



Georgia Center for Opportunity

Data-Driven Review



Columbus State University
Turner College of Business and Technology



The Butler Center for Research
and Economic Development



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From Barriers to Opportunities:

A Data-Driven Review of The BETTER WORK Program in Columbus, GA



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Introduction

The Georgia Center for Opportunity (GCO) is a nonprofit organization committed to helping individuals and families across Georgia overcome barriers to economic opportunity. Through its BETTER WORK initiative, GCO has been actively engaged in the Columbus community, partnering with local organizations to connect job seekers with training, support services, and long-term employment opportunities. One of the hallmark programs under this initiative is Jobs for Life, which focuses on job readiness, personal development, and community support to help individuals move from dependency to self-sufficiency.

In partnership with GCO, the Butler Center for Research and Economic Development designed a 25-question survey to assess participant outcomes and perspectives after engaging with the BETTER WORK program. The first five questions collect demographic information, including household size, number of dependents, income level, current employment status, and whether the respondent has attended a Jobs for Life class. Questions 5 through 25 use a scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to evaluate participants' perceived changes in quality of life across several dimensions—such as transportation access, health, housing stability, financial well-being, family relationships, and personal goal setting. The data collected offers insight into how participants experience change as a result of the program and provides a framework for evaluating its broader impact on the program participants in Columbus. The survey questions were electronically distributed via email as part of an anonymous survey sent to BETTER WORK program graduates from Columbus, GA. The survey was administered by the Georgia Center for Opportunity's Columbus office, which also collected and securely stored the response data.

Demographic Questions

1. How many people, including yourself, live in your household?
2. How many dependents do you have? This is anyone who relies on you to care for them.
3. Are you currently employed?
4. Have you attended a Jobs for Life class?

Program Impact and Life Change Assessment Questions (Rated from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree):

5. I have reliable transportation that allows me to get to work, appointments, and other necessary places.
6. I have the necessary education or skills to achieve my career and personal goals.
7. I have access to enough food to meet my nutritional needs.
8. I do not have unresolved legal issues that interfere with daily life.
9. I can manage debt without it negatively affecting my financial well-being.
10. How would you rate your overall health?
11. My relationship with my family has improved since participating in the BETTER WORK program.
12. I have found or improved my support group since participating in the program.
13. I have gathered the necessary documents (ID, Social Security card, work authorization) to be employed since participating in the program.
14. I am closer to a job that meets my financial needs and career goals since participating in the BETTER WORK program. *(Answer only if you are currently employed)*
15. I have created a budget since participating in the program.
16. My living situation has become more stable and secure since participating in the program.
17. My ability to afford housing has improved since participating in the BETTER WORK program.
18. My access to healthcare, including health insurance, has improved since participating in the program.
19. My access to reliable and affordable childcare that allows me to meet my work and personal commitments has improved since participating in the program.
20. Have you experienced an increase in your income since participating in the BETTER WORK Program?
 - My income has decreased
 - No change in my income
 - My yearly income increased by less than \$10,000
 - My yearly income increased by \$10,000 - \$20,000
 - My yearly income increased by more than \$20,000
21. The BETTER WORK program was beneficial to my personal and professional life overall.
22. I am able to think more clearly about my future.
23. I have goals or dreams that I am actively working toward.
24. I would recommend the BETTER WORK program to others.
25. In the past 30 days, how often have you used substances (such as drugs not prescribed to you or alcohol)? *This information is confidential and will not be shared.*

Data

An anonymous survey was electronically distributed via email to former participants in the BETTER WORK program. We received a total of 22 responses. The graphs below show the descriptive statistics of the collected data.

Regarding household size, 28.6% of respondents reported living alone with no dependents, and another 28.6% reported living in households of three individuals. Two-person households were the next most common group. The number of dependents ranged from 0 to 5, with 19.1% of respondents reporting three or more dependents. The majority (80.9%) had between zero and three dependents.

Employment status showed that 68.2% of respondents were employed, while 31.8% were unemployed. About 31.8% had attended the "Jobs for Life" program. Additionally, 63.6% of respondents reported having access to reliable transportation.

A significant portion (72.6%) believed they had the appropriate education and skills to achieve their career goals. However, nutritional needs remain a concern: 41% of respondents were either neutral or disagreed that they had adequate access to food, although 59.1% rated their overall health as good or very good.

Legal and financial concerns also emerged. About 22.7% of respondents expressed extreme concern over unresolved legal issues, and an equal percentage reported being in the lowest two ranks for debt management. Half of the respondents indicated they had not created a budget. Social and emotional support appeared limited: the majority of respondents did not report significant improvements in family relationships or support group connections. However, 27.3% and 45.5% placed themselves in the top two ranks for improved family relationships and support groups, respectively.

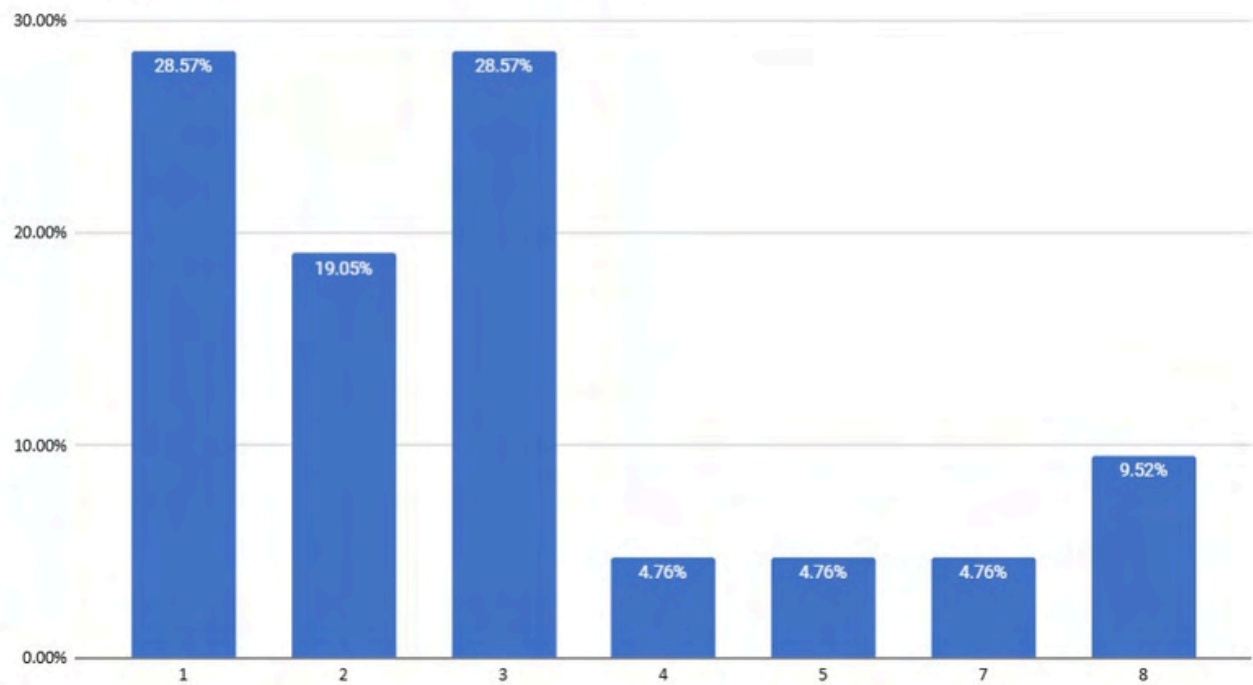
Regarding employment documentation, 22.7% reported concerns about lacking the necessary legal documents to be employed. Low wages was also a challenge: 40.9% disagreed that they were closer to a job that meets their financial needs.

Living conditions and housing affordability remain pressing issues. Around 40.9% of respondents reported minimal improvement in their living situation, and 54.6% expressed strong dissatisfaction with their housing affordability.

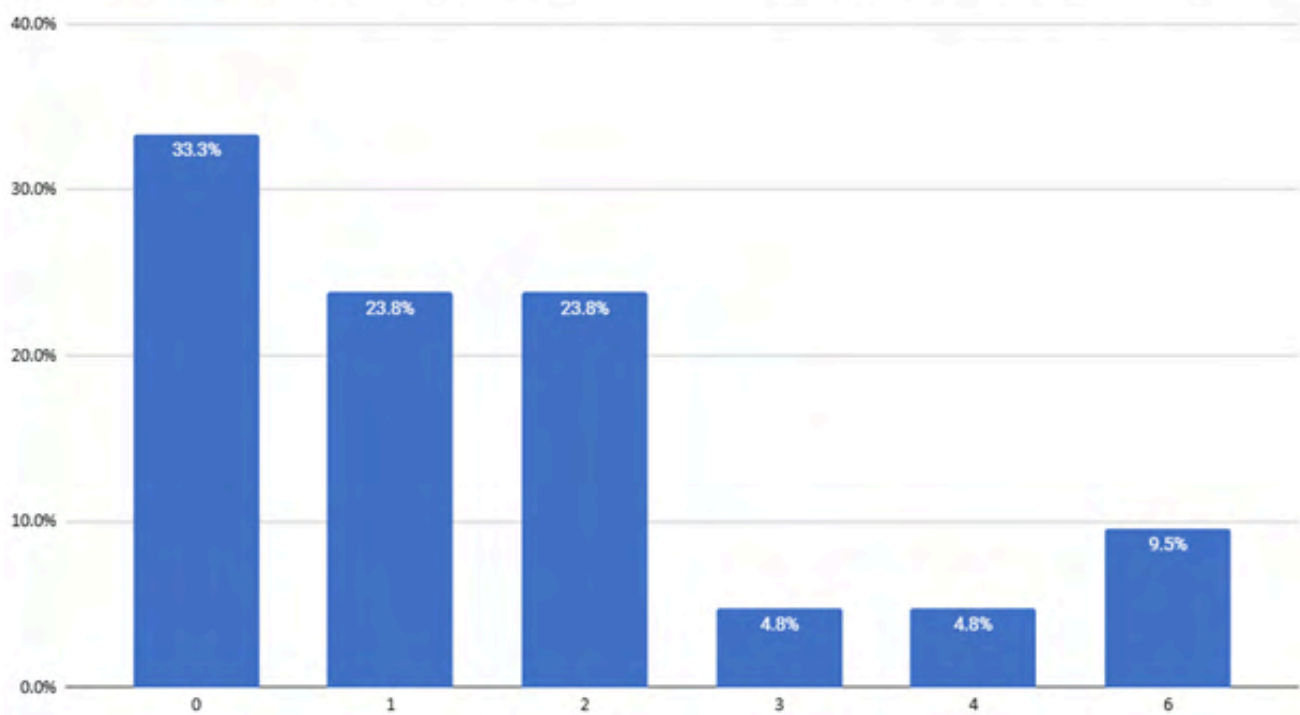
Access to healthcare and childcare also appeared limited, only 37% of respondents were satisfied with their access to healthcare, and just 19.1% were satisfied with childcare access.

Despite these challenges, 54.5% of respondents reported an increase in income since joining the program. Most respondents viewed the BETTER WORK program positively and saw it was beneficial to their personal and professional life, and 77.3% stated they would strongly recommend it to others. Finally, substance use remains a concern, as 13.6% of respondents reported using drugs or non-prescribed substances in the past 30 days.

How many people, including yourself, live in your household?



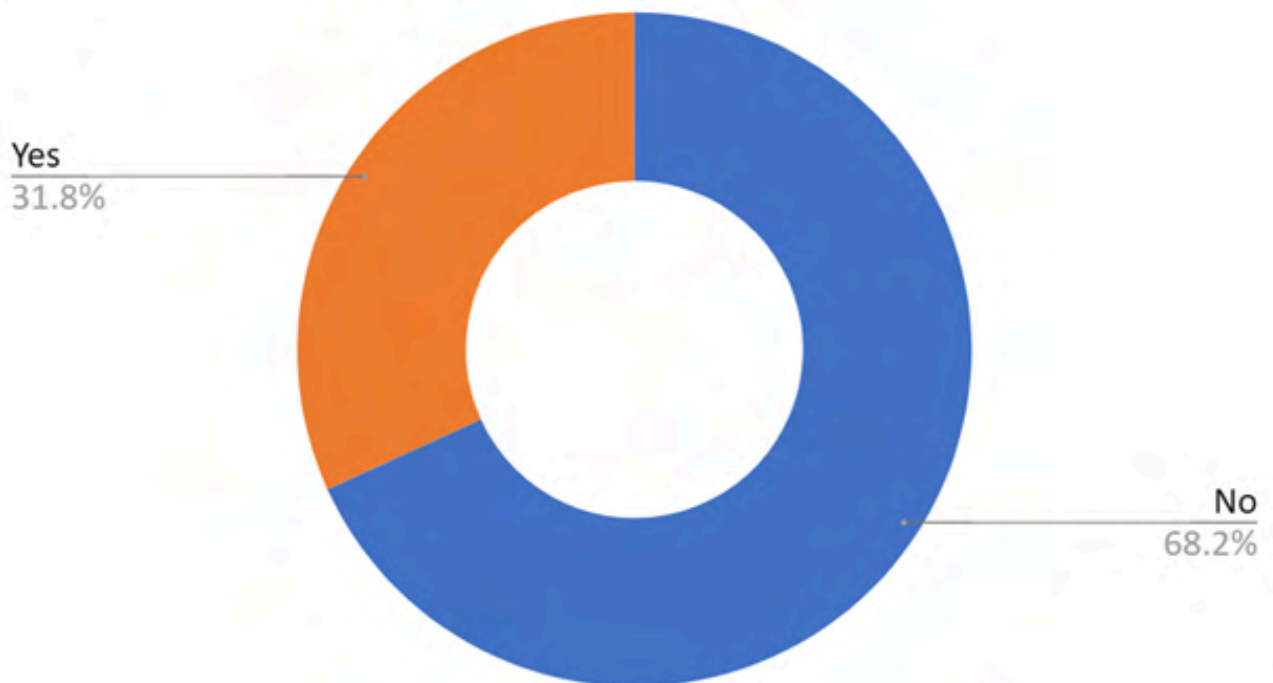
How many dependents do you have? This is anyone who relies on you to care for them.



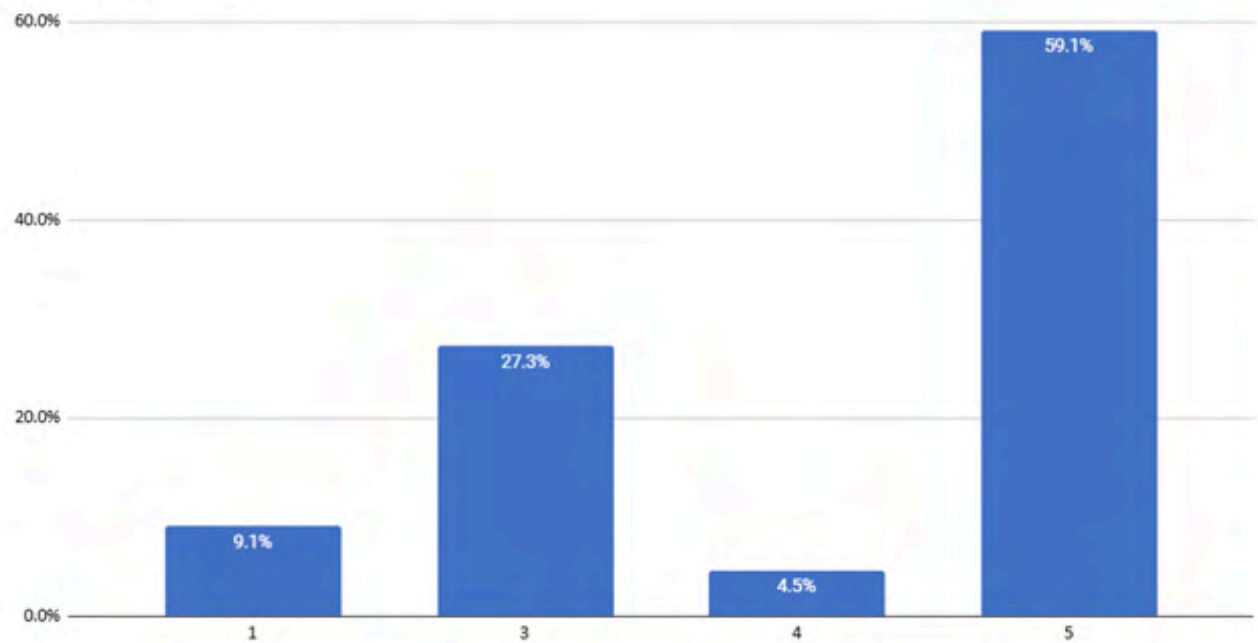
Are you currently employed?



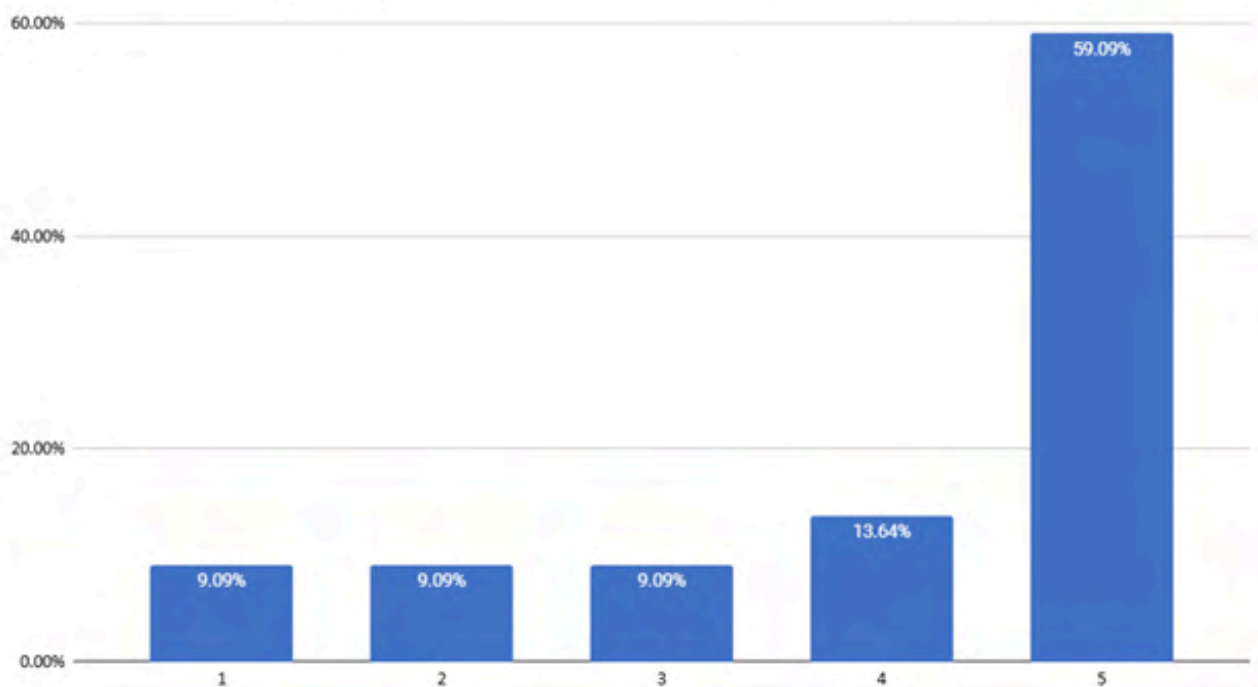
Have you attended a Jobs for Life class?



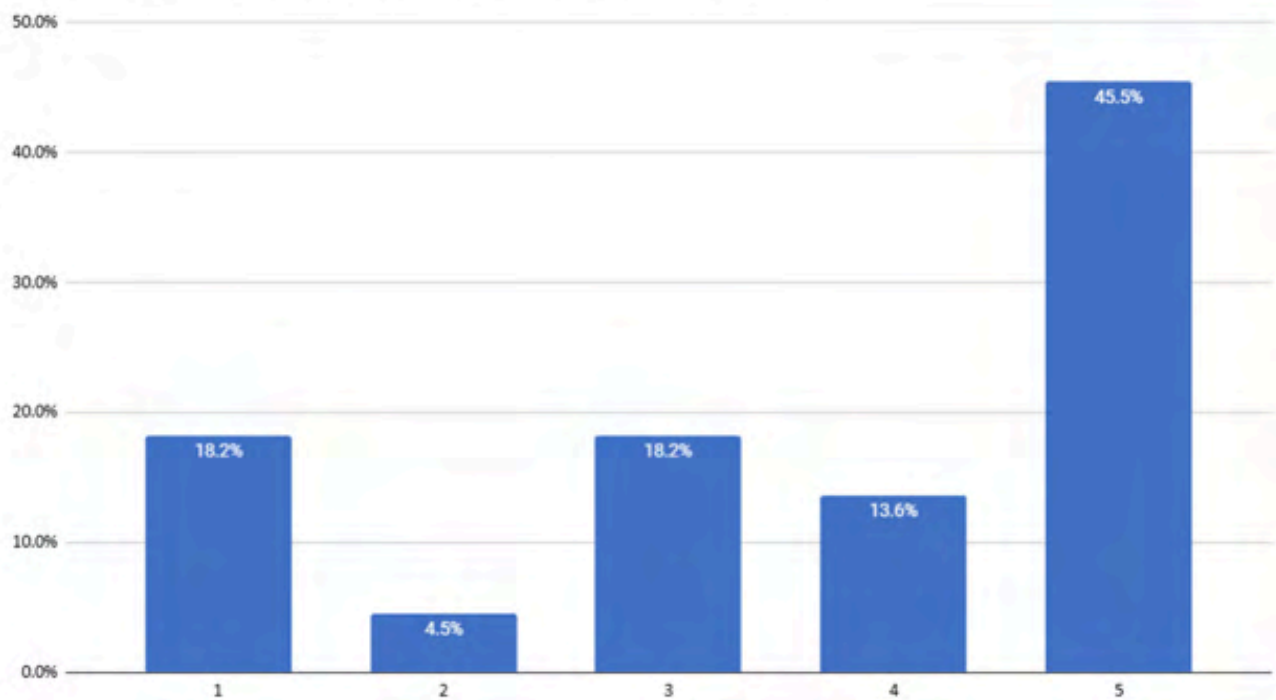
I have reliable transportation that allows me to get to work, appointments, and other necessary places.



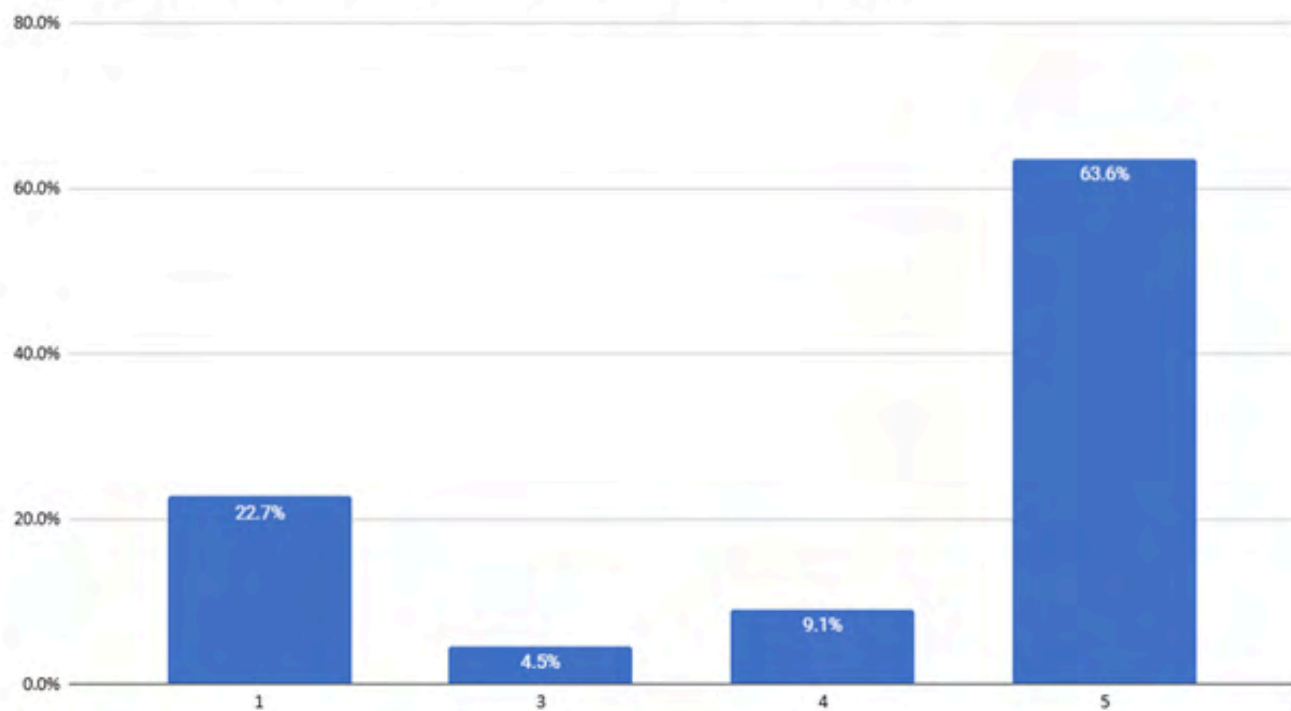
I have the necessary education or skills to achieve my career and personal goals.



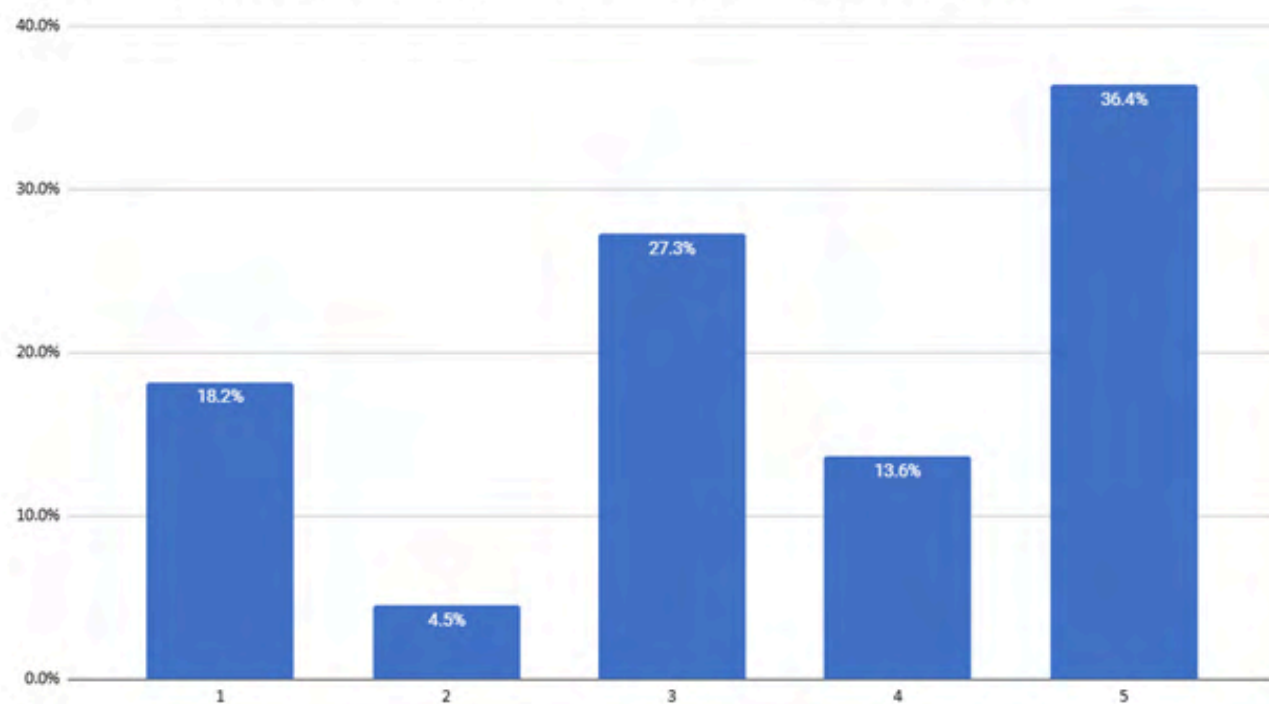
I have access to enough food to meet my nutritional needs.



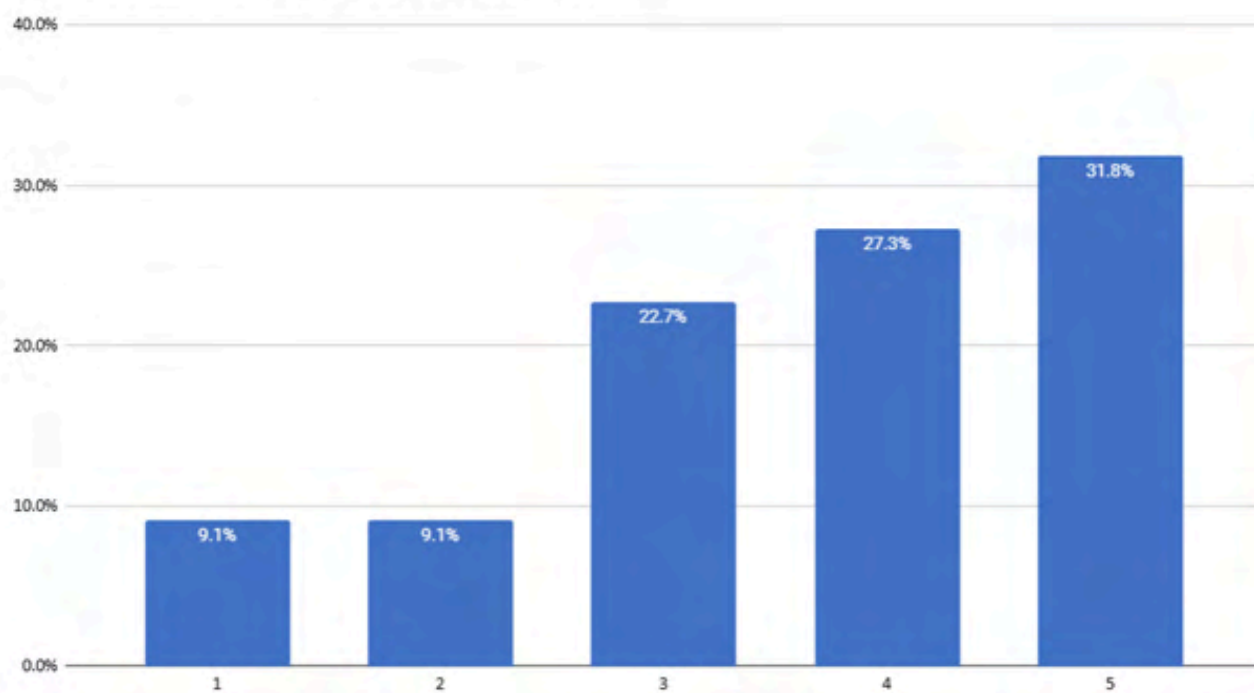
I do not have unresolved legal issues that interfere with daily life.



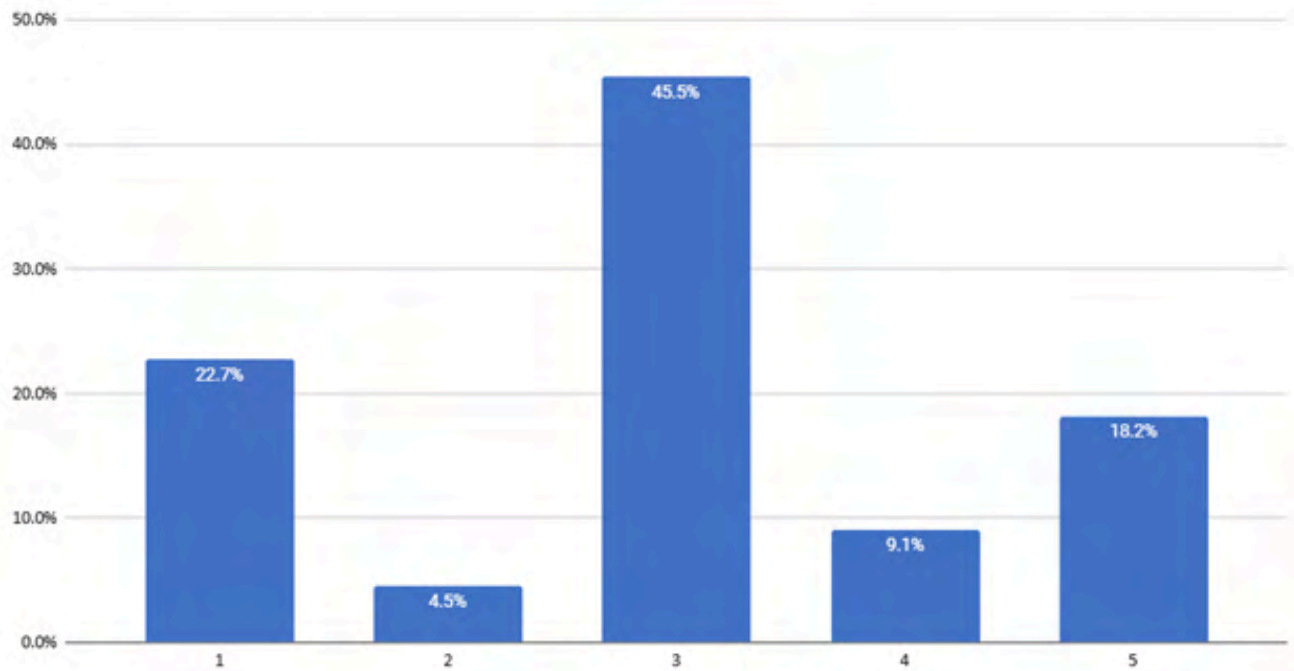
I can manage debt without it negatively affecting my financial well-being.



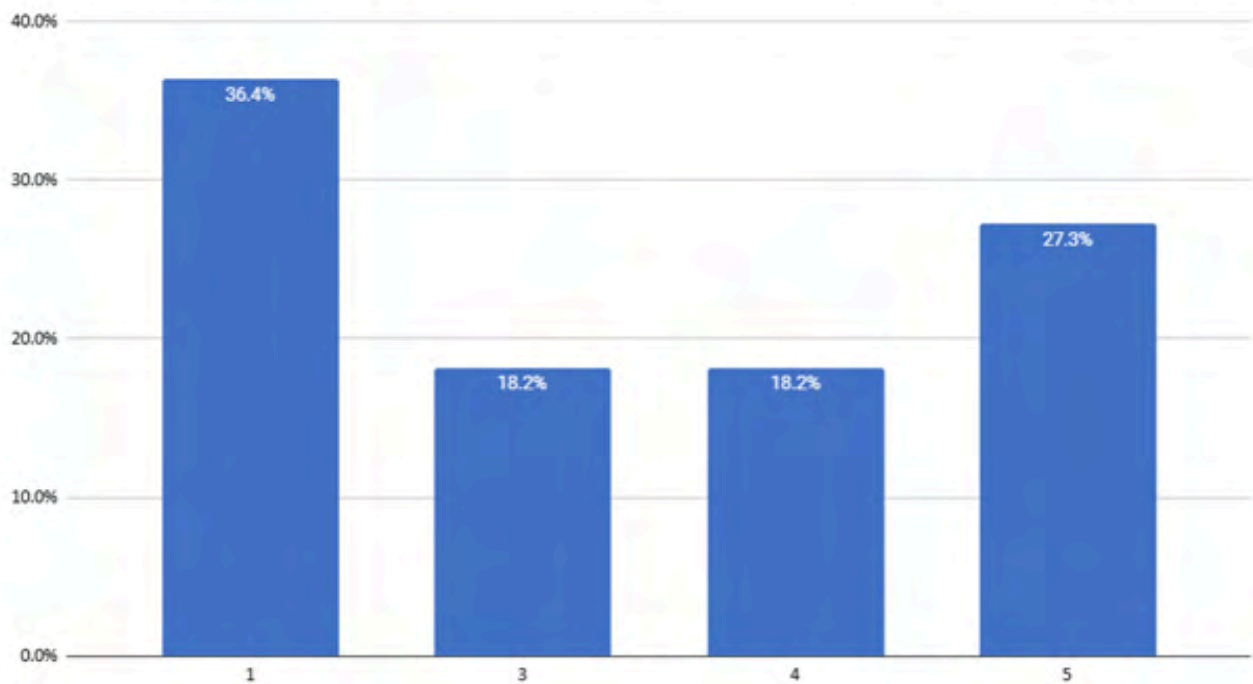
How would you rate your overall health?



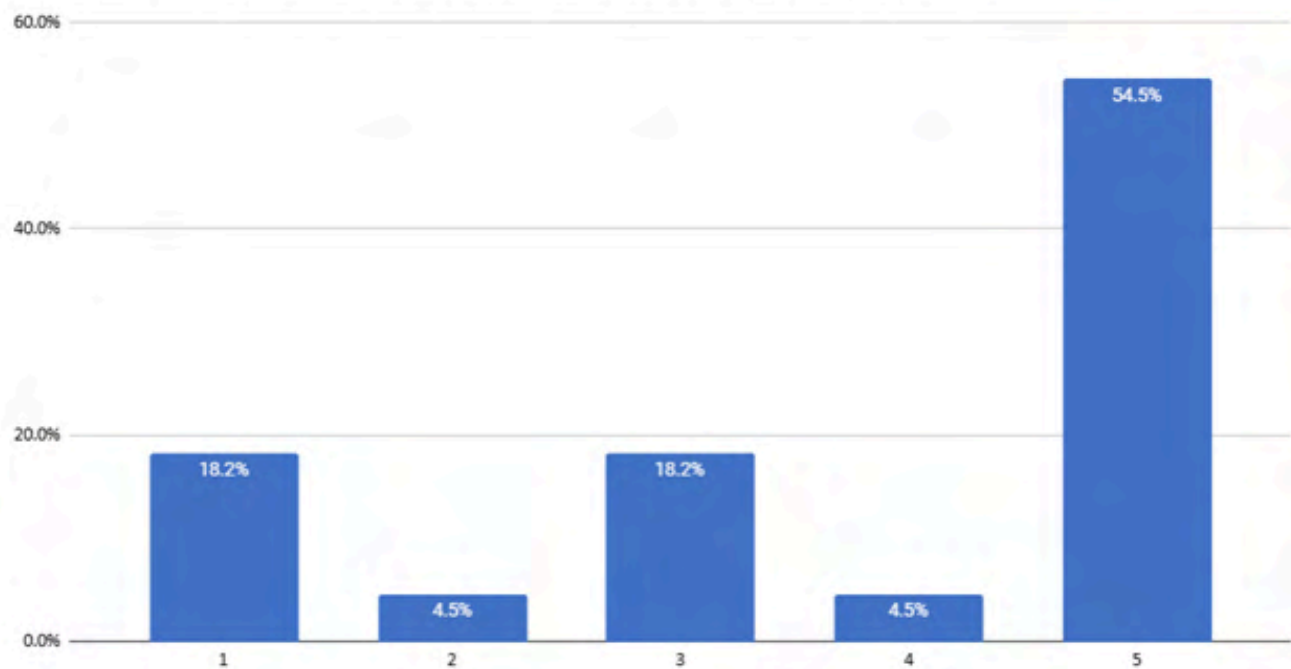
My relationship with my family has improved since participating in the BETTER WORK program.



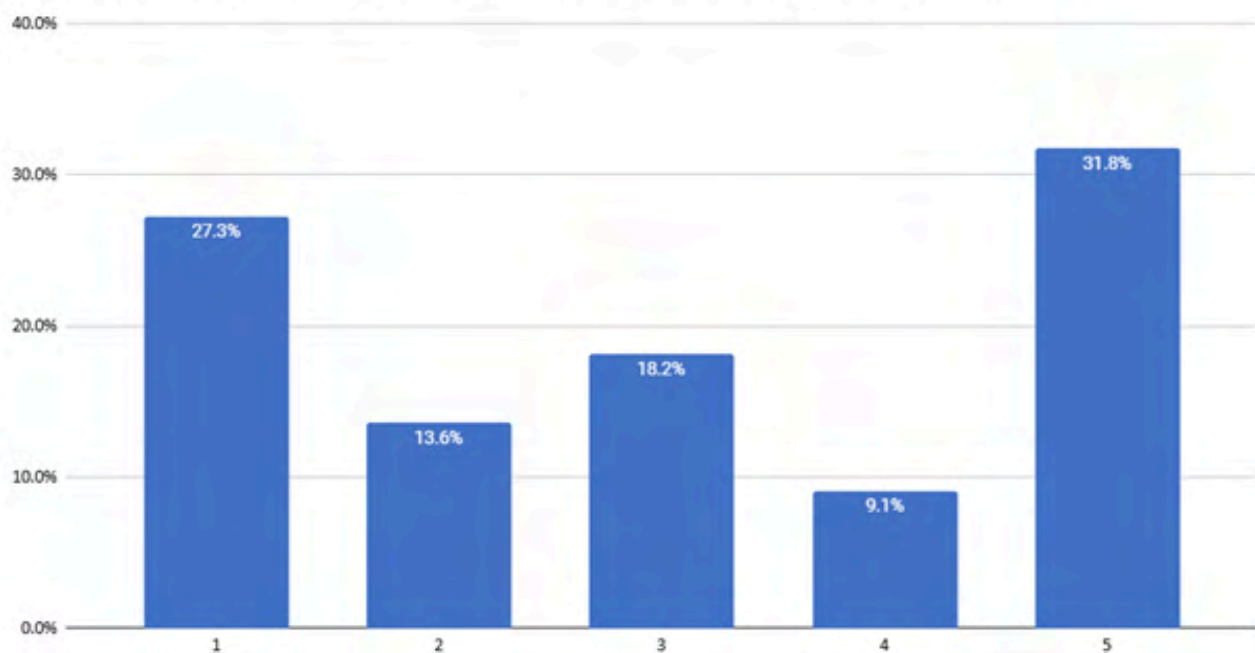
I have found or improved my support group since participating in the program.



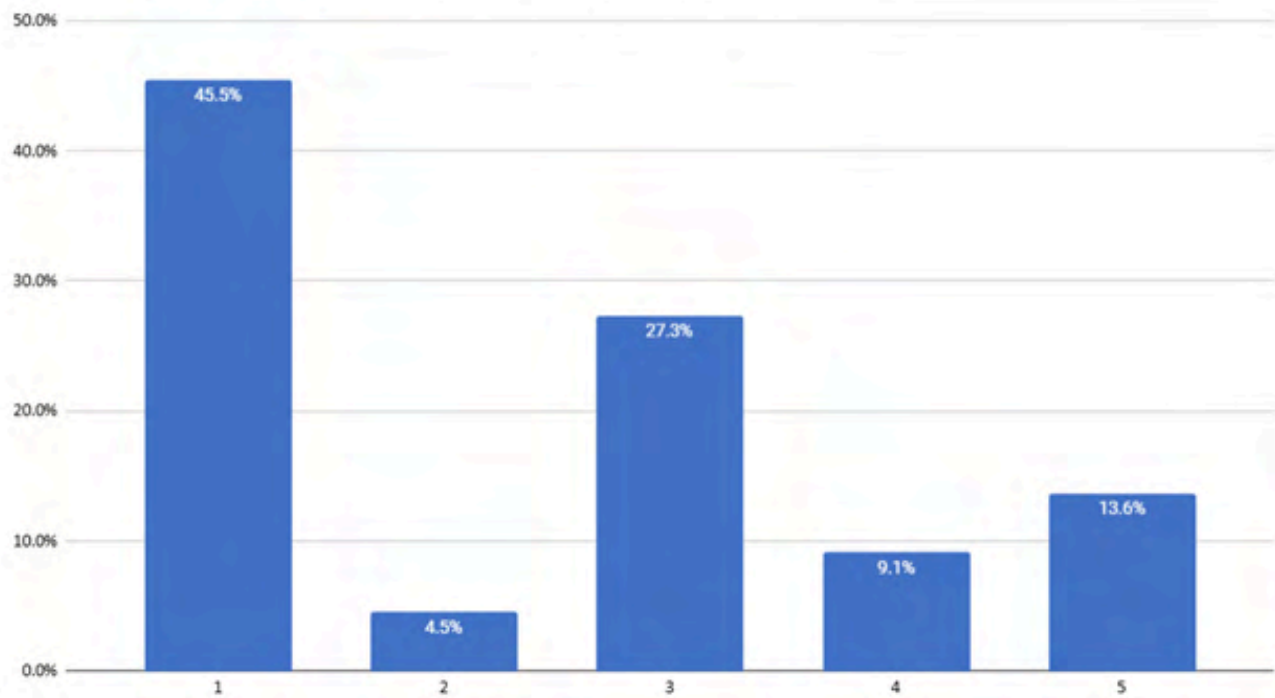
I have gathered the necessary documents (ID, Social Security card, work authorization) to be employed since participating in the program.



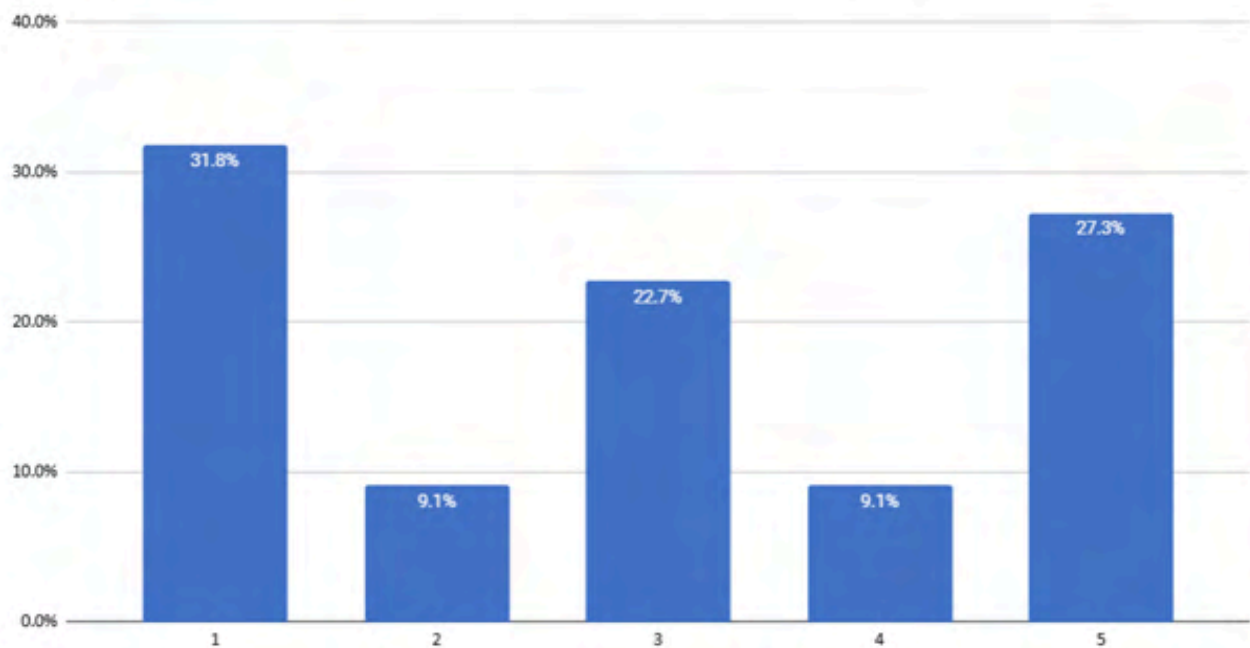
I am closer to a job that meets my financial needs and career goals since participating in the BETTER WORK program. (answer only if you are currently employed)



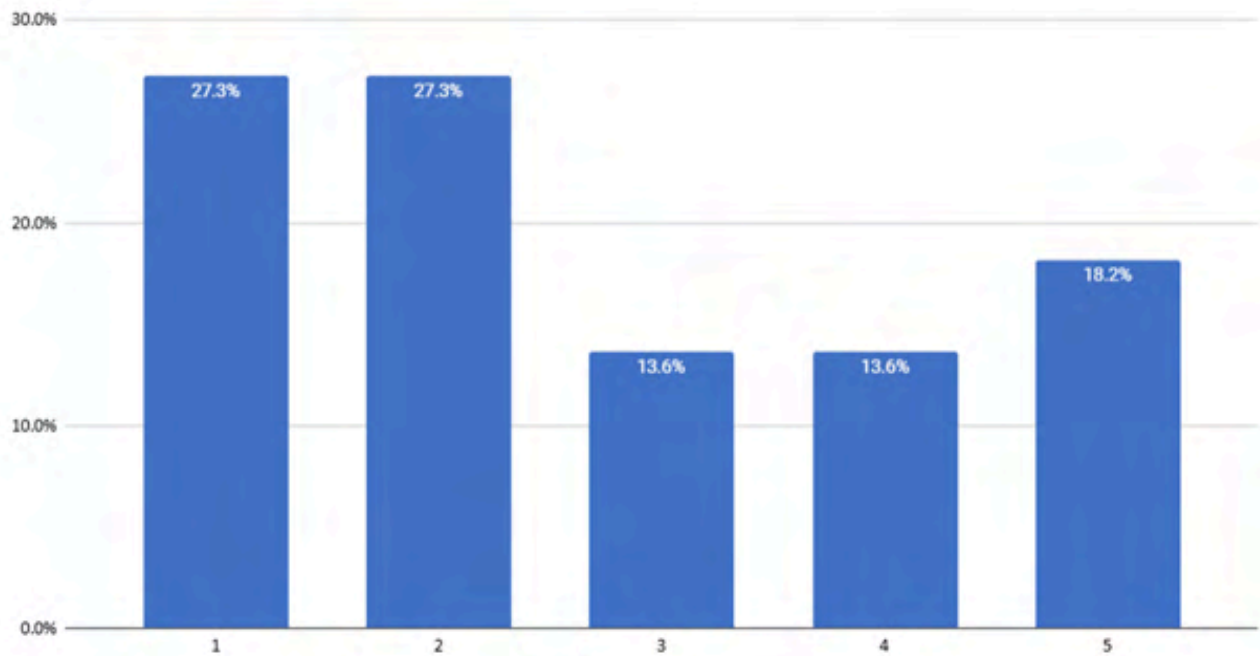
I have created a budget since participating in the program.



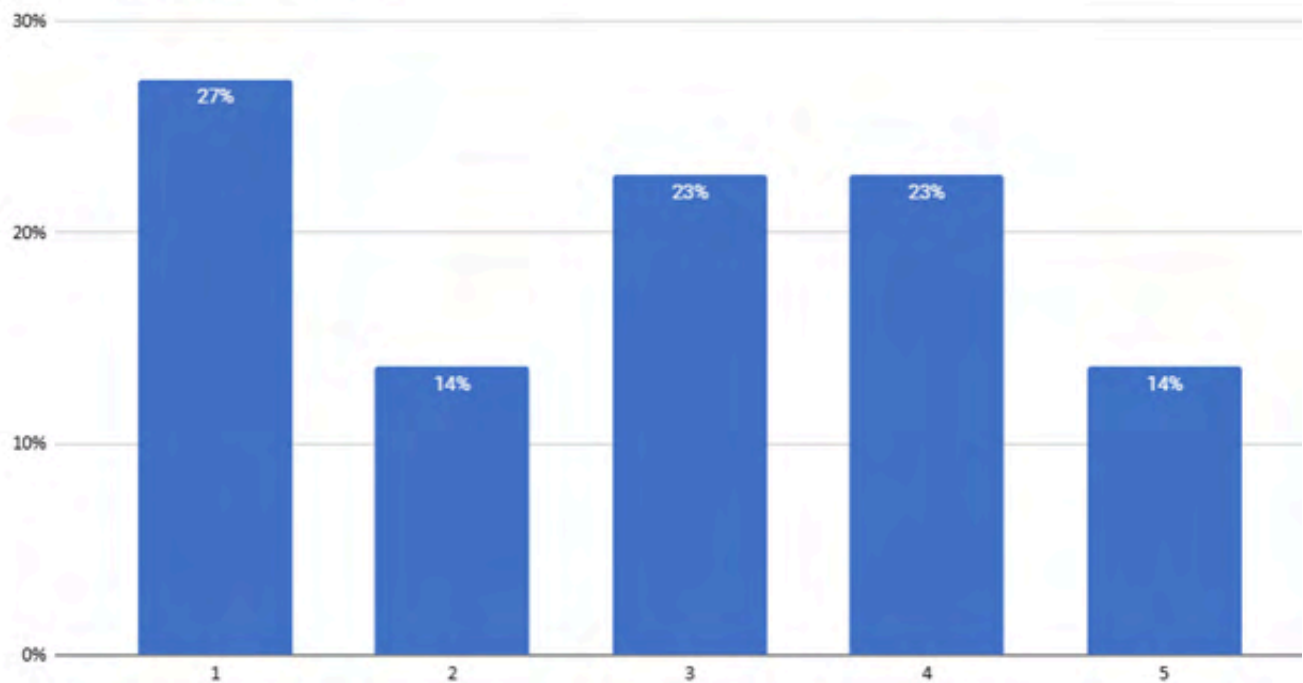
My living situation has become more stable and secure since participating in the program.



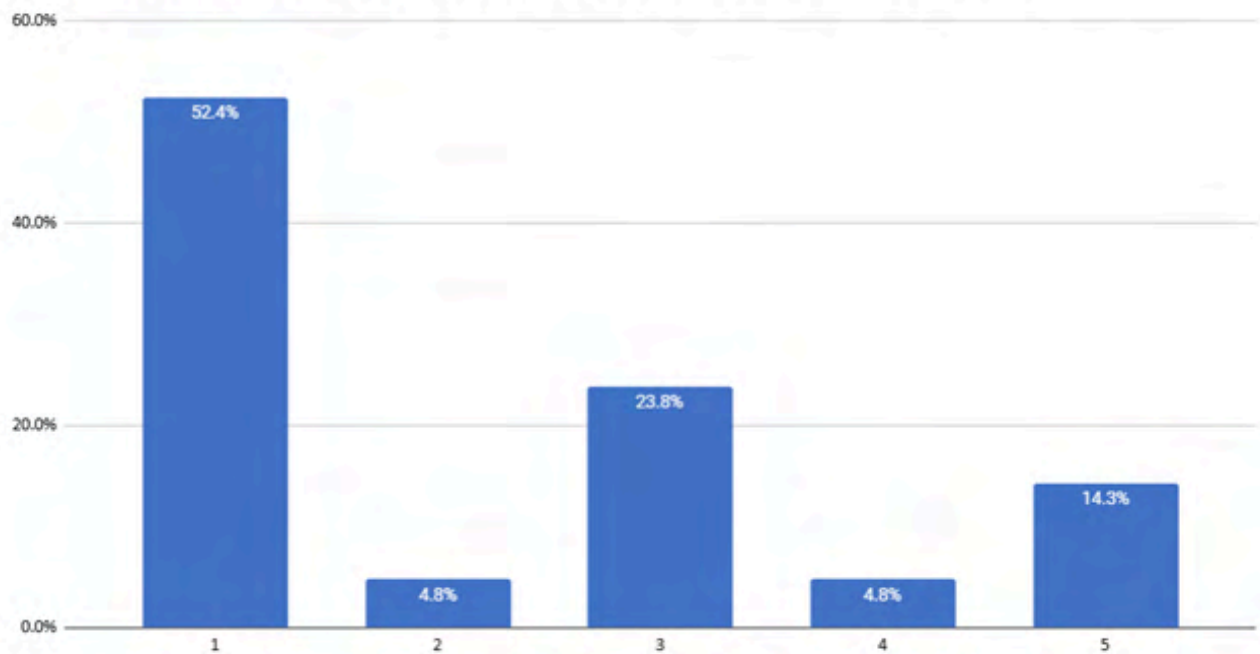
My ability to afford housing has improved since participating in the BETTER WORK program.



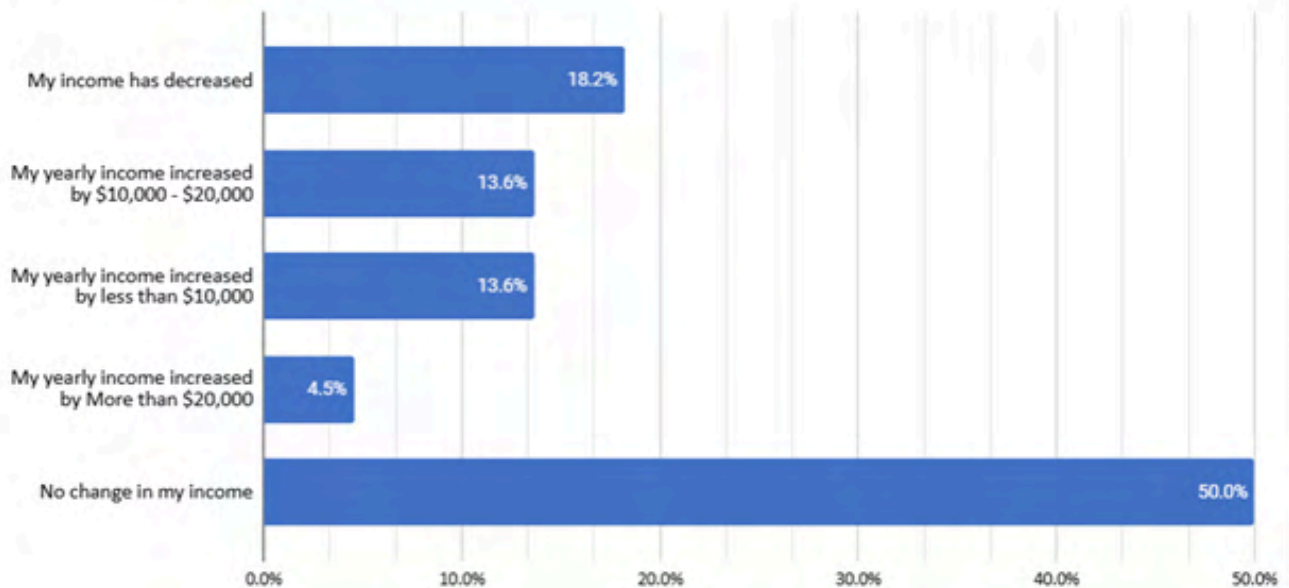
My access to healthcare, including health insurance has improved since participating in the program.



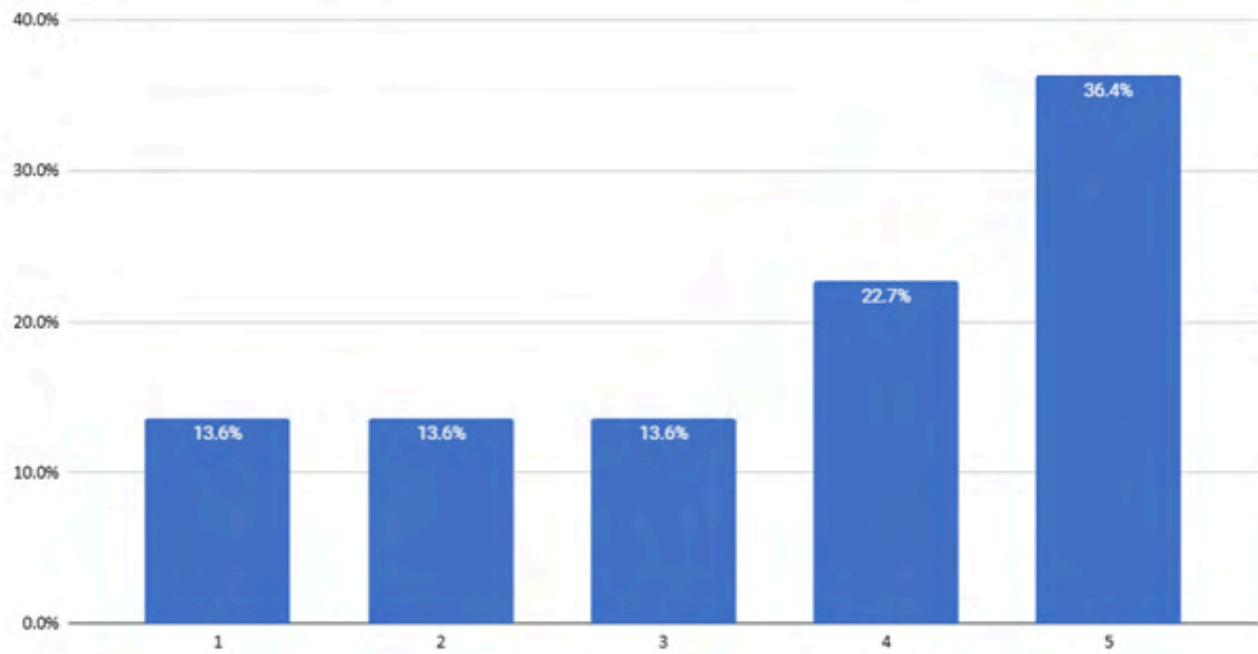
My access to reliable and affordable childcare that allows me to meet my work and personal commitments has improved since participating in the program.



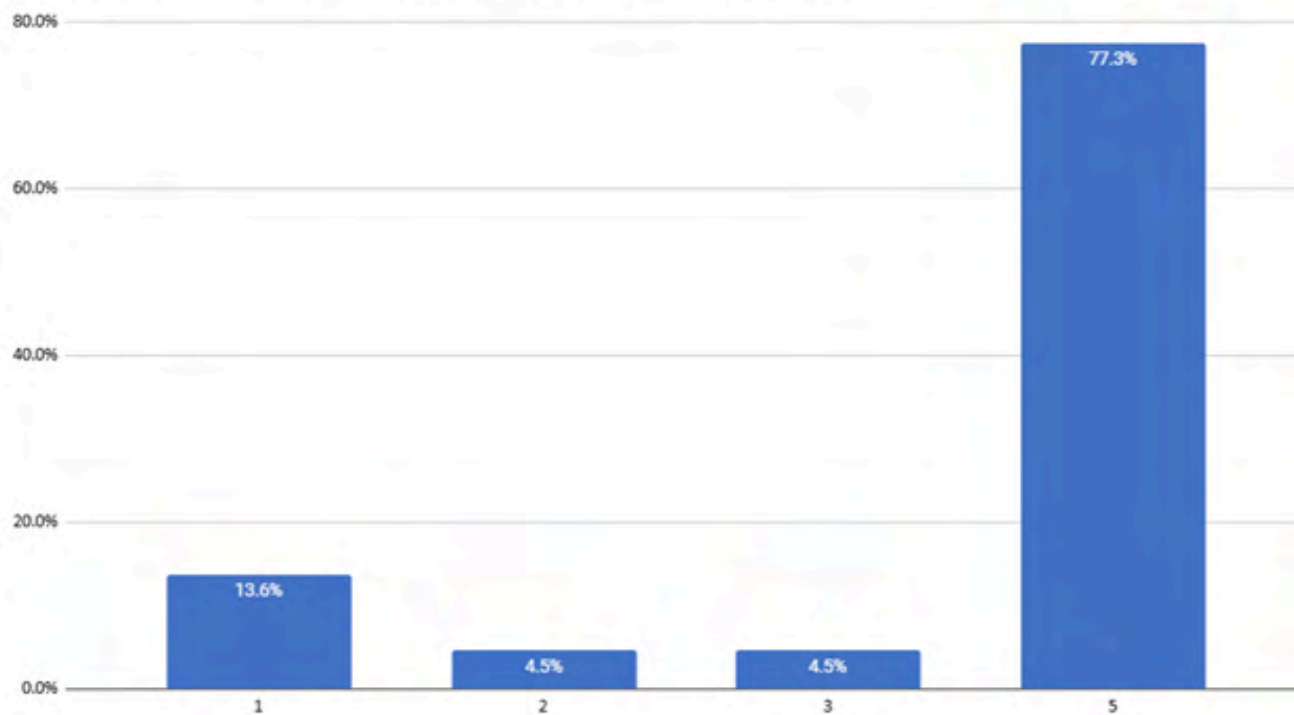
Have you experienced an increase in your income since participating in the BETTER WORK Program? Please select one.



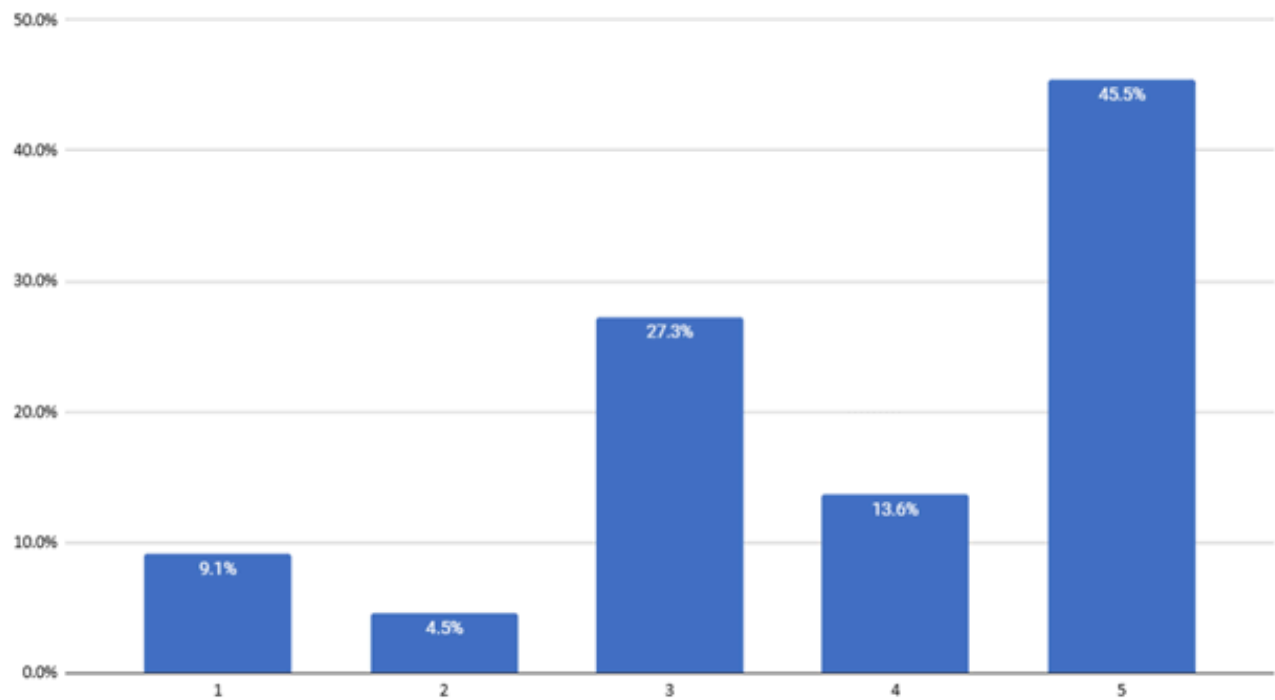
The BETTER WORK program was beneficial to my personal and professional life overall.



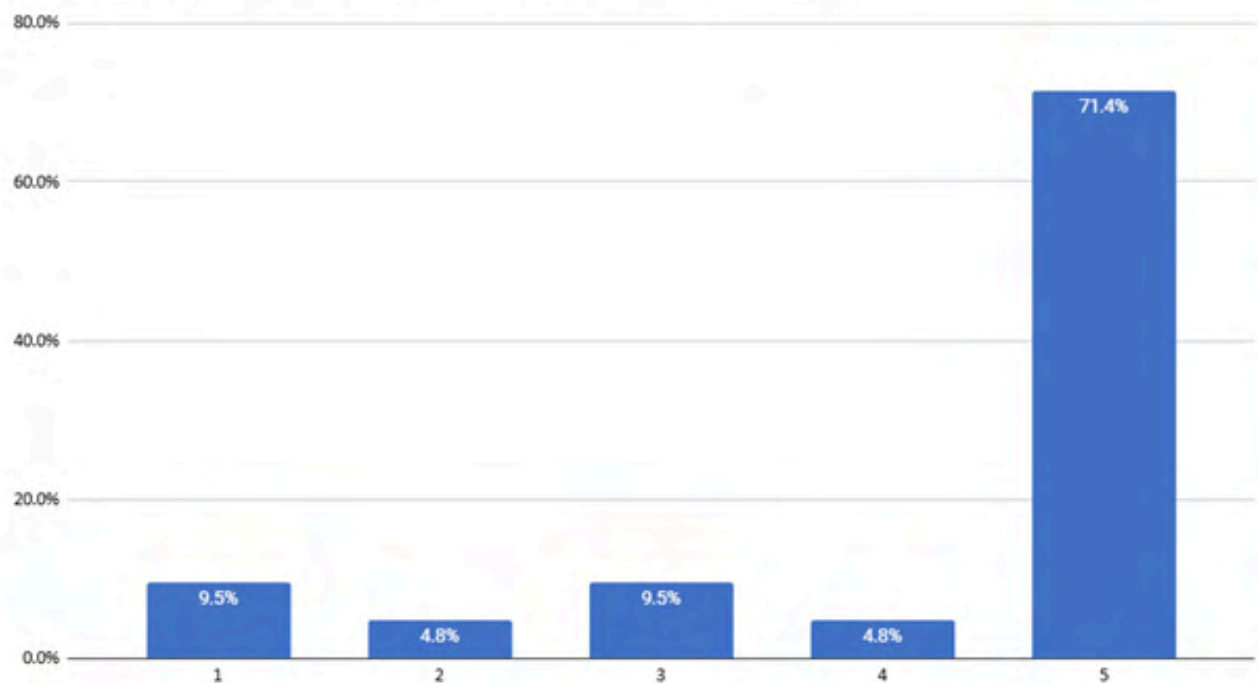
I would recommend the BETTER WORK program to others.



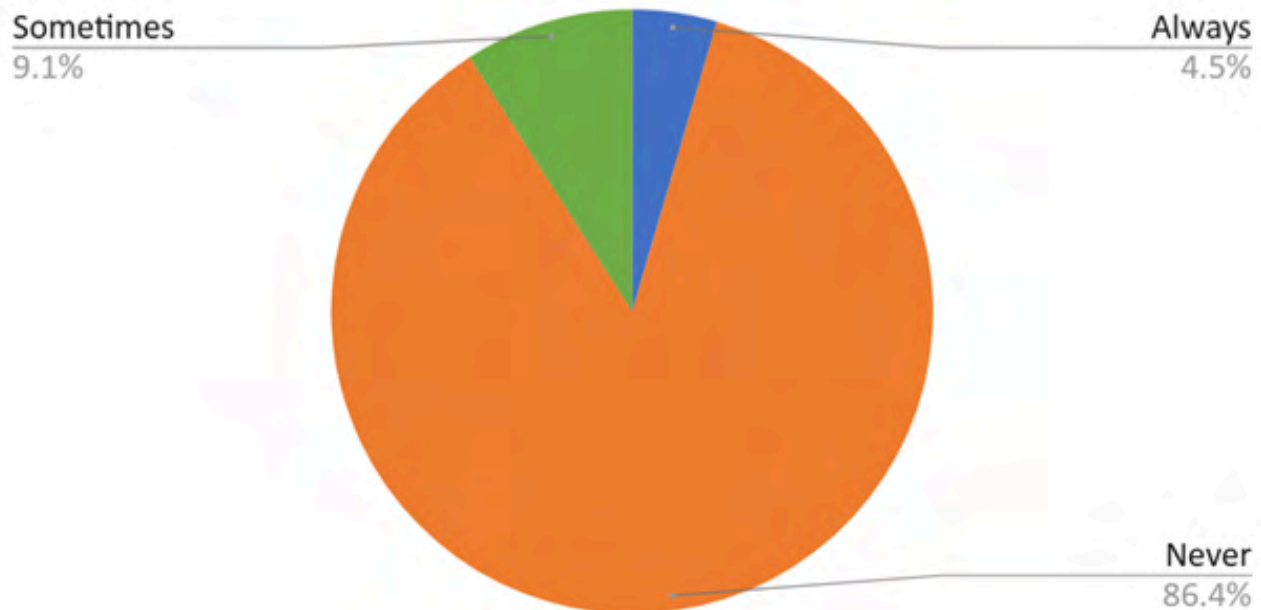
I am able to think more clearly about my future.



I have goals or dreams that I am actively working toward.



In the past 30 days, how often have you used substances (such as drugs not prescribed to you or alcohol) *This information is confidential and will not be shared*



Methodology and Discussion

Despite the relatively small sample size, our analysis leverages the collected data to shed light on the impact of the BETTER WORK program on disadvantaged populations in Columbus, GA. Our analysis focused on two key outcome variables to assess the effectiveness of the BETTER WORK program: (1) whether the respondent would recommend the program to others, and (2) whether the respondent believes the program was beneficial to their personal and professional life. For both variables, we recoded responses into binary outcomes—assigning a value of 1 to those who selected “neutral,” “agree,” or “strongly agree,” and a value of 0 to those who selected “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” The two variables are highly correlated (.66***) indicating that perceiving the program as beneficial to one’s personal and professional life increases the likelihood of recommending it by 66 percentage points. This relationship is statistically significant at the 0.001 level, underscoring a strong and meaningful association between perceived benefit and program endorsement. Given this strong correlation, either variable may serve as a reasonable proxy for the other, and both can be effectively used as outcome measures in evaluating the program’s overall impact. The data shows that 27.2% of respondents did not perceive the program as beneficial to their personal and professional life, and 18.1% reported that they would not recommend the program to others.

To examine what factors are associated with these outcomes, we employed a Linear Probability Model (LPM) using the rest of the survey variables as predictors. The results show that having a larger household size and more dependents are associated with higher likelihood of recommending the program and perceiving personal and professional life improvement.

An additional household member increases the probability of recommending the program by 0.59 percentage points, while each additional dependent raises the personal and professional satisfaction by 1.14 percentage points. The result is statistically significant at 10% significance level. Employment status has the most substantial effect; being currently employed is associated with a 40.3 percentage point higher probability of recommending the program—a statistically significant (at 5% level of significance) and economically meaningful result. Education level, interestingly, is negatively associated with both outcomes. A one-point increase in agreement that they possess the necessary education or skills reduces the likelihood of recommending the program by 12.18 percentage points and the perceived benefit by 13.56 percentage points. This may indicate that individuals with higher perceived education needs found less value in the program offerings. Stronger family relationships and support groups are associated with higher likelihood of recommendation, though only support group improvements (9.91 percentage points) are statistically significant. Those who have legal issues are more likely to recommend the program by 9.4 percentage point and see improvement in their personal and professional life by 13.4 percentage point. The findings are statistically significant for both outcome variables. Those who attended the “Jobs for Life” course are more likely to recommend the Better Work program by 4.25 percentage point and see improvement in their personal and professional skills by 18.4 percentage point. However, the results is statistically insignificant legal stability, and health improvements also demonstrate meaningful effects. Those with access to adequate nutrition are 79.2 percentage points more likely to recommend the program Food security, debt management, health conditions, childcare accessibility, income, and clarity about the future are all positively associated with recommending the program but there is no statical evidence to support these associations. This could become significant with a greater sample size.

	Recomend the Program	Personal and Professional Development
Number of Household	.0059*	0.0293
Number of Dependents	0.0361	.0114*
Currently Employed	.4032**	0.4898
Attended Jobs for life	0.0425	0.1839
Access to Transportation	0.0597	0.0457
Necessary Education and Skills	-.1218*	-.1356*
Access to Food	0.07923	0.0462
Legal Issues	-.0944*	-.1347**
Debt Management	0.0087	0.0278
Overall Health	0.1037	-0.0009
Family Relationship Improvement	0.0569	-0.0871
Access to Support Group	.0991*	0.1892
Legal Documents for Employment	-0.0499	-0.0481
Job Meets Financial Needs	0.1371	0.1527
Created Budget	0.067	0.0123
Stable Living Situation	0.0098	0.012
Housing Affordability	-0.0596	-0.0053
Access to Healthcare	0.1074	0.0167
Access to Childcare	0.0101	0.0721
Increased Income	0.1007	0.1384
Future Clarity	0.0782	0.1037
Working Towards Goals	-0.0041	-0.0053

Notes: “*” = p value < 0.1 | “**” = p value < 0.05 | “****” = p value < 0.01
Survey Questions: **Number of Persons in Household:** How many people, including yourself, live in your household? **Number of Dependents:** How many dependents do you have? This is anyone who relies on you to care for them. **Currently Employed:** Are you currently employed? **Jobs for Life:** Have you attended a Jobs for Life class? **Access to Transportation:** I have reliable transportation that allows me to get to work, appointments, and other necessary places. **Necessary Education and Skills:** I have the necessary education or skills to achieve my career and personal goals. **Access to Food:** I have access to enough food to meet my nutritional needs. **Legal Issues:** I do not have unresolved legal issues that interfere with daily life. **Debt management:** I can manage debt without it negatively affecting my financial well-being. **Overall Health:** How would you rate your overall health? **Family relationship Improvement:** My relationship with my family has improved since participating in the BETTER WORK program. **Access to Support Group:** I have found or improved my support group since participating in the program. **Legal Documents for Employment:** I have gathered the necessary documents (ID, Social Security card, work authorization) to be employed since participating in the program. **Job meets Financial Needs:** I am closer to a job that meets my financial needs and career goals since participating in the BETTER WORK program. (answer only if you are currently employed) **Created Budget:** I have created a budget since participating in the program. **Stable Living situation:** My living situation has become more stable and secure since participating in the program. **Housing Affordability:** My ability to afford housing has improved since participating in the BETTER WORK program. **Access to Healthcare:** My access to healthcare, including health insurance has improved since participating in the program. **Access to Childcare:** My access to reliable and affordable childcare that allows me to meet my work and personal commitments has improved since participating in the program. **Increased Income:** Have you experienced an increase in your income since participating in the BETTER WORK Program? Please select one. **Future Clarity:** I am able to think more clearly about my future. **Working Towards Goals:** I have goals or dreams that I am actively working toward.

Correlation Analysis

To assess robustness, we examine the correlation between key variables used in the analysis. The correlation coefficient is calculated by dividing the covariance of two variables by the product of their standard deviations. The coefficient ranges from -1 to 1 , where values from -1 to -0.5 suggest a strong negative correlation, -0.5 to 0 a weak negative correlation, 0 to 0.5 a weak positive correlation, and 0.5 to 1 a strong positive correlation.

The data reveal strong positive correlations between being employed and several outcomes: improvement in family relationships (0.56), support group access (0.53), job satisfaction (0.75), budget creation (0.59), improvement in living situation (0.52), housing affordability (0.52), childcare accessibility (0.52), and perceived improvement in personal and professional life (0.53). Attending the Jobs for Life program shows a strong association with clarity about the future (0.62). As expected, food security is moderately correlated with improvement in living situation (0.47), and debt management correlates with income growth (0.47). Improved family relationships are strongly correlated with finding support groups (0.55) and moderately with childcare accessibility (0.47). Having the necessary documentation is highly associated with actively working toward one's goals (0.71). Support group access is strongly correlated with several outcomes: job satisfaction (0.84), budget creation (0.58), improved living situation (0.69), housing affordability (0.51), better health conditions (0.47), childcare accessibility (0.54), improved personal and professional life (0.78), recommending the program (0.56), and future clarity (0.51). Similarly, working in a job that meets one's financial needs shows high correlations with budget creation (0.64), living situation improvement (0.88), housing affordability (0.68), healthcare access (0.58), childcare access (0.72), income growth (0.52), personal and professional life improvement (0.80), recommendation likelihood (0.59), and future clarity (0.52). Notably, access to healthcare is strongly correlated with childcare access (0.74), and budget creation is highly correlated with both better living conditions (0.68) and housing affordability (0.69).

	No. of Household	No. of Dependent	Currently Employed	Attended Jobs for Life	Access to Transportation	Necessary Education and Skills	Access to Food
Number of Household	1						
Number of Dependents	0.91	1					
Currently Employed	0.26	0.16	1				
Attended Jobs For Life	0.03	-0.07	0.04	1			
Access to Transportation	-0.06	-0.14	-0.05	0.2	1		
Necessary Education and Skills	0.05	-0.07	-0.26	-0.02	0.18	1	
Access to Food	-0.19	-0.36	0.41	-0.09	0.3	0.2	1
Legal Issues	-0.5	-0.56	-0.21	0.04	0.001	-0.12	0.09
Debt Management	-0.14	-0.29	0.01	0.19	0.32	-0.33	0.31
Overall Health	0.18	0.07	-0.04	-0.03	0.51	0.38	0.42
Family Relationship Improvement	-0.1	-0.16	0.56	-0.05	-0.37	-0.2	0.33
Access to Support Group	0.04	-0.13	-0.53	0.35	0.1	-0.1	0.4
Legal Documents for Employment	-0.16	-0.23	-0.37	0.43	0.4	0.37	0.07
Job Meets Financial Needs	0.19	0.002	0.75	0.22	0.13	-0.1	0.41
Created Budget	0.22	0.05	0.59	0.27	0.11	-0.56	0.25
Stable Living Situation	0.11	-0.05	0.76	0.1	0.33	-0.23	0.47
Housing Affordability	0.2	-0.02	0.52	0.08	0.15	-0.13	0.29
Access to Healthcare	-0.01	-0.19	0.26	-0.12	0.12	-0.14	0.31
Access to Childcare	0.24	0.07	0.54	0.04	0.01	-0.19	0.26
Increased Income	0.22	0.18	0.56	-0.13	-0.11	-0.4	0.26
Personal and Professional Development	0.26	0.11	0.53	0.28	0.16	-0.17	0.32
Recommend the Program	0.27	0.2	0.37	0.09	0.18	-0.23	0.22
Future Clarity	0.05	-0.06	0.2	0.62	0.6	0.13	0.24
Working Towards Goals	0.17	0.19	0.17	0.36	0.43	0.13	-0.08

	Legal Issues	Debt Management	Overall Health	Family Relationship Improvement	Support Group	Legal Documents for Employment	Job Meets Financial Needs	Created Budget	Stable Living Situation
Legal Issues	1								
Debt Management	0.32	1							
Overall Health	-0.04	0.16	1						
Family Relationship Improvement	-0.08	-0.03	-0.28	1					
Support Group	-0.25	0.34	0.1	0.56	1				
Legal Documents for Employment	-0.1	0.11	0.18	-0.22	0.23	1			
Job Meets Financial Needs	-0.31	0.22	0.05	0.49	0.83	0.09	1		
Created Budget	-0.13	0.38	0.06	0.38	0.58	0.21	0.65	1	
Stable Living Situation	-0.19	0.29	0.03	0.42	0.69	0.04	0.89	0.68	1
Housing Affordability	-0.16	0.38	0.08	0.34	0.5	-0.05	0.68	0.7	0.65
Access to Healthcare	-0.03	0.26	-0.06	0.41	0.47	0.24	0.59	0.48	0.68
Access to Childcare	-0.28	-0.03	-0.18	0.47	0.54	0.09	0.41	0.45	0.74
Increased Income	-0.23	0.48	-0.05	0.3	0.35	-0.38	0.52	0.35	0.46
Personal & Professional Development	-0.34	0.23	0.23	0.27	0.78	0.02	0.79	0.45	0.64
Recommend the Program	-0.35	0.12	0.41	0.3	0.56	-0.03	0.59	0.42	0.47
Future Clarity	-0.32	0.23	0.24	-0.06	0.51	0.5	0.52	0.4	0.45
Working Towards Goals	-0.39	0.09	0.29	-0.23	0.27	0.71	0.07	0.27	-0.02

	Housing Affordability	Access to Healthcare	Access Childcare	Increased Income	Personal & Professional Development	Recommend the Program	Future Clarity	Working Towards Goals
Housing Affordability	1							
Access to Healthcare	0.46	1						
Access to Childcare	0.49	0.76	1					
Increased Income	0.53	0.16	0.15	1				
Personal & Professional Development	0.58	0.34	0.48	0.38	1			
Recommend the Program	0.48	0.37	0.37	0.28	0.78	1		
Future Clarity	0.45	0.08	0.3	0.03	0.54	0.38	1	
Working Towards Goals	0.03	-0.04	-0.04	-0.13	0.16	0.16	0.52	1

Conclusion

The findings from the analysis of the BETTER WORK program in Columbus, GA highlight several important patterns. The majority of respondents expressed positive views of the program: 77.3% said they would recommend it to others, and nearly three-quarters agreed it benefited their personal and professional lives. Employment status emerged as the strongest predictor of program satisfaction and recommendation, suggesting that helping participants secure or maintain employment significantly enhances the perceived value of the program. Household characteristics also played a role—those with larger households and more dependents were more likely to view the program favorably, possibly because the benefits had broader impacts on their families. Participation in the “Jobs for Life” program showed positive, though not always statistically significant, associations with future clarity and overall satisfaction.

However, there were notable challenges. A sizable portion of respondents reported unresolved legal issues, poor debt management, housing instability, and limited access to childcare. These persistent barriers may limit the long-term impact of the program for some participants. Additionally, the negative association between perceived education levels and program satisfaction suggests that participants who believe they already have sufficient skills may not find the offerings as valuable, signaling a potential gap in matching services with participant needs. The correlation analysis further reinforces the importance of comprehensive support networks. Support group access, employment, job quality were all strongly associated with improved life outcomes. While the small sample size limits broad generalization, the findings offer important insight into which program components are most impactful—and where additional investment could help participants achieve lasting economic self-sufficiency.

Overall, the data suggest that the BETTER WORK program is making a meaningful difference in the lives of many participants, especially those facing multiple barriers. Future efforts should continue to focus on integrated support services connecting job training with legal aid, housing assistance, and childcare to ensure more participants can translate opportunity into long-term progress.