

# Our crisis of care: Supporting women and caregivers during the pandemic and beyond <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## Excerpted from executive summary

Nearly a full year since the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic first shuttered businesses and schools across the city, much has been written about the economic fall-out caused by the pandemic, and the toll of accumulating caregiving responsibilities as family members battle the virus, child care programs close, and many children transition to remote learning. What has been largely missing from the conversation in New York City until now is real data – not just on the economic burdens, but on how the demands of our changing work and family lives have played out across lines of race, income, and gender.

It is against this backdrop that the Comptroller's Office and A Better Balance jointly administered a survey to better understand how New Yorkers are navigating professional and personal responsibilities in COVID-19-era New York City. The findings are clear: New York City is facing an unprecedented crisis of care. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated structural inequalities that force too many New Yorkers to choose between their jobs and their own health or the health of their loved ones. And it is low-income New Yorkers, New Yorkers of color, and women—overrepresented in frontline jobs, among part-time workers, and caregivers—who have disproportionately borne the brunt of this crisis.

While many employers in higher-income industries have adopted remote work or telework policies, essential workers—many in low-wage service jobs—have remained on the frontlines, putting their health and the wellbeing of their families at risk. Meanwhile, thousands of New Yorkers have lost their jobs and are seeking work. Still others, overwhelmingly women and disproportionately women of color, facing mounting care needs or having fallen ill themselves, have left the workforce altogether. These local trends are reflected nationally as well. In September 2020 alone, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, of the 1.1 million people that left the workforce, 865,000 were women; in December, women of color accounted for all of the jobs lost in the U.S.<sup>[i]</sup>

Of course, not all of the workplace changes precipitated by the pandemic have been unwelcome. Responses to the survey—representing more than 1,200 New Yorkers reflective of the city's broader demographics—make clear that New Yorkers of all backgrounds overwhelmingly want more workplace flexibility. The possibility of remote work has been a critical support for many workers who have had that option available to them and some employers have risen to the occasion.

Yet the survey also reveals that access to flexible work arrangements remains highly unequal, with low-income and part-time workers being far less likely to have access to and more likely to experience retaliation for requesting these benefits than higher-income or full-time workers. Paid time off from work has also been a crucial support for many during this time, but many workers remain unable to access paid leave—either because there is no leave available to them, or because they are not aware of or able to exercise their existing rights to paid leave. For many, the frustration with the last year's upheavals now borders on despondence, as reflected in the many comments that survey respondents chose to leave behind.

Responses also reveal that while New York City and New York State have many critical laws in place to support working families, including paid sick time and paid family leave, the City, State, and federal governments need to do a better job educating workers and enforcing these laws so that all covered workers, especially the most vulnerable, can access them. At the same time, certain gaps in the law remain and further legislative action is required to fill them.

Topline findings from the survey revealed that:

- The pandemic accelerated seismic changes to the nature of work in New York City. While those with more flexibility were more satisfied with and want to preserve their options, the vast majority of New Yorkers balancing work and caregiving want to see further changes now and after the pandemic ends.
  - More than three in four (78 percent) New Yorkers experienced a change in their employment, work location, or work hours due to the pandemic, with many higher-income respondents transitioning to remote work and lower-income respondents reporting higher rates of job loss.

- Most New Yorkers, across income levels and industries, want the flexibility that working from home offers. The overwhelming majority—roughly nine in ten working New Yorkers (92 percent)—reported that they would prefer to work remotely at least some of the time, if given the option.
  - Caregivers, especially those who care for young children, are less likely to report being satisfied with the amount of flexibility they currently have at work than non-caregivers – 55 percent compared to 69 percent.
  - Lower-income respondents, who are less likely to have access to flexible work arrangements, are also less likely to be satisfied with their employers' level of flexibility than higher-income respondents: 71 percent of respondents with incomes over \$100,000 were satisfied with their employer's flexibility, compared to only 48 percent of those with incomes below \$50,000.
  - More than one in four working respondents (27 percent) reported that they would consider leaving their job if their employer denied a request for flexibility.
- Lack of quality, affordable child care is putting many New Yorkers, especially women and people of color, in an impossible position:
  - More than half (52 percent) of women caring for children cut back on paid working hours, compared to only one in three (34 percent) men.
  - Women were also twice as likely as men (33 percent to 16 percent) to need to take time off from work due to child care responsibilities.
  - Women of color were more likely than white women to have needed to take time off to care for a child (36 percent to 29 percent) and less likely to have paid leave available to them, indicating a great lack of access to safe, affordable child care options and an urgent need for education and enforcement of existing leave laws and additional emergency leave rights.
- Fair and flexible work was crucial for New Yorkers struggling to balance the competing demands of work and care during the pandemic, yet access to flexibility remains inequitable:
  - 58 percent of working respondents reported having a flexible schedule, defined in the survey as the ability to change one's work schedule, reduce or increase work hours, or seek alternative work arrangements such as working from home.
  - While 73 percent of respondents with incomes over \$100,000 reported having access to a flexible schedule, only 41 percent with incomes below \$50,000 did.
  - Women had less access to flexibility than men, with 56 percent of women and 65 percent of men reporting that they had flexible schedules.
  - Women of color had among the least access to flexibility. About half (52 percent) of women of color reported having such access, while 63 percent of white women did.
- Many New Yorkers are facing challenges at work based on their caregiving responsibilities and need for fair and flexible work:
  - Women were more than four times as likely as men to experience retaliation related to their responsibilities as a caregiver, while individuals who live with someone with a disability were twice as likely as those who do not to have been retaliated against for this reason.
  - Caregivers with income below \$50,000 were about twice as likely as those with income above \$100,000 to experience retaliation after requesting more flexibility.
  - 11 percent of respondents of color reported that they experienced retaliation during the course of the pandemic, either for requesting more workplace flexibility or because of their caregiving responsibilities, compared to only 6 percent of white respondents. The most common forms of retaliation were being reassigned or excluded from certain job functions.
- New York City and New York State have passed groundbreaking paid sick and paid family leave laws, yet low-income and part-time workers still report a widespread lack of access to the leave rights they are guaranteed by law. This is especially concerning during a global pandemic when such laws are a key public health tool, ensuring workers can maintain their health and economic security.
  - Despite the outsized impacts of COVID-19 on low-income workers, their access to paid time off for health needs remains abysmal. While 88 percent of workers making over \$100,000 had access to paid time off to tend to their own illness, only 33 percent of lower-income workers reported the same, indicating that many low-income workers may not be receiving the sick time they have the right to by law.
  - Part-time workers also struggle to access leave, despite clear legal rights to sick leave, a serious concern as the nature of our economy continues to change with part-time work growing more ubiquitous. While 76 percent of full-time workers had access to paid time off to care for their own illness, only 24 percent of part-time workers reported being able to take time off for illness. Only 15 percent of independent contractors had access to paid sick leave.

The experiences of New Yorkers who responded to the survey make clear that equitable access to fair and flexible work arrangements that recognize and respect the reality of caregiving are crucial for workers across the boroughs. The survey also suggests that caregivers, in particular, do not want a return to “normal” once the risks presented by the pandemic subside. The status quo pre-pandemic was a culture that largely privileged work at the expense of families' health – a rigid, unforgiving, and unworkable framework for many. While New York City and New York State lead the nation in guaranteeing time off, many vulnerable workers remain cut off from critical workforce protections. Caregivers in particular are in need of additional emergency leave options and workplace flexibility.

As challenging as it has been and will continue to be, this pandemic presents a unique opportunity to re-envision our relationship to work and caregiving in New York City. The solutions to the problems raised by survey respondents are multifold and will require lawmakers, workers, and employers to work collaboratively, during the pandemic and beyond. As New Yorkers begin to look ahead to what comes next, we must learn from the lessons of the last year. That means guaranteeing support for workers where it is currently lacking, by ensuring that everyone in New York City—regardless of gender, race and ethnicity, income, disability, or immigration status—is able to balance protecting their health, caring for their families, and staying afloat economically. To that end, this report offers the following recommendations:

1. Ensure equitable access to quality, affordable child care.
2. Broaden New York City's right-to-request fair and flexible work law.
3. Strengthen outreach, education, and enforcement of the City's and State's human rights laws that support caregivers, pregnant workers, and workers with disabilities.
4. Strengthen the City human rights law so that workers who need to provide care for themselves and their loved ones are able to do so and maintain their financial security and are not penalized at work.
5. Strengthen outreach, education, and enforcement of existing paid leave laws.
6. Expand emergency leave rights in response to the pandemic and expand permanent paid leave rights.
7. Strengthen workforce protections for independent contractors and fight misclassification.
8. Ensure New York City serves as a model employer and supports businesses and workers in this changing landscape.

New York City has already demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of COVID-19. As we look towards a post-pandemic future, New York City can continue to lead the way by supporting workers and businesses as they adapt to this new environment and the changing nature of work. New York City can and must work to ensure that the post-pandemic City is a more equitable, flexible, and supportive one for New York City's caregivers. New Yorkers' economic security—and the economic health of the city—depends on it.

**Related link:** To revive NYC, invest in childcare <sup>[4]</sup>

**Region:** United States <sup>[5]</sup>

**Tags:** care work <sup>[6]</sup>

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