



COVID-Related Hardships in Low-Income Minority Families:

Children's Education was a Bigger Hardship Than Income and Food Security

■ Overview

Low income and minority communities (hereafter, LIM) have borne a disproportionate burden of COVID-19 related morbidity and mortality.^{1,2} But research on the pandemic's impacts regarding other aspects of well-being in these communities is still emerging. Studies done early in the pandemic indicate that LIM communities suffered substantial loss of income and increased food insecurity.^{3,4,5,6} The Federal government's stimulus funding, expanded unemployment benefits, and housing protections, along with the safety net of social welfare programs, have provided some economic and housing support to families, but one critical area that has not received much needed support is children's education. There is mounting evidence supporting the widely held belief that school campus closures have had adverse impacts on education and socioemotional well-being among children across the board and in LIM communities in particular.^{5,6} Understanding the context within which children in LIM families received education during the pandemic is critical for developing strategies to mitigate adverse impacts on their academic and socioemotional well-being.

One critical area that has not received much needed support is children's education

In this brief, we report findings from data collected on families living in public housing communities in Los Angeles who were recruited prior to the pandemic as part of a longitudinal cohort study – the Watts Neighborhood Health Study (WNHS). The WNHS recruited adults and children ages 2 years and older from 607 households living in three public housing sites – Jordan Downs, Nickerson Gardens, and Imperial Courts – in the Watts neighborhood of South Los Angeles during 2018-2019. Between June 2020 and April 2021, questions about COVID-19-related hardships were administered to all adult and child respondents ages 9 years and older as part of their WNHS annual surveys. A total of 724 adults and 365 children ages 9-17 years completed the surveys, which were conducted remotely, via phone or video/audio-conferencing application. The study was approved by the University of Southern California's Institutional Review Board.

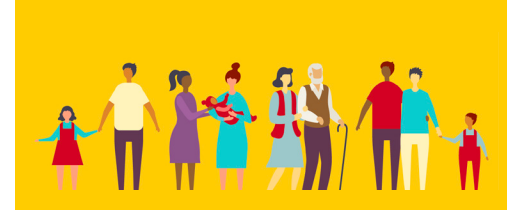


■ Study Participants

Table 1 reports the background characteristics of our study sample. Both adult and child respondents were predominantly Black and Hispanic and over 76% of adult respondents were female. About 58% of adults had an annual household income below \$20,000 and just under 38% had not completed high school. Over 65% of adults had at least one child (aged 2-17 years) residing in their household and over 60% received public assistance.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

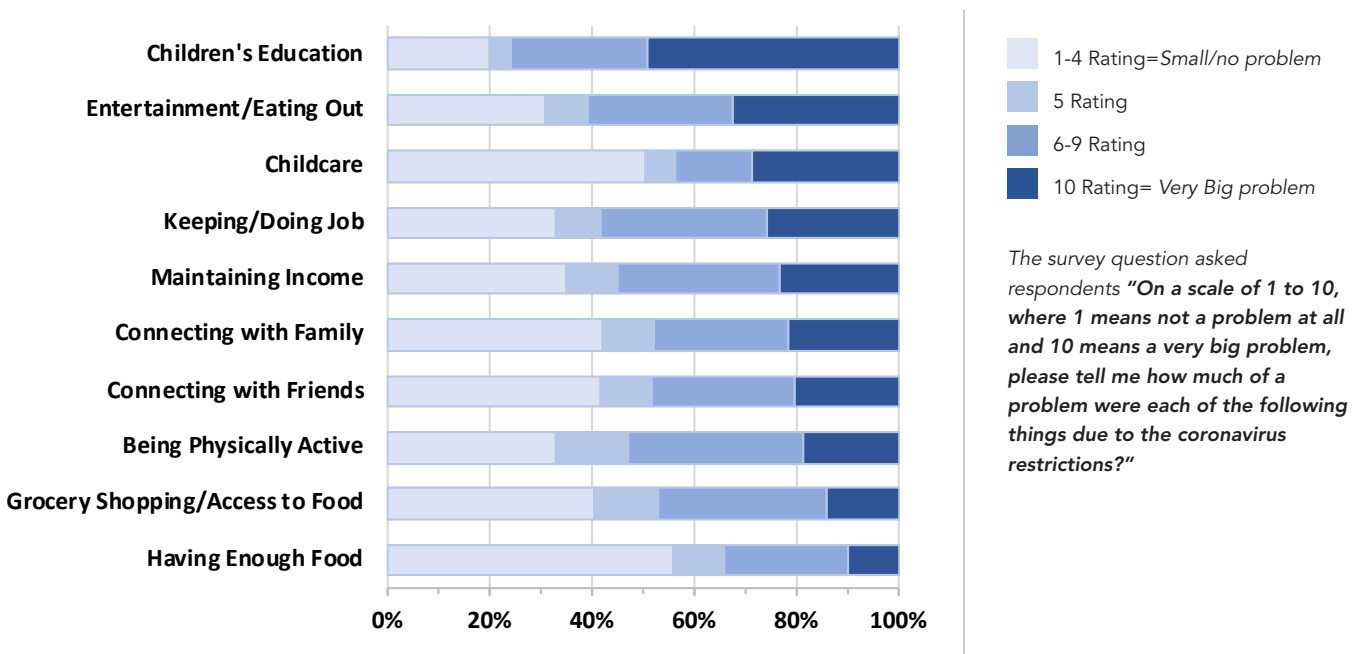
Adults (n=724)		% or mean
Gender		
Female		76.4%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black		31.3%
Hispanic		66.8%
Age (years)		40.9
Household Characteristics		
Household Income (2019)		
Less than \$5k		11.7%
\$5k to <\$10k		13.0%
\$10k - <\$15K		21.1%
\$15k - <\$20k		11.8%
\$20k +		42.3%
Highest Level of Education		
Less than high school degree		37.6%
High school degree or GED		35.2%
Some college or tech/vocational school		23.0%
College degree or higher		4.2%
Have Children (age 2-17) in home		65.3%
Receives any public assistance		61.5%
Children (n=365)		% or mean
Gender		
Female		51.2%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black		22.7%
Hispanic		71.8%
Age (years)		12.8



COVID-Related Hardships

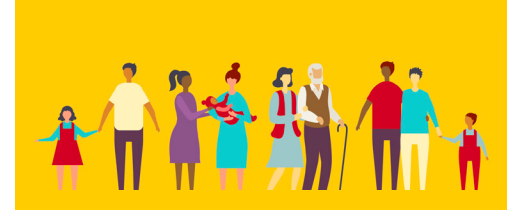
For a significant portion of the past year, Los Angeles County has been subject to restrictions that limited work, economic activity, schooling, and social interactions for its residents, in an attempt to substantially slow the spread of COVID-19. To assess the hardships faced by LIM residents during COVID-19 restrictions, we asked adult public housing residents in our sample to rate how much difficulty they experienced due to the coronavirus restrictions in several important aspects of their lives, including maintaining income, keeping or doing their job, staying connected with family and friends, children’s education and learning, childcare, grocery shopping and food access, food security, eating out and entertainment, exercise and physical activity, and other (free response).

Figure 1. **Difficulty Experienced by Adults due to COVID-19 Restrictions**



As shown in Figure 1, adult public housing residents had the most difficulty with their children’s education. Nearly 50% of respondents rated children’s education with the worst score, and about 27% gave a score above 5 but less than 10. Like most LA County families with school-age children, families in this community were forced to transition to an at-home learning environment at the beginning of the pandemic. As noted in a piece by the LA Times⁸, many families struggled to be successful in the at-home classroom, but LIM families suffered the most. For many LIM families, school-provided resources and support were substantially less prevalent, and took a considerably longer time to be provided, than in affluent areas. Among this population of public housing families, therefore, it is not surprising that at-home education posed the greatest challenge.

Public housing residents had the most difficulty with their children’s education



The second highest rated difficulty was entertainment/eating out, with nearly a third of the adult respondents scoring it a 10 and just under 30% scoring between 6 and 9. LA County enacted heavy restrictions to indoor entertainment, including indoor dining, which continued throughout the pandemic and greatly reduced opportunities for leisure.^{9,10}

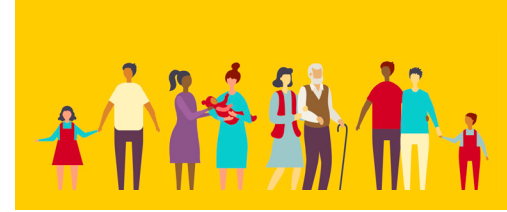
With regards to childcare, the sample was heavily split between having small or no problem (50%) and having a very big problem (44% scoring it higher than 5, with 29% scoring it a 10). With schools, after-school programs, and family- and center-based childcare centers closed during the pandemic, families with young children likely faced the most hardship with childcare. For parents working as essential workers, lack of childcare may have forced many parents out of jobs.^{11,12} A study by Northeastern University found over 13% of working parents had left a job or reduced hours during the pandemic because of childcare demands.¹³ Conversely, families with teens or older adolescents may not have the same childcare needs.

Other reports of the pandemic often noted income stability as the primary difficulty for LIM groups.^{4,14} As shown in Figure 1, however, ratings of income and job stability (i.e. “maintaining income” and “keeping/doing job”) fell in the middle indicating substantial heterogeneity in experiences. On the one hand, nearly a quarter of the respondents rated “maintaining income” and “keeping/doing their job” a very big problem, with an additional third of respondents rating between 6 and 9. On the other hand, about a third of respondents rated problems with income and job as small or none. This heterogeneity of experience likely reflects differences in pre-pandemic working status of respondents as well as types of jobs held by those who were working (e.g. essential workers, caregivers, construction workers, and transportation workers). Before the pandemic, adults in our study sample were most often employed in essential industries such as labor/construction, security, janitorial services, food/hospitality, and childcare. Despite the essential nature of these jobs, consistent work hours and job stability during the pandemic varied widely across and within each sector. For example, those who ran at-home daycares may have seen no lapse in income, while those employed at childcare centers remained unable to work.

In further contrast to other reports of COVID difficulties^{15,16}, food security was rated as least problematic by LIM families. Nearly 60% of adult respondents said that they had small to no problem (rating 1-4) having enough food, and only about 10% of respondents denoted food security as a “very big problem”. These findings may be explained by several factors. As shown in Table 1, over 61% of households in our sample were receiving public assistance during the pandemic. Furthermore, the Housing Authority and the City of Los Angeles were running daily meal programs at all these sites during the pandemic for seniors and disabled individuals and had multiple partners providing food donations to large families on a weekly basis. In addition, Grab and Go meal sites were located at most public housing communities in Los Angeles if they weren’t in walking distance to a school with a daily Grab and Go site. These findings suggest that city and statewide public assistance programs were adequately supporting very low-income families during the pandemic, but also adds an important layer to other reports on the pandemic-related needs of low-income populations.

Ratings of income and job stability (i.e. “maintaining income” and “keeping/doing job”) fell in the middle indicating substantial heterogeneity in experiences

Food security was rated as least problematic by LIM families



Being physically active was also not rated as a big problem by most respondents. This is welcome news since rates of overweight and obesity are very high in this community – about 85%, based on other data collected in the study. Reasons for why some respondents felt being physically active was a very big problem (19%) could include concerns about contracting the virus in physical activity spaces, or due to closure of indoor exercise facilities.

Experiences with social connectedness were varied with just over 40% rating it as a small or no problem while about 20% rated it as a very big problem. This could be due to varying family structures (e.g. presence of elderly or high-risk members).

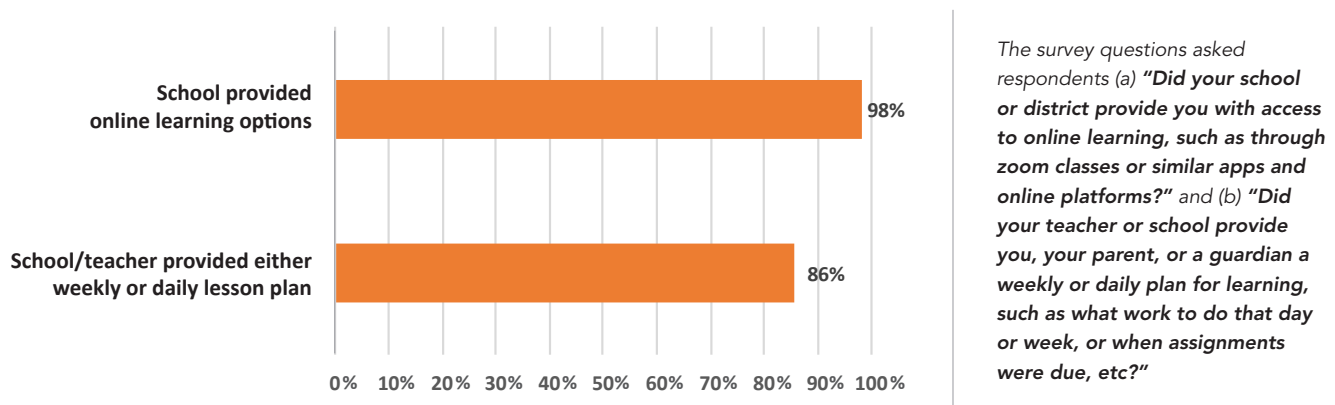
In the rest of this brief, we focus our discussion on children’s education, which was the issue that families in our sample experienced most difficulties with. We highlight the findings from surveys of 9-17-year-old children and adolescents from these same families. Given these were all school-age children, our surveys focused on learning more about children’s lived experience with at-home learning, as well as their socioemotional well-being.

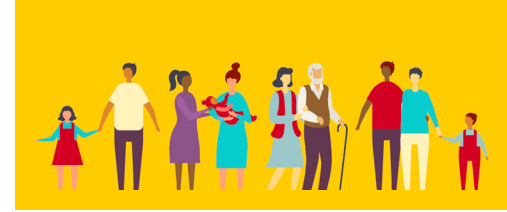
■ Children’s Experiences with At-Home Learning

To capture the at-home learning environment, surveyed children were asked about their school’s plan for online learning, their time spent on and ability to complete schoolwork, what resources they had available at home to participate in at-home learning, and how much help they received on schoolwork from their family.

As shown in Figure 2, 98% of children were given opportunities for online learning through their school and 86% were provided with either a weekly or daily lesson plan. While this is encouraging news, children struggled to engage with lessons and complete weekly assignments.

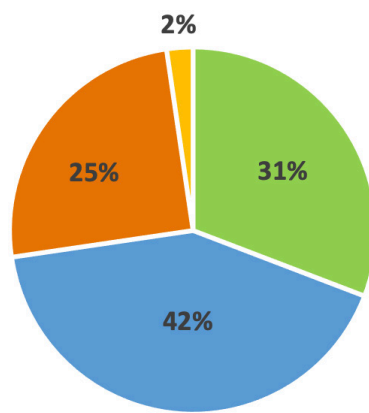
Figure 2. **School Plan for Online Learning**





When asked how much assigned work they were able to complete each week (Figure 3), only 31% of children said they completed “all of it”; more than a quarter said “some” or “none of it.” Similarly, as shown on Figure 4, about 38% of children spent 2 hours at most on schoolwork each day, which includes time in the online classroom and time talking to teachers. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in a regular school year elementary and secondary school children average upwards of 4.7 hours of schoolwork per week, in addition to the 8 or so hours a day they spend learning in a classroom.¹⁷ When it comes to the pandemic learning environment, therefore, our findings highlight a serious lack of engagement.

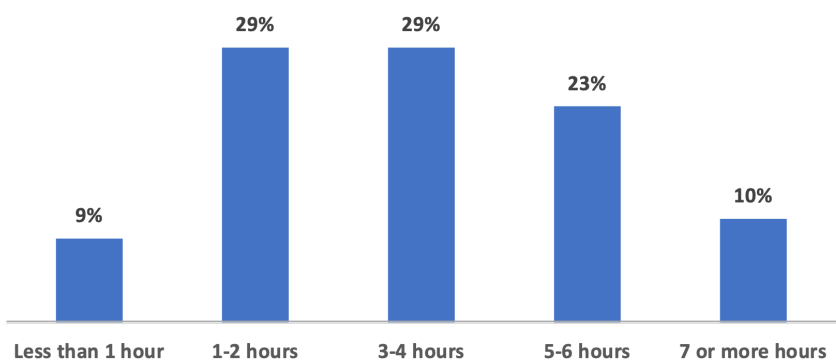
Figure 3. **Schoolwork Completed Each Week**



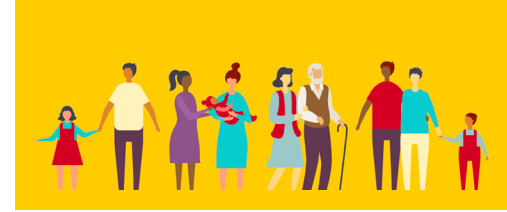
- All of it
- Most of it
- Some of it
- None of it

The survey question asked “**How much of your schoolwork that your teacher assigned you each week did you complete? Would you say— all of it, most of it, some of it, or none of it?**”

Figure 4. **Hours Per Day Children Spent on Schoolwork**

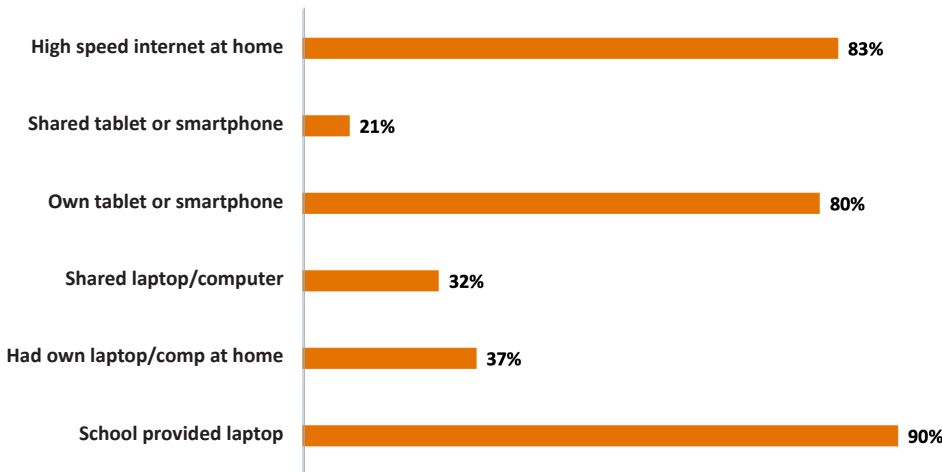


The survey question asked “**How many hours a day did you usually spend on weekdays doing schoolwork, including the time you spent on online lessons or talking with teachers about school?**”



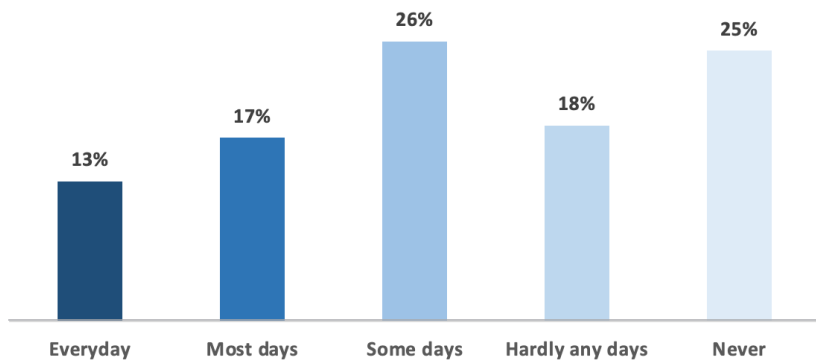
Despite the difficulty of engaging in an online classroom, our findings do show that over 90% of children had a school-provided laptop. This was critically important for children in our study sample, as there is an existing, and widening, digital divide between affluent and LIM groups.¹⁸ Furthermore, for many of the children in our sample, school-provided laptops made online learning possible. As shown in Figure 5, only 37% of surveyed children had their own computer at home and thus, without this school support, would have been unable to attend online learning. Despite having access to a computer, 17% of our sample denoted that they did not have high-speed internet at home. Additionally, 25% of children said they “never” received help with schoolwork from family members (Figure 6). Thus while schools helped fill a critical gap in computer access, lack of high-speed internet and family support to be successful in the online learning space were remaining gaps for LIM families.

Figure 5. **Children’s Resources at Home**

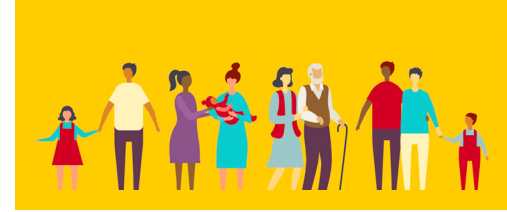


The survey question asked “Please tell me if you had the following resources at your home when the schools were closed” (with possible responses yes/no for each of the resources).

Figure 6. **Days Per Week Children Received Help with School from Family Member**



The survey question asked “How often did a parent or family member help you with any schoolwork or did any learning activities with you, such as reading, math, art or science projects etc, when the school was closed? Would you say everyday, most days, some days, hardly any days, or never?”



■ Children's Socioemotional Well-Being

In addition to the challenges of at-home learning, children's socioemotional well-being was also greatly impacted by COVID-19. When asked how worried they were about their family's financial situation (Figure 7), 60% of children said they were at least "a little worried" (18% said they were "very worried"). Similarly, 53% of children said they had at least "a little" trouble concentrating on schoolwork or other things because of COVID concerns, with 13% having "a lot" of trouble (Figure 8).

Figure 7. **Children's Concern about Family's Financial Situation during COVID**

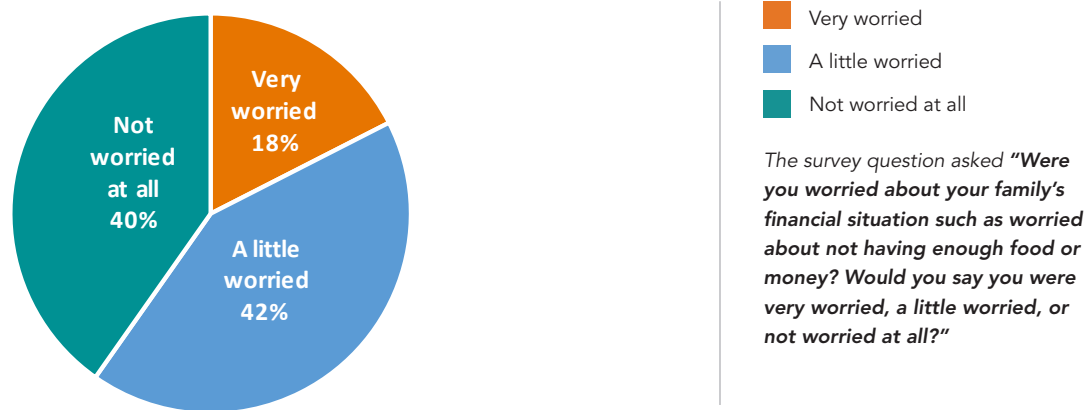
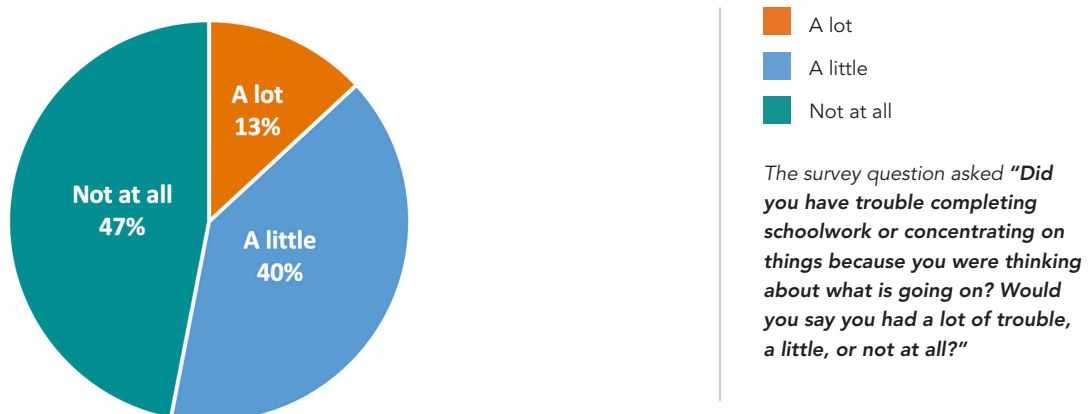
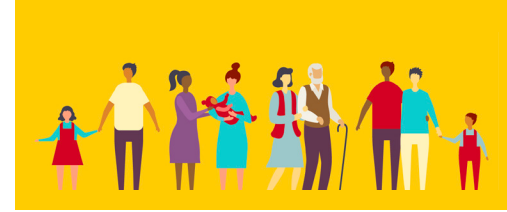


Figure 8. **Children's Difficulty Concentrating and Completing Schoolwork Due to COVID Concerns**





■ Discussion

While studies conducted earlier in the pandemic focused on reduced food security and income for LIM populations, findings in this report tell a different story. Across all surveyed adults, and supported by the lived experience of surveyed children, at-home education consistently stood out as the main difficulty for families. Because of the challenges with at-home learning, children struggled to complete schoolwork and to simply engage in a learning environment. A lowered level of engagement can lead to both educational and economic impacts, including lowered academic achievement, higher rates of dropout, and fewer opportunities for employment.¹⁹ Within a LIM population that is already disproportionately marginalized, the risk of these negative outcomes becomes increasingly higher.²⁰

Food security and income stability were not found to be significant barriers for LIM families

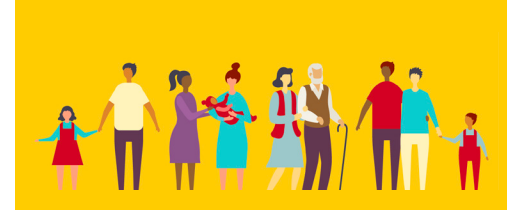
Furthermore, these findings show that the majority of children were concerned about the broad impacts of COVID-19, which impacted both their ability to concentrate in school and their overall mental health. Experiencing this kind of emotional stress at an early age can lead to a plethora of negative, long-term health outcomes such as chronic disease, cognitive decline, and shortened life expectancy.^{21,22,23} Again, within LIM populations who already face significant health inequities, the risk of experiencing these stress-related outcomes is even greater.²⁴

In contrast to other pandemic reports, food security and income stability were not found to be significant barriers for LIM families living in public housing in Los Angeles.¹⁵ This is notable not only because it demonstrates that the safety net in LA County helped very low-income families buffer the economic shocks of COVID-19, but also, and more importantly, because it highlights the knowledge gap between what resources are needed and what are actually being provided.

Our findings suggest that educational support should be a top priority for LIM families with children. The remote learning model left many LIM children without the individual support that many higher income families were able to provide their children due to greater parental involvement (due to more flexible and stable jobs and more educated parents) or the ability to purchase private tutoring for their children, further exacerbating educational inequality.^{25,26,27,28,29} There is an urgent need to “level the playing field” for LIM children and develop effective strategies for closing the achievement gap. This would require a deeper understanding of the barriers to learning, both remote and in-person, for children in LIM families and tailoring solutions accordingly. An effective strategy would provide greater resources and support for academic “catchup” while also addressing children’s emotional well-being.

Our findings suggest that educational support should be a top priority for LIM families with children.

Our findings also suggest a few areas for future research, most prominently that the impacts of COVID-19 may be distinctly different for very low-income families compared to low-income families. The need to distinguish between the experience of these groups is critical for several reasons, but most importantly for policymakers who will define the post-pandemic educational and economic landscape.



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