

Worries about COVID-19 divide along racial, ethnic lines, state poll finds

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People of color are a large part of the low-paid service sector workforce that keeps the U.S. economy functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic. But they often feel more at risk both from the virus and from economic impact of the crisis, according to a new poll from UC Berkeley's Institute for Governmental Studies. Credit: U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Charles Oki

More than three of every four Californians say that the COVID-19 pandemic poses a threat to their health and their finances, but the risks are felt far more acutely by people of color, according to a new poll from UC Berkeley's Institute for Governmental Studies (IGS).

In two reports issued this week, the Berkeley IGS Poll found some common ground in how Californians are experiencing the [pandemic](#), but also stark divisions along political, class and racial and ethnic lines.

The most striking findings are in the disparities between white Californians and their Black, Latinx and Asian American counterparts. For example, two-thirds of Black and Latinx voters called the COVID-19 virus a major [threat](#) to their health, compared to just under half of whites. And among Latinx voters who predominantly speak Spanish, 84% called the virus is a major threat.

"There are two big drivers that can explain the way Californians are responding to the virus," said IGS co-Director Cristina Mora. "One is politics—that's big. But even more important is the issue of race. What race you are is completely shaping your experience of the pandemic—both your sense of economic threat and your sense of it as a health threat."

The poll also found deep partisan issues on a range of strategic questions that have emerged during the effort to control the virus. Few support the full reopening of schools this fall, but most voters are split on the way forward. A large majority agrees that people should be required to wear masks in stores and offices, but Republicans are much more likely to reject such measures.

Among the key findings:

Californians at all income levels feel the health and

economic threats from the pandemic, but those at the lower end of the scale feel them most acutely

A majority of registered voters surveyed—56%—say the coronavirus is posing a major threat to their own health or the health of their families. Only 9% of voters say it poses no risk. But the poll found respondents' sense of security was closely linked to their income.

Among those making less than \$20,000 a year, 66% reported that the virus is a major threat to their health, compared to 45% who make over \$200,000 per year. Those at higher incomes were more likely to regard the virus as a minor health threat.

Financially, 62% of voters earning under \$20,000 a year call the pandemic a major threat; just 9% say it poses no threat. By comparison, only 24% of those making over \$200,000 per year call the pandemic a major threat, while 28% of them say it poses no threat.

People of color feel the threat more sharply than other Californians

"The findings show the disproportionate burden that communities of color in California shoulder as they and their families face serious health threats," Mora said. "They, in large part, form the skeleton crews that keep the state's service sector economy going during the pandemic."

Among Latinx and Black poll respondents, 66% feel that the pandemic is a major threat to their [health](#) or that of their families, followed by 62% of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Among white voters, 48% called the pandemic a major threat, but they were more likely than others to call it a minor threat.

A similar pattern emerged on issues of economic risk. Among white respondents, 31% say the pandemic poses a major risk to themselves and their families; 22% say it poses no threat to income. Among Latinx respondents, 59% called it a major threat—with the number rising to 79% among those who speak primarily Spanish.

Forth-nine percent of Blacks respondents and 45% of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders shared that view.

Already, 45% of the Latinx respondents—and 72% of the Spanish speakers—say that the pandemic is posing a very serious problem in their ability to pay for food, medicine, housing and other basics. Just 14% of white respondents agree, along with just over a quarter of Black respondents and those who are Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

Californians aren't sure how to move forward into the new school year

Only 14% of registered voters think schools should open as normal this fall. But the rest are deeply divided on the alternatives: 42% favor mixing online and in-person classes, while 39% say classes should be held only online.

But the partisan gap is dramatic: Just 2% of Democrats and 9% of independents would open schools as normal, compared with 44% of Republicans.

Opinion on policies and practical measures to combat the pandemic are split along partisan lines

Overall, 80% of Californians strongly favor requirements that people wear masks in enclosed public places such as offices and stores. Among

Democrats, 95% favored the rule, along with 85% of those who express no party preference. But only 44% of Republicans strongly favor the policy.

A similar split emerged on the question of whether California reopened businesses too quickly after the pandemic's first surge. Eighty percent of Democrats and 64% who expressed no party preference say the re-opening happened too fast. Among Republicans, only 22% agreed, with 73% saying the reopening had to happen quickly because of economic damage being caused by the closures and restrictions.

More information: The reports were released by the Berkeley IGS Poll on Wednesday ([Aug. 5](#)) and [Thursday \(Aug. 6\)](#).

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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