

Women's earnings found to drop after childbirth

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When U.S. couples have their first child, mothers' earnings still drop substantially relative to fathers', and new Cornell research demonstrates the stubborn, decades-old pattern isn't changing despite broad increases

in other aspects of gender equality.

The research indicates the relative drop in the earnings of mothers cuts across all [education levels](#). The COVID-19 pandemic may lock the income imbalance in place as mothers who pulled back to care for children face worse hiring prospects and wage penalties as they seek to restart their work lives.

An article on the research, "Change and Variation in U.S. Couples' Earnings Equality Following Parenthood," was published March 22 in *Population and Development Review*. The [research](#) was conducted by sociologists Kelly Musick of the Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, Pilar Gonalons-Pons of the University of Pennsylvania and Christine Schwartz of the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

"The gender revolution has stalled, and women remain economically vulnerable," Musick said, noting the country is an outlier among wealthy nations in offering no mandated paid leave following childbirth, no system of subsidized childcare and scant public support for working families.

The study is one of the first to assess changes over time in within-family earnings inequality, tracking what happened to the incomes of couples over a full 10 years. The researchers used detailed survey results and administrative tax records that provide long-run data on earnings, birth and marriage dates and key characteristics such as education.

The researchers analyzed a period of about 30 years, from the 1980s through the 2000s. They found a brief period in the 1980s when [wives](#) became less financially dependent on their husbands after parenthood. Wives' earnings share dropped 13 percentage points following the first birth in the 1980s, relative to 10 percentage points in the 2000s. That modest change held largely true no matter the education or income level

of the husband and wife.

Musick said the similarities by education were something of a surprise because disparities—especially among those with and without a [college degree](#)—have grown in other aspects of family life over this time period. "Across groups, wives become more financially dependent on their husbands after parenthood," the researchers concluded, a worrying sign particularly in the U.S., where divorce remains common and policy support for families is weak.

"The pandemic puts into sharp relief the pitfalls of our fend-for-yourself approach to managing work and family," Musick said. The pandemic also creates an opening for policymakers to build a stronger "infrastructure of care" and the success of that effort will shape gender inequalities in work and [family](#) in the decades to come, she said.

More information: Kelly Musick et al, Change and Variation in U.S. Couples' Earnings Equality Following Parenthood, *Population and Development Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/padr.12481](https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12481)

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