



**NATIONAL
WOMEN'S
LAW CENTER**

Justice for Her. Justice for All.

RESILIENT BUT NOT RECOVERED

BLACK WOMEN IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Authors

Sarah Javaid and Marie S. Cole

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Katherine Gallagher Robbins, Emily Martin, Marissa Moore, Maria Patrick, Beth Stover, Jasmine Tucker, Julie Vogtman, Hilary Woodward, and GQR for their help with the development, design, factchecking, review, and dissemination of this fact sheet.

Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and the ensuing economic recession, the U.S. economy has rebounded in some ways, largely as a result of the American Rescue Plan Act and other relief measures enacted in 2020 and 2021.¹ But throughout the pandemic, millions of people lost jobs and income they have not yet recovered—and Black women have been affected especially hard. In February 2022, the unemployment rate for Black women remained at 6.1%—notably higher than their 4.8% unemployment in February 2020, before the pandemic.² By July 2022, the unemployment rate for Black women remained elevated at 5.3%, even as unemployment for women overall declined to its February 2020 rate (3.1%).³

Black women have long been failed by biased systems and structures—including racist and sexist policies—that undermine their ability to thrive. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has been especially destructive for Black communities and has coincided with a long-overdue consideration of racism in the United States—particularly anti-Black racism—illuminated the experiences of Black communities across the country. It also provided a new moment to listen closely to Black women and to reevaluate policies and social supports for them. In 2022, the National Women's Law Center partnered with polling firm GQR to

hear from Black women 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 COVID-19 pandemic have affected Black women's 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.⁴ Quotes featured are from participants in focus groups and in-depth interviews led by Sprout Insight in December 2021.⁵

Black women have yet to return to pre-pandemic employment levels, and many work in lower quality jobs without benefits.

The pandemic wreaked havoc on the economy. Between February and April 2020, the U.S. economy shed nearly 22 million jobs, more than half of which (54%) were held by women.⁶ At its peak in May 2020, the unemployment rate for Black women reached 16.6%, and it remained in the double digits for six months in 2020.⁷ While we are currently in a recovery, economic gains are not being experienced evenly across groups by race and gender. At 5.3%, the unemployment rate for Black women in July 2022 was still about 1.7 times higher than the unemployment rate for white men (3.1%).⁸

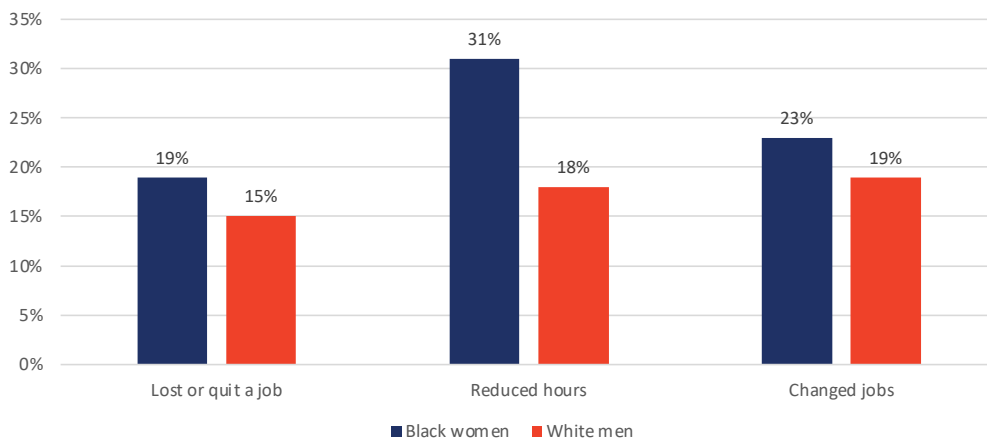
NWLC polling affirms that the pandemic appeared to disrupt Black women's employment more severely than white men's. In particular, Black women were more likely than white men⁹ to see their hours of paid work reduced during the pandemic. Among Black women who were employed in February 2020:

- Nearly one in five (19%) report they lost or quit a job during the pandemic;
- More than three in 10 (31%) report that they or their employer reduced their hours during the pandemic; and
- Almost one in four (23%) say they changed jobs during the pandemic.

“Honestly I feel like . . . I’m starting over completely. Because any savings that I had at the time . . . went towards survival basically.”

– Black woman, Michigan; has worked in different food service jobs during pandemic

Pandemic Employment Changes for Black Women and White Men Employed in February 2020



Among all Black women who lost or quit a job during the pandemic, 58% have since gotten a new job (compared to 65% of white men). And fewer than half of Black women who experienced an employment change (43%) say their new job or employment status is better than their previous one, compared to 60% of white men.

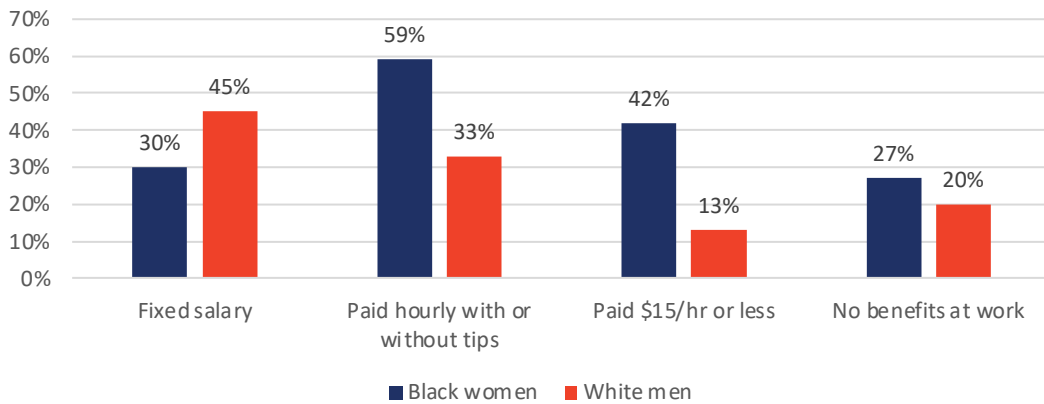
Indeed, both during the pandemic and long before it, Black women have been far more likely than white men to work in underpaid, undervalued jobs.¹⁰ More than one in three Black women (36.8%)—the largest share of any group by race/ethnicity or gender—worked in child care, health care, food service, and other front-line jobs before the pandemic started, compared to just 12.6% of white men; many of these essential roles remain low-paid.¹¹ NWLC's polling confirms Black women are more likely than white men to be paid \$15 an hour or less and less likely than white men to be in salaried jobs.

Among those employed:

- Three in 10 Black women (30%) are salaried, compared to 45% of white men;
- Nearly three in five Black women (59%) are paid hourly wages, including those who rely on tips for some or all of their income, compared to one-third (33%) of white men; and
- Over four in 10 Black women (42%) make \$15 per hour or less, compared to just 13% of white men.

Additionally, more Black women work in jobs that do not offer benefits like health insurance, retirement benefits, paid sick days, paid family or medical leave, or paid vacation time. More than one in four Black women (27%) report having no such benefits in their current or most recent job, compared to one in five white men (20%).

Select Employment and Compensation Features, Black Women and White Men



The pandemic strained Black women's mental health and increased caregiving demands.

The COVID-19 pandemic upended all our lives as it forced people out of school and work and separated them from their routines and support networks. This had a dramatic impact on Black women's household and family care responsibilities and mental health.

“[I]t was really stressful, because the teachers require so much, and also I . . . noticed that my daughter, she was starting to struggle a little bit in math, so . . . I had to scale back from my own business so I could help her a little bit more with her studies so that she wouldn't fall behind. So it was a lot.”

– Black woman, Michigan; aesthetician

- Nearly six in 10 Black women (57%) say they had to take on a lot more household chores and care of family members during the pandemic, compared to 46% of white men.
- Over one in three Black women (34%) say they have children 18 or younger living at home. Ongoing school and child care disruptions have interfered with Black women's ability to work: Among Black mothers, nearly half (45%) report they reduce their hours, work more nights/weekends, or stop working altogether when their children are not in school or they do not have child care.

- One in four Black women (25%) report they are caregivers for ill or disabled family members.

“[It's] the uncertainty. So, no job, essentially, no work is ever secure. But having been through this pandemic and still going through it, it just increases that level of uncertainty. So for me, that's why, now I have . . . anxiety because I have to worry about that.”

– Black woman, Virginia; works in the beauty industry

Over half of Black women (51%) shared that the pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health. Nearly half of Black women (48%) cite bills and expenses as one of their top two sources of stress, followed by their personal health (35%), their family's health (17%), and their job (17%). Of the Black women who report experiencing negative mental health outcomes, nearly three in four (73%) did not seek treatment from a mental health professional. Among those who did not seek treatment, more than half (53%) 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.¹² In addition, 41% of Black women who did not seek treatment report that treatment or professional help was not affordable, too hard to access, or they did not have time to pursue it.

Over half of Black women (51%) shared that the pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health.

The pandemic impacted Black women's finances, plans, and goals—and many want to work from home in higher paying jobs with better benefits.

For many Black women, volatile employment and increased expenses over the course of the pandemic has undermined their economic security: More than one in four Black women (28%) say their financial situation is worse now than before the pandemic, compared to 22% of white men. The pandemic has also prompted changes to life plans: Nearly one in eight Black women (12%) say they delayed or abandoned plans to have children because of the pandemic, and about one in seven (14%) report that the pandemic forced them to delay their retirement plans.¹³ About one in four Black women (24%, however, describe their financial situation as improved two years after the onset of the pandemic. Black women disproportionately cite more work, higher pay, and financial supports like the Child Tax Credit as their primary reasons for having improved household finances.

In NWLC's polling, more than one in four Black women (27%) say they are planning to change jobs within the next six months. As Black women look to their next job, nearly half of Black women (49%) say that salary and benefits are one of the two most important features to them in a job. Having the ability to work from home is also especially important among Black women, with more than one in four (26%) Black women naming this as a priority, compared to 16% of white men. Currently, most Black women (55%) say they only work in person, while 45% work from home at least some of the time.

More than one in four Black women (28%) say their financial situation is worse now than before the pandemic.

Moving toward a full recovery for Black women.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken hundreds of thousands of lives in the United States and continues to wreak deep financial and emotional pain for millions. While the federal government's response in the first year of the pandemic prevented greater devastation and set the stage for a strong recovery, without

further—and substantial—policy intervention, Black women will not achieve a full or sustainable recovery.

Policies that improve job quality, ensure access to health care, and strengthen financial well-being for individuals and families are critical and enormously popular, particularly among Black women.

Policy	Share of Black women's support
Fund free pre-kindergarten for all children ages 3 and 4	88%
Provide all workers with paid family and medical leave 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	87%
Increase funding to make home- and community-based services for seniors and people with disabilities more widely available and improve job quality for home care workers	87%
Gradually raise the national minimum wage from \$7.25 per hour to \$15 per hour, then automatically increase it to keep pace with rising wages	86%
Ensure families can access high-quality, affordable child care , making sure no family pays more than 7% of their income for child care and early educators are paid a living wage	85%
Provide access to comprehensive health care with no cost-sharing	85%
Increase the wage that employers are required to pay tipped workers , so that tipped workers are entitled to the same minimum wage as anyone else, before tips	81%
Ensure all families can access the full child tax credit and continue payments that gave families up to \$300 per child monthly	81%
Protect employees' right to discuss salaries with colleagues , so employees can find out if they are being paid unfairly compared to their coworkers	79%
Grant employees the right to request a work schedule change without fear of retaliation, and require employers to provide at least two weeks' notice of work schedules for workers in jobs with variable hours	78%
Protect the right and ability to access reproductive health care , including abortion	73%
Require employers to report pay data by gender, race, and ethnicity to the agency that enforces workplace discrimination laws, so the agency can identify pay discrimination	72%

- 1 Dave Kamper, "One Year In, the American Rescue Plan Has Fueled a Fast Recovery" (Economic Policy Institute, March 11, 2022), <https://www.epi.org/blog/one-year-in-the-american-rescue-plan-has-fueled-a-fast-recovery-policy-makers-should-use-remaining-arpa-funds-in-2022-to-make-transformative-investments-that-will-build-a-more-equitable-economy/>; "Robust COVID Relief Achieved Historic Gains Against Poverty and Hardship, Bolstered Economy" (Center on Budget & Policy Priorities, February 24, 2022), https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/2-24-2022pov_1.pdf.
- 2 Jasmine Tucker and Julie Vogtman, "Resilient but Not Recovered: After Two Years of the COVID-19 Crisis, Women Are Still Struggling" (National Women's Law Center, March 2022), <https://nwl.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/FINAL-NWLC-Resilient-But-Not-Recovered-3.29.22.pdf>.
- 3 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://nwl.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/July-Jobs-Day.pdf>.
- 4 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.
- 5 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.
- 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://nwl.org/resource/womens-jobs-are-being-added-back-to-the-economy-but-many-need-improving/>.
- 7 See Jasmine Tucker and Julie Vogtman, "Resilient But Not Recovered: After Two Years of the COVID-19 Crisis, Women Are Still Struggling."
- 8 Jasmine Tucker and Brooke LePage, "Men Have Recovered Net Jobs Lost to Pandemic While Women Are Still Missing 100,000 Jobs."
- 9 In this fact sheet, data from NWLC's polling on white men refers to white, non-Hispanic men; polling data on Black women refers to Black, non-Hispanic women.
- 10 Jasmine Tucker and Julie Vogtman, "When Hard Work is Not Enough: Women in Low-Paid Jobs" (National Women's Law Center, April 2020), <https://nwl.org/resource/when-hard-work-is-not-enough-women-in-low-paid-jobs/>.
- 11 Jasmine Tucker, "It's Time to Pay Black Women What They're Owed" (National Women's Law Center, July 2021), <https://nwl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/BWEPD-2021-7.26.21.pdf>.
- 12 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 Sample size for white men who responded that the pandemic impacted retirement or family plans is too small for independent analysis.



**NATIONAL
WOMEN'S
LAW CENTER**

Justice for Her. Justice for All.

11 Dupont Circle NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20036
202.588.5180 | fax 202.588.5185
www.nwlc.org

 facebook.com/nwlc  [@nwlc](https://twitter.com/nwlc)

 [@nationalwomenslawcenter](https://instagram.com/nationalwomenslawcenter)

 [@nationalwomenslawcenter](https://tiktok.com/@nationalwomenslawcenter)