WORKTRENDS
AMERICANS' ATTITUDES ABOUT WORK, EMPLOYERS, AND GOVERNMENT

Whipsawed, Precarious, and Pessimistic: Americans' Changing Views About the Economy and Labor Market During a Decade of Fundamental Change

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Introduction

Despite significant improvements in the labor market since the Great Recession and the depths of the pandemic, and with historically low levels of unemployment, Americans' attitudes about the economy have soured, according to *Work Trends* surveys conducted over more than a decade by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

The cost of living remains Americans' greatest concern even as the job market — low unemployment rates and high job openings — remains strong, according to a new nationally representative survey of 1,026 American adults conducted by the Heldrich Center in April 2023. More than 9 in 10 (96%) Americans say they are very or somewhat concerned about the cost of living, with 71% saying they are very concerned (see Table 1). Nearly 9 in 10 (88%) of the survey respondents also fear that the nation will experience a recession within the next 12 months.

Table 1: Percent Very Concerned/Very and Somewhat Concerned About Economic Indicators, National Sample, April 2023

	April 2023 Percent Very or Somewhat Concerned	April 2023 Percent Very Concerned
The cost of living	96%	71%
Possibility of economic downturn or recession in next 12 months	88%	50%
Older workers being able to retire when they want to	80%	40%
Availability of good jobs at good pay for those who want to work	71%	33%
Job security for those currently working	70%	25%
Ability to financially support you and your family	69%	36%
Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the economy	69%	29%
Impact of technology on jobs, such as automation of jobs	67%	25%
Job market for those looking for work	60%	21%
Current unemployment rate	58%	20%

Thinking about some economic issues...how concerned are you about (ITEM [RANDOMIZED])? Very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned, or not at all concerned?

Americans' changing assessment of the labor market is detailed in Table 2. The majority of Americans are profoundly **less** concerned about the labor market in 2023 compared to 2013, yet anxiety about the job market and job security have **increased** since late 2021.

- In April 2023, 58% of Americans are very or somewhat concerned about the current rate of unemployment, 60% about the job market for those looking for work, and 70% about job security for working Americans.
- In November 2021, 62% of Americans were very or somewhat concerned about the current rate of unemployment, 46% about the job market for those looking for work, and 54% about job security for working Americans.
- In January 2013, however, 88% were very or somewhat concerned about the unemployment rate, 90% about the job market for those looking for work, and 86% about job security for working Americans.

Table 2: Percent Very or Somewhat Concerned About Economic Indicators, National Sample, Trend Data

	April 2023	November 2021	December 2020	August 2018[1]	January 2013[2]	August 2010[3]
Job security for those currently working						
Total concerned	70%	54%	83%	55%	86%	89%
Very concerned	25%	19%	29%	12%	43%	52%
Somewhat concerned	45%	35%	54%	43%	43%	37%
Job market for those looking for work						
Total concerned	60%	46%	86%	56%	90%	93%
Very concerned	21%	14%	43%	15%	53%	64%
Somewhat concerned	39%	32%	43%	41%	37%	29%
Current unemployment rate						
Total concerned	58%	62%	84%	44%	88%	92%
Very concerned	20%	24%	41%	7%	42%	55%
Somewhat concerned	38%	38%	43%	37%	46%	37%
Sample size[4]	1,025	1,004	809	807	1,073	809

Thinking about some economic issues...how concerned are you about (ITEM [RANDOMIZED])? Very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned, or not at all concerned?

1 Items were presented as separate questions.

2 Answer category was "not concerned at all."

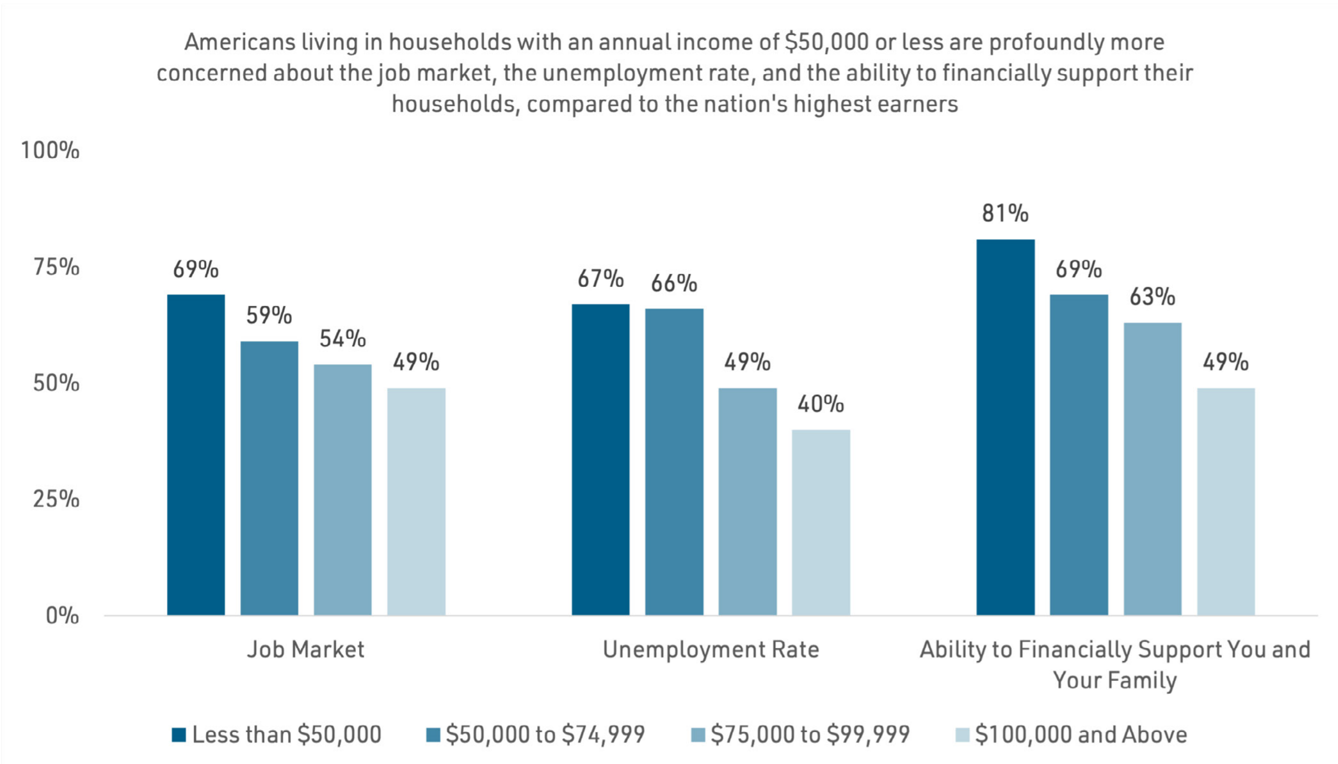
3 For August 2010, the question stem was "Please indicate how concerned you are about these three issues..."

4 Sample sizes are unweighted and represent the smallest sample size asked for the items presented, and excludes any "don't know" or "refused" responses that may have been included in previous toplines or reports released.

Contrasting Views by Income

America's lowest earners are profoundly more concerned about the job market, the unemployment rate, and the ability to financially support their households, compared to the nation's highest earners. Sixty-nine percent of Americans earning less than $50,000 annually say they are very or somewhat concerned about the job market, compared to 49% of Americans living in households earning $100,000 and above annually (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percent Very/Somewhat Concerned About Economic Indicators, National Sample by Income, April 2023[5]



In addition, **42% of workers say they are very or somewhat concerned about their own job security** – opinions that differ considerably by household income – 60% of workers earning less than $50,000 annually are very or somewhat concerned about the security of their current job, compared to 25% of workers earning $100,000 and above annually (see Figure 2).

5 Unweighted sample sizes are 389, 158, 174, and 303, respectively. There are statistically significant differences between the following groups: on job market: less than $50,000 compared to all other groups, and $50,000 to $74,999 compared to $100,000 and above; on unemployment rate: less than $50,000 compared to $75,000 to $99,999 and $100,000 and above groups, $50,000 to $74,999 compared to $75,000 to $99,999 and $100,000 and above groups; and on financially supporting family: less than $50,000 compared to all other groups, $50,000 to $74,999 compared to $100,000 and above, and $75,000 to $99,999 compared to $100,000 and above.

Figure 2: Percent Very/Somewhat Concerned About Own Job Security, Employed Americans by Income, April 2023[6]

When asked how confident they are that they might find a new job if they lost or wanted to leave their current job, working Americans are split: as shown in Table 3, 33% are extremely or very confident they will find another job that is as good or better than their current one, 36% are somewhat confident, and 31% say they are not very or not at all confident. **This is an increase from January 2013 but a decrease from November 2021, when 51% of American workers said they were extremely or very confident.** When tabulated by household income, there is little meaningful variation on this measure, however, one-third of workers in households earning less than $50,000 annually say they are not very or not at all confident they can find another job as good or better (37%) compared to one-fourth of workers earning $100,000 and above annually (24%).

[6] Unweighted sample sizes are 188, 103, 123, and 232, respectively. There are statistically significant differences between the following groups: less than $50,000 compared to all others, and $50,000 to $74,999 compared to $100,000 and above.

Table 3: Percent Confidence in Finding New Job, Employed Americans, Trend Data[7]

	April 2023	November 2021	December 2020	August 2018	January 2013	August 2010
Extremely confident	11%	26%	10%	10%	8%	7%
Very confident	22%	25%	17%	21%	10%	12%
Somewhat confident	36%	29%	35%	42%	34%	31%
Not very confident	21%	16%	26%	21%	30%	30%
Not at all confident	10%	5%	13%	7%	18%	21%
Sample size	646	575	458	451	673	321

How confident are you that if you lost or wanted to leave your current job, you could find another job as good or better?

Several other important trends were documented in this survey. In the April 2023 survey, nearly two-thirds of Americans say that now is **a good time to find a quality job (64%)**; in January 2013, only 27% thought it was a good time to find work (see Table 4). In April 2023, younger Americans are **far less likel**y to say it is a good time to find a quality job, compared to older Americans (see Figure 3).

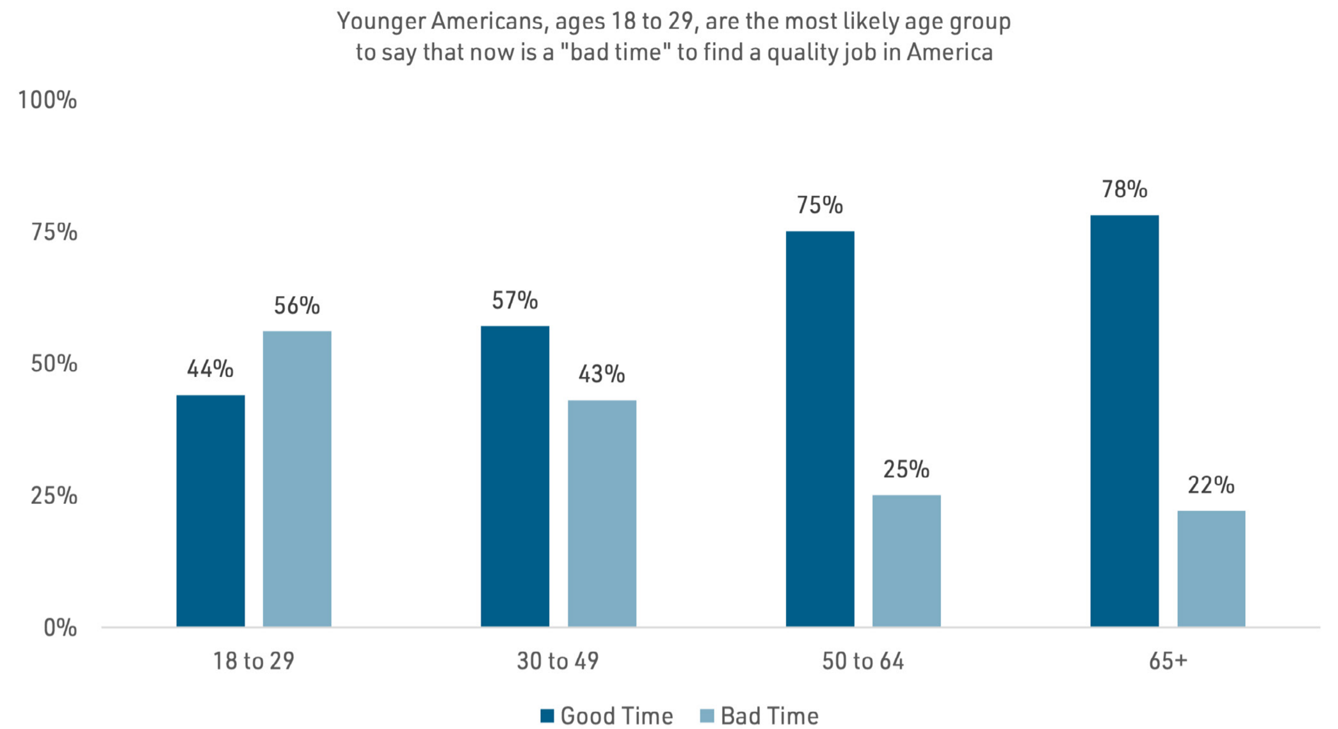
Table 4: Good Time/Bad Time to Find Quality Job, National Sample, Trend Data

	April 2023	November 2021	December 2020	August 2018	January 2013
Good time	64%	76%	27%	64%	27%
Bad time	36%	24%	73%	36%	73%
Sample size	1,026	1,006	811	808	1,082

Thinking about the job situation in America today...would you say now is a (good time) or a (bad time) to find a quality job? (ROTATE phrases in parentheses)

[7] The sample composition of employed samples for the trend data vary minimally across surveys. For example, April 2023 and November 2021 include workers who are employed full or part time, on temporary furlough, or retired from main occupation but now working. December 2020 includes workers who are employed full or part time or retired from main occupation, but working for needed income (N=30). August 2018 includes workers who are full or part time or self-employed (N=33). January 2013 includes workers who are employed full or part time, self-employed (N=54), or in the military (N=6). August 2010 includes workers who say they are employed (versus unemployed/looking and unemployed/not looking).

Figure 3: Good Time/Bad Time to Find Quality Job, Employed Americans, April 2023[8]



Nearly 6 in 10 (57%) respondents disagree with the statement that "Overall, job, career, and employment opportunities will be better for the next generation than for my generation." There has been little change over time on this measure since 2018 (see Table 5).

Table 5: Percent Agree that Jobs will be Better for Next Generation, National Sample, Trend Data

	April 2023	November 2021	December 2020	August 2018[9]
Agree	**43%**	**50%**	**39%**	**46%**
Strongly agree	10%	10%	5%	
Somewhat agree	33%	40%	34%	
Disagree	**57%**	**50%**	**60%**	**52%**
Somewhat disagree	44%	42%	49%	
Strongly disagree	13%	8%	11%	
Sample size	1,026	998	809	804

Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement? "Overall, job, career, and employment opportunities will be better for the next generation than for my generation."

[8] Unweighted sample sizes are 133, 380, 265, and 232, respectively. There are statistically significant differences between all of the age groups.

[9] Two percent selected "neither"; this was removed after the first day/night of interviewing.

How We Did This

The current *Work Trends* survey was fielded online (N=995) and by telephone (N=31) in English and Spanish between April 7 and 10, 2023 to a national probability sample of 1,026 U.S. adults age 18 and older. The survey was conducted using the SSRS Opinion Panel Omnibus, and designed by the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University. The margin of error for the total national sample is +/- 3.40 percentage points at a 95% confidence interval. The margin of error for the employed sample is +/- 4.30 percentage points at a 95% confidence interval. Sampling error does not take into account other sources of variation inherent in public opinion studies, such as non-response, question wording, or contextual effects.

Survey dates, margins of error, and links to topline questionnaires for *Work Trends* surveys referenced in this brief are listed in the reports below.[10] *Work Trends* reports, briefs, and toplines since 1999 can be found **here**, and are archived by the **Roper Center**.

November 2021 (this release is based on labor force sample)
Survey dates: November 19 to 21, 2021
Margin of error: +/- 3.3%

December 2020
Survey dates: December 4 to 14, 2020
Margin of error: +/- 3.8%

August 2018
Survey dates: August 8 to 19, 2018
Margin of error: +/-3.4%

January 2013
Survey dates: January 9 to 16, 2013
Margin of error: +/- 3.0%

August 2010
Survey dates: July 19 to August 6, 2010
Margin of error: +/- 4.0%

[10] When comparing the numbers in this brief with the trend data presented in the links, percentages may be greater or less by one percentage point due to rounding, exclusion of "don't know/refused" responses, and use of unadjusted weights.

Topline Survey Results: *Work Trends* April 2023 Survey

Fielded online (N=995) and by telephone (N=31) from April 7 to 10, 2023 by SSRS on its Opinion Panel Omnibus platform. Fielded in English (N=1,001) and Spanish (N=25).

Margin of error at the 95% confidence level for total sample: N=1,026, +/- 3.4%

Margin of error at the 95% confidence level for employed respondents: N=646, +/- 4.3%

Estimates may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Don't know/Refused was an option for the telephone interviewer to select, but was not read to the respondent; "Web Blank" means that the respondent skipped the question online; "Don't know" was not a response category offered to the online respondent. This topline excludes the "Don't know/Refused/Web Blank" answer category, which represents less than 0.5% of the total sample for Q3a, Q3c, Q3d, and Q3j.

* denotes reported percentage is less than 0.5%.

Weighted frequency percentages and unweighted sample sizes are presented.

Q1. Which of the following best describes your current employment situation?

Based on total sample (N=1,026)

Employed working full-time hours (at least 35 hours per week)	45%
Employed working part-time hours (34 hours or less per week)	12%
Unemployed and looking for work	7%
Unemployed and not looking for work	8%
On temporary furlough from a job	*
In the military	*
Retired from main occupation, but now working	3%
Retired from main occupation, and not working	24%
Total	100%

Q2. Thinking about the job situation in America today, would you say that now is a good time or a bad time to find a quality job?

ITEMS ROTATED, presented in table below

Based on total sample (N=1,026)

Good time	64%
Bad time	36%
Total	100%

Q3. Thinking about some economic issues...how concerned are you about...?

ITEMS RANDOMIZED, presented in grid

a. The current unemployment rate

Based on total sample (N=1,025)

Very/Somewhat concerned	58%
Very concerned	20%
Somewhat concerned	38%
Not too/Not at all concerned	42%
Not too concerned	31%
Not at all concerned	11%
Total	100%

b. The job market for those looking for work

Based on total sample (N=1,026)

Very/Somewhat concerned	60%
Very concerned	21%
Somewhat concerned	39%
Not too/Not at all concerned	40%
Not too concerned	31%
Not at all concerned	9%
Total	100%

c. Job security for those currently working

Based on total sample (N=1,024)

Very/Somewhat concerned	70%
Very concerned	25%
Somewhat concerned	45%
Not too/Not at all concerned	30%
Not too concerned	25%
Not at all concerned	5%
Total	100%

d. Your own job security

Based on employed full time, employed part time, on temporary furlough, or retired from main occupation but now working (N=645)

Very/Somewhat concerned	42%
Very concerned	16%
Somewhat concerned	26%
Not too/Not at all concerned	58%
Not too concerned	34%
Not at all concerned	24%
Total	100%

e. The ability to financially support you and your family

Based on total sample (N=1,026)

Very/Somewhat concerned	69%
Very concerned	36%
Somewhat concerned	32%
Not too/Not at all concerned	31%
Not too concerned	21%
Not at all concerned	10%
Total	100%

f. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy

Based on total sample (N=1,026)

Very/Somewhat concerned	69%
Very concerned	29%
Somewhat concerned	40%
Not too/Not at all concerned	31%
Not too concerned	22%
Not at all concerned	9%
Total	100%

g. The impact of technology on jobs, such as automation of jobs

Based on total sample (N=1,026)

Very/Somewhat concerned	67%
Very concerned	25%
Somewhat concerned	42%
Not too/Not at all concerned	33%
Not too concerned	26%
Not at all concerned	7%
Total	100%

h. The availability of good jobs at good pay for those who want to work

Based on total sample (N=1,026)

Very/Somewhat concerned	71%
Very concerned	33%
Somewhat concerned	38%
Not too/Not at all concerned	29%
Not too concerned	22%
Not at all concerned	7%
Total	100%

i. Older workers being able to retire when they want to

Based on total sample (N=1,026)

Very/Somewhat concerned	80%
Very concerned	40%
Somewhat concerned	40%
Not too/Not at all concerned	20%
Not too concerned	14%
Not at all concerned	6%
Total	100%

j. The cost of living

Based on total sample (N=1,025)

Very/Somewhat concerned	96%
Very concerned	71%
Somewhat concerned	25%
Not too/Not at all concerned	4%
Not too concerned	3%
Not at all concerned	1%
Total	100%

k. The impact of the global supply chain on your work

Based on employed full time, employed part time, on temporary furlough, or retired from main occupation but now working (N=646)

Very/Somewhat concerned	60%
Very concerned	22%
Somewhat concerned	38%
Not too/Not at all concerned	40%
Not too concerned	30%
Not at all concerned	10%
Total	100%

l. The possibility of an economic downturn or recession in the next 12 months

Based on total sample (N=1,026)

Very/Somewhat concerned	88%
Very concerned	50%
Somewhat concerned	39%
Not too/Not at all concerned	12%
Not too concerned	10%
Not at all concerned	2%
Total	100%

Q4. To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

ITEMS RANDOMIZED; presented on separate screens if online

a. It's not hard to find a job in America if you really want to work

Based on total sample (N=1,026)

Agree	76%
Strongly agree	37%
Somewhat agree	39%
Disagree	24%
Somewhat disagree	16%
Strongly disagree	8%
Total	100%

b. Overall, job, career, and employment opportunities will be better for the next generation than for my generation

Based on total sample (N=1,026)

Agree	43%
Strongly agree	10%
Somewhat agree	33%
Disagree	57%
Somewhat disagree	44%
Strongly disagree	13%
Total	100%

Q5. How confident are you that if you lost or wanted to leave your current job, you could find another job as good or better?

Based on employed full time, employed part time, on temporary furlough, or retired from main occupation but now working (N=646)

Extremely confident	11%
Very confident	22%
Somewhat confident	36%
Not very confident	21%
Not at all confident	10%
Total	100%

Methodological Statement

The current survey was fielded from April 7 to 10, 2023 online (via a unique password-embedded link, N=995) and by telephone (via CATI system, N=31), in English (N=1,001) and in Spanish (N=25), with a national probability sample of 1,026 U.S. residents age 18 or older using the SSRS Opinion Panel Omnibus, designed and analyzed by public opinion researchers at the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, and managed by SSRS.

The SSRS Opinion Panel Omnibus uses the SSRS Opinion Panel, which randomly recruits members based on nationally representative Address Based Sample design by Marketing Systems Group through the U.S. Postal Service's Computerized Delivery Sequence File. The panel is multi-mode: Internet households participate via web and non-Internet households participate via phone. This survey was included as part of the Omnibus. All respondents who completed the survey received a check as compensation. Design is managed by SSRS: there is subject area exclusivity for each client question insert. Quality checks were incorporated in the online survey, and for the phone survey, monitored by interviewing staff.

The study has been weighted and calibrated first using a base weight to account for panelists' probability of selection and raking on various demographic categories such as age, gender/sex, race/ethnicity, census region, education, civic engagement, population density, frequency of Internet use, voter status, religious affiliation, and party identification based on various data sources, including the 2022 Current Population Survey, 2021 Census Planning Database, the Pew Research Center's National Public Opinion Reference Survey, the September 2019 Current Population Survey Volunteering and Civic Life Supplement, and voter data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

All surveys are subject to sampling error, which is the expected probable difference between interviewing everyone in a population versus a scientific sampling drawn from that population. The sampling error for the total survey sample of 1,026 respondents is +/- 3.40 percentage points at a 95% confidence interval (design effect is 1.24, the effect of post-data collection statistical adjustments to adjust tests of statistical significance when using the data). Sampling error increases as the sample size decreases, so statements based on various population subgroups, such as separate figures reported by employment status, are subject to more error than are statements based on the total sample. For example, the sampling error for the employed sample of 646 respondents who are employed is +/- 4.3 percentage points at a 95% confidence interval. Sampling error does not take into account other sources of variation inherent in public opinion studies, such as non-response, question wording, or contextual effects.

The completion rate for this omnibus survey is 44.6%. The cumulative response rate, which considers the panel recruitment survey response rate and the survey response rate is 2.7%. For more information, see: **https://ssrs.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ESOMAR-37_2022.pdf**.

April 2023 Sample Characteristics (total sample, N=1,026)[11]

	Unweighted Sample Size	Weighted Sample Percent
Gender		
Male	463	48%
Female	551	51%
Other	7	*
Total	1,021	100%
Age		
18 to 29	133	17%
30 to 49	380	35%
50 to 64	265	25%
65+	232	22%
Total	1,010	100%
Employment Status		
Employed full time	481	45%
Employed part time	129	12%
Unemployed/looking	58	7%
Unemployed and not looking	70	8%
On temporary furlough	4	*
In the military	2	*
Retired but now working	32	3%
Retired and not working	250	24%
Total	1,026	100%
Race/Ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	657	63%
Black, non-Hispanic	83	12%
Other, non-Hispanic	89	9%
Hispanic	168	17%
Total	997	100%
Household Income		
$0 to $49,999	390	45%
$50,000 to $74,999	158	15%
$75,000 to $99,999	174	15%
$100,000+	303	25%
Total	1,025	100%

[11] Excludes any refusals to answer the demographic questions.

Background

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey was founded as a research and policy organization devoted to strengthening New Jersey's and the nation's workforce during a time of global economic change. The Heldrich Center researches and puts to work strategies that increase worker skills and employability, strengthen the ability of companies to compete, create jobs where they are needed, and improve the quality and performance of the workforce development system. Since 1997, the Heldrich Center has experienced rapid growth, working with federal and state government partners, Fortune 100 companies, and major foundations. The center embodies its slogan "Solutions at Work" by teaming with partners and clients to translate cutting-edge research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, unions, schools, community-based organizations, and government officials can leverage to strengthen the nation's workforce.

Since its inception, the Heldrich Center has sought to inform employers, union leaders, policymakers, community members, the media, and academic communities about critical workforce and education issues that relate to the emerging global economy. To better understand the public's attitudes about work, employers, and the government, and improve workplace practices and policy, the Heldrich Center produces the *Work Trends* surveys on a regular basis. (The complete set of reports is available at **www.heldrich.rutgers.edu**). The surveys poll the general public on critical workforce issues facing Americans and American businesses. The survey findings are promoted widely to the media and national constituencies. The series is directed by Carl E. Van Horn, Ph.D., Director of the Heldrich Center and Distinguished Professor of Public Policy at Rutgers University.

Whipsawed, Precarious, and Pessimistic: Americans' Changing Views About the Economy and Labor Market During a Decade of Fundamental Change continues to advance the goals of the *Work Trends* series to give American workers a voice in the national economic policy debates, and thereby provides policymakers and employers with reliable insights into how workers across the nation are judging and acting upon the realities of work and the workplace.

The authors of this brief were Jessica Starace, MPP and Carl Van Horn, Ph.D. Robb C. Sewell was the editor and graphic designer.