

Sharp decline in women's labor force participation in Illinois due to COVID-19

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A new paper co-written by a University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign researcher who studies labor issues affecting low-wage workers finds that almost 40% of working mothers in the state of Illinois lost jobs or

were working fewer hours due to the ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The [economic downturn](#) and shuttering of schools and day care facilities caused by the [public health measures](#) implemented to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus led to a sharp decline in women's labor force participation rates that hasn't been seen in three decades, says Alison Dickson, a senior instructor in the School of Labor and Employment Relations and one of the paper's co-authors.

"COVID-19 exacerbated an existing [child](#) care crisis that disproportionately impacted and continues to affect working women," said Dickson, also an affiliate of the Project for Middle Class Renewal. "As we start to rebuild from the pandemic, we should be investing in policies that support working families and help combat gender-based inequities in our economy."

The research was co-written by U. of I. labor professors Robert Bruno and Emily E. LB. Twarog; and Jill Gigstad and Frank Manzo IV of the Illinois Economic Policy Institute.

To examine the extent and impact of COVID-19, Dickson and her co-authors in fall 2020 surveyed more than 1,000 [working mothers](#) in the state of Illinois who were employed before the pandemic. Participation in the survey was limited to working- and middle-class mothers from households with total household incomes of \$150,000 or less. Over two-thirds of respondents resided in households with less than \$70,000 in combined income, which is close to the median household income for all Illinois residents.

"With our survey, we were able to measure a number of different ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the careers of working women in Illinois," Dickson said. "The top-line result was that nearly

four in 10 of all working mothers either lost their jobs or were working fewer hours because of the child care burden produced by the pandemic. We also found that the negative economic consequences were more severe for working women whose children's schools or child care facilities had closed—60% worked fewer hours, 58% earned less income and 66% reported that their job performance suffered.

"You could pin the blame for these negative economic consequences on the pandemic, but the lack of a child care safety net in the state of Illinois—whether it's through schools, day care facilities or summer camps—is just as much to blame."

For working mothers of color, the effect was even more pronounced, Dickson said. According to the paper, among mothers of color who were employed, more than half declined work-related opportunities due to school and child care closures, compared with 39% of white respondents.

"While we were able to show that these findings were significant and pervasive across the state and across the income spectrum, they were especially difficult and created additional hardships for working women of color," she said. "On its face, that's not very surprising. But here we are, 14 months into this pandemic, and kids across the state are still at home.

"Other people are moving on, getting ready to eat indoors at restaurants and take summer vacations. And yet, schools and day care facilities are still closed or only open for limited hours, which forces working women to choose between earning a paycheck or caring for their children."

While COVID-19 exposed the fragility of Illinois' child care system, the child care crisis is poised to continue well after the [pandemic](#) has ended, the researchers said.

"It just crystalizes the idea that we need to start thinking about child care in the U.S. as another form of infrastructure that's just as important and vital as bridges and roads," Dickson said. "In the state of Illinois, we could start by increasing access to affordable child care programs, funding more before- and after-school programs, and expanding flexible scheduling, paid leave and collective bargaining rights to support working parents across the state."

The paper is part of the Project for Middle Class Renewal, a research-based initiative tasked with investigating the labor market institutions and policies in today's economy while elevating public discourse on issues affecting workers.

More information: Woman and child care in Illinois: A survey of working mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[publish.illinois.edu/projectfor...-Impacts-FINAL-2.pdf](https://publish.illinois.edu/projectfor-mc-renewal-impacts-final-2.pdf)

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