

Why haven't U.S. mothers returned to work? The child-care infrastructure they need is still missing. ^[1]

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Excerpted

Last Friday's U.S. job numbers show that mothers' employment likely remains low. While the economy gained over a half-million jobs, it lost 65,000 in education. Child-care centers remain heavily understaffed, with virtually no job gains — including more than 100,000 fewer child-care workers in October 2020 compared with October 2019. All of these are jobs often staffed by women with children at home.

That's consistent with our research, which finds that U.S. mothers have consistently been hit hardest by the coronavirus pandemic's economic effects. Based on our own calculations from the U.S. Census Bureau's September 2021 Current Population Survey, we find that among workers ages 25 to 54, there are currently 1.3 million fewer employed mothers than in February 2020 — but only 734,000 fewer employed fathers and 321,000 fewer employed men and women without children at home. Among mothers who remain employed, many have reduced hours to handle additional child-care and housework needs at the expense of their well-being and financial security.

These absences may be contributing to widely discussed labor shortages. That's especially so in sectors such as public education and health care, which have recovered fewer jobs, require in-person work and are where women with children at home made up a large share of the pre-pandemic workforce.

Pundits have been debating the reasons behind what's being called the Great Resignation, a trend showing workers quitting jobs at historically high rates. They've focused on employees' desires for better wages, working conditions and a fairer, more equitable work and family life. In addition, mothers with younger children have been especially challenged by the pandemic — and they are leaving their jobs at higher rates.

Why?

The data show that mothers are not fully back to work

Among parents, mothers with children under the age of 13 have had the largest reductions in employment since the start of the pandemic. Mothers' employment has dropped by 7.1 percent compared with fathers' 3.1 percent, or by more than double. We arrived at these figures by comparing employment for mothers and fathers ages of 25 to 54, in their prime working years, and living with children under age 13 in the Current Population Survey from February 2020 and September 2021.

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This means that even as the economy has reopened, mothers have struggled to return to the workforce, with a staggering 1.3 million fewer mothers employed in September than at the start of the pandemic. Black mothers and mothers with lower levels of education have had the slowest return to work. These mothers are less likely to have access to paid leave, telework options or affordable child care.

While job losses in the pandemic have been clustered in sectors dominated by women, this does not fully account for mothers' disproportionate employment loss. Mothers are exiting the labor force at alarming rates.

Pandemic child care and school closures make it difficult for mothers to work

Women still handle most child rearing in U.S. families, and so their ability to work relies on child-care centers and schools. Although many reopened this fall, not all have been consistently available, given coronavirus exposures and staffing shortages.

As recently as this September, 4.4 million women with children under 5 reported that the pandemic had disrupted their access to child care in the past month. About 8 in 10 child-care providers are experiencing staff shortages. Others have gone out of business. Research shows these closures have disproportionately affected Black and Latino families, widening inequities in child-care access and leaving parents with even fewer options for child care in an already skimpy landscape of care. As a result, millions of mothers cut work hours, lost jobs or were unable to reenter paid work.

School closures also hurt mothers' ability to work. We constructed a database of school operating status — whether they were meeting in person, fully remotely or some hybrid of the two — in September 2020 for the 9,195 U.S. public elementary school districts that serve 98 percent of the country's public elementary school students, or more than 24 million children.

We found most U.S. students in public schools that offered remote learning. When we examined these against the Current Population Survey's employment data, we found that in districts with remote or hybrid learning, mothers' employment dropped significantly compared with 2019. In these school districts, the gap between mothers' and fathers' employment widened by four percentage points compared with households in districts where kids could go to school in person full time.

In other words, for families without in-person schooling, the Great Resignation was actually the Great Push: Mothers were pushed out of jobs because they had no other care options for children.

Districts with a greater share of Black and Hispanic students were less likely to offer in-person school options, even after accounting for coronavirus rates and population density. In other words, Black and Hispanic mothers with young school-age children endured greater-than-average care disruptions, making it harder for them to return to work. In a self-reinforcing cycle, the fact that mothers cannot go back to work for lack of child care increases ongoing staffing shortages in the industries that rely heavily on mothers' labor.

Roads, child care and public school are basic infrastructure that support employment

Our research shows investments in child care during the Great Recession meant fewer families fell into poverty. We also find that in states where child care is more affordable and more easily accessible, and where federal and state programs are more generous, mothers are more likely to be employed. Without public investment, many mothers — disproportionately, the ones in low-wage jobs — are left behind, delaying a full recovery and contributing to the loss of talent.

For many mothers, the Great Resignation isn't voluntary. They have been left with impossible choices between paid work and caring for their children that make this a Great Push instead.

Mothers' disappearance from jobs is not inevitable. In other high-income countries with robust paid leave and child-care infrastructure, and that prioritized school and day-care reopenings, mothers did not experience the same major hits to employment. In other words, when parents elsewhere — and especially mothers — had paid leave and affordable, accessible child care, they were able to stay on the job.

Region: United States [3]

Tags: economic recovery [4]

gender equity [5]

child care infrastructure [6]

mother's labour force participation [7]

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Links

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