

Gender disparities in the labour market? Examining the COVID-19 pandemic in Alberta ^[1]

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Excerpt from summary

The initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic generated large labour market disparities between men and women; however, in Alberta these differences did not persist beyond summer 2020. Instead, the pandemic continues to persistently and negatively affect the labour market patterns of parents with young children, regardless of the parent's gender. This finding should guide policy-makers when planning for the province's economic recovery.

Using data from Alberta up to and including the December 2020 release of the Labour Force Survey, we do not find evidence that the "shecession" continued into Alberta's second round of health restriction measures. Instead, we find that school transitions to virtual learning, daycare closures, and parents opting for online learning resulted in profound and persistent effects on workers with young children compared to workers without children.

Recovery plans focusing solely on gender may be therefore insufficient for addressing the effects that different groups have experienced during the pandemic. Policy-makers should target policies towards both mothers and fathers with young children. Moreover, new policies should be aimed at supporting parents so that they do not face additional stress over how they will pay their bills and feed their families if they lose their jobs or must reduce their hours to stay home to care for their children.

The Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit (CRCB) should remain in place until all threats of school and child-care facility closures are past. Alberta has received approximately \$144 million in direct CRCB subsidies, but the weekly amount of \$500 per recipient is less than minimum wage in a full-time job, meaning parents still may be unable to pay bills and meet their families' needs. The province should top up the CRCB for lower- or single-income parents.

Employment Insurance benefits should be made available to parents who quit their jobs to take care of their children as a direct result of public health measures. As well, those parents with young children who receive welfare payments should not be required to search for jobs while public health measures remain in place.

The Alberta government needs to work together with the federal government to provide adequate support to daycare centres and schools to cover the added pandemic-related costs. Alberta received \$87 million in federal funding to help with those costs and has itself contributed \$17.8 million to extra health and safety measures in daycare centres. This is money well spent, for when parents feel their children are in a safe place, they will not keep them at home and jeopardize or lose their own employment.

However, the end of the pandemic will not mean an abrupt end to its effects on the labour market. Even though this paper finds no differences in the situations of employed men and women, the latter may experience more labour market friction in the long run, due to missed opportunities for on-the-job training and work experience. One benefit that can come out of the labour market disruptions caused by the pandemic is a renewed focus on addressing pre-pandemic inequities between men and women with children. From this perspective, Alberta should celebrate and embrace the recent federal commitment to a Canada-wide early learning and child care plan.

Region: Alberta ^[3]

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