

A Year Into the Pandemic, Women Are Still Short Nearly 5.1 Million Jobs

BY CLAIRE EWING-NELSON

The most recent Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) monthly jobs report shows that the economy gained 379,000 net jobs in February.¹ Women accounted for 64.6% of net job gain last month, gaining 245,000 jobs while men gained 134,000.² Even with February's gains, however, more than 2 in 5 (42.4%) of the over 22.3 million jobs lost in March and April 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis have not returned.³ In February, 26,000 women entered the labor force, meaning they are either working or looking for work.⁴ Even with this slight gain, the net number of women who have left the labor force since the start of the pandemic remains at over 2.3 million. Women's labor force participation rate was 57.0% last month, compared to 59.2% in February 2020. Before the pandemic, women's labor force participation rate had not been this low since 1988.⁵ By comparison, more than 1.8 million men have left the labor force since February 2021. Their labor force participation rate was 69.6% in February 2021, compared to 71.6% in February 2020.⁶

Nearly 1 in 16 (5.9%) women ages 20 and over were unemployed in February, down from 6.0% in January.⁷ The unemployment rate for women ages 20 and over was still almost twice as high as the 3.1% unemployment rate for women in the same age group in February 2020.⁸ Black women and Latinas continue to be hit particularly hard by the economic crisis: nearly 1 in 11 Black women ages 20 and over (8.9%)⁹ and more than 1 in 12 Latinas (8.5%) were unemployed.¹⁰ February's jobs data also indicates that many unemployed people have been out of work for much of the COVID-19 crisis. Among adult women ages 20 and over who were unemployed last month, 2 in 5 (41.0%) had been out of work for 6 months or longer. Rates of long-term unemployment were similar for Black women ages 16 and over (40.7%), Latinas ages 16 and over (39.3%), and Asian women ages 16 and over (44.7%).¹¹

Women gained 245,000 jobs last month but are still short nearly 5.1 million jobs since this time last year.

- The leisure and hospitality sector gained 355,000 jobs last month. Women accounted for 45.1% of these gains, while making up 53.2% of the leisure and hospitality workforce.¹²
- The government sector lost 86,000 jobs last month, with women accounting for 16.3% of the losses. Women made up 57.7% of the government workforce.¹³
- The retail trade sector gained 41,100 jobs last month. Women accounted for 30.4% of those gains, while making up 48.4% of the retail trade workforce.¹⁴

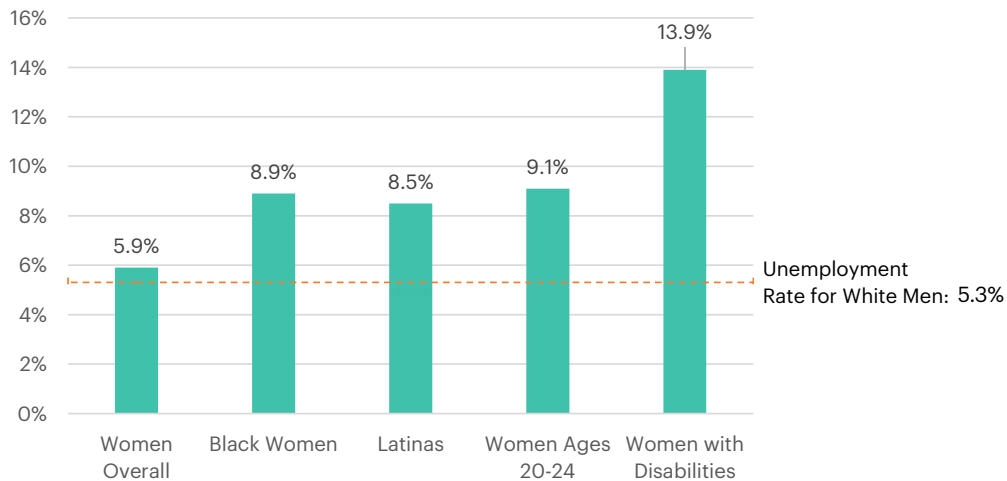
- The child care sector gained 9,500 jobs last month.¹⁵ Accounting for this slight gain, the net number of child care jobs lost since the start of the crisis is 170,200. Nearly 1 in 6 child care jobs lost since the start of the crisis have not returned.¹⁶

Due to a misclassification error in the household survey component of every BLS Employment Situation Summary since March 2020, the reported unemployment rate for February slightly underestimates the share of the labor force that was unemployed. BLS estimates that the actual unemployment rate for February was 0.5 percentage points higher than reported. The actual unemployment rates for demographic subgroups are also likely higher than reported.

The overall unemployment rate masks even higher rates for Black women, Latinas, and other demographic groups.

- Nearly 1 in 11 Black women ages 20 and over (8.9%) were unemployed in February.¹⁷ Black women’s unemployment rate was up from 8.5% in January and was more than 1.8 times higher than their pre-pandemic unemployment rate (4.9% in February 2020).¹⁸
- More than 1 in 12 Latinas ages 20 and over (8.5%) were unemployed in February, down from 8.8% in January.¹⁹ This is still more than 1.7 times their pre-pandemic unemployment rate (4.9% in February 2020).²⁰
- Nearly 1 in 16 Asian women ages 20 and over (6.0%) were unemployed in February, down from 7.9% in January, and twice as high as their pre-pandemic unemployment rate (3.0% in February 2020).²¹
- By comparison, the unemployment rate for white men ages 20 and over was 5.3% in February.²²
- Nearly 1 in 7 (13.9%) women with disabilities were unemployed in February²³– an increase of over 6 percentage points from their unemployment rate in February 2020 (7.4%).²⁴
- Pandemic-related job losses continue to hit younger women especially hard, with approximately 1 in 11 (9.1%) women between the ages of 20 and 24 unemployed in February.²⁵ The unemployment rate for Black women ages 20 to 24 was nearly twice as high (17.6%),²⁶ and the unemployment rate for Latinas ages 20 to 24 was 9.3%.²⁷

Women's Unemployment Rates (February 2021)



Source: BLS, February 2020 Employment Situation Summary Tables A-1, A-2, A-3, A-6, and A-13. Unemployment rates for white men, women overall, Latinas, and Black women are seasonally adjusted and are for people ages 20 years and over. The unemployment rate for women ages 20-24 is not seasonally adjusted. The unemployment rate for women with disabilities is not seasonally adjusted and is for women ages 16-64.

Many unemployed women have been out of work for 6 months or longer, and many of those who are working are not getting the hours they want or need.

- In February, more than 2 in 5 women ages 20 and over (41.0%) had been out of work for 6 months or longer. Among unemployed women ages 16 and over, 39.5% had been out of work for 6 months or longer, including 40.7% of Black women, 39.3% of Latinas, and 44.7% of Asian women.²⁸
- More than 1 in 7 women ages 16 and over (15.3%) working part-time in February were doing so involuntarily, meaning they wanted full-time work. These rates were even higher for Latinas (26.7%), Black women (18.8%), and Asian women (19.4%).²⁹

Women have borne the brunt of pandemic-related job losses over the past year.

Even with job gains in recent months, more than 2 in 5 (41.5%) of the over 12.2 million jobs women lost in March and April 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis have yet to return.³⁰ Since February 2020, women have lost nearly 5.1 million net jobs, and have disproportionately suffered pandemic-related job loss, accounting for 53.5% of overall net job loss since the start of the pandemic, despite holding 50.0% of jobs in February 2020.³¹

Nearly eight in ten of women's net job losses (79.6%) since February 2020 were in the following industries:

- Leisure and hospitality industry (36.4%)
- Education and health industry (20.2%)
- Government (15.9%)
- Retail industry (7.0%)³²

Women's job losses in the retail sector have been particularly striking. Women made up 49.6% of this sector's workforce in February 2020 but accounted for 98.0% of net jobs lost in the past year.³³

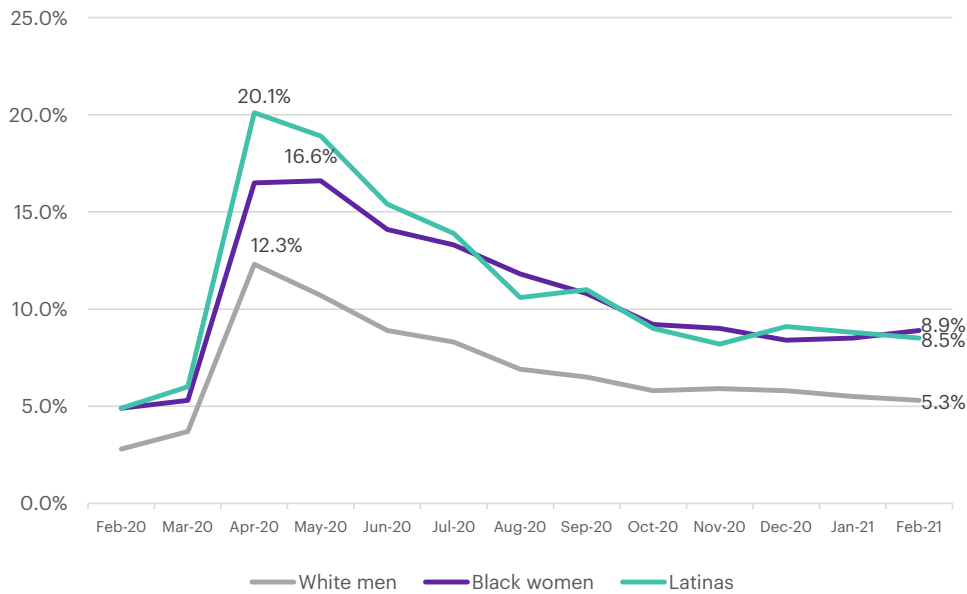
Women make up the majority of people who have left the labor force over the past year.

In February 2021, over 2.3 million fewer women were in the labor force compared to February 2020. This means they are no longer working or looking for work, which brings their labor force participation level to 57.0%, a level that women have not seen since 1988, and one that has persisted for several months of this pandemic. By comparison, more than 1.8 million men have left the labor force since February 2020, and their labor force participation rate was 69.6% in February.³⁴

In April, the month with the largest number of jobs lost ever – let alone in the pandemic – women's unemployment rate reached 15.5% – the first time women's unemployment has ever reached double digits in the over 70 years BLS been reporting this data. Men's unemployment peaked at 13.1% that month.³⁵

And while women's unemployment rate has dropped to 5.9% and men's unemployment rate has dropped to 6.0%, those overall rates mask disparities experienced by Black women and Latinas.³⁶ Latinas saw a peak unemployment rate of 20.1% in April³⁷ while Black women saw their unemployment rate peak later – in May 2020 – at 16.6%.³⁸ White men's unemployment peaked at 12.3% in April 2020.³⁹ And while these rates have come down since then, unemployment rates for Black women and Latinas were still 1.6 times higher than for white men in February 2021.

Unemployment Rate by Selected Demographics (Feb. 2020 - Feb. 2021)



Reported unemployment rates may appear lower than they are partly because people who have left the labor force entirely are no longer counted among those who are unemployed. If all 2.3 million women who have left the labor force since February 2020 rejoined and were counted among those who were unemployed in February 2021, the women’s unemployment rate would have been 8.8% in February 2021 instead of 5.9%.⁴⁰ Similarly, if the over 1.8 million men who have left the labor force since February 2020 rejoined and were counted among the unemployed last month, men’s unemployment rate would have been 8.0% instead of 6.0%.

Over the past year, 606,000 Black women have left the labor force, along with 618,000 Latinas. If these women rejoined the labor force in February and were counted among the unemployed, the unemployment rate for Black women would have been 14.1% instead of 8.9% and Latinas’ would have been 13.1% instead of 8.5%.⁴¹

1 NWLC calculations based on BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Establishment Data Table B-1: Employees on nonfarm payrolls by industry sector and selected industry detail, available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t17.htm>.

2 NWLC calculations based on BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Establishment Data Table B-1 and BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Establishment Data Table B-5: Employment of women on nonfarm payrolls by industry sector, seasonally adjusted, available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t21.htm>.

3 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Establishment Data Table B-1, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbt1.htm>. Throughout this factsheet, we measure changes since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic using the February 2020 Employment Situation Summary as a reference point.

4 NWLC calculations based on BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-1: Employment Status of the civilian population by sex and age, available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t01.htm>. Figure is seasonally adjusted and captures women ages 20 and over.

5 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Household Data Table A-1, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab1.htm>. Figures are seasonally adjusted and capture women ages 20 and over.

6 *Id.* Figure is seasonally adjusted and captures men ages 20 and over.

7 BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-1. Figures are seasonally adjusted.

8 BLS, historical data for Household Data Table A-1. Figure is seasonally adjusted.

9 BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-2: Employment status of the civilian population by race, sex, and age, available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm>. Figure is seasonally adjusted and is for Black women ages 20 and over.

10 BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-3: Employment status of the Hispanic or Latino population by sex and age, available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t03.htm>. Figure is seasonally adjusted and is for Latinas ages 20 and over.

- 11 NWLC calculations based on BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-36: Unemployed persons by age, sex, race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, marital status, and duration of unemployment, available at <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea36.htm>. Figures are not seasonally adjusted.
- 12 NWLC calculations based on BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Establishment Data Table B-1 and BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Establishment Data Table B-5.
- 13 *Id.*
- 14 *Id.*
- 15 NWLC calculations based on BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Establishment Data Table B-1.
- 16 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Establishment Data Table B-1.
- 17 BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-2.
- 18 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Household Data Table A-2, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab2.htm>
- 19 BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-3.
- 20 BLS, historical data for Household Data Table A-3, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab3.htm>
- 21 NWLC calculations based on BLS, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Unemployment Rate – 20 yrs. & over, Asian Women.
- 22 NWLC calculations based on BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-2. Figure is seasonally adjusted.
- 23 BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-6: Employment status of the civilian population by sex, age, and disability status, not seasonally adjusted, available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t06.htm>. Figures are for women with disabilities between the ages of 16 and 64.
- 24 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Household Data Table A-6, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab6.htm>.
- 25 BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-13: Employment status of the civilian population by age, sex, and race, available at <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea13.htm>. Figure is not seasonally adjusted.
- 26 *Id.* Figure is not seasonally adjusted.
- 27 BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-14: Employment status of the Hispanic or Latino population by age and sex, available at <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea14.htm>. Figure is not seasonally adjusted.
- 28 NWLC calculations based on BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-36.
- 29 NWLC calculations based on BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-27: Persons at work in nonagricultural industries by age, sex, race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, marital status, and usual full- or part-time status, available at <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea27.htm>. Figures are not seasonally adjusted and are for women ages 16 and over.
- 30 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Establishment Data Table B-5, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab5.htm>.
- 31 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Establishment Data Table B-5, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab5.htm> and historical data for Establishment Data Table B-1, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab1.htm>.
- 32 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Establishment Data Table B-5, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab5.htm>.
- 33 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Establishment Data Table B-5, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab5.htm> and historical data for Establishment Data Table B-1, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab1.htm>.
- 34 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Household Data Table A-1, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab1.htm>. Figures are seasonally adjusted and capture women ages 20 and over.
- 35 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Household Data Table A-1, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab1.htm>. Figures are seasonally adjusted and capture women ages 20 and over.
- 36 BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-1. Figures are seasonally adjusted.
- 37 BLS, historical data for Household Data Table A-3, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab3.htm>.
- 38 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Household Data Table A-2, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab2.htm>.
- 39 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Household Data Table A-2, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab2.htm>.
- 40 NWLC calculations based on BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-1, available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t01.htm>. To calculate these adjusted unemployment rates, NWLC added the 2,328,000 women who have dropped out of the labor force over the last year to the number of women in February who were in the labor force and to the number of women who were unemployed and recalculated the share of women in the labor force who were unemployed. The same was done for men.
- 41 NWLC calculations based on BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-2: Employment status of the civilian population by race, sex, and age, available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm> and BLS, February 2021 Employment Situation Summary, Household Data Table A-3: Employment status of the Hispanic or Latino population by sex and age, available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t03.htm>. To calculate these adjusted unemployment rates, NWLC added the 606,000 Black women who have dropped out of the labor force over the last year to the number of Black women in February who were in the labor force and to the number of Black women who were unemployed and recalculated the share of women in the labor force who were unemployed. The same was done for Latinas.