



Child Care Teachers' Experiences with COVID-19: Findings from the Study of Early Education in Louisiana

Anna J. Markowitz, Daphna Bassok, Amy Smith, Sarah Kiscaden

EdPolicyWorks at the University of Virginia

UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies

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The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, which arrived in the United States in early 2020, had a profound impact on the child care sector. Nationwide, more than half of child care centers shut down soon after the pandemic started (Bipartisan Policy Institute, 2020). Those that remained open faced considerable risks, both financially and in terms of provider health and wellbeing. Several recent surveys of child care directors highlight the financial challenges many centers are facing, and raise questions about centers' ability to re-open and stay open (e.g., Bipartisan Policy Center, 2020; Louisiana Policy Institute, 2020; NAEYC, 2020; Bassok, Markowitz, Michie, & Smith, 2020). Much less has been reported, however, about the experiences of the teachers who care for and educate young children in these centers, whose livelihoods were suddenly upended. Re-opening child care and supporting young children requires a clear understanding of teachers' experiences with COVID-19 and the supports they need.

This report presents findings from the Study of Early Education in Louisiana (SEE-LA) COVID-19 Teacher Survey, which was fielded between April 20 and May 29 in Jefferson and Rapides, two large Louisiana parishes. Echoing national and state-wide data, most child care sites in Jefferson and Rapides closed for at least some period of time following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: 75% of sites represented in our data reported closing at least temporarily (e.g., Bassok, Markowitz, Smith, & Kiscaden, 2020; Guidry, 2020).

The SEE-LA COVID-19 Teacher Survey aimed to better understand how child care teachers experienced COVID-19. The survey is part of a longstanding collaboration with the Louisiana Department of Education, the Jefferson Parish Early Childhood Collaborative, and the Rapides Early Childhood Network. All child care teachers who were working in a publicly-subsidized child care center in the fall of 2019 were invited to participate, including lead and assistant teachers, floaters, and other staff.

In total we invited 667 teachers from 88 child care sites to participate in the survey via email; all respondents were offered a \$25 gift card in recognition of their time. Of these, 393 teachers from all 88 sites completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 61%. Because we invited all teachers working in fall 2019, our results capture what happened to child care teachers even if by the time they

received the survey their site was no longer operating, they were laid off, or they had opted to leave. We do exclude teachers who left early childhood positions *prior* to March 2020 (N=24), so the overall sample size throughout this report is 369. These response rates are high—between two and three times as large as those from other ECE workforce surveys (e.g., Boyd-Swan & Herbst, 2019). They therefore provide a rich picture of the challenges COVID-19 created for child care teachers in these two parishes.

Jefferson and Rapides are the 2nd and 10th biggest parishes in Louisiana. They are diverse with respect to race and ethnicity. In 2018, Jefferson was about 53% White, 28% Black, 15% Hispanic, and 4% Asian; Rapides was about 61% White, 32% Black, 3% Hispanic, and 2% Asian (US Census Bureau, 2018). In both parishes, 27% of children live in poverty, a percentage that exceeds the national average, and a high proportion of families receive means-tested services (US Census Bureau, 2019).

Of the teachers who responded to the survey, 48% identified as Black, 46% as White, 5% as Hispanic, the remainder as another race or ethnicity. About three quarters (74%) of respondents were lead teachers, and the remaining included assistant teachers, floaters, or other individuals working in the classroom with children. Respondents were, on average, 39 years old, with ages ranging from 18 to 75; just over a quarter (27%) were 50 or older. Most teachers reported a high school degree as their highest level of education (40%), but many had some college experience (30%), or held an associate's degree (13%).

The survey asked child care teachers questions about how they experienced COVID-19, in terms of their employment, their wellbeing, and their access to supports. This report presents findings organized into three sections:

1. Changes to teachers' employment status and earnings due to COVID-19 (e.g., layoffs, reduced hours, etc.)
2. Child care teaching during a pandemic (e.g., changes to routines, workplace concerns, etc.)
3. Teachers' wellbeing and access to supports during the pandemic (e.g., food insecurity and depression, health benefits and sick leave, etc.)

Employment and Earnings During COVID-19

Nearly three-quarters of child care sites in our sample experienced at least a short-term closure during the coronavirus pandemic (Bassok et al., 2020), yet nearly all teachers—91%—reported that they were still employed at their child care site. At the same time, 85% of teachers reported missing work during the pandemic, and of these 81% reported missing two weeks of work or more. More than half of teachers reported that this missed work occurred due to a site closure. That so many reported that they were still employed reflects that many of the site closures were temporary, and that teachers who were still out of work expected they would be able to return to their position in the future.

Nonetheless, many teachers reported losing their job, being unable to work, or being laid off due to COVID-19. We defined a teacher as being “laid off” if they reported any of the following: that they were laid off due to COVID-19; that they were no longer an employee of their site due to closure as a result of COVID-19; that they missed any work during the pandemic as a result of being laid off; or that one of the ways that their current position had been affected by the pandemic was that they were laid off.

Overall, about a third of teachers reported that they were laid off either currently or at some point during the pandemic. Rates of layoff were comparable across Jefferson (30%) and Rapides (36%), and did not vary between lead and non-lead teachers (each 32%).

Table 1. Change in Teacher Weekly Earnings during the Pandemic

	All Teachers	Laid-Off Teachers	Not Laid-Off Teachers
Decreased	54.6%	70.8%	47.1%
Stayed the Same	39.2%	24.8%	45.9%
Increased	6.2%	4.4%	7.0%

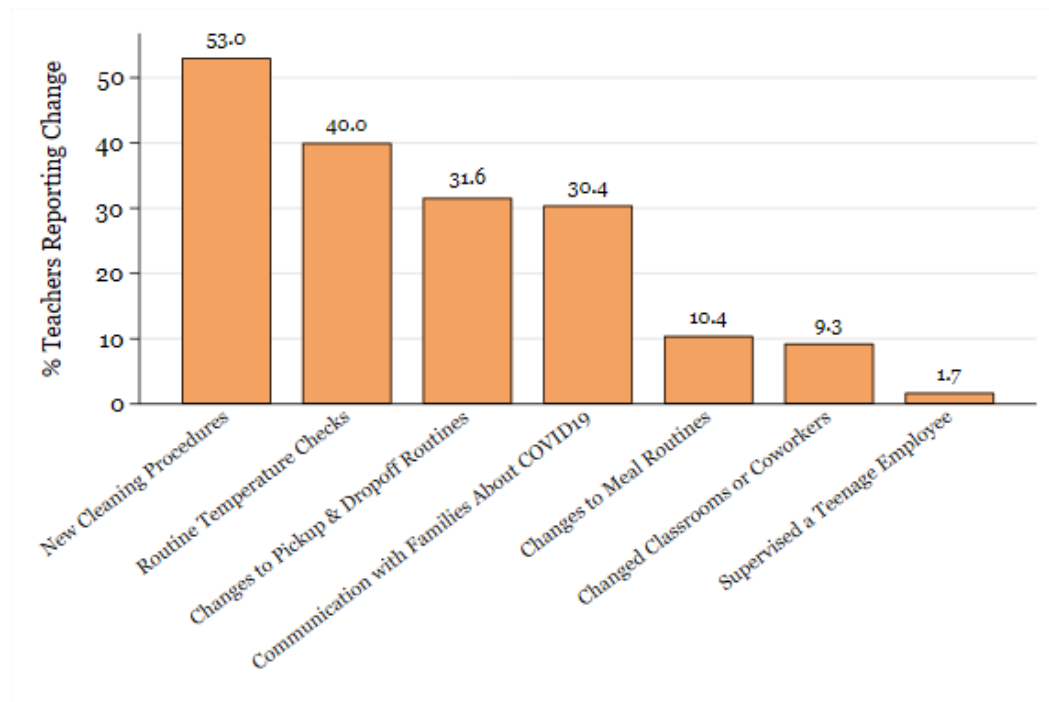
Consistent with the high rates of closure, most teachers experienced changes in their weekly earnings during the pandemic. As shown in Table 1, 55% of all teachers reported a decrease in their weekly earnings. Unsurprisingly, teachers who were laid off during COVID-19 were about one and a half times more likely to report a decrease in earnings than teachers who remained employed (71% compared to 47%).

Of the teachers who reported a decrease in earnings, 65% reported receiving some type financial support (e.g., grants, donations, or relief payments) for these lost wages (not shown). Those who did not noted the lack of financial support and pay. One reported, “I haven’t received any money for the days I worked before we closed,” and another stated, “they should have funding set up for teachers especially for times like these.” Comments like these are particularly notable given that early educators working in school-based pre-kindergarten and Head Start settings continued to earn their regular wages throughout the pandemic.

Working in Child Care During COVID-19

Teachers reported making a number of changes to their daily routines in order to mitigate risks related to COVID-19. As shown in Figure 1, the most common changes included implementing new cleaning procedures (53%), regular temperature checks (40%), new pick-up and drop-off procedures (32%), and additional communication with families (30%). Several teachers noted that these routines were “vital for everyone’s wellbeing” and necessary for their sites to “return back to a safe place.” About a fifth (19%) of teachers reported they spent their own money—on average about \$150—on necessary supplies related to these new routines (not shown).

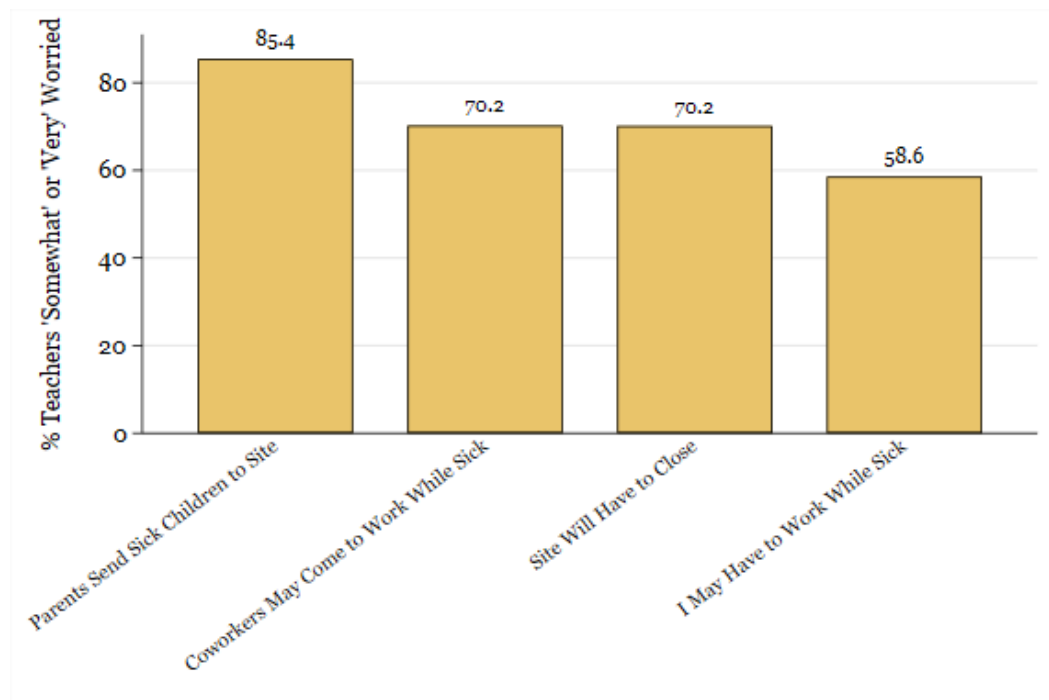
Figure 1. Changes in Site Routine in Response to the Pandemic



The survey asked teachers how concerned they were about several COVID-19 related scenarios (Figure 2). The majority of teachers reported being somewhat or very worried that children would come to their site sick (85%), that coworkers will work while sick (70%), that their site will have to close (70%), and that they will have to work while sick (59%). In response to an open-ended, written response question, many teachers explicitly noted fearing for their life at work, but feeling they lacked alternatives. One reported, “I could probably die if I go back to work, but I have to.” Another explained, “It’s a scary time trying to stay open and serve the parents and children... it’s just hard right now thinking about getting the virus and bringing it home to my family.” A third expressed concern that keeping her job depended on risking her health, saying, “We have to sign waivers because of this virus... I [am] scared to return to work but I have no choice. I will be fired.”

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Figure 2. Teacher Concerns About Site Operations



Wellbeing and Supports

Research shows that teachers' wellbeing is linked to the quality of teacher-child instructional interactions, the warmth and supportiveness of teacher-child relationships, and children's academic outcomes (e.g., Buettner et al., 2016; Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Jeon et al., 2014; Ota et al., 2012; Sandilos et al., 2015; Whitaker et al., 2015). The survey asked teachers about their financial and emotional wellbeing during the pandemic, as well as about supports they received either through their employer or more broadly.

As noted above, 55% of teachers reported a decrease in their weekly earnings as a result of the pandemic. In line with these financial losses, about 73% of teachers reported that it was at least "somewhat difficult" to make ends meet with their current household income (Table 2). In reflecting

on these struggles, one teacher noted, "It has made me realize how little we are actually paid." Another reported having to "stretch money" and not being able to pay their bills, and a third observed, "We really don't get paid enough for what we are taking on. We are literally putting our lives on the line right now to continue to care for the children."

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Table 2. Difficulty of Living on Household Income

Difficulty	Percent of Teachers
Not at All Difficult	27.5%
Somewhat Difficult	50.7%
Very Difficult	14.5%
Extremely Difficult	7.3%

Teachers also reported high levels of food insecurity: 42% indicated that they worried that their food would run out, and about a third worried that their food sometimes or often did not last and /or that they sometimes or often could not afford balanced meals (Table 3). Overall, 50% of teachers reported some level of food insecurity (i.e. by indicating at least one of these measures was sometimes or often true).

Table 3. Measures of Teacher Food Insecurity

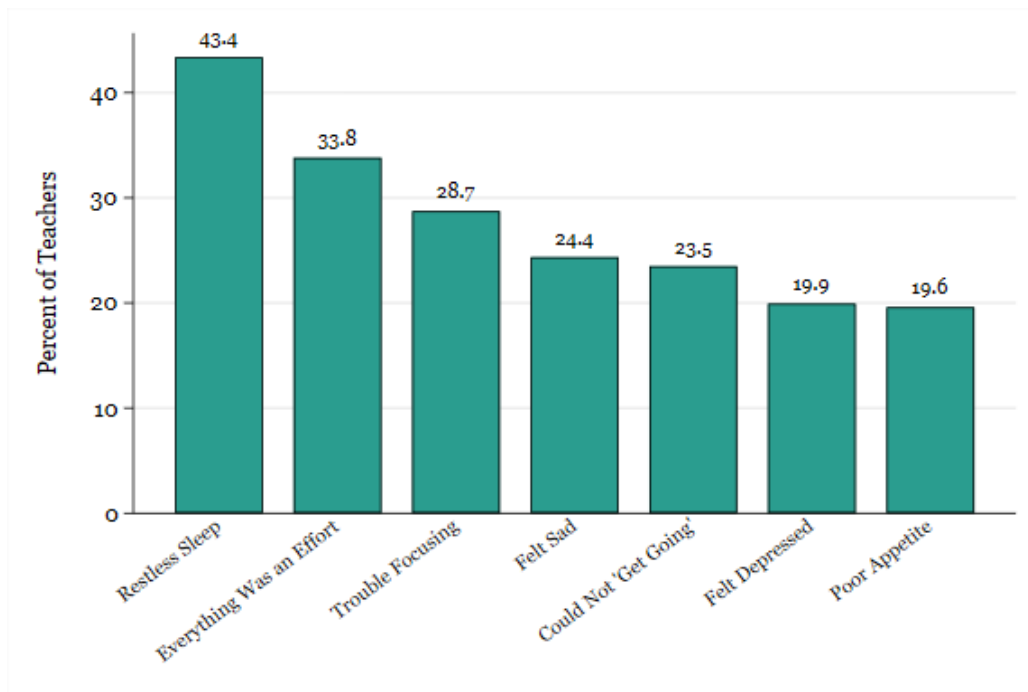
	Never True	Sometimes True	Often True
I/we have worried that my /our food might run out before I/we have money to get more.	58.0%	33.1%	8.9%
The food that I/we bought just didn't last, and I/we didn't have the money to get more.	66.7%	27.0%	6.3%
I/we couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.	67.8%	24.3%	7.9%

In addition to the high levels of financial stress and food insecurity, over a third of teachers (38%) reported clinically-relevant levels of depressive symptoms on the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale, a widely-used, well-validated measure (Levine, 2013). Laid off teachers reported higher rates of depression (44.6%) than non-laid off teachers (35.2%).

These rates of depression are high. On a similar survey of child care teachers in the same two parishes in 2018, depression rates were 22% (Bassok, Markowitz, Smith, & Oleson, 2019). While the 2018 rates were already high, the rates post COVID-19 nearly doubled. For context, the rates of depression among adults in the United States before COVID-19 was under 10%, though rates of depression in the U.S. more generally have spiked since COVID-19 and are now about 27% (CDC, 2020).

Figure 3 shows teachers' self-report of individual depressive symptoms. About 43% of teachers reported having trouble sleeping in the past week; 34% indicated they felt everything they did was an effort; and 29% reported trouble focusing. Laid off teachers experienced particularly high rates of depressive symptoms. They were at least 1.5 times more likely to report trouble "getting going," trouble focusing, feeling sad, and feeling depressed (not shown).

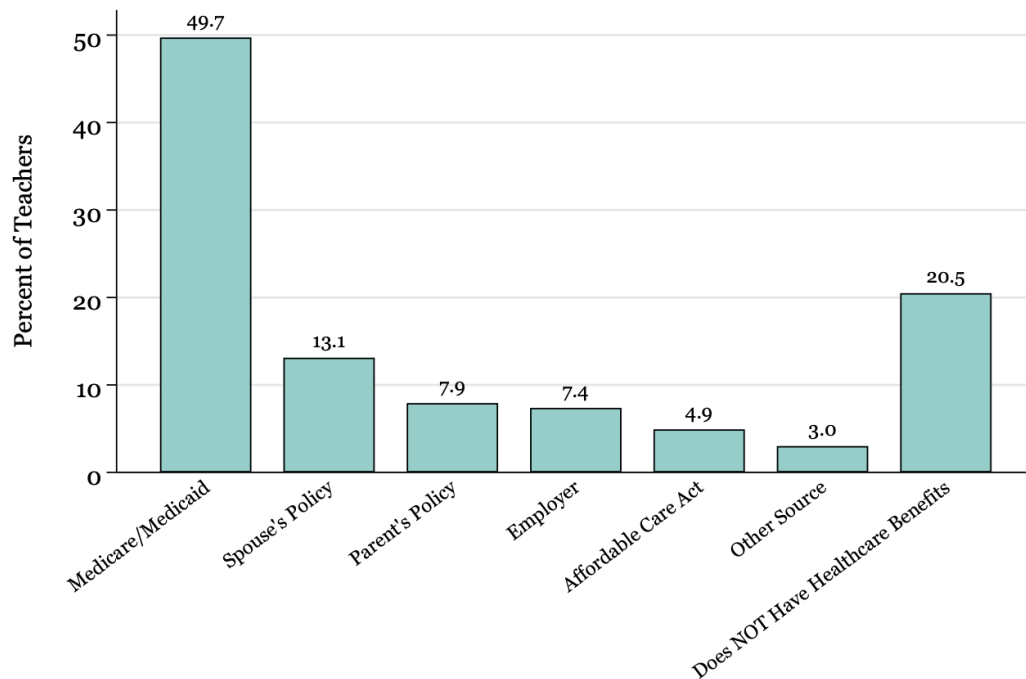
Figure 3. Teacher Report of Individual Depressive Symptoms Experienced at Least Occasionally in Past Seven Days



Access to Supports

Access to health care is of particular concern for frontline workers during a pandemic. As shown in Figure 4, one-fifth of child care teachers (20%) reported that they did not have health insurance at all. Half of teachers accessed health insurance through Medicare or Medicaid (50%). Only 7% reported accessing health care through their site. One teacher wrote, "I would wish we Lead Teachers could have more help on... good health insurance."

Figure 4. Sources of Teacher Healthcare Benefits



Similarly, very few teachers reported having sick leave (Figure 5). Seventy-four percent of teachers reported having no sick leave at all, and another 9% reported having only unpaid sick leave. One teacher reported, “I just want a safe environment during this time... and [to] have some kind of sick leave for teachers because most of our sickness does come from the kids.”

Most teachers reported that they or someone in their household received some type of public assistance in the past month (Figure 6). For instance, 54% indicated they or someone in their household received unemployment income, and 39% reported receipt of pandemic-related government payments. In all, 86% of teachers reported that they or a member of their household received at least one form of public assistance in the past month. One teacher highlighted the importance of public assistance for ECE teachers specifically, saying “Right now, [unemployment] is paying double what I would usually make... it is good to save that money for when you do go back to work and start making a whole lot less again at a daycare.”

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Figure 5. Availability of Paid and Unpaid Sick Leave to Teachers

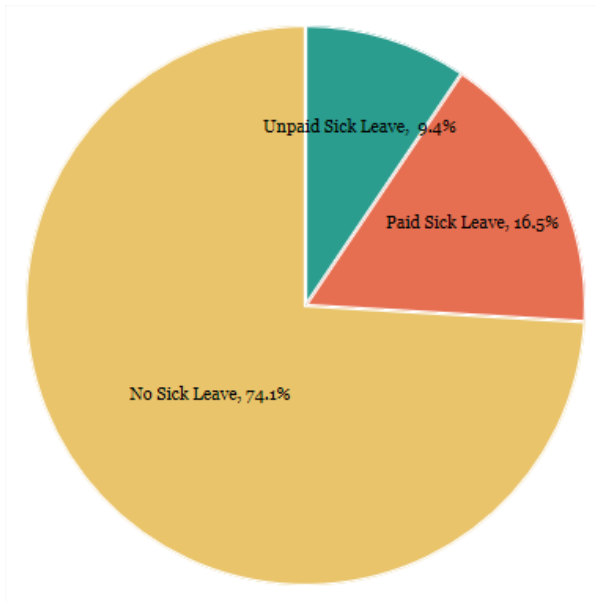


Figure 6. Public Assistance Received by Teachers' Households in the Past Month

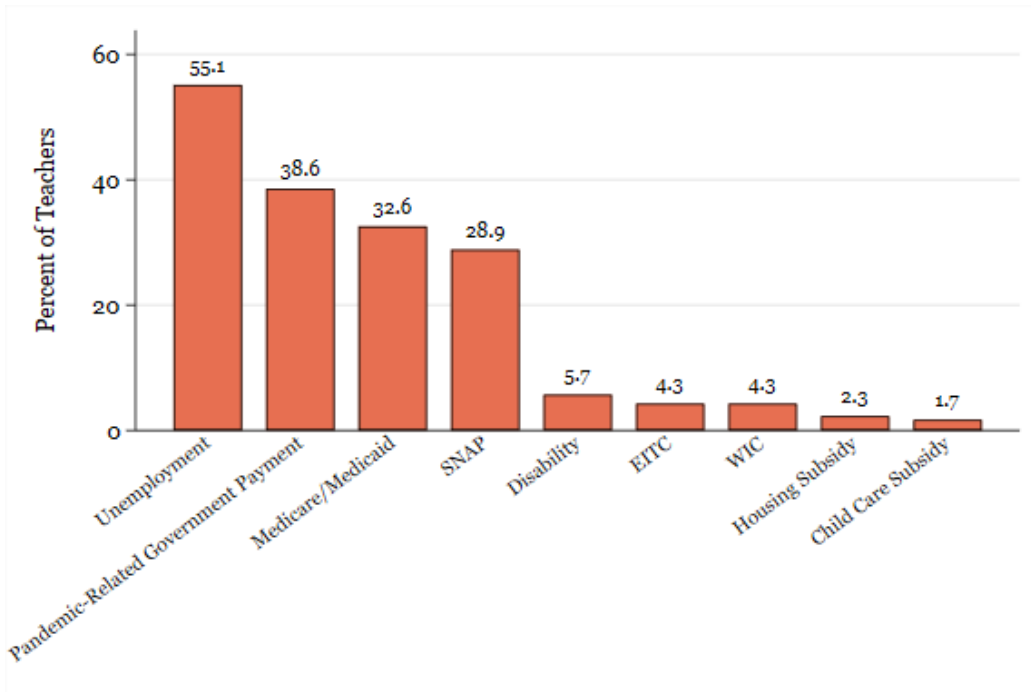


Figure 7 shows that despite the hardships that COVID-19 created, many teachers reported feeling “somewhat” or “very” supported by the families they serve (56%), their site leader (68%), their state and local government (60%), and the federal government (60%). Teachers emphasized the importance of having a supportive site leader in particular; one called it vital to have a “positive director/owner keep in touch and fill you in on progress.”

Figure 7. Perceived Support from Families, Staff, Local Leadership, and Government Entities



However, many teachers also noted lack of support as a major challenge. One said, "I have gotten no direction from my site as to what to do during this time. I have had to plan and enact the plans on my own to still be of service to the children and families in my program."

"I feel that the government and city leaders included/considered K-12 schools during this pandemic, but failed us and left out early childhood as if we didn't matter."

Teachers reported feeling left behind during the pandemic, especially by their federal, state, and local governments. One teacher reported, "I feel that the government and city leaders included / considered K-12 schools during this pandemic, but failed us and left out early childhood as if we didn't matter." Another teacher wrote that "protective equipment should have been given to us," and a third noted, "Our industry needs protection, just like our frontline workers in the medical field. We will require masks / gloves / shields to continue to care for the children at the daycares."

Conclusion

Child care is essential for parents to return to work, for the economy to re-open, and for the United States to begin to recover from COVID-19. Unfortunately, the pandemic has been devastating for the child care sector and for the child care teachers who care for millions of young children. This report aimed to highlight the challenges experienced by these early educators.

Nationwide, over 300,000 child care teachers lost their jobs due to COVID-19 (Mongeau & Mader, 2020). In Jefferson and Rapides, where the SEE-LA COVID-19 Teacher Survey took place, many teachers provided some care in the months of March, April, and May, but most sites ultimately closed, upending teachers' financial stability and personal wellbeing. The majority of teachers lost earnings as a result of the pandemic; and about a third of teachers were laid off.

In operating sites, teachers had to make substantial changes to daily routines, and for many these new duties and structural changes persist as child care re-opens. Teachers reported concerns about the health risks of staying in the classroom and the potential for their site to close again. Despite the particular risk of working while ill during the pandemic, the majority of teachers do not have any type of sick leave, and about one-fifth of teachers do not have health insurance. Three quarters of teachers indicated it was difficult to live on their current household income, and half were experiencing food insecurity. These challenges were reflected in teachers' mental health: nearly 4 in 10 teachers reported clinically-relevant levels of depressive symptoms. These challenges, if unaddressed, will have long-term implications for these teachers, for the children they care for and educate, and for society.

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