

Introduction

The American Community Survey (ACS):

- Conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau.
- Produces annual estimates of social, demographic, economic, and housing characteristics.
- Multimodal (internet, mail, telephone, personal interview).

Problem:

- Among internet respondents, “Help Screen” engagement changed related to inclusion and exclusion of “with COVID-19 guidance” text.
- COVID-19 guidance text encourages “Help Screen” utilization at the beginning of the pandemic, but possibly discourages it later.

For more information, please refer to the Census Bureau Surveys and Programs webpage:
<www.census.gov/programs-programs-surveys/acs>.

Background

In August 2020, the “Help Screen” links were transitioned to include “with COVID-19 guidance,” as seen in the example below. This text was removed in January 2023 and returned to its original form.

43 f. Did Sample Person receive any public assistance or welfare payments from the state or local welfare office during the PAST 12 MONTHS? (Help)

Yes

No

43 f. Did Another Person receive any public assistance or welfare payments from the state or local welfare office during the PAST 12 MONTHS? (Help-with COVID-19 guidance)

Yes

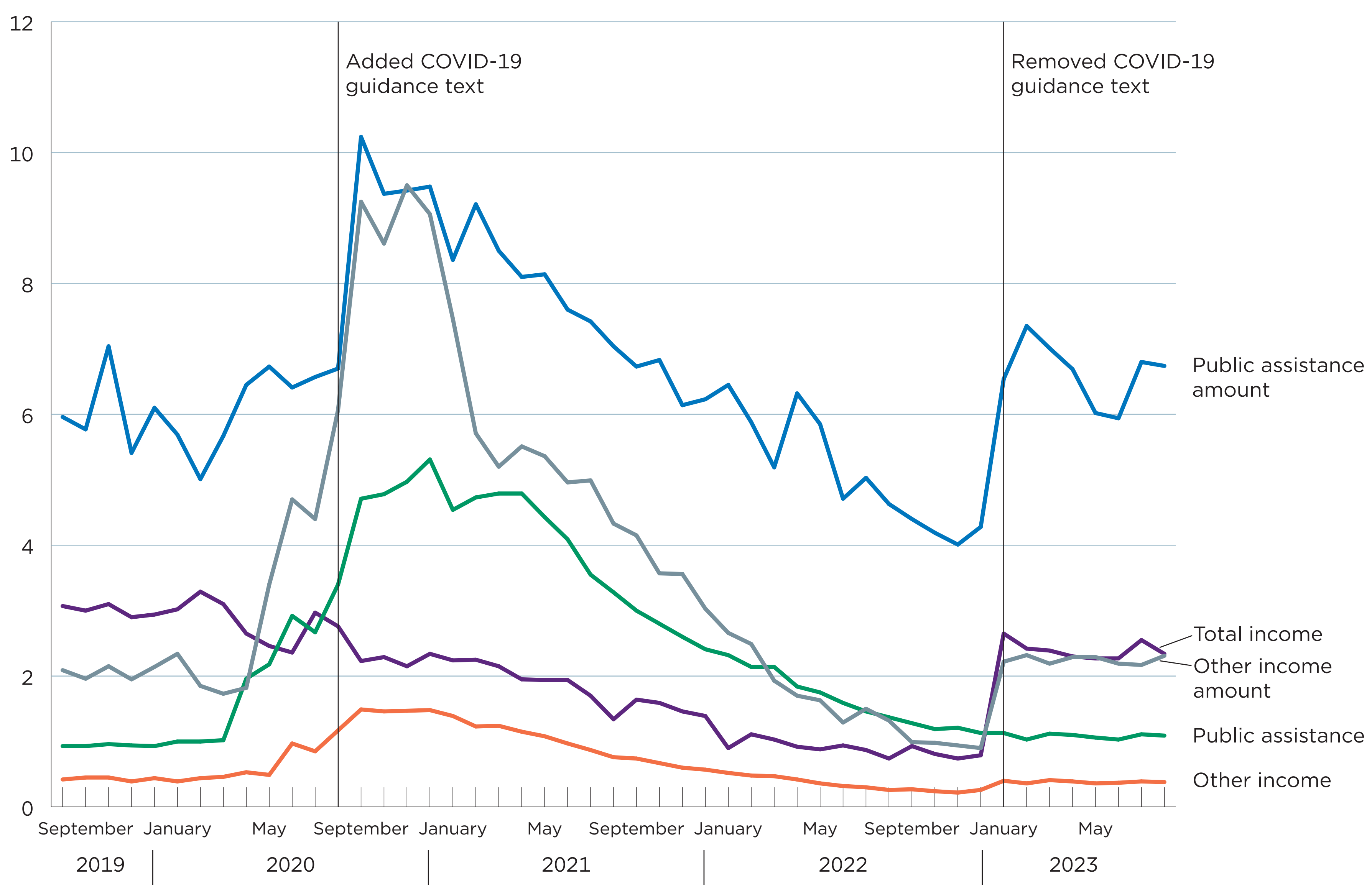
No

Survey Questions That Included COVID-19 Guidance Text

- Other income**—yes/no indicator of regular income from other sources such as VA payments, unemployment, child support, or alimony.
- Other income amount**—amount of other income as a numerical value.
- Public assistance amount**—yes/no indicator of public assistance or welfare payments from the state or local welfare office in past 12 months.
- Public assistance amount**—amount of public assistance as a numerical value.
- Total income**—amount of income from all sources as a numerical value.
- Attend school**—attended school in the past 3 months.

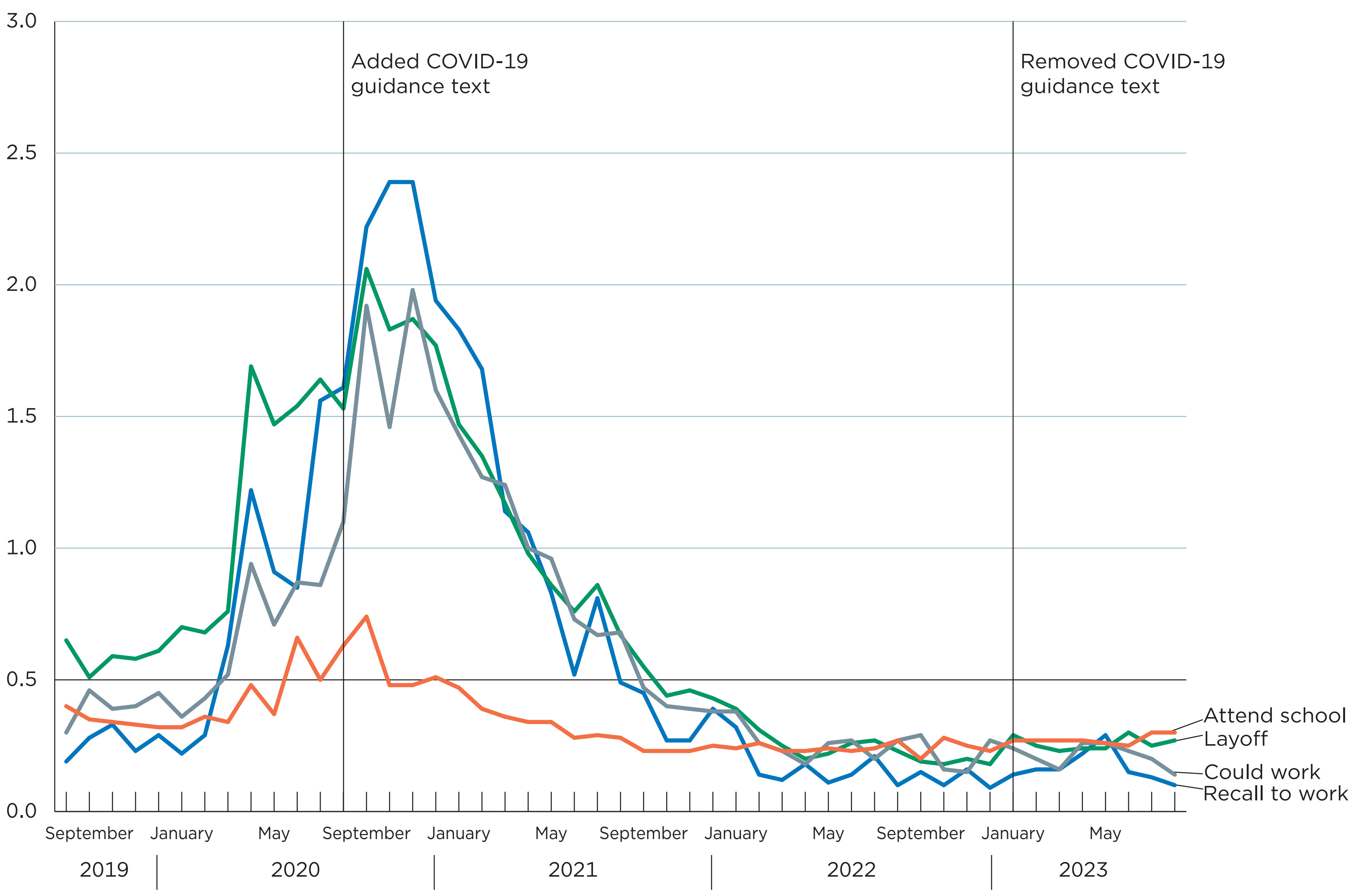
Research Question: How did “Help Screen” engagement change among internet respondents following both the introduction of “with COVID-19 guidance” text (August 2020) and its ensuing elimination in January 2023?

Figure 1. Percentage Who Engaged With “Help Screen” by Survey Question and Panel (COVID-19 Impacted Income Components)



Source: American Community Survey internet paradata, 2019–2023.

Figure 2. Percentage Who Engaged With “Help Screen” by Survey Question and Panel (COVID-19 Impacted Occupation Components)



Source: American Community Survey internet paradata, 2019–2023.

- Could work**—could have started a job if offered one, or returned to work if recalled.
- Layoff**—on layoff from a job in the past week.
- Temporary absent**—temporarily absent from a job or business in the last week.
- Recall to work**—been informed that they will be recalled to work within the next 6 months or been given a date to return to work.
- Highest level**—highest degree or level of school that has been completed.
- Computer use**—do they or any member of their household own or use a desktop, laptop, smartphone, or tablet?
- Internet access**—do they or any member of their household have access to the internet?
- Tenure**—is the home owned with or without a mortgage, rented, or occupied without payment of rent?
- Monthly rent**—cost of renting a home as a numerical value.
- Mortgage amount**—mortgage amount as a numerical value.

Findings

- “Help Screen” utilization is stable through 2019 and early 2020, and then increases for most of the survey questions in which COVID-19 guidance text is added.
- Engagement peaks in late 2020, followed by a gradual decline through the end of 2022.
- Utilization of “Help Screens” rebounds immediately after removal of the COVID-19 guidance text in January 2023 and levels off into the remainder of 2023.
- While many components did experience a reengagement spike following the removal of COVID-19 guidance text, other components returned to relatively normal engagement prior to the removal of this text.
- Very noticeable “Help Screen” engagement increases can be seen with occupation-related survey questions at the beginning of the pandemic and following the inclusion of the COVID-19 guidance text.

Takeaways

- Minor alterations to survey design can have an outsized impact on respondent behavior.
- Regular evaluation and analysis of survey design changes is a necessary component of survey operations, particularly as is related to current events.
- An appetite for supplemental assistance with survey response fluctuates relative to broader societal conditions.