

Child Nutrition Programs, Fall 2023: Challenges and Support Systems

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OVERVIEW

Challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic continue to impact Child Nutrition Programs (CNPs). Supply chain issues, increased food costs, labor shortages, product shortages, indirect costs, and mental health stressors are some of the challenges identified previously through ICN's mission of supporting CNPs. The Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division (ICN ARD) contacted CNP professionals via an online rapid-response survey between September and November 2023. The purpose of the survey was to identify and further understand the following: (1) The feelings, attitudes, and levels of felt support of CNP professionals regarding their CNP at present and in the future; (2) the extent to which the issues above were still impacting CNPs as they began school year 2023 (SY23); and (3) the usefulness of support systems in place for CNPs to aid in navigating any of these challenges.

METHODS

Recruitment and Target Audience

Recruitment took place via ICN's website and social media accounts. A recruitment message containing a link to the online rapid response survey was displayed in these online locations from September to November 2023. During that timeframe, each person navigating to the ICN's website, logging on to an ICN social media site, or registering for an ICN webinar or virtual instructor lead training was presented with the opportunity to participate. The individual's participation in a United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services Child Nutrition Program and their willingness to participate

in an online rapid response survey were the only criteria necessary to be selected as a participant.

The target audience for this rapid response survey included a nationally representative sample of CNP professionals, including representatives responsible for administration and oversight of school meals programs and/or child and adult care food programs (CACFP), local school food authorities (SFAs), school nutrition (SN) management and staff, and/or CACFP providers (including staff working in sponsoring organizations for and independent child care centers, family day care homes, Head Start, outside-of-school hours programs, and at-risk after school programs).

Survey Design

The survey was designed to identify and further understand the following: (1) The feelings, attitudes, and levels of felt support of CNP professionals regarding their CNP at present and in the future; (2) the extent to which the issues above were still impacting CNPs as they began SY23; and (3) the usefulness of support systems in place for CNPs to aid in navigating any of these challenges.

Additionally, demographic questions were included to capture relevant information about the participants' work experience with CNPs. These questions were placed at the end of the survey instead of the beginning to elicit a more inviting and conversational survey experience, where participants felt comfortable answering honestly without concern about their identity being linked to their responses.



Survey Questions

The online survey contained 16 questions in total, categorized into three sections:

Part One: How do you feel? The first two questions of the survey were in this section: (Q1) A multiple choice question asking what the participant finds most rewarding about their job; and (Q2) A collection of eleven statements inquiring about the participants' feelings and attitudes toward their CNP at present and in the future, as well as their levels of felt support. The participants were asked to select from "True, False, and Unsure" to respond to these eleven statements.

Part Two: What do you think? This section was comprised of eight questions: (Q3–Q7) A series of questions asking participants to rank on a scale of 1–5, the usefulness of support systems in helping their CNP Navigate: Supply Chain Issues, Increased Food Costs, Labor shortages, Product Shortages, and Mental Health Stressors); (Q8) An open-ended question asking participants to identify any support systems that were not mentioned in the previous questions; (Q9) A Likert Scale Question asking participants to indicate how challenging six areas of foodservice operation were for their CNP as they began SY2023, using a scale of "not at all challenging, somewhat challenging, or very challenging"; and (Q10) A multiple choice question asking participants to identify three ways the ICN could further support their CNP in addressing supply chain issues, increased food costs, labor shortages, product shortages, indirect costs, and mental health stressors.

Part Three: A little about you! This section was comprised of five multiple choice questions and one open-ended question asking: (Q11) The current position held by the participant within their CNP; (Q12) The length of time the participant has worked in their current position; (Q13) Which program(s) the participant works for; (Q14) How many children/students the participants' CNP serves; (Q15) In which USDA region the participant works; and (Q16) If there is anything else the participant would like to share with the ICN.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey required ten to twenty minutes, and participation was voluntary. Each question required a response to progress to the next; however, the first page of the survey informed participants that they could cease answering questions at any time, regardless of the percentage of the survey that would be rendered incomplete. Researchers thought it was important not to force responses, understanding that it could have a negative impact on data analysis.

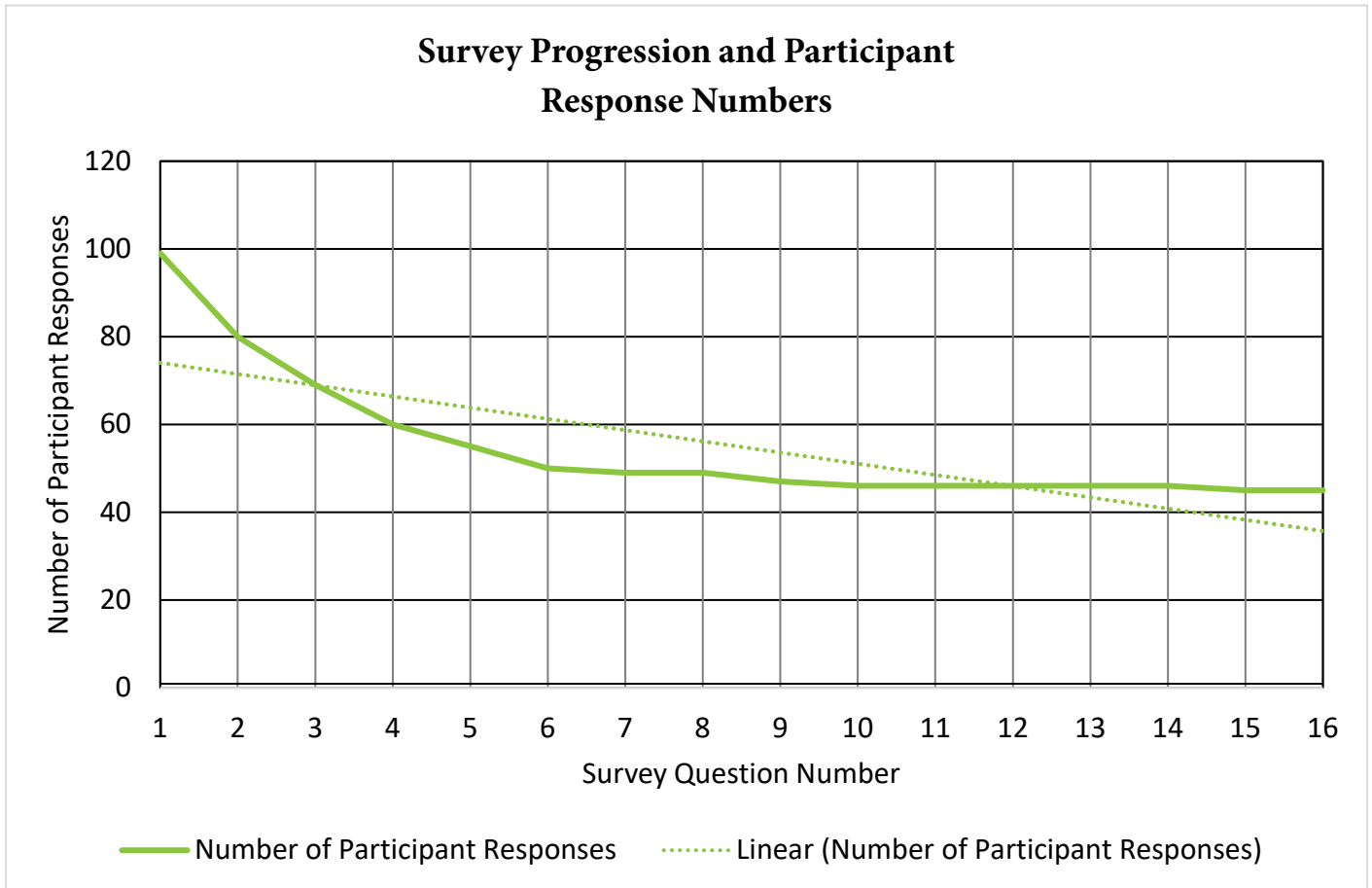
Following the data collection phase, the researchers began data analysis. The first step was manually compiling all participant response data from the online survey platform (Qualtrics) and inputting it in an Excel worksheet with the necessary column labels to organize all participant data. After the data was input into Excel, the researchers identified any unreliable responses (data displaying a repetitive pattern, appearing to lack intent, or indications the participant did not read the instructions) and labeled these data points "NA". Unreliable responses were looked at on a question-by-question basis, and if the participant only responded questionably for one data point, the following responses were included in the analysis; this is why a higher number of responses were recorded for question 4 than question 3, even though participants could not continue in the survey without completing the current question they were on.

RESULTS

Participant Response Rate

Data analysis revealed a downward trend in participant responses as survey questions progressed. More specifically, one hundred and twenty individuals (n=120) accessed the survey's starting page, ninety-nine individuals (n=99) completed the first survey question, and forty-five individuals (n=45) completed all sixteen survey questions. Chart 1 displays the progression of survey questions and the corresponding number of participant responses.

Chart 1

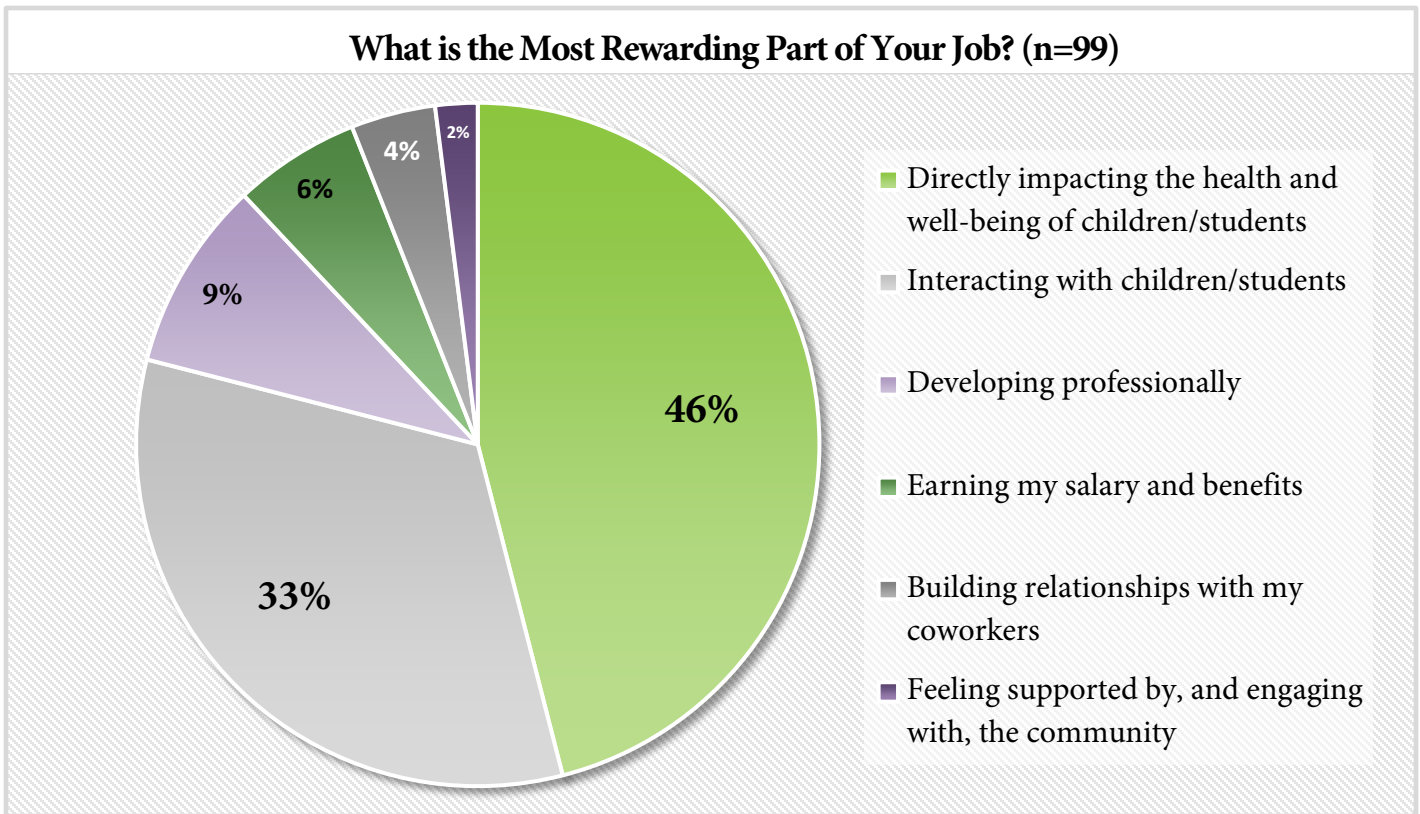


Part One: “How Do You Feel?”

Job Satisfaction

When asked about the most rewarding part of their job, the children and/or students were noted as a major factor for 78% of respondents' job satisfaction. Specifically, impacting the student's health and well-being (46%) and interacting with children/students (33%) were indicated as the most rewarding parts of most participants' jobs within their CNP. The results for this question are presented in Chart 2.

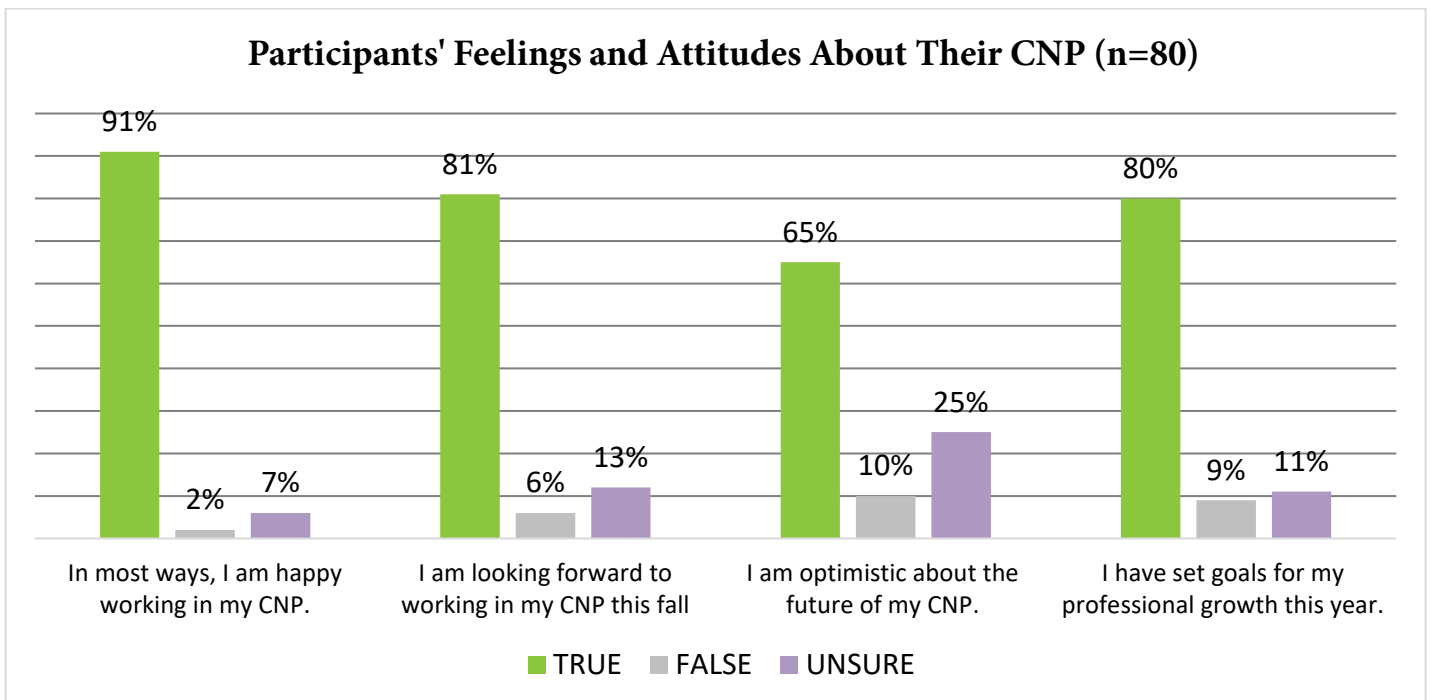
Chart 2



Feelings and Attitudes

A high level of respondent agreement for all four statements indicates that the majority of participants are happy working in their CNP (91%), are looking forward to working in their CNP this fall (81%), are optimistic about the future of their CNP (65%); and have set goals for their professional growth this year (80%).

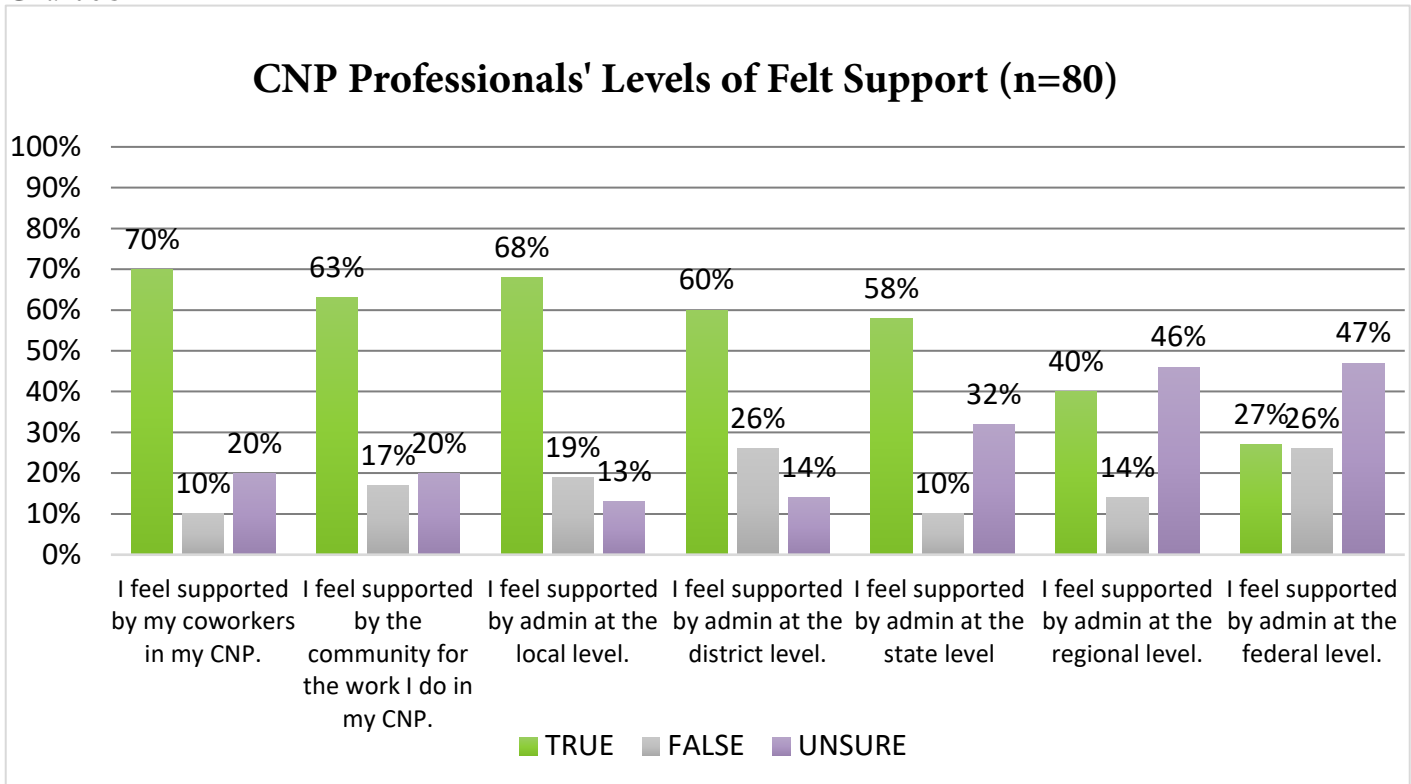
Chart 3a



Levels of Felt Support

Respondents indicated a similar level of support felt by both their coworkers in their CNP (69%), Administration at the local level (68%), their community (63%), and the level of support experienced by administration at the district level (59%) and administration at the State level (58%) were almost identical. The levels of felt support up to this point displayed high levels of positive support experienced by a majority of respondents; however, when asked if they felt supported by the administration at the regional and federal levels, the percentage of “false” and unsure” responses outweighed the “true.” Sixty percent (60%) of respondents were unsure or did not feel supported by the administration at the regional level, and seventy-three percent (73%) were unsure or did not feel supported by the administration at the federal level. The seven statements regarding support and the corresponding categorical responses (True, False, and Unsure) are displayed in percentages in Chart 3b.

Chart 3b



Part Two: “What Do You Think?”

Challenges for Child Nutrition Programs

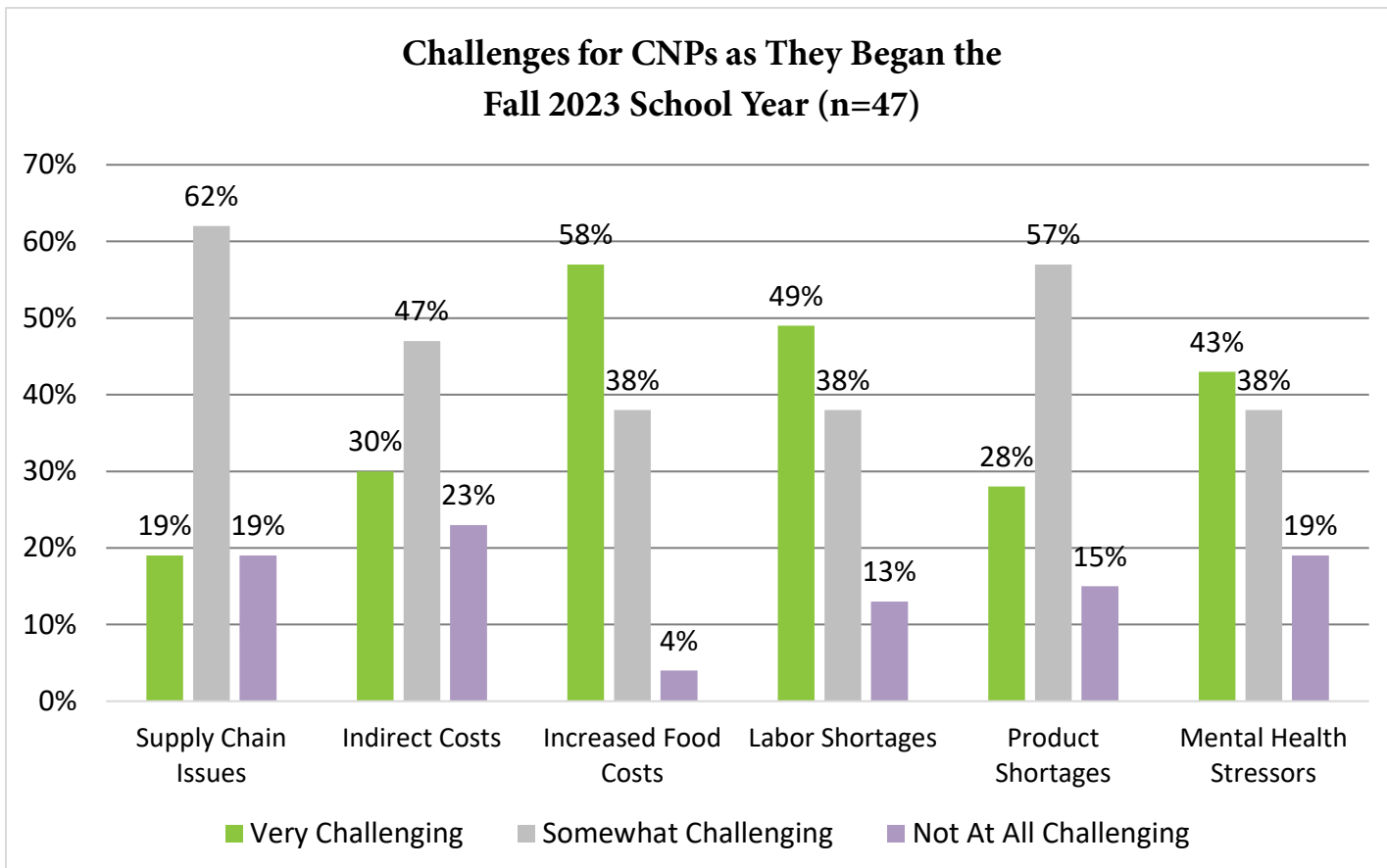
The COVID-19 pandemic impacted food service operations nationwide, generating significant challenges for CNPs. For many CNPs, those challenges outlasted the duration of the pandemic and remain issues today.

Participants were presented with issues identified as challenging for CNPs during COVID-19 and asked how challenging each was for their CNP as they began the Fall 2023 school year. The issues included supply chain, indirect costs, increased food costs, labor shortages, product shortages, and mental health stressors. Giving respondents the option to respond with either “very challenging, somewhat challenging, or not challenging” allowed researchers to assess which issue was the most challenging overall by combining “very challenging” and “somewhat challenging” into one response count representing “challenging.” Further, researchers identified the

difficulty levels within issues, allowing for prioritization based on a higher count of “very challenging” versus “somewhat challenging.”

Out of forty-seven (47) respondents, most identified all issues as challenging for CNPs going into the Fall 2023 school year. This finding was not overly surprising and confirms that these challenges have persisted past the end of the pandemic, with only slight variations in the difficulty level they each present to CNPs (Chart 4).

Chart 4



Increased food costs were ranked the most challenging for CNPs going into the fall 2023 school year, with ninety-six percent (96%) of respondents indicating it as somewhat or very challenging. Labor and product shortages were ranked second and third most challenging by eighty-seven (87%) and eighty-five percent (85%) of respondents. Supply chain issues and mental health stressors shared the ranking of fourth most challenging by eighty-one percent (81%) of respondents, and indirect costs were ranked the least challenging of the issues, even though seventy-seven percent (77%) indicated it to be challenging. These percentages again emphasize that all topics listed above are challenging for CNPs going into Fall 2023- some are just slightly more challenging than others.

Usefulness of Support Systems

Respondents indicated that communication was the most useful support system for addressing challenges within their CNPs. Communication with industry personnel and vendors, more specifically, was the most useful in navigating supply chain issues, increased food costs, and product shortages, while communication and collaboration with coworkers were the most useful in navigating labor shortages and mental health stressors. The rankings of support systems' usefulness in navigating each issue are outlined below.

Rank of Support Systems' Usefulness

(1=most useful; 5=least useful) in navigating the following issues:

Increased Food Costs

1. Communication and Collaboration with Industry Personnel and Vendors
2. Communication and Collaboration with Coworkers
3. Administrative Support
4. Trainings, Webinars, and/or Educational Resources
5. Internet Search Engines (i.e., Google, social media)

Labor Shortages

1. Communication and Collaboration with Coworkers
2. Administrative Support
3. Internet Search Engines (i.e., Google, social media)
4. Trainings, Webinars, and/or Educational Resources
5. Communication and Collaboration with Industry Personnel and Vendors

Product Shortages

1. Communication and Collaboration with Industry Personnel and Vendors
2. Communication and Collaboration with Coworkers
3. Administrative Support
4. Trainings, Webinars, and/or Educational Resources
5. Internet Search Engines (i.e., Google, social media)

Supply Chain Issues

1. Communication and Collaboration with Industry Personnel and Vendors
2. Communication and Collaboration with Coworkers
3. Trainings, Webinars, and/or Educational Resources
4. Administrative Support
5. Internet Search Engines (i.e., Google, social media)

Mental Health Stressors

1. Communication and Collaboration with Coworkers
2. Administrative Support
3. Trainings, Webinars, and/or Educational Resources
4. Communication and Collaboration with Industry Personnel and Vendors
5. Internet Search Engines (i.e., Google, social media)

Institute of Child Nutrition Support

Lastly, participants were asked to identify three ways the ICN could further support their CNP in addressing supply chain issues, increased food costs, labor shortages, product shortages, indirect costs, and mental health stressors. The response options included: Creating trainings on, and opportunities for partnerships and collaborations with, other CNPs and allied organizations; Creating short educational videos; Creating new trainings (virtual or face-to-face); Creating posters or infographics with tips and strategies; Hosting listening sessions for CNP professionals; and Other (Please specify). Chart 5 illustrates respondents' preferred means of receiving support from the ICN, including the frequency of responses chosen, and Table 1 provides additional input gathered from respondents who chose "other" and were asked to specify.

Chart 5

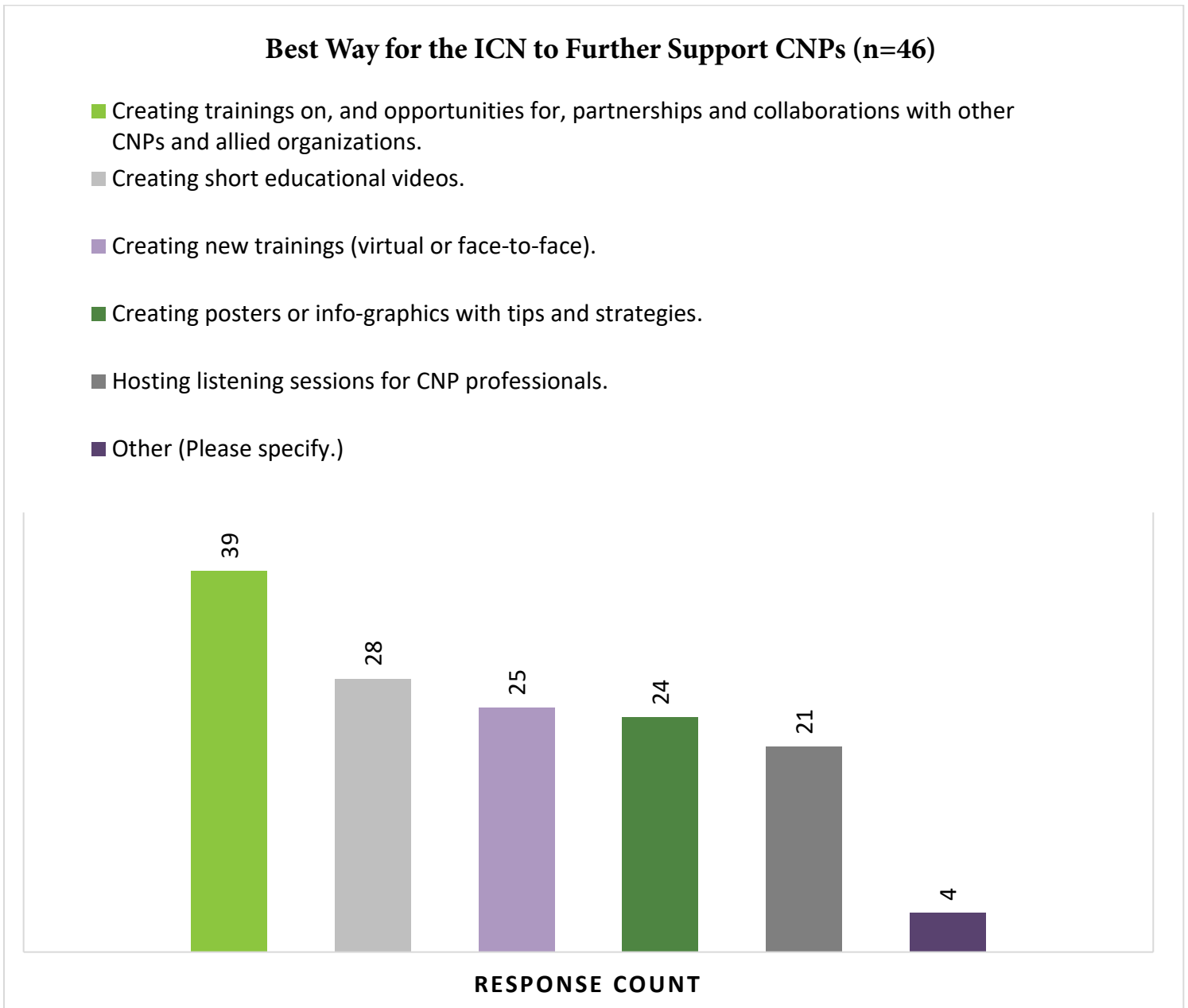


Table 1

Themes	Statement from Respondent
Standardized/ Consistent Responses	Standardized responses from the USDA, School Nutrition Association, etc., for all schools across the country.
Social Media	Greater social media presence and use
Grant Mapping Resources	Create bulletin or spreadsheets that will map grants and allocations with names, specific goals, formula calculations, or blank space to write in the district's amount received, allowable spending, reporting, and spending deadlines.

Part Three: “A Little About You!”

Demographics

Most respondents indicated having been in their current SN work position for one to ten years. Work positions held by survey respondents included SN directors, assistant directors, nutrition managers, supervisors, staff, Childcare staff, Head Start administrators and staff, and other roles within SN program operations. Most respondents indicated working in SN programs or in CACFPs that served <1000–5000 students and children, and all USDA FNS regions were represented.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to identify and further understand: (1) The extent to which any or all of the challenges highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic were still affecting CNPs as they began the fall 2023 school year; (2) The usefulness of support systems in place for CNPs to aid in navigating any of these challenges; and (3) The feelings, attitudes, and levels of felt support of CNP professionals regarding their CNP in the present and future.

Findings from this survey indicate that child nutrition (CN) professionals were challenged by supply chain issues, labor and product shortages, mental health stressors, higher indirect costs, and higher food costs as they began the Fall 2023 school year, and increased food costs and labor shortages were deemed the most challenging. When asked about the support systems in place for CNPs to help navigate the aforementioned challenges, communication and collaboration with both industry personnel and vendors, as well as coworkers within CNPs, were said to be the most useful.

Understanding the challenges CN professionals continue to face in their CNPs and how they may or may not be receiving support to help navigate them can have practical applications for the ICN. These challenges do not lend themselves to a quick fix; however, identifying communication and collaboration with industry, vendors, and coworkers as the most useful support system for CNPs dealing with these issues, can provide direction in assessing the information and services currently provided by the ICN in their goals to support CN professionals. Respondents specified that trainings and opportunities for partnerships and collaborations with other CNPs and allied organizations would be the most useful way the ICN could support them.

In addition to physical challenges and barriers, the researchers felt it was important to explore intrinsic motivation, feelings and attitudes of CN professionals to add to the understanding of their experience in CNPs. An overwhelming majority of respondents shared their reason for job satisfaction, agreeing that the most rewarding part of working in CNPs is the children and/or students. In regard to feeling supported for their work, most CN professionals said they felt support from their coworkers, the community, and the administration at the local, district, and state levels, but not at the regional or Federal level. Lastly, the survey responses revealed that CN professionals hold an overall positive regard for their experience with their current CNPs as well as their outlook on the program's future.

Limitations

The researchers left the survey active for two months with the hope that it would allow participants flexibility and time to participate, considering how busy schools and CNPs are during September and October. Still, September–November may have played a significant role in the low number of responses.

Two survey design details may have limited the potential data collected. Participants were not mandated to complete the survey, as it was voluntary. Although a response was required to progress through the survey, participants could “quit” the survey at any time by ceasing to answer more. Also, the demographic questions were placed after the survey to make the user more comfortable and feel less like they were in an interview. In doing so, there was much less data to report on the characteristics of the participants who completed the survey.



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