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# **RESILIENT BUT NOT RECOVERED**

**MOTHERS IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS**

# **Author**

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# **Acknowledgements**

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# Introduction

**Parents, especially parents of color,** have long been failed by racist, sexist policies that make it nearly impossible to balance work and caring for children. The COVID-19 pandemic thrust these experiences into the spotlight, as caregiving demands intensified for many parents—especially mothers—while our nation's caregiving infrastructure neared collapse. These pressures, in turn, severely strained many mothers' household finances and their mental health.

But the pandemic also created a moment to reevaluate existing policies and supports for mothers and their families and to listen closely to what they want. In 2022, the National Women's Law Center partnered with polling firm GQR to hear from moms across the country about how they have been faring in the pandemic. This analysis captures key findings from that research, highlighting how two years of the pandemic have affected mothers' jobs, their finances, their health, and their lives—and detailing the investments and supports they need to thrive.

## About the Data

Unless otherwise noted, data in this fact sheet is from a February 2022 poll conducted by polling firm GQR and the National Women's Law Center (the "NWLC polling"). The poll includes a nationally representative base sample of 1,000 adults in the United States, in addition to oversamples of Black women, Latinas, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) women, women who left the workforce at some point during the pandemic, women in low-paid jobs making \$15/hour or less, and state oversamples in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, and West Virginia.<sup>1</sup> Quotes featured are from participants in focus groups and in-depth interviews led by Sprout Insight in December 2021.<sup>2</sup>

## Parents in this survey

One in three people surveyed (33%) identify as parents.<sup>3</sup> Among these parents, more than one-third of mothers (34%) and fathers (34%) have young children under the age of 5. Dads are more likely to be married (70%) compared to moms (52%).<sup>4</sup> Over one in 10 parents (11%) identified as LGBTQ and nonbinary people.<sup>5</sup> Nearly two in five mothers have a college degree or higher education (38%), compared to 42% of fathers. On top of their other responsibilities, more than three in 10 mothers (31%) and one in four fathers (25%) are caring for an ill or disabled family member full time, part time, or occasionally.

## The pandemic has been especially disruptive for mothers' jobs and economic well-being.

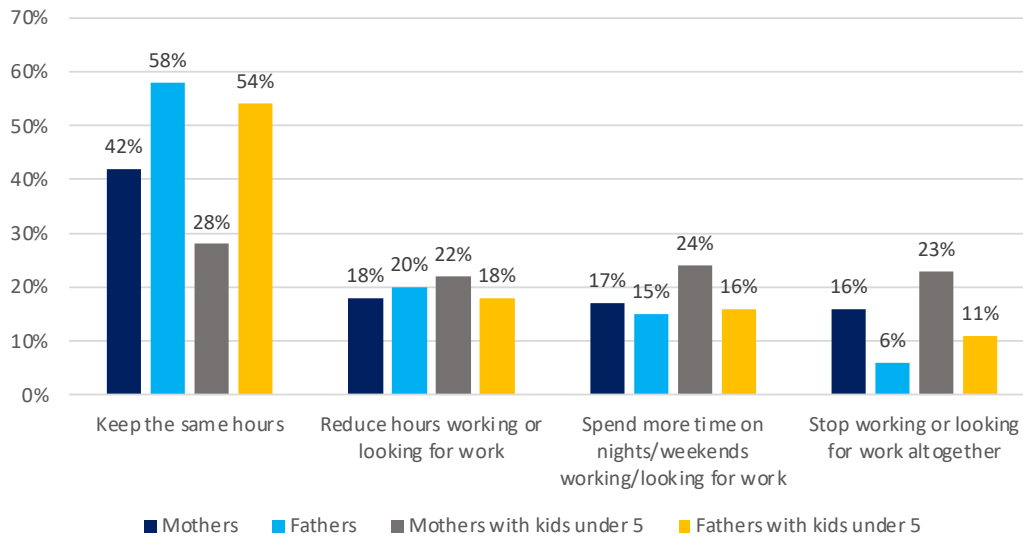
Between February and April 2020, the U.S. economy shed nearly 22 million jobs, more than half of which (54%) were held by women—and during the same period, more than 3.6 million women and over 3.4 million men exited the labor force, meaning they were no longer working or looking for work.<sup>6</sup> While both employment and labor force participation rates have rebounded from their pandemic lows, as of July 2022, men have recovered all of their net jobs lost to the pandemic while women are still missing 100,000 jobs—and there are still 579,000 fewer women in the labor force in July 2022 than in February 2020. While 183,000 men left the labor force in July, women

still make up 88% of net labor force leavers since February 2020.<sup>7</sup> Heightened caregiving demands and ongoing disruptions to school and child care—including staffing shortages at schools and child care facilities—appear to have played a substantial role in both undermining women's ability to work during the first two years of the pandemic and in holding some back from re-entering the workforce today.<sup>8</sup>

**“It’s been really, really hard, because . . . they were out of school, and with them out of school, that pretty much put my work to a halt anyway, because somebody had to be there to watch them.”**

*– White woman, Georgia; has held several jobs during pandemic, currently works repairing washing machines*

Though many parents took on additional child care responsibilities during the pandemic, mothers—especially those with young children—typically took on a greater share than fathers and experienced a greater impact on their work as a result,<sup>9</sup> particularly when faced with the school and child care disruptions that have been a persistent feature of the pandemic. In NWLC's polling, only 42% of mothers, and 28% of mothers of children under 5, say they maintain their usual work hours when their children are not in school in person or they do not have child care, compared to 58% of fathers and 54% of fathers with children under 5. Nearly one in six mothers (16%)—including nearly one in four mothers with children under 5 (23%)—report that they stop working (or looking for work) when their children are not in school or child care, compared to just 6% of fathers and 11% of fathers with children under 5.

**When your child(ren) are not at school in person or when you do not have child care, do you:**

The disparities between mothers and fathers are particularly evident in who has been able to return to work: Among parents who lost or quit a job during the pandemic, only 46% of mothers say they have gotten a new job, compared to 76% of fathers. And fathers

usually fare better after employment disruptions or changes: 68% of fathers who lost or quit their job, had reduced hours, or changed jobs during the pandemic say their new position is somewhat or much better, compared to only 48% of mothers.

**Among parents who lost or quit a job during the pandemic, only 46% of mothers say they have gotten a new job, compared to 76% of fathers.**

**“I was looking at so many different things. Like, oh, maybe I can do another support role, or I can do customer service, or . . . retail. [But] anything I was trying to even get into, to try to figure out if there was another way to pick up more hours . . . I was like, what do I do with the kids?”**

*Asian American woman, Georgia; works as a project manager, has had her hours reduced during the pandemic*

# COVID upended parents' lives and plans and had consequences for their mental health.

For many mothers, employment changes and increased caregiving demands during the pandemic have strained household finances, produced new stressors, and prompted changes to life plans. Nearly two in five mothers (37%) report their financial situation has worsened since COVID began. Both financial and caregiving concerns loom large for parents: 48% of mothers and 44% of fathers name bills and expenses as one of their top two sources of stress, while 35% of mothers and 24% of fathers identify caring for children as a top stressor. More than seven in 10 mothers (71%) and two in three fathers (66%) say they have taken on a lot more responsibility for household chores and care of family members during the pandemic; this trend is particularly stark for Black<sup>10</sup> and Latina mothers, 73%

and 74% of whom, respectively, indicate taking on additional caregiving responsibilities.<sup>11</sup> The pandemic is also changing parents' plans: 28% of mothers and 34% of fathers report that they have had to abandon or delay plans for having children or delay retirement as a result of the pandemic.

**"I think parenting has just become more, I would say, times two. Because it never ends, so it just became double."**

*– Black woman, Maryland; laid off from position as a social worker and now working several part-time jobs as a cashier and child caregiver in others' homes*

The disproportionate pressures that mothers have faced during the pandemic also appear to have yielded a greater negative impact on mothers' mental health than fathers'. Nearly three in five mothers (58%) indicate COVID has had a somewhat or very negative impact on their mental health, compared to just over two in five fathers (42%). However, more than six in 10 mothers overall (62%) and about two-thirds of mothers of color (66%) who experienced a negative health impact did not seek treatment from a mental health professional. Of those who did not seek treatment, nearly half of moms of color (49%) report they could handle their mental health concerns themselves or did not need treatment—which may be driven by in part by the discrimination that Black women have faced in the health care system, including the tendency for their concerns not to be taken seriously by health care professionals.<sup>12</sup> In addition, nearly half of moms of color who did not seek treatment (45%) report that treatment or professional help was not affordable, too hard to access, or they did not have time to pursue it.

**Nearly two in five mothers report their finances are worse today than before the pandemic, and close to three in five say the pandemic harmed their mental health.**

# Mothers face lower wages and job quality relative to fathers—and many are looking for more pay, opportunity, and autonomy at work.

Even before the pandemic, mothers working full time, year round typically were paid just 75 cents for every dollar paid to fathers,<sup>13</sup> and mothers of every race were typically paid less than white fathers; for example, Black moms working full time in 2019 made 52 cents, and Latina moms just 46 cents, compared to white, non-Hispanic fathers.<sup>14</sup> And all of these gaps grow wider still if mothers' earnings are compared to fathers' without restriction to full-time wage earners, since mothers are far more likely than fathers to work in part-time jobs that, relative to full-time jobs, typically pay less per hour, lack benefits, and are more likely to feature unstable and unpredictable work hours.<sup>15</sup>

**More than two in five working mothers report being paid \$15 per hour or less.**

**“As a teacher, I feel we are so ... underpaid because of the stress. And ... when it comes to early childhood education, it's all women mostly, and we're totally underpaid for the amount of work that we do.”**

*– Asian American woman, Arizona; has worked as a preschool teacher throughout the pandemic*

The pandemic threatens to widen these gaps, as mothers continue to be pushed into lower-quality, part-time jobs or to take time out of the workforce because, for example, they cannot find child care they can afford or cannot find a job that provides adequate supports for caregiving. In the NWLC polling:

- More than three in four fathers (76%) report being employed full time in February 2022, compared to just half (50%) of mothers. Nearly one in eight mothers (12%) report being employed part time in February 2022, and one in 10 report being not employed but looking for work.
- Nearly half of working fathers (46%) are salaried, compared to just over one in three working mothers (35%).
- Among employed mothers, more than two in five (43%) report being paid \$15 per hour or less.
- Three in 10 mothers (30%) report they received no benefits—i.e., no health insurance, retirement benefits, paid sick days, paid family or medical leave, or paid vacation time—in their current or most recent job.

Looking ahead, three in 10 mothers (30%) say they are planning to change jobs or seek new employment within the next six months. As mothers look to their next job, salary and benefits are a top priority: more than half of mothers (51%) say that salary and benefits are one of the two most important features to them in a job, followed by control over their hours, the ability to work from home, and opportunities for career growth (24% each).

# Moving toward a full recovery for mothers.

Over the course of the pandemic, women have been over-represented among essential workers, unemployed workers, and unpaid caregivers who struggled to balance work with caring for children and family members. More than two years after the COVID-19 pandemic began, hundreds of thousands of women—disproportionately mothers and caregivers—have not yet returned to the labor force. The American Rescue Plan Act was a lifeline, helping millions of families make ends meet, stabilizing our collapsing child care sector, and investing in emergency public health measures. But it was not designed to address the structural flaws that left us so vulnerable to the pandemic in the first place and which, left unaddressed, will continue to yield a fragile and unequal economy for mothers and the families who depend on them.

Policies that bolster families' incomes, ensure access to health care—including reproductive health care—without cost barriers, and invest in our caregiving infrastructure to help people both work and care for their loved ones are essential. These policies are incredibly popular among mothers.

**“[A]s a single mom, it’s very difficult trying to focus on everything on the outside and then come home to take [care] on the inside, especially [when] at that point I was working two jobs.”**

*– Latina, Arizona; has worked multiple jobs during the pandemic as a bartender, house cleaner, food delivery person*

Policy	Share of mothers' support
Increase funding to make <b>home- and community-based services</b> for seniors and people with disabilities more widely available and improve job quality for home care workers	88%
Ensure families can access <b>high-quality, affordable child care</b> , making sure no family pays more than 7% of their income for child care and early educators are paid a living wage	86%
Provide all workers with <b>paid family and medical leave</b> to take time to care for a child, recover from a serious health condition, or care for a family member with a serious health condition	85%
Grant employees the <b>right to request a work schedule change</b> without fear of retaliation, and require employers to provide at least <b>two weeks' notice of work schedules</b> for workers in jobs with variable hours	82%
Fund <b>free pre-kindergarten</b> for all children ages 3 and 4	82%
<b>Increase the wage that employers are required to pay tipped workers</b> , so that tipped workers are entitled to the same minimum wage as anyone else, before tips	81%
Ensure all families can access the full <b>child tax credit</b> and continue payments that gave families up to \$300 per child monthly	80%
<b>Protect employees' right to discuss salaries with colleagues</b> , so employees can find out if they are being paid unfairly compared to their coworkers	80%
Gradually <b>raise the national minimum wage</b> from \$7.25 per hour to \$15 per hour, then automatically increase it to keep pace with rising wages	79%
Provide <b>access to comprehensive health care with no cost-sharing</b>	77%
<b>Protect the right and ability to access reproductive health care</b> , including abortion	74%
<b>Require employers to report pay data by gender, race, and ethnicity</b> to the agency that enforces workplace discrimination laws, so the agency can identify pay discrimination	71%

- 1 Margin of error on a probability sample of this size for the national base is lower than +/-3 percent. Margins of error for the oversampled groups range from +/-3.3 percent for women who left the workforce to +/-6.1 percent for AAPI women. Margin of error is higher among subgroups. GQR survey data were weighted by age, race, and census region to reflect the U.S. population, as well as weighted to income by race. For more details and reports drawn from the NWLC-GQR polling data, see <http://www.nwlc.org/resilient-but-not-recovered>.
- 2 In partnership with NWLC, Sprout Insight conducted qualitative research interviews from December 7–13, 2021 with a total of 35 working women between the ages of 25–55 years from Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Of the 35 women, 22 participated in 20-minute in-depth individual virtual interviews, and the remaining 13 women participated in three 90-minute virtual focus groups. Women were recruited to quotas for racial/ethnic background (i.e., AAPI, Black, Latina, and white) and job type (hourly and salaried). Women varied in relationship status, employment situation, and income.
- 3 Parents are those who indicated they have a child aged 18 and under living in their home.
- 4 Unmarried moms include those who are single, separated/divorced, widowed, or living with a partner as a couple.
- 5 LGBTQ and nonbinary people includes those who identify as lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or nonbinary.
- 6 Brooke LePage, “Women’s Jobs Are Being Added Back to the Economy—But Many Need Improving” (National Women’s Law Center, June 2022), <https://nwlc.org/resource/womens-jobs-are-being-added-back-to-the-economy-but-many-need-improving/>.
- 7 Figures for workers who left the labor force refer to women and men ages 20 and older. Jasmine Tucker and Brooke LePage, “Men Have Recovered Net Jobs Lost to Pandemic While Women are Still Missing 100,000 Jobs,” (National Women’s Law Center, August 2022), <https://nwlc.org/resource/men-have-recovered-net-jobs-lost-to-pandemic-while-women-are-still-missing-100000-jobs/>.
- 8 See Jasmine Tucker and Brooke LePage, “Men Have Recovered Net Jobs Lost to Pandemic While Women are Still Missing 100,000 Jobs” (as of July 2022, the child care sector was still missing over 1 in 12 jobs since the start of the pandemic); Gabe Cohen, “Child Care Centers Can’t Afford to Stay Open. Here’s What This Means for Families,” *CNN*, July 6, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/06/economy/rising-cost-child-care/index.html>; Stephanie Hughes, “A Lack of Affordable Child Care Is Keeping Women Out of the Workforce,” *Marketplace*, July 8, 2022, <https://www.marketplace.org/2022/07/08/lack-of-affordable-child-care-keeping-women-out-of-workforce/>; “‘Never Seen It This Bad’: America Faces Catastrophic Teacher Shortage,” *Washington Post*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/08/03/school-teacher-shortage/>. See also, e.g., Misty L. Heggeness et al., “Tracking Job Losses for Mothers of School-Age Children During a Health Crisis” (U.S. Census Bureau, March 2021), <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/moms-work-and-the-pandemic.html>. Additional research indicates that mothers without college degrees were more likely to leave the labor force during the pandemic; college-educated women with young children were more likely to work but also more likely to work remotely, which tends to give parents more flexibility to manage caregiving responsibilities, including more child care from fathers. See Claire Cain Miller, “The Pandemic Has Been Punishing for Working Mothers. But Mostly, They’ve Kept Working,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/11/upshot/pandemic-working-mothers-jobs.html>.
- 9 See, e.g., Misty L. Heggeness and Jason M. Fields, “Working Moms Bear Brunt of Home Schooling While Working During COVID-19” (U.S. Census Bureau, August 2020), <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/08/parents-juggle-work-and-child-care-during-pandemic.html>; Claire Cain Miller, “Nearly Half of Men Say They Do Most of the Homeschooling. 3 Percent of Women Agree,” *New York Times*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/upshot/pandemic-chores-homeschooling-gender.html>; Natasha Walter, “Guilt and Fury: How Covid Brought Mothers to Breaking Point,” *Guardian*, February 28, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/feb/28/mums-women-coronavirus-covid-homeschooling-inequality>.
- 10 Throughout this analysis we use the terms “Black women” and “white women” to signify Black, non-Hispanic women and white, non-Hispanic women.
- 11 Figures include respondents who indicated they strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement, “I have had to take a lot more responsibility for household chores and care of family members during this pandemic.”
- 12 See, e.g., Amira Lewally, “As a Black Woman, I Had to Beg Doctors to Take Me Seriously When My Brain Was Leaking,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/story/2020-10-30/amira-lewally-i-begged-doctors-to-take-me-seriously-when-my-brain-was-leaking>; Kylie M. Smith, “Discrimination and Racism in the History of Mental Health Care” (National Alliance on Mental Illness, July 2020), <https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/July-2020/Discrimination-and-Racism-in-the-History-of-Mental-Health-Care>; Anushay Hossain, “The Pain Gap: How Sexism and Racism in Healthcare Kills Women,” Simon & Schuster 2021.
- 13 “The Wage Gap: The Who, How, Why, and What to Do” (National Women’s Law Center, September 2021), <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021-who-what-why-wage-gap.pdf>.
- 14 Jasmine Tucker, “The Wage Gap Robs Women of Economic Security as the Harsh Impact of COVID-19 Continues” (National Women’s Law Center, March 2022), <https://nwlc.org/resource/the-wage-gap-robs-women-of-economic-security-as-the-harsh-impact-of-covid-19-continues/>.
- 15 See, e.g., Brooke LePage, “Part-Time Workers Are Facing Heightened Uncertainty During COVID—And Most Are Women” (National Women’s Law Center, February 2022), <https://nwlc.org/resource/part-time-workers-factsheet/#>.



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