

The Impact of COVID-19 on U.S. College Students, and How Educators Should Respond

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ABSTRACT

The genesis and spread of COVID-19 around the world since 2020 have caused severe impacts in every aspect of people's lives, from work life to recreation, social activities to physical health. Higher education has not been excluded. Universities have altered curriculum, changed delivery methods, provided more counseling, purchased new technology, and altered attendance policy for classroom, athletic, social and artistic events (Hamlin, 2021).

To assess the impacts of these changes on college students, the authors created a questionnaire to ask students about their perceptions of these COVID-related impacts on their own personal lives. The survey had 56 questions about how the virus affected their academic, social, financial, physical and emotional lives. Over 800 students responded with objective input and subjective comments. Due to the volume of data, the authors have split the study into two parts. The survey results for the first part, academic and social aspects of the survey, were published in *Understanding the Impact of Covid-19 on College Student Academic and Social Lives*, Research in Higher Education Journal Volume 41 (see <http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/213347.pdf>). It will sometimes be referred to herein to provide clarity to the reader. The actual survey itself can also be found at that site.

This paper focuses on the impact of the coronavirus on student financial and physical well-being, which have become major stressors to this age group and have contributed to higher levels of anxiety and depression. It also examines how the virus has affected their social and emotional well-being. Lastly, recommendations are made to help educators understand the severity of the problem, and to take action to provide assistance for those students who have been adversely affected.

Keywords: Covid-19, College Student, Social Effects, Emotional Effects, Stress, Educator Responses

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INTRODUCTION.

COVID-19 is a name created in 2019 by the World Health Organization to mean “Coronavirus Disease 2019” (Kaplan, 2020). Coronaviruses are not new- they were first identified in humans as early as 1965. There are many varieties of this virus, and they derive their name from the crown-like appearance at the cellular level. There are already several variants which have infected millions of people, including Delta to Omicron. The rapid contagion of the pandemic and its variants has defied the use of masks, social distancing and even vaccines. As of January 4, 2020 over 16,540,000 cases were documented throughout the world, with 655,300 deaths and 10,346,125 recovered. By January 4, 2022 the cases had risen to 292,169,523, with 1,559,755 people dying each day (New York Times, 2022).

In the United States, the world’s most infected nation, 4,323,693 cases were confirmed, with 148,669 deaths by mid-2020 (Johns Hopkins University, 2020). By the end of 2021, over 53 million Americans had contracted the virus, and 820,355 had died, with over 40,000 more dying each month (Center for Disease Control, 2021).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE.

The research is focused primarily on how the virus has impacted the lives of college students in five areas: academic, social, financial, physical, and emotional. For this article, we will be focusing primarily on the last three of these areas, as well as expanding on our original comments about social changes which have affected these young people. It will also be shown that the financial and physical impacts of the virus have also affected their social, emotional and mental health. The Review of Literature will include comments on each of these topics.

Financial Impacts:

Many college students have lost jobs, or experienced reduced hours worked on their jobs, since the outbreak of the virus. Thousands lost their jobs working at their universities as student help or interns (Brown, 2020) while others who worked in the private sector either completely lost their jobs or had a significant cut in pay or hours. This is not just an American phenomenon. In Canada, many students who planned on working during the summer in the U.S. had their jobs cancelled (Thurton, 2020). According to a report by the Asian Development Bank and the ILO, Indian students are projected to lose 6.1 million jobs due to the pandemic, and 14.8 million young people will suffer job cuts in the region (Good Returns, 2020).

Many college students fear for their financial future. Many of those who expected to start internships, fellowships and jobs in the summer of 2020 were stunned to find that their employment had been cancelled; internships had been moved online; and companies like Disney not only cancelled summer internships but sent their Spring interns home (Perrett, 2020).

One study at Arizona State University in 2020 found that “thirteen percent of the students who responded have delayed their graduation, and 40% have lost a job, internship or job offer. A little less than one-third expect to earn less at age 35 than they previously anticipated (St. Amour, 2020). This result was not equally spread among differing demographic groups- for example, non-white students were 70% more likely to change their majors; first-generation students were 50% more likely to delay graduation than those who have college-educated

parents, and lower income students were 55 percent more likely to delay graduation. COVID-19 also nearly doubled the gap between higher- and lower-income students' expected GPAs (ibid).

All of this has created fear and anxiety among college students, and some are considering dropping out of college because of it (Hess, 2020). They are not only fearing for their current economic situation, but for their future career opportunities as well (Kalpaxis, 2020). Two thirds of students are more worried about finding a job after they graduate, and about one third of students have trouble paying for food, housing and school (Ascione, 2021).

Physical Impacts:

Stress, anxiety and depression can also take a toll on the physical well-being of individuals. College students are in the prime of life, and overall should be in relatively good health. However, people who are experiencing anxiety, depression and other troubles due to financial and/or academic changes can also experience psychosomatic and physical disorders as well. According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, "over 165 million children and adolescents in 165 countries have been affected by the closures...and physical activity (PA) and sedentary behavior (SB) have been drastically impacted due to the prolonged school closures and home confinement during the pandemic." (Xiang, Zhang and Kyuwahara, 2020). Due to these factors, "it is well-known that reduced PA and SB are linked to both negative physical and mental health outcomes, such as loss of muscular and cardiorespiratory fitness, weight gain, psychosocial problems, and poor academic achievements...evidence suggests that the negative impact may extend to adulthood" (ibid).

The World Health Organization states that each person should have "150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity per week. The benefits of such periodic exercise are proven very helpful, especially in times of anxiety, crisis and fear. There are concerns therefore that, in the context of the pandemic, lack of access to regular sporting or exercise routines may result in challenges to the immune system, physical health, including by leading to the commencement of or exacerbating existing diseases that have their roots in a sedentary lifestyle." (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). This has become very difficult for college students, since the global outbreak of COVID-19 has resulted in closure of gyms, stadiums, pools, dance and fitness studios, physiotherapy centres, parks and playgrounds. Many individuals are therefore not able to actively participate in their regular individual or group sporting or physical activities outside of their homes. Under such conditions, many tend to be less physically active, have longer screen time, irregular sleep patterns as well as worse diets, resulting in weight gain and loss of physical fitness. Low-income families are especially vulnerable to negative effects of stay at home rules as they tend to have sub-standard accommodations and more confined spaces, making it difficult to engage in physical exercise." (ibid).

Social and Emotional Impacts:

The nature of the college experience is, for most non-remote students, very social in nature. From classrooms to dorms, from clubs to athletic and cultural events, social interaction is a key part of the higher education environment. Though some prefer isolation and remote study, the majority of resident students on college campuses look forward to socializing. (Hamlin, 2021). As one educator said, "15-to-24 year olds need to be together. Their brains require

socialization, and the impact of extended periods of isolation is as deadly to them as exposure to the COVID-19 is to the 65-plus demographic...so please, for their health, let these young people participate in class, athletics, band, choir, debate and student government with appropriate protective equipment and social distancing..." (Bullock, 2020).

One global study found that the problems being faced by US students was also affecting college students worldwide. This analysis of 711 students from 41 countries showed that "The respondents noted that the main personal challenges due to the mandated social isolation (and not mutually exclusive) are: a lack of personal interactions with colleagues and staff (72%), a lack of motivation (57%), anxiety, and closely followed by boredom and loneliness (Filho, 2021).

According to Dan Ariely, a three-time bestselling New York Times author and professor of Psychology at Duke University, "the virus is a huge issue, and the economic impact of shutdowns is massive...when things are unpredictable they are very hard to deal with...and who has the most amount of unpredictability? Young people...basically have no control over their environment." (Koetsier, 2020). 20% of college students are more depressed, 11% are more anxious, and 16% are more lonely (ibid).

Pressure affects everyone in different ways. Some respond positively and are motivated to excel. Others withdraw and feel burdened and overwhelmed. Most people can handle change and pressure when it is in increments and over some lengthy period of time, and some even prosper under these conditions. However, when a change is massive in scale and occurs in a short period, like the coronavirus pandemic, many people feel overwhelmed. College students are in that category. According to an interview with a licensed professional counselor at Pennsylvania State University, "college students are at increased risk of mental health problems during the pandemic. They face unique challenges as a result of the abrupt disruption of school. The pandemic has posed an extreme threat to collegiate mental health...from a convergence of impacts on college students. Not only does it...lead to poor mental health, but the losses and grief and unprecedented disruptions of students' lives can also contribute to significant distress. The uncertainty and disruptions of students' lives led to a spectrum of psychological consequences, such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, difficulty sleeping and...grief disorder." (Aten, 2020).

According to a study by Dartmouth College, researchers found "a notable increase in self-reported symptoms of anxiety and depression during the onset of COVID-19. During this time, major policy changes, such as the switch to remote learning, took place." The result was that "college students were more depressed and anxious than they were during similar time frames in previous academic years." (Karlovitich, 2020).

One study found that two-thirds of surveyed students say that the virus has somewhat or very negatively impacted their mental health. Students are facing new stressors and mental health challenges (Ascione, 2021). According to HealthDay News, "one in four young people are suffering from depression, while one in five have higher levels of anxiety." (Reinberg, 2021). One "mega-study" (an analysis of other studies) which combined the results of 29 previously published studies from January 2020 to March 2021, covering 80,900 youth, found that "being socially isolated, kept away from friends, and the disruption of school routines and extracurricular activities during the pandemic has caused widespread anxiety and depression symptoms in the US and the rest of the world." More specifically, one report in JAMA Pediatrics quotes doctors as seeing "a 50% increase in suicidal adolescents and an almost 300% increase in admissions for eating disorders amongst adolescents." (Madigan, 2021).

Another study, focused on university students, found that 71% of their respondents (who were personally interviewed) had increased stress and anxiety due to the COVID outbreak. This increase was brought about by specific stressors, including fear about their own health or their loved ones (91%), difficulty in concentrating (89%), difficulty sleeping (86%), decreased social interactions (86%), and increased concerns about academic performance (82%) (Son, 2020).

SURVEY ANALYSIS:

To address each of the areas described above (financial changes, physical impact, social behaviors, and mental and emotional functioning), we constructed a 56-item, self-report survey with items from each dimension. We used a 1-5 Likert-type scale for each, with larger numbers reflecting more pronounced levels. We asked 10 students to review the survey for clarity, readability, and face validity before soliciting respondents. Upon reviewing the pre-survey input, the authors recruited 823 respondents (25.8% male, 46.4% female, 26% were non-binary, preferred to not disclose, or did not complete this information) from various synchronous remote, or asynchronous remote courses during the 2020 summer and fall semesters at a medium-sized (12000) American university. Ninety three percent of the respondents (93%) were from USA, with students from China, France, Republic of Korea, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, Argentina, and the UAE included in the sample. The mean age of our sample was 22.58 years (SD = 5.9). Most academic majors, and all university colleges and schools, were represented. For our sample, 328 (42%) were classified as Seniors, 193 (25%) were Juniors, 137 (17%) were Sophomores, and 116 (15%) were Freshmen. Forty nine did not respond. Most, (66%) were single, 26% were married, and 8% were cohabitating with a partner (Hamlin, 2021).

A) Financial Effects: When we examined financial stability in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that the majority of our sample were still employed (76%), while only 3% had lost their job due to the pandemic. Over 85% noted their salaries had not changed, and 66% reported their work hours had not changed or had increased since the pandemic started. Almost 44% speculated they would have to work more hours in the future because of changes caused by COVID-19. Despite strong employment data, half (50%) of the respondents worry about their ability to pay for rent or housing than they did before COVID-19 (see Figure 1- Appendix 1). Similarly, concern about food insecurity was an issue with nearly 40% reporting worry about their ability to pay for food more now than they did at the beginning of 2020 (see Figure 2- Appendix 1). Similar concerns emerged about respondents' ability to pay for health care (46%-see Figure 3- Appendix 1). More than half (57%) expressed concern that COVID-19 had adversely impacted their ability to obtain a job after graduation, yet most (73%) report no changes in their desire to graduate, or to attend graduate school (43.7%) if they had those plans pre-COVID-19. The pandemic has, however, negatively impacted confidence to succeed in school and in a career for about 55% of our sample.

B) Physical Effects: Through the pandemic, nearly 40% of our sample have gained more than 10 pounds without trying (see Figure 4- Appendix 1). They are also sleeping significantly less than they were at the beginning of 2020. These two items put together suggest that students are becoming less active, more restless, and thus less able to focus on their most important goals in life, including academics and social acceptance. This conclusion is also reinforced when most

students (almost two to one) stated that they “Disagree or Strongly Disagree” that they currently wake up rested and refreshed in the morning (59%- see Figure 5- Appendix 1).

In addition, most of our respondents observed that their eating patterns have become significantly worse (52.5%). Over 54% reported exercising less than they did one year previously, and 42% stated their attitude about staying healthy and in shape has declined since the pandemic started. If this pattern is accurate, and persists, it could suggest that millions of our current college-aged population will face serious health repercussions in coming years due to the effects of the virus on their eating, sleeping and attitudes about their general health.

C) Social and Emotional Effects: Over 80% of respondents who identified as single said that the pandemic has changed the way they socialize with friends (see Figure 6- Appendix 1). In addition, 84% of students reported reductions in their attendance at social activities, parties, or dating events. Over half indicated they were going to be less likely to attend social and sporting activities (53%), have less involvement with clubs and organizations (58%), and would be less likely to use campus facilities, like the bookstore (55%). These findings suggest that the majority of college students, who are unmarried and not cohabiting, are finding it more difficult to socialize, and when they do it is often done differently than before. This could have significant social consequences in coming years, including how students communicate, date, attend events and associate in small and large groups. They are making more use of technology to communicate, share information, conduct meetings and grow friendships and social networks. While convenient and inexpensive, our survey indicates that this use of technology is less satisfying and personal than face-to-face opportunities, and can result in miscommunication and other problems of a social nature to these young people.

Married or cohabiting students have not fared much better during the pandemic. For example, over 80% of such students noted that the coronavirus has changed the way they socialize with friends and relatives since 2020.

The pandemic is also taking an emotional toll on all demographic groups of students. For example, over 84% report being under more stress than when the pandemic began (see Figure 7- Appendix 1). However, the good news is that many of these college students feel they have support and are enabled to succeed even when faced with such obstacles. Most respondents (78%) stated that their partner, family, or friends provide the emotional support they need to succeed through the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has caused (see Figure 8- Appendix 1). Also, the majority (64%) feel emotionally able to deal with challenges they face in their academic pursuits, as well as financial, physical and social/emotional pressures they feel (64%). Lastly, most respondents, (71%) indicated that they have healthy outlets (exercise, reading, etc.) which help them deal with life’s stressors.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

College students are typically between 18 and 26 years of age. These are years that, even in normal times, are filled with challenges and opportunities, risks and rewards. Some of life’s biggest decisions are made during that span, including career path and marriage, and building social networks that will last a lifetime. Many students already are exposed to new environments, with roommates, budgeting and social pressures. Others are married or cohabiting, learning to survive in a world of infinite opportunities and obstacles. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its variants and years-long lifespan, has caused university students in the U.S.

and abroad to be exposed to even more challenges and stresses than normal, and has resulted in many of these young people experiencing hardships in multiple areas of their lives. Our respondents are struggling with new social norms, and they are socially distant and separated from teachers, coaches and mentors, as well as peers and fellow students. The certainty of a future that they assumed to be secure and prosperous has been very much put in doubt. Many are married with families, and are employed and working more hours, yet they feel more financial pressure as retail prices continue to rise. As employees in higher education who are impacted by changes in the financial, physical, social and emotional needs of their students, we are in a unique position to provide the help they need to emerge stronger and more prepared for the uncertain world ahead of them (Hamlin, 2021). We are now over 24 months into the COVID pandemic, and businesses and educational institutions have, of necessity, changed their models of operation and execution. This will cause further disruptions to their career planning and financial well-being. These career and financial stressors may also lead to heightened levels of physical, social and emotional challenges in the future. Colleges nationwide are having to adopt new practices to meet the needs of their students, mostly through the use of technology and remote delivery of class content. Below we offer some recommendations to consider based on the results of our survey:

- 1) For faculty members: It is now imperative that faculty members of all ranks and tenure status become proficient in remote delivery of their class content. Prior to the pandemic, many educators were content to focus primarily on live instruction for their classes. However, in the past 24 months many universities were forced to deliver class content either in a hybrid mode, or entirely online. Many campuses were completely closed for live instruction. This forced a great number of unprepared faculty members to change their teaching mode without prior training or preparation. The increased number of classes offered through distance education has increased demand for both online classes and other new types of college classes, including new platforms with shorter semesters and other alternatives attractive to college students. All faculty should be trained in new delivery technologies and be made aware of the needs of the students they teach. Newly hired faculty should be required to familiarize themselves with these new methods of teaching, and provided adequate resources to adapt. More senior faculty can be incentivized to make the change through rewards such as temporarily lower teaching loads, providing group and individual training, and a reducing publishing requirements for a time. We recommend examining best practices for tips and practical suggestions. Most universities have teaching centers, where networks for helping faculty sprang up spontaneously as COVID-19 began.

We also recommend frank and open discussion about critical thinking, and how it applies to the Covid-19 issue. The passionate and polarizing nature of the reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic in social and news media has led to a dazzling array of conflicting information and misinformation. Many students are ill-equipped to navigate through unsubstantiated claims and conspiracy theories prevalent in their phenomenological world. Helping them objectively explore the ideas they hear with scientific logic and sound data could help alleviate some of their stress and anxiety, and provide them with a more adaptive plan for their lives moving forward. Above all, faculty should have high expectations of excellence from their students, along with

compassion in understanding what their class members are going through.

- 2) For Advisors, counselors and faculty members: Train students to recognize the value of autonomy and self-reliance. We recommend faculty members take class time to invite a dialogue about students' experience of COVID-19. Advisors and counselors can reinforce this effort by providing a listening ear, and adequate resources, to students who seek their input. All should provide a listening ear and encourage them to share ideas and coping strategies with each other in groups. Making these resources available to students either digitally or hard-copy could also be very instructive for students, and will build confidence in each student's ability to handle their own problems, and foster growth and maturity. It will also create opportunities for social connections and a feeling of "sharing the load." Advisors, counselors and faculty members should be trained to recognize and deal with students who exhibit social anxiety, signs of pressure, anti-social behavior and signs of depression.
- 3) For Deans and Department Chairs: Reexamine course curricula and adjust as appropriate. Students are under intense time pressure, are emotionally distressed, and have become more socially disconnected at a critical age when social networking helps promote long-term identity formation. Consider adopting 7 or 8 week classes for students who want to take fewer classes at a time, rather than the traditional 15 week semester. Consider the costs and benefits of providing remote versus live courses, with an eye toward meeting student needs. Many options now exist for complete program completion online, which is often more profitable for the university and more convenient for the student. However, such efforts may reduce the demand for live courses, and have a negative effect on student social needs and mastery of course material. This pandemic provides faculty a unique opportunity to carefully examine the content of their curriculum and refine their learning goals and objectives for courses.

Deans and Chairs also need to reassess their budgets and load/prep models to allow for more resources to be spent on student needs and faculty and staff training. This will be difficult due to falling enrollment at many colleges, but failure to do so will result in more retention problems, falling morale and greater crises in the long run. It also may be necessary to add or drop some class offerings (or make required courses electives, etc.) after heeding the input of the curriculum committees on current relevance of specific classes and the overall curriculum. All of this should be done with the needs of the students as the top priority.

- 4) For administrators: It is imperative that those with budgetary authority on campus find the way to provide resources for faculty, advisors and staff to be trained to listen, observe and act appropriately when they see students who display the signs of stress mentioned in this report. In former days, most faculty focused almost entirely on the academic performance of their pupils. This has changed to the point where today, professors must enforce mask mandates; enforce spacing guidelines; provide exceptions to their syllabus for students who get sick; teach live, remote or hybrid classes, which requires giving a lecture before live students and using microphones and cameras for those who are remote; and give guidance and feedback to students who seek help for non-academic reasons. Staff and advisors are no less affected. One way for administrators to ease the

burden would be to provide direct meetings with college employees and field ideas on how to better handle the situation; have the Faculty Senate provide an assessment of the severity of the problem on each individual campus; and assess the workload on advisors and counselors. This will be perceived by all college employees as transparent, and a genuine attempt to listen and work together to solve the problem.

These efforts may not solve the problem. Only time will tell if the virus continues to mutate and grow, or finally disappears on its own. The one thing that is most important is that the student body perceive that college personnel care, will listen and try to understand, and will act as necessary to make it possible for students to succeed during this turbulent time. One positive result of the survey was that most students felt that the university was doing everything it could to deal with the problem positively (Hamlin, 2021). The result of that perception was that, at the institution where this survey was taken, enrollment actually rose significantly for the 2021-2022 academic year.



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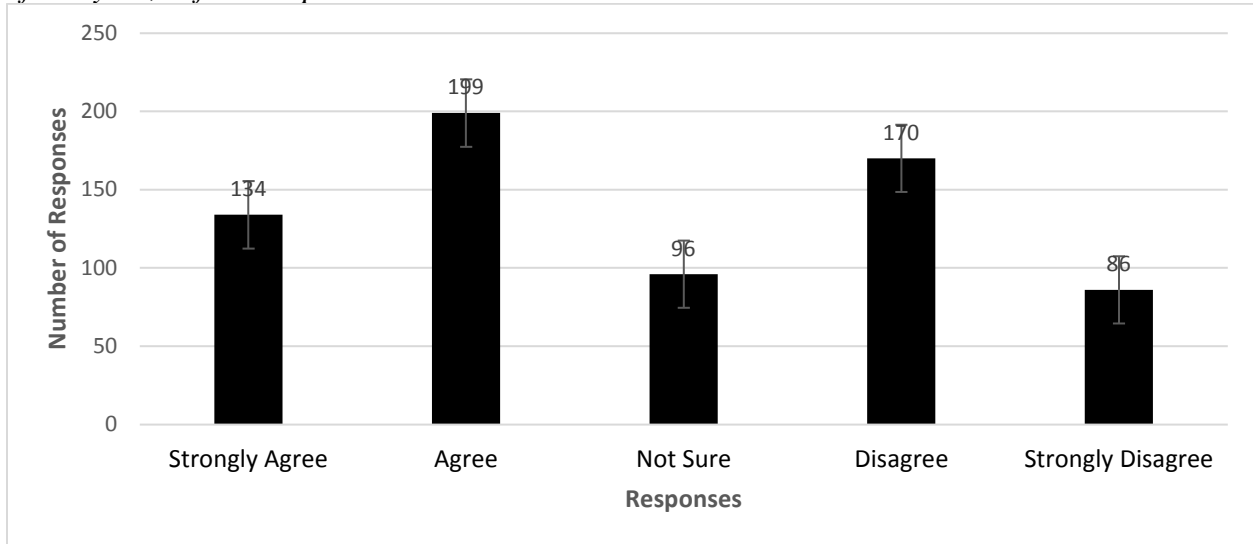
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APPENDIX 1: FIGURES AND CHARTS

Figure 1.

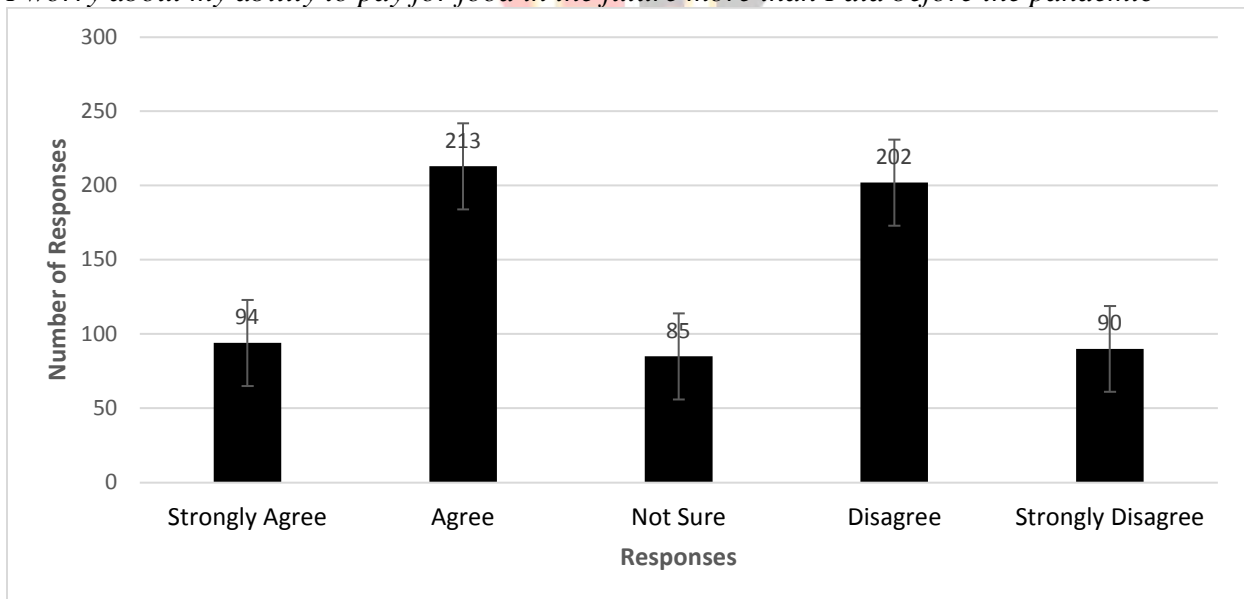
I worry about my ability to pay for rent or housing in the future more than I did at the beginning of this year, before the pandemic.



Note Mean = 2.82, SD = 1.34

Figure 2.

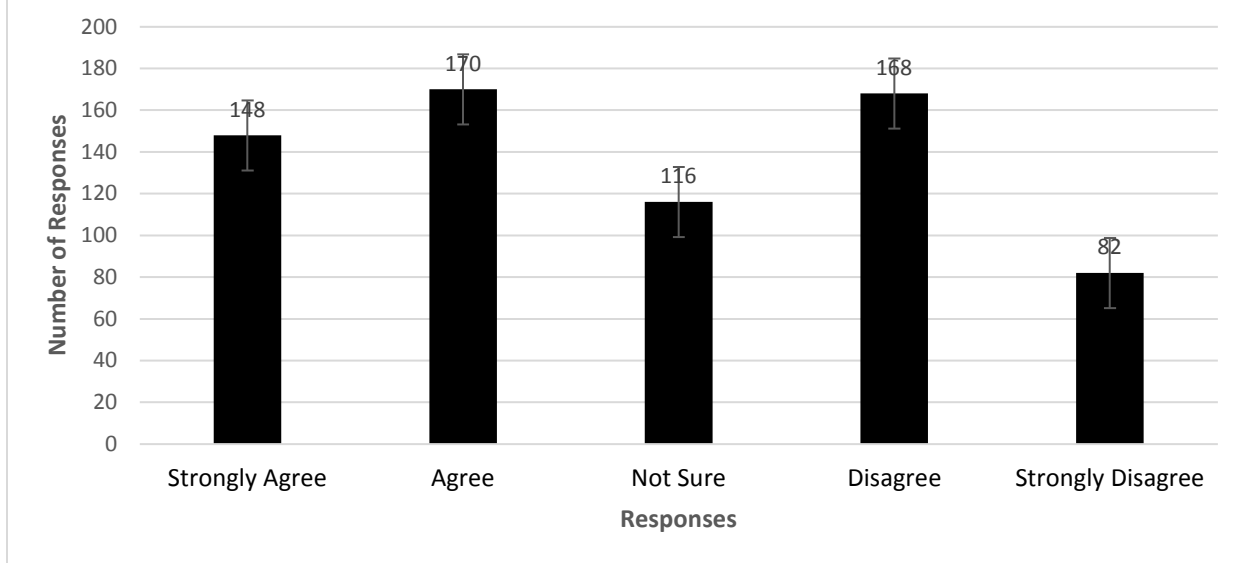
I worry about my ability to pay for food in the future more than I did before the pandemic



Note. Mean = 2.97, SD = 1.3

Figure 3

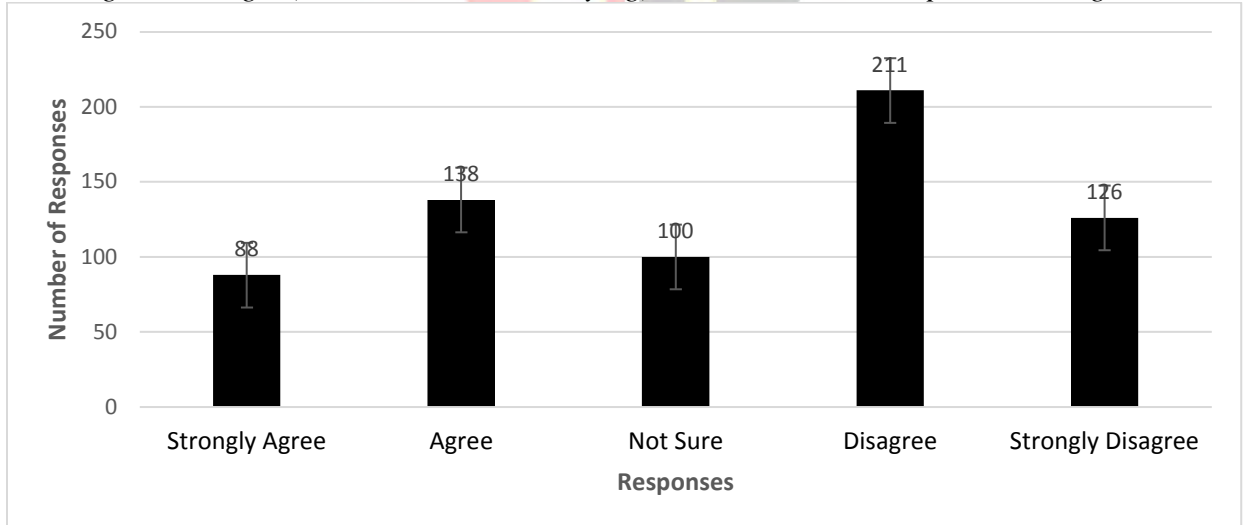
I worry about my ability to pay for health care in the future, more than I did before the pandemic



Note, Mean = 2.80, SD = 1.34

Figure 4

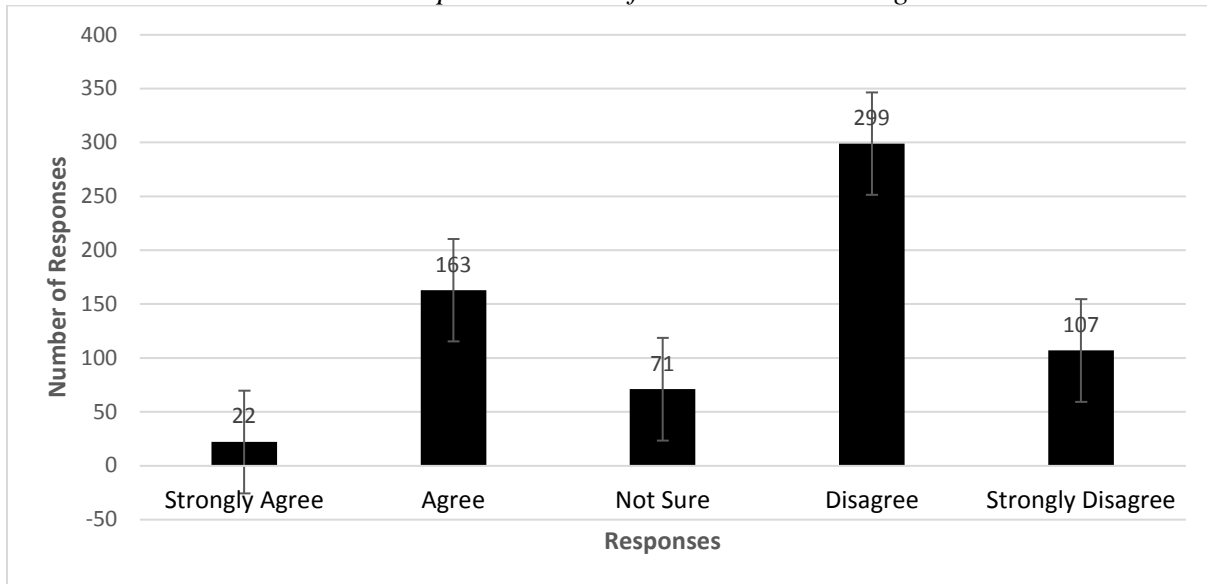
I have gained weight (over 10 lbs. without trying) since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020



Note, Mean = 3.22, SD = 1.33

Figure 5

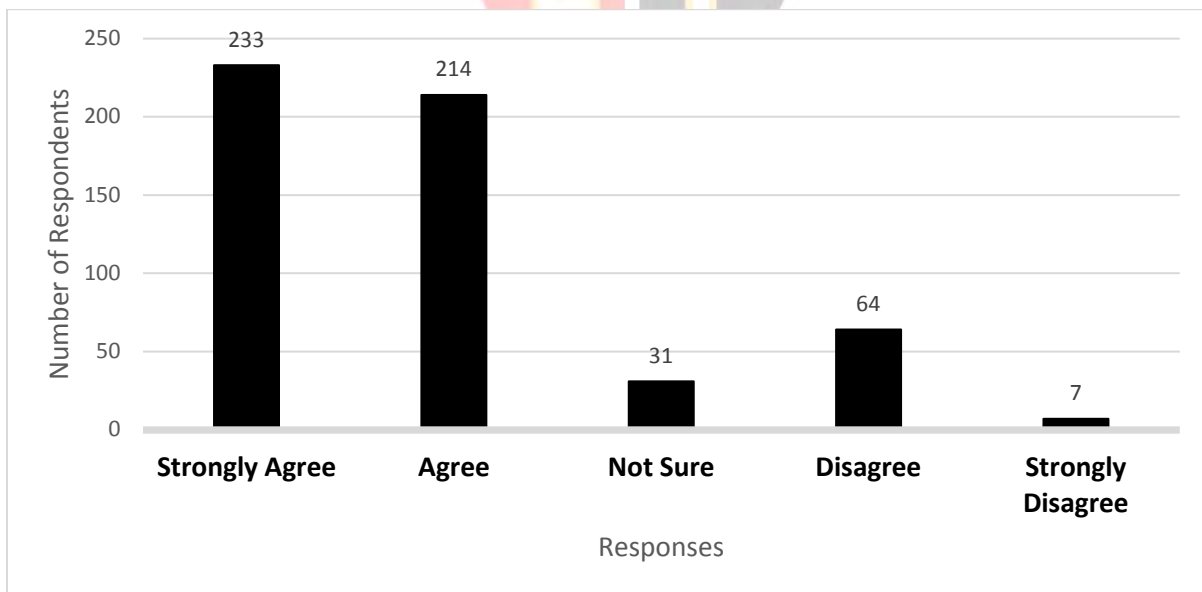
I wake up rested and refreshed most mornings.



Note, Mean = 3.46, SD = 1.13

Figure 6

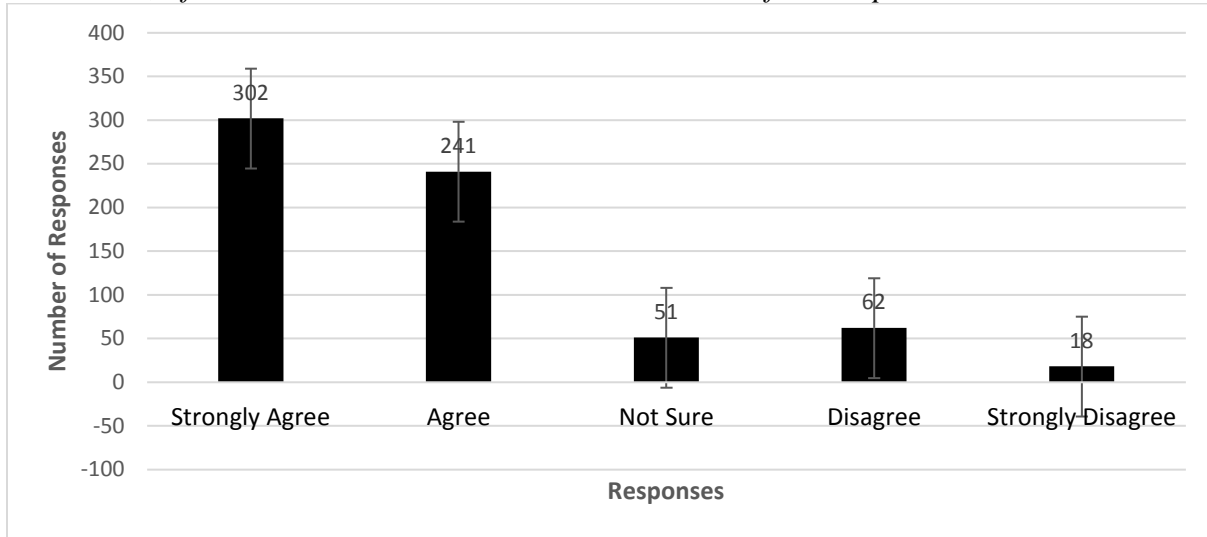
The pandemic has changed the way I socialize with my friends



Note, Mean = 1.9, SD = 1.03

Figure 7

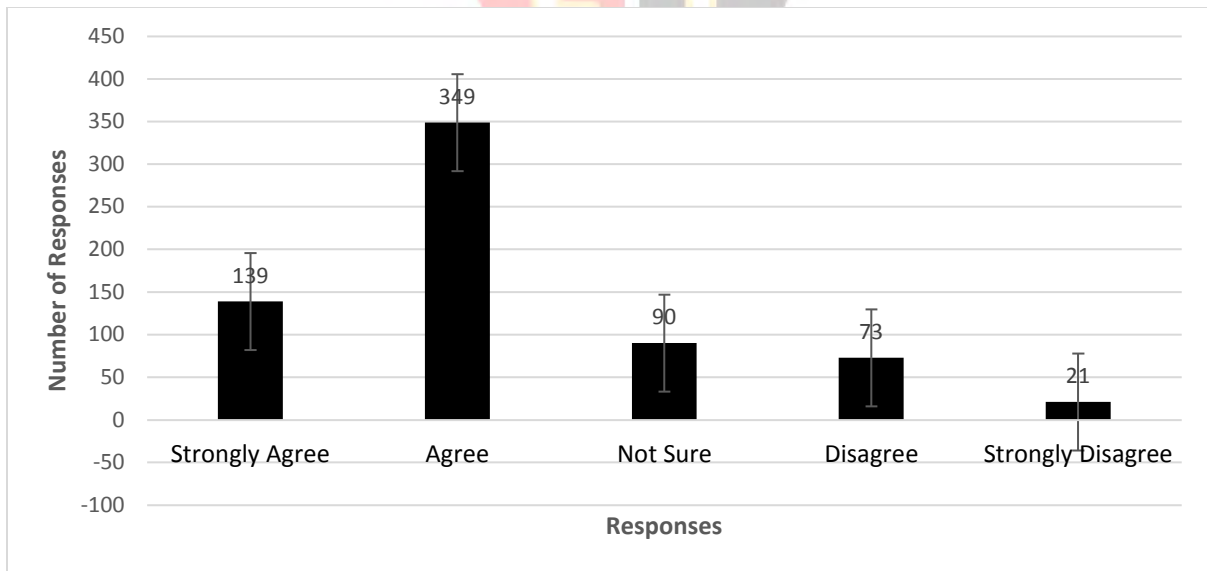
Overall, I feel like I am under more stress than I was before the pandemic started in 2020.



Note, Mean = 1.89, SD = 1.06

Figure 8

My partner, family, and/or friends provide me the emotional support I need to succeed through the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has caused.



Note, Mean = 2.24, SD = 1.0