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

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May 2022

Since the COVID-19 pandemic became widespread in early 2020, maternal employment has experienced significant disruptions. Here, we show how steeply maternal employment declined in 2020, how much improvement there has been in maternal employment two years later, and where disparities remain in employment recovery. In the analyses presented, we primarily focus on employment among parents with children under the age of 13, as they experienced the largest increase in caregiving hours during the pandemic.¹

Maternal employment fell steeply and has not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels

Maternal employment declined by 15.7% in April 2020, a larger decline than the 9.6% reduction fathers experienced at that time. Throughout the pandemic, mothers’ employment has recovered more slowly and remains 2.0% below their February 2020 employment rate, representing about 333,500 working mothers. Fathers’ employment has fully recovered to pre-pandemic employment levels.

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% in April 2020 relative to February 2020. Black mothers’ employment fell 15.2% and remains 5.7% below February 2020 levels. Longstanding discriminatory labor market policies and practices reflected in occupational segregation, unequal pay, and lower access to employment benefits and protections and remote work are among
some of the factors that have hindered Black and Hispanic mothers’ employment recovery. Black and Hispanic mothers were also more likely to reside in areas with disrupted childcare services and reduced availability of in-person school instruction.

Mothers of younger children experienced more disruptions to employment

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. Among mothers, they also have the lowest employment rate recovery, still 2.4% behind their pre-pandemic level.
Mothers of the youngest children (under 6) also experienced significant reductions in employment rates early in the pandemic as childcare options were disrupted and remain 1.9% below pre-pandemic employment levels. Mothers of older children (13-17) and fathers of children across all three age groups of children have recovered their pre-pandemic employment levels.

**Mothers with lower levels of educational attainment remain below their pre-pandemic employment rates**

Although mothers with a bachelor’s degree or higher level of education are now above pre-pandemic employment, employment rates among mothers with lower levels of educational attainment remain 3.2 to 6.2% below their pre-pandemic levels. The ability to telework was crucial early in the pandemic to maintain employment and 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 with a bachelor’s degree reported teleworking due to the pandemic compared with 17.9% of mothers with a high school diploma.

![Percent Change in Employment Rates by Selected Characteristics: February 2022 relative to February 2020](chart)

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. Employment in 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 17.1%. Many of those transitioning out of part-time employment likely exited the labor force, became unemployed, or experienced greater work hour variability if they remained employed. Compared with fathers, mothers were more likely to exit the
labor force, enter unemployment or variable work hour employment, and less likely to gain full time hours.

Care infrastructure is also a critical employment support. As schools have reopened to in-person instruction, we may see improvement in employment for mothers of younger kids. However, employment in child day care services, including after school care which is a critical support for parents with young school-aged children, remains 11% below pre-pandemic levels. The Census Bureau shows that households continue to report work disruptions due to a lack of childcare. As recently as February 2022, 5.9 million women in households with children under 5 and 4.9 million women in households with children ages 5 to 11 reported at least one type of work disruption, such as working reduced hours, taking leave, or losing a job, for a member of the household due to a lack of childcare. Even as childcare disruptions were more widespread early in the pandemic, parents continue to lack access to affordable childcare with recent increases in childcare prices exceeding inflation and with availability that has become even more constrained as many childcare providers closed permanently during the pandemic.6

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.

Endnotes


https://read.dukeupress.edu/demography/article/59/1/1/286878/Research-Note-School-Reopenings-During-the-COVID.


6 “Demanding Change: Repairing our Child Care System.” Child Care Aware of America (2022).