

How COVID-19 sent women's workforce progress backward^[1]

Congress' \$64.5 Billion Mistake

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AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPTS

Key findings

- The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a striking blow to a child care sector that was already failing to support all families, and 4.5 million child care slots could be lost permanently.
- There were nearly 10 million mothers of young children in the labor force in 2019. This report explores how insufficient child care could affect their work, their wages, their long-term economic outcomes, and the economic recovery.
- This report estimates that the risk of mothers leaving the labor force and reducing work hours in order to assume caretaking responsibilities amounts to \$64.5 billion per year in lost wages and economic activity.
- Without both immediate and long-term action to shore up the child care infrastructure and establish more progressive work-family policies, the United States cannot achieve continued economic growth nor protect and advance gender equity.

Introduction and summary

Four times as many women as men dropped out of the labor force in September, roughly 865,000 women compared with 216,000 men. This validates predictions that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women—and the accompanying child care and school crises—would be severe. In July, a Washington Post article—titled, “Coronavirus child-care crisis will set women back a generation”—pointed out that “[o]ne out of four women who reported becoming unemployed during the pandemic said it was because of a lack of child care—twice the rate among men.” In August, CNN ran the headline, “Working mothers are quitting to take care of their kids, and the US job market may never be the same.”

This report aims to give quantified answers to two questions: What might be the impact of the pandemic-induced reduction in child care options on women's employment and the U.S. economy? And extrapolating from those data, what are the possible implications for long-term gender equity and the well-being of women and families?

Unfortunately, too many unknowns make it impossible to predict exactly how families will react to the ever-shifting landscape of public health, employment, and caregiving. Yet the lack of a child care infrastructure or family-forward workplace policies—policies that support caregivers to both provide and care for their family members—means the challenges of this moment are leading the United States toward a catastrophe. Mothers will continue to shoulder the majority of family caregiving responsibilities, as they have both historically and thus far in the pandemic. Mothers of color will be the most affected. This will have a significant negative effect on women's employment and labor force participation rates, which will in turn have a negative effect not only on both current and future earnings but also on retirement security and gender equity in workplaces and homes.

The losses in child care and school supervision hours as a result of the pandemic could lead to a significant decline in women's total wages. This report estimates that if conditions for families do not improve—and if the levels of maternal labor force participation and work hours experienced during the April 2020 first-wave peak of infections and COVID-19 lockdowns persist long term—lost wages would amount to \$64.5 billion per year. This is a crushing loss to families and communities that are still reeling from the pandemic-induced economic collapse. Furthermore, without a significant public response, these consequences will have additional ripple effects that will continue to hurt communities and stifle the economic recovery.

This report begins by looking at the impact of the pandemic on the child care sector and how that affects families—particularly working mothers—and especially mothers of color. It then quantifies the potential loss to women, families, communities, and the economy as mothers reduce work hours or exit the workforce entirely as well as how racism and sexism contributed to these outcomes. The report concludes with a list of policy recommendations to both repair the hole in the nation's economy by building a robust child care infrastructure and establish work-family policies that would help achieve gender equity during the pandemic and beyond.

Region: United States^[3]

Tags: gender equality^[4]

women's labour force participation^[5]

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[2] <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/10/30/492582/covid-19-sent-womens-workforce-progress-backward/>

[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865>

[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/gender-equality>

[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/womens-labour-force-participation>