

Even in 'care work,' women face lower wages if they have kids

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A new study that examined parenthood and "care work" has found that mothers get paid less than either men or women without children, even in fields that are traditionally thought of as being "women's work." Men,

on the other hand, generally received higher pay after becoming fathers—though white fathers benefited from this more than Black, Asian or Hispanic fathers.

The paper, "The Effect of Parenthood on Care Workers' Earnings: Exploring Identity Mobilization's Applicability," is published in *The Sociological Quarterly*. First author of the paper is Alyssa Alexander, a Ph.D. graduate at NC State who is now at the University of British Columbia.

"We know that there is a parenthood [wage](#) gap in professional work—in which women make less money after having children, while men do not," says Anna Manzoni, co-author of the study and professor of sociology at North Carolina State University. "We were interested in exploring whether a parenthood wage gap occurs among care workers."

The researchers defined care work as occupations that involve providing for someone's needs and well-being who typically cannot provide for their own. This includes occupations such as nursing, health care aides, K-12 teachers, childcare workers, religious clergy, and [social workers](#).

"We were interested in care workers because we thought employers may use stereotypes linked to parental identity to determine rewards, and care workers may leverage their parental identity to signal appropriateness for work, possibly leading to higher, rather than lower, earnings," Manzoni says. "We were also interested in the role of race and gender, which may signal different levels of appropriateness to employers according to how they fulfill employer-held gender and racial stereotypes."

To that end, the researchers drew on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, which collects socio-demographic information, as well as data on work, pay, family status and related subjects—a nationally representative sample of more than 3 million

people. The researchers used data from the years 1980, 1990, and then yearly from 2000 through 2018. Specifically, the researchers analyzed data from 805,786 care workers between the ages of 18 and 37.

"The findings were very straightforward," Manzoni says. "Wages for women without children were more than 12% higher than wages for mothers, once all factors were accounted for. This penalty was more pronounced for white women than for Asian, Hispanic or Black women—though all of them saw their wages decline after parenthood. We think the difference between [white women](#) and women of color stems from the racialized belief that women of color are appropriate for caring labor."

Meanwhile, the researchers also found that wages for fathers tended to be higher than wages for men without children. However, race comes into play here as well. Once other variables came into play, Black fathers actually saw a slight decline in wages after becoming parents.

"Put simply, our findings suggest that being seen as appropriate often does not result in wage advantages in [care work](#)," Manzoni says.

"Organizational practices and culture continue to disadvantage mothers and people of color, reinforcing inequality.

"In short, our results highlight the permanency of the belief that mothers are not compatible with paid work."

More information: Alyssa Alexander et al, The Effect of Parenthood on Care Workers' Earnings: Exploring Identity Mobilization's Applicability, *The Sociological Quarterly* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/00380253.2024.2371130](#)

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