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Attendance Rates

Jamila Teal
California State University, Monterey Bay

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Attendance Rates

Jamila Teal

Early Learning Program Lizbeth Gomez

Collaborative Health & Human Services

Department of Health Human Services and Public Policy

California State University Monterey Bay

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Author Note

Jamila Teal, Department of Health Human Services and Public Policy, California State University Monterey Bay. This research was supported by the Early Learning Program. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jamila Teal, California State University Monterey Bay, 100 Campus Center, Seaside, CA, 93955. Contact: jteal@csumb.edu.

Abstract

Absence is a normal part of childhood for kids going to school because sometimes life happens. Kids get sick, have family emergencies, the family might have to move, or lack consistent transportation to get to school. The Early Learning Program (ELP) is a non-profit organization that provides education for preschool aged children and focuses on making preschool easily accessible, primarily for low-income families. It is not uncommon for some families to take advantage of the ELP by not prioritizing taking their kids to school and getting them there on time. Now that the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the lives of so many, especially those of low income status, many parents were forced to remove their children from school. This project focuses on why children are absent from school and how the novel coronavirus pandemic has affected the choices of sending their children to school. A survey was administered, and the data collected will aid in deciding how the ELP will move forward with how to recruit students and assure parents of their childrens' safety. After 87 responses, the data revealed that all the parents were satisfied with ELP services and are pleased with the COVID-19 safety measures. Going forward, the ELP will have to find ways to satisfy English and Spanish speaking families on whether to have an extended break or extended remote learning services.

Keywords: Absence, school, low-income

Early Learning Program in Salinas and South County

The Early Learning Program of Monterey County was established to provide low income families with free preschool education. The mission of the Early Learning Program is to provide the highest quality of education to children ages 3-5. The Monterey County Office of Education Early Learning Program, in partnership with the community, is dedicated to providing the highest quality, early childhood education for children, along with comprehensive family services. (MCOE, 2020).

The Early Learning Program (ELP) provides many services in conjunction with education for children aged 3-5. Parents are provided with several different program options that apply to the families needs. The biggest option is scheduling. Parents can take advantage of having their child at a specified location for morning, afternoon, or extended day school hours, which would be from the morning to the afternoon. Families are also offered a Family Support Advocate (FSA) who can provide solutions to meet their needs. If the child is falling behind due to poor behavior, frequent tardiness, or any other issues that may arise that will cause difficulty for the parents, the child, or both, FSA will intervene. The ELP can also accommodate children with special needs, such as asthma, food allergies, etc., with a health plan to ensure child safety.

The Early Learning Program currently provides service to 732 students, in which 660 are funded by the Early Learning Program and 72 are funded by California State (MCOE, 2020). In 2018, the California Department of Education granted the Early Learning Program the opportunity to receive state funding to serve children. In 2019, the Early Learning Program received another award to expand services for part time and full time care for children with a higher income than Head Start's guidelines (MCOE, 2020).

One of the focal points of the Early Learning Program and the most important job is called ERSEA, which stands for eligibility, recruitment, selection, enrollment and attendance. The purpose of ERSEA is to recruit eligible students, select them, get them enrolled, and keep their attendance above 85%. When a student or students fall below the 85% mark too frequently, it can affect future funding for the program and ultimately end the program that will disrupt students transitioning from pre-k to kindergarten.

This capstone project will take a microscopic view at attendance rates and how the rates affect education and the program as a whole. This capstone project will consist of research of the Early Learning Program sites and compare and contrast attendance rates from highest to lowest. Research of sites with the lowest attendance and will be reviewed to discover why attendance rates are so low. The goal is to bring sites with low attendance rates up to 85% or higher on a consistent basis.

Problem Description

Attendance Discrepancies

Children are missing school more frequently in one location than others. For the Early Learning Program to run smoothly it is imperative for children to attend school consistently and strive to be on time daily. When attendance rates decline, it creates a ripple effect that impairs student learning, and can affect future funding that will ultimately hurt faculty and cost jobs. Nearly 8 million students, in every state and at every grade level, missed three or more weeks of school in 2015-2016, according to data released by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (Attendance Works, 2018). Children who miss school at the beginning of the

school year are more likely to have poor outcomes academically. Chronic absence is defined as missing more than 10% of the school year. If this pattern continues through 6th grade, students are more likely to drop out of school (Attendance Works, 2018). It is important to help parents and guardians understand that bringing their children to school regularly not only benefits their own children, but has a positive impact on other students as well.

Contributing Factors

In the Early Learning Program, the top leading reasons for absences are illness, transportation, and moving, because many parents are seasonal farm workers (Early Learning Program, 2020). It is common knowledge that children get sick and spread germs. However there are misconceptions about defining a child as being sick and too sick for school. “Colds, coughs and sore throats are common in kids, and do not require that children stay home from school or daycare, especially if symptoms are mild. However, if cold symptoms include a fever, or if a cough is excessive enough to disrupt their learning, you should keep your child home to rest.” (Children's Health, 2020.) Not all symptoms require children to stay home. If symptoms are severe, such as vomiting and high fevers then children should stay home. There is still much confusion about when to keep kids home due to an illness.

Transportation is a huge factor and stressor for some parents when it comes to getting children to school on time or at all. Sometimes financial circumstances arise where some families can't afford to repair a car or don't have a secondary car or family support. Parents can lose a job at random, which can cause them to seek another job with a less accommodating schedule. Regardless of the circumstances impacting transportation, it is still a very stressful situation. “27 percent of parents feel like they have put their job at risk in order to meet their

child's transportation needs. 40 percent say that their work schedule is affected at least once a week due to having to shuttle their kids around." (Audrey, 2016). Having transportation to get children to school is critical. However, if parents are forced to choose between taking kids to school or getting to work to support the family, it is likely the child will have to sacrifice missing school.

There are many families of the Early Learning Program who are migrant workers. This occupation is difficult for families because moving from Salinas to Yuma for four months out of the year takes place during the school year. Sometimes kids have to go with their families and other times they stay in Salinas during the school year. "In the fall families move to Yuma for lettuce season and return to Salinas in the spring for lettuce and vegetables and return in the spring." (Mathews, 2018.) Finances and family support determine what is best for the child but still have a strong impact on the child or children.

Consequences

Frequent absences have negative effects on children resulting in an inability to follow school routines. Routine tasks such as remembering classmates' names and following daily instructions can ultimately lead to failing in acclimating in transitioning to kindergarten. The consequences of children missing school due to illness, can cause unnecessary frequent absenteeism because the child may not be as sick as parents believe. If a child has to stay home for every cough or sneeze they would miss school quite frequently and can become a future truant. "Truancy measures only unexcused absences." (Healthy Children, 2020). Parents should not get comfortable with keeping their children home when they are supposed to be in school. Not only can a child fall behind socially and academically, but depending on the state, it can lead

to complacency. When a child reaches public school and unexcused absences will not be tolerated, legal action would be required.

Children of migrant workers are always impacted when they have to move or the parents have to move. Change in a child's environment, no matter if it is expected or unexpected can be stressful. "Salinas teachers say that some students struggle in the winter when farmworker parents head off to Yuma, leaving them with other relatives." (Mathews, 2018). Even when children don't have to move with their parents, children still have a hard time coping with the change of being without their parents, even if it is only for a few months. Children need consistency and routine, especially at a young age. When a routine is disrupted, it is difficult to predict how a child will cope with the change. The change might be so impactful that the child may have to miss school until they are ready to return.

When children do not have transportation to school, children are more likely not to come to school. Majority of low income families do not have two reliable cars, nor are they likely to work a job that has an accommodating schedule to get their children to school on time. These families are likely to have to choose between bringing their kids to school, or leaving them home to make it to work on time, to provide the family. "Sometimes it just isn't possible to get them there, even if you do carpooling which can fall apart at the last minute if someone gets sick or can't make it." (Audrey, 2016). No matter the social economic background, sometimes circumstances arise where parents fail to have reliable transportation to get their kids to school and on time. When kids are late or miss school they fall behind and miss out on learning opportunities that might not get repeated.

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Illness	Children are missing school more frequently in one location than others.	Frequent absenteeism, falling behind, can spread to others
Frequent moving		Inconsistency for children at home
Transportation		Children can not make it to school

Capstone Project Description and Justification**Capstone Project & Project Purpose**

By analyzing attendance data, the goal is to understand the specific barriers for the families at the Early Learning Program. Once the data is analyzed and the understanding is verified, the Early Learning Program can make changes to better accommodate attendance barriers and reduce absences which will increase the chances of children becoming successful. The purpose of this project is to reduce the causes of frequent absences so children can get the most out of their education by being present as often as possible. When children become ill, have to move across counties or states annually, or lack transportation due to circumstances beyond their control, it can have lasting consequences. These consequences include frequent absenteeism, falling behind in class, spreading preventable illnesses, inconsistency at home, and not coming to school at all. When these consequences are addressed, the project will help staff, help parents, in helping their children succeed in their academic future.

Project Justification

The value of a needs assessment will contain pertinent information. The needs assessment will be given to 20 families from centers showing the lowest and highest attendance rates. The reason they will be given to centers with the lowest and highest attendance rates is because it will paint a clear picture of the difference between those centers. Having an assessment of why some centers are doing better than others will give staff an opportunity to make resources more equitable to the centers that need them. The needs assessment will address what exactly the families need help with to get their children to school on time, daily. Most importantly the needs assessment will provide answers to get students attendance rates above 85% attendance rate or less than 10% of the school year. The needs assessment will be sent out to all families asking why they have their children in preschool and if they believe preschool is critical.

Having this information will give staff a clear understanding of a students frequent absenteeism. “ The elementary school literature also highlights the fact that school absences are influenced by numerous factors that cut across different layers of the family, community, and school context, and are not solely determined by child health” (Ansari and Putrell, 2017). Other than leading factors that prevent students from going to school there can also be a cultural barrier that negates the importance of attending school daily. If that is the case it is detrimental to learn if there are other factors that keep kids from school. “Accounting for these ecological factors may be even more necessary when examining absenteeism in preschool, as parents are less likely to view preschool attendance as critical, compared with attendance in elementary school years” (Ansari and Putrell, 2017). If parents are keeping their children home because they don’t feel like

taking them to preschool or the parents don't view preschool as absolutely necessary and critical as data proves it is, this project presents the opportunity to obtain those answers. Not all parents may be honest and forthright about their feelings about preschool. However, if this project presents that is the case, staff will be given an opportunity to explain the benefits of preschool and prove it is not the same as daycare.

Project Implementation

The plan was to compare and contrast attendance rates over the last two years between schools with low attendance rates and high attendance rates. Due to the novel coronavirus, that plan has been changed. The new project is to learn how the coronavirus has impacted families and learn how the ELP can assist with those changes. The conception of this project was developed over several months and can be found in Appendix A. The first step was to create a needs assessment by gathering attendance data over the last two school years. To do this requires accessing attendance sheets from the main office and organizing it by location and reasoning. This data includes the top 5-7 frequent reasons for absences and tardiness, the locations of those absences and tardiness, whether those absences were remedied and how they were remedied.

The next step was to create a chart and or spreadsheet organizing the data using Google Sheets and Google graphs. The data was organized by location, reasons for absences, tardiness, and remedies. The next step was to have a focus group via Zoom to discuss the needs of the families having issues tackling getting their child to school on time. There was a Spanish speaking translator for this Zoom meeting. During this Zoom meeting, discussions about what the organization can do to meet families needs and a projected timeline. After this Zoom meeting, a survey will be sent out via email/mail asking parents to rate the importance of

preschool. This survey will be provided in English and Spanish. It will also have a series of questions regarding their understanding of preschool. This data will also be analyzed and put on a Google spreadsheet. Now everything is completed all information will be given to the Early Learning Program provided with recommendations to implement for the new school year.

Due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, the project had to be adjusted. Instead of focusing on the most common reasons of why children are absent over the past two years, the focus was shifted to how families are coping with the current pandemic. To conduct this study, a survey of questions was drafted, improvised by my mentor, and reviewed by family support services and teachers. Google translate, along with my mentor, translated the survey to Spanish so it could be distributed to primary spanish speakers and increase the number of participants. The survey was sent out to four hundred families via text and email. The families were given ten days to complete. The survey consisted of ten questions and a section for comments. Once all the data was collected and analyzed, the English and Spanish responses were compared and contrasted. The data was put on presentation slides to present to the Early Learning Program staff and concluded with information on what kind of changes to make currently and in the future.

Assessment Plan & Expected Outcomes

The original assessment plan was to analyze two years of past attendance data and use that data to reduce the number of absences at sites with low attendance scores. Due to the shift of COVID-19, the assessment plan now, is to learn what families are coping with in the middle of a global pandemic. This assessment can be measured by the number of parents who respond to the

survey. Google Forms will provide a graph based on the questions and number of responses. The graph will provide numeric results that will tally the percentage of how parents respond.

The expected outcome of this project is to be able to provide the Early Learning Program with significant data based on the clients needs which are based on the responses. If a significant number of parents respond to the survey, the ELP will be able to address any concerns on how to navigate through the pandemic. Depending on the length of the pandemic, the responses will prepare the future students and parents on what to expect for the following new school year.

Project Results

After ten days and 87 responses, (41 English speakers and 46 Spanish speakers) the data revealed comparative and contrasting results. In regards to how families learned about the program, the majority of surveyors heard about the program through friends and family. Both parties are comfortable with in person and remote services. Majority of the families revealed that the pandemic has impacted their livelihood primarily through reduction in hours at work, which lead to a financial impact as well. The majority of parents state they prefer to leave their children at school while they are at work and have not sought out another preschool since the pandemic started. The majority of parents state that COVID-19 safety measures are the number priority for school settings. The top two reasons parents keep their children home from school are the child is ill, followed by a family emergency. Finally, the last question asked parents if they preferred extended remote services or an extended break over winter break. This was the only question that revealed the biggest contrast. 52% of Spanish speaking families prefer extended remote services over winter break, while 39% of English speakers prefer an extended break.

This assessment revealed and addressed more than the expected outcomes. The survey turned out to be more beneficial than expected because it addressed concerns beyond the pandemic. The survey addressed concerns directly related to ERSEA and gave more insight to the likelihood of why a child would be absent if there was no pandemic. Another benefit, was it addressed how children are being recruited to attend the program. Attendance is what keeps the agency active. 61% of Spanish speakers learned of the program through friends and family, followed by 13% learned from a banner at school. For the English speakers, 49% learned from friends and family, followed by 12% learned of the agency through flyers. The big takeaway from this data is the community of family and friends keeps children attending the Early Learning Program.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Based on the results of this capstone project, several takeaways were highlighted. Not only did this capstone project collect data on how families were affected by COVID-19, it also gave data on what initially brought families to the Early Learning Program. Based on the results it was concluded that families trust the reputation of the Early Learning Program. The majority of the families were recruited by friends and family. This shows how close knit the community is and the reputation of the ELP speaks for itself. Another highlight was most families were impacted by COVID-19 due to a reduction in hours and/financial hardships. The fact that the ELP accommodates low income families by providing free education and meals is a huge benefit. Finally, there is the cultural conflict of whether to provide extended remote services for Spanish speaking families, or an extended break for English speaking families. It is imperative that this issue is addressed immediately before the next winter break. Deciding whether or not to

do either option must be decided because the winter months are when the ELP attendance rates drop. A recommendation to address this issue is do an extended break one year, followed by extended remote learning the following year. While it is still uncertain where the country will be in light of the pandemic, doing trial and error with these services will provide data on what is most beneficial for families and the agency.

Personal Reflection

I learned so much from this capstone project. The biggest takeaway from this was cultures have different needs. Prior to starting this project I was aware that the majority of the ELP clientele were primary spanish speakers. I was also aware of the ELP migrant worker base. When I implemented the project, I knew I had to do a survey in English and Spanish version. I naively expected the answers to be the same or similar for every question. To my surprise that was not the case. For example, one of the questions asked if families prefer an extended break during the winter or extended remote services. 52% of spanish speaking families prefer extended remote services while 39% of English speaking families prefer an extended break. This example highlights the cultural differences and expectations between different families.

The initial project I wanted to do was to back track at least two years to see which sites had the most absences and which had the least to compare and contrast. I wanted to visit the sites that were struggling with attendance and implement what was working for the sites who had the highest attendance. This capstone project would have required several site visits and interacting with teachers and staff. Prior to COVID-19, visiting other sites was one of the highlights of

interning at ELP. Even though this project did not allow me to physically engage with staff members at other sites, I was able to come up with a capstone project that was beneficial to the ELP to where this data can be used for future pandemics or any other circumstances that would require chronic remote learning.

If I could do this project again under the exact same conditions, knowing what I know now, I would have tried to come up with something more engaging for parents along with the survey. Ideas that come to mind would be a technology survey, to have a baseline of where they are, and or a monthly flyer to keep parents informed of any future changes. The monthly flyer would be full of creative ideas to do with children or that children can do alone.

My advice for the future intern of ELP: Ask a ton of questions about the agency. Engage with as many staff members as possible and ask questions. Everyone working there is passionate about their job and genuinely cares about the program and the community. If the pandemic is still in effect when you come aboard, do not get discouraged. Safety is the number one priority, and you will never be asked to do anything that would put you in harm's way. There are still so many things to do for the agency. The staff is always welcome to new ideas, and new ways to build upon the old ideas, or replace them. This is the place to step out of your comfort zone and take initiative to implement your own ideas. Most importantly, communicate with your mentor as much as possible whenever there is an issue or if it is something positive such as an idea that would be beneficial. People who effectively communicate accordingly, are most likely to be remembered.

This capstone project is the biggest accomplishment of my academic career. In hindsight, I enjoyed the highs and lows of what it took to complete this project. My ultimate goal from start

to finish of this capstone was to make it beneficial for The Early Learning Program. I want this program to remain successful and I want to contribute to the success of the agency in any way possible. Conducting the survey and reading the results showed how vested parents are in their child's education and how much of an impact the ELP has on their lives. This capstone project has ignited my passion for wanting to contribute to the community in all of my future endeavors.

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

Activities	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
Capstone project approval by mentor	February 2020	Lizbeth Gomez
Gather attendance data from past 2 years	June-July 2020	Lizbeth Gomez
Create document/spreadsheet organizing data	July 2020	Lizbeth Gomez
Project shift due to COVID	August 2020	Lizbeth Gomez
Survey is constructed with questions in regards to how families are coping with school during a pandemic	September 2020	Lizbeth Gomez
Survey is revised by mentor and assisting staff.	October 2020	Lizbeth Gomez
Distributed the survey in Spanish and English via email and text to be filled out on phone or laptop convenience and efficiency.	October 2020	Lizbeth Gomez
Survey concluded after ten days for analysis.	October 2020	Lizbeth Gomez
Data is analyzed to address concerns and improvise for the following school year.	November 2020	Lizbeth Gomez
Presentation is compiled and presented to The Early Learning Program Staff	December 2020	Lizbeth Gomez Sonia Jaramillo

Appendix B

Child Enrollment and Attendance

The following is a voluntary and anonymous survey used to support a student academic project at California State University Monterey Bay. The intent is to gather information about the impact of Covid-19 for families dependent on childcare services who are essential workers. Responses to this survey are confidential and any information provided cannot be used to

identify a participant. Please answer all questions to the best of your knowledge, and remember to be honest as this information will improve the practices in our program. This survey is provided in English and Spanish.

1. How did you hear about our program?

- a. Friends/Family
- b. Social Media
- c. Organization/Agency
- d. Event
- e. Flyer in the community
- f. Staff Member
- g. Banner outside school
- h. Program Vehicles (School bus/Rocket looking vans)
- i. Other: _____

2. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, would you have considered bringing your child to a preschool center?

- A. Strongly Agree
- B. Agree
- C. Undecided / Neutral
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly Disagree

3. if you keep your child home from school, what is typically the cause? Check all that apply. You will not get in trouble for being honest.

- A. Sick
- B. No transportation
- C. Overslept
- D. Child was uncooperative
- E. Family Emergency
- F. Other: _____

4. How has the covid-19 pandemic impacted your family? Check all that apply.

- A. Job Loss
 - B. Reduction of job hours
 - C. Job change
 - D. Financial impact
 - E. Loss of transportation
 - F. Loss of family support
 - G. More than one job
 - H. Housing Insecurity
 - I. Food Insecurity
 - J. If your option is not listed, please write them down.
- _____

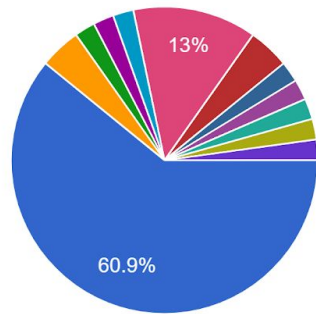
- 5. Currently, if you had the option of taking your child to a preschool center or keeping them home, what would you choose?**
- A. Home
 - B. Preschool Center
 - C. Other: _____
- 6. Have you sought another Preschool service while being enrolled in our program?**
- A. Yes
 - B. No
- 7. If yes, do you plan to switch programs?**
- A. Yes
 - B. No
- 8. What do you look for in a preschool program during Covid-19?**
- A. Covid safety procedures
 - B. Convenience
 - C. Schedules (AM/PM/Extended)
 - D. Smaller class size
 - E. Options for virtual/in person opportunities
 - F. Other: _____
- 9. For children enrolled in remote services, how are you and your child coping with remote learning?**
- A. Good
 - B. Fair
 - C. Poor
 - D. Other: _____
- 10. What can the Early Learning Program do to support you and your child during COVID-19?**
-

- 11. Are you open to remote learning during the months of November, December, and January?**
- A. Yes
 - B. No

Appendix C

1. How did you hear about our program?

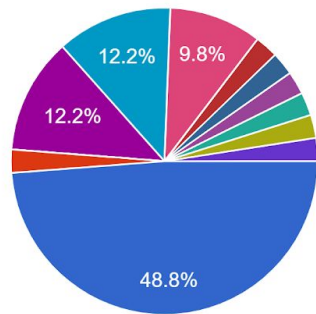
46 responses



- Amistades/Familiares
 - Redes Sociales
 - Organizaciones/Agencias
 - Evento
 - Boletin en la comunidad
 - Empleado del Programa
 - Letrero fuera de la escuela
 - Vehiculos del programa (envoltura de...)
- ▲ 1/2 ▼

1. How did you hear about our program?

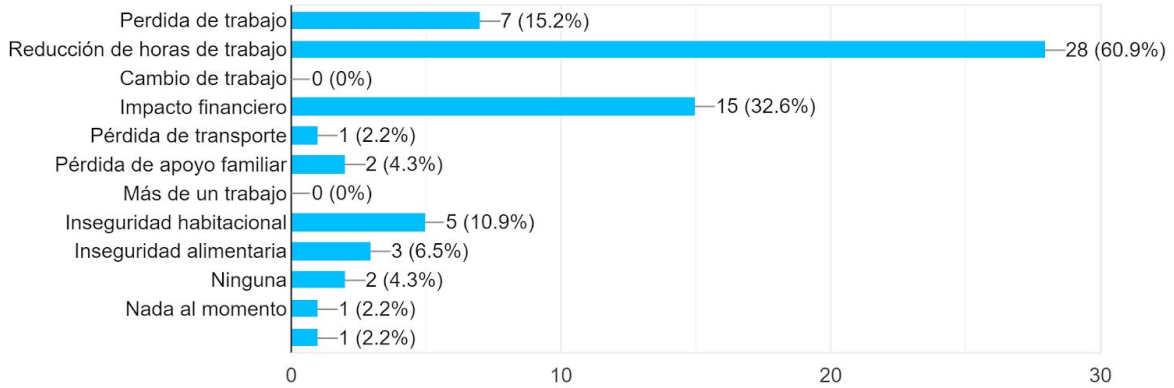
41 responses



- Friends/Family
 - Social Media
 - Organization/Agency
 - Event
 - Flyer in the community
 - Staff Member
 - Banner outside school
 - Program Vehicles (School Bus wrap o...)
- ▲ 1/2 ▼

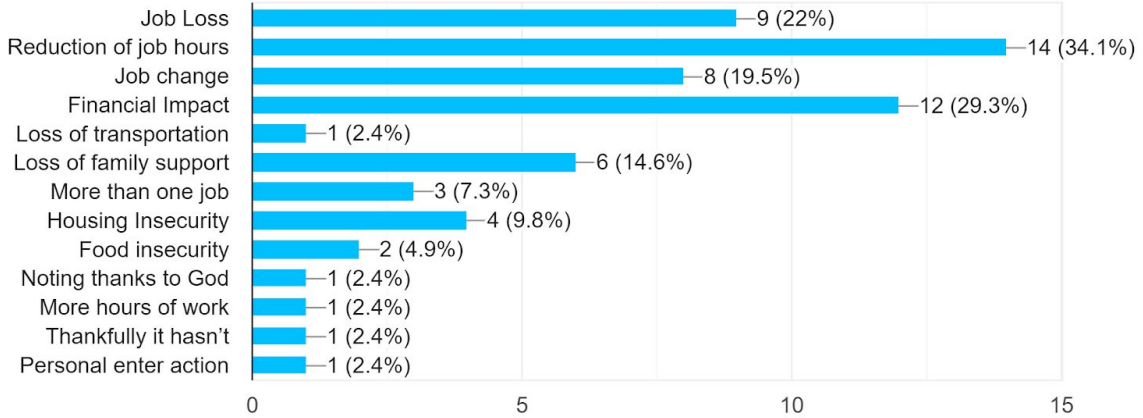
4. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the economic stability of your family? Please check all that apply.

46 responses



4. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your family's economic stability? Check all that apply.

41 responses



10. During the months of November, December and January, the low class attendance, do you think it would be better to have an extended break...nt remote / virtual services during these months?
 46 responses



10. During the months of November, December, and January, our attendance drops, do you think it would be best to have an extended break or implement remote services during these months?
 41 responses

