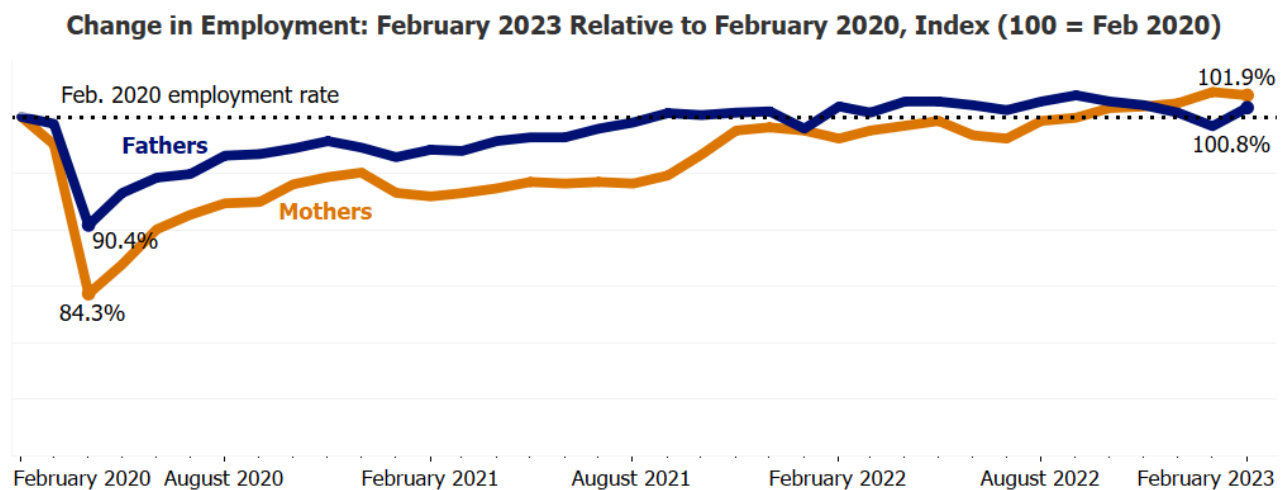


Mothers' Employment Three Years Later: An Assessment of Employment Loss and Recovery During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Following a significant decline in employment in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic and a lagging recovery in 2021 compared with fathers, maternal employment reached pre-pandemic levels in late 2022. This report follows mothers' and fathers' employment trajectories from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and measures employment recovery three years later, comparing employment levels between February 2020 and February 2023. In the analyses presented, the primary focus is on employment among parents ages 25 to 54 living with children under the age of 13, as they experienced the largest disruptions in employment and biggest increases in caregiving hours during the pandemic among parents.¹

Maternal employment fell steeply in the early months of the pandemic and did not recover until late 2022



Note: Employment rates for mothers and fathers ages 25 to 54 with children under 13 living in the household.
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey IPUMS (not seasonally adjusted)
Graphic: Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor

Maternal employment declined by 15.7% in April 2020, a larger decline than the 9.6% reduction fathers

¹ Landivar, Liana Christin, Leah Ruppanner, William J. Scarborough, and Caitlyn Collins. 2020. "Early Signs Indicate That COVID-19 is Exacerbating Gender Inequality in the Labor Force." *Socius*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023120947997>; Bauer, Lauren, Sara Estep, and Winnie Yee. 2021. "Time Waited for No Mom in 2020." The Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2021/07/22/time-waited-for-no-mom-in-2020/#:~:text=In%202020%2C%20mothers%20of%20younger,of%20the%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic.>

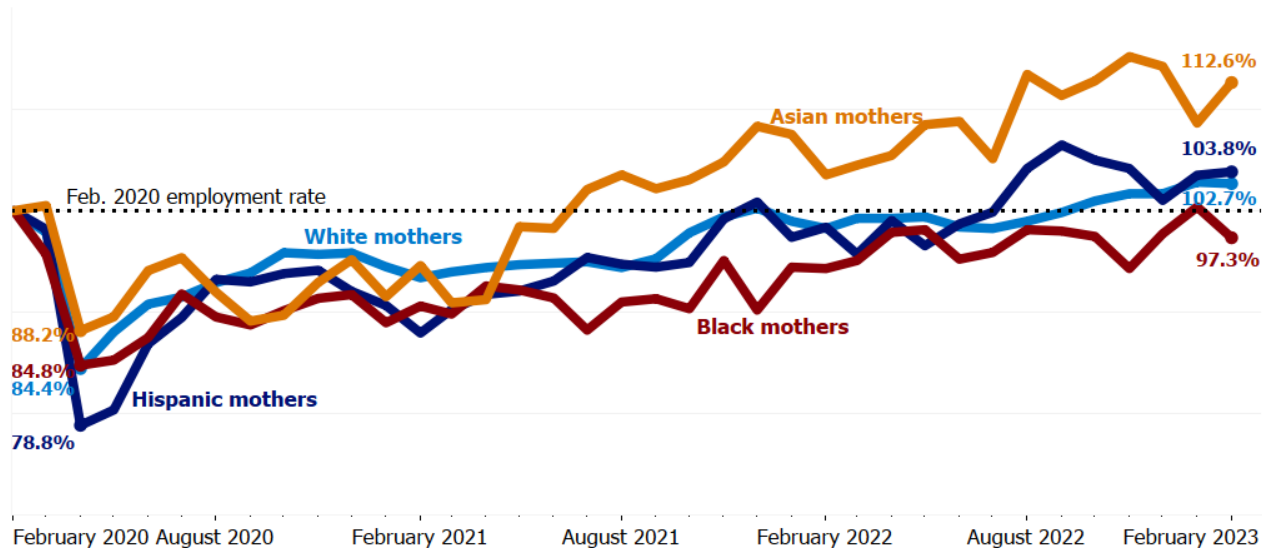
experienced at that time. Fathers reached pre-pandemic employment levels in September 2021, whereas mothers recovered to pre-pandemic levels more than a year later, in October 2022.

Throughout most of the pandemic, mothers' employment has recovered more slowly than fathers', but in February 2023, mothers' employment was 1.9% above pre-pandemic levels compared with 0.8% among fathers. As was the case before the pandemic, a smaller percentage of mothers (71.7%) is employed than fathers (92.1%).

Hispanic mothers experienced the largest decline in employment rates but Black mothers have experienced the slowest employment recovery

Hispanic mothers had the largest initial decline in employment rates, falling 21.2% by April 2020. Black mothers' employment rate fell 15.2% in the early months of the pandemic and remains 2.7% below February 2020 levels.

Change in Mothers' Employment Rates by Race: February 2023 Relative to February 2020, Index (100 = Feb 2020)



Note: Employment rates for mothers ages 25 to 54 with children under 13 living in the household.
 Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey IPUMS (not seasonally adjusted)
 Graphic: Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor

Longstanding discriminatory labor market policies and practices reflected in occupational segregation, unequal pay, and lower access to employment benefits and protections and telework are among some of the factors that contributed to larger employment losses and slower recovery for Black and Hispanic mothers.² Black and Hispanic mothers were also more likely to reside in areas that had disrupted

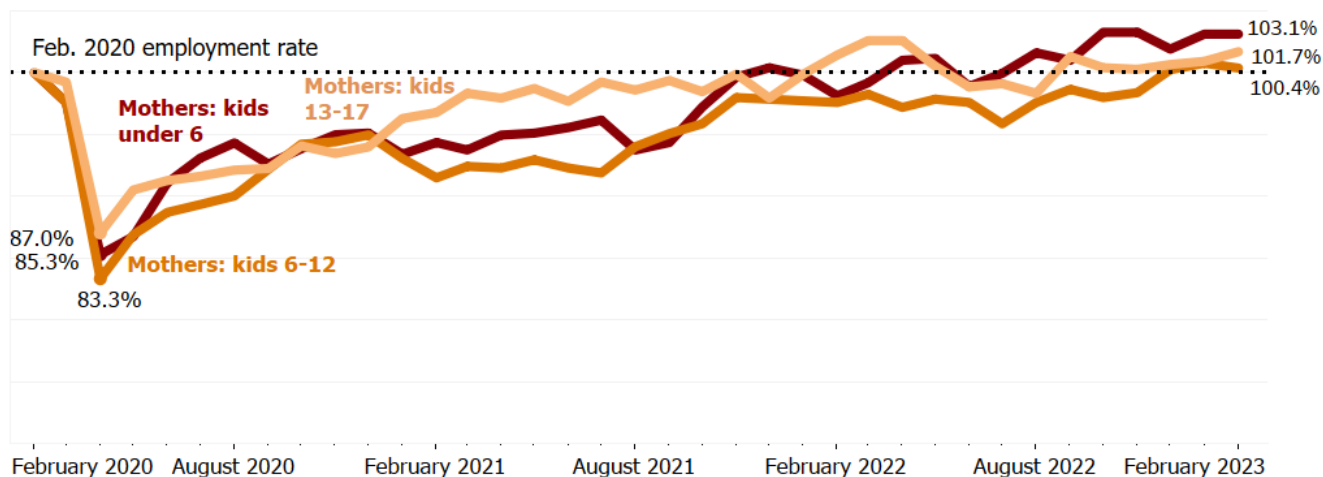
² U.S. Department of Labor. 2022. "Bearing the Cost: How Overrepresentation in Undervalued Roles Hurt Women During the Pandemic." <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WB/media/BearingTheCostReportFactSheet.pdf>; Women's Bureau. 2022. "Earnings and Earning Ratios by Sex, Race, and Occupation Group." <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/earnings/wage-gap-race-occupation>; Wolfe, Rebecca, Kristen Harknett, and Daniel Schneider. 2021. "Inequalities at Work and the Toll of COVID-19." Health Affairs Health Policy Brief. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hpb20210428.863621/full/>; Pirtle, Whitney N. Laster and Tashelle Wright. 2021. "Structural Gendered Racism Revealed in Pandemic Times: Intersectional Approaches to

childcare services and reduced availability of in-person school instruction during the first year of the pandemic when Black and Hispanic mothers' employment recovery was lower than White mothers' employment recovery.³ Black mothers continue to have the highest employment rate compared with mothers of other racial and ethnic groups but remain below their February 2020 employment level. In contrast, Asian, Hispanic, and White mothers have higher employment levels in February 2023 than in February 2020. In February 2023, 70.5% of Asian mothers, 73.7% of Black mothers, 62.7% of Hispanic mothers, and 71.9% of White mothers with children under 13 were employed.

Mothers of younger children experienced more disruptions to employment and a slower recovery

Mothers of young school age children (6-12) experienced the steepest declines in employment rates in April 2020 as schools throughout the country closed to in-person instruction. Declining by 16.7% in April 2020, mothers of young school-agers did not recover to pre-pandemic employment levels until December 2022. Mothers of the youngest children (under 6) first recovered to pre-pandemic levels a year earlier, in December 2021, and mothers of older children (13 to 17) first reached pre-pandemic employment levels in February 2022.

Change in Mothers' Employment Rate by Age of Youngest Child: February 2023 Relative to February 2020, Index (100 = Feb 2020)



Note: Employment rates for mothers ages 25 to 54 with children under 18 living in the household.
 Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey IPUMS (not seasonally adjusted)
 Graphic: Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor

Understanding Race and Gender Health Inequities in COVID-19." Gender & Society 35(2): 168-179.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/08912432211001302>.

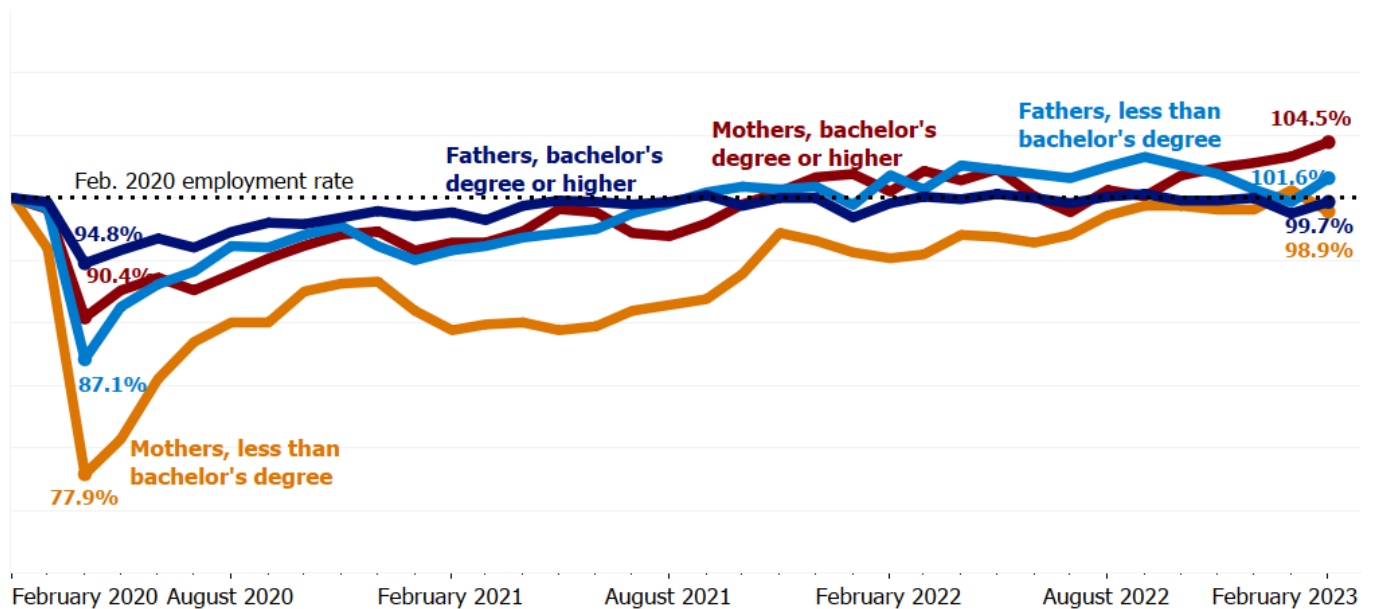
³ Lee, Emma K. and Zachary Parolin. 2021. "The Care Burden during COVID-19: A National Database of Child Care Closures in the United States." Socius. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/23780231211032028>;
 Landivar, Liana Christin, Leah Ruppner, Lloyd Rouse, William J. Scarborough, and Caitlyn Collins. 2022. "Research Note: School Reopenings During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Implications for Gender and Racial Equity." Demography 59(1): 1-12. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/demography/article/59/1/1/286878/Research-Note-School-Reopenings-During-the-COVID>.

Mothers with lower levels of educational attainment had greater employment losses and slower recovery

At the onset of the pandemic, employment losses were steep, especially so for lower-educated workers. In April 2020, mothers without a bachelor’s degree had an employment rate that was 22.1% below their February 2020 rate. Among mothers with a bachelor’s degree or higher level of education, the employment rate declined by 9.6%. Fathers without a bachelor’s degree also had substantial employment rate declines in the first few months of the pandemic, falling by 12.9% in April 2020 relative to February 2020. Fathers with a bachelor’s degree experienced the smallest losses with employment rates declining by 5.2%.

College-educated parents and fathers without a bachelor’s degree recovered employment more quickly than mothers with lower educational attainment. The gap in recovery between mothers with lower educational attainment and everyone else was particularly large throughout 2020 and 2021 and the first half of 2022. Although educational attainment was an important determinant of employment in the early months of the pandemic, even in the first few months of the pandemic, mothers without a bachelor’s degree had reductions in employment rates that were substantially larger than the reductions fathers without a bachelor’s degree experienced. Then, as the pandemic progressed, it was specifically mothers and not fathers with lower educational attainment that were left behind in the recovery. Fathers with lower educational attainment exceeded pre-pandemic employment levels by September 2021 while mothers with lower educational attainment remained below pre-pandemic levels in February 2023.

Change in Employment Rates by Educational Attainment: February 2023 Relative to February 2020, Index (100 = Feb 2020)



Note: Employment rates for mothers and fathers ages 25 to 54 with children under 13 living in the household.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey IPUMS (not seasonally adjusted)

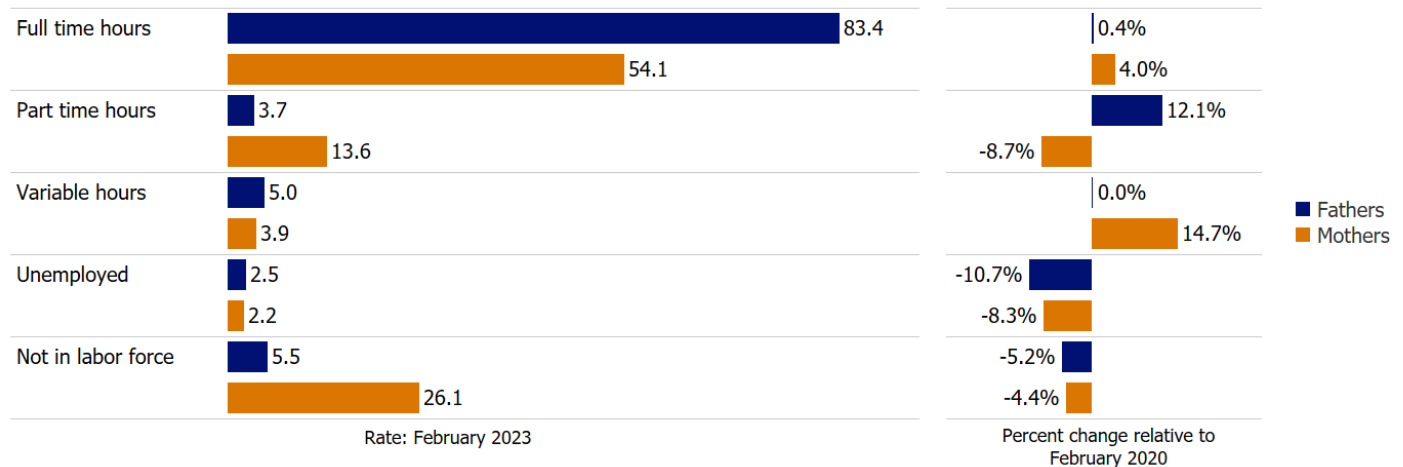
Graphic: Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor

The expansion of telework may have been an asset to mothers with a bachelor’s degree, enabling many to remain employed during the pandemic and supporting their stronger employment recovery, now at 4.5% above pre-pandemic levels.⁴ Although fathers with a bachelor’s degree have slightly lower than pre-pandemic employment levels (-0.3%), they do maintain high employment levels (95.3%) compared with fathers with less than a bachelor’s degree (89.7%). These employment levels are also substantially higher than mothers’ at the same level of education: 63.5% (less than a bachelor’s degree) and 81.9% (bachelor’s degree or higher). The ability to telework was crucial early in the pandemic to maintain employment.⁵ Workers with lower levels of educational attainment were less likely to have access. In May 2020, when the Bureau of Labor Statistics first started tracking pandemic-related telework, 63.1% of mothers and 63.1% of fathers with a bachelor’s degree reported teleworking due to the pandemic compared with 25.0% of mothers and 13.1% of fathers without a bachelor’s degree.⁶

Employment among part-time workers continues to trail gains among full-time workers

Since the start of the pandemic, employment losses have disproportionately impacted women in service occupations and part-time workers. These jobs are more likely to be poorly compensated, lack paid leave and have limited telework options which support employment continuity.⁷ Employment in

Parents' Employment Status and Work Hours in February 2023 and Change Relative to February 2020



Note: Respondents ages 25 to 54. Parents with children under age 13 living in the household.
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey IPUMS
Graphic: Women’s Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. 2022. “The Number of People Primarily Working From Home Tripled Between 2019 and 2021.” Issued September. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/people-working-from-home.html>.

⁵ Dey, Matthew, Harley Frazis, David S. Piccone, Jr., and Mark A. Loewenstein. 2021. “Teleworking and Lost Work During the Pandemic: New Evidence from the CPS.” Monthly Labor Review. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2021/article/teleworking-and-lost-work-during-the-pandemic-new-evidence-from-the-cps.htm>.

⁶ Author’s calculations using the May 2020 Current Population Survey.

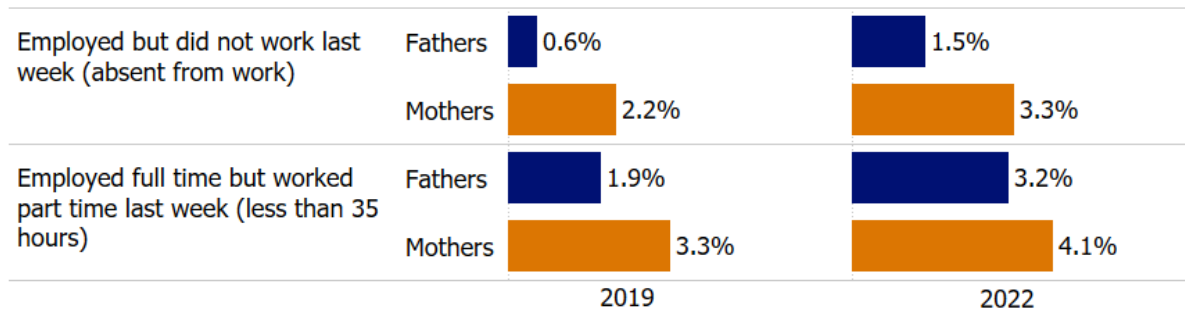
⁷ Landivar, Liana Christin, Rose A. Woods, and Gretchen M. Livingston. 2022. “Does Part-Time Work Offer Flexibility to Employed Mothers?” Monthly Labor Review. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2022/article/pdf/does-part-time-work-offer-flexibility-to-employed-mothers.pdf>; Women’s Bureau. 2022. “Access to Leave and Job Flexibilities.” <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/leave-job-flexibilities>

service occupations, which includes food preparation and serving, childcare workers, and building and grounds cleaning, lags behind other major occupational groups in its employment recovery. Many service occupations also disproportionately employ part-time workers. Compared with February 2020, mothers' employment rate in part time work is down by 8.7%. Although fathers' employment in part-time jobs did increase, it makes up a relatively small share of their employment: 3.3% in February 2020 and 3.7% in February 2023. Mothers have made some gains in full-time work, up 4.0% relative to February 2020, and many have picked up more variable work hours, up 14.7%.

Continued care disruptions have resulted in more missed work and work-hour reductions among the employed

Care infrastructure is a critical employment support. When parents do not have reliable and accessible child care, mothers in particular are more likely to leave the labor force.⁸ Even among those employed, breakdowns in child care result in increased absences and reduced work hours. Among employed prime age workers who have children under the age of 13, 3.3% of mothers and 1.5% of fathers in 2022 (annual average) cited childcare problems as the reason they did not work in the past week compared with 2.2% of mothers and 0.6% of fathers in 2019 (annual average). Among those who usually work full time but worked part time (less than 35 hours) the week prior to the survey, 4.1% of mothers and 3.2% of fathers in 2022 and 3.3% of mothers and 1.9% of fathers in 2019 cited childcare problems as the reason for these hours. This shows that childcare-related employment disruptions have increased since the start of the pandemic and it also shows that mothers are more likely to suffer employment disruptions compared with fathers.

Among Employed Parents Who Did Not Work Or Worked Part-Time Last Week, Percent Selecting Childcare Problems as the Reason: 2019 and 2022 Annual Averages



Note: Employed respondents ages 25 to 54. Parents with children under age 13 living in the household.
 Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey IPUMS
 Graphic: Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor

Even as childcare disruptions were more widespread early in the pandemic, parents continue to lack access to affordable child care throughout the country and with availability that has become even more

⁸ Landivar, Liana Christin, Nikki L. Graf, and Giorleny Altamirano Rayo. 2023. "Childcare Prices in Local Areas: Initial Findings from the National Database of Childcare Prices." Women's Bureau Issue Brief. U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, DC. Issued January. https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WB/NDCP/508_WB_IssueBrief-NDCP-20230213.pdf

constrained as many childcare providers closed permanently or lost workers during the pandemic.⁹ Expanded access to paid family and medical leave, fair scheduling, improved compensation, and greater investment in care infrastructure can help achieve a more equitable recovery. It would also improve stability in employment hours among those employed and reduce gender disparities in labor supply.

⁹Women’s Bureau. 2023. “Childcare Prices as a Share of Median Family Income by Age of Children and Care Setting.” <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/topics/childcare/median-family-income-by-age-care-setting>; Child Care Aware of America. 2022. “Demanding Change: Repairing our Child Care System.” <https://www.childcareaware.org/demanding-change-repairing-our-child-care-system/>; Crouse, Gilbert, Robin Ghertner, and Nina Chien. 2023. “Child Care Industry Trends During the Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Issued January. https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/71981d3ec3a1d02537d86d827806834b/Child-Care-Trends-COVID.pdf?itid=lk_inline_enhanced-template