



Papers

Stevenson, J. (2022). *COVID-19 and the U.S. Economy: The Road to Recovery*. Hamilton Project, Brookings Institution. <https://www.hamiltonproject.org/publications/2022/01/2022-01-10-covid-19-and-the-us-economy-the-road-to-recovery-stevenson-john/>

Full report (<https://www.hamiltonproject.org/publications/2022/01/2022-01-10-covid-19-and-the-us-economy-the-road-to-recovery-stevenson-john/>)

Full report (https://www.hamiltonproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/COVID_Recovery_Stevenson_v5.pdf)

More than a year and a half after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic brought the U.S. economy to a screeching halt, the employment landscape remains in flux. Employers report shortages of workers, and quits and stated intentions to quit have hit record highs, but employment remains well below pre-pandemic levels.

Agree

Throughout, the pandemic's impact on women's employment has been a focal concern. Women (https://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/files/Stevenson_LO_FINAL.pdf) have borne the brunt of job loss from the very first days of the pandemic (Stevenson 2020). That is because women (<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/flex2.t01.htm>), particularly minority women (<https://www.epi.org/blog/black-and-hispanic-workers-are-much-less-likely-to-be-able-to-work-from-home/>), are more likely to be in positions that require in-person work (Gould and Shierholz 2020). At the start of the pandemic, women held the majority of nonfarm payroll jobs, a milestone that they had reached in December 2019. Women's labor force participation had risen both absolutely and relative to that of men in the years before the pandemic. Part of this growth was driven by mothers, whose employment reached a peak in 2019. Mothers in 2020 were older, with more work experience, and more education, potentially shaping their response to the pandemic-induced recession compared to previous recessions.

Women disproportionately work in low-wage service occupations which has been a double-edged sword: as the pandemic intensified, many were laid off and many others were asked to work in increasingly dangerous conditions. More generally, women's employment declined more than that of men since those working in so-called pink jobs (e.g., in education and health services) were more likely to experience layoffs.

Beyond the involuntary job loss, women also shouldered more of the caregiving burden during the pandemic. As the sociologist Jessica Calarco pointedly put it, "Other countries have social safety nets. The U.S. has women (Peterson 2020)." Mothers took leave (<https://www.minneapolisfed.org/research/institute-working-papers/why-is-mommy-so-stressed-estimating-the-immediate-impact-of-the-covid-19-shock-on-parental-attachment-to-the-labor-market-and-the-double-bind-of-mothers>), and were more likely than fathers to drop out of the labor force (Heggeness 2020). They increased (<https://data.unwomen.org/features/covid-19-pandemic-has-increased-care-burden-how-much-0>) their time spent on child care and were more likely than fathers to help children (<https://www.fastcompany.com/90667597/what-the-american-time-use-survey-can-teach-leaders-about-the-female-workforce>) with education (<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.nr0.htm>) (Azcona, Bhatt, and Love 2020; Greene 2021). It was not only mothers who faced an increase in caregiving: two out of every three caregivers (<https://www.cdc.gov/women/caregivers-covid-19/index.html>) in the United States are women, providing support not only to children, but also to adults with chronic illnesses or disabilities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2021). Eldercare responsibilities increased (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7919204/>), particularly for women (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/08901171211030142c>) (Cohen, Nash, and Greaney 2021), as people began to see institutional settings as unsafe places for their older loved ones to live.

The erasure of decades of women's progress in the labor market highlighted a real fear that the pandemic would set back women's roles in the labor market. Would men go back to work while women stayed home? Had we entered a new era of gender

inequality? Or would women return to work and to making further strides in achieving gender equality at work?

This report reviews what has happened to women's employment and labor force participation in the recovery from the pandemic. The fear that women would be set back decades has not come to fruition, at least not when it comes to employment rates relative to those of men: women have returned to work just as rapidly as men have. However, the pandemic has profoundly shaped expectations and behavior in the labor market. Many workers are continuing to experience tenuous attachment to work, with short spells out of work still more common in 2021 than they were in 2019. This volatility partially reflects high rates of churn in the labor market, since both women and men are seeking new jobs and changing industries at higher rates than before the pandemic.

Both women and men are reevaluating their working lives, with 55 percent (<https://www.bankrate.com/personal-finance/job-seekers-survey-august-2021/>) of those in the labor force saying that they want to seek a new employment over the coming year (Foster 2021). Parents made many different types of employment and career adjustments over the past 18 months that may shape their labor market outcomes for years to come. And many parents—both fathers and mothers—do not plan on returning to pre-pandemic employment patterns. So, while women are returning to the labor market, they may be returning on very different terms.

Full report **PDF** (https://www.hamiltonproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/COVID_Recovery_Stevenson_v5.pdf)

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