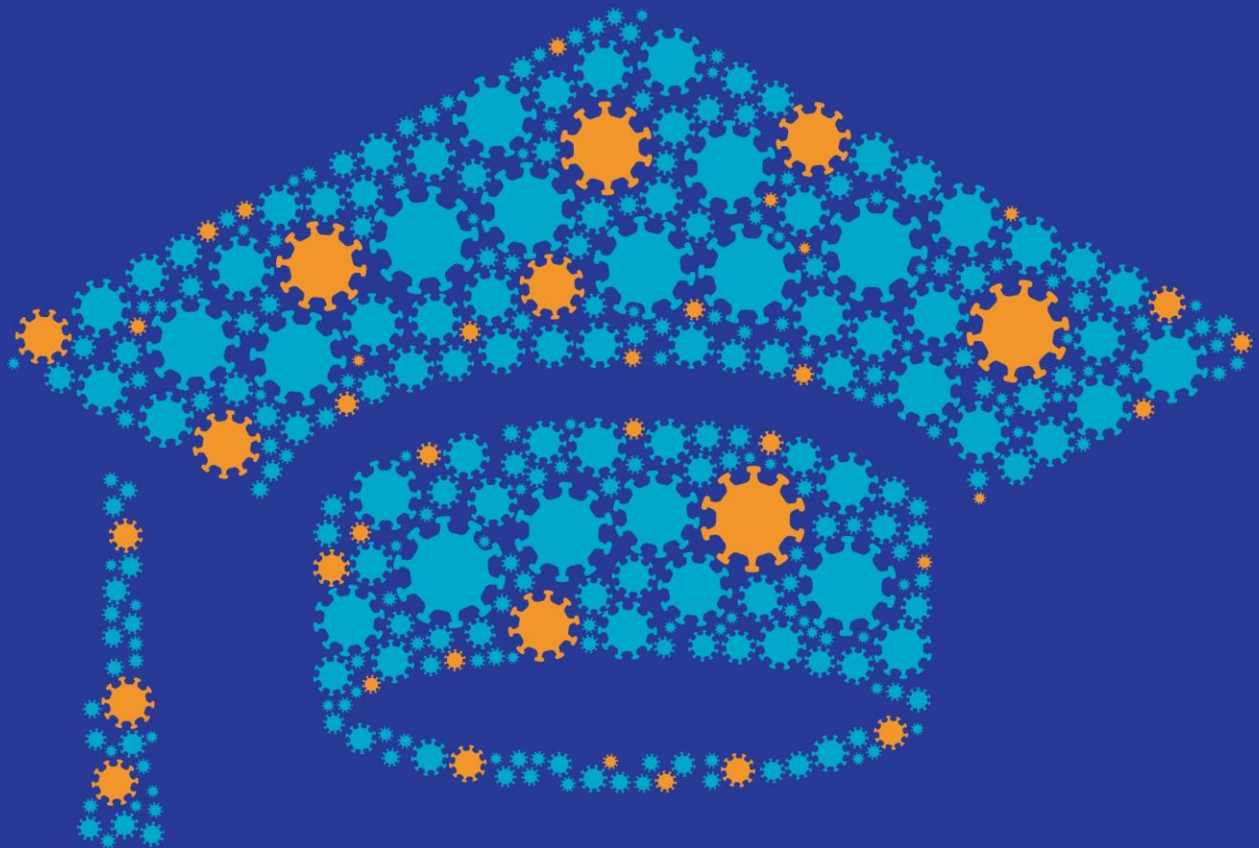


Disproportionate Effects: The Pandemic's Impact On Promising Low-Income Graduates

Results of a National Survey



EdWeek
Research Center

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About Editorial Projects In Education

Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization based in Bethesda, Md. Its primary mission is to help raise the level of awareness and understanding among professionals and the public of important issues in American education. EPE covers local, state, national, and international news and issues from preschool through the 12th grade. Editorial Projects in Education publishes Education Week, America's newspaper of record for precollegiate education, the online Teacher, EdWeek Market Brief, and the TopSchoolJobs employment resource. It also produces periodic special reports on issues ranging from technology to textbooks, as well as books of special interest to educators.

The EdWeek Research Center conducts surveys, collects data, and performs analyses that appear in Education Week and special reports such as Quality Counts, and Technology Counts. The center also conducts independent research studies.

About the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation supports Education Week's coverage of the education of exceptionally promising students who have financial need. The foundation provides generous scholarships to exceptionally high-achieving students throughout the country who have financial need as well as grants that support high-achieving, low-income students with innovative programming. www.jkcf.org

REPORT: Holly Kurtz, Director, EdWeek Research Center - Sterling Lloyd, Assistant Director - Alex Harwin, Research Analyst - Victor Chen, Research Intern - Yukiko Furuya, Research Intern



6935 Arlington Road
Bethesda, MD 20814
www.edweek.org/rc | rcinfo@epe.org

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Executive Summary

In August 2020, the EdWeek Research Center conducted a nationally representative survey of more than 2,000 high-achieving recent high school graduates in order to better understand the coronavirus pandemic's impact on these young people as they prepared to transition from high school to college and the workforce.

To qualify for the survey, respondents had to report that they graduated in 2020 and either earned at least a “B” grade-point average in high school or finished in the top-half of their graduating class.

Survey results indicate most high-achieving graduates felt stressed about the future due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A substantial share reported that the pandemic altered their plans for school or work as they grappled with its far-reaching economic and educational effects.

Although the ripple effects of the coronavirus are widespread, they hit those from low-income families the hardest. These recent graduates are nearly twice as likely as their peers from wealthier homes to have had their post-high school plans disrupted by COVID-19 and its resulting economic fallout. Some opted for less-expensive schools or colleges closer to home or chose to sit out the first year of college altogether. Their families suffered in disproportionate numbers from the underlying health conditions that make exposure to the virus a greater risk, as well as from the severe economic consequences of COVID-19, such as layoffs and pay cuts.

Key findings, which are discussed in more detail throughout the report, include:

- Seventy-five percent of high-achieving recent graduates said they worried to “some” degree or “a lot” about the future. Many also noted economic and health-related stress as well.
- Recent graduates from poorer backgrounds are nearly twice as likely as their peers from wealthier homes to have had their post-high school plans disrupted by COVID-19 and its resulting economic fallout.
- Additionally, graduates that most often were able to stick to their plans were already intending to attend a four-year college or university. Seventy-four percent of graduates planning on going to a four-year college or university said they ended up following through. In contrast, only 57 percent of young adults who were thinking about attending a two-year community college ended up being able to do so.
- Poorer graduates were 1.4 times more likely to have changed plans because they did not want to risk paying for online courses even though they signed up to attend college in-person (11 versus 8 percent).
- They were 1.4 times more likely to continue living in their family's home when they originally planned to move out on their own (21 versus 15 percent).
- As of the end of the summer, 45 percent of students who did not qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch while they were in school said their families had not experienced any economic impacts from the downturn since February. Only 21 percent of poorer graduates felt the same way.

Introduction

Overall, the pandemic hit high-achieving members of the class of 2020 from low-income homes much harder than it did their better-off peers.

In a national survey administered in August 2020, the EdWeek Research Center found that most recent graduates polled were still pursuing their college aspirations, despite the pandemic-related upheaval that marked the second half of their senior year. But 47 percent of the students who said they had at one time or another qualified for subsidized school meals said they had changed their plans due to COVID-19. Among the students who had never participated in the federal free- and reduced-price meal program, the share was just 28 percent.

Whether or not the disruptions experienced by the class of 2020 will have extensive long-term academic or economic impacts is an open question. Some [research](#) shows that delaying college enrollment after completing high school negatively affects students' likelihood of attending a four-year college and their future earnings; other [research](#) points to a need for more in-depth knowledge about college students who did not enroll directly after high school or who may follow nontraditional pathways in postsecondary education.

Most of the young adults in the survey — regardless of their economic backgrounds — reported that they experienced stress about the future as a result of COVID-19. Most also indicated they did not receive certain types of support — such as checks on their mental well-being — from their high schools during the pandemic. However, the EdWeek Research Center survey found that students in poverty felt the impact disproportionately compared to their wealthier peers when it comes to pandemic-related changes in their post-high school plans. The most vulnerable graduates are already feeling the impact of a more uncertain future.

| SURVEY DETAILS

Survey Administered: August 2020

Sample: Nationally-representative

Method: Online [Email invitations sent for an online survey]

Respondents: Recent high school graduates who reported they either earned at least a “B” grade-point average in high school or finished in the top-half of their graduating class.

The Survey

Between August 11th and 20th, 2020, the EdWeek Research Center conducted a nationally representative online survey that asked recent high school graduates about the ways in which the pandemic affected their future plans. More than 2,000 high-achieving recent graduates participated in the survey. Eighty-seven percent of those polled completed high school with an overall GPA of at least a “B”, and 67 percent were in the top 50 percent of their class. Sixty-eight percent had taken two or more advanced courses, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate coursework and 86 percent were accepted into one or more colleges.

Additionally, most participants at one point or another qualified for free- or reduced-price lunch during their K-12 education.

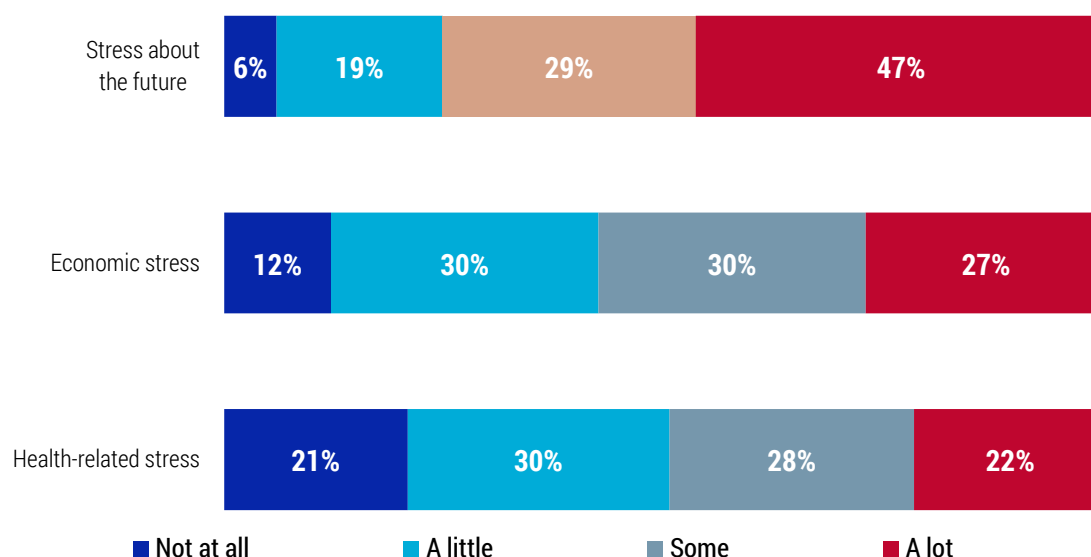
Survey Respondents

Number of respondents	Graduated from high school with an overall grade point average of AT LEAST “B”	Was in the top 50% of my high school class	Two or more advanced courses	Accepted to one or more colleges	Ever qualified for free- or reduced-price school meals
2,135	87%	67%	68%	86%	62%

Overall Results: Recent Graduates Felt Stressed and Lacked Support

The various economic and health-related concerns that emerged from the pandemic have taken an emotional toll, most of the graduates reported. Seventy-five percent of those polled said they worried to “some” degree or “a lot” about the future. Many also noted economic and health-related stress as well.

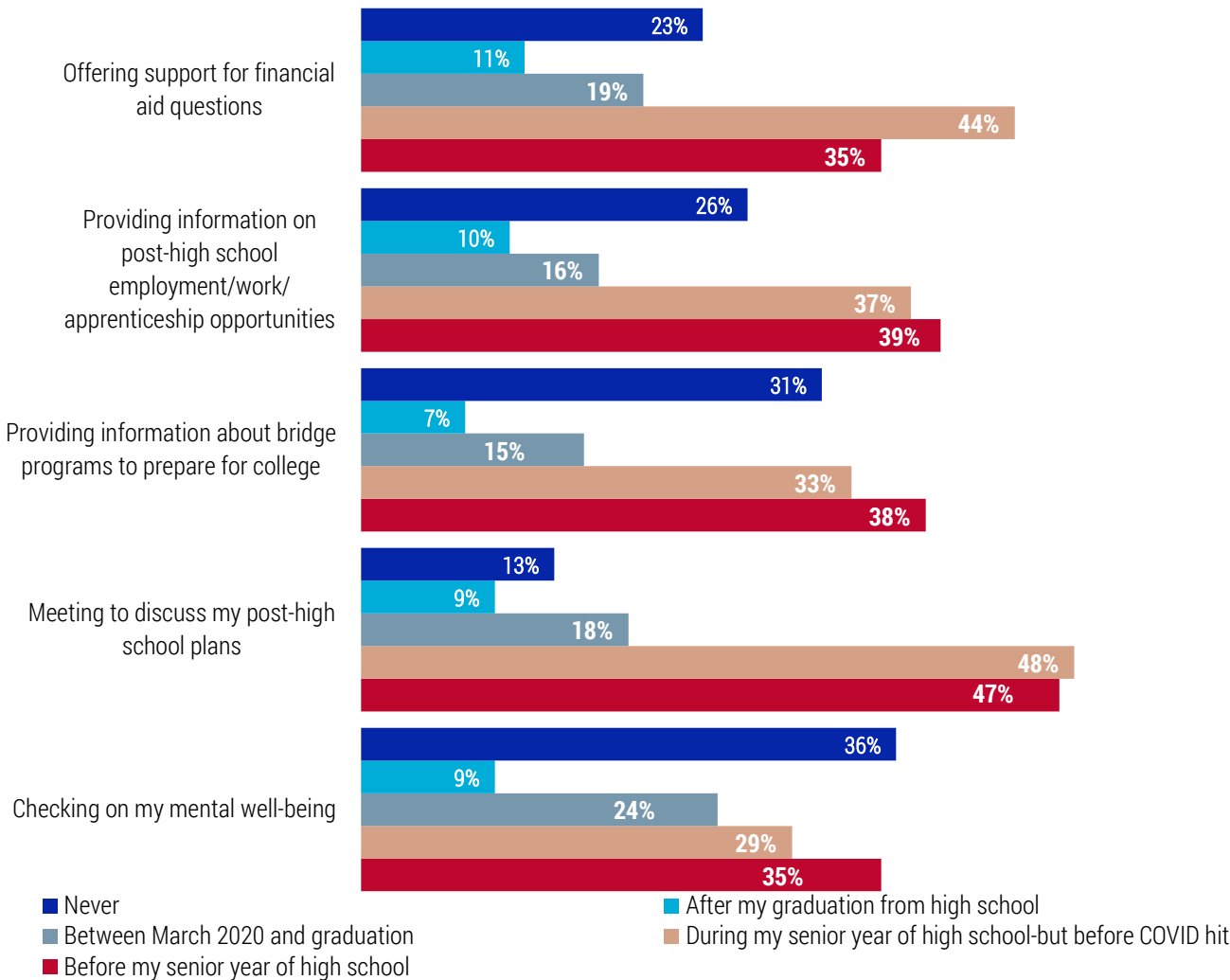
Most recent graduates said that stress from COVID-19 had an impact on them.



Many graduates also reported a sense of disconnection from the high schools they left behind. Only 18 percent of recent graduates reported that anyone from their school contacted them about their post-high school plans between March 2020 and graduation. After graduation, only 9 percent said they had anyone from their school connect with them.

Less than a quarter of graduates reported that their high schools checked on their mental well-being between the start of the pandemic in March 2020 and graduation. Thirty-six percent said their schools never checked on their well-being during their high school years.

Some graduates reported they never received the following types of support from their high schools.



Note: Respondents were asked to select all that apply.

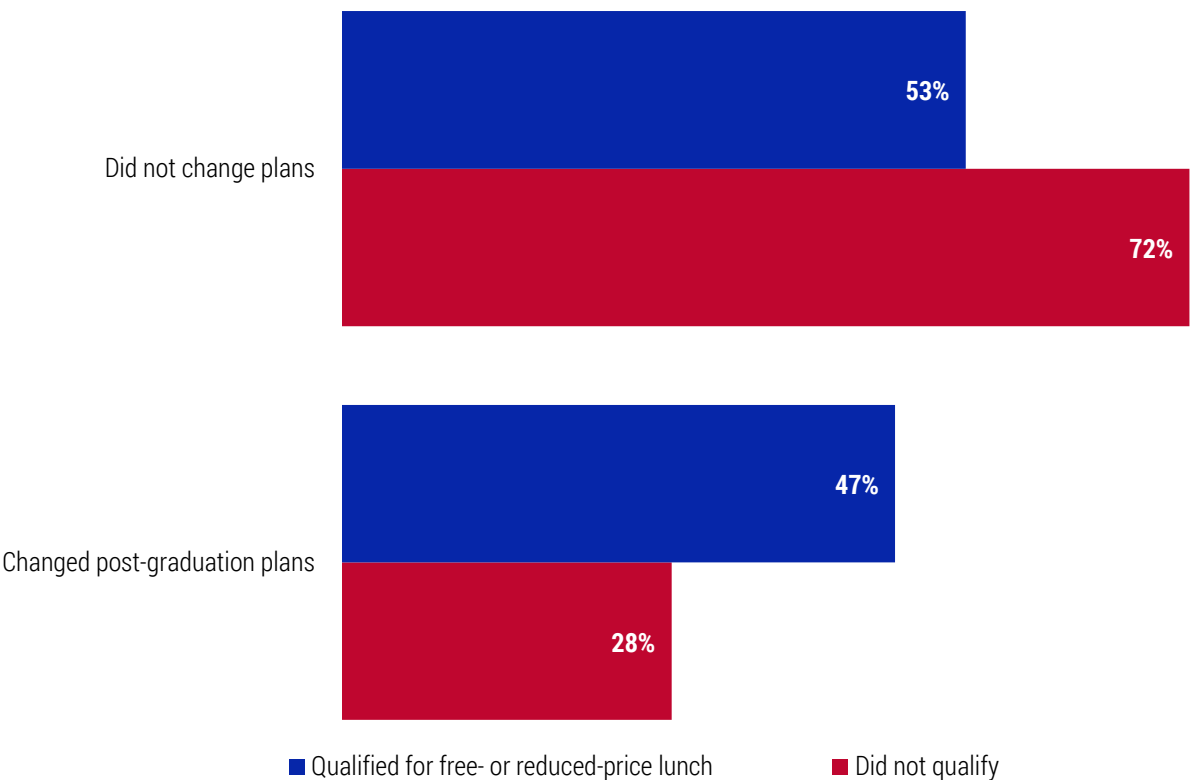
The Impact of Poverty on College Plans

Many high-achieving students surveyed did not change their post-high school plans. Most students who planned on attending college said they were enrolled in a two- or four-year college or university at the time of the survey.

However, recent graduates from poorer backgrounds are nearly twice as likely as their peers from wealthier homes to have had their post-high school plans disrupted by COVID-19 and its resulting economic fallout.

Additionally, graduates that most often were able to stick to their plans were already intending to attend a four-year college or university. Seventy-four percent of graduates planning on going to a four-year college or university said they ended up following through. In contrast, only 57 percent of young adults who were thinking about attending a two-year community college ended up being able to do so. These results suggest the pandemic’s effects may ultimately compound long-standing equity challenges that already present barriers to postsecondary success.

Changes in post-high school plans were more common for graduates from low-income backgrounds.



Survey respondents who planned to attend a four-year college before the pandemic were more likely to report that they enrolled in college as originally expected.

Before COVID-19 thought they would attend a four-year college

74%

Before COVID-19 thought they would attend a two-year college

57%

Impact of Health Concerns on Future Plans

For most of the graduates polled, health and the economy were key concerns. Only 1 out of 5 recent graduates said that health concerns associated with the coronavirus did not affect their college and job plans.

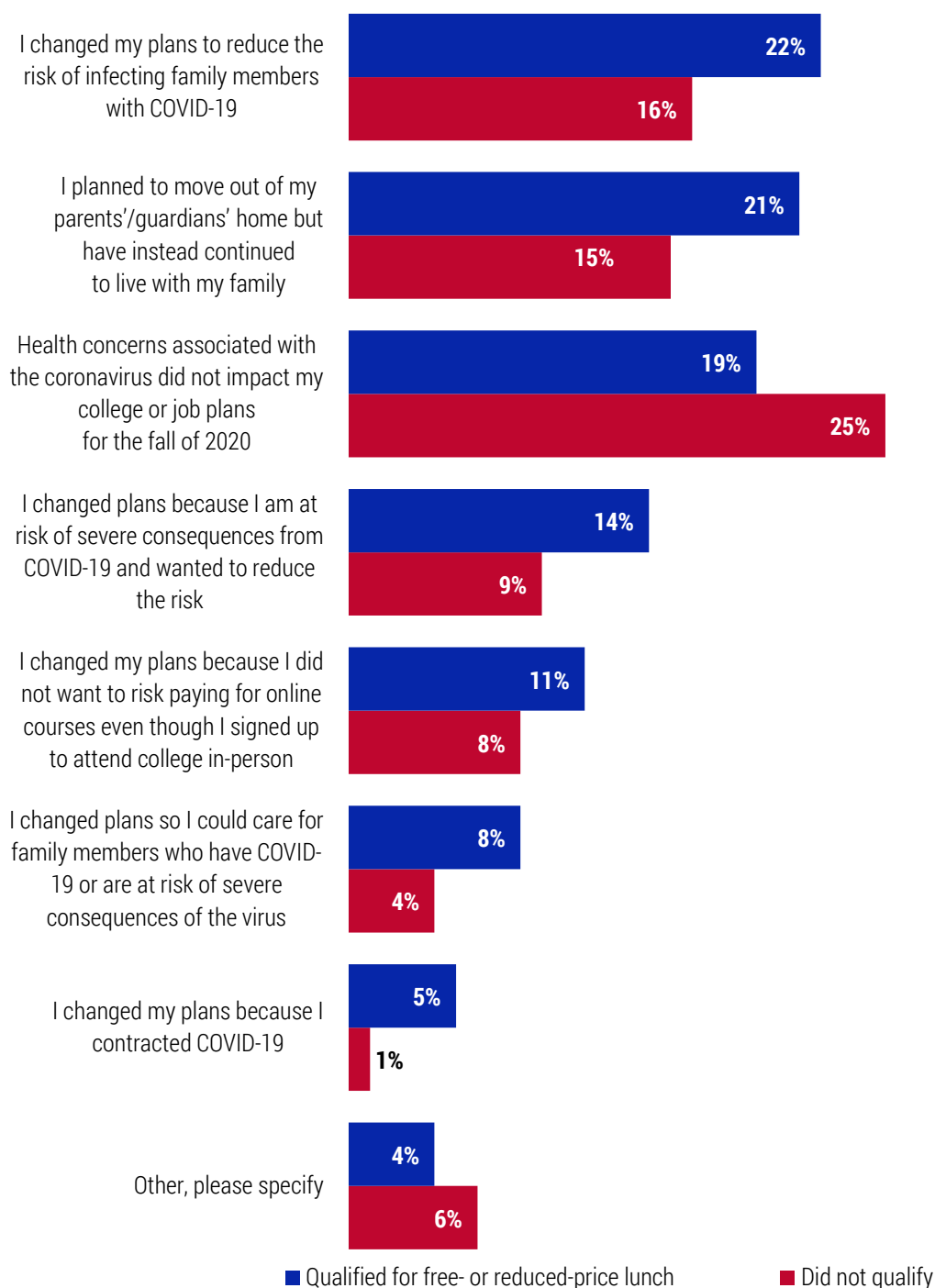
Graduates changed their plans in a number of different ways and for a variety of reasons including the hope of reducing the risk of infecting family with COVID-19 or contracting the disease themselves.

Some changed plans in order to care for family members who have COVID-19 or are at risk of suffering severe consequences of the virus.

A smaller share indicated that they personally contracted the virus.

Survey respondents from low-income families were more likely than their more affluent peers to report that health concerns associated with the pandemic impacted their educational or work plans.

Health concerns associated with the coronavirus impacted college or job plans for the fall of 2020, particularly for graduates from low-income families.



Poorer graduates were 1.4 times more likely to have changed plans because they did not want to risk paying for online courses even though they signed up to attend college in-person (11 versus 8 percent).

They were 1.4 times more likely to continue living in their family's home when they originally planned to move out on their own (21 versus 15 percent).

They were also 2.3 times more likely to have changed their plans so they could care for family members who have COVID-19 or are at risk of suffering severe consequences from it (8 percent versus 4 percent).

Moreover, wealthier graduates were statistically more likely than their poorer peers to say they did not have to deal with any health-related implications associated with the pandemic (19 percent versus 25 percent).

Impact of Economic Downturn on Future Plans and Family Finances

Survey findings indicate that due to the economic downturn associated with the coronavirus pandemic, a quarter of respondents want to work but can't find a job.

Overall, nearly 1 in 5 said they planned to move to a dorm or their own place but have instead continued to live with family for economic reasons. About the same share reported that they chose a college closer to home.

Smaller percentages found that their families could contribute less than expected to college tuition or that they had to choose a less expensive college than originally planned.

Some respondents also noted that money from their own jobs now has to go toward college expenses instead of savings or extra spending money. Others reported that money from their own jobs now has to go toward supporting family not paying for college-related expenses, as initially expected.

The economic downturn associated with the pandemic also affected the future plans of graduates from poorer families more than those from wealthier backgrounds.

They were 1.5 times more likely to have chosen a college closer to home (20 percent vs. 13 percent).

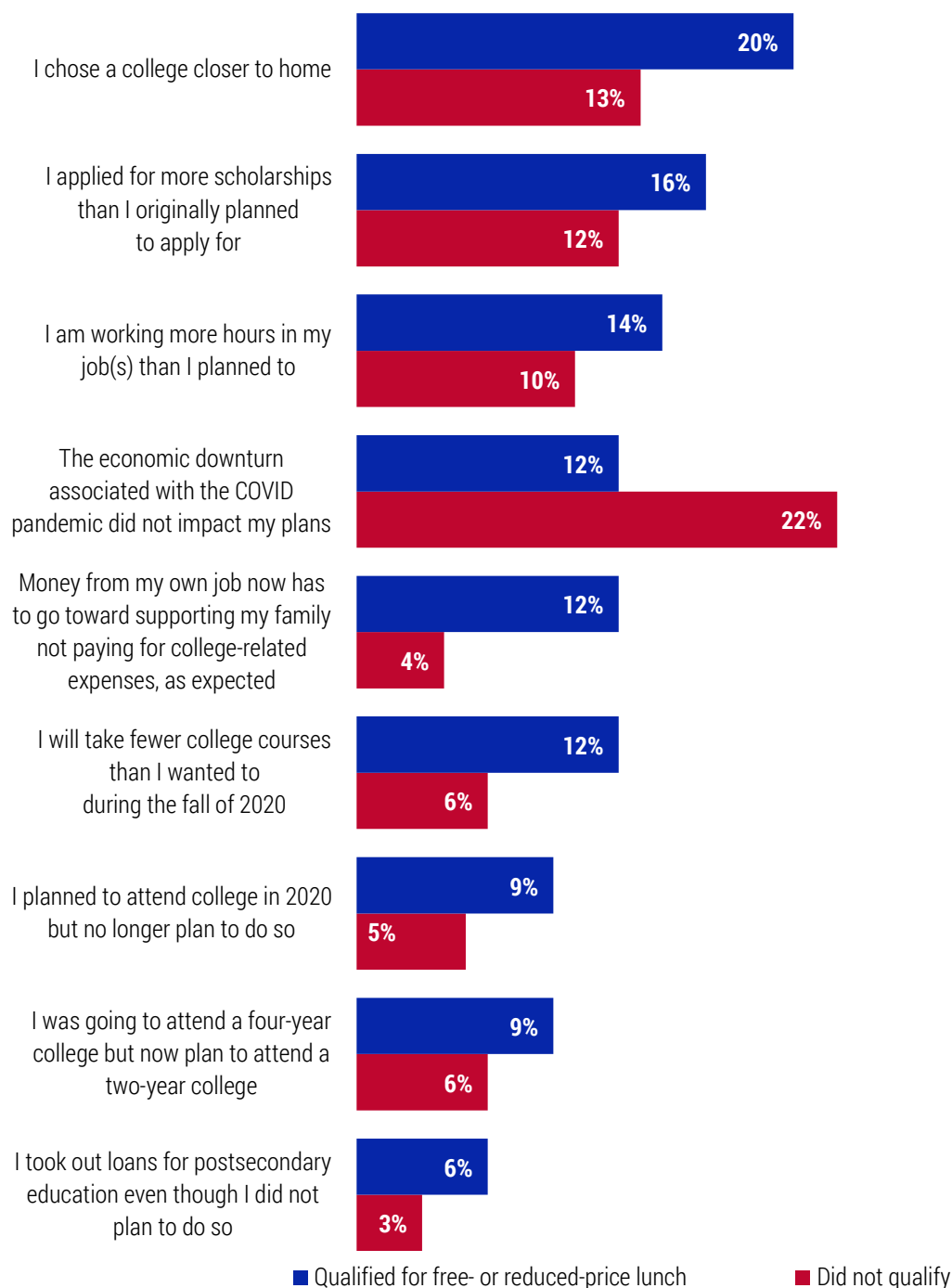
These young people were also 1.6 times more likely to switch their postsecondary plans from a four-year college to a two-year college (9 percent vs. 6 percent).

They were also nearly twice as likely to forgo previous plans to attend college altogether in 2020 (9 percent vs. 5 percent).

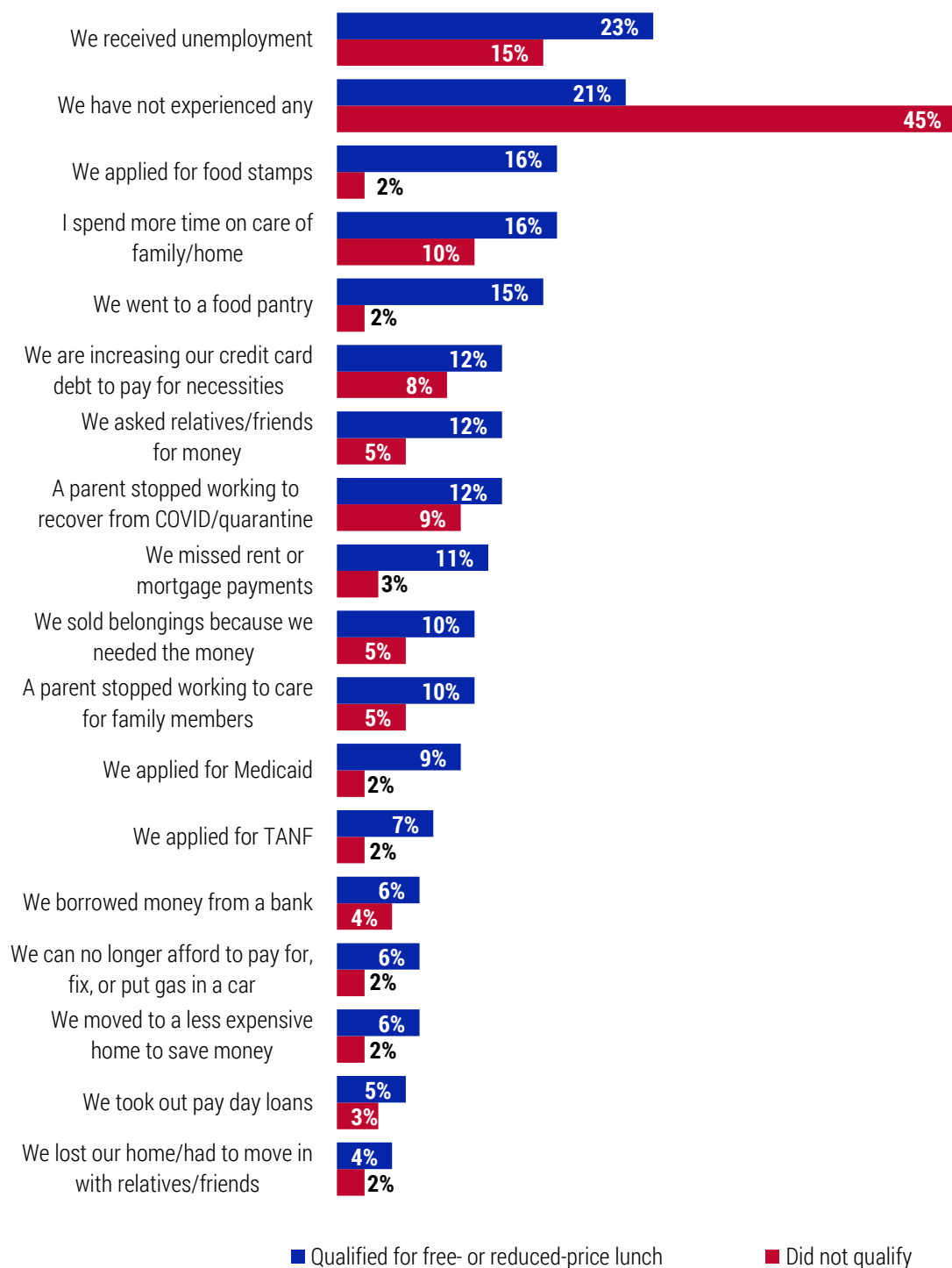
Wealthier graduates were nearly two times more likely than their less affluent peers to say that the economy did not impact their plans (22 vs. 12 percent).

On the other hand, poorer graduates were three times more likely to say that money from their own jobs will have to go supporting their families rather than to pay for college-related expenses as previously anticipated.

The economic downturn associated with the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted college or job plans for the fall of 2020, with graduates from low-income backgrounds more likely to report an impact.



Recent graduates from low-income backgrounds were more likely than their more affluent peers to report that their families experienced financial challenges due to the economic downturn associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.



From a financial perspective, the initial months of the pandemic were difficult for many families across the nation. Just 30 percent of recent graduates indicated that their families experienced zero impact from the economic downturn associated with the pandemic. Recent graduates from low-income backgrounds faced a disproportionate share of economic challenges.

As of the end of the summer, 45 percent of graduates who did not qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch while they were in school said their families had not experienced any economic impacts from the downturn since February. Only 21 percent of poorer graduates felt the same way. They more often said that their parents had to stop working, were more likely to have applied for government assistance (e.g., Medicaid, TANF), and to have received unemployment compensation. They were more than twice as likely to have to sell belongings as well.

Conclusion

Recent high school graduates (even those with strong academic records) have — like the rest of the world — felt the impact of the pandemic. These young adults perceived that they did not always receive consistent support from their high schools. They also reported having health and economic stress in addition to concern about the future.

It is still too early to say whether the pandemic will have long-term effects on outcomes for high-achieving graduates from low-income families. But even before the seismic impact of the coronavirus, these young people often faced greater barriers in transitioning to postsecondary education and the workforce.

Equity has always been a challenge for K-12 and postsecondary educational systems. Even for the highest achieving youth from low-income backgrounds, the coronavirus pandemic could compound existing challenges and increase the need for effective support programs to assist these promising young people as they transition to college and the workforce.