

# To improve pandemic work outcomes for parents, ask when, not where

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Efforts to contain the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) changed where and how people work. For many parents, supervising their children's education occupied at least some portion of their available work time during the day. In "[Parental participation in a pandemic labor market](#)" (*FRBSF Economic Letter*, Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, April 5, 2021), Olivia Lofton, Nicolas Petrosky-Nadeau, and Lily Seitelman use differences in when and where someone can work, particularly regarding parents, to examine gender gaps in labor market outcomes.

The authors use Current Population Survey microdata on prime-age workers (ages 25 to 54) from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) to assess how much parents contributed to the widening labor market gaps among men and women during COVID-19. By midsummer 2020, both men and women had recovered about half the initial declines in labor force participation caused by COVID-19. From July 2020 through December 2020, the labor force participation rate for men remained about 1.0 percentage point lower than prepandemic levels, versus 2.2 percentage points lower for women. Mothers accounted for nearly three-fourths of the 2.2-percentage-point decline in the labor force participation rate for women, while fathers accounted for one-third of the decline for men. About 700,000 additional prime-age mothers would have participated in the labor force at the end of the year had their recovery been like that of women who are not mothers.

Lofton, Petrosky-Nadeau, and Seitelman then looked at labor force participation for men and women by household income. After they split the households into three groups based on income (less than \$50,000; \$50,000–\$99,999; and \$100,000 or more), the authors found that mothers with an annual household income less than \$50,000 exited the labor force at four times the rate of mothers in households making \$100,000 or more. From February 2020 to December 2020, labor force participation declined nearly 9 percent for mothers with a household income less than \$50,000. Fathers had smaller labor force participation declines than mothers across all three income groups.

Finally, the authors examined BLS occupational data relating to telework and work schedule flexibility. Changes in the ratio of mothers' employment to women's employment for various occupation groups were compared with the share of jobs with flexible hours. The data showed that flexibility in work schedules, rather than the ability to work from home, offset some of the employment decreases caused by the pandemic. For example, the ratio of mothers' to women's employment in management occupations (an occupational group with more flexible hours) did not change substantially during the pandemic. Education occupations, with more fixed schedules, saw the ratio decline.

Lofton, Petrosky-Nadeau, and Seitelman's research shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, nonparent men and women had similar labor market dynamics through December 2020. Fathers fared better than other groups, while mothers generally experienced a slower labor market recovery. A solution to the disparity may be flexible

work hours rather than flexible work locations. If the slow labor force recovery of mothers persists, there could be long lasting repercussions, such as lower earnings potential, a permanent change in household behavioral adaptations, or changes to future labor force participation decisions made by parents.