Mothers Are 3 Times More Likely Than Fathers to Have Lost Jobs in Pandemic

Mothers of children age 12 and younger lost nearly 2.2 million jobs between February and August, a 12% drop, while fathers saw a 4% drop.

October 2, 2020 By Tim Henderson

Mothers of small children have lost work at three times the rate of fathers in the pandemic, a situation that threatens not only progress toward gender equity but middle-class income gains that have become increasingly dependent on working women.

Mothers of children 12 years old and younger lost nearly 2.2 million jobs between February and August, a 12% drop, a Stateline analysis found. Fathers of small children saw a 4% drop of about 870,000 jobs.

The loss was even worse for single mothers of young children, who lost 16% of jobs they held in February, compared with a 6% drop for single fathers, according to the analysis of Current Population Survey data provided by the University of Minnesota at ipums.org.

Those losses are likely to have worsened in September as more schools opened and online learning puts more and more pressure on women to help young children with schoolwork.

Angie Schmitt, a mother of two in Cleveland, Ohio, was shocked when she found out her kindergartner was expected to be in online video sessions for much of the 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. school day. The reality was even worse, draining the time she needs for work as a transportation consultant, and she's lost four months of pay.

Her school asked parents to learn one virtual meeting platform, but after an outage they switched to a different one, which times out after less than an hour, she said. The sessions require constant attention from her and her husband. She worries her 3-year-old daughter isn't getting enough of her time and that she herself is not getting enough sleep trying to keep up.

"My husband and I both have master's degrees and we are computer professionals and still the IT struggles are so intense and stressful and frequent," Schmitt said. "I can't imagine how others are navigating this."

Her husband helps but has less flexibility. "Since I'm self-employed and make less money, I'm the

main person" dealing with school issues, she said.

The changes threaten to reverse decades of progress, not only in gender equality, but also in overall household income gains for the middle class. Women's rights advocates are calling for state and federal policies to help women weather the storm by mandating more flexible school and work schedules, requiring more paid leave for family care and establishing more protection against job discrimination because child care tends to fall to women.

"This will set gender equity back quite a bit," said Ariane Hegewisch, a program director for the Institute for Women's Policy Research in Washington, D.C., adding that many advocates also see the crisis as a chance to make important policy changes to improve the lives of working mothers.

"The energy is around for finally making big changes," Hegewisch said.

Single mom Kelli Shelhorse of Frederick, Maryland, said a supportive work environment has been key to keeping her job as a middle school counselor, working at home while helping her daughters, 7 and 10, keep up with online schoolwork.

"I feel extremely lucky to have an understanding administration that always says, 'You have to take care of you and your kids,'" Shelhorse said in an email to Stateline. "So they know that I am under a lot of stress and everything falls on me, so if I need to step away to help one of my daughters they understand."

Across the country almost two-thirds of parents say their children have switched to online learning, and another 13% are using paper materials sent home by schools, according to a Census Bureau survey in early September. The sudden switch to virtual classes has required a lot of adult supervision, with common technology glitches a time-consuming dilemma.

Even when moms and dads are both working from home, women tend to get the brunt of child-care duties, including the new online school hassles. A July study by Washington University in St. Louis found that mothers of young children have lost four to five times more work hours than fathers in the pandemic.

Also, a third of working women said a spouse was not helping with child care during the pandemic, according to a University of Southern California study, leading to higher levels of psychological distress among mothers than fathers or women without children.

In a survey of Wyoming women, more than two-thirds of mothers said school and day care changes in the pandemic had a "moderate or severe impact on daily life," and a quarter of mothers were afraid of losing work because of a lack of child care. The survey was conducted in June by a group of nonprofits and the University of Wyoming.

Businesses owned by women also are taking an outsize hit. In a Hawaii state survey, female business owners were twice as likely to say their businesses will not survive the pandemic. Only 5% of female business owners said they were unaffected by the pandemic, compared with almost

23% of male business owners.

Schmitt said some of her friends have left jobs or moved children to private schools with in-person classes. She's struggling to avoid quitting her job.

"Women's earnings peak at [age] 40. I'm 38. I can't afford to take a year and a half off," Schmitt said. "I would never be able to retire or get back on my feet."

Sarah Summerlin of Silver Spring, Maryland, also faced struggles to continue her part-time job as a tutor while overseeing remote schoolwork for an 8-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter. Some of her clients with small children are hiring in-home help or forming cooperatives to hold schoolwork sessions.

"I took some time off," Summerlin said, but after a period of adjustment, the computer work has proceeded smoothly. She and her husband can work or take walks to relax while the children do schoolwork online.

"They interrupt our work pretty frequently, but usually just with simple questions," Summerlin said. "It makes for some long days but I'm nearly back up to my full caseload [of tutorial students]."

Without women's contributions, middle-class income would have stagnated in recent decades, concluded a May Brookings Institution study of the pandemic's effect on women in the workplace.

State and federal policy has been slow to react with more flexibility in job and school structure for working mothers, an issue now reaching a crisis because of the need to monitor in-home schooling for children, according to the Brookings study.

The Institute for Women's Policy Research recommended "bold public policies at the state and federal level," including closing the male-female pay gap, support for mothers unable to work because of the pandemic and more paid family and medical leave, in a September editorial.

State policy can help close the male-female wage gap with laws requiring employers to report pay disparity, laws that are already on the books in Alaska, Illinois, Minnesota and New Hampshire. Some states also have laws against wage secrecy and bans on asking new hires about past earnings, which can help equalize pay.

The left-leaning Center for American Progress also called for state and federal legislation to protect working parents from discrimination based on their caregiving responsibilities.

Among the states and cities that already have job protections for parents and other caregivers: Alaska, Connecticut, the District of Columbia, Delaware, Minnesota, New York state and New York City, according to a July report from A Better Balance, a New York City legal organization that lobbies for laws to protect families. New Jersey and the federal government offer similar protections to their own employees, protecting them from discrimination based on family duties,

according to the report.

A temporary federal rule requires paid leave, subsidized with tax credits for employers, for parents forced to stay home because of school and child-care closings. New York state sued to get an August court order allowing the leave to be stopped and resumed when needed.

Some employers are trying to bridge the gap with subsidies for nannies and other in-home help for parents.

Women are more likely to work and to hold full-time, well-paid jobs than they were in the 1970s, according to the Brookings study. But that success comes at a price: Women are more time-squeezed than ever because they're still expected to do more than their share of work in the home as well.

"Without new policies and practices that involve greater sharing of the burdens of unpaid work in the home, more support for time-squeezed working families, and higher pay for both men and women, whatever growth we have seen in middle-class incomes may disappear entirely," the study concluded.

Some states have reacted to parents' need for more help in the pandemic.

New Mexico amended rules in September to allow child-care subsidies for people working at home, and has also helped child-care providers with payments when they're forced to close their doors. Michigan is considering a bill to extend child-care subsidies to people with incomes up to 250% of the poverty threshold during the emergency.

California's budget passed in June included $152 million to help child-care providers affected by closings if they can provide distance learning services to children. Illinois set aside $270 million to help distressed child-care operations.

Rep. Micaela Lara Cadena, a Democrat from Mesilla, one of only two New Mexico state legislators with children at home, said more needs to be done to reopen child-care centers and schools so life can return to normal for mothers like herself.

"This has fundamentally changed and disrupted the lives of working mothers. It's going to take a lot of work to catch up and regain our position in the workplace," said Lara Cadena, 37, who works at home both as a lawmaker and a magazine research director, while supervising two daughters, ages 13 and 9.

She feels fortunate to work for a female-owned company that already provides flexible schedules so she hasn't had to lose work hours. Her partner, the father of her children, has often been on the road this school year for film industry projects.

Internet connections are crucial both for her work and her daughters' schoolwork, she said.

But with only the bandwidth from a dial-up connection, she has to drop out of legislative

committee meetings when her children need to do schoolwork. In the spring, one teacher held his Zoom meeting with students in a McDonald's parking lot for lack of home internet access, she said.

Her new chores include going to one child's school to pick up torn-out pages of a math book for daily lessons since the school is not allowed to send the textbook home. Pressing an online "Done!" button for assignments rarely works, so she has to help her younger daughter craft an e-mail with a screenshot of the finished work.

"This is not the district's fault. The educators, the children, the parents are all trying to deal with this unknown technology," Lara Cadena said. "We now spend twice as long trying to turn in the work as we do actually learning."

If working women continue to suffer losses, the current recession could mark a long-term setback. Just as the Great Recession forced older men into early retirement, this recession could be a setback for women with children, said Diane Lim, an economist and adjunct professor at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

"I can imagine a lot of working moms not being able to effectively keep working while their school-aged kids are stuck home with them, saying 'Well, I guess I'm a stay-at-home mom now,'" Lim said.

This article was originally published on September 28, 2020, by Stateline, an initiative of The Pew Charitable Trusts. It is republished with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.covidhealth.com/article/mothers-3-times-likely-fathers-lost-jobs-pandemic