

# Mothers' paid work suffers during pandemic, study finds

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Credit: Marty from Manitou Springs, USA. Via Wikipedia.

When COVID-19 forced schools and daycares to shut down and millions of Americans to transition to working from home, some suggested the pandemic might equalize certain aspects of gender equality as men increased their household contributions.

Four months later, however, new research from Washington University in St. Louis finds early evidence that the pandemic has exacerbated—not improved—the gender gap in work hours, which could have enduring consequences for working mothers.

"Our findings indicate mothers are bearing the brunt of the pandemic and may face long-term employment penalties as a consequence," said Caitlyn Collins, assistant professor of sociology in Arts & Sciences and co-author of the study.

Between March and April, mothers' work hours fell four to five times as much as fathers', according to the study first published online in *Gender, Work and Organization* in July.

While mothers scaled back their work hours by about 5%, or two hours per week, fathers' work hours remained largely stable. The impact was greatest among mothers of primary school-aged children or younger children for whom caregiving and homeschooling demands are most intense.

Collins and co-authors—Liana Christin Landivar at the Maryland Population Research Center; Leah Ruppner at the University of Melbourne; and William Scarborough at the University of North Texas—used data from the U.S. Current Population Survey to assess how dual-earner heterosexual married couples with children adjusted their work during the pandemic from February through April. The monthly labor statistics survey includes information from approximately 60,000 households across the United States.

They also examined a subset of households in which both mothers and fathers are employed in telecommuting-capable occupations. They found across all models, fathers' predicted work hours did not fall below 40 hours per week, indicating that while the pandemic had a major toll on

all aspects of society, most fathers in heterosexual, dual-earner households continued to put in a full work week.

"Even among households in which both parents are able to work from home and are directly exposed to childcare and housework demands, mothers are scaling back to meet these responsibilities to a greater extent than fathers. Ultimately, our analyses reveal that gender inequality in parents' work hours has worsened during the pandemic," Collins said.

The cause of this inequity is unclear. Collins said it's possible in times of crisis families revert to more traditional gender roles in the household division of labor. Or, it could be that financial stress and the need to protect primary earners—most often fathers—caused mothers to assume more of the unpaid domestic work.

What remains clear to the researchers, however, is that this inequity can have long-term, disastrous effects on women's careers.

"Scaling back work is part of a downward spiral that often leads to labor force exits—especially in cases where employers are inflexible with schedules or penalize employees unable to meet work expectations in the face of growing care demands," Collins and her co-authors wrote.

"We are also concerned that many employers will be looking for ways to save money and it may be at the expense of mothers who have already weakened their labor market attachment," they wrote.

Another potential consequence for the workplace: Future merit-based promotions and pay raises may disproportionately benefit men whose work commitments remained high during the pandemic.

The situation is not expected to improve in the near term as states reopen and onsite work resumes. Initially, telecommuting may have prevented

some [mothers](#) from more extensive job loss as schools and daycares closed, Collins said. However, with summer camps closed, daycares operating at limited capacity and uncertainty about the coming school year, dual-earner households will be faced with tough choices on how to navigate paid work and family life.

"Flexibility is key right now," Collins said. "By easing work demands and allowing flexibility where possible in the coming months, employers can prevent long-term losses in women's labor force participation. And fathers should be encouraged to provide more hours of care for their children, even if it means sacrificing paid [work hours](#) to do so."

**More information:** Caitlyn Collins et al, COVID-19 and the Gender Gap in Work Hours, *Gender, Work & Organization* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/gwao.12506](#)

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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