

Poll: Many not eager to engage in reopening Massachusetts

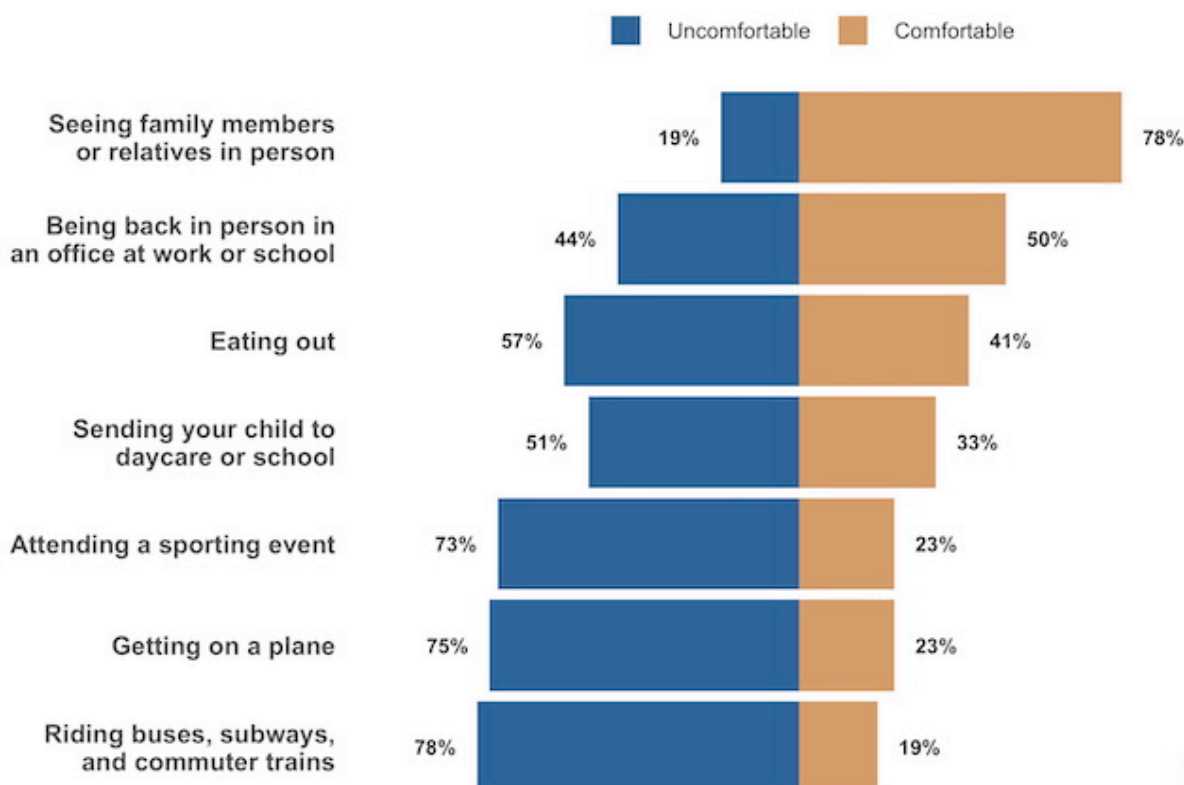
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The gradual reopening of the economy in Massachusetts has led to employees feeling more stable in their jobs and financial situations over the past month, according to a new Suffolk University poll for WGBH News, the State House News Service, The Boston Globe, and MassLive.

COVID reshapes Massachusetts attitudes toward public activity

What activities residents would be comfortable doing now or once allowed



Undecided responses not included.

Data: Suffolk University/SHNS/Boston Globe/WGBH/MassLive poll of 500 Mass. residents, June 18 to June 21.



[Graphic: Chris Lisinski/SHNS]

But residents continue to harbor anxiety over venturing back out to engage in what used to be mundane activities, like eating at a restaurant or taking the subway to see a baseball game. And parents are deeply divided over whether they think it's safe to send their children back to daycare or school, according to the poll.

The pandemic has also hit communities of color particularly hard financially, according to the survey, with Hispanic residents far more likely than white, Black and Asian workers to report diminished income from the coronavirus outbreak, and workers with less education and lower incomes before the pandemic reporting a greater impact from COVID-19.

The WGBH News/SHNS/Suffolk survey of 500 Massachusetts residents was conducted June 18-21 with live callers on cellphones and landlines. It has a margin of error of 4.4 percent.

Michael Riccardelli, 31, of Worcester, worked as a cook for faculty, staff and students at Worcester State University when the pandemic hit and the college shut down its campus. While he hopes to return to his job in the fall, he has had to rely on unemployment benefits to scrap by since March, and even those have now been shut off due to confusion over what program he should qualify under.

"A lot of restaurants are hiring now. Everyone's opening. But the rent's due at the end of the month," said Riccardelli, who hopes to find something part-time until the fall.

The worry still being felt across Massachusetts as the rate of new infections, deaths and hospitalizations from COVID-19 decline underscores the challenges of returning to some normalcy, and reviving an economy before a vaccine for the virus becomes available.

Over 27 percent of people said they had either an extremely high level of fear or were living through the most fearful

moments of their lives, while another 39.4 percent of people said they had above average fear.

“It’s anxiety inducing,” Riccardelli said. “I want to go out and I want things to be open again. But I have terrible asthma. If I did get it, this would destroy me.”

Forty-eight percent said they were somewhat or very concerned about their personal financial situation or employment, down from 56 percent in late April and early May, while the percent of people not at all concerned rose from 25.8 percent to 34.2 percent.

The number of people reporting that the pandemic had diminished their regular income was also down over nine points to 36.4 percent.

“That tide has been stemmed. It’s still high, but the trend line is going in the right direction,” said David Paleologos, director of the Suffolk University Political Research Center, which conducted the poll.

Hispanic workers were far more likely than white, Black and Asian workers to report a loss of income, with 48 percent of Hispanic residents saying they had lost income due to the coronavirus compared to 44 percent of Asian, 39 percent of Blacks and 34 percent of white residents.

Workers who earned less before the pandemic and had attained lower levels of education were also more likely to say they had seen their income diminish compared to workers with more formal education and higher salaries.

“That’s a problem,” Paleologos said. “COVID-19 has become this regressive tax on people because lower income people are hurting the most. People who can sit at home and do Zoom meetings don’t have to be out scraping for their hourly wage.”

As in all polls, smaller subsets of people carry a higher

margin of error.

Gov. Charlie Baker's handling of the pandemic continued to earn him high marks, in this latest survey, with 81 percent approving of his handling of the outbreak, and 74.4 percent approving of his approach to reopening the economy. Support for his handling of the outbreak was just slightly down from 84 percent in early May.

With some criticizing the governor for being too cautious, the Republican's strongest support was with Democrats and independents, including 82 percent of Democrats and 73 percent of independents who approved of his approach to reopening the economy, compared with only 57 percent of Republicans.

"I absolutely like the way he's done it. He's taken his time and doing it the right way. We understand the economy is probably suffering a little for it, but he's making the right choices. Slow but steady," said Rachelle Smith, 56, of Brockton, who identified as a Democrat.

The WGBH News/SHNS/Suffolk poll found a vast disconnect between people's feelings about Massachusetts versus the country, with 71 percent saying the state is on the right track, but only 19.8 percent feeling the same about the country.

As Baker has slowly allowed parts of the economy to reopen for business, he has urged residents not to become complacent about the social distancing and mask-wearing practices that he attributes to Massachusetts's ability to safely return to some activities.

Yet, the survey suggests that some people are growing more relaxed about needing to stay at home as much as possible and not gathering in groups.

Only 44.2 percent of those polled said they were very strict about social distancing, compared with over 69 percent a

little more than a month ago, and 11.4 said they weren't strict at all. That trend was more evident among younger people, with only 21 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds reporting that they are "very strict" about social distancing, compared with 62 percent of those over 65.

"That just blinks a red light to me, because they could potentially be carriers," Paleologos said.

Smith works as residential counselor, and while her employment has not been interrupted she's had to endure daily temperature checks, and has even gone through "lock-ins" for two-week stretches in the group homes to prevent the spread of the virus.

"I'm really, really, really nervous because people are not taking the right precautions. Some people are afraid to say they're sick. They don't want to go to the hospital, and don't have the money for that," Smith said.

Others are more confident in people taking the necessary precautions to control the spread of the virus. Raul Silva, a civil engineer with the Department of Conservation and Recreation, said he feels precautions like wearing masks and maintaining distance have become ingrained.

"I think folks have gotten used to it. Everyone has a mask at their front door. I think it's just become more normal to wear a mask," Silva said.

Even though businesses are reopening, all people aren't quite comfortable yet with the idea of venturing back out into the world.

With the exception of the nearly 78 percent of people who said they are comfortable with seeing family members and relatives in person (up six points), the reluctance to go out to eat or ride a train has remained largely unchanged over the past month.

Forty-one percent in this most recent survey said they would be comfortable dining at a restaurant, compared to 42 percent in early May, while only 19.2 percent said they'd be comfortable riding a bus, subway or commuter train, up just over one percentage point.

Only 23.4 percent of people said they'd be comfortable attending a sporting event, and 22.8 percent said they'd be alright with the idea of getting on a plane. In fact, the number of people comfortable with the idea of returning to school or the office fell from 58 percent in the last survey to 50.2 percent this month.

"I think it's going Ok. But there's still some things I won't do," said Barry Ellison, 40, of Hamilton, discussing the reopening. He specifically mentioned eating indoors at a restaurant, which was allowed for the first time in months on Monday.

"Even though they're reopened at this point, I don't really feel comfortable doing that," he said.

The 35- to 44-year-old age group was consistently the most cautious in what they felt comfortable doing, according to the poll.

Ellison worked as a service supervisor at an auto dealership until he was furloughed. He has now been offered his job back, but he will have to work entirely on commission, which was not the case before the pandemic when he was also earning a training wage. "I'm hoping for the best because I don't have a client base," he said.

One of the biggest challenges facing Massachusetts and its economy is figuring out how to safely reopen day cares and schools so that children don't fall behind in their learning and parents can return fully to work.

Forty-five percent of people polled who had school-aged

children at home said they'd be comfortable sending their child back to school or day care, compared to 49 percent who said they were not comfortable and 16 percent who were undecided.

Forty-eight percent of those same parents said they thought K-12 schools would be able to reopen in the fall in a way that would keep most kids and adults safe.

The survey asked all residents whether children returning to school was important enough to risk a small number of people contracting the coronavirus as a result in the fall, and 40.6 percent said it was, while 38.2 percent said remote learning was working well enough and returning to the classroom was not worth the risk.

A smaller percent – just 14.4 percent – said the educational harm being done far outweighed the health risks and children should return to school even if a significant number of people become infected as a result.