

Low-wage workers, women hit hardest by pandemic economy ^[1]

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EXCERPT

OTTAWA — Manitoba women and low-wage workers continue to be the hardest hit from the COVID-19 recession, while the province is the worst in Canada for jobs lost since February.

Friday's labour-force survey paints a grim picture of the impact of closed schools and businesses on Canadian families, with the wealthiest returning to a pre-pandemic situation and those least-paid losing the most.

Compared with a year ago, unemployment among Manitoba women aged 25 and older has risen more than double that of Manitoba men.

"The ripple effects are deepening, and what was affecting women just continues to do so," said Molly McCracken, Manitoba head of the left-learning Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

"This is hard to see, for sure."

Statistics Canada gathered its data Dec. 6 to 12, a month into Winnipeg's code-red lockdown.

At that point, employment in Manitoba was down 5.8 per cent compared with February, while employment dropped nationally 3.3 per cent in that period.

Manitoba's unemployment rate stood at 8.2 per cent last month, when adjusted for seasonal variations.

Across Canada, single parents of children under 6 years old have a staggering 27.1 per cent drop in employment. The situation is only slightly better among single parents of kids under 16, whose employment has dropped 16.9 per cent.

Canadians working in food services, culture and health-care are disproportionately out of work. Women are over-represented in each of those fields, McCracken points out.

She noted that women already bear more of the burden for looking after kids and older relatives.

"If you've lost your job, it's hard to get child care back when you get a new job," she said.

Employment numbers also don't account for people who still have jobs but are being paid for less than half their normal hours, as well as people who aren't working and unable to seek work.

Canadians who make more than \$35 per hour have returned to work, recuperating slightly more than the February baseline of hours worked, according to CCPA analysis of Friday's data.

Those making \$24 to \$35 an hour have seen a five per cent drop in those working a majority of their usual hours.

Those paid less than \$17 an hour face the steadiest drop in employment, with 16 per cent fewer of that group reporting being either unemployed or working less than a majority of their usual hours.

McCracken said federal and provincial efforts to top up front-line workers' pay has been helpful, but Manitoba's contracting out of public services means more precarious jobs for women working in health and social services.

She was also critical of the province over child care, arguing a new scheme to create spots in lockstep with business isn't as proven as simply funding new, publicly run spaces.

"The provincial response has been non-existent when it comes to gender issues and COVID," she charged.

McCracken also argued provinces can easily shift around federal COVID-19 supports for child care, because of the few strings attached. "The federal government needs to take more leadership and demand accountability for funds it flows to provinces," she said.

In a statement, Families Minister Rochelle Squires noted the government recently formed a new parent advisory committee to help improve child care in Manitoba, with an emphasis on choice and accessibility. Part of that is a nursery-school system that would reserve the most subsidized spots to those with lower incomes.

"Our government continues to make important progress in creating child-care choices for Manitoba families, reducing red tape and enabling child-care providers to continue meeting the needs of parents and children, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic," Squires wrote.

The Friday data also show persistently higher unemployment among younger and racialized Canadians as well as Indigenous people, compared with the general population.

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