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Demographic Changes In Employment During The COVID-19 Pandemic

Megan Dunn

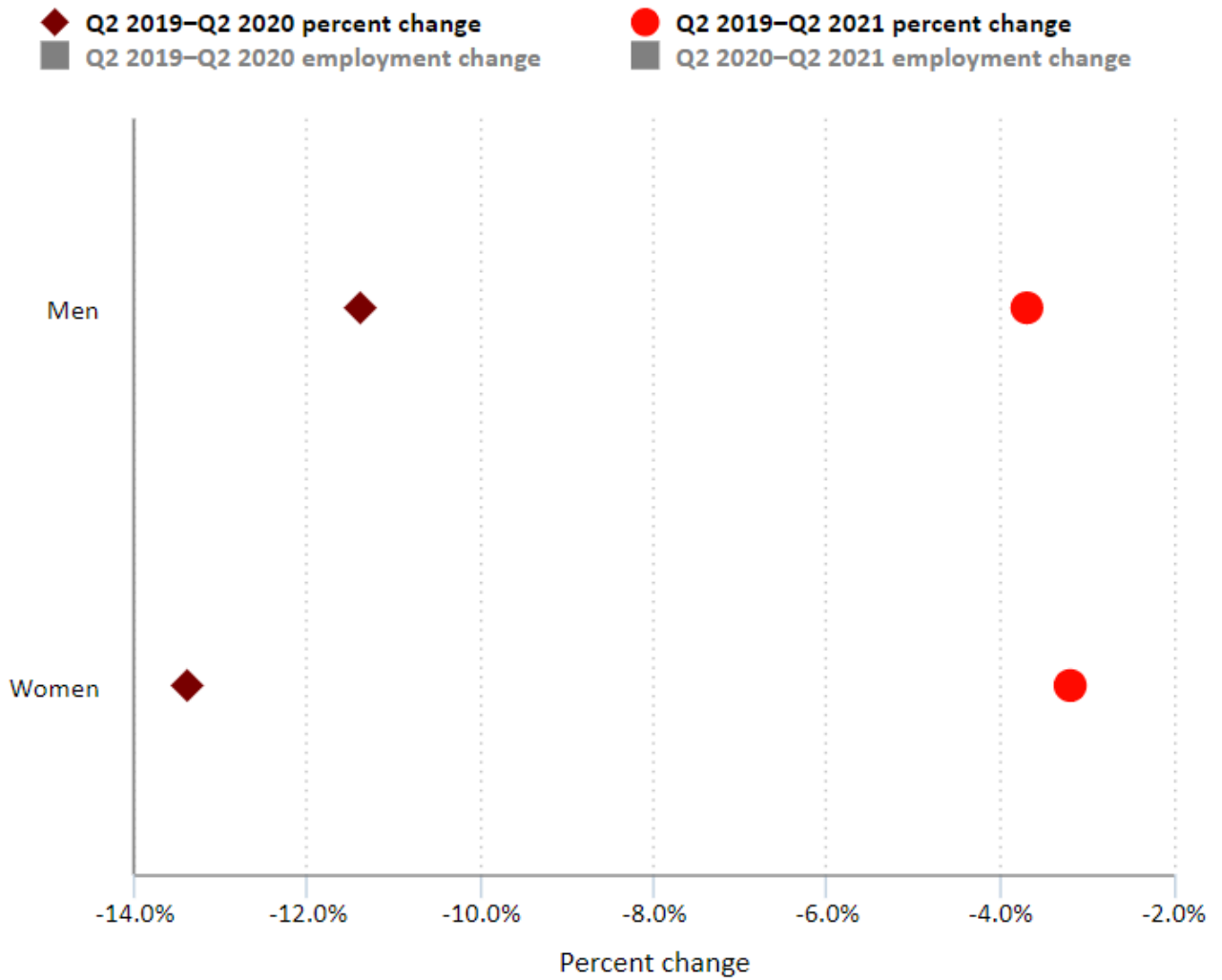
2020 was a year of widespread labor market difficulty as the country struggled with the COVID-19 pandemic. People were less likely to be employed in the second quarter of 2020—during the depths of the February–April recession—than during the second quarter of 2019, a year before the pandemic. In the second quarter of 2019, the employment–population ratio was 60.7 percent. In the second quarter of 2020, it fell 7.7 percentage points—the largest over-the-year change ever recorded—to 53.0 percent. By the second quarter of 2021, a year into the pandemic, the ratio had risen to 58.1 percent, still below its pre-pandemic level.

At the onset of the pandemic, employment declined more for women than for men

The number of employed people plummeted from 2019 to 2020 as the pandemic unfolded. Both men and women experienced unprecedented employment declines, but the decline for women was steeper than that for men (−13.4 percent and −11.4 percent, respectively).

By the second quarter of 2021, as vaccines became available and some of the restrictions that curtailed economic activity during 2020 were lifted, the number of employed people began to rise. The 2021 employment increase—much like the loss in 2020—was steeper for women than for men. In spite of these gains, employment was still down considerably from 2019 for both women and men (3.2 percent and 3.7 percent, respectively).

Employment changes by sex, 2nd quarter 2019–2nd quarter 2021

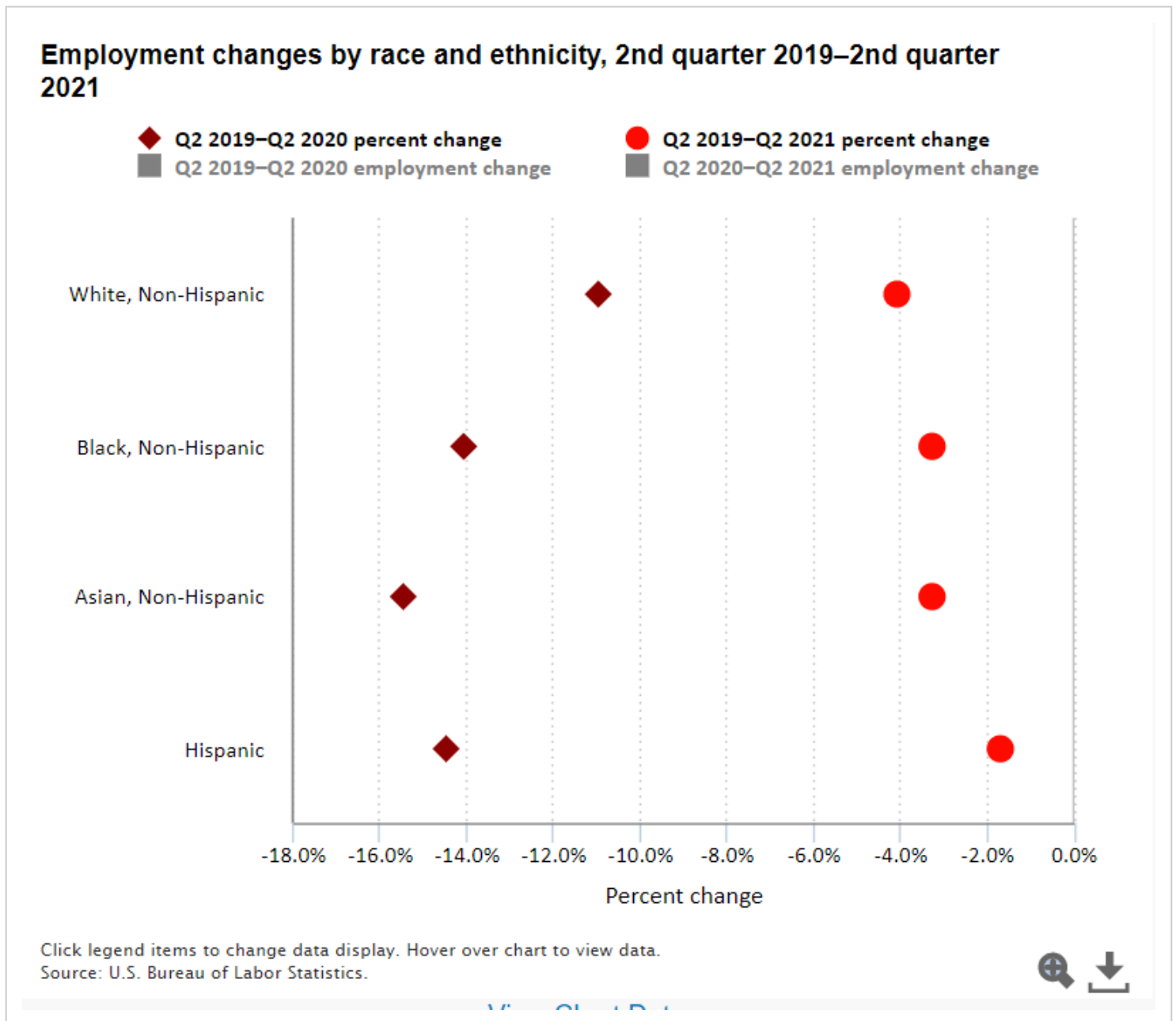


Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



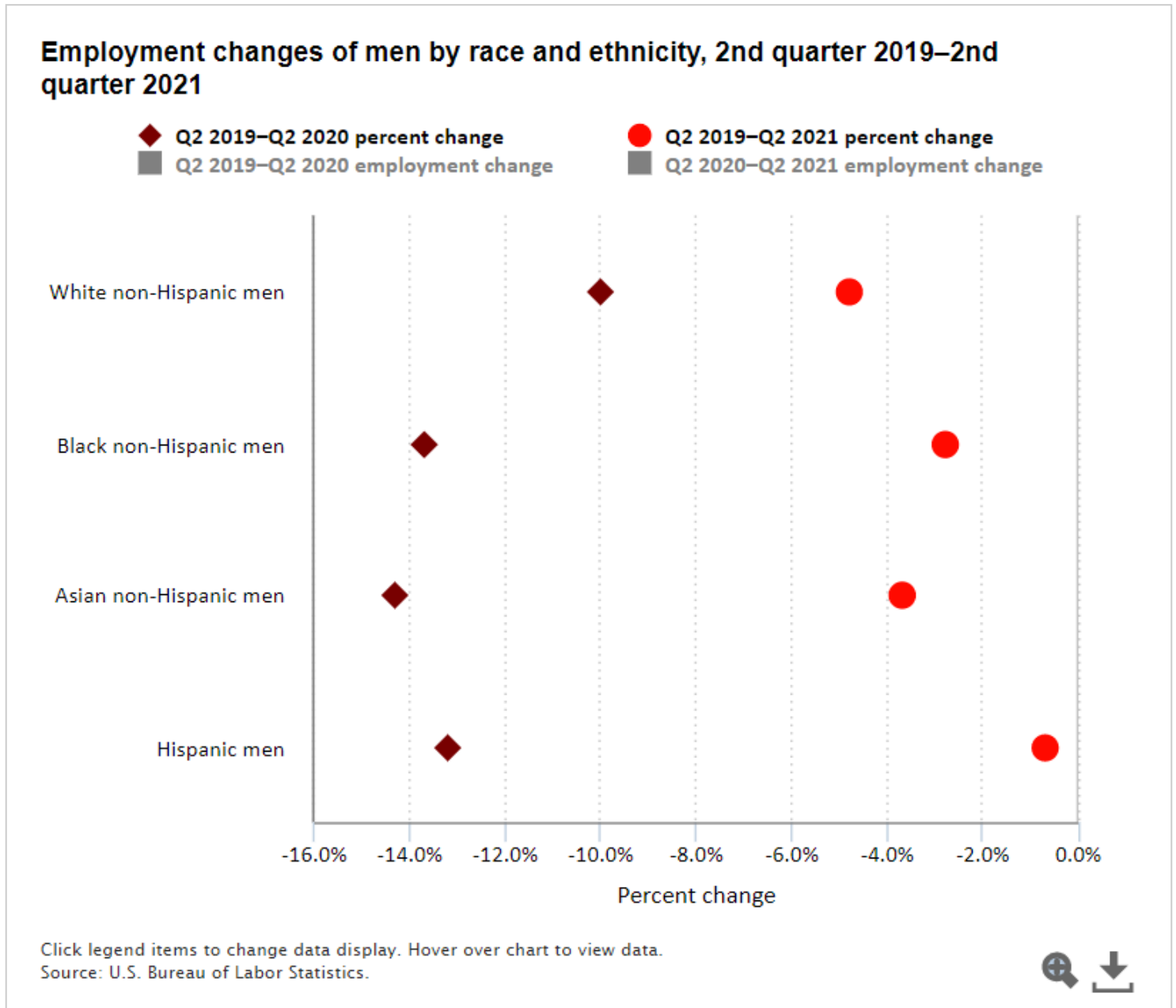
White workers were least affected by employment loss at start of pandemic, but their recovery lagged

Employment of White non-Hispanic workers declined less (in relative terms) than that of other workers in 2020. But by 2021, employment for all groups had begun to recover, and the shortfalls for each group were more similar than they had been in 2020.



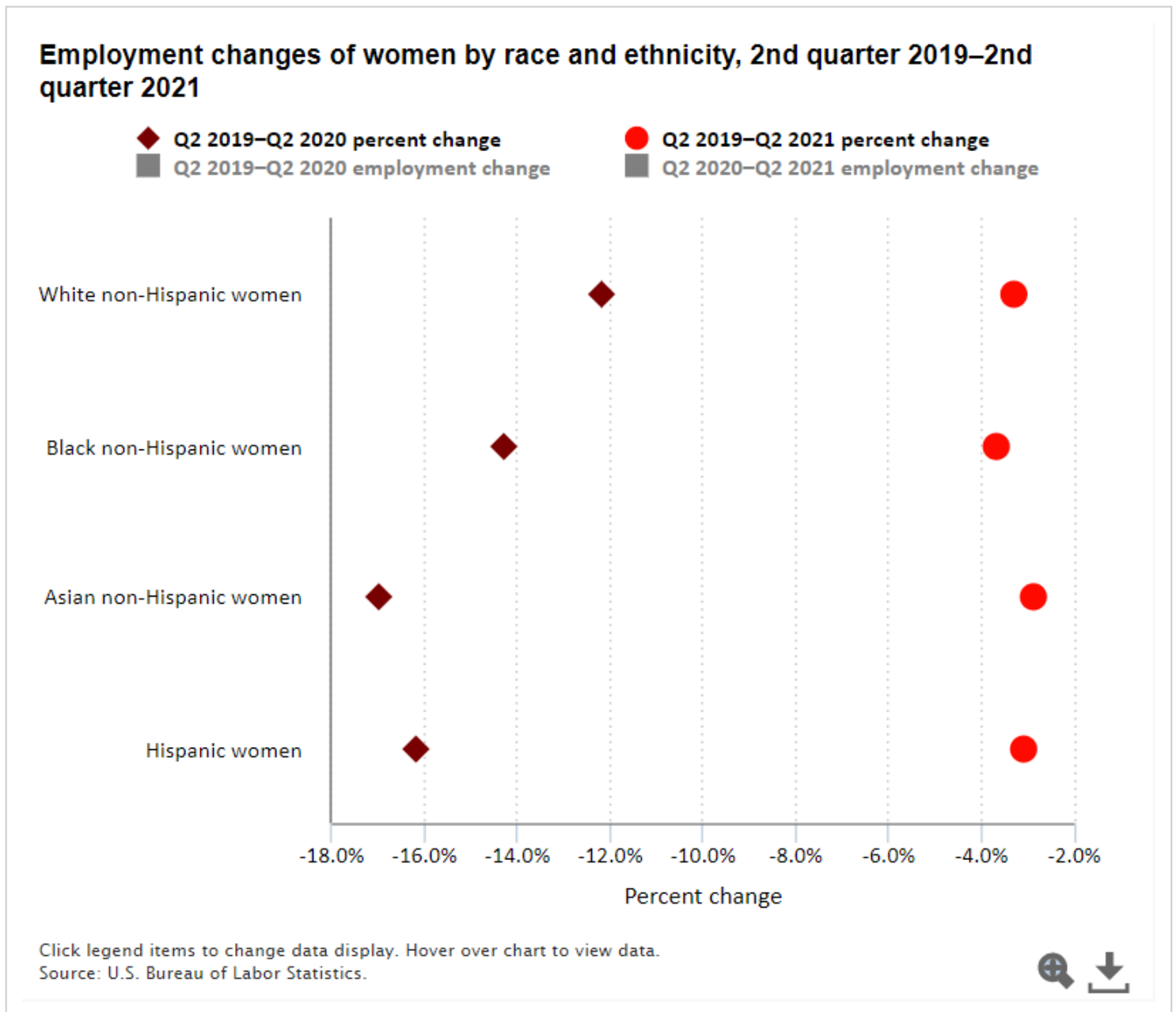
White men were least affected by employment loss, but their recovery lagged

White non-Hispanic men suffered the smallest relative decline in employment, at the onset of the pandemic in 2020 (-10.0 percent). However, White men recovered only about half of their 2020 employment losses in 2021, while other groups recovered about three-fourths or more of their losses. In 2021, employment of White men was down by 4.8 percent, somewhat more than that of men in other groups.



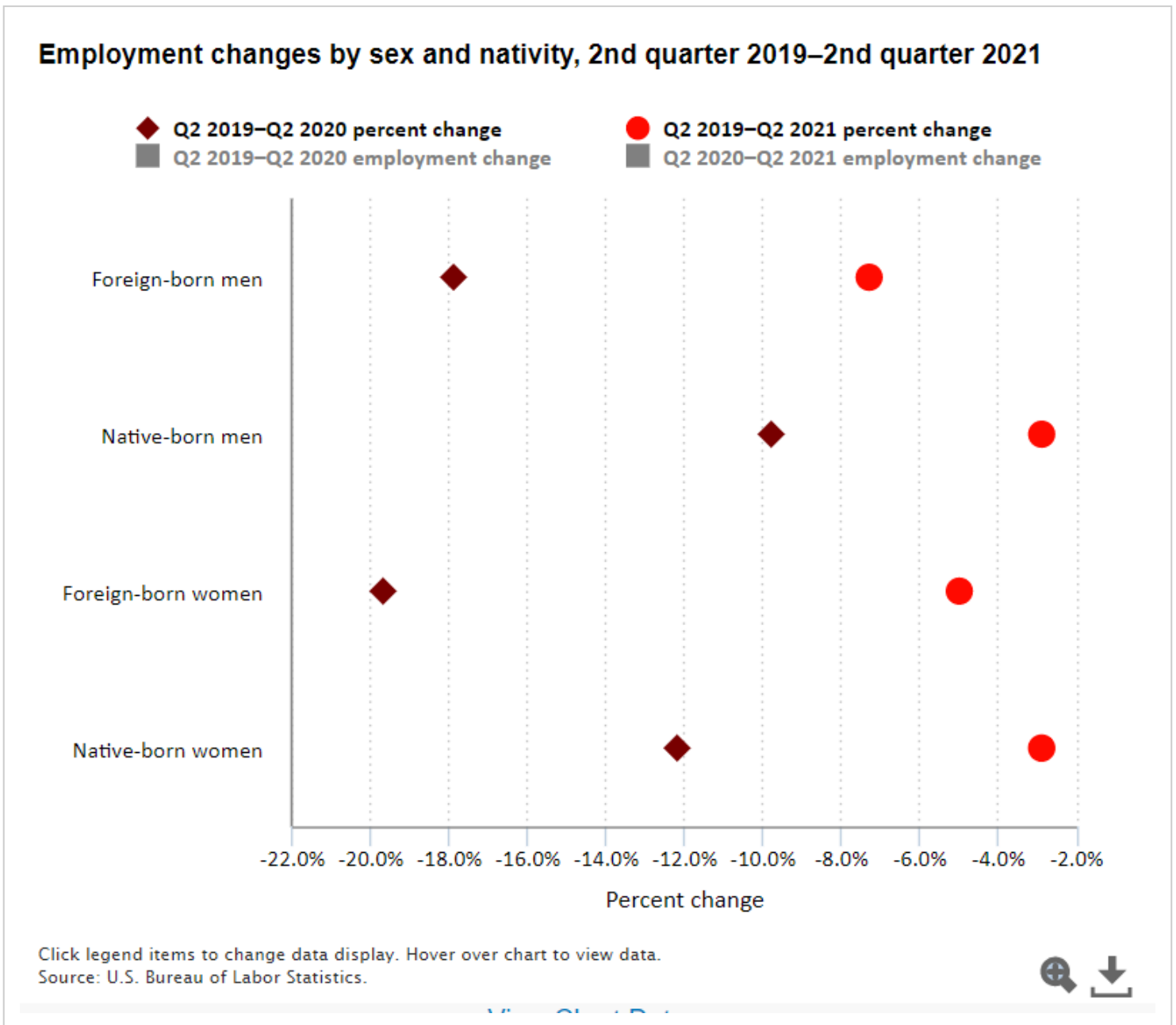
Asian and Hispanic women were most affected by employment loss at beginning of pandemic

Early in the pandemic, employment declined the most for Asian and Hispanic women (−17.0 percent and −16.2 percent), and it declined the least for White women (−12.2 percent). Nevertheless, employment for all groups had begun to recover by 2021, and the shortfalls among women were more similar than they had been in 2020.



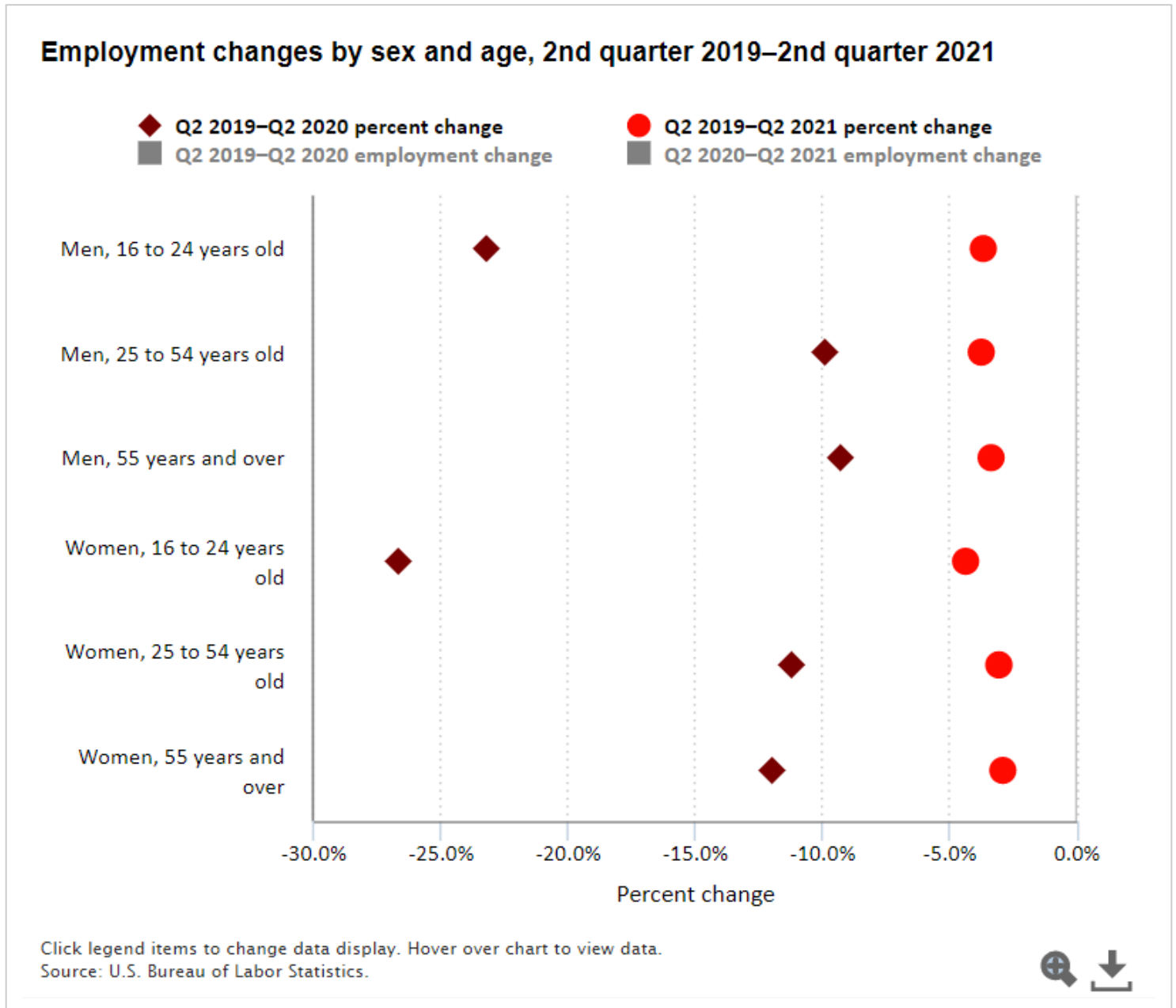
Employment declines larger for the foreign born than for the native born in 2020

At the onset of the pandemic in 2020, employment declined by 19.7 percent for foreign-born women and by 17.9 percent for foreign-born men. By comparison, employment declined by 12.2 percent for native-born women and by 9.8 percent for native-born men. Although the foreign born recovered larger shares of their employment declines than the native-born in 2021, the decline for foreign-born men was more than double that for native-born men one year into the pandemic.



Youth were more affected by employment loss than other groups at beginning of pandemic

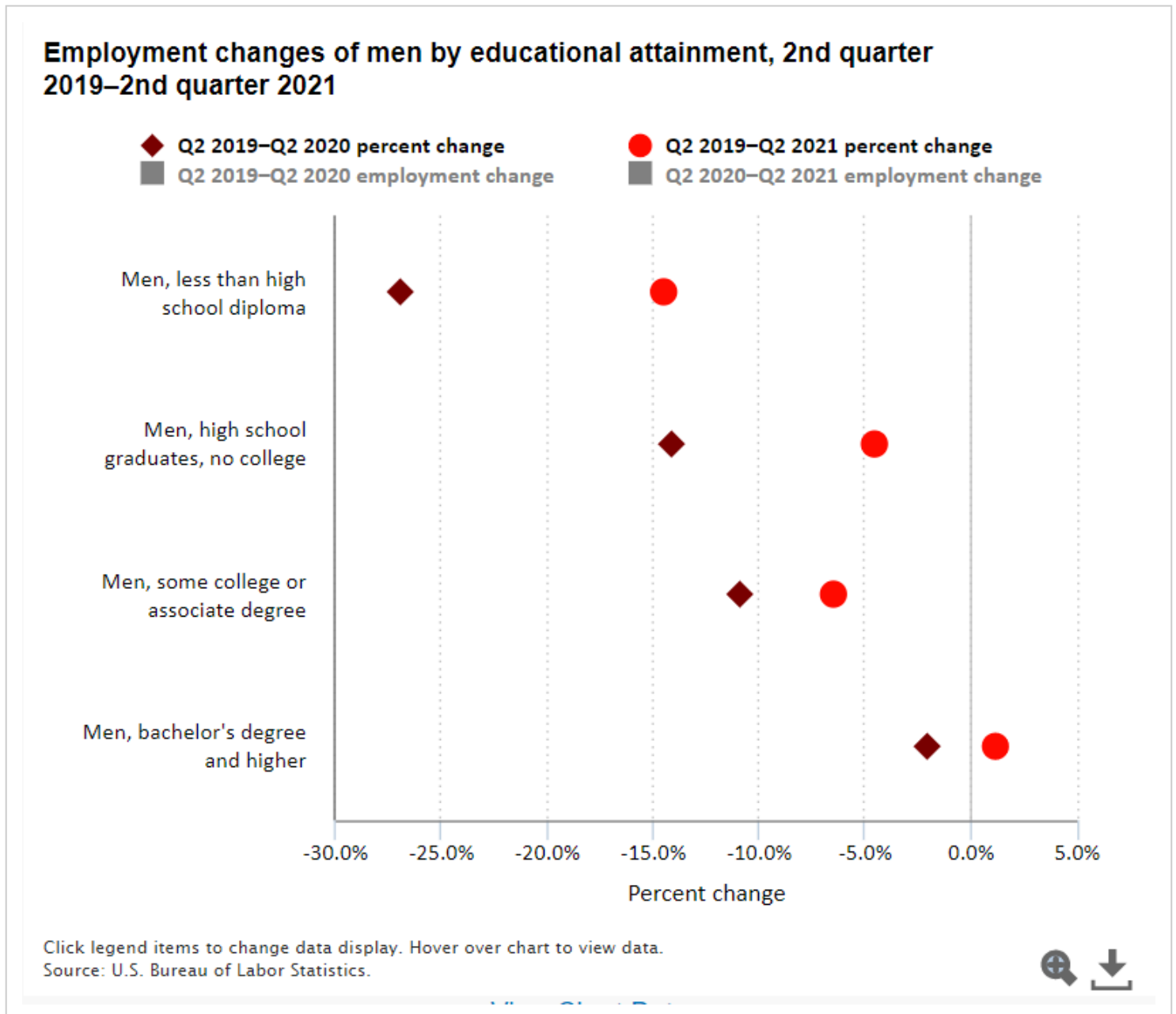
Employment of men and women ages 16 to 24 declined by about one-fourth in 2020. This was more than double the share of employment men and women in other age groups lost. By 2021, youth recovered more than 80 percent of the employment they lost, while older age groups recovered substantially less. Thus, one year into the pandemic, employment was down comparably across all age groups.



The least educated were disproportionately affected

Among men age 25 and older, employment declined the most at the beginning of the pandemic for men with less than a high school diploma (-27.0 percent). By contrast, declines for men with bachelor's degrees were small in relative terms in 2020 (-2.1 percent).

By 2021, employment was still down disproportionately for men with less than a high school diploma (-14.5 percent) compared with those who were college graduates. The size of employment increases among college graduates in 2021 actually exceeded the pandemic-related losses in the prior year—employment was up by 1.1 percent compared with their pre-pandemic levels.

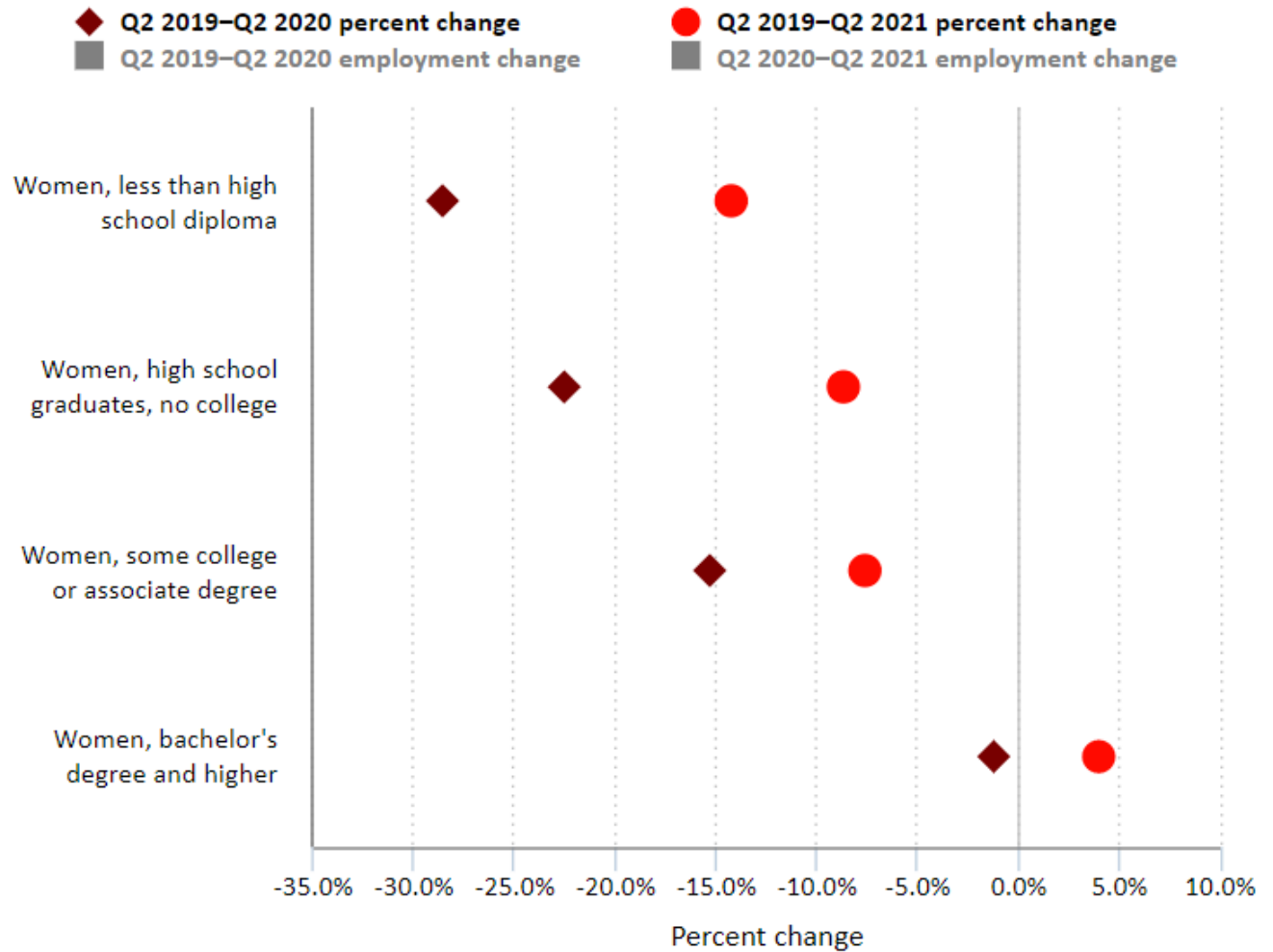


Women with least education affected more than those with college degrees

Similar to men, employment declined the most at the beginning of the pandemic for women with less than a high school diploma (−28.6 percent). Women who were high school graduates but did not attend any college also experienced a relatively large decline of 22.6 percent. By contrast, declines for women with bachelor’s degrees were small in relative terms in 2020 (−1.3 percent).

By 2021, employment was still down disproportionately for women with less than a high school diploma (−14.3 percent) compared with those who were college graduates. The size of employment increases among college graduates in 2021 actually exceeded the pandemic-related losses in the prior year—employment was up by 4.0 percent compared with their pre-pandemic levels.

Employment changes of women by educational attainment, 2nd quarter 2019–2nd quarter 2021

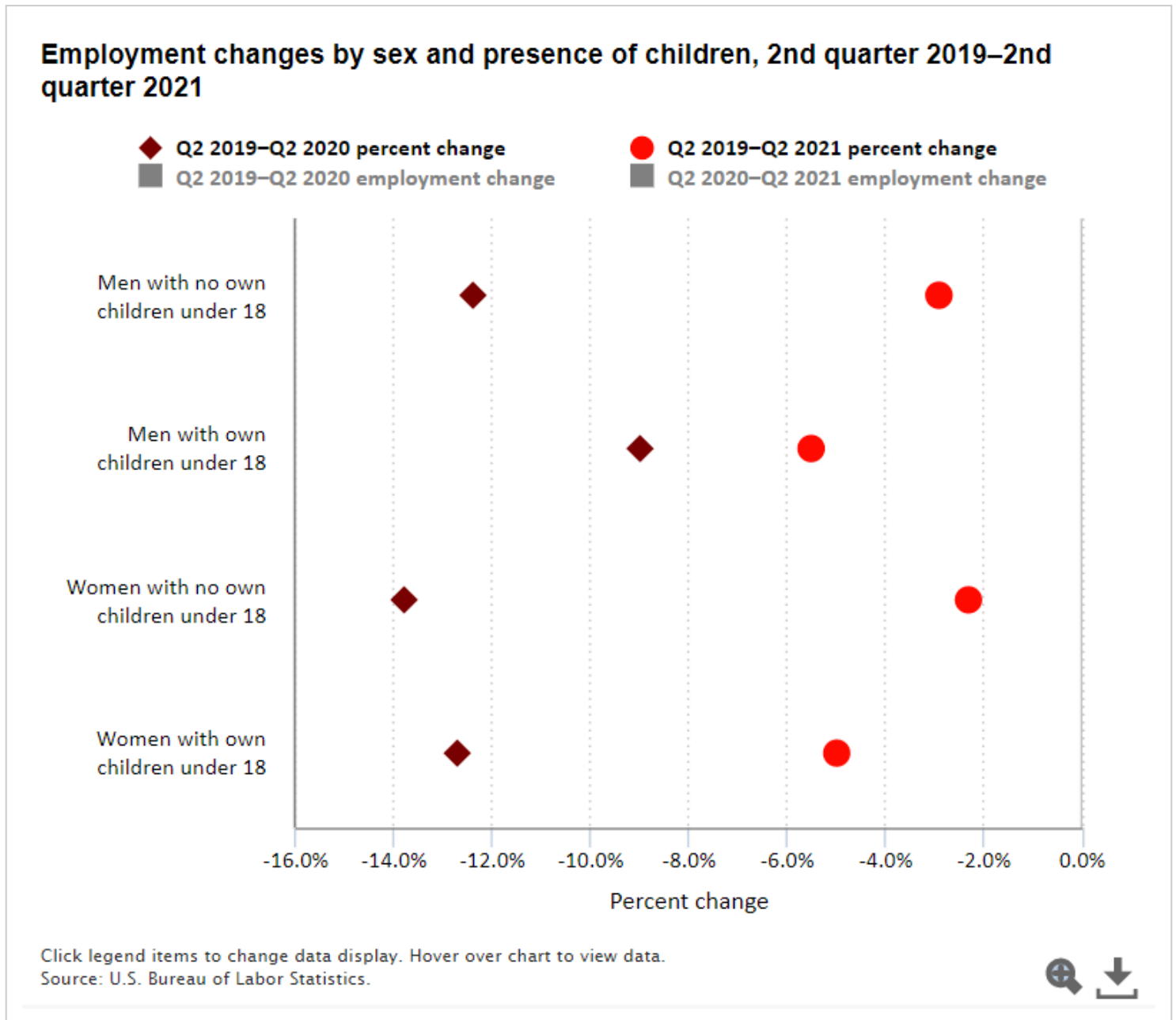


Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



Employment of fathers declined the least in 2020

Fathers of children under age 18 had a smaller decline in employment, at 9.0 percent in 2020, than men and women without children under age 18, and women with children. Declines among men without children under age 18 (-12.4 percent), women without children (-13.8 percent), and mothers (-12.7 percent) were similar to each other at the onset of the pandemic. One year into the pandemic, men and women without children gained back larger shares of their 2020 employment losses than did parents. However, employment in 2021 was down comparably for men and women regardless of whether they had children or not.



For more information

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The data presented in this *Spotlight on Statistics* are from the [Current Population Survey](#) (CPS). The CPS is a survey of about 60,000 households that provides data on employment and unemployment for the nation's civilian noninstitutional population ages 16 years and older.

The analysis in this *Spotlight on Statistics* article uses second quarter not seasonally adjusted data for 2019, 2020, and 2021 to compare the same quarter prior to the pandemic, during the pandemic-related recession, and one year into the pandemic. All percent changes discussed are relative to the second quarter of 2019, when total employment was 157.2 million. That is, they are presented as the percent change in the number of employed people from the pre-pandemic level in the second quarter of 2019. For example, in the second quarter of 2020, employment was 12.3 percent lower than the previous year, which represents the change from pre-pandemic employment levels to pandemic-era lows. In the second quarter of 2021, employment was 3.5 percent lower than in 2019; this represents the difference between pre-pandemic employment levels and employment levels as economic activity began to resume. That is, just how far below pre-pandemic levels employment remained a year after the pandemic began. For simplicity, this article uses just the year, instead of the quarter and year, when discussing changes.