

*Council on Contemporary
Families Symposium:*

*The COVID-19 Pandemic
and the Future of Gender
Equality*

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CCF Symposium: The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Gender Equality

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Executive Summary: The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Gender Equality

Prepared by Daniel L. Carlson, University of Utah and Richard J. Petts, Ball State University, for the Council on Contemporary Families symposium The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Gender Equality.

The COVID-19 pandemic upended the lives of families around the world. Aside from its obvious and substantial costs to life and health, the pandemic created crises at both home and work – the consequences of which varied by gender. A [new online symposium](#) presented by the [Council on Contemporary Families](#) highlights what emerging research tells us about changes to family and work life during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, what these changes meant for gender inequalities during the pandemic, and what they mean for the future of gender equality in the US.

In the first briefing paper of this symposium, Liana Christin Landivar and Pilar Gonalons-Pons [detail the depths and duration of pandemic closures to schools and daycares in the United States and the consequences these closures had for parents, care workers, and social inequalities](#). Their research shows that mothers left work at higher rates than fathers to attend to children’s care and educational demands, and this was especially acute for Black mothers and non-college educated mothers who faced prolonged school closures and/or lack of access to remote work. They note that childcare availability in the US has declined substantially since the pandemic (even before the recent end to federal subsidies) while costs have risen substantially, outstripping inflation. In addition to parents being negatively affected by the closure of schools and paid childcare, so teachers and childcare providers– most of whom are women of color – were also adversely affected. Childcare workers had twice the likelihood of losing their jobs as other workers during the pandemic and experienced a 50% decline in earnings. Moreover, poor pay and stressful working conditions led many teachers and care providers to leave their jobs permanently, producing substantial staffing shortages. Landivar and Gonalons-Pons conclude their brief by remarking that the pandemic damaged an already fragile care infrastructure in the US, increasing inequality moving forward by putting quality affordable care even further out of reach for poor families and increasing burdens on mothers.

Pandemic lockdowns portended an increase in domestic labor for families, which has the potential for increasing burdens on women who are conventionally responsible for this work. Using time-diary data, Liana Sayer and Joanna Pepin [examine gender differences in parents’ time in housework and childcare during the pandemic](#) with surprising results. They find that parents’ overall time in primary childcare, and the gender gap in primary childcare, remained unchanged during the pandemic. Though mothers increased their time in developmental childcare (e.g., education) early in the pandemic, they spent less time in physical care. By 2021,

mothers had reverted to pre-pandemic childcare patterns. Gender gaps in childcare were substantially smaller when mothers were employed and fathers worked from home, suggesting that work-family policies like paid childcare leave that keep women attached to the labor force and job flexibility which provides fathers more time at home are likely to enhance equality in domestic labor. Though the gender gap in childcare remained virtually unchanged, the gender gap in housework and time with children narrowed slightly early in the pandemic as fathers did more housework and spent more time with kids. Nevertheless, change was fleeting as fathers' time in housework and with children reverted back toward pre-pandemic levels by 2021, though time with kids continues to remain elevated.

In the third brief of our symposium, Jill Yavorsky, Yue Qian, and Liana Christin Landivar [detail the costs of domestic labor demands on women's paid work, earnings, and careers](#). They note that although official statistics suggest that women's labor force participation has finally rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, this masks both the costs of the pandemic for women's careers as well as educational gradients in these costs. Specifically, they highlight that labor force participation rates of non-college educated mothers have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels. Moreover, the motherhood wage penalty substantially increased for college educated mothers during the pandemic, reversing twenty years of progress. Using evidence from survey experiments with managers, they note that the motherhood wage penalty may stem from discrimination related to mothers' childcare issues.

The ability of college-educated mothers to remain attached to the labor force during the pandemic and for fathers to increase their time in childcare stems in part from remote work. In the next brief of this symposium, Wen Fan and Richard Petts [show us that although remote work can reduce gender inequalities in some domains, it can exacerbate inequalities in others](#). Remote work allowed mothers to remain in their paid positions and helped to facilitate fathers' involvement in domestic labor, but it was also associated with decreases in work hours for mothers (but not fathers). Moreover, they report that although disadvantaged women may prefer remote work, likely because of their limited access to affordable childcare, they accrue fewer benefits using it relative to fathers. The tendency of women to use job flexibility to dedicate more time to unpaid labor at the expense of their paid work, suggests that how remote work is used and by whom matters greatly for the future of gender equality.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a policy response on multiple levels, not least of which was helping families navigate illness, job furloughs, and the loss of care supports. Jeff Hayes and Elizabeth Peters [provide an overview of leave policy in the United States and its benefits to individuals and families](#). They detail the aims and scope of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) -- not only how it fell short of providing the care supports that families in the US needed during the pandemic but also how access to leave continued to be unequally distributed. They conclude with the observation that the COVID-19 pandemic shows us that

unexpected events happen and a lack of comprehensive public policy exacerbates the negative effects of these events.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic created conditions that could feasibly reduce gender inequalities at home, and thus help mothers maintain their paid jobs, it appears that inequalities were instead exacerbated. Arielle Kuperberg, Sarah Thébaud, Kathleen Gerson, and Brad Harrington ask: [why aren't more fathers stepping up to shoulder a larger share of childcare and housework in families?](#) Findings from their collective research suggest that entrenched cultural norms regarding masculinity, fatherhood, and breadwinning may be a root cause. Though Americans increasingly embrace men as caregivers, they value their breadwinning role even more. While men themselves desire to be more engaged husbands and fathers, they are skeptical about their abilities to achieve this in the face of workplace cultures that stigmatize and punish “leaning-out.” The power of these norms that encourage male breadwinning and discourage male caregiving are demonstrated both before and during the pandemic in the way out-of-work fathers (ages 30-50) living with their children categorize themselves as “retired” rather than “stay-at-home dads.”

The looming threat of COVID, in addition to substantial disruptions to work and family life, made the pandemic an incredibly stressful time. In the final briefing paper of the symposium, Daniel Carlson and Melissa Milkie [discuss why gender disparities in mental health grew during the pandemic](#). Though mental health declined broadly for both men and women, it declined more precipitously among parents, mothers especially. Importantly, three years later, mental health has yet to improve in the US. Reviewing the literature and findings from their own research, Carlson and Milkie note that major stressors such as job loss, feelings of isolation, worry about COVID, and work-family conflicts were all more likely to be experienced by mothers. They argue that although the ability to be home with one's family was likely a boon to well-being, it was outweighed in countries like the United States by work-family stress emanating from a distinct lack of policy support. In addition to policy, the authors also point out that gender disparities in mental health during the pandemic also likely stem from pervasive cultural norms for intensive mothers and ideal workers. As family managers, mothers likely bore the brunt of pandemic stress regarding family health and children's learning. Yet, while mothers may have felt compelled to attend to these responsibilities, they nevertheless felt extreme guilt about the way family issues interfered with their jobs.

The briefing papers in [this symposium](#) demonstrate that gender inequalities grew across numerous domains during the COVID-19 pandemic, with potentially long-term consequences. They emphasize that the pandemic created conditions – such as school and daycare closures – in combination with the absence of supportive family care policies and the presence of workplace and gender norms that push care on women and paid work on men, that exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in the United States. At the same time, the authors point out that the pandemic revealed several avenues for how to reduce gender inequalities (e.g., fathers' remote work; investment in care infrastructure; paid parental leave) and each paper

provides clear prescriptions for how we can mitigate the damage inflicted by the pandemic. Such recommendations are vital if we truly hope to reduce gender inequalities in work and family life moving forward.

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Childcare Challenges During the Pandemic and Their Impact on Parents and Care Providers

A briefing paper prepared by Liana Christin Landivar, Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, and Pilar Gonalons-Pons, University of Pennsylvania for the Council on Contemporary Families online symposium The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Gender Equality.

Views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Department of Labor.

In March 2020, as part of states' initial pandemic response, most childcare centers and virtually all schools closed to in-person operations, impacting a large share of the country's children and their caregivers. About one-third of childcare centers [remained closed](#) a year later. Additionally, over 60 percent of elementary students attended public school districts that only offered [fully or partially remote](#) instruction in the Fall of 2020 with reduced in-person operations continuing for up to a year and a half in parts of the country. Unlike other high-income countries, the weak support for care infrastructure in the U.S. left parents and essential care providers in childcare centers and homes, preschools, and schools unprepared to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the pandemic. This resulted in significant consequences for both parents and providers, and ultimately, for social inequality.

How the lack of care infrastructure impacted parents

Employment swiftly declined among [mothers](#) in the first year of the pandemic. Mothers were more likely to leave their jobs and delay re-employment than fathers because they picked up [significant and prolonged increases in carework](#) at [home](#), lacking alternative care arrangements for their children. As schools and childcare centers closed, care from friends and family also became more limited because of pandemic-related risks. Employment reductions were particularly large among mothers working in low-wage jobs without workplace flexibilities such as [paid leave](#) or [telework](#) that could have helped accommodate work and care obligations at home.

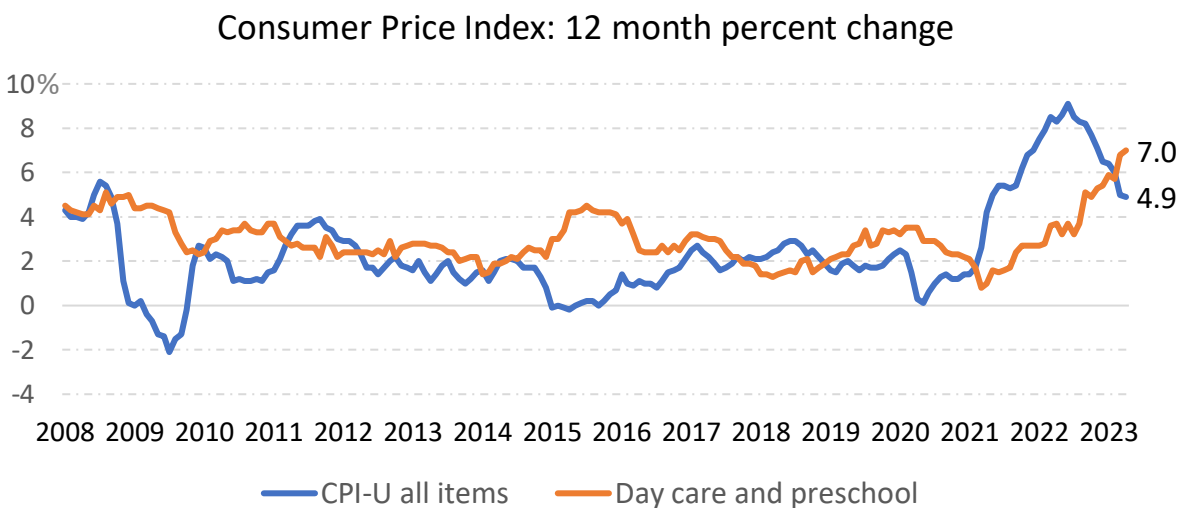
The pandemic left a long-lasting imprint on mothers lacking care arrangements during the first year of the pandemic. Mothers who lived in areas with remote public school instruction had [prolonged reduced employment](#), particularly mothers without a college degree. Even [three years later](#), the employment rates of Black mothers and mothers without a college degree had still not returned to pre-pandemic employment levels. Among college graduates, many of whom were able to keep working, the [gender wage gap expanded](#).

Today, parents are still dealing with childcare disruptions, resulting in an increase in work disruptions. A new [report](#) shows that in 2022, 3.3% of mothers and 1.5% of fathers reported being absent from work in the past week due to childcare problems. An additional 4.1% of

mothers and 3.2% of fathers who regularly work full-time had worked part-time in the past week due to childcare problems. These numbers are higher than prior to the pandemic, with mothers continuing to report more work disruptions due to childcare lapses than fathers.

Increasing childcare prices are also putting pressure on parents, many of whom rely on paid childcare to be able to work. Since the start of the pandemic, childcare prices have risen to cover temporary reduced capacity limits, safety equipment needs, significant worker turnover, and rapidly rising inflation. New data from the [Women’s Bureau](#) shows that families were paying between \$4,810 per year for school-age children in before/aftercare to \$17,171 per year for infants (in 2022 dollars), absorbing between 8 percent and 19 percent of family income per child in paid care. In the past year, childcare prices have risen an additional 7% from a year earlier – outpacing inflation (Figure 1) and putting childcare farther out of reach for lower- and middle-income families.

Figure 1. Consumer Price Index for All Items and Day Care and Preschool: 12 Month Percent Change



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Price Index. Authors’ calculations.

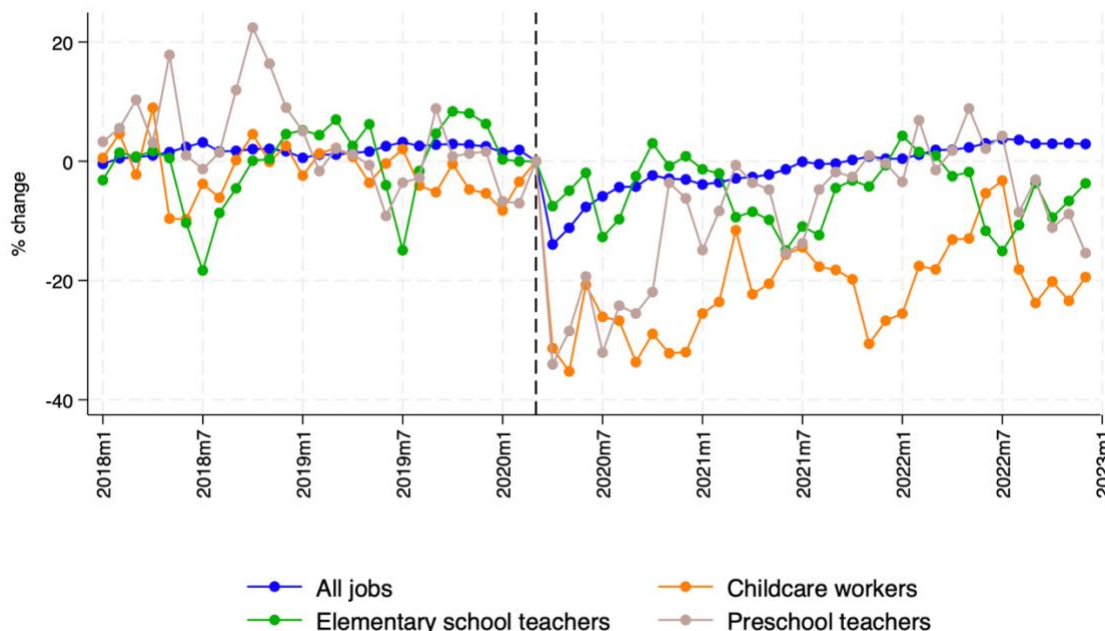
How the pandemic impacted care workers and providers

Care workers and providers were profoundly impacted by the pandemic.

Nearly [16,000 childcare centers](#) went out of business in the first year of the pandemic, representing about 9 percent of childcare centers nationwide. Among providers remaining open, new capacity limits drastically reduced the number of children that could be served. Closures and capacity reductions were especially concentrated among [providers](#) serving Asian, Black, and Latino children.

Childcare workers were more than twice as likely to experience job loss and employment reductions than workers in other industries (Figure 2) and saw their [earnings decline 50% more](#) than other workers. Childcare employment [has lagged](#) behind other sectors in its recovery, with the number of employees per childcare establishment remaining below pre-pandemic levels as of 2023. Though public school teachers earn more than childcare workers, and were largely protected from job loss during the pandemic, they left their jobs for retirement at double the rate of other workers. Even as most schools reopened to in-person instruction in Spring 2021, teachers are continuing to deal with increased [mental health and well-being](#) concerns among students, difficulty securing [resources](#) and equipment, and [lost instructional time](#) as a result of the pandemic, increasing the demands in their jobs.

Figure 2. Percentage Change in Number of Employed Individuals in the US Economy and in Select Childcare-Related Jobs: 2018-2022



Note: The sample includes all working age adults (16-65) and uses sample weights. Percentage change calculated in reference to March 2020. Teachers' employment levels decline during summer months due to seasonality of employment.

Source: Current Population Survey 2018-2022. Authors' calculations.

Some of the challenges in rebuilding the educational and childcare sector stem from poor compensation of care workers, and inadequate government funding of care providers resulting in what the U.S. Treasury calls a [broken market](#). Childcare workers are paid among the lowest wages of all occupations in the United States: [\\$13.71 an hour](#) in 2022. As prices and inflation surged in 2021 and [wages increased](#) for lower-paid workers, childcare worker compensation became even more inadequate, resulting in greater difficulties attracting a sufficient number of workers to the sector to develop adequate supply. Similarly, the education sector has experienced [staffing shortages](#) and [teachers are underpaid](#) for their qualifications. Taken

together, these factors have led to a slower recovery among care workers and providers than the rest of the economy.

The US Care Infrastructure and the Future of Gender Equality

The COVID-19 pandemic drew unprecedented attention to the fragility of the care infrastructure in this country. Longstanding hesitation to government investment in care infrastructure has resulted in a “system” of disconnected and largely privatized care providers, particularly when it comes to the care for younger children, and unaffordable prices for families. In all, by radically disrupting an already fragile care infrastructure, the pandemic has exacerbated economic inequalities by gender as well as by class and race. Gaps in employment and [wages](#) between mothers and fathers grew and the slow recovery of the care sector is disproportionately hurting working class women of color. Care infrastructure is the backbone of the economy. Adequate public investment is necessary to increase stability in employment, reduce disparities in labor supply and childcare access, and achieve a more equitable recovery.

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Pandemic Influences on Gender Inequality in Unpaid Work

A briefing paper prepared by Liana C. Sayer, University of Maryland and Joanna R. Pepin, University of Toronto for the Council on Contemporary Families online symposium The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Gender Equality.

In the past, widespread economic impacts have affected gender dynamics in paid and unpaid work. For example, the concentration of job loss among men during the 2008 recession was associated with [increases in married fathers' household and care work](#). The COVID-19 pandemic produced [an unprecedented economic crisis](#) and it too brought about changes in parents' employment. [Job loss and reduced work hours](#) were initially concentrated among women, particularly racial and ethnic minority women, and disproportionately affected mothers.

These employment changes alongside stay-at-home guidelines, restrictions on eating at restaurants, [altered grocery shopping and cooking patterns](#), and public health guidance to sanitize living quarters led many scholars and pundits to speculate families were spending more of their time cooking and cleaning. Childcare closures and the shift to remote learning for schoolchildren upended parents' expectations of the time necessary for supervising their children. ***Did these sharp disruptions to everyday family life affect gender inequality in unpaid work? And how are these changes associated with paid work during COVID?***

On the one hand, gender inequality in unpaid work may have worsened during the pandemic. The lack of formal childcare and increased needs for cooking and cleaning were likely to affect mothers more than fathers due to [expectations of intensive mothering](#) and notions that [women are primarily responsible for the household](#). On the other hand, [greater access to remote work](#), especially among employed fathers, and [a redistribution of daily activities](#) (e.g., less time transporting children to extracurricular activities) may have facilitated more equality in sharing housework and childcare.

Same song, new verse?

Similar to what happened during the 2008 recession, initial research showed some signs that, in the early days of the pandemic, the parental gender gap in unpaid work narrowed. [One study showed an 18% decrease](#) in the number of minutes per day mothers and fathers spent with their children. In the Fall of 2019, the gender gap was about 175 minutes – nearly 3 hours – per day. By the Fall of 2020, the daily gap in time spent with children had declined to 144 minutes per day (about 2 hours 25 minutes). [Another study](#), based on a non-probability sample of 1,025 US parents in different-gender partnerships, showed similar patterns. Although mothers continued to do more housework and childcare than fathers about one month into the pandemic, notably, fathers increased their contribution to the household labor. **It was fathers' greater time spent in unpaid labor that narrowed the gender gap.**

However, as the pandemic carried on, **evidence of lasting change didn't materialize.** [A follow-up study](#) showed that the shift toward more equal sharing of housework returned to pre-pandemic levels by November 2020. As childcare facilities remained closed and schools shifted

to remote learning, [mothers more than fathers rearranged their daily lives](#) to provide more supervision for children’s school-related activities and to physically care for children at home. The return to [mothers doing more of this work than fathers was rationalized by parents](#) who pointed to structural constraints – such as the motherhood earnings penalty and fatherhood premium – and cultural prescriptions about appropriate behaviors for men and women.

The premier source of daily activity data, the [American Time Use Survey](#), is now available for the years prior to the pandemic (2019), early in the pandemic (2020), and late in the pandemic (2021). A new study¹ uses this data to show how the pandemic affected gender inequality in unpaid work among parents with children ages 12 and younger. The analysis focuses on changes from 2019 to 2021 in mothers’ and fathers’ time spent on housework and three types of childcare: 1) parental childcare (time when childcare is the primary task and only focus of attention); 2) secondary childcare (time when parents are monitoring children but not directly engaged in childcare or other activities with children); and 3) total time spent with children present (e.g., watching TV with children). **The findings confirm the pandemic affected gender inequality in unpaid work and reveal that it did so unevenly across types of unpaid work.**

Table 1. 2019 to 2021 Change in Mothers' and Fathers' Minutes in Child Time and Housework, children 12 and younger

| Daily Minutes | Mothers | | | | | Fathers | | | | |
|---------------|---------|-------|-------|--------|--------|---------|-------|-------|--------|--------|
| | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | Δ 2020 | Δ 2021 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | Δ 2020 | Δ 2021 |
| Child Care | 118.8 | 122.8 | 116.4 | 4.0 | 2.4 | 78.6 | 79.7 | 82.0 | 1.1 | 3.5 |
| Physical | 61.8 | 51.8 | 60.1 | -10.1 | -1.7 | 31.4 | 31.2 | 33.5 | -0.2 | 2.1 |
| Developmental | 57.0 | 71.0 | 56.4 | 14.1 | -0.6 | 47.2 | 48.5 | 48.6 | 1.3 | 1.4 |
| Secondary | 370.2 | 417.6 | 392.5 | 47.4 | 22.2 | 312.2 | 343.0 | 326.7 | 30.8 | 14.5 |
| With children | 395.7 | 394.6 | 389.7 | -1.1 | -6.1 | 311.7 | 341.4 | 325.1 | 29.6 | 13.3 |
| Housework | 144.4 | 145.4 | 147.2 | 0.9 | 2.8 | 100.6 | 110.2 | 98.7 | 9.6 | -2.0 |
| Core | 132.6 | 128.5 | 130.5 | -4.1 | -2.1 | 66.7 | 67.3 | 66.0 | 0.5 | -0.8 |
| Non-core | 6.4 | 12.1 | 9.5 | 5.7 | 3.1 | 28.1 | 37.8 | 24.6 | 9.7 | -3.5 |
| N | 1,287 | 870 | 1,142 | | | 1,016 | 654 | 917 | | |

Note: Estimates adjusted for employment status and location, marital status, number of children and age of youngest child, education, race and ethnicity, below poverty household income, age, and weekend diary day. Red coefficients indicate significant gender differences for each year. Bolded coefficients indicate significant year differences for women and for men. ATUS 2019-2021. Parents ages 18 to 65 with own household children ages 12 and younger.

The most striking finding is the lack of change in the gender gap in parental childcare time. There were no statistically significant changes in either mothers’ or fathers’ time providing childcare between 2019 and 2021, meaning mothers continued to do about 40 minutes more childcare per day than fathers. Time parents are actively providing care consists of both physical childcare (e.g., hands-on care and supervision) and developmental childcare (e.g., education, playing, talking). Between 2019 and 2020, mothers’ physical childcare decreased slightly, but this was counterbalanced by a modest increase in time spent on developmental childcare, and levels in 2021 were similar to 2019. This lack of change in primary childcare suggests that in 2020 parents redistributed time across specific types of childcare activities (such as away from driving children to organized activities to managing and supervising children’s remote education and play) rather than making larger investments of time in childcare.

Still, the time parents are actively providing care does not reflect the whole spectrum of parental time investments in children. Some childcare is multitasked with other activities. For example, parents fortunate to work remotely may have experienced more flexibility in integrating childcare and housework into their lives by multitasking. But [research on the early days of the pandemic](#) suggests that [fathers who work remotely safeguard](#) their work time and space (and leisure) from care of and time with children. Although the ATUS data (like most international time use data) does not collect data on multitasking, it does collect data on secondary childcare – time parents are monitoring children’s activities and whereabouts while doing something else. Mothers’ secondary childcare initially increased 47 minutes/day in 2020 but then decreased 22 minutes from 2020-2021. Fathers followed a similar pattern, leading the gender gap in secondary childcare to remain constant during the early pandemic years.

Parents also do some daily activities with children present, such as taking a walk or watching TV while children are present. Mothers’ time with children did not change between 2019 and 2021 – around 6 hours and 40 minutes each day. In contrast, fathers’ time with children increased 30 minutes in 2020 and 13 minutes more by 2021. As a result, the gender gap in time with children narrowed from 2019-2021. The slight decrease in fathers’ time with children in 2021 may result from easing restrictions on public activities and social interactions, with children returning to school and childcare centers and older children spending more time outside their homes with friends.

The ATUS data also suggests the pandemic impacted unpaid work differently depending on parents’ employment circumstances¹. Among employed mothers and fathers who worked only at home on the ATUS diary day, mothers spend about 30 minutes more per day than fathers providing physical care – but there is no significant gender gap in developmental care. This holds in 2019, 2020, and 2021 – suggesting the pandemic didn’t disrupt or exacerbate the gender gap in parental childcare. Additionally, fathers who worked at home on ATUS diary day reported more childcare time compared with those who worked outside the home (about 38 minutes more in 2021), and just about as much as non-employed fathers. College educated fathers are more likely to hold jobs that allow remote work and those fathers may have engaged in [status safeguarding](#) parenting behaviors during the pandemic.

Turning to housework, fathers’ time in housework increased about 10 minutes/day between 2019 and 2020 before a return to 2019 levels by 2021. Mothers continue to do about an hour more housework per day than fathers. Hence, the pandemic appears not to have led to greater gender equality in housework. Interestingly, though, housework did not increase during the pandemic even among mothers who worked remotely.

What do these findings mean for gender inequality in unpaid work in the future? There are two possible ways to narrow the gender gap in housework and childcare: 1) decrease women’s time spent in unpaid labor or 2) increase men’s time spent in unpaid labor. [Longitudinal data](#) suggest childcare time increased among some parents, such as those who reduced paid work hours or left jobs altogether. About half of mothers’ increased childcare time during the initial phase of the pandemic can be [attributed to mothers’ decline in paid work](#) and leaving the labor market altogether. This is not surprising given that the United States only temporarily expanded the family safety net. Pundits and scholars alike believe the possibility of addressing the critical

need for federal policies subsidizing childcare facilities and securing a robust care infrastructure is slim in the current political and social conflict. Still, [13 U.S. states and D.C.](#) have passed legislation requiring paid family or parental leave, and [14 U.S. States and D.C. require employers to provide paid](#) sick days. These workplace policies are likely to support mothers' labor force participation, tamping down increases in mothers time spent providing childcare. Additionally, the absence of paid parental leave in the U.S. and U.K. [negatively affected mothers' mental health during COVID](#), in contrast to those in countries like Canada and Australia that offered paid leave during COVID.

College educated workers are demanding continued options to work at home and some workplaces have relented to these demands. Some pre-pandemic research suggests that [men who work from home share more equally](#) in domestic labor, [particularly when their partners are employed fulltime](#). If greater access to remote work persists, some [privileged] fathers may be more able to achieve their [growing desire to spend more time with their children](#). Still, [pre-pandemic research](#) shows that fathers' paid labor time tends to be protected from routine childcare duties, potentially mitigating substantial changes. And, many workers – particularly low-income and racial/ethnic minority workers, [continue to lack access to flexible work policies](#).

The long historical arc of work on gender inequality in unpaid work offers only one vision for greater gender equality: it requires fathers' daily time use to become more like mothers, particularly through the investment of fathers in housework and in childcare. Intentional efforts to bring this about at both an individual and societal level are necessary to bring about more lasting shifts toward greater equality in unpaid labor.

¹Sayer, Liana C., Kelsey Drotning, and Sarah Flood. "Gender Racial, and Class Disparities in COVID-19 Impacts on Parent's Work & Family Time." Paper presented at the June 2022 Work and Family Research Network conference, New York, NY

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Mothers Continue to Experience Career Consequences Three Years into the Pandemic

A briefing paper prepared by Jill E. Yavorsky, University of North Carolina Charlotte, Yue Qian, University of British Columbia, and Liana Christin Landivar, Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, for the Council on Contemporary Families symposium The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Gender Equality.

Views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Department of Labor.

Three years later, women's careers have still not fully recovered from pandemic-related impacts.

From the beginning of the pandemic, [women-dominated jobs](#) were hit hardest with employment losses, and mothers were more likely to lose or quit their jobs because of the [additional childcare](#) that fell on their plates due to [school and childcare closures](#).

In a set of new studies, we examine career outcomes using data spanning the start of the pandemic through 2023 and uncover critical ways in which mothers' careers are *still* lagging behind all others. We also find that a mothers' education level is a key determinant for the *type* of career consequence they face.

In the beginning of 2023, the employment of mothers without a college degree – a group hit hardest in the early months of the pandemic – had still not recovered, as our [recent research](#) shows. Their employment remained lower in February 2023 than what it was pre-pandemic. In contrast, employment for fathers with and without a college degree and college-educated mothers fully recovered in 2021.

These results align with our [new research](#) based on Current Population Survey data showing that among those without a college degree and who had quit, been fired, or laid off during the pandemic, partnered mothers with children under age 13 were significantly less likely than comparable fathers to find new employment.

Why has lower educated mothers' employment not rebounded?

Certainly, the concentration of mothers without a college degree in job sectors that experienced large employment reductions, such as the service industry, contributed to their [sharp losses in employment](#) early in the pandemic, and greater losses compared to fathers. But even [within job sectors](#), mothers lost or left jobs at higher rates than fathers in nearly all industries.

Two big reasons many mothers left the labor force early in the pandemic and some have not returned are worsening childcare challenges and a lack of access to family-friendly workplace benefits.

[New research](#) shows that mothers who could work from home sustained employment at higher rates throughout the pandemic than those who were in jobs requiring on-site work. Unfortunately, few low-income jobs provide the ability to [work from home](#) or access to [paid leave](#), making it difficult to meet intense caregiving obligations that grew over the pandemic and for some remained persistent.

For example, our new [research](#) using the American Community Survey, Current Population Survey, and the Elementary School Operating Status database shows that the impact of school closures had a particularly lingering negative effect on lower educated mothers' employment. About 24% of elementary students were in school districts that did not fully reopen for between a year to a year and a half, a very prolonged gap in care infrastructure for young kids who still need supervision.

Our research shows it is mothers who picked up this added care, for many at the expense of their jobs. School closures for elementary students were associated with a 5 percentage point increase in the employment gap between mothers and fathers without a college degree. And notably, this gap persisted *even 6 months after schools reopened*.

Moreover, many childcare providers [raised their prices](#) or [closed](#) during the pandemic, making it even more difficult to find nearby and affordable childcare for lower educated mothers – many of whom already lived in childcare deserts or strained to meet [high childcare prices before](#) the pandemic.

What about college-educated mothers' jobs?

If *long-term* employment hits largely did not impact college-educated mothers, then one might surmise that this group of women did not suffer any long-term career consequences. However, our new research suggests otherwise.

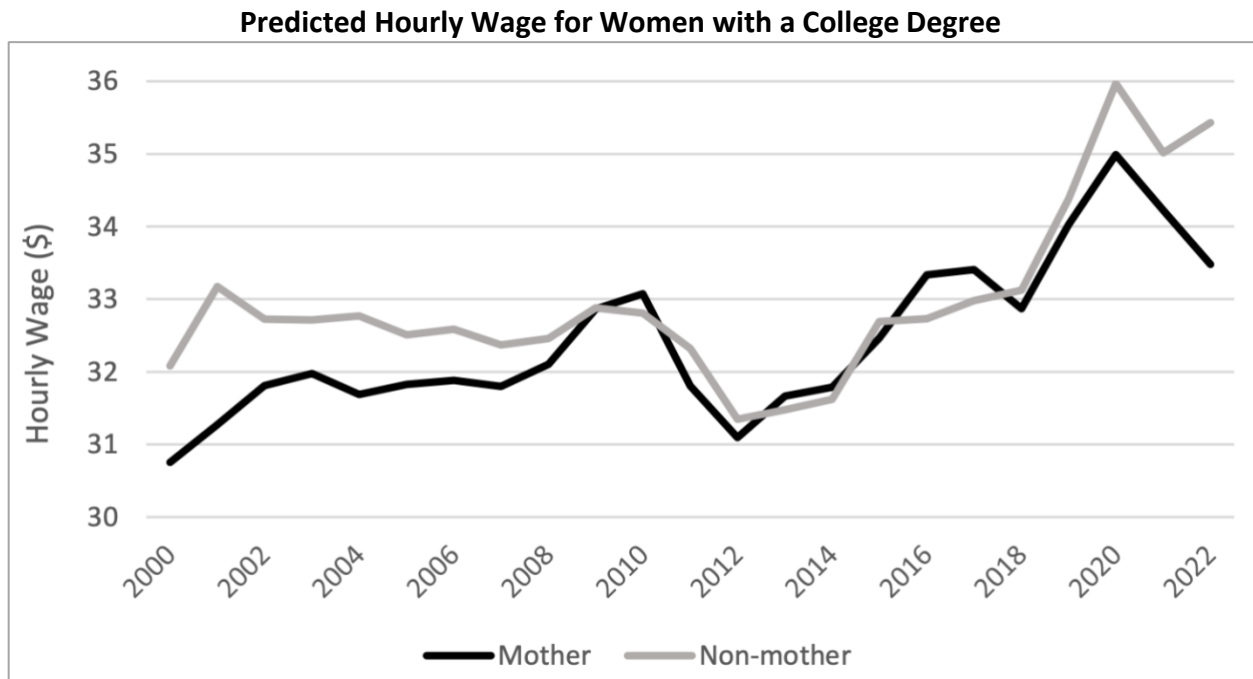
We conducted two studies that provide insights into the potential repercussions for college-educated women who remained employed during the pandemic.

First, we [find](#) that college-educated mothers experienced the largest motherhood wage penalty since the early 2000s, reversing twenty years of progress for this group of women. The motherhood wage penalty captures wage differences between mothers and non-mothers who have similar characteristics.

Prior to the pandemic, the motherhood wage gap for college-educated women had been eliminated, such that mothers and non-mothers earned similar wages. However, three years

into the pandemic, college-educated mothers experienced a 6% wage penalty, relative to non-mothers.

As the graph below shows, wages for both mothers and non-mothers with a college degree took a hit after the onset of the pandemic in 2020, but non-mothers' wages rebounded, whereas mothers' wages did not.



Note. For analysis shown in graph, we used months March through December for each of the years to maintain consistency across time and to capture the dip of the pandemic which began in March 2020.

We find that about a quarter of the wage penalty can be explained by either mothers holding jobs that experienced smaller wage gains in 2021 than the jobs that non-mothers held, and/or mothers switched into lower paying jobs during the pandemic, in part due to heightened work-family conflict.

Increases in the motherhood wage penalty may have also been due to heightened [employer discrimination](#) against mothers who experienced productivity losses, as many highly educated mothers suffered temporary [productivity declines](#) during the pandemic due to the additional childcare and housework they absorbed.

In a [new study](#), we find that managers particularly penalize mothers for temporary declines in job productivity that result from childcare issues.

Specifically, managers distribute 30% fewer career rewards to mothers, compared to fathers, when their productivity temporarily declines due to childcare issues outside their control. There

are no gender gaps in rewards when the employee's productivity increases or stays constant from previous productivity levels (before they had childcare issues). We find that this is due to managers perceiving mothers as being less committed to their jobs and less interested in advancing in their careers than fathers.

What our results mean for gender progress

Taken together, our new studies show that mothers are continuing to suffer losses in employment, wages, and career advancement due to the COVID-19 pandemic – but in varying ways across educational levels. Lower-educated mothers are less likely to be employed since the pandemic, whereas higher-educated mothers, likely because of their ability to work remotely and greater access to childcare, have been able to retain their jobs but may be experiencing wage and promotion losses along with other career penalties.

To achieve a gender-equitable post-pandemic recovery, organizational and public policies are particularly needed to support labor market re-entry, equitable wages, and fair chances of moving through the career ladder.

And, our findings make clear that to jumpstart gender progress for all women, it is critical to build a more reliable, accessible, and affordable care infrastructure.

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Can Remote Work Fuel Gender Equality? Evidence Shows Cause for Optimism but Challenges Remain

A briefing paper prepared by Wen Fan, Boston University, and Richard J. Petts, Ball State University, for the Council on Contemporary Families symposium The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Gender Equality.

[Acknowledgement: The authors greatly appreciate Jennifer Glass and Jerry Jacobs for their generous feedback on a previous version of the briefing paper.]

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed where paid work is done, leading millions to become remote workers overnight. Large numbers ([40%](#) of full-time employees) continue to work remotely three years following the pandemic onset, and workers today [highly value](#) flexible work options. Yet, access to, and use of, fully remote or hybrid (i.e., partially remote) work (remote work for short hereafter) remains uneven. Notably, [men are more likely](#) to say they can work from home, but of those who can work remotely, women work from home more than men. Gender differences in perceptions and experiences of remote work are also complex, as these forms of flexible work are associated with [stigmas](#) for men and discussed as both “[a blessing and a curse](#)” for women. These gender differences raise important questions about the consequences of remote work for gender equality; does remote work promote gender equality or in fact widen the long-existing gender gap in paid and unpaid labor?

Two new research projects provide insight into the implications of pandemic-induced remote work for gender equality. One study, the [Study on U.S. Parents’ Divisions of Labor During COVID-19](#) (SPDLC), is a longitudinal survey of partnered U.S. parents residing with a biological child administered from April 2020 to October 2022. Another study, the [Remote Work Dynamics Panel Study](#), is a four-wave, nationally representative survey of U.S. workers who spent at least some time working from home since the onset of the pandemic (October 2020 to April 2022). Collectively, these two projects show that remote work fosters gender equality in some dimensions but perpetuates gender inequalities in other domains.

How Remote Work Enhances Gender Equality

New evidence from these projects highlights two ways in which increased access to remote work might promote gender equality. First, **remote work allows women, especially less educated women, to work in a place they prefer.** Working from home has been historically [popular](#) among women as it enables them to maintain their attachment to the paid labor force while also managing housework and childcare. Greater access to remote work since the pandemic thus disproportionately helps women (more than it does for men) to align where they work with their preferences. When women wanted to work from home but had to go back to the office because of employer mandates, evidence shows that they tended to leave the labor force, at least in the short term. And this is especially the case for women [without a college degree](#), who have fewer options than men or more educated women in locating a new job with remote options.

Second, **among heterosexual partnered parents, remote work provides opportunities for fathers to share domestic labor, which also strengthens mothers' labor force attachment.** When partnered fathers worked from home more frequently during the pandemic, partnered mothers performed [smaller shares of housework and childcare](#); mothers were additionally [more likely to be employed and worked more hours](#) in paid labor, thereby reducing the well-known gender gap in both paid and unpaid labor. The pattern is even more pronounced when fathers worked exclusively from home. Working from home likely exposes fathers to domestic labor and allows them to have [more time to perform these tasks](#), which, in turn, enables their partners to spend more hours in paid labor.

How Remote Work Hinders Gender Equality

Despite the potential for remote work to promote gender equality, results from these projects also illustrate ways in which **remote work widened some gender gaps in both domestic and paid labor during the pandemic.** In the initial transition into remote work, results show [a deeply gendered process](#) with women more likely than men to experience change—either a major decrease or a major increase—in work hours. Men had more control over the hours they work, making a deliberate decision to work the same hours and being able to maintain high productivity due to fewer interruptions when working from home. In contrast, findings based on partnered parents show that [mothers with job flexibility](#) tended to scale back their work hours to accommodate housework and childcare duties, suggesting that enduring gender norms may have led mothers to prioritize the home front during the pandemic. Another strategy some mothers adopted to deal with domestic disruptions in the pandemic was to [work longer hours](#), particularly non-conventional hours such as when children were in bed.

Another way in which remote work exacerbated gender inequality is that **remote work helps improve the well-being of minoritized men more than women.** Gender equality and racial equality are intricately linked. Given [explicit and implicit racial bias, discrimination, and microaggressions](#) in office environments, it has long been [argued](#) that remote work may contribute to the well-being of minoritized workers more than for white workers. [New evidence](#) shows that remote work promotes well-being generally, but across all gender/racial groups, men of color benefit the most from remote work. The generally lower occupational status of women of color may have limited the extent to which they emotionally and psychologically benefit from remote work.

Lessons from the Pandemic: The Future of Remote Work and Gender Equality

How then do we make sense of the mixed findings about the implications of increased access to remote work for gender equality? We believe that emerging evidence offers important lessons about the ways in which remote work can be used to promote greater gender equality in the U.S. beyond the pandemic. While there may not be a perfect one-size-fits-all remote work policy, we believe policies can be flexible enough to work for a wide range of companies and workers.

1. For jobs that allow working from home, companies should provide workers equal access to remote work regardless of their gender. To avoid remote work being seen as just a policy for women, men should be incentivized to work remotely. Doing so may minimize stigmas

associated with remote work while also promoting greater gender equality in domestic labor. This may also allow families to be more flexible, such as by alternating which partner works from home and which works in the office on any given day.

2. There should be clear organizational guidelines and expectations for the day-to-day implementations of remote work. Given that remote work may in fact [intensify job demands and further blur work–life boundaries](#), a consequence [disproportionately borne by women](#), companies and organizations need to provide more job autonomy, set up clear expectations for remote workers, and focus on outcomes instead of office time as the metric for evaluation or promotion.
3. While remote work can potentially help workers better manage work and family responsibilities, it is not a complete solution as these new findings show. Increased access to good, [affordable childcare](#) in conjunction with better, more equitable remote work policies, would increase the likelihood that both men and women maximize the benefits of remote work and decrease the likelihood of exacerbating [gender gaps in domestic labor](#) by reducing childcare burdens on mothers in particular.
4. Better remote work policies are needed for women of color and less educated women. These workers are less likely to have access to remote work, despite desiring it more than men, and they tend to work in environments with high demands, low control, and low support—factors that mitigate the benefits of remote work. Organizational and public policies that create a more equitable workforce and promote more equitable working-from-home experiences—for example, [IT expense reimbursement policies](#) or [“work-from-home pledges”](#) that specify company norms around remote work—are essential for improving well-being among disadvantaged women workers.

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Leave Laws Support Equity

A briefing paper prepared by Jeff Hayes, Women’s Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor¹, and H. Elizabeth Peters, Urban Institute, for the Council on Contemporary Families symposium The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Gender Equality.

Many workers will provide care for a newborn or for a family member with a serious illness and will experience the challenges of trying to manage the competing responsibilities of working and caregiving. Indeed, increases in the labor force participation of women, the increasing number of single parent families (and families where the female is the primary breadwinner), and changes in the nature of work (e.g., the 24/7 economy) have contributed to greater work-family conflict. The consequences of managing these dual responsibilities are also [unequally experienced](#) across gender, race/ethnicity, age, and socio-economic status. These challenges were exacerbated when the COVID pandemic severely limited the availability of the formal care infrastructure (e.g., childcare and school), and families had to increase their caregiving activities. Policy makers and employers have attempted to support working caregivers by developing policies such as paid family leave and paid sick leave – including [increased access](#) to paid leave during COVID – but [access to these supports](#) are not equally distributed.

Some employers provide paid leave as part of an employee benefit package. The proportion of workers who have access to employer-provided paid parental or family leave varies across different surveys. The [National Compensation Survey](#) tends to report the lowest numbers (24% of private industry workers with access to paid family leave in 2022) but a greater percentage of workers in [other surveys](#) of workers report being able to take paid leave for [family and medical reasons](#). These types of benefits increased early in the pandemic, [declined in the second and third years](#) of the pandemic, and have started to increase again in 2023. But, they are still [more likely to be available to those who work full-time, have high wages, and are highly educated](#).

For more than 30 years, most employees have been [protected by the Family and Medical Leave Act](#) (FMLA) when taking leave from work to care for themselves, for a new child, or for a seriously ill child, spouse or parent. FMLA provides the right to job-protected, unpaid time off to [eligible employees](#). While FMLA was a major first step in public leave benefits in 1993, FMLA’s protections are not equally available to all workers – only [56% of employees are eligible – and](#) lack of pay puts leave taking out of reach for many. Yet, these protections are crucial for employees and working families. One in five Black (21%) and Hispanic (20%) employees without FMLA protections report that taking family and medical leave resulted in [losing their job](#) – higher than reported by those covered under the FMLA (6% and 16%, respectively).

¹ Views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. Department of Labor.

To address disparities in access to FMLA and lack of paid family leave more generally, since [2002 fourteen states, including the District of Columbia, have adopted public policies that provide paid family and medical leave benefits when workers need time off for covered purposes](#). These state policies also cover a broader set of workers than the FMLA by including those working in smaller businesses and those with shorter work experience. The primary inequality in these laws relates to geography—only workers living in these states are covered.

One other type of inequality relates to differences in access to paid leave for new parents compared to access to paid leave for family caregiving. Until recently, most of the attention and research on paid leave focused on new parents; yet as the population continues to age, the need for eldercare and for supporting those who provide that care will only continue to increase. There is a [similar disparity](#) in access to paid leave for eldercare providers compared to parental leave. [One study](#) shows that 53 percent of fulltime workers report that they have access to paid leave for parental leave versus only 42 percent reporting access to paid leave for elder care of other types of family caregiving, and these disparities have been corroborated in [other studies](#) as well. Studies have also found that the take-up rate for family care benefits is also much lower than for parental care, and that some of this difference has been attributed to a [lack of awareness about these types of benefits](#). This discrepancy in availability between parental and family paid leave is also seen across OECD countries: [while 37 countries provide paid leave for new mothers only 32 provide paid leave to new fathers](#). For [family care](#), 35 provide paid leave to parents caring for children with health needs and only 25 provide paid leave for caregivers of a family member who is not a child. Among the OECD countries that do have family caregiving leave, that leave is often [less generous than what is available for new parents](#).

The benefits of paid family and medical leave are supported by research on existing state programs as well as [international evidence](#). [Positive outcomes](#) for paid parental leave include two-generational benefits from improved birthweight outcomes, increased breastfeeding, and [lower infant mortality](#). The introduction of paid family leave in California led to [more fathers taking leave](#), and taking longer leaves, both of which can have long-term impacts on father involvement. For those with aging parents or spouses in poor health, living in a state with paid family leave increases labor market attachment as well as an increased likelihood of being a [working caregiver](#) and a decline in reports of being depressed or in poor health. Moreover, evidence shows that paid family leave programs can help reduce inequality in access to leave. Indeed, simulation models suggest that a public program does increase paid leave benefits for [lower wage workers and lower income families](#). Data for [Washington](#), the first combined paid family and medical leave program to provide benefits contemporaneously, shows that benefits from the state program are disproportionately reaching women and workers of color needing medical or family leaves.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic made the overall lack of support (and the disparities in that support) for working parents and family caregivers impossible to ignore. Workers needed paid leave when they were sick with COVID, when they were required to quarantine after being exposed to COVID, or when they needed to provide care for sick children or family members, or provide care when schools or child care providers were closed. The US federal government responded to this crisis by passing the Families First Coronavirus Response Act ([FFCRA](#)), which required certain employers to provide employees with paid sick leave or expanded family and medical leave for specified reasons related to COVID-19. The FFCRA broadened the allowable reasons for taking paid leave to include not only workers' own health needs, but also to meet family caregiving needs from both illness and mitigation efforts such as school and child care closures. However, exemptions in the FFCRA meant [millions of workers were not covered](#). The policy was only in place temporarily and expired on December 31, 2020. Data on take up of the FFCRA benefits provided as tax credits to employers is sparse, but [GAO](#) has reported that employers' low awareness or understanding and lack of administrative report for accessing credits may have reduced usage of the credit based on interviews with business representatives and payroll or tax professionals.

In addition to the federal COVID paid leave response, 10 states and 22 cities and counties [enacted paid sick leave policies](#) that exceeded FFCRA requirements. Examples of these extensions included allowing paid leave to be used to obtain a vaccination, extending eligibility to gig workers, and covering leave for those who were not actively sick, but who had been exposed to COVID and needed to quarantine. Many of these responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have since expired, but several states explicitly recognized the possibility of future health public health emergencies, and put in place [policies](#) that would provide additional paid leave supports when such public health emergencies were announced.

The COVID-19 pandemic served to highlight the challenges that families face in managing the dual responsibilities of work and caregiving, and served as a warning of how unanticipated events such as a public health emergency could completely undo the plans that families had developed for addressing such challenges. Research has documented the importance of paid leave in [reducing the spread of COVID-19 at the start of the pandemic](#). Emergency policies were able to [reach lower-wage service workers](#), [reduce inequality in access to leave](#), and [increase vaccination rates](#) including among socially vulnerable populations. A great deal of suffering and lives might have been saved if such policies had been in place and familiar to workers at the start of the pandemic. Given the ongoing circulation of new variants and the threat of what a next virus might bring, COVID-19 strengthened the case for a national paid leave policy to protect workers and their families in health emergencies. Such a program should be broad, comprehensive, progressive, and responsibly financed. Based on existing state-level policies, a national policy should cover a wide range of family needs, provide leave for care needs across family types, provide adequate benefits to underpin family security, and protect jobs and workers from any retaliation for taking leave. It should also be structured to ensure that

workers who need it most — low-income workers, workers of color, and other marginalized groups — can use it. This will require thoughtful design, outreach, and administration.

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Dads Home With Kids Peaked During The COVID-19 Pandemic - But Not for The Reason You Think

A briefing paper prepared by Arielle Kuperberg, University of North Carolina – Greensboro, Sarah Thébaud, University of California, Santa Barbara, Kathleen Gerson, New York University, and Brad Harrington, Boston College, for the Council on Contemporary Families symposium The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Gender Equality.

More dads were out of the labor force during the COVID-19 pandemic than ever before. In 2021, 15% of U.S. dads who lived with their children weren't working, and weren't actively searching for work – an all-time high (see Figure 1).

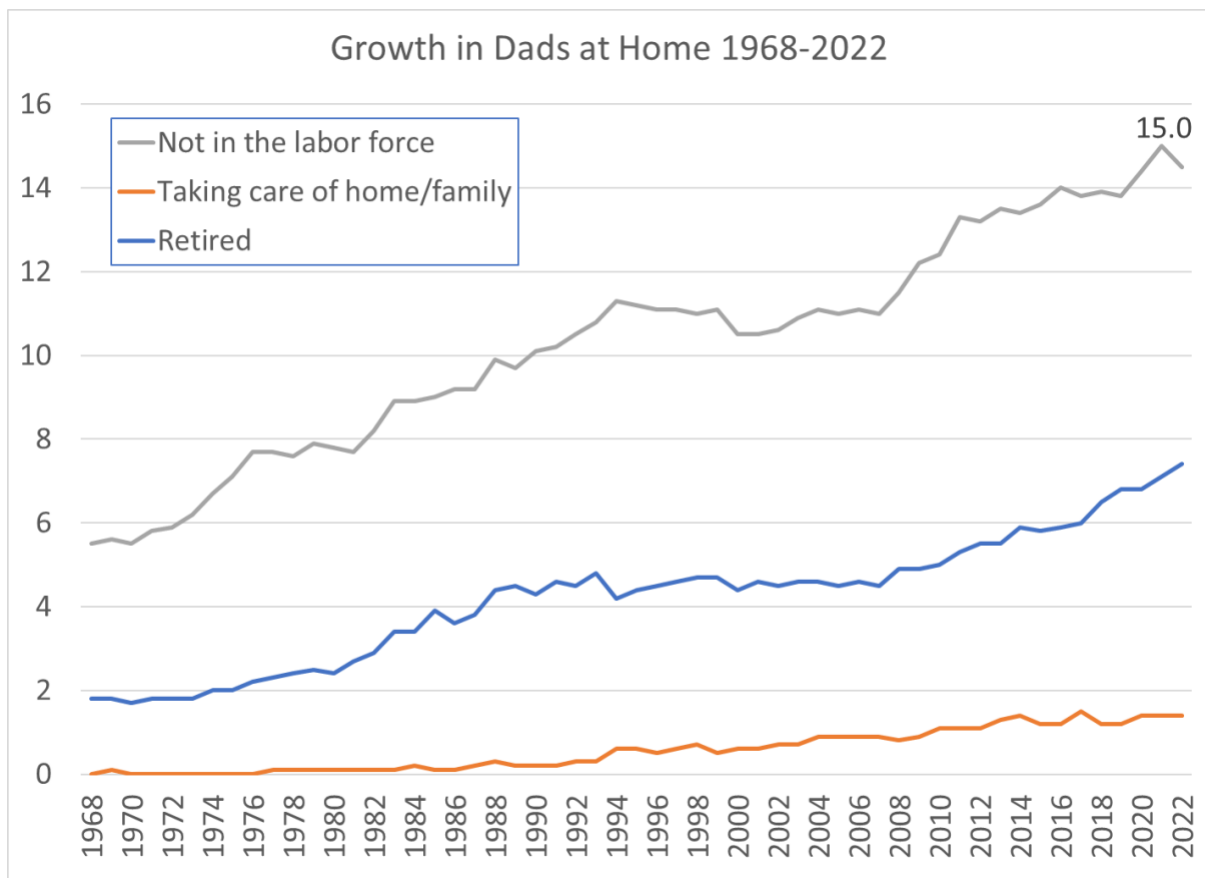


Figure 1: Growth in Dads at Home, 1968-2022. Analysis of Current Population Survey Data, Yearly March Supplement, conducted using the ipums.org online data analyzer. Analysis includes all men living with their own children under age 18 at time of survey, and is nationally representative of the United States. Update and expansion of results [previously published](#). Data analyzed by authors for Council on Contemporary Families.

But according to them, it wasn't because they were taking care of the kids. Only one-percent of dads who lived with their children in 2021 and 2022 (fewer than 1 of 10 dads out of the labor force) said they were not looking for a job because they were taking care of home and family. Instead, **almost all of the recent growth in dads out of the workforce has been the result of an increase in those who report that they are "retired."** In 2000, 4.4% of dads living with their minor children were retired; by 2022, this had risen to 7.4%, accounting for about half of dads living with their children who were out of the labor force.

The rise in retirement rates was a result of two trends. One is that **fewer young men are having children**. Recent PEW reports found that [63% of young men are single](#), and that [birth rates have dropped to record lows](#). Our analysis of the [Current Population Survey – March Supplement](#), a nationally representative annual survey of U.S. adults, found that in 2000, 44% of men in their 30s were not living with any of their own minor children - but by 2022 this number was almost 55%. We found rates of fatherhood are staying steady for men in their 40s and slightly growing among men in their 50s and 60s, so a larger share of dads are older.

Second, our analysis of the data found a growing share of even younger dads in their 50s, 40s, and even 30s say they are retired. During the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, more dads retired than usual, as health risks, lack of child care, and labor market upheavals drove many workers out of the paid workforce. Taken together, the increase in fathers out of the paid labor force **are more a result of trends in fathers' aging and retirement than changing ideas about gender, work and parenthood.**

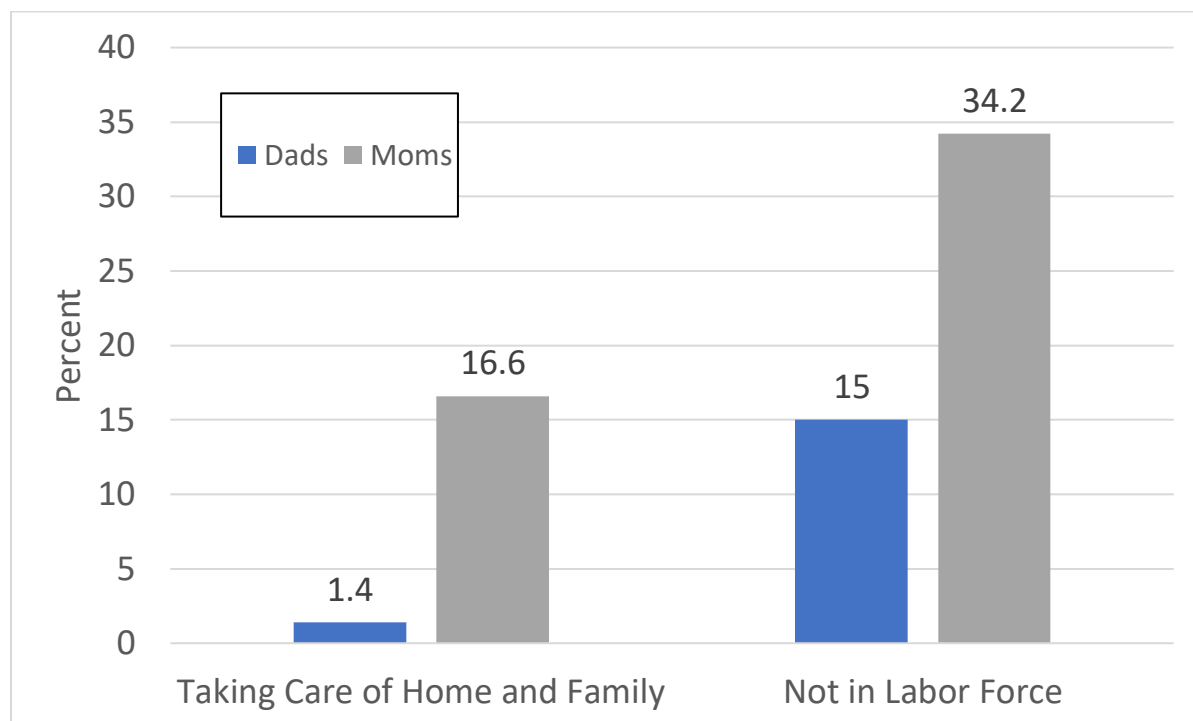


Figure 2: Fathers and Mothers Living with their own Children under Age 18, 2021. Authors' Analysis of Current Population Survey – March Supplement Data.

But why *aren't* more dads stepping up to stay home to care for home and family? After all, [in an increasing number](#) of families, including an increasing number of two-parent [married families](#), mothers are the sole or “primary earners” (earning over 60% of the household income) for at least part of their children’s childhood. But while rates of moms staying home with kids have declined over time, we found that even when the proportion of dads out of the labor force reached peak rates in 2021, mothers living with their children were over ten times as likely as fathers living with their children to report they were home to take care of home and children (see Figure 2).

Our collective research suggests that culturally entrenched ideas about masculinity, fatherhood, and breadwinning still shape gender differences in staying home to care for children. Although men value care, and society increasingly values fathers as caregivers, dads are still most strongly judged on their roles as workers and financial providers, limiting their ability to comfortably take on caring roles.

In research-in-progress on trait desirability for American men and women, Thébaud & colleagues find that, in one sense, people’s perspectives on masculinity *do* appear to be evolving: most people believe it is highly socially desirable for men, especially fathers, to be caring, supportive, family-oriented, kind, and affectionate. In fact, these traits were perceived to be just as desirable in men as other, more stereotypically masculine, attributes like competitiveness and risk-taking. However, they also found that this apparent desirability for men to be engaged in caregiving is overshadowed by an extremely strong and durable expectation that men prioritize work: ***being hardworking, ambitious, career-oriented, and a provider were rated as the most highly desirable attributes in men.***

Additional research by Harrington, Thébaud and colleagues further illustrates this duality in fatherhood expectations. In a [study](#) of more than a thousand working parents in professional occupations, **more than three quarters would ideally prefer to share caregiving responsibilities equally with their spouse. But fewer than half were actually able to achieve that ideal in their day to day lives.** Why? Workplace culture and expectations – especially the often taken-for-granted notion that the best workers are those who prioritize work over outside responsibilities – are one important culprit. That is, even when fathers would ideally like to share caregiving equally with their spouse, and even when they work in organizations that offer generous policies and benefits, the presence of intense work demands and expectations in their workplace can dramatically reduce their chances of achieving that ideal.

Restrictive ideas about masculinity, gender and work also shape young people’s outlooks. In [another study](#) by Gerson, 120 millennials were interviewed about how they envisioned their work and family ties. She found that most men and women aspired to share paid work and caregiving in an egalitarian partnership, yet they were skeptical about the chances of achieving this goal. Men felt constrained by the need to put work first, which meant they looked to a partner to do most of the caregiving. Yet women did not share this view. ***They wished to avoid a “traditional” relationship that expected them to do most of childcare, even if that meant***

remaining single and either forgoing childbearing or bearing and supporting a child on their own. Such perspectives may explain recent declines in childbearing.

The enduring expectation that fathers should prioritize work is apparent in how stay-at-home dads are viewed and treated. Research by [Kuperberg and colleagues](#) examining news articles about stay-at-home dads over 30 years indicates that while stigma surrounding stay-at-home dads has declined over time, dads who voluntarily *choose* to stay home with their kids are still described as being ridiculed, excluded, and socially isolated, receiving “strange looks” and “snide comments.” This persistent stigma may explain why out-of-work dads in their 30s, 40s, and 50s increasingly describe themselves as “retired,” but not “taking care of home and family.”

This kind of social environment - in which father’s caregiving is highly valued, but their employment and career devotion remains virtually non-negotiable - severely limits the range of options that parents face when it comes to figuring out how to best organize work and family responsibilities.

To achieve gender equality in work and family roles, it seems clear that we need greater attention to fathers, fatherhood, and ideas about masculinity and work. The pandemic pushed more fathers to “retire” before their children were adults, and potentially take on more caretaking roles at home. Other research in this symposium also finds that remote work led to greater equality in home roles. As more dads gained experience with caretaking roles during the pandemic, and economic forces continue to shift, families may continue to rely on dads for childcare at higher rates, creating new possibilities for families.

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Work-Family Stressors, Gender, and Mental Health During COVID-19 and Beyond

A briefing paper prepared by Daniel L. Carson, University of Utah, and Melissa A. Milkie, University of Toronto, for the Council on Contemporary Families symposium The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Future of Gender Equality.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a stressful time for American adults. Indeed, rates of clinical depression and anxiety were [300% higher](#) in the early days of the pandemic than they were the previous year. Not only was there [substantial concern and worry about the virus](#) itself, but social measures to stem the virus spread (i.e., lockdowns; school closures) created work-family stressors for many adults, [parents especially](#). Like other impacts of the pandemic, work-family stress was not distributed evenly as [US mothers' mental health appeared most negatively affected](#). Given [pre-existing gender disparities in psychological well-being](#), the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated gender inequalities in mental health. This brief focuses on gender differences in psychological distress and its links to work-family stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic. We highlight how the pandemic may have magnified existing differences in well-being between mothers and fathers and conclude with a discussion of interventions that are needed to reduce these inequalities.

COVID and Mental Health

In addition to its obvious costs to life and physical health, the COVID-19 pandemic took a big toll on psychological well-being. In the United States, estimates from the [US Census Household Pulse Survey](#) indicate that one-third of the adult population suffered from clinical levels of depression and anxiety during the early days of the pandemic. In contrast, estimates indicate that [only 10%](#) of US adults reported clinical levels of anxiety and depression in 2019. Worse yet, the number of depressed and anxious adults increased as the pandemic persisted, rising to more than 2 in 5 by the end of 2020. Today, psychological distress remains elevated compared to pre-pandemic levels. Estimates indicate that as of June 2023, nearly one-third of US adults still suffered from clinical levels of anxiety and/or depression.

Work and Family Roles and Psychological Distress During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

One of the primary reasons psychological distress increased during the COVID pandemic is that it created a great deal of stress in people's work and family roles. Social distancing measures designed to stem the transmission of COVID (e.g., closures of schools, childcare centers, non-essential services, and changes in work conditions) had numerous impacts. First, many people

experienced a reduction in social integration, social support, and loss of potentially valued identities – all of which are central to mental health. Indeed, [loneliness](#) and [job loss](#) were two of the strongest predictors of mental health during the pandemic. Job loss also threatened mental health through financial hardship.

Second, roles and their responsibilities [became increasingly overwhelming](#), particularly for mothers, due to the loss of childcare, school, and informal parenting supports. Both men and women increased their [time in housework and childcare during the pandemic](#), though women continued doing the majority share of these tasks. Time in both [physical](#) and [mental](#) domestic labor during the pandemic was positively associated with increases in psychological distress, but primarily for women. Yet, at least for a time, fathers increased their relative share of domestic labor, particularly when they were able to work from home; this increase in equality was associated with [perceptions of better relationship quality](#) among mothers. Occupational changes occurred too, with some jobs becoming potentially better due to remote work and less commuting time, and other jobs largely populated by women such as essential service, teaching, and health care work, [becoming increasingly difficult](#) due to potential virus transmission, [staff shortages, and other problems](#).

Third, at least in the early days of the pandemic, conflicts between work and family obligations for US parents [appear to have worsened](#), on average. Among those who remained employed during the pandemic, increases in distress were limited largely to parents and tied to work-family conflict and adjustments to paid work schedules. Parents who were essential workers had to worry about facilitating virtual school or arranging care, while remote-working parents faced with the [blurring of boundaries](#) between home and work, had to juggle paid work while simultaneously monitoring and educating children. In the US at least, psychological distress was tied especially to interference of domestic responsibilities with paid work and the associated [guilt](#) of not meeting obligations for one's job. Nevertheless, when push came to shove, many parents, but mothers especially, [cut back on paid work](#) during the pandemic - likely to alleviate work-family conflict. Alas, [altering paid work schedules](#) was also associated with higher levels of distress.

Exacerbated Gender Disparities in Stress and Mental Health?

Gender disparities in mental health in the US grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to [steeper declines](#) in women's mental health than men's. This is likely due, in part, to the fact that women reported more feelings of social isolation, [more job loss](#), more [work-family conflicts](#), and are [more susceptible](#) to the negative effects of domestic labor on mental health than men. Though gender inequalities in mental health increased in the US, this was not the case everywhere. Indeed, cross-national examinations of psychological well-being reveal

possible reasons why inequalities increased in the US and not in other places and also suggest interventions to protect mental health and reduce mental health disparities moving forward.

Studies from the US, UK, Canada, and Australia reveal that gender disparities in mental health grew in the US and UK but not in Canada and Australia. Moreover, the pandemic appeared to affect mental health to a lesser extent in [Canada](#) and [Australia](#) than in the US and [UK](#). One reason for these differences is better government and worker supports in Canada and Australia. Though [public policies](#) to deal with job loss (e.g., unemployment insurance) were universally generous cross-nationally and appear central to [limiting family financial loss](#), access to supportive [leave and care policies varied](#). Compared to Canada and Australia, parents in the US and UK had no guaranteed access to [paid parental/childcare leave](#), leaving parents in these countries potentially more financially, emotionally, and psychologically distressed. Domestic responsibilities increased broadly in all four countries, yet in the US and UK especially, parents had fewer resources to help them handle the increase in care and educational responsibilities.

Another reason for increased mental health disparities in the US appears to be individual and cultural beliefs about gender, work, and family. [Ideal worker culture](#) is particularly intense in the US compared to many other countries. As such, the existence of family-to-work conflict and family-to-work *guilt* and its ties to US parents' distress during the pandemic is unsurprising. Additionally, though both men and women increased their performance of domestic labor during the pandemic, this increase was associated largely with increased distress among mothers only – which may be owed to persistent external and internal pressures toward [intensive mothering](#). Indeed, in the US, beliefs in intensive mothering coupled with a lack of comprehensive public policy to limit the transmission of COVID, placed mothers at the forefront of protecting family health. [Worries over COVID](#) were especially associated with maternal stress in the US.

Discussion: What about gender inequalities in mental health beyond pandemic times?

Though the WHO declared an end to COVID-19 as a global health emergency in May 2023, levels of stress and distress in US society are as high today as they were in 2020 when the pandemic started. Questions remain, therefore, as to the long-term impact of the pandemic on mental health and gender disparities in psychological well-being. While the jury is still out as to the full impacts of the pandemic for men versus women, and the longevity of some of the changes and their sequelae, research provides a potential roadmap for how to protect mental health moving forward, especially for parents, and reduce gender disparities.

Given the centrality of work to mental health, job losses during the pandemic likely had significant, long-term impacts. Mothers in less resourced positions may have been the worst off. Women's labor force participation rates [returned to pre-pandemic levels](#) in 2023, though

the [most disadvantaged mothers lagged behind as of 2022](#). Efforts to return mothers to the paid labor force, and avoid penalizing them for interruptions to paid work during the pandemic, are essential to promoting gender equality moving forward.

Though rates of labor force participation have returned to normal, one change that is proving to last is remote work, as a [much larger portion of workdays are currently](#) done remotely compared to pre-pandemic times. Yet, whether the new climate of remote work reduces or exacerbates gender disparities in mental health may depend on how it is used and by whom. Prior to the pandemic, a substantial proportion of parents reported elevated levels of distress linked to [time deficits](#) with their children. During the pandemic, parents were able to spend more time with children in part due to remote work, suggesting that remote work may have somewhat protected mental health, [at least for mothers](#). Potentially, [valued time with children could continue](#) in some form post-pandemic for those with increased access to autonomy, remote work, or other expanded control over paid work commitments, leading to improvements in well-being.

At the same time, [working mothers managed homeschooling](#) much more so than fathers and were overloaded due to stretched roles of supervision and care while children were locked down. Women experience more work-family conflicts due to high expectations at home and job characteristics (i.e., less autonomy) that don't provide them enough or the right kinds of freedom or resources. Though being home has benefits by potentially providing more parental fulfillment and easing of managing home demands, remote work by mothers coupled with primary responsibility for domestic labor, without partners also stepping up, would likely exacerbate gender mental health disparities. In contrast, remote work by fathers could reduce gender disparities broadly, including in mental health. Not only does domestic labor have little impact on men's mental health (vs. the negative effect for women), but men who work remotely also do more domestic labor. This was true both [before](#) and [during the pandemic](#).

In all, the pandemic allowed us to see more closely the problems with work roles, family roles and connection between them that undermine mental health in the US. [Both structures and cultures](#) need to change in order to better people's, especially women's, lives. Structurally both government and workplace policies matter; the exacerbated gaps between U.S. mothers' and fathers' mental health that emerged due to overwhelming demands in roles and work-family conflict could be mitigated by policies such as paid parental/childcare leave, increased autonomy, remote work, low-cost quality child care, a 4-day workweek and so on. Additionally, direct child credits, as well as guaranteed paid time off and vacations could go a long way to reducing work-family conflicts and stressors through provision of financial supports. Yet, despite the pandemic creating a great reflection about our values around time, relationships, and work, the culture of ideal workers and intensive parenting that contributes to higher work-

family conflict and pushes mothers out of paid work may be harder to change. Regardless, more awareness and social change toward “[work-family justice](#)” is possible. Nonetheless, the conversation surrounding work-family justice and gender equality must also include a discussion of parental well-being. Parents’ mental health is important not only in its own right, but also through those they care for – our future generations. The tolls of the pandemic on mental health and gender disparities in mental health cannot be ignored.

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For Further Information

Daniel L. Carlson and Richard J. Petts convened and edited this symposium. They are available for further information.

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Founded in 1996 and based at the University of Texas at Austin, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets, which journalists can sign up to receive by writing to Stephanie Coontz, Director of Research and Public Education, at coontzs@msn.com. CCF has also developed programs to train scholars to write for public audiences, and mentor the next generation of family scholars to engage with the media/public through our Early Career Scholars Program.

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