

Two Years into the Pandemic, Women Ages 65 and Older Had Yet to Recover Their COVID-Related Employment Losses

By Catherine Hill and Gretchen Livingston

Employment for many demographic groups, including women ages 55 to 64, was fast approaching pre-pandemic levels two years after the onset of the pandemic.¹ White, Black, and Latina women ages 65 and older, however, were still far from recovering their pandemic losses. These recent patterns stood in sharp contrast to what had been a decades-long rise in labor force participation and employment among women ages 55 and older.² The slow recovery among older women is likely due in part to the outsized caregiving responsibilities ascribed to women; persistent health concerns faced by older women in the wake of the pandemic; and occupational segregation. Whether these older women—already at heightened risk of living in poverty prior to the pandemic³—will regain their lost jobs and ultimately resume pre-pandemic employment trends remains an open question, with long-term implications for their economic security in general, and their retirement security in particular.

Employment here refers to the **employment-population ratio** which represents the number of people who are working for pay, divided by the total number of civilian, working-age people.

The **unemployment rate** represents the number of people who are not employed, but are actively seeking employment, divided by the total labor force, which is the sum of the employed and unemployed.

The **labor force participation rate** represents the total number of people who are either employed or unemployed, divided by the total number of civilian, working-age people.

Occupational segregation occurs when one demographic group is over- or under-represented in certain occupations. For instance, the overrepresentation of women in teaching, and the underrepresentation of women in the construction trades, are examples of occupational gender segregation.

OLDER WOMEN IN THE LABOR FORCE

In the decades prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, women ages 55 and older were a growing share of the U.S. labor force. In 2000, they accounted for 12.6 percent of the female labor force, and by 2020 that share had nearly doubled to 23.4 percent.⁴ This dramatic increase was driven largely by two factors: The sheer size of the “Baby Boom” generation (born from 1946 to 1964) meant that there were relatively large numbers of women ages 55 and older in the population,⁵ and the share of these women who were in the labor force was much higher than had been the case in the past.⁶

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor. 2022. *The Employment Situation*. Issued July 8.

<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empisit.pdf>

² Jennifer Schramm. 2022. *After Recent Gains, Older Women's Labor Force Participation Still Stuck Below Pre-Pandemic Levels*, American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). Issued April 8. <https://blog.aarp.org/thinking-policy/older-womens-labor-force-participation-still-below-pre-pandemic-levels>

³ Monique Morrissey. 2016. *Women Over 65 Are More Likely to Be Poor Than Men, Regardless of Race, Educational Background, and Marital Status*, Economic Policy Institute. Issued March 8. <https://www.epi.org/publication/women-over-65-are-more-likely-to-in-poverty-than-men>

⁴ Mitra Toossi & Morisi, Teresa L. 2017. *Women in the Workforce Before, During, and After the Great Recession, Spotlight on Statistics*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor. Issued July. <https://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2017/women-in-the-workforce-before-during-and-after-the-great-recession/home.htm>;

Women's Bureau, Department of Labor. *Women of Working Age*. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/latest-annual-data/working-women#Percent-Distribution-of-the-Labor-Force-by-Age-and-Sex> (visited August 12, 2022)

⁵ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor. 2021. *A Labor Day Look at How American Workers Have Changed over 40 Years*. Issued September 1.

<https://blogs.bls.gov/blog/tag/baby-boomers>

⁶ Mitra Toossi & Morisi, Teresa L. 2017. *supra* note 4

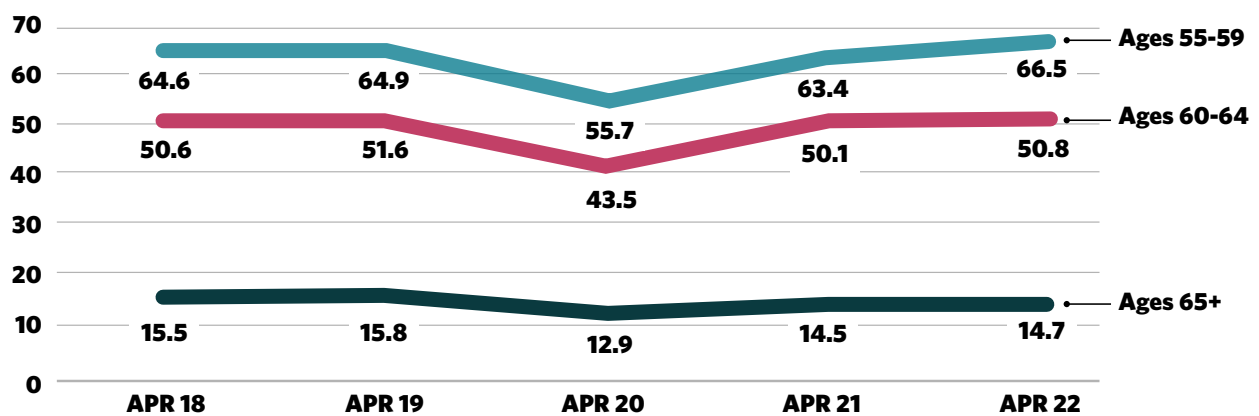


The pandemic, however, brought a quick end to long-standing increases in labor force participation and employment among female workers 55 years and older, especially those 65 years and older ([see Figure 1](#)).

FIGURE 1

ACROSS ALL AGES, OLDER WOMEN EXPERIENCED DRAMATIC JOB LOSSES DURING THE PANDEMIC

SHARE EMPLOYED, BY AGE (%)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey

Notes: Data are not seasonally adjusted. Covid-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020.

Employment among women ages 55 and older dropped precipitously between April 2019 and April 2020, with the largest losses concentrated at the onset of the pandemic. Among women ages 55 to 59, the share employed declined from 64.9 percent to 55.7 percent: This translates into an overall 14 percent decline in the employment rate of this age group. Meanwhile, the share of employed women ages 60 to 64 dropped from 51.6 percent to 43.5 percent (a 16 percent decline in that group's employment rate); and the employment rate for those ages 65 and older declined by 18 percent.

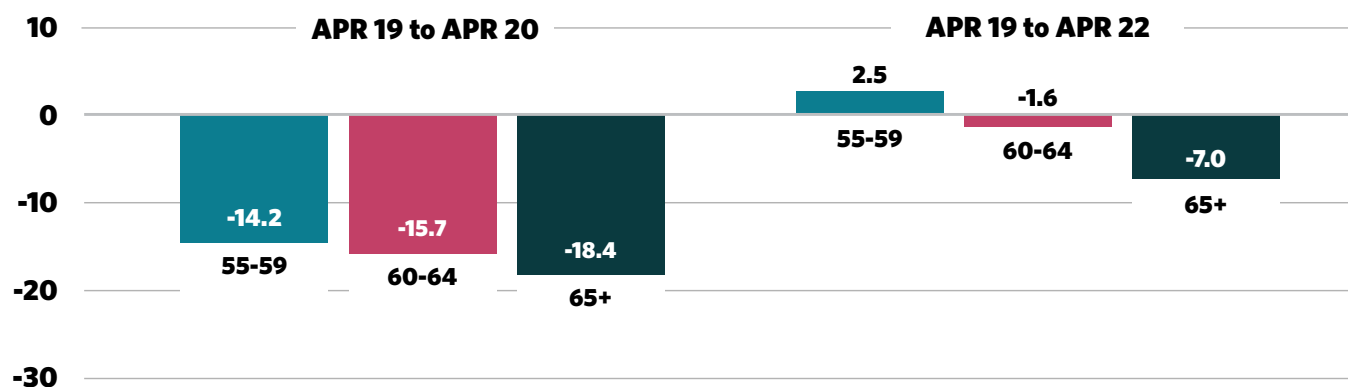
Flashing forward to April 2022, among women ages 55 and older, only those ages 55 to 59 surpassed their pre-pandemic employment rate: 66.5 percent of these women were employed, compared with 64.9 percent in April 2019.⁷ Meanwhile, women ages 60 to 64 had almost recovered in terms of employment, though their April employment rate of 50.8 percent remained slightly below the April 2019 rate of 51.6 percent. Recovery for women ages 65 and older was far less complete over this period: While the drop in the share employed from 15.8 percent to 14.7 percent may seem small, it represents a seven percent decline in the overall employment level ([see Figure 2](#)).

⁷ The same is true for women ages 25 to 54, who reached pre-pandemic levels of employment, though men in this age range had yet to do so as of April 2022.

FIGURE 2

ALL OLDER WOMEN EXPERIENCED INITIAL PANDEMIC JOB LOSSES; LOSSES PERSIST FOR WOMEN 65 AND OLDER

CHANGE IN SHARE EMPLOYED, BY AGE (%)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey

Notes: Data are not seasonally adjusted. Covid-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020.

VARIATIONS BY RACE AND ETHNICITY IN PANDEMIC-RELATED JOB LOSSES⁸

The pandemic caused devastating job loss for all women 55 and older, and for Black and Latina women these dramatic employment losses further exacerbated long-standing racial disparities in the labor market (see Figure 3). The pattern of employment loss among older White women in April 2020 largely mirrored that of older women as a whole: Losses ranged from 13.6 percent to 18.5 percent, with larger losses for those ages 65 and older. Among older Black women, those ages 65 and older experienced a 20 percent job loss between April 2019 and April 2020, while at the same time, those ages 55 to 64 experienced losses that were still notable, but smaller than those experienced by their Latina and white counterparts. Older Latina women suffered particularly challenging employment outcomes during the pandemic: Those ages 55 to 64 experienced declines of about 19 percent, and nearly 28 percent of the small share of working Latinas ages 65 and older lost jobs.

Two years after the onset of the pandemic, job recovery among white, Black and Latina women ages 55 and older still varied across race and ethnicity, and within it, by age. Across all three groups, women ages 65 and older suffered the biggest employment losses (see Figure 4).⁹ Among white and Latina women, the shares ages 55 to 59 who were employed reached pre-pandemic levels, while the shares ages 60 to 64 who were employed continue to lag slightly. Meanwhile, the employment rate for Black women ages 55 to 59 surpassed pre-pandemic levels, while it continued to lag for those ages 60 to 64, compared with April 2019 rates.

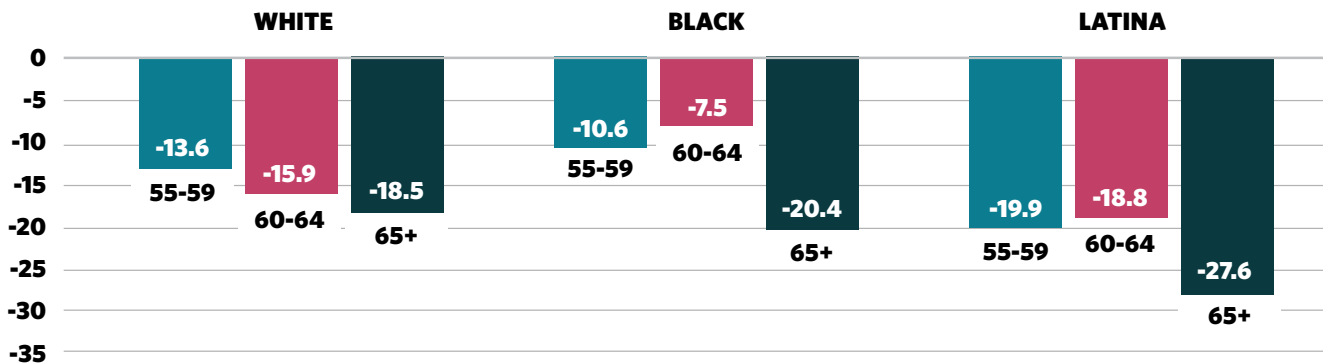
⁸ These data reflect trends in employment from April 2019 to April 2022. It's worth noting, though, that recently-released BLS data show employment for most older Black and Latina women in August 2022 was higher than it had been prior to the pandemic, in August 2019. People who identify as Hispanic or Latina may be of any race. Other race and ethnic categories are not analyzed due to data limitations.

⁹ This pattern mirrors the broader labor force experience of women ages 25 to 54, whereby Latinas continue to suffer the most significant job losses, followed by Black and white women.

FIGURE 3

AMONG OLDER WOMEN, INITIAL IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC HARDEST ON LATINAS 65 AND OLDER

CHANGE IN SHARE EMPLOYED FROM APRIL 2019 TO APRIL 2020, BY AGE, RACE AND ETHNICITY (%)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey

Notes: Data are not seasonally adjusted. Covid-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020. Latinas may be of any race.

WHERE DID THE OLDER WOMEN WORKERS GO, AND WHY?

Initially, the pandemic led to widespread job losses via unemployment. This was particularly true among people 65 and older, whose unemployment rates quadrupled in March and April 2020.¹⁰

At the same time, labor force participation, too, declined, with the biggest drops for persons ages 65 and older. By February 2021, labor force participation for this group had declined by 11.1 percent compared with pre-pandemic levels. By contrast, the participation for those ages 55 to 64 only declined by 1.2 percent.¹¹

One driving factor was the surge in retirement during the pandemic, concentrated among the population 65 and older. Estimates suggest that the pandemic led to over 2.4 million “excess retirements”,¹² and that women were more likely than men to retire early.¹³ Not only was there an uptick in retirement for older women, but the movement out of retirement and back into the labor force has become less common since the onset of the pandemic.¹⁴

The pandemic likely caused some individuals who were already planning to retire to do so sooner, and it may have dissuaded some retirees who had planned to re-enter the labor market from doing so. On the one hand, high stock prices and soaring housing values may have encouraged retirement for the small share of individuals who could afford it. At the same time, for some older people, retirement may not have been entirely voluntary, but instead spurred by either concerns about personal health in the workplace; caregiving needs brought on by the pandemic; or unemployment.¹⁵

¹⁰ Juliette Cubanski et al. 2020. *Older Adults Are Hit Hard by COVID-19 – and Also Losing Jobs*, Kaiser Family Foundation. Issued May 13.

<https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/older-adults-are-hit-hard-by-covid-19-and-also-losing-jobs/>

¹¹ Richard W. Johnson. 2021. *Will Older Adults Return to the Workforce?* Urban Institute. Issued March 12.

<https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/will-older-adults-return-workforce>

¹² Miguel Faria e Castro. 2021. *The COVID Retirement Boom*, *Economic Synopses*, No. 25. Federal Reserve of St. Louis. Issued October 15.

<https://research.stlouisfed.org/publications/economic-synopses/2021/10/15/the-covid-retirement-boom>

¹³ William M. Rodgers III & Ricketts, Lowell. 2022. *The Great Retirement: Who Are the Retirees?* Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Issued January 4.

<https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2022/january/great-retirement-who-are-retirees>

¹⁴ Jun Nie and Yang, Shu-Kuei X. 2021. *What Has Driven the Recent Increase in Retirements?* Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. Issued August 11.

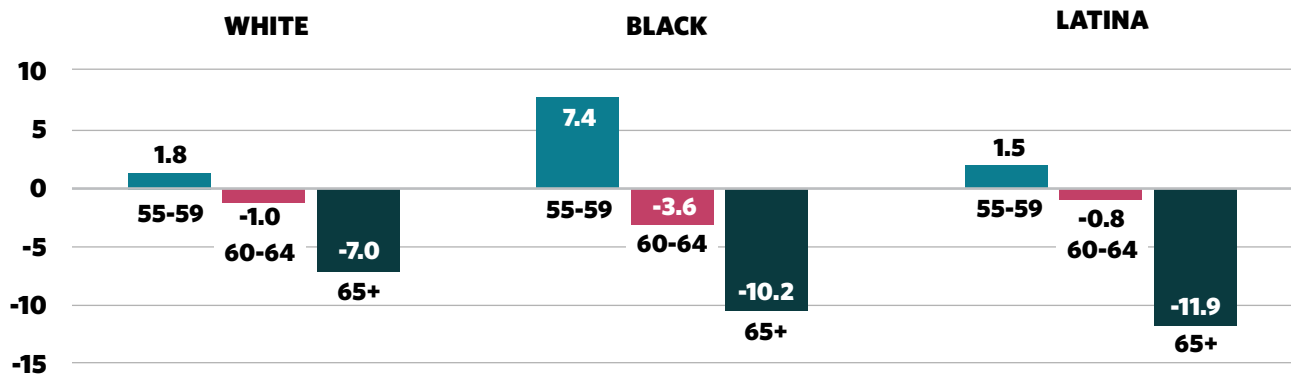
<https://www.kansascityfed.org/research/economic-bulletin/what-has-driven-the-recent-increase-in-retirements/>

¹⁵ Richard W. Johnson. 2021. *supra* note 11

FIGURE 4

TWO YEARS INTO THE PANDEMIC, JOBS RECOVERY FOR WOMEN AGES 65 AND OLDER SLOW ACROSS ALL RACE AND ETHNIC GROUPS

CHANGE IN SHARE EMPLOYED FROM APRIL 2019 TO APRIL 2022, BY AGE, RACE AND ETHNICITY (%)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey

Notes: Data are not seasonally adjusted. Covid-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020. Latinas may be of any race. While these data reflect trends in employment from April 2019 to April 2022, it's worth noting that recently-released BLS data show employment for most older Black and Latina women in August 2022 was higher than it had been prior to the pandemic, in August 2019.

The impact of COVID-19 compounded the unique challenges already faced by women workers and may further limit their labor force participation by constraining their efforts to remain in or re-enter the workforce. Namely, occupational segregation, coupled with an unprecedented surge in family caregiving, created a “perfect storm” that concentrated the pandemic’s initial impact on women of all ages, according to recent research from the Department of Labor.¹⁶ This dampened their recovery from these employment losses.¹⁷ Furthermore, because women were concentrated in sectors that were disproportionately hit by the pandemic, such as education and health care, they were more likely to lose their jobs when the pandemic struck. At the same time, women are more likely to be caregivers for family members of all ages than their male peers,¹⁸ and many were forced to take on more caregiving responsibilities in the wake of day care,¹⁹ adult care,²⁰ and nursing home closures.²¹

Moreover, the health risks now associated with being in the workforce may loom larger for older women, who are more likely to become seriously ill from COVID-19 compared to others. This may be exacerbated by older women’s concentration in caregiving occupations involving proximity and physical contact.²²

¹⁶ Department of Labor. 2022. *Bearing the Cost: How Overrepresentation in Undervalued Jobs Disadvantaged Women During the Pandemic*. Issued March 15. <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WB/media/BearingTheCostReport.pdf>

¹⁷ Betsey Stevenson. 2021. *Women, Work, and Families: Recovering from the Pandemic-Induced Recession*. Brookings Institute. Issued September 29. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/women-work-and-families-recovering-from-the-pandemic-induced-recession>

¹⁸ American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). 2020. *Caregiving in the United States*. Issued May. <https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/2020/05/full-report-caregiving-in-the-united-states.doi.10.26419-2Fppi.00103.001.pdf>

¹⁹ Misty L. Heggeness and Jason M. Fields. 2020. *Working Moms Bear Brunt of Home Schooling While Working During COVID-19*. U.S. Census Bureau. Issued August 18. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/08/parents-juggle-work-and-child-care-during-pandemic.html>

²⁰ *Caregiving in the U.S.* 2020. *supra* note 18; *Bearing the Cost*. 2022. *supra* note 16

²¹ Emily Paulin. 2022. *Inside the ‘Staffing Apocalypse’ Devastating U.S. Nursing Homes*. American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). Issued June 9. <https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/health/info-2022/labor-shortage-nursing-homes.html>

²² Richard W. Johnson & Claire Xiaozhi Wang. 2017. *What Are the Top Jobs for Older Workers?* Urban Institute. Issued December. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/95011/what-are-the-top-jobs-for-older-workers_0.pdf

IMPLICATIONS FOR RETIREMENT SECURITY

Pandemic employment losses likely exacerbate the financial uncertainties long faced by women 65 and older. One-in-ten women ages 65 and older live below the poverty line, and this figure rises to one-in-eight for women ages 75 and older. For women of color, the poverty level is even greater. One-in-five Black women 65 and older are poor as are more than one-in-six Latinas.²³ Many older women who were already struggling prior to the pandemic must also try to recover the job and income losses incurred over the past two years, despite relatively few healthy working years ahead of them. At the same time, working fewer years, working at a lower rate of pay, or retiring early may further reduce financial security by lowering retirement income from sources such as Social Security.²⁴

HOW THE DEPARTMENT OF LABOR CAN HELP

Programs that help older Americans find work are one means of facilitating their financially secure retirement. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)²⁵ supports several such programs, including American Jobs Centers,²⁶ which number over 2,300 nationwide and are funded by the Department of Labor. These are free-of-charge sources of career exploration and related employment and job search services, ready to assist older workers, and indeed workers of any age, seeking to re-enter the workforce. Furthermore, through the WIOA Adult program, states and local areas prioritize and serve low-income individuals who are receiving public assistance or who lack basic skills by providing training, job search assistance, and supportive services. At the same time, the WIOA Dislocated Worker program helps workers return to work as quickly as possible and overcome barriers to employment after job loss, mass layoffs, or transitions in economic sectors, which can be particularly relevant for many older workers.

The Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP),²⁷ also administered by the Department of Labor and implemented locally through states and national nonprofits, has helped over one million people by providing work-based job training, support, and paid community service opportunities for low-income, unemployed seniors. Through the program, older workers gain critical soft skills and industry-specific skills, actively search for employment, and learn technology and internet skills, ultimately preparing them for unsubsidized employment opportunities after exit from the program. Typically, about 65 percent of SCSEP participants are women.

In addition, the Department's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) provides a number of online tools and resources to the public that are relevant to the needs of older workers. The ETA-sponsored CareerOneStop website²⁸ delivers easy-to-understand workforce information that helps users make informed decisions and find local resources on career and employment matters, including training opportunities, industry-recognized certifications, national and state employment projections data and occupational information, and job postings from multiple job banks. It even has a specific portal with job search tips for workers over the age of 55,²⁹ including information on navigating age bias in hiring, exploring new careers, using social media for networking, and writing resumes and interviewing, as well as a landing page geared toward reemployment of workers experiencing a job loss.³⁰

²³ Congressional Research Service. 2021. *Poverty Among the Population Aged 65 and Older*. Issued April 14. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R45791.pdf>

²⁴ American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). 2022. *How Are Social Security Benefits Calculated?* <https://www.aarp.org/retirement/social-security/questions-answers/social-security-benefits-calculation.html>

²⁵ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wioa>

²⁶ <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/training/onestop>

²⁷ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/seniors>

²⁸ <https://www.careeronestop.org/>

²⁹ <https://www.careeronestop.org/ResourcesFor/55PlusWorkers/55-plus-workers.aspx>

³⁰ <https://www.careeronestop.org/WorkerReEmployment/default.aspx>

