

Uptick in Women's Labor Force Participation Still Leaves Rate at Level Last Seen in 1991

JASMINE TUCKER

The most recent Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) monthly jobs report shows that 321,000 women ages 20 and over joined the labor force in December, meaning they are newly working or looking for work. 105,000 men ages 20 and over left the labor force last month. Even with women joining the labor force in December, women's labor force participation was still just 57.8% last month, up from 57.5% in November 2021. This remains well below their pre-pandemic labor force participation rate of 59.3% in February 2020. Before the pandemic started, women's labor force participation rate had not been as low as 57.8% since 1991.¹

144,000 Black women joined the labor force last month, but rather than joining the labor force as job holders, the entire net increase of Black women labor force participants were unemployed and looking for work.² The increase in Black women's labor force participation thus drove Black women's unemployment rate up from 4.9% in November to 6.2% in December.³ Except for Black women, every group ages 20 and over experienced improvements in unemployment rates in December.

In addition, the economy gained 199,000 jobs in December 2021. Women gained just 23.6% of these jobs, or 47,000, while men gained 152,000 jobs last month. Despite these gains, it would take nearly 18 months of growth at December's level to gain back the nearly 3.6 million jobs the economy has lost since February 2020 and it would take women 45 months of growth at December's level to gain back the over 2.1 million jobs they have lost since February 2020.

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Women gained 47,000 jobs last month but are still short over 2.1 million jobs since February 2020.

- Since February 2020, the economy has experienced a net loss of nearly 3.6 million jobs; women account for 59.2% of those losses.

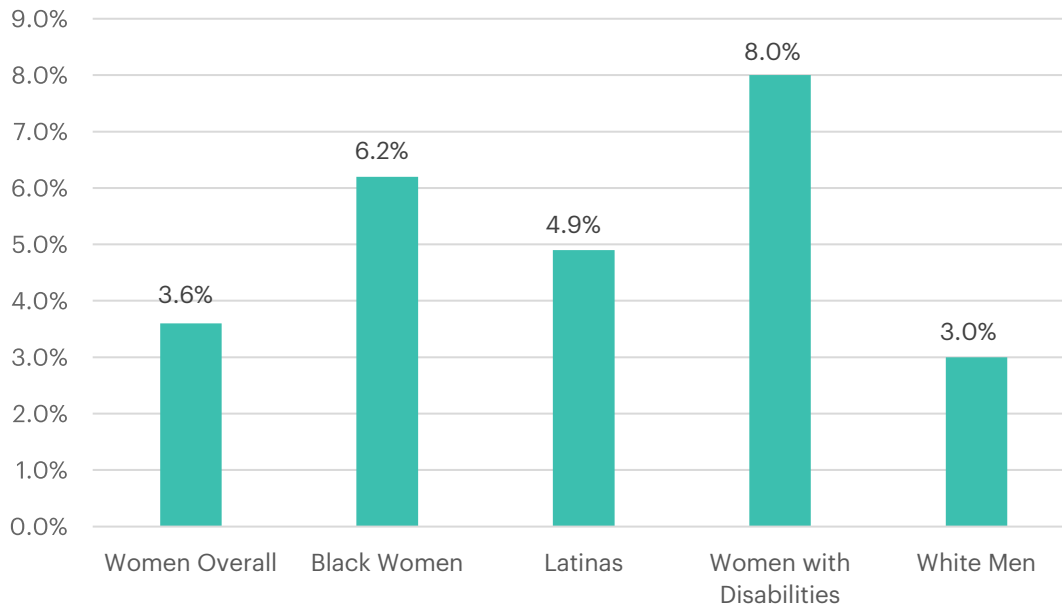
- The leisure and hospitality sector gained 53,000 jobs in December 2021; women lost 4,000 jobs in this sector while men gained 57,000. Women make up 52.8% of the sector's workforce.
- The retail trade sector lost 2,100 jobs in December 2021; women accounted for all of these losses while men gained 700 retail jobs. Women make up 48.8% of the sector's workforce.
- The government sector lost 12,000 jobs last month. Women gained 2,000 jobs in this sector while men lost 14,000 jobs. Women make up 57.9% of the government sector's workforce.
- The education and health services sector gained 10,000 jobs in December 2021; women accounted for all of these gains while men lost 9,000 jobs. Women make up 77.1% of the education and health services workforce.
- The child care sector lost 3,700 jobs last month. The net number of child care jobs lost since February 2020 is 111,400. The child care sector has lost more than 1 in 10 jobs (10.6%) since the start of the crisis.⁷

Due to a misclassification error in the household survey component of every BLS Employment Situation Summary since March 2020, the reported unemployment rate for December 2021 slightly underestimates the share of the labor force that was unemployed. BLS estimates that the actual unemployment rate for December 2021 was 0.1 percentage points higher than reported. The actual unemployment rates for demographic subgroups are also likely higher than reported.

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

- Nearly 1 in 16 Black women ages 20 and over (6.2%) were unemployed in December 2021, up from 4.9% in November 2021. Nearly 1 in 14 Black men ages 20 and over (7.0%) were unemployed in December 2021, down from 7.2% in November 2021.⁸
- Nearly 1 in 20 Latinas ages 20 and over (4.9%) were unemployed in December 2021, down from 5.3% in November 2021.⁹
- About 1 in 30 Asian women ages 20 and over (3.3%) were unemployed in December 2021, down from 3.9% in November 2021.¹⁰
- By comparison, the unemployment rate for white men ages 20 and over was 3.0% in December 2021, down from 3.3% in November 2021.¹¹
- Nearly 1 in 12 women with disabilities (8.0%) were unemployed in December 2021, up from 7.5% in November 2021.¹²

Unemployment Rates for Selected Demographics, December 2021



Source: BLS, *Employment Situation Summary Tables A-1, A-2, A-3, and A-6*. Unemployment rates for white men, women overall, Latinas, and Black women are seasonally adjusted and are for people ages 20 and over. 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.

In December 2021, over 1 in 3 unemployed women ages 20 and over (34.2%) had been out of work for six months or longer. Among unemployed women ages 16 and over, 32.6% had been out of work for six months or longer, including 32.1% of unemployed Asian women, 41.4% of unemployed Black women, and 31.6% of unemployed Latinas.¹³

Additionally, in December 2021, over 1 in 5 unemployed women ages 16 and over (20.9%) had been out of work for a year or longer.¹⁴

If the over 1.1 million women who have left the labor force since February 2020 were counted among the unemployed, women's unemployment would have been 5.1% last month.

Reported unemployment rates do not capture people who have left the labor force entirely and are no longer looking for work. If the over 1.1 million women ages 20 and over who have left the labor force since February 2020 were counted as unemployed in December 2021, women's unemployment rate would have been 5.1% in December 2021 instead of the reported 3.6%. Similarly, if the over 1.0 million men ages 20 and over who have left the labor force since February 2020 were counted as unemployed, men's unemployment rate would have been 4.8% last month instead of the reported 3.6%.¹⁵

Since February 2020, 291,000 Black women have left the labor force, along with 156,000 Latinas. If these women were counted as unemployed, the unemployment rate for Black women in December 2021 would have been 8.8% instead of 6.2%, and Latinas' unemployment rate would have been 6.1% instead of 4.9%.²²

- 1 National Women's Law Center (NWLC) calculations using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), "Employees on Nonfarm Payrolls by Industry Sector and Selected Industry Detail," Table B-1 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary* (Washington, DC: January 7, 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empst17.htm>. Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesstab1.htm>. Figures are seasonally adjusted.
- 2 NWLC calculations using BLS, "Employment Status of the Civilian Population by Race, Sex, and Age," Table A-2 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary* (Washington, DC: January 7, 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empst102.htm>. Figure is seasonally adjusted.
- 3 NWLC calculations using BLS, Table A-2 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary*.
- 4 NWLC calculations using BLS, Table B-1 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary* and BLS, "Employment of Women on Nonfarm Payrolls by Industry Sector, Seasonally Adjusted," Table B-5 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary* (Washington, DC: January 7, 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empst121.htm>. Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesstab5.htm>. Throughout this factsheet, changes since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic use February 2020 as a reference point.
- 5 NWLC calculations using BLS, Table B-1 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary* and BLS, "Employment of Women on Nonfarm Payrolls by Industry Sector, Seasonally Adjusted," Table B-5 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary* (Washington, DC: January 7, 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empst121.htm>. Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesstab5.htm>.
- 6 NWLC calculations using BLS, Table B-1 and Table B-5 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary*.
- 7 NWLC calculations using BLS, Table B-1 and Table B-5 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary*.
- 8 BLS, Table A-2 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary*. Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab2.htm>. Figures are seasonally adjusted.
- 9 NWLC calculations using BLS, "Employment status of the Hispanic or Latino population by sex and age," Table A-3 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary*. (Washington, DC: January 7, 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empst103.htm>. Figures are seasonally adjusted.
- 10 NWLC calculations using BLS, "(Unadj) Unemployment Rate – Asian, Women," *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey* (Washington, DC: January 7, 2022), <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNU04032342>. Figures are not seasonally adjusted.
- 11 NWLC calculations using BLS, Table A-2 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary*, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empst102.htm>. Figure is seasonally adjusted.
- 12 NWLC calculations using BLS, "Employment Status of the Civilian Population by Sex, Age, and Disability Status, Not Seasonally Adjusted," Table A-6 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary*, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empst106.htm>. Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab6.htm>.
- 13 NWLC calculations based on BLS, *December 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/empst/cpseea36.htm>. Figures are not seasonally adjusted.
- 14 NWLC calculations using BLS, "(Unadj) Number Unemployed for 52 Weeks & Over, Women," *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey* (Washington, DC: January 7, 2022), <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNU03008735> and BLS, Table A-36 in *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*; Figure is not seasonally adjusted.
- 15 NWLC calculations using BLS, Table A-1 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary*. To calculate these adjusted unemployment rates, NWLC added the 1,112,000 women who have dropped out of the labor force since February 2020 to the number of women in December 2021 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.
- 16 NWLC calculations using BLS, Table A-2 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary* and BLS, Table A-3 in *November 2021 Employment Situation Summary*. To calculate these adjusted unemployment rates, NWLC added the 291,000 Black women who have dropped out of the labor force since February 2020 to the number of Black women in December 2021 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.