



SUSTAINING & ADAPTING DURING THE PANDEMIC

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Working Mothers

April 2022



EARLY MILESTONES
COLORADO

Women have experienced a disproportionate disruption in earnings and career paths during the pandemic. This brief focuses on the outsized burden that a lack of affordable, accessible, and reliable child care places on mothers' and female caregivers' participation in Colorado's labor force.

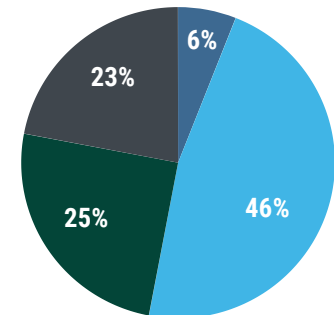
CHILD CARE BURDENS FALL LARGELY ON WOMEN

Early Milestones surveyed families in Summer 2020 and again in May 2021.¹ In our first survey, nearly two-thirds (64%) of responding families shared that their child care arrangements changed due to the pandemic. School and child care shutdowns, as well as inconsistent availability of care for children forced many parents to take on the responsibility of daily care and remote learning for their children.

These burdens fell largely on mothers and female caregivers. In our second survey, four out of five (82%) mothers reported being primarily responsible for supervising their children's remote learning. Nearly half (48%) of mothers reported spending at least four hours per day supporting virtual learning, compared to 37% of fathers reporting the same increased commitment. This caused many mothers to report increased stress and feelings of inadequacy during the pandemic.

While many children returned to in-person school and child care settings in fall 2021, the impact of the pandemic on working mothers' finances, work lives, and mental well-being continues to be a concern.²

Additional Time Needed Per Day to Support Remote Learning



- No additional time
- 1 to 3 hours
- 4 to 5 hours
- More than 5 hours

"It's been stressful, disappointing, and I had to take on a mother/teacher role during remote learning, which didn't give me enough time to take care of myself or other duties."

**Mother in Denver County,
Identified as Black/African-American**

"I had to switch to third shift just to make sure someone is available to watch my son... The pandemic closed his [child care provider, which] will not be reopening."

**Mother in Pueblo County,
Identified as Hispanic/Latinx**

HIGHER RATES OF EMPLOYMENT CHANGE AND WORK DISRUPTION

By April of 2020, nearly 3.5 million mothers nationwide took leave or left the workforce altogether,³ and recovery has been slow. Findings from the **Common Sense Institute** and **Executives Partnering to Invest in Children** indicate that 6% fewer mothers in the United States were participating in the workforce in December of 2020 than before the pandemic. As of January 2021, 1.6 million mothers with school-age children remained out of the workforce compared to pre-pandemic numbers.^{4,5}

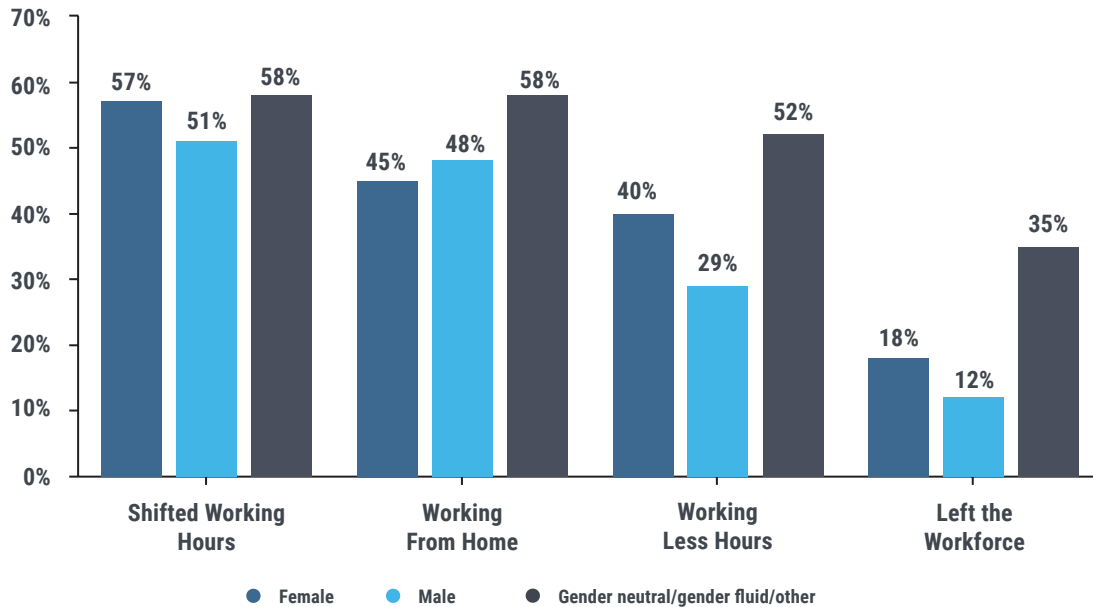
¹ Data for this brief was collected through a survey of 5,867 Colorado-based families with children 12 years old or younger, completed in May of 2021.

² Calarco, J. M., Meanwell, E. V., Anderson, E., & Knopf, A. (2020, October 9). "My husband thinks I'm crazy": COVID-19-related conflict in couples with young children. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/cpkj6>

When they didn't leave their jobs altogether, women with children were more likely to reduce working hours or consider stepping back from their careers than fathers or women without children.⁶

Among our survey respondents in Colorado, 80% experienced disruptions to their work during the first 9 months of the pandemic, shifting to remote work, reducing hours, or leaving the workforce. In the first year, 15% of female caregivers quit their jobs, 19% were furloughed or laid off, and 30% worked fewer hours. Many of these changes were made so parents could provide direct care to their children. While male and female caregivers reported working remotely to care for children equally, 40% of female respondents were working fewer hours to provide direct care for their children, compared to 29% of male caregivers. Nearly one in five (18%) female caregivers were forced to leave the workforce altogether, compared to 12% of male caregivers.

Changes in Work Status by Gender



“Luckily my job is flexible and for part of this I was on maternity leave but it’s still been hard working full time and caring for 1-2 kids. I work a lot of nights just to catch up.”

**Mother in Douglas County,
Identified as white**

“I lost my job because the remote learning pods still needed me to provide dedicated teaching for my child. I tried to find new remote work but when the schools and child care providers closed in November I wasn’t able to keep working. Now I don’t even look for work until full day child care is available again”

**Mother in Denver County,
Identified as white**

³ Heggeness, M. L., Fields, J., Garcia, Y. A., & Shulzetenberg, A. (2021, March 3) Moms, work, and the pandemic. Census.gov. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/moms-work-and-the-pandemic.html>

⁴ Brown, C., Giannou, A., & Riehl, N. 2021 The she-cession in Colorado: Impact of COVID-19 on women in the workforce in 2020. Common Sense Institute and EPIC. https://commonsenseinstituteco.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CSI_2020INREVIEW_REPORT_FINAL.pdf

⁵ Heggeness, M. L., Fields, J., Garcia, Y. A., & Shulzetenberg, A. (2021, March 3) Moms, work, and the pandemic. Census.gov. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/moms-work-and-the-pandemic.html>

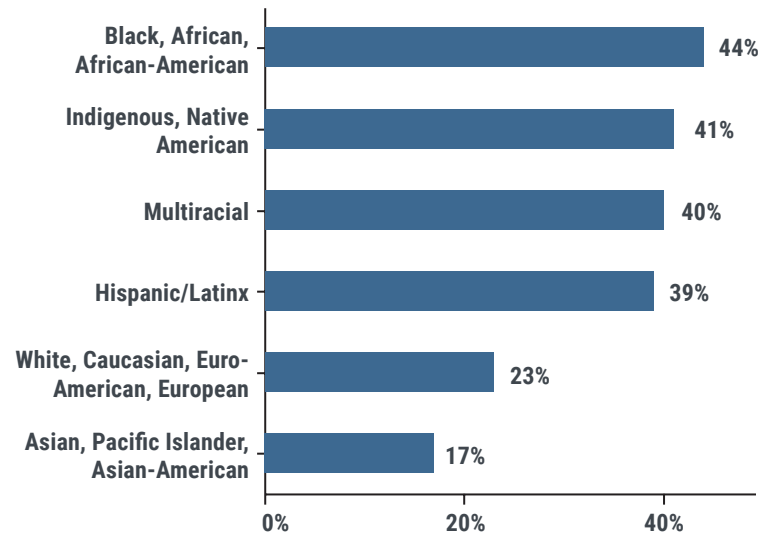
⁶ Burns, T., Huang, J. Krivkovich, A., Rambachan, I., Trkulja, T., & Yee, L. (2021). Women in the workplace. LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace>

DISPROPORTIONATE CHALLENGES FOR PARENTS IN UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES

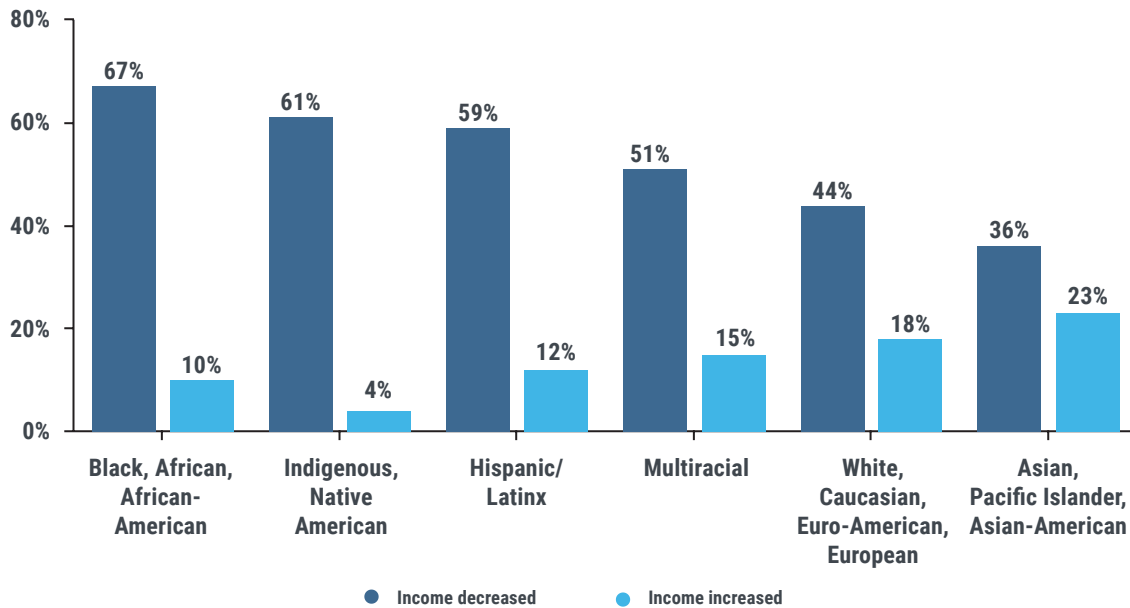
In Colorado and nationally, low-income mothers and mothers of color are more likely to be their family's primary source of income.⁷ They are also more likely to work in-person and essential service jobs, leaving them especially vulnerable to COVID-19 infection, pandemic related job changes, and overall economic hardship.

In our survey, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous mothers were nearly twice as likely as white mothers to report moderate or extreme difficulty paying bills. Two-thirds (67%) of Black mothers, 61% of Indigenous mothers, and 59% of Latinx mothers reported a decrease in income.

Moderate or Extreme Difficulty Paying Bills by Race/Ethnicity



Income Change by Race/Ethnicity

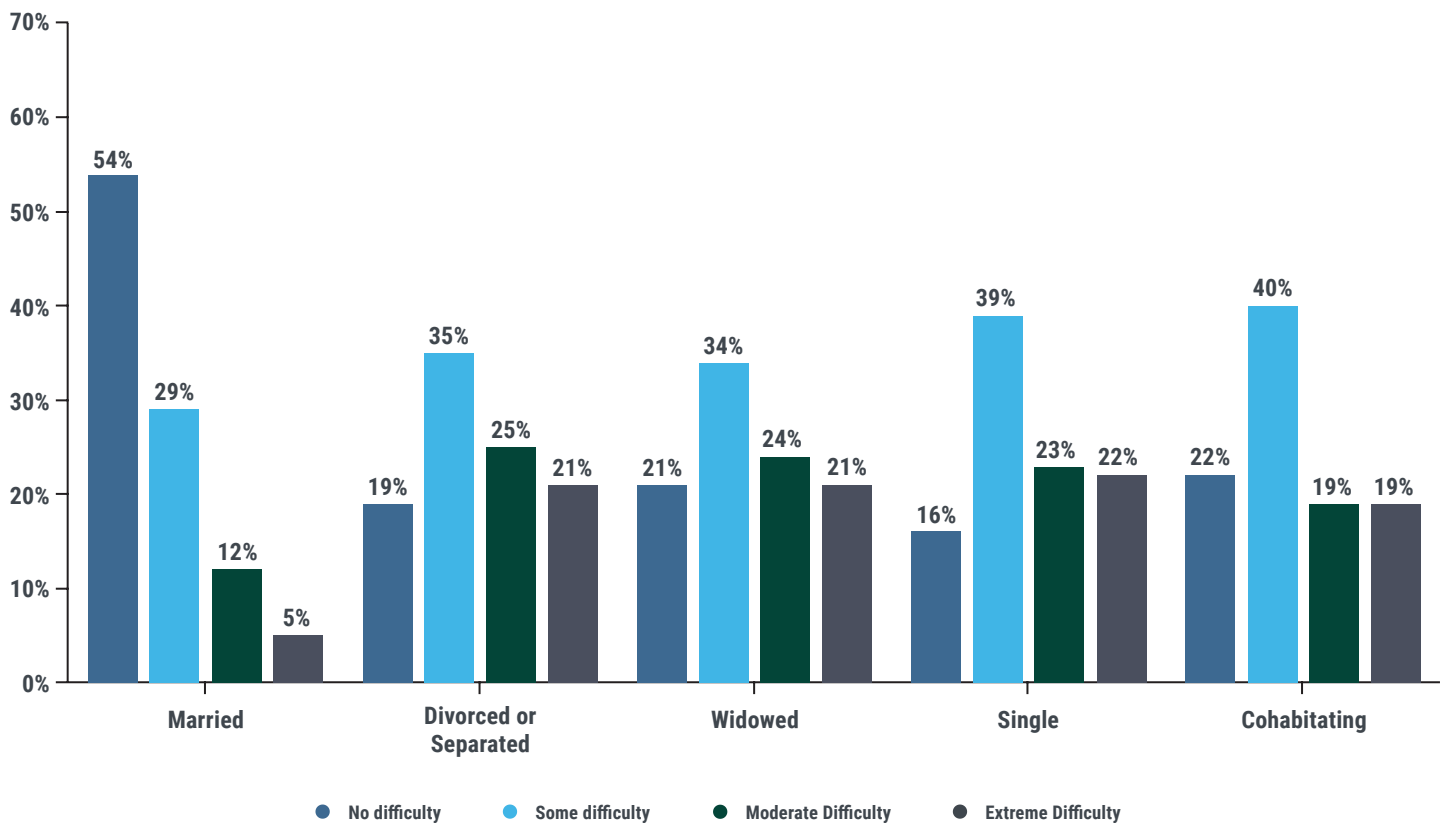


⁷ Glynn, S. J., (2019, May 10). Breadwinning mothers continue to be the U.S. norm. Center for American Progress. <https://americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2019/05/10/469739/breadwinning-mothers-continue-u-s-norm/>

Single mothers (62%) were more likely than married mothers (40%) to report a decrease in household income during the pandemic. They also were more likely to experience difficulty paying bills, with more than four times as many single mothers reporting extreme difficulty (22%) compared to married mothers (5%). Among all unmarried mothers, Indigenous mothers were the most likely to report difficulty paying bills (93%), followed by Black (84%) and Latinx mothers (76%).

Reduced income and continued child care shortages leave many mothers' financial situation unsustainable, especially for those living at the intersection of longstanding race- and class-based inequities.

Difficulty Paying Bills by Marital Status



“I had to quit my job to take my [son] to school and pick him up... I filed for unemployment but have not received any money yet. I don't have any income. [We] are going to be homeless soon if I don't get back to work.”

**Mother in El Paso County,
Identified as Hispanic/Latinx**

“I am a single mother with no assistance from my child's father. During this pandemic, I've had to pick up a part-time position to support my child care needs, which also takes away from spending time with my child.”

**Mother in Denver County,
Identified as Black/African-American**

Considerations & Opportunities

While many of our survey findings are driven by longstanding dynamics of race, class and gender inequity, opportunities to better understand these issues, invest in families, and reduce systemic barriers remain.

- **Foundations can fund research** about the links between the child care crisis and workforce participation by Colorado mothers.
- **Employers can create greater workplace flexibility** to attract, retain, and support women with children. This may include the remote opportunities, flexible schedules, and resources to support work-life balance and career development.
- **Policymakers can prioritize equitable access** to affordable child care and financial support for families, especially low-income households and families of color. They can also support policies such as paid family leave, universal child care, and universal pre-kindergarten.

“Working while caring for a toddler is a miserable experience for both of us. Even with expanded flexibility from my job, I felt like I was failing him and failing at my job.”

*Mother in Denver County,
Identified as White*

“I am barely keeping up with bills and food for the house! I am afraid I will be losing my job soon because I don’t have child care for my son.”

*Mother in Arapahoe County,
Identified as Black/African-American*

Partners

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The Colorado Health Foundation

Suggested Citation

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