



2026 Debt Survey

The AFT and Protect Borrowers surveyed more than 7,500 AFT members, including educators, healthcare workers and public employees, to better understand the strain of today's cost-of-living crisis. The results offer new insights into how brittle working families' finances have become.

The data shows how families are barely able to stay afloat as the ever-increasing cost of debt squeezes households across the country.

74 percent of respondents report living paycheck to paycheck.

50 percent of respondents say financial distress is creating strain in their families and households.

Teachers are being forced to take on more forms of debt just to get by. Over the past 12 months:

More than half of respondents only made minimum payments on their credit cards.

1 in 3 respondents relied on a credit card to pay a utility bill.

1 in 5 respondents used credit cards to pay off other debts.

1 in 8 respondents used credit cards to pay rent.

The cost-of-living crisis is affecting the physical and mental health of those working in essential professions.

More than half of respondents reported losing sleep due to mounting debt.

8 in 20 respondents reported increased levels of stress due to the current cost-of-living crisis.

32 percent of respondents reported avoiding medical treatments during times of financial distress.

This is what AFT members who are teachers, nurses, school staff, retirees and working people are saying:

It's terrible having to choose between things that should all be considered necessities. "Robbing Peter to pay Paul" is how I finagle monthly bills. ... When you are barely scraping by, saving for retirement is a luxury. ... It's frustrating. It's depressing. It's not the way it's supposed to be.

—Jessica from Minnesota

Child care costs have put a significant strain on our family's finances. Up until this past year, I'd never carried any debt (with the exception of my home/auto loans). I am now in nearly \$20k worth of credit card debt due to low pay (despite working two jobs) and the astronomical cost of child care and daily essentials.

—Brittany from New York

*I have personally struggled to afford basic necessities despite doing everything that is traditionally considered “right.” ... Instead, rising housing, food, healthcare, and insurance costs along with repeated double-digit insurance premium increases for educators have created ongoing financial strain. ... **The message this sends is deeply troubling: even when educators follow the rules, invest in education, eliminate debt, and work full time in public service, financial security is no longer guaranteed. This is not a personal failure; it is a systemic one***

—Rebecca from New Mexico

***I’ve had to take out loans from places like [payday lenders] to supplement income** over summer months when I don’t have much to pay rent and some of my bills. February, July, August, and September are my hardest months of the year to pay bills because I don’t get a full check due to Christmas break and summer vacation. **I’ve considered moving but my credit score isn’t good enough to get approved anywhere.** My rent alone is \$2800 which is cheap compared to what I’ve seen. Trying to pay off my student loan debt is a nightmare because I can barely afford housing bills. My electric bill is usually over \$200 unless it’s April-November (when it’s hot) and we need the AC but the cost is often a \$700 bill.*

—Ashlei from California

*This is a huge source of stress. I cannot sleep, **[I am] waking up worrying about money. I have to charge groceries on my credit card to buy food** for my child. ... I’m a stressed out mess.*

—Brenda from Connecticut

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We believe that everyone deserves the right to form and join a union; the right to a living wage, safe working conditions and a secure retirement; and the opportunity to thrive, not just survive. One job should be enough. In the public sector, union workers covered by a collective bargaining agreement still earn 15.7 percent more than their nonunion counterparts, 95 percent of union workers have access to health insurance, and union workers are 41 percent more likely to have employer-sponsored retirement. Protect Borrowers and the AFT have helped over 1 million public employees have \$79.4 million of student debt forgiven.

We have proven that when we fight, we win. The AFT’s new Fight for Affordability campaign is designed to help union members find pathways to a better life by taking on predatory corporations and demanding accountability for rising costs. We’re organizing for real solutions that protect workers, reduce financial stress and make affordability a reality.