ideas for their future job or career in 2020 than did in 2019.

In 2020, slightly more than one-quarter (27%) of respondents overall report feeling very clear about their future job or career goals compared to 43 percent of respondents overall in 2019. There is at least a nine percentage point drop across all gender/race subgroups in 2020 compared to 2019. Certainty about the future appears to be gendered: the drop is most precipitous among Black female respondents (22 percentage points lower in 2020 than in 2019) and Hispanic female respondents (18 percentage points lower in 2020 than in 2019).

Across race, gender, and income level, fewer youth respondents in 2020 feel that they know what they want to do and the steps to get there.

SEPTEMBER 2019 ➔ AUGUST 2020



30%
of Hispanic male respondents felt this way in 2020. This number is a decline from the 2019 survey.

There is also a substantial decline in the proportion of youth respondents who report that *I know what I want to do for my work or career, and I also know the specific steps I need to take to get there*. In 2020, 33 percent of respondents overall report feeling this way, compared to 46 percent of respondents overall in 2019. The largest decline is among Black female respondents (19 percentage points lower in 2020 than in 2019), and there are also double-digit declines among Hispanic male respondents (18 percentage points lower in 2020 than in 2019), white male respondents (15 percentage points lower in 2020 than in 2019), and Black male respondents (12 percentage points lower in 2020 than in 2019).

Fewer respondents overall report feeling they have an *extremely good idea* where to look for information (29% in 2020 compared to 37% in 2019) **or** where to seek guidance (26% in 2020 compared to 33% in 2019) about how to achieve their future job, work, or career goals.

Many youth respondents' perception of the value of college has changed since the COVID-19 outbreak.

Slightly more than half (52%) of youth respondents say that they value college differently now than before COVID-19.

Twenty-eight percent (28%) of youth respondents overall report *I used to think college is/would be worth it for me [prior to the COVID outbreak] but now I think it is/would not be worth it*.

Among respondents from households with lower incomes that figure is 25 percent and 32 percent and 34 percent among respondents from households with middle or higher incomes, respectively.

At the same time, nearly a quarter of youth respondents report that the coronavirus outbreak has shifted their thinking in the opposite direction: 24 percent overall report *I used to think college is/would not be worth it for me but now I think it is/would be worth it*.

A total of 23 percent of respondents from households with lower incomes (14% for respondents from households with very low incomes and 26% for respondents from households with low incomes) report they used to think college was not worth it but now think college is worth it. That figure is 25 percent for respondents from middle income households and 30 percent for respondents from households with higher incomes.

Overall, 17 percent of youth respondents report feeling unsure about whether they are thinking differently about college being worth it for them since the coronavirus outbreak. Black male respondents (21%) are the most likely to report being unsure.

Fewer respondents report feeling college is or would be worth it in 2020 than did in 2019.

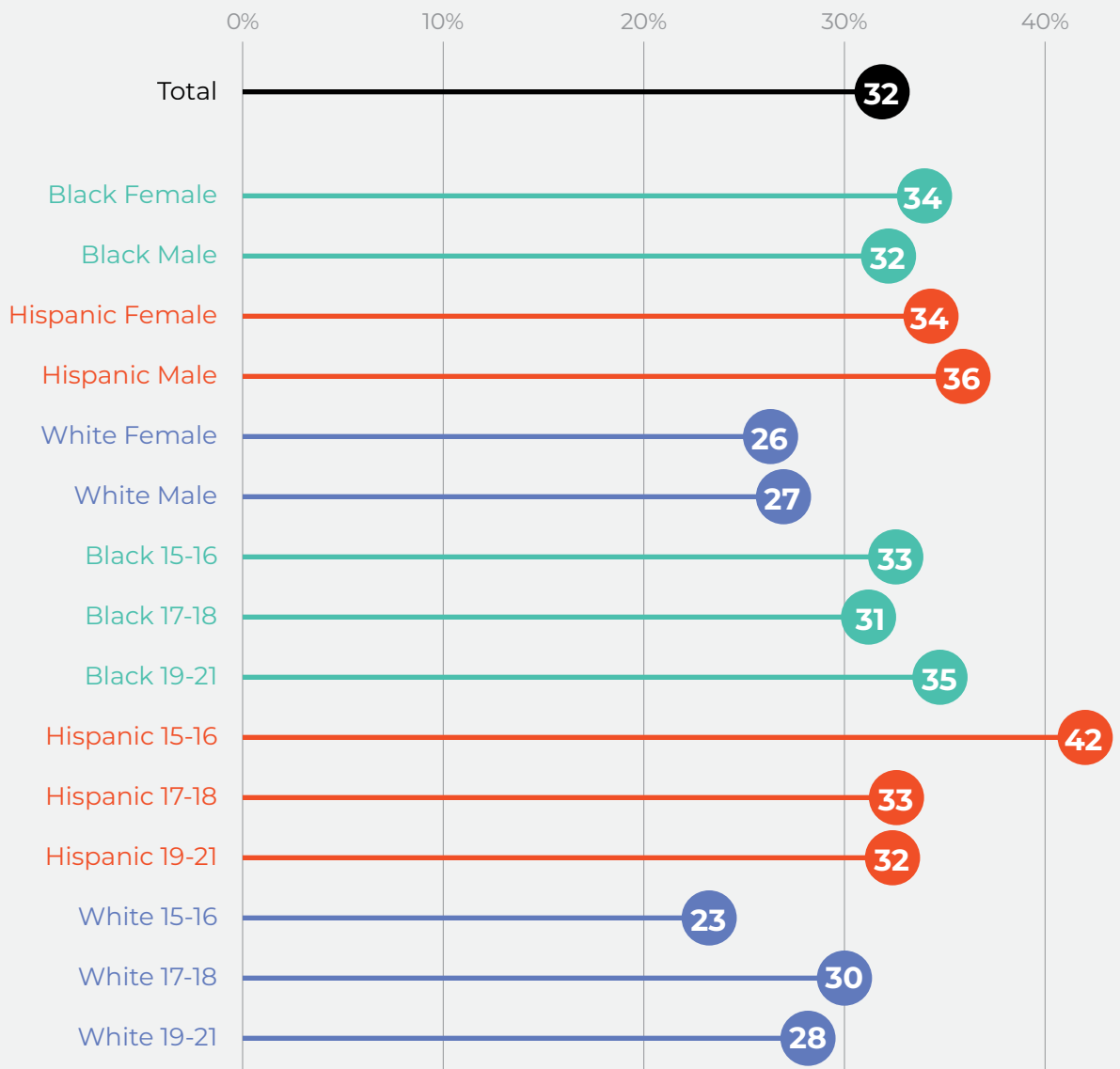
In 2020, 62 percent of respondents overall report feeling that *college is or would be worth it*, including a majority of respondents across every race/gender subgroup. However, this is a nine percentage point decline from 2019 (71% overall). The largest declines in 2020 are among Black female respondents (57% report *college is or would be worth it* in 2020 compared to 78% in 2019) and white female respondents (61% in 2020 compared to 75% in 2019).

Many respondents are helping to care for someone other than themselves at home.

The responsibility of caring for a younger sibling falls more heavily on Black and Hispanic respondents than white respondents: 34 percent of Black and Hispanic female respondents, 36 percent of Hispanic male respondents, and 32 percent of Black male respondents report helping to provide care for a younger sibling, cousin, or other younger family member at home. This is in contrast to 26 percent and 27 percent of white female respondents and white male respondents, respectively. Fourteen percent (14%) of respondents overall are helping to provide care for someone older than themselves in their household.

Do you help provide care for other people in your household, such as a child younger than you or an older person living with you?

Those answering: Yes, I help provide care for someone younger than me

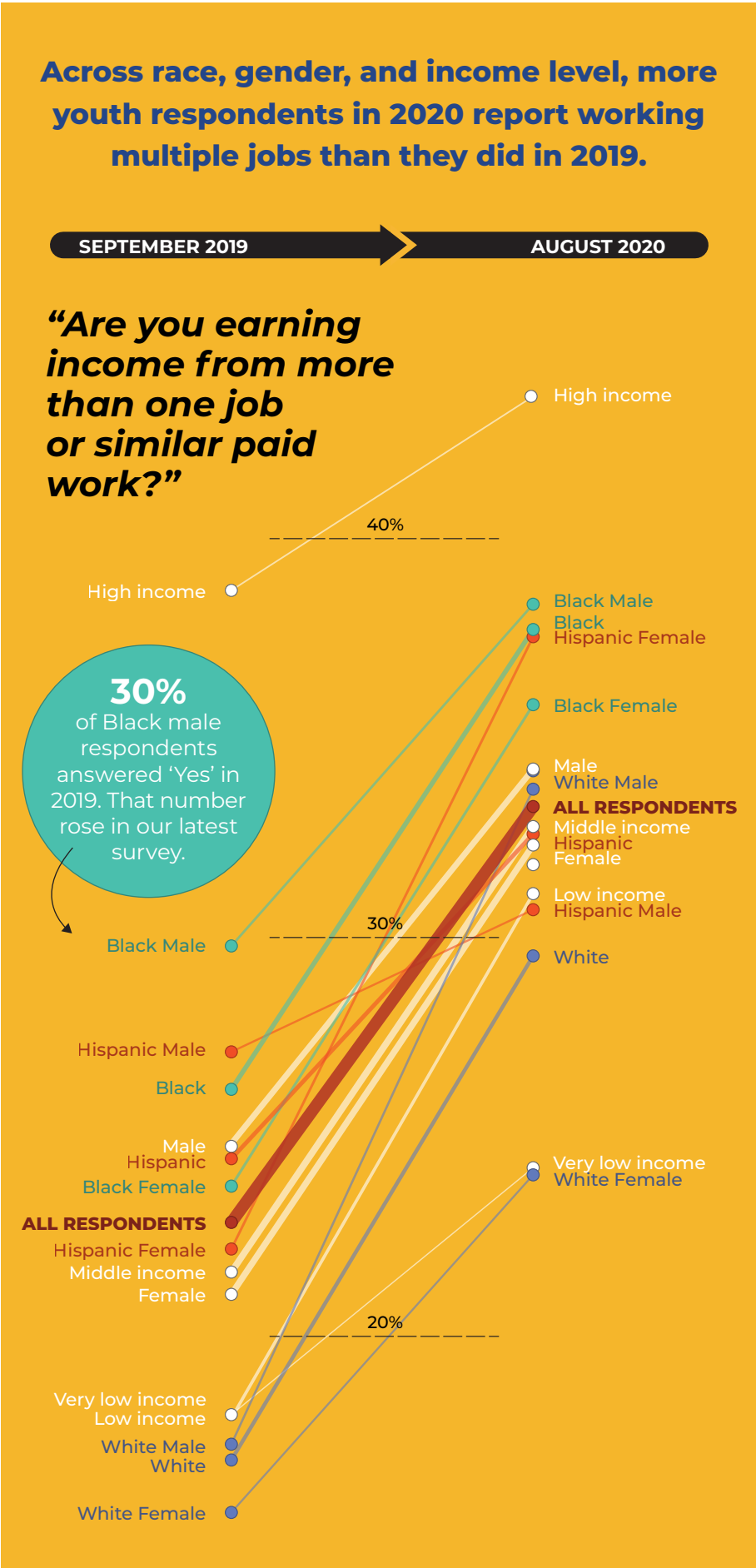


Among respondents who left their jobs due to coronavirus-related issues, 57 percent report having to help more with childcare responsibilities at home, such as helping to provide care for a younger sibling, cousin, or other child, as a *very important* (33%) or *somewhat important* (24%) factor in their decision to leave their job. Similarly, 50 percent of respondents who left their jobs due to coronavirus-related issues report having to help provide more care for an older family member, such as a parent, aunt, uncle, or grandparent, as a *very important* (32%) or *somewhat important* (18%) factor.

More respondents are working multiple jobs in 2020 than in 2019.

The percentage of respondents working more than one job jumped overall by 10 percentage points from last year (23% in 2019 compared to 33% in 2020). The most pronounced increases are among white male respondents (17% in 2019 compared to 34% in 2020); Black female respondents (24% in 2019 compared to 36% in 2020); and Hispanic female respondents (22% in 2019 compared to 38% in 2020 compared).

What kind of work are Black and Hispanic young people and white youth from households with lower incomes doing? Among youth respondents who are employed, nearly half (48%) report that they are considered “essential workers.” Among Hispanic female respondents who are currently working for pay, 57% fall into this



category. Half (50%) of both white and Hispanic male respondents who are currently working for pay report working essential jobs. Of respondents who are currently working, 36 percent report working in a grocery store, restaurant, or similar food service job; 27 percent report working in retail; 15 percent report working in construction, plumbing, electrical, HVAC, or a similar field; nine percent report working in childcare (such as a babysitter or nanny); 13 percent report having an office job; and ten percent report they are doing health care work.

Among respondents who work full-time or part-time, nearly a quarter (24%) report feeling *somewhat unsafe* (19%) or *very unsafe* (5%) in their workplaces compared to 48 percent who report they feel *somewhat safe* and 25 percent who report feeling *extremely safe*.

Compared to 2019, there is a notable dip in the proportion of respondents who are working for pay. In 2020, 48 percent of youth respondents overall report that they are currently working full time, part time, or taking part in a paid internship compared to 54 percent in 2019. (Note: the 2019 question and data did not include paid internships.)

The uptick in respondents working multiple jobs could be related to the impact the pandemic has had and continues to have on their own jobs and finances, as well as those of their immediate family members.

Sixteen percent (16%) of respondents overall report having lost income due to a decrease in work hours or less business; 11 percent report they were temporarily laid off or temporarily lost a job; nine percent report they have lost a job; and eight percent report they have lost an internship, apprenticeship, or similar learning/training opportunity because of COVID-19.

When asked about the financial impact of COVID-19 on their immediate families, 20 percent of respondents report that a family member has lost income due to a decrease in work hours or less business; 15 percent report that a family member has been temporarily laid off or temporarily lost a job; ten percent report that a family member has lost a job; and 11 percent report that a family member has had difficulty finding a job.

More than two-thirds (69%) of youth respondents feel the country will eventually go back to the way it was before the coronavirus outbreak, but perceptions differ on how long this will take.

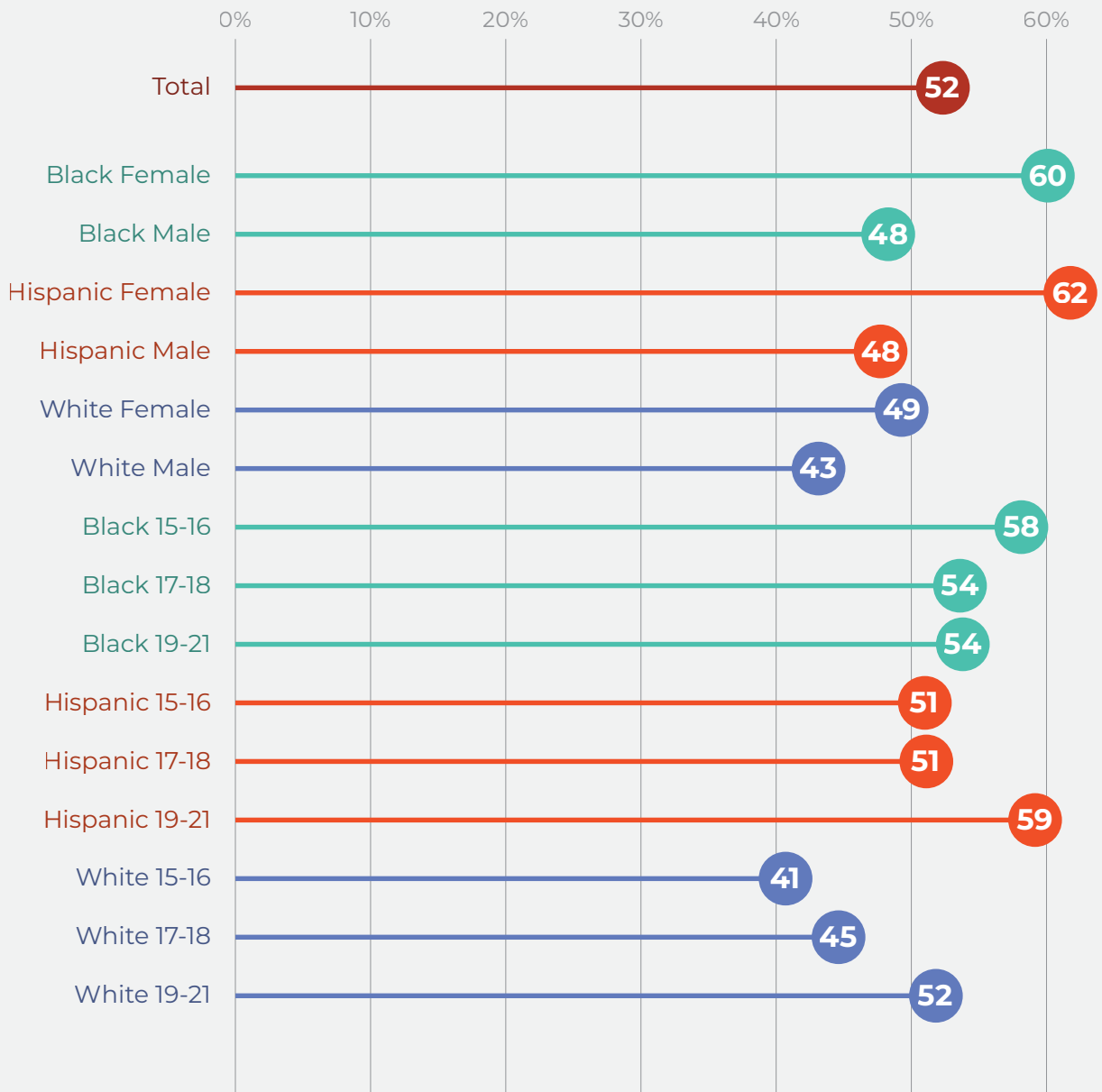
Thirty-two percent (32%) of youth respondents overall feel the country *will be different for a few months but eventually it will go back to normal*. A somewhat smaller percentage (27%) believes the recovery will take longer: they feel the country *will be different for a few years before it returns to normal*. A small minority (9%) feel the country *will soon be or already is back to normal*. Twenty-two percent of youth respondents feel the country *will be different permanently and it will have a new normal*.

A majority of respondents overall feel the worst is yet to come with respect to the coronavirus in the United States.

Youth were asked to reflect on where on the road to recovery they believe the country to be. While 52% feel the worst is yet to come, nearly one-quarter (23%) believe *the worst is behind us*, and 10 percent feel *the coronavirus is not that big of a problem*. Hispanic female respondents (62%) and Black female respondents (60%) are the most likely to feel *the worst is yet to come*.

Which of the following best describes your feelings about coronavirus in the united states?

Those answering: The worst is yet to come



Looking Ahead

Over the next four months, we will be releasing additional briefs and a final report based on our tracking poll research. In these upcoming surveys, we'll be exploring how the movement for racial justice is affecting young people's perceptions of their future and work as well as the roles that mentors and other influential and caring adults play on youth decision-making.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/13/covid-19-job-and-income-loss-leading-to-more-hunger-and-financial-hardship/>
- 2 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/05/financial-and-health-impacts-of-covid-19-vary-widely-by-race-and-ethnicity/>
- 3 <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-white-wage-gaps-expand-with-rising-wage-inequality/>
- 4 http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/images/nbhds_exec_summary.pdf
- 5 <https://edtrust.org/resource/affordability-gap/>
- 6 <https://time.com/3608291/college-costs-financial-aid-merit-aid/>
- 7 *Striving and Thriving: Full Report* provides insight into how Black and Hispanic young people and white young people from households with lower incomes envision their future selves in the workforce—what they like to do, what they believe they are skilled at, and where they feel they belong related to work. <https://www.equitablefutures.org/striving-to-thriving/>
- 8 Survey Methodology: <https://www.equitablefutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Equitable-Futures-COVID-19-Youth-Tracking-Poll-P1-Methodology.pdf>
- 9 Survey Results: <https://www.equitablefutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Equitable-Futures-COVID-19-Youth-Tracking-Poll-P1-Results.pdf>

Data visualization by Andrew Garcia Phillips